Dying to be seen: An interpretive study of porcelain portraits on grave markers

by

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Abstract

This article explores the roles that porcelain portraits on grave markers play in identity construction and performance. Through semi-structured interviews, the biographies of five individuals are examined and then compared to determine norms or differences regarding their views on sepulchral photographs as a form of memorialization. While the decision to display a gravestone portrait could simply be a long-standing cultural practice, this interpretivist study indicates that the role of photo-tombstones is negotiated through a hybridization process involving religious syncretism, cultural convergence, or familial expectations. The role of photography as material culture is also examined, both as a metonymic replacement for the deceased and for its links to memory recall and remembrance.

*Key Words: gravestone, hybridization, identity, memorialization, portrait, syncretism*
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As one with a formal background in visual communications, I am intrigued by that which is out of view, or even hidden. When the opportunity to join the funeral business presented itself a few years ago, my apprehension at the thought of being surrounded by death eventually yielded to a thanatological curiosity and the chance to “peak behind the door” proved to be enlightening and uniquely rewarding. One of the burial traditions that caught my eye during graveside services was that of placing a porcelain photograph of the deceased on the stelae at the grave or the plaque on the columbarium niche. These “photo-tombstones” were more prominent in some sections of the cemetery than others and, at closer inspection the display of these images seemed to be more frequent amongst specific cultural groups than others. This observation led me to inquire about this gravestone phenomenon with my funeral home colleagues: Were there similarities in the memorialization function of these sepulchral portraits between cultural groups? Were they aligned with high context cultures that ascribed latent meaning to them that I didn’t understand? Were they simply passport photos for entry into the afterlife? Since my co-workers could muster only speculation on these issues, I have undertaken a formal research study of these porcelain portraits to elucidate possible reasons for their inclusion on gravestones.

Five individuals were chosen as case studies due to their membership or co-membership in specific cultural groups represented amongst the interred at Queen’s Park Cemetery in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with them to explore the use or non-use of porcelain portraits on grave markers as part of their negotiated identities. Their lives as told to me become the framework upon which I interpret the meanings that sepulchral portraits have for each of them, and possibly to connections with their membership in broader cultural or religious communities.
Using a qualitative, interpretivist approach, the goal of this study is to investigate the roles that porcelain portraits on grave markers could play in identity construction and negotiation. The topic of photo-tombstones is not found in the academic literature in any field of study, so there exists a sizable gap in the substantive literature. To address this substantive gap, this research project draws upon material culture studies through combined focuses on memorialization (Connerton, 2006; Knappett, 2002; Rowlands & Tilley, 2008), hybridization (Stoddard & Cornwell, 1999), personal narrative (Woodward, 2009), and syncretism (Tan, 2002) within cultural systems as they relate to porcelain portraits. A secondary discipline relevant to this topic is visual studies whereby the role of photography and death (Edwards, 2002; Pinney, 2006) will be explored in light of private and public spaces (Tilley, 2006).

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW
There is an absence of scholarly research solely on sepulchral portraits, although they do appear in thanatologically related studies as secondary or minor considerations. For example, one of these appearances is a cursory mention in Hamscher (2006) in relation to a personalization shift in memorialization and in postmodern gravestone designs in general. Matturri (1993) also includes a theoretical analysis of photo-tombstones within the Italian Catholic tradition, while Crissman (1994) and Gradwohl (1993) relate them back to Appalachian and Jewish monuments respectively. Sepulchral portraits have even been discussed and debated briefly in Jewish responsa—the body of rabbinic literature that serves as a guide for interpreting Jewish law—most notably in Freehof (1976), Jacob (1980), and Yoffie (1997). Ancestor portraits, a direct cousin to funeral portraits, are mentioned by Chow and Teather (1998), Harrell (1979), and Teather (2001) as it relates to ancestor
worship in Chinese folk religion. There is a lack of evidence that shows research having been conducted wholly on sepulchral portraits within any ancestor-worshipping communities.

There are two mass-market books available on the topic of photo-tombstones: Yang’s (2001) book is a photographic exposé geared for a lay audience although it does provide some technical information on photo-ceramic production. Also a lay publication, Horne’s (2004) book on photo-tombstones offers greater relevance to my study although its primary focus is tracking waves of immigration to a specific region of the United States. Providing a somewhat scholarly perspective to the book, however, is a doctorate-level editor who contributes its Introduction, History and Culture chapters.

Aside from the material culture aspect of cemetery artifacts and funerary art, the historical role of photography is also relevant to this study for two reasons. First, the development of the French-based daguerreotype photograph was used in the production of the first cameos to appear on gravestones; and second, the study of memorialization inevitably involves the human eye, our primary sensory organ, and how it is causally linked to memory retention and recall. Porcelain portraits on grave monuments, therefore, represent the convergence of these two phenomena.

The ability of photography to capture a scene in time and save it for future consumption is ubiquitous in most societies. This ability to “preserve” reality has been studied since the daguerreotype’s inception in the late 1830s. Goldsmith (1979) explores photographic portraiture at the height of its novelty during the 19th century; and Riches and Dawson (1998) further examine daguerreotype portraiture and its role in post-mortem photography. Camera Lucida, Barthes’ (1980) influential work on the semiotic nature of photography is widely revered as a classic, although other scholars (Batchen, 2004; Lesy,
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2007; Morris, 2009) have more closely examined the link between photography, the eye, and the act of remembrance. Still others (Francis, Kellaher, & Neophytou, 2005; Godel, 2007; Rose, 2003) have studied the relationship between the mourning process and photography, and the role of photographs in funeral practices as discussed by Crissman (1994) and Morris (2009).

As mentioned, there is no evidence in the analytical literature of studies pertaining to sepulchral portraits on grave markers. Material culture studies has explored cognate themes relevant to my research: memorialization (Connerton, 2006; Rowlands & Tilley, 2008), identity construction (Tilley, 2006), and syncretism (Tan, 2002; van Dommelen, 2006), which leads to a broader discussion of hybridization in the data analysis section of this paper. Narrative studies, such as those found in Woodward (2009) form the structural basis upon which my case studies were modeled.

In its effort to discover the roles that photo-tombstones may have for the identities of the five individuals highlighted here, this study has drawn upon a broader interpretivist pool of resources to help find these answers. Other disciplines, such as visual studies, have used material objects as their focus, including the referent dimension unique to photographs (Edwards, 2002; Rose, 2003; Ruby, 2005) and on the objecthood of photographs (Knappett, 2002). Thanatological studies on cemeteries (Wright, 2005) and private versus public mourning (Doss, 2002; Harlow, 2005; Rose, 2003) have also been utilized to accommodate a wider scope.
METHOD

Opened in 1940, Queen’s Park Cemetery is one of the largest, non-denominational public cemeteries in the city (City of Calgary, 2009). It offers a diverse range of interment options and its open-air sections contain both upright monuments and flat markers. Compared to the stricter grave rules that govern private or smaller cemeteries elsewhere in the city, the range of memorialization options visible at Queen’s Park adds a dimension of validity to this study as it represents a good cross-section of Calgary’s population over time. So it was here that my inquiry began into the role that porcelain portraits on grave markers may have for members of specific cultural groups.

A visual audit of the cemetery yielded the impression that porcelain portraits appeared more often in certain cultural or religious groups than others. Through snowball sampling, interviewees were recruited who self-identified as members of one or more of these cultural groups for me to understand the role that porcelain portraits may or may not have in the performance of their identity as members of those groups. In addition, recruitment of informed or expert respondents such as spiritual leaders, monument makers, and funeral directors was achieved through purposive sampling. These individuals provided insights into the porcelain portrait phenomenon from a formalized or institutional perspective.

Between March and June 2010, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 24 respondents. With the exception of a spontaneous telephone interview with a Catholic priest and a Jewish congregant, written and informed consent was given by all participants and a general interview guide was used, although tailored somewhat depending on each participant and the sensitizing concepts being explored. The guide included
questions such as “Have you participated in the purchasing decision for a deceased relative’s
grave monument or niche plaque?” and “Why did you (or did you not) choose a porcelain
portrait for your loved one’s grave marker?” The average time spent with each participant
was one hour and, when possible, interviews were captured on a digital voice recorder and
selectively transcribed afterwards.

Of the twenty-four non-expert interviews conducted, five were selected as case
studies to describe the role(s) that porcelain portraits may play for them as identity
performing resources. Taking a broad, interpretivist approach that is holistic and contextual
by nature, the five case studies were analyzed for underlying norms and compared with
existent analytical perspectives to understand how their individual beliefs and practices may
have either supported or collided with any formal behaviours based on institutional
moorings.

IDENTITY PERFORMANCES: FIVE CASES

Mary

“It sounds morbid, but we should actually videotape what’s happening . . .
video the body, take pictures. It really does sound morbid.”

~ TERRY (MARY’S DAUGHTER)

Mary⁴, my next-door neighbor, was 85 years old when she passed away at home from cardiac
arrest. At her funeral mass five days later, my wife and I had the privilege of meeting
members of her family whom we had merely heard about from Jane for the decade she was
our neighbor. As we mingled with her family, the cosmopolitan features evident in her eight
children and 13 grandchildren were obvious; no doubt the result of her bi-racial marriage and
her children’s mixed unions.
Mary was born to Chinese immigrants in British Guiana in 1924, and at the age of 25, she married Joseph Saint-Élie, whose family is of African descent. As Mary’s youngest daughter Terry told me, “My mom’s dad, my grandfather, moved from China to French Guiana, and then he moved to British Guiana because he had travelled there so much.” Terry’s memory of her maternal grandmother is vague but she does recall that, “He travelled and then met my grandmother. She spoke French and he spoke Chinese and very little English when he moved to British Guiana.” Although Mary grew up in an English-speaking environment and, due to her parents’ influence, embraced Anglican Christianity as a youth, she converted to Catholicism when she and Joseph married in 1949. Her Chinese identity was not wholly abandoned, however, as Terry explains: “Years ago when we lived in Guiana, we were involved in the Chinese Cultural Association [and would celebrate] the Chinese New Year. So they would have the Dragon Dance and she would attend that and be involved.”

Mary, Joseph, and family immigrated to Canada on July 1, 1979, and moved into the home next door to the house that my wife and I would purchase 20 years later. Although our neighborhood is only a short commute to Chinatown in downtown Calgary, Mary had not had a Chinese neighbor for the entire time she had lived there, so when she saw my Chinese wife and I unpacking household items, she came over, introduced herself, and at the end of the conversation gave my wife a hug and expressed excitement at finally having a Chinese neighbor.

When Joseph died in 1999, his passing was the first significant loss to her family. Terry points out that, “We were lucky . . . she prepared everything and, before my dad died, she didn’t talk a lot about death.” Taking control of her husband’s funeral arrangements was
a time when Mary would again rise to the occasion despite having eight adult children who could have managed such affairs on her behalf. As Terry recalls, her lifelong obsession with preparation and planning was evident even during this time of intense grief:

She had pretty much planned everything because of my dad. When my dad died, nothing was set up . . . so she picked out everything. And at the time she was doing that, she decided she would do hers also. So everything was all done, everything was all paid for, 10 years ago. So a picture of dad was on the headstone from years ago.

One thing that Terry isn’t sure about is whether her mother’s choice of photograph that was used for her dad’s gravestone portrait was carefully planned to reflect his favorite suit—the one he was buried in—or whether it was merely coincidence: “When she picked the picture, I don’t know if she thought about it. I have no idea if she said, ‘This is his suit, this is what he’s going to wear to match that picture.’ ” The photograph Mary chose was well-known amongst the family and could be her complement to the epitaph that she selected for his headstone. As Terry mentions, “When she chose those words they were very meaningful to her . . . as it says on the bottom ‘Together Forever’ so I think part of that could have had some meaning to the photograph.” She also alludes to two possible reasons why her mother would opt for a portrait at all for the gravestone she shares with her father:

I think part of it was her Chinese heritage, because I know most Chinese will choose to do it . . . it’s part of Chinese culture. Whether it’s a Catholic thing, I’m not sure if it is. I’ve never gone around [the cemetery] and looked, but now that you’ve mentioned it, I think the [grave] next to her has a similar stone, and a few others around her have a similar stone, so maybe it is a Catholic thing.
When Mary died in May 2009, there were very few details for the family to wrap up since she had pre-planned her own funeral 10 years prior at the time of Joseph’s arrangements. Normally, the responsibility for memorializing a loved one is assigned to a surviving family member who decides—based on their understanding of what the deceased would have wanted—what mnemonic devices to use. What is noteworthy in Mary’s situation, then, is that she took control, not only of her husband’s identity, but also of her own. In regards to the portrait, Terry claims that she herself may have chosen differently, “I don’t know if I would have done that because the way I looked at it when it was set up years ago, I’m kind of a private person and to display [a picture], it is public, so you’re taking away the privacy.” With the passage of time, however, her mother’s decision to put a porcelain portrait on her grave marker has caused Terry to view sepulchral portraits differently:

- at the time, it really didn’t have an effect on me, it didn’t mean anything . . .
- until she actually died. When I go to see it now, it’s really touching. That’s the only way I can explain it. Before that, because I could actually see her in real life, it didn’t have a connection at that time.

The importance of closure in the loss of their mother has impacted the eight siblings in various ways. For Terry, a Catholic, felt that her mother’s death was “. . . meant for her, for her life to be taken at that time . . .” Seeing her gravestone portrait, as she’s pointed out, offers her a modicum of comfort. An ailing sister at the time, who missed her mother’s funeral, was less understanding about divine intervention in her mother’s passing and “that it wasn’t meant to happen suddenly. Something went wrong [with the paramedic treatment].” To help her sister find some closure, Terry suggested that they videotape as many aspects of the funeral process as possible to help her sister understand what actually
transpired. Perhaps her sister would look upon her parents’ gravestone portrait and share the momentary solace that Terry eventually found in the picture.

As one who has overcome great disparity in her life—converging ethnicities, multiple religions, distant countries—Terry characterizes her mother as having a mind of her own. Her gravestone seems to speak to this quality:

> I know she was very proud of who they were as a couple because years ago, having an interracial marriage, they had struggles. You know, 60-something years ago, how many interracial marriages did they have? Not very many, so I think they both were very proud of what they accomplished, what they overcame.

Figure 1: Headstone for George and Jane Saint-Élie in the Roman Catholic section of Queen’s Park Cemetery in Calgary.

(Photo by Patrick Brooks)
Edmond

“Well, they say [the spirits] can use them. Right now in Hong Kong they even burn Mercedes Benz, iPods, flat screen TVs . . .”

~ EDMOND CHONG

Edmond was born in 1955 in Macau, one of two administrative regions of the People’s Republic of China (the other being Hong Kong). His mother, a Catholic, was the third wife of a man whose second wife had previously bore him three sons and a daughter, Edmond’s half-siblings. Despite his mother’s Christian beliefs—and his being baptized a Catholic as a youth—he did not attend any of the Catholic missionary schools left behind by the Portugese administration years earlier. Edmond recalls that “after my mom died, I moved to Hong Kong with my dad. I was nine years old.” Now, living in an even larger metropolitan area than Macau, his opinions about ideal city size and comfortable living space began to form: “No, small is good, as long as its quiet and not too many people . . . I don’t like people.”

In 1976 at the age of 21, Edmond immigrated to Canada; his departure from Hong Kong followed the exodus of his own half-siblings who opted to bring their respective families to this part of the world a few years before. In addition to remaining closer to his nieces, nephews, and siblings, he felt that there were limited job opportunities for him and, as he puts it, “I kind of wanted a change, too.” In 1981, a few years after arriving in Calgary, Edmond wed Lillian, herself a former resident of Hong Kong. In 1983, they welcomed a son, William, and in 1990, a daughter, Michelle.

Edmond’s upbringing in Macau and Hong Kong exposed him to cultures that have, over many centuries, syncretized different religious practices and local customs. Buddhism and Chinese folk religion, in particular, was a curious combination in his childhood home,
as Edmond remembers: “I think it’s kind of a mix. You pay respect to your ancestor using a Buddhist gesture.” He recalls that, although not a religious figure, the teachings of Confucius “influenced the everyday lives of Chinese people. [He] put ancestors on a higher pedestal . . . almost the same level as God.” So when his parents would burn incense at the home altar, “It’s in respect to the parents, to the ancestors . . . it’s kind of a Buddhist thing.” Confucianism and Chinese folk religion predate the arrival of Buddhism in China so when Buddhism did arrive from India, Edmond believes that “[the people] still had to put in the ancestor type of element to make it work first, or else it wouldn’t have gotten accepted in China.”

When I asked him what happens to an ancestor’s spirit upon death, he replied, “[It] goes to the afterlife . . . reincarnation.” And when asked if he believes that a spirit, according to some scholars who have studied death in Chinese culture, splits into three entities—one stays with the home altar, one resides at the grave, and one enters the afterlife—Edmond feels that this viewpoint is an example of the regional beliefs that exist for certain customs. For him, “It’s the same spirit. It’s not split into three.” Actually, ancestor veneration is a tradition that he still practices: “Every year we have a day that we go to the cemetery, you know . . . Ching Ming. It’s a big thing in China and Hong Kong, even here.” Part of the Ching Ming custom is to burn joss money and other paper goods to equip the ancestor’s spirit for a comfortable existence in the afterlife, although Edmond feels that the extent of paper items offered these days raises an eyebrow: “Right now in Hong Kong they even burn Mercedes Benz, iPods, flat screen TVs.”

According to Edmond, displaying portraits of the deceased on gravestones, columbaria niches, and memorial hall plaques are a western influence: “Well, I think it’s a contemporary thing. Like in ancient times, we never put portraits on there. Probably it is a
western influence. That’s what I would think.” The popularity of the portraits over time suggests to him that, “. . . it’s almost like a standard. Just like the tombstones . . . all made the same way, unless someone says they don’t have a portrait or they don’t want to put it on there.” For those gravestones with portraits, he has mixed feelings: “I think with the photograph there, even if it’s not a Chinese [idea], having it there can bring back memories of that person. Nowadays, if you don’t have that picture I think you’ve kind of lost something.” Even as a genealogical tool, Edmond feels that having a portrait on the gravestone is helpful:

Well, you know, just like looking at a TV is better than looking at books. I think that is how the trend is, eh? Like how are you going to describe a person without looking at a picture? The best way to describe him is to look at an actual picture instead of, oh yeah, he’s got dark hair and brown eyes.

Edmond’s daughter, Michelle, experienced this revelation personally when she visited her grandfather’s grave in Hong Kong recently and viewed his portrait for the first time: “Well, I know what he looks like now.” Edmond adds that, “I actually talked to the kids and William said, ‘Well, it’s good for you to put your picture on there . . . you can relate to it.’”

Figure 2-A: Section of Junk Bay Cemetery in Hong Kong showing a standardized monument design with portraits. (Photo by Chris Cho)
Another western burial influence that Edmond witnessed was a shift to smaller monuments and memorials. He says that with its population doubling since he left in 1976, Hong Kong’s lack of available burial space has given rise to “. . . a shape like a miniature of the centerpiece of a Chinese tombstone.” A traditional Chinese burial plot, which could be a sizable armchair-shaped worshipping platform (Figure 2-B), has been reduced to just a replica of the façade of a traditional burial monument (Figure 2-A), or, for cremations and memorials, reduced even more to a four-inch square plaque displayed in a memorial hall (Figure 2-C); all three, of course, display a porcelain portrait of the deceased.

As someone who has expressed unease amidst large groups of people, Edmond sees some conflict between his children’s desire to see his portrait being displayed and his own reluctance to have one: “I’m comfortable with my family members but not strangers looking at you . . . they size you up. Why should I put my picture there for a stranger to come across and look at it?” The final decision on having a portrait rests with his children, as he wonders, “How hard do they want to remember me?”

*Figure 2-B: Large burial plot in Macau with standardized centerpiece. (Photo by Chris Cho)*

*Figure 2-C: Memorial plaque of Edmond’s mother on the Catholic side of a memorial hall at the Calgary Chinatown Seniors Centre. (Photo by Patrick Brooks)*
Benjamin

“Are you valuing the image of the person? How far do you want to take it?

Maybe take the person to a taxidermist, stuff them, and put them up on the mantel?”

~ BENJAMIN GOLDBERG

Born in 1951 to immigrant parents, first-generation Canadian Benjamin Goldberg grew up in what he calls “a modern orthodox family” in a suburb of Montréal. His parents were observant of Jewish orthodoxy, due in no small part to their Eastern European heritage, she was Polish and he was Belarusian. They were, however, “observant in a practical way,” according to Benjamin. “They would typically work through the Sabbath to keep their business operating but kept a kosher home, went to synagogue on high holidays, and prayed at home on Sundays.” He admits that from the time of his bar mitzvah to age 17, he adopted “a religious phase . . . and become quite observant,” but as a young man, he pulled away from his orthodox identity and embraced the temptations of life in a large, urban centre. He reluctantly confesses that he “went astray with hormones and experimented with drugs.” In 1978, at the age of 27, he moved to Calgary. Staying with a cousin for a month, he landed a job and began his search for, as he puts it, “fame and fortune.” What followed, however, was the duality of being an accountant by day and a connoisseur of the visual arts by night. For much of the ’80s and ’90s, Benjamin had neglected his orthodox upbringing and identified himself as a Jew in name only.

Since reverence for the dead is a fundamental Jewish value—and, conveniently for him, is one that even a secular Jew can passively perform—Benjamin had continued to observe restrictions bestowed upon him by the Talmud regarding his proximity to mortal remains. As his father told him years before, his paternal ancestry is from a priestly line of
Russian Jews and thus he is “forbidden to come within six feet of a grave site.” He remembers his favorite aunt and uncle dying when he was quite young but cannot recall why his family did not attend their funerals. Although death was generally not discussed in the Goldberg household, Benjamin does not know if this silence was related to their priestly status or whether his parents were merely uncomfortable with the topic. The only times he had been to a cemetery—the Baron de Hirsch Jewish Cemetery in Montréal—was as a passenger in a vehicle for the cemetery’s main roadway was wide enough to accommodate a six-foot clearance between he and any grave they encountered. And from this limited vantage point, he doesn’t recall seeing any portraits on Jewish markers. Even a visit to a distant relative’s grave in Tel Aviv in the 1970s did not challenge this perspective: “I saw the graves but they were all plain. They were all like a regular stone with writing on it and that’s it. No pictures of any kind.” When I asked him for his thoughts on the porcelain portrait phenomenon on Jewish markers (see Figure 3), his response was simple: “For me, there’s not even a thought of having a photograph. It’s foreign to my experience.”

“With the death of my father,” Benjamin recalls, “I had a decision to make. Do I say the ritual mourner’s prayers for 11 months or do I hire someone to do that on my behalf?” At this watershed moment, he acknowledges that a shift in his identity had occurred: “I felt my father was worth it to me to go back to my roots and do that.” While his non-observant brother opted to pay to have prayers recited, Benjamin was compelled to do it himself. He joined an orthodox synagogue in Calgary, found a quorum of 10 men to pray with, and after the 11 months were over, he was inspired to reclaim his Jewish heritage that had been shelved for nearly 20 years.
Since his father’s death and the renegotiating of his orthodox Jewish identity now a priority, his isolated views—both literally and figuratively—on Jewish gravestones became tendentious with his synagogue’s. For instance, their official position on porcelain portraits on Jewish grave markers is made clear by Rabbi Greene: “According to most authorities, photographs are not called graven images, not bound by the second commandment. It seems from the Talmud that only three-dimensional images are forbidden. This would seem to not apply to photographs at all.” This distinction may help explain their appearance on older gravestones in Israel, as a co-congregant explained to me: “In Israel, I noticed more frequent children’s photos on markers. If it’s a child, there’s a greater chance of having a photo. Psychologically, I guess I could see wanting to preserve as much of that child as possible.”

Allowing photographs on early markers may have eluded rabbinic proscription based on a loophole in Jewish law but it eventually drew criticism in light of Jewish values surrounding cemeteries, as Rabbi Greene explains: “Number one . . . it’s not proper to try and make one grave much more prominent than another. Making a distinction among the dead was not a good idea. The other value is humility. In death we are humbled before God. The soul lives on and the body passes away.”

Because of these two deep-rooted values, the orthodox position is to disallow them on their congregants’ markers, called aniconism, and preventing the adornment of Jewish markers with portraits is systemically enforced by the chevra kadisha, the Jewish burial society. The chevra kadisha, in turn, act as an agent for the highest-ranking orthodox rabbi in Calgary on matters of Jewish law and values concerning burials. When Benajamin pre-purchased his own grave marker through the chevra kadisha, portrait-less markers are the norm, which affirmed his understanding that a central aspect of Jewish membership was
having a standardized tombstone. When shown a photograph depicting two Jewish markers with portraits, however, he was genuinely surprised: “It was very unexpected to see when you showed me the pictures [of the Singer graves] and I didn’t get it. It doesn’t fit with my mind’s eye of orthodoxy.”

Through his participation in this research study, Benjamin has, for the first time, articulated his perspective on why he thinks sepulchral portraits runs counter to the two Jewish values described by Rabbi Greene. Benjamin first makes a distinction in terminology: “it’s a grave ‘marker,’ not a grave monument,” which speaks to the Jewish avoidance of creating an icon, or fetish, out of the deceased’s remains. As well, Jewish law dictates that a body should be buried within 24 hours of death, which makes sense to Benjamin because “you’re beholden to the spirit and the teachings . . . to the essence of the person, not the carrying case of the person.”

For most Jews, as Edmond explains, mnemonic devices used to memorialize Jews are typically honor plaques, patron lists, or sponsorship certificates rather than a grave marker.
that becomes ostentatious when it attempts to “outdo” its cemetery neighbors. In his opinion, seeing a portrait on a marker seems wrong:

Of course you remember the person and value the person but you value them for the deeds that they did and the stuff that they did as a person. When you bury the body, the physical is out of sight and out of mind right away. So the face reminds you of the body.

With a home full of visual art, sculpture, and photographs, he acknowledges the affective power of the visual and negotiates their contextual meanings for himself—for example, the portrait of his dad in the family album serves a much different function than if it appeared on his gravestone. Had his membership in Judaism not been orthodox and of the priestly line he admits that having a portrait on a gravestone might be acceptable: “And you know what, had I been brought up with it, I might have a totally different perspective on it.”

Amali

“He had built his own tomb and was living in it. It was like a house.”

~ CHAMINDA (AMALI’S DAUGHTER)

Amali Samarakoon was a life-long vegetarian and teetotaler. Until his death in 2005, his oldest daughter, Chaminda, describes him as being in “perfect health. He had no diabetes . . . nothing,” and that he was a “scholar and was very attached to the English language. He would know all the poets—Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, Tennyson . . . he was a walking encyclopedia.” Amali lived to be 98 and outlived his wife by 12 years despite being 10 years her senior. Chaminda recalls that her father “left his native village when he was 18 to join the postal department in Colombo, the largest city in Sri Lanka.” His knack for knowledge was particularly evident during this period, as she recalls: “He was engaged in self study.
He studied law and even wrote books on related subjects. He was a self-made man.”

Through an arranged marriage, Amali wed his second cousin Mendee Pinsalis in 1940. Both groom and bride were from the village of Balapitiya on the south coast of Sri Lanka and, although their matrimonial union had an astrological blessing (as required by local custom at the time) their formal religious affiliations were poles apart. His family followed the pure form of Buddhism called Theraveda (still the dominant religion in Sri Lanka) and she grew up as an Anglican, an iteration of Christianity that was brought to the area by British colonialists between 1815 and 1947.

Amali and Mendee were flexible enough in their world views that they both developed a syncretized philosophy of their respective religions. Their granddaughter, Panesh, suggests that their time in Colombo helped establish their individual identities: “My grandparents had been residing in Colombo with all of the cosmopolitan influences for a long, long time.” Chaminda adds that despite any cultural differences between the two, “both parents were educated in English and shared many ideas and ideals.” Amali and Mendee had four children (two boys and two girls) and are buried together in a family plot in the Buddhist section of Holy Emmanuelle Church, an Anglican parish in Colombo.

Cremation, not burial, is the traditional method of body disposal for Theraveda Buddhists. After cremation, Chaminda explains, “The ashes are then taken and put into the sea or the river. That is the normal pattern. The erection of monuments is not the normal pattern.” Amali’s granddaughter, Panesh, clarifies that “it is a form of suffering to grieve for a long time. I think most people who practice the pure form of Buddhism will refrain from erecting monuments and going back with flowers now and then.” Although Amali was the “practicing Buddhist” in his marriage, he “retained a strong love for our own identity and
Sri Lankan customs,” as Chaminda remembers. “My mother to a lesser extent.” Since both of her parents were “very much influenced by Western thoughts and practices,” it didn’t surprise the family when Amali built a tombstone to memorialize his Christian wife’s cremated remains in 1993. “When my mother was alive I would hear the two of them discussing the family tomb. It was generally accepted that they both wanted their ashes to be deposited [in the cemetery];” this would appear to align with Panesh’s assessment of her grandparents’ blended views on marriage and religion: “Because people are cultural first and religious second, in that sense.”

Since being identified as a self-made man by his own daughter, Amali may have been inspired to build his wife’s tombstone after seeing what a successful businessman had created for himself in the same cemetery in which the Samarakoons had purchased their family plot: “I remember when we were little, we would go to the crematorium and my siblings and father would stand there and look at it. He had built his own tomb and he was living in it. It was like a house.” Although Amali may have taken note of the businessman’s display of pictures on his tomb, as daughter Chaminda recalls: “He had put pictures, his wife’s pictures all over,” it was Amali’s children who ultimately suggested he install a picture of their mother on the front of the tombstone:
At the beginning when my mother passed away, we just had to give them a laminated photo of her in which they . . . inserted into a little scooped out area of the rock, but it got spoiled in no time so when my father passed away, they did it on a porcelain plate.

When I asked Chaminda why she thought her father acquiesced to having a portrait of his wife on her tombstone, a practice not followed in Theraveda Buddhism, she replied, “It must just be perpetuation of memory.” As a Theravedan Buddhist, her father would have accepted the lack of a physical memorial as standard practice since one’s body is “just the vessel that keeps the mind.” Chaminda’s daughter added that, “He would burn incense or a candle there when he goes,” which would suggest he was negotiating his behaviors based on syncretized Western and Buddhist rituals.

When Amali passed away 12 years later, the children removed the single photo of their mother from the tombstone and “put a picture of the two of them together on the gravestone.” Chaminda recalls that “he was very happy when we put on my mother’s photograph when she passed away. He was very happy seeing that so we knew he would want it to.” Being prominently displayed in a public cemetery would not have bothered her father, she acknowledges: “My mother said she wanted a simple funeral, but my father . . . my father used to always say, ‘I want a grand funeral! Why would I want to hide? I want people to know!’ ”
Dorothy

“In a way I feel it’s really nobody’s business who’s under that headstone or what they look like.”

~ DOROTHY PREECE

Born and raised in Port Arthur, Ontario (now one half of Thunder Bay), in 1943, Dorothy Arthur lost her father to a World War II injury when she was six years old. Her mother, now a single parent, would frequently enlist Dorothy’s help in raising her brother who was four years younger. Her mother did not keep a Christian home, as she remembers: “[Religion] was never forced on us or anything. We went to Sunday school as kids but that was about it. Basically [mom] left it up to us to make up our own minds.” By the time she was 16 and living in Kakabeka Falls, Ontario, with her mother and new stepfather, she admits that “I quit going to Sunday school long before that,” although her own mother had actually become a regular churchgoer. With limited job opportunities, Dorothy joined the military at the age of 18 and spent two years performing gendered tasks in support roles since combat duties for women were limited in the early 1960s. She met and married a radar technician, Master Corporal Douglas Preece in 1963 and left the military but did not leave military life. Between 1965 and 1975, they were stationed at four different Canadian Forces radar bases across Canada and welcomed two sons along the way.

Early in her marriage, Dorothy recalls working at a temporary job that—like her military commitment—seemed to reflect her community-minded ethos: “I worked on a health survey where I was out meeting people . . . out and around the countryside and on the farms and what have you.” When asked if being community-minded was an accurate label, however, she rejects it outright: “Aaah . . . not particularly.” When the family was stationed
in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, Dorothy took a creative writing course and landed part-time work writing local television commercials. This experience helped her a few years later when Douglas left the military and the family moved to Grande Prairie, Alberta, where Dorothy began writing radio spots for a local station. Helping the community would again become part of her identity once her children had left home. She volunteered as a tutor for special needs students and still maintains a long-standing commitment to Grande Prairie’s Frontier Museum where she enjoys sharing history with “those that are interested.”

Dorothy traces her own reluctance to embrace ritualized behavior to when she was a young girl: “I’ve just never liked rituals . . . period. I couldn’t even get going in the Brownies when I was a kid. Because of all the little rituals they used to have, I would think ‘Gee, that’s kind of stupid.’” Immersing herself in military protocol a few years later became equally frustrating since she knew that women were not considered equal participants in defending the country. And from the narrow funeral experience she has, she’s come to loathe the spectacle of the institutionalized mortuary process:

I don’t know why they need to make such a big to-do about burying somebody.
I can see maybe having a little service at the graveside or something and saying a few words . . . but these formalized rituals that they go through at the churches and that. Why? When you’re dead, you’re dead.

As a self-described “heathen” who does not require a clergy member to act as an agent for salvation, her views on memorialization likewise seem to favor simplicity and pragmatism rather than spectacle and ritual. “I think a lot of times [family] put up these fancy gravestones . . . like they’re doing it out of a guilt trip. Treat them like crap when they’re living and make up for it with a fancy funeral.” Even pondering her own death, her interest lies with not being
memorialized at all, as she explains: “Well, I think I’m going to be cremated and have my ashes scattered over Thunder Bay.”

When Dorothy does imagine having a gravestone put up in her memory, it doesn’t include a porcelain portrait of her on it. “I’ve never seen a portrait on a military grave . . .” is a comment that echoes her own history with the Air Force and the insignificance of such portraits for remembering the fallen. Or that they are merely not needed as visual reminders for family members to ponder, as she explains:

And anybody who’s going to go visit these places, these particular graves, they know what that person looked like. They’re probably going to have pictures of them at home somewhere, in a photo album, or whatever. They’re sort of ostentatious, really. They’re sort of saying “Look at me, I was here!”

The grave is a personal space that happens to exist in a public venue and, for Dorothy, this shared purpose is problematic. Asked whether she would like to see a picture of her own mother on her gravestone, her answer was, “No, I don’t really think so. And if you’re going to put a picture on, what are you going to pick? A photo when they were young and vibrant or when they’re old and wrinkled?” The issue of

*Figure 5: Grave goods left behind monument at the Grande Prairie Cemetery. (Photo by Sharon Brooks)*
permanence and replacement are an issue as well: “No, heck, in a hundred years it would be all weathered anyway. There wouldn’t be much to look at, would there? Or some vandals would get at it.” Her views on displaying a family picture for public consumption are simple: “She’s my mother and not the public’s!”

If she were to be memorialized with a gravestone Dorothy believes it should be more descriptive than just her stats. The variety of customization in contemporary grave monuments is unlimited so remembering the person’s life experiences should be the priority “because it tells you what that person did and what they were interested in . . . far more than a portrait does.” Even the grave goods that people leave behind “tells you more about that person than any picture could,” as she states:

There was one there that really caught my eye . . . there was a sign on the back of his grave . . . it was like a crossing sign for a road except it had a guy going fishing. He had a pole over his shoulder and he was heading somewhere . . . he was going fishing. And that, to me, speaks volumes about this person.

Having an epitaph seems more agreeable to her than utilizing any visuals, as Dorothy claims: “If I was going to have a headstone, I would rather have some kind of epitaph rather than a picture.” She admits, it could simply be her fondness for “the printed word, poetry, and such” that draws her to an epitaph and nothing more. Assuming, of course, she forgos Plan A, the scattering of her ashes over Thunder Bay.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As tools to aid in the performance of their identities, porcelain portraits have been embraced or avoided by the five participants for different reasons. For Mary, “Identity is transient, a reflection on where you are now” (Tilley, 2006, p. 9), which in her case was eventually
settling on a Catholic exit strategy. For Edmond, he seems ambivalent about ancestor worship and its connection to tombstone portraits but recognizes the greater social and familial importance of tradition, as Tilley (2006) suggests: “Senses of self identity and social identity are bound up with the contingencies and uncertainties of the present ways in which to relate to an idealized past and an imagined future” (p. 17). For Dorothy, a grave monument “exist[s] as a means of fixing history” (Rowlands & Tilley, 2006, p. 500) and having her portrait displayed would bring an undesirable form of immortality. For Amali, his phototombstone provides a greater voice amongst his peers and became a “matter of social performance and display” (Woodward, 2009, p. 63). And for Edmond, the traditional orthodox view of early photo-tombstones has been turned upside down leaving a legacy that “may be held by some people as an ideology and by others as tradition; and what has been tradition may under certain historical circumstances become ideology” (Swidler, 1986, p. 279).

At closer inspection, three underlying norms emerge between these five cases: (a) they show a hybridization of religious or cultural practices, (b) there is emotional discord brought on by private grief in a public venue, and (c) that mimicking surrounding graves was a key motivator in displaying a portrait and not necessarily capitalizing on any ascribed higher purpose for it. It is self-evident that these norms have been instigated, at some level, by the presence or non-presence of a sepulchral portrait assigned to a grave marker. Compared with traditionally sanctioned sepulchral motifs—such as religious iconography or the self-narrative of epigraphy—the addition of a photographic portrait can be tremendously potent as an aid to memorialization. To this end, a discussion of the role of photographs as material culture is looked at first.
Photographs, whether in an album or on a gravestone, “generate the powerful illusion that it is actually possible to be in the presence of [a] past reality” (Connerton, 2006, p. 318). Since the advent of photography—and postmortem portraiture (Crissman, 1994; Horne, 2004), in particular—the unique ability of a photographic image to carry a likeness of its referent (Knappett, 2002; Morris, 2009; Pinney, 2006; Rose, 2003) has made it a central component in the funerary process because such an object is a synecdochal stand-in for the presence of the absent person (Woodward, 2009). Today, however, “photographs of the dead are no longer considered appropriate; it is photographic *remembrances* of the person in life, not in death, which are valued” (Layne, 2000, p. 334, italics added).

Postmortem portraits may have fallen out of favor as gravestone adornments in the late 19th century, but it did not eradicate photo-tombstones altogether as they have been found in cultures who share customs that keep the dead alive (Horne, 2004; Matturri, 1993), such as Italian Catholics, Eastern European Jews, and peoples in Latin America. In Riches and Dawson (1998), it is argued that “memory is created and preserved around physical objects and spaces. Photographs particularly capture and preserve memories, enabling the past to be recalled and reinterpreted” (p. 122). With an unassailable ability to stimulate remembrance, its deliberate integration with a core ritual such as burial and its proximity to the deceased’s physical remains, it is no surprise that a domestic emblem such as a family photograph (Hurdley, 2007) can invoke polarized responses when used as a sepulchral portrait, as these cases have shown.

With the notion of remembrance as a material culture attribute of photography being common to all five case studies, a more focused analysis can be made of how this attribute has manifested into certain norms across these cultural identities. The first emerging pattern,
hybridization, has two distinct forms: the syncretism of several religious practices and beliefs by one culture; and the amalgamation of one or more ethnicities, cultures, or religious affiliations within an individual. The syncretism of religious practices, specifically, Christianity and Buddhism within Southeast Asian cultures, is common as van Dommelen (2006) explains: “Hybridity ranks particularly prominently among material culture studies of colonial situations, as the combined use of objects with different backgrounds is often an obvious feature” (p. 118). The repeated claim by my Asian participants that porcelain portraits are a “Western” influence is supported by Mitchell (1974) who studied religious pluralism in that region and the prominent role that missionary schools had in the area. Edmond’s childhood in Macau is an example of how Portuguese Catholicism fused with Buddhism, which had already merged with Chinese folk religion from centuries before. The respondents’ assertions that porcelain portraits were introduced to Southeast Asia by the West is a reflection of a critical feature of the hybridization process, “in which existing practices and objects are recombined into new ones” (van Dommelen, 2006, p. 119).

As monument historian Mueller (1976) describes, a recombined object such as the phototombstone most likely came about through historical connections and progressions between cultures, and this would explain the transfer of monument designs from one time and place to another. The conceptual challenge of blending aspects of Eastern and Western belief systems would have failed if the multiplicity of beliefs and rituals did not meet the emotional needs of their adherents, as Parkes, Laungani, and Young (1997) point out: “They may have a symbolic or poetic truth that transcends reason” (p. 241).

The amalgamation of different ethnic, religious, or cultural aspects of the respondents was evident in most of the five case studies. Hannerz (1992) confirms that “culture has
increasingly taken on ‘hybrid’ or ‘creolized’ forms” (p. 8) and Mary Saint-Élie’s grave marker is a textbook example of the multicultural influences that can factor into one’s identity. Her own daughter did not know whether the porcelain portrait on her marker was honoring her Chinese roots or merely confirming her membership in the Catholic section of the cemetery where most markers have pictures. Or maybe it was both since a gravestone carrying multiple or various symbols “becomes part of an identity construction where the deceased is rooted in several cultural contexts” (Reimers, 1999, p. 164).

As a mnemonic device capable of triggering memories (Rowlands & Tilley, 2008), the use of a photo-tombstone appears to be widespread amongst identifiable sections of Queen’s Park Cemetery. Such portraits, being displayed in a public venue and within their larger collective space, “they are not restricted to individual memory but may also keep the deceased alive in the collective memory, shared with other family members or friends, or even strangers” (Howarth, 2000, p. 133). Herein lies the dilemma: is the intention of the tombstone to become a public record of one’s life, or is it a private affair that, by necessity of law, happens to reside in a public space? For secularist Dorothy, the matter is simple; she herself is guarded and uncomfortable with the nosiness of strangers, a distrust that extends to the cemetery. For her, a photograph doesn’t say much about the person anyway and, as Kasabova (2008) explains, “its metonymy brings about the transfer of presence rather than a transfer of meaning” (p. 335) which tells a stranger little about the person. Batchen (2004, p. 15) further adds that:

the photograph does not really prompt you to remember people the way you might otherwise remember them—the way they moved, the manner of their speech, the
sound of their voice, that lift of the eyebrow when they made a joke, their smell, the rasp of their skin on yours, the emotions they stirred.

Although Edmond and Terry had similar comments about the public viewing of a loved one’s picture, public spectacle was favored by Amali for a portrait on his grave marker in Sri Lanka.

As mentioned earlier, the decision to include a portrait on a headstone was not contingent on a higher purpose that may have precipitated its origin as a cultural practice. As Hamscher (2006) observed, “Cemeteries are inherently conservative places, and many consumers are content with replicating what they see around them” (p. 9). This sentiment was echoed by a local monument marker that was interviewed for this study: “They may be sitting here and look down and see that I have a picture there [with the samples] or they may have seen it in the cemetery.” For the individuals in the case studies, they either liked the portrait idea after seeing it elsewhere (Amali), was treating it as part of a normal grave design (Edmond), may have been inspired to fit into two cultures with a single portrait (Mary), or, in Benjamin’s case, had seen nothing but portrait-less markers in his lifetime and knew nothing else (even though his orthodox beliefs now formally prevent him from displaying one). As for Dorothy, finding inspiration in others’ gravestone designs has nothing to do with portraits and more to do with expressing a life story through shape, objects, and words.

CONCLUSION

Years ago, my participation in the mortuary business brought porcelain portraits to my attention. Their inclusion on the gravestones of a diverse array of cultures suggested to me that, at face value, their purpose was more or less the same for each religion and culture that opted for expressing one. My funeral home experience also underscored the reality of
grieving family members behaving in an unpredictable manner; which can manifest in surprising ways when it is directed toward the “visual and performative dimensions of mourning” (Doss, 2002, p. 71). This unpredictability seems to have carried over to the five individuals in this study who all reacted to porcelain portraits differently and a single truth value was not evident between them.

Drawing conclusions on the transferability and pragmatic validity of this study’s findings is uneven given its focus on individual narratives and the myriad of factors that involve the decision of installing a portrait on a gravestone. For example, mimicking the aesthetic of surrounding graves may have strong validity (i.e., for Roman Catholics) but its transferability could be weak if there is no photograph available to produce a cameo; or transferability may be high if there is a tradition of photo-tombstones amongst the cultural hybridization in the deceased’s identity but validity would be null if the requisite technology is not accessible or cost prohibitive. At the very least we could conclude that memorializing a loved one is done in the spirit of being permanent, so having a porcelain portrait allows it to communicate across the surviving family members, across the culture it claims membership in, and even across time as future generations gaze upon the cameo.

Perhaps the most insightful theme to emerge from these case studies is the notion of hybridization as it is syncretized amongst religions (e.g., Buddhism with ancestor worship), or—more importantly for this study—how it is negotiated within one’s own cultural identity. As we heard from those individuals with roots in the east, the claim that porcelain portraits were a Western influence has echoes of colonialism—such as the Portugese in Macau or the British in Hong Kong—which was a precursor to globalization. More recently, worldwide migration has resulted in ethnic intermingling, cultural assimilation, and, in Mary’s case,
cosmopolitanism through her mixed children. As the individuals chosen for this study show, a member of a high context culture, like orthodox Judaism, can represent a form of “pure” identity although Tilley (2006) counters this position by saying, “There is no such thing as a traditional identity, only forms of constructing identities that might be labelled traditional by some according to particular, and ultimately, arbitrary criteria” (p. 12). For most participants, then, their identities exist in liminal states; open to negotiation and the forces that press upon them.
Notes

1 Although there are slight technical differences between some of these definitions and the items they refer to, for the purposes of this study all of these labels—porcelain portraits, sepulchral portraits, photo-ceramics, photo-tombstones, cameos—pertain to the same item: photographs mounted on grave markers and monuments, columbaria plaques, or memorial hall plaques.

2 For the purposes of this study, these terms are essentially interchangeable.

3 The term “institutional” is borrowed from Collier (2003) and refers to the formal institutions of that society (e.g., churches, fraternities).

4 All participant names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

5 The traditional definition of “aniconism” has its roots in the absence of an object of worship. Popular usage, however, has extended its meaning to include anything existing in the physical world.
Appendix

Informed Consent Form

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

Instructions: As the interviewee, please read this form carefully. If you have any questions about this form or your involvement in this research project, please ask the principal investigator before signing this form. Before the interview can start, two copies of this form will be signed by both the investigator and the interviewee, with the interviewee being given one copy. A copy of the final research report will be available for participants upon request.

1. I volunteer to participate in a thesis research project conducted in Calgary, Alberta, Canada by Patrick Brooks from Royal Roads University. I understand that the project is designed to gather cross-cultural information about porcelain portraits on gravestones.

2. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty, at which point all previously collected data will be destroyed upon my request.

3. I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion of death, burial, and gravestones interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

4. I understand that the interview questions will be open-ended, meaning that a question is designed to help me focus on a particular issue but I am not restricted in my answers or responses. I will be asked to talk about myself and to share my thoughts on the research topic.

5. I understand that my participation involves being interviewed (in English) by the principal investigator. The interview will last approximately one to two hours. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio recording of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made.

6. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals. All data will be archived for five years and then destroyed.

7. I understand that this research is not conducted on behalf of any commercial organization, nor are the results of this project intended for commercialization. My participation will not have any effect on my work, school, or other public interests.

8. I understand that this research study has been approved by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board (RRUWEB). For research problems or questions regarding subjects, the RRUWEB may be contacted through xxxxxxx xxxxxxx at xxxxxxx.xxxxxxx@royalroads.ca.

9. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

My Printed Name __________________________ Date __________________________

My Signature __________________________ Signature of the Investigator __________________________
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