

## The Enduring Agency of the Dead: Violence, Trauma, and Commemoration

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This special issue of *Český lid* explores the agency of the dead in the lives of the living in diverse cultural contexts, drawing on ethnographic research on violence, trauma, and commemoration. Across the social sciences and humanities, these topics have been investigated as deeply interconnected processes that shape collective identity and political legitimacy (e.g., Ashplant – Dawson – Roper 2000; Bar-Tal 2003; Edkins 2003; Das 2003; Truc 2011). Scholars are increasingly paying attention to the role of the dead in the lives of the living. Rather than treating the deceased as passive objects of mourning, they argue that the dead act as moral agents in political life and shape collective memory and national identity (Verdery 2000; Crossland 2009; Ferrándiz 2013; Rosenblatt 2015). Various ethnographic studies have demonstrated how material remains and traces of the dead exert influence on the living through commemoration rituals and personal experiences (e.g., Orsi 2004; Das – Cavell 2007; Maddrell 2013; Mencej 2021; Repič – Hamer 2025). In this context, space plays a very important role, which is reflected in the concept of deathscapes, which refers to the material expression of death-related practices in the landscape (Teather 2001; Maddrell – Sidaway 2010; Van Dyke 2019; Sendyka 2021).

The increasing attention to the role of the dead in contemporary society reflects broader ontological turns in anthropology manifested in post-humanism and relational ontology. In keeping with these developments, the contributions in this special issue center on the relational dynamics between the living and the dead that extend beyond biological death. They reveal how the dead influence the living through affective bonds, material remains, space, and ritual practices. Theoretically, these studies can be situated within several major trajectories in anthropology, sociology, and memory studies that rethink agency, death, and relationality.

Yordanka Dimcheva uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the experiences of survivors of terrorist attacks in Paris (2015) and Nice (2016). Her study aligns with the concept of continuing bonds developed by Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman (1996), which challenges stage-based models of grief by arguing that relationships with the deceased persist rather than dissolve. Dimcheva's analysis extends this insight to relationships with unknown dead, showing how ethical identification and shared vulnerability produce agential ties that extend beyond kinship, which are further fostered through grief, ethics, and meaning-making.

Petra Hamer examines the concept of *šehidi*, which denotes Muslim martyrs in Bosnia. She explores cemeteries, funerals, and recitations, portraying individuals in this category of deceased as political agents who reshape identities via local and transnational memorials. Hamer's investigation of *šehidi* resonates with scholarship on martyrdom and political theology, in which the dead shape national and transnational identities (e.g., Hatina 2014; Murphy 2023). The deceased here function not merely as symbols but as moral and political agents who redistribute recognition and privilege.

Jaka Repič analyzes Second World War and post-war mass graves in Slovenia, arguing that bones and objects evoke emotions, mobilize action, and redefine memory politics within communities. Repič's analysis of Slovenian mass graves parallels Katherine Verdery's (2000) argument that dead bodies are potent nodes in nationalist and post-conflict memory politics. His focus on exhumations also connects with forensic anthropology and post-conflict studies, demonstrating how material remains catalyze claims for justice and national reckoning (Crossland 2009; Ferrándiz 2013; Anstett – Dreyfus 2015). Here, agency is not metaphorical: bones reshape social relations, activate institutions, and transform political discourse.

Michal Uhrin details religious rituals related to the commemoration of the dead in rural Slovakia, mapping deathscapes across cemeteries, churches, and homes as sites of cultural continuity and change. Consistent with debates on secularism and post-secular Europe, Uhrin demonstrates how religious traditions persist within ostensibly secular societies, aligning with scholarship on lived religion (Orsi 2004; McGuire 2008). In this context, the dead become mediators between religious cosmologies and modern bureaucratic states. Here, space and material objects used in commemoration rituals provide channels through which the dead exert influence on the living.

Through an autoethnography of a trial in the South Africa, Felicity Wood critiques the dehumanization of victims in court while revealing their subtle influence on the emotions and ideas of the living. Wood's autoethnography of courtroom proceedings contributes to legal anthropology and trauma studies (Das 2003; Fassin – Rechtman 2009). Her argument recalls Didier Fassin's (2012) work on humanitarian reason and the politics of victimhood. At the same time, the subtle affective presence of the dead in legal settings aligns with scholarship on testimony and witnessing (e.g., Felman – Laub 1992), in which absence exerts moral force.

Thus, the studies in this special issue consider the dead as active relational agents. The issue's central claim – that the dead exercise agency through affect, materiality, and ritual – resonates strongly with posthuman and relational ontologies. Engaging both implicitly and explicitly with the

relational theories of agency associated with Bruno Latour (2005) and Karen Barad (2003), the issue reconceptualizes agency as emerging from human-nonhuman entanglements. Bones, graves, memorial plaques, cemeteries, court transcripts, and liturgical recitations do not merely signify the dead; they mediate affects, mobilize publics, and reconfigure moral and political fields. This perspective aligns with Katherine Verdery's (2000) insight that dead bodies have "political lives", while expanding it through meticulous ethnographic attention to affective bonds, everyday ritual, and legal practice.

To conclude, the contributions to this special issue advance a relational and processual understanding of agency that challenges anthropocentric assumptions in social theory. Rather than treating the dead as passive objects of memory, symbol, or representation, the authors demonstrate how agency emerges through dynamic interactions among survivors, material remains, ritual practices, and legal institutions. In doing so, they build upon foundational anthropological insights – from Robert Hertz's (1960) sociology of death to Victor Turner's (1969) ritual process – and extend them into contemporary contexts shaped by terrorism, post-war exhumations, martyrdom, courtroom procedures, and vernacular commemoration. Future research might examine how these relational agencies are negotiated within increasingly pluralistic and globalized contexts, in which secular governance and religious resurgence intersect.

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*Tatiana Bužeková* (Faculty of Arts, Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia)

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