



Centre for Death & Society (CDAS) Conference 2026 handbook

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PROGRAMME

The Centre for Death & Society Conference 2026 will take place across three days from Wednesday 17 June to Friday 19 June. All sessions will be online.

[You can find the full programme on our Centre for Death & Society \(CDAS\) Conference 2026 programme web page.](#)

SESSION DETAILS

Day 1: Wednesday 17 June

Keynote: Carceral Care and the Production of Care-less Deaths: A Sociological Analysis of Prolonged Dying after Traumatic Brain Injury

Wednesday 17 June, 12.40pm – 1.30pm

Ian Stobirski

Our first keynote of the conference explores their paper, which advances a radical death-studies analysis of prolonged dying following traumatic brain injury (TBI) in the United Kingdom, foregrounding Critical Disability Theory (CDT) to interrogate the sociopolitical dimensions of care. It conceptualises carceral care as the dominant mode of disability management, in which care is reconfigured as containment, risk regulation, and bureaucratic endurance, rather than relational or ethical engagement. Within this regime, disabled life is maintained not for its intrinsic value, but because it is administratively manageable and institutionally stabilising. Rejecting medicalised narratives of recovery and rehabilitation, the paper theorises prolonged dying as a form of slow death: an attritional process through which disabled subjects persist biologically while experiencing progressive social, relational, and biographical erosion. Neoliberal outsourcing across UK health and social care fragments responsibility and proceduralises care, producing lives that endure under bureaucratic governance while being stripped of social presence. Safeguarding rationalities operate as moral alibis, legitimating prolonged containment while foreclosing meaningful decision-making about death, dying, and social belonging.

The concept of care-less death is introduced to capture the culmination of this trajectory: a death emptied of social recognition and relational meaning, preceded by years of managed debility. By situating TBI within debates on social death, slow violence, and necropolitics, the paper argues that prolonged dying is a politically sanctioned outcome of neoliberal disability governance in the UK. It contributes to critical understandings of disability, social death, and the ethics of care, offering a radical lens for scholars and practitioners concerned with the governance of vulnerable live.

About the speaker

Ian Stobirski is a postgraduate researcher at the University of Kent and a qualitative researcher who centres his work on disruptive narratives and stories of lived experience. His research explores traumatic brain injury and social death, focusing particularly on the loss of social relevance to family and friends after TBI, the impact on both carers and the cared for, and the systemic failures that leave survivors without adequate rehabilitation. Ian's commitment to this work is deeply personal. Ten years ago, he sustained a traumatic brain injury that ended a twenty year career in IT sales. In the years that followed, he also survived a suicide attempt. These experiences gave him firsthand knowledge of how survivors become socially invisible and how poorly the system responds. To bridge lived experience with practice, he worked as a researcher supporting individuals with TBI while completing his PGCE. Now, as a postgraduate researcher, he uses qualitative methods to foreground the voices of survivors, carers, and families, examining how their stories disrupt conventional understandings of rehabilitation and care. As a keynote speaker, Ian brings a rare perspective shaped by survival, frontline work, and scholarly inquiry. His talk will reflect on what it takes to reclaim a life after the system fails, what thanatology can learn from loss that begins long before the body fails, and why listening to disruptive narratives is essential to building more human centered systems of support.

Papers: Objects or Subjects

Wednesday 17 June, 1.40pm – 2.40pm

Religion, Power and Death

Adem Sağır

This presentation examines the organization of dead bodies after the February 6, 2023, earthquakes in Türkiye through the perspective of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), focusing on how power is produced, negotiated, and stabilized in disaster contexts. Rather than treating death management as a purely technical or institutional process, the study conceptualizes it as a socio-material network in which human and non-human actants, including institutions, bodies, infrastructures, discourses, technologies, and emotions, interact and reshape one another. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, including interviews with personnel of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA), document analysis, and observations, the study traces how the PRA emerged as the central actor in the organization of dead bodies. The analysis demonstrates that the PRA occupied an ambivalent position. While it exercised relative autonomy in ritual practices, it simultaneously reproduced dominant political discourses in public narratives of death. In particular, the discourse of the “Disaster of the Century” functioned as a powerful



non-human actant, transforming contested realities of delay, failure, and vulnerability into an inevitable catastrophe and thereby closing off critical debate.

The paper argues that this process produced a “black box” in ANT terms, in which heterogeneous relations and controversies were obscured by an apparently natural order. Beyond the immediate disaster context, this black box continued to shape explanations of subsequent earthquakes and vulnerabilities, revealing how death becomes a site where power is not only exercised but also normalized and rendered unquestionable. By applying the principle of generalized symmetry, the study shows that power in disaster contexts is not confined to institutions or political actors but is distributed across networks of bodies, materials, discourses, and technologies. The paper contributes to death studies by demonstrating how disasters transform death into a relational field of power and by highlighting the analytical potential of ANT for understanding the politics of death in contemporary societies.

The subversive necropower of the dead

Joshua Hurtado Hurtado

The state, corporations and criminal organisations attempt to erase the dead from public life in contexts of necropolitical violence, making their lives ungrievable and exerting control over the rituals and symbols that aim to reclaim the dead’s worth (Borgstrom & Visser, 2025; Butler, 2009; Mbembe, 2020; Santos, 2025). While most studies of resistance against necropolitical violence show how families and friends organise and form social movements to dispute the attempts to erase the dead (Gordillo-García, 2023; Valencia & Herrera Sánchez, 2022), what remains undertheorised is how the dead themselves might prove central agents in resisting necropolitical violence. Death Studies scholarship has addressed the agency of the dead (Harper, 2010; Heng, 2022; Penfold-Mounce, 2018), but theorising it as subversive necropower can reveal how the dead can unsettle the necrogovernance structures that seek to erase them. In this article, I draw on Ohlson’s concept of ‘subversive necropower’ (2021) and recent scholarship on discourse and new materialism (Carpentier, 2024; Harju, 2024) to theorise how the dead can deploy their own necropower. I identify three interconnected sources of power of the dead: materiality, meaning and affect, and illustrate how they operate in the contexts of digital afterlives and environmental conflicts. I suggest that to assess how successful the dead are in deploying their subversive necropower, we should examine the degree to which they a) defy official narratives; b) support the living in resisting necrogovernance structures; and c) limit the expansion of necropolitical violence.

The Agency of Dead Bodies in Iran's January 2026 Mass Killings: Sovereignty, Refusal, and Ritual Innovation

Hajar Ghorbani

Building on my past three years of research, this paper develops a case study of posthumous agency resulting from the January 2026 tragedy in Iran. During protests against economic inflation, state violence produced mass death and a struggle over the custody, visibility, naming, and burial of those killed. This massacre plunged Iranian society, and the diaspora, into collective trauma amid digital blockade and disrupted global communication. Drawing on a curated archive of circulating images, social-media fieldnotes, ethnographic attention to funerary and post-funerary practices, and interviews with survivors of state violence, I trace a contest between state sovereignty over the dead and family-led practices of refusal. I argue that the bodies of those killed are not passive objects within a necropolitical order; they become catalytic nodes that compel action, reorganize social relations, and expose the limits of state control. As authorities attempt to contain death through threats, push silence, and the management of burial and mourning, families refuse state-led repertoires and perform liminal, protest-inflected rites and celebrations: rhythmic clapping, dancing, white clothing, music, wedding-coded gestures, and chants that recode the dead as “heroes” rather than “martyrs” historically mobilized to sustain state ideology. These practices distribute across regions, producing a united structure of mourning that is simultaneously national and local. I show how the state's mistaken claim to rule through corpses loses legitimacy by generating ritual innovation that keeps loss politically unresolved. The analysis speaks to wider debates on death, power, and contemporary colonial violence beyond Iran.

Papers: Digital

Wednesday 17 June, 1.40pm – 2.40pm

Artificially alive: An exploration of AI resurrections and spectral labor modes in a postmortal society

Tom Divon and Christian Pentzold

This presentation examines how generative AI reshapes relations between the living and the dead, and how power is exercised, contested, and redistributed in these encounters. While death once marked an endpoint of agency, advances in generative AI now enable the GenAI resurrections to be built from the archival data of the deceased. By analyzing over 50 real-world cases across the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia, our paper identifies three distinct modes of AI resurrection:



spectacularization, sociopoliticization, and mundanization. Spectacularization refers to the large-scale re-staging of deceased public figures for entertainment and cultural consumption, where the dead are revived as immersive spectacles. Sociopoliticization captures cases in which the deceased are reanimated as political actors or witnesses, made to testify, protest, or symbolize injustice in ways that mobilize moral authority while fixing their voice posthumously. Mundanization describes the everyday users engaging with synthetic media to sustain ongoing relationships with dead loved ones, integrating digital resurrection into daily life. We argue that these resurrections do more than extend memory; they operationalize the deceased as sources of spectral labor—data, voice, and likeness that can be repurposed, monetized, and mobilized without consent. Power in these contexts is multifaceted: infrastructural, as platform owners govern the technical possibilities and limits of digital afterlives; epistemic, as the authority to define whose death is visible and how it is narrated resides with those who control data; and biopolitical, as posthumous presence becomes a site where living communities, market logics, and legal frameworks collide. Together, these dynamics raise our central question: what forms of power emerge when political and commercial entities get to decide how the dead continue to act, speak, and matter in the present?

Relational Distance and AI Reanimations of the Dead in Japan: Who Can Be Reanimated?

Akiko Orita

This talk examines how people negotiate acceptance of AI-mediated reanimations of the dead, focusing on how authority, consent, and legitimacy are negotiated across different relational distances in Japanese context. Based on qualitative interviews with eight participants conducted in October 2025, the study investigates how people distinguish AI-generated reanimations from traditional photos and media portrayals such as dramas and documentaries. Participants were asked about hypothetical AI reanimations of themselves (first-person death), close others such as family members (second-person death), and historical or public figures. Views on first-person representations varied widely. Regarding second-person death, some expressed interest in interacting with AI representations of grandparents they never knew, while others felt memory alone was sufficient or raised concerns about exposing family privacy. In contrast, AI reanimations of historical figures were generally met with curiosity, particularly for "ordinary" individuals in historical materials. However, concerns about accuracy led some to regard such uses as acceptable only for entertainment. These findings reveal contested power relations. Participants foreground questions of who has authority to authorize, create, and control posthumous representations and for what purposes. Participants situate AI-mediated representations within broader cultural practices of representing the dead, while

identifying AI's interactive nature as redistributing agency among the living, the dead, and technological systems. This raises questions about whose interests AI reanimations serve and how consent and legitimacy are negotiated when authorship is distributed across families, institutions, and algorithms. AI reanimation highlights shifting boundaries through which authority over the dead is claimed and contested.

Digital Power, Vulnerability and Resistance: How Adolescents and Young Adults with Cancer Use Social Media to Negotiate Illness, Identity and Mortality

Belén Jiménez and Alejandra Castañeda Fe

Adolescents and young adults (AYA) with cancer inhabit a paradoxical terrain where vulnerability and agency coexist. Social media platforms –especially TikTok and Instagram– have become key spaces in which young patients narrate illness, confront mortality and negotiate forms of power that shape their experiences: the power of medical institutions, of algorithms, of audiences, and of the illness itself. Yet little is known about how these digital practices reconfigure relationships to dying, care and authority. This paper draws on a qualitative study combining netnography of public social-media profiles of AYA with advanced cancer (Spain and France) and in-depth interviews with young patients and healthcare professionals. Through reflexive thematic analysis, the study examines how digital storytelling mediates psychological, social and temporal aspects of living with life-limiting disease.

Findings reveal three interwoven dynamics of power:

- (1) Narrative agency and resistance, as AYA reclaim authorship against reductive biomedical identities;
- (2) Algorithmic exposure, where visibility, surveillance and affective labour shape what can be shown and felt;
- (3) Relational asymmetries, as platforms produce new solidarities while amplifying inequalities and emotional risks.

The analysis shows that social media function as contested spaces where young people grapple with dying while simultaneously performing empowerment, seeking recognition, and making sense of anticipatory loss. By foregrounding the entanglement of digital technologies, care and mortality, this paper argues that understanding AYA cancer trajectories today requires addressing how power circulates through digital infrastructures, mediating not only how young people live with illness, but how they imagine and articulate their own endings.

Roundtable: What deaths matter in death studies? Global power and inequalities in the study of death

Wednesday 17 June, 3pm – 4pm

Naomi Pendle, Fisayo Ajala, Jean-Benoit Falisse, Nada Afioni, Safa Suliman and Yumna Masarwa

Contemporary Death Studies is often dominated by Global North discourses centered on aging, “dying well”, palliative care, and innovative disposal technologies. This roundtable interrogates the power imbalances inherent in this academic hierarchy, asking: whose deaths are theorized, and whose are relegated to the margins? Drawing on research from a forthcoming special issue on death during armed conflict, this session examines the troublesome deaths and disrupted rituals in contexts such as Sudan, South Sudan, Gaza, DR Congo and Nigeria. In these regions, the structural realities of violence, displacement, and premature mortality fundamentally preclude the “normal” mourning practices, such as formal burials and farewell ceremonies, that underpin Western death scholarship. By centering these experiences, we explore how power operates through hierarchy of life and death and the systematic exclusion of non-Western, conflict-affected deaths from mainstream theoretical frameworks. We use the lens of colonial legacies, geopolitical hierarchies, humanitarian regimes, and media visibility to capture and reflect on both lived experiences of death and the epistemic boundaries of the field.

Participants will discuss the ethical and epistemological implications of these inequalities, challenging the field to move beyond sanitized narratives of mortality. We will address how institutional and colonial power shapes knowledge about death, and how reclaiming the narratives of those denied a “good death” serves as a form of academic and political resistance. This discussion aims to bridge the gap between humanitarian realities and death scholarship, advocating for a more inclusive, globally-aware discipline that acknowledges the uneven distribution of power in both life and death.

Roundtable: Hail the Victorious Dead: Elements of Power in Memorialization

Wednesday 17 June, 3pm – 4pm

Robert Spinelli, Robyn Lacy, Kaylee Alexander, Katie Clary, Carolyn Dillian, Jessica Elton, Jessica Freeman, Ciara Henderson

Power and its relationship to people's lives is something inherent, found in most interactions between individuals and societies. Our roundtable talk features authors from our recently published (Dec 2025) edited collection, *Death, Commemoration & Cultural Meaning*, who will explore ways in which power structures continue to play a dynamic part in a post-death existence. Kaylee Alexander's work examines how violent data can be digitally displayed in affective and effective ways, and posits the question of whether the transformation to the digital sphere always relegates us to a palatable, yet desensitized distance from traumatic experience. Jessica Freeman & Jessica Elton will discuss how digital spaces have facilitated collective grief, mourning, and memorialization through their analysis of the Twitter (now X) response to Queen Elizabeth II's death in 2022, and how social media allows users to discuss, comment, and share personal accounts on various topics, including death in collective and public ways. Ciara Henderson focuses on the most powerless, examining the lack of death tradition surrounding stillborn infants, regarded by Christian theology as being of a liminal status, as unbaptised dead. This resulted in the creation of Cillíní, or Children's Burial Grounds, a complex and diverse space in the Irish landscape. Finally, Katie Clary and Carolyn Dillian explore their case study on how Indigenous people's state-recognized status does not give them access to practice traditional burial and death rites. Their in-depth look at colonial impact on Indigenous peoples also provides a background on NAGPRA and other legislation directly impacting the rights of Native American tribes.

Roundtable: Tiredness of Life in Older Persons: The Power and Politics of Death through a Multidisciplinary Lens

Wednesday 17 June, 3pm – 4pm

John Troyer, Jana Rek-Kralova, Kenneth Chambaere, Els Van Wijngaarden

This Roundtable will discuss the current research being conducted by the multidisciplinary Understanding Tiredness Of Life in Older People (UnTiL Net) Scientific Research Network. The network aims to unite, coordinate and encourage collaborative research efforts in the domain of tiredness of life in older persons, in collaboration with strong international research experts in the EU and UK. The network is funded by the EU Research Foundation Flanders. To date, the UnTiL Network has developed the following working concepts around Tiredness of Life and the Power and Politics of Death:

- Tiredness of life in older persons is a subjective state of suffering from a combination of physical, emotional, cognitive and existential fatigue, to the effect that the person experiences an aversion or indifference to their life as it is and/or to the outlook on their future.

- The experience can be accompanied with: a sense of disconnectedness with the self, others and/or the world; feelings of disrupted coherence of the person's life course and narrative (fore)closure, and; feeling that life has come to be meaningless and without value.
- The experience originates from an individually unique pattern of losses accumulated throughout life and/or suffered in old age.
- Experienced losses may include: loss of body (declining health, physical function, cognitive abilities); loss of independence, control, autonomy; loss of important others and meaningful relationships; loss of social roles and identity/self; loss of perspectives and hopes for the future.

The Roundtable will discuss their ToL findings and how the experience can be dynamic, fluctuating in intensity and in negative appraisal by the person, up to, and including death.

Papers: Inequalities and Social Justice

Wednesday 17 June, 4.15pm – 5.15pm

Euthanasia and care ethics: A review of the Chilean debate from a power perspective

Vicente Santibáñez Aravena

In Chile, even though most of the public opinion is in favor of euthanasia since 2014 (Criteria, 2025), this doesn't translate into political and legislative support to date, which makes the country a controversial case. We propose an analysis of the main public discourses against (Ugarte, 2019; 2020; Schnettler, 2022) and for euthanasia (Aurenque, 2021; Micolich & Dittborn, 2024) to show that the legal and ethical arguments presuppose a stance on the medical power over life and death. Through the Foucauldian concepts of biopolitics and anatomopolitics (Foucault, 2009), euthanasia is seen as a practice that challenges the verticality that underpins power relations between doctors and patients (Foucault, 1978). If power relations are constitutive to all forms of care relations (Tronto 2024), then the analysis on the Chilean case of euthanasia can be useful to propose a philosophical definition of care that, in line with the general definition provided by Tronto and Fisher (1990), allows to bring together the subjective aspect of power dynamics and distributions. The novelty of this approach lies in the fact that it turns the concept of care into an analytical tool, one that can explicitly thematize the power relations and distributions denounced by feminists: such as the dichotomy between domestic and public, essentialism, and caring only for the people that are just like us (Alegria 2024).

When Systems Decide Who Deserves Care: Power and Death at the Margins

Courtney R. Petruik

This paper presentation examines power operating at end-of-life through the everyday organization of care for people experiencing homelessness. Drawing on an institutional ethnographic study of a community-based palliative outreach team in Calgary, Canada, the project traces how death is governed through institutional relations that determine whose deaths are anticipated, supported, deferred, or rendered invisible. From the standpoint of clients with life-limiting illness, I show how mainstream health systems, organized around assumptions of housing stability, compliance, and measurability, produce structural exclusions that intensify suffering and hasten premature death. These exclusions are not accidental, but are coordinated through policies, texts, funding arrangements, and discourses that regulate access to care and distribute responsibility away from the state and onto individuals already positioned at the margins. The analysis also highlights how a small palliative outreach team exercises limited but meaningful forms of counter-power by reworking dominant definitions of “palliative care,” embedding social conditions into end-of-life practice, and mobilizing harm reduction as a care ethic rather than a behavioural intervention. Yet this resistance is constrained by philanthropic funding structures that demand accountability without fully recognizing relational, time-intensive care work. The paper argues that end-of-life inequities for people experiencing homelessness should be understood as a form of institutionalized power over death; where survival, comfort, and dignity are unevenly distributed through routine organizational practices. By making visible how death is managed through systems rather than individuals alone, this paper contributes to critical death studies by foregrounding the political economy of dying at the social margins.

Exploring Grief-Fuelled Activism with the Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia (YCCI)

Lisa McLean, Maryam Al-Sabawi, Ayesha Islam

Grief can be a powerful force for advocacy and social justice. Following a traumatic or unjust loss, the collective responses of bereaved individuals and communities can bring attention to systemic injustices, challenge hierarchies of grievability (Butler, 2020) and the disenfranchisement of grief (Doka, 1989), while contributing to positive social change. This presentation examines the concept of ‘grief activism’ (Stierl, 2016; McLean, 2024) via the experiences of members of the Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia (YCCI). The YCCI formed following an Islamophobic terror attack that took the lives of five members of a Muslim family in London, Canada in 2021. As Judith

Butler (2004) describes, grief is often understood as private and grievers positioned as powerless or apolitical. Despite this, grief is a frequent driver of movements for social justice where individuals build collective agency, experience empowerment, and develop avenues for meaning making following loss. This presentation will discuss the results of a participatory research project with members of the YCCI about their experiences with ‘grief activism’ and how they mobilize grief into collective power and action.

Papers: Violence

Wednesday 17 June, 4.15pm – 5.15pm

Who May Move, Who May Die: Borders, Racial Capitalism, and Necropolitical Sovereignty

Grace McWilliam

This presentation examines contemporary migration regimes in the Global North through the lenses of necropolitics, racial capitalism, and global apartheid, arguing that migrant suffering and death are not policy failures but structural features of liberal capitalist governance. Liberal democracies depend on migrant labour, particularly in precarious, care-based, and physically demanding sectors, while simultaneously constructing migrants as security threats. This contradiction is sustained through a moral performance in which exclusion is framed as legality and protection, even as racialised labour is quietly absorbed and exploited. Migration is thus rendered economically indispensable yet politically intolerable, producing a two-tier system in which migrants are permanently necessary but never fully included.

Drawing on scholarship on global apartheid and border securitisation, the paper analyses how borders are continuously reconstituted through racialised surveillance, detention, and bureaucratic violence. These bordering processes make the racialised migrant body hyper-visible as threat and invisible as subject, functioning as necropolitical technologies that manage populations through exposure to slow death. Deaths in deserts, detention centres, and the Mediterranean are not aberrations but outcomes of a system designed to discipline surplus racialised populations while preserving white citizen reassurance and capitalist mobility.

The paper further explores the spectacle of migrant death, arguing that visibility and invisibility operate as complementary tools of necropolitical governance. While certain deaths become hyper-visible through viral imagery, provoking momentary outrage, the vast majority remain unseen, normalised as necessary sacrifices for security and stability. Spectacular deaths both humanise and depoliticise, reducing structural violence to isolated tragedy while obscuring state responsibility. Ultimately, the paper

contends that borders function as theatres of necropolitics, where sovereignty is enacted through the managed visibility of suffering and the racialised distribution of who may live, who may die, and who may be mourned.

Hunted, Haunting Bodies: Israel's Necropolitics Against the Dead in Gaza

Rimona Afana

"They started bombing the graves. There's no safety for the dead even." That is a message I got from my sister R. (then 13 years old, living in Rafah) in 2021. Those words came from a child who four months prior had buried our father. A child who was for days under Israeli bombardment and who, like most kids in Gaza, survived several wars of aggression. Covered here is an under-appreciated form of state crime: while most news and studies discuss crimes against the living in Gaza, I document Israel's invisibilised crimes against the dead. Most cemeteries in Gaza have been destroyed or damaged by bombing, bulldozing, and quasi-random exhumations: thousands of bodies displaced, dismembered, scattered, looted. Desecrating the dead has become another form of necropolitics: besides the destruction of cemeteries, hundreds of Palestinian bodies were returned tortured beyond recognition: bearing signs of hanging, gunfire wounds, broken bones, severe burns, crushed under tanks, or even with organs removed. Torture has been integral to the genocide on Gaza and to the decades-long colonial machinery crushing Palestinian bodies and souls.

The abnormality of a life defined by war crimes, crimes against humanity and human rights violations is complemented by the anomaly of a death which remains open-ended, as even the dead are not afforded respite from crime. In honor of my Palestinian grandparents, who never found peace, even after death, I document the horrific nature of dying and death amid genocide, colonialism and occupation, and the mutilated grief survivors are left with.

Death, Accountability, and Bureaucracy: Inquiry Commission as a Technology of Power in South Asia

Salman Hussain

As a modern form of governance, the inquiry commission, in its various iterations – such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – continues to be invoked by states and demanded by human rights activists and victims to address the indignities experienced by Indigenous and racialized communities (Niezen 2017). The commission form pervades contemporary debates around restitution and justice raised by victims of diverse forms of violence, including apartheid, Indigenous genocide, and slavery. Examining the historical role of inquiry commissions in colonial India, as well as their

contemporary hegemony in South Asia, this paper asks how liberal legal institutions address victims' demands for justice and restitution in contexts of war and terrorism?

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with the families of child victims of a terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Pakistan in 2014, this paper traces families' struggles for compensation and justice through the lens of an inquiry commission established to investigate the attack. The analysis is based on interviews with family members, observations at protests, seminars, and related activities, and a close reading of the commission's final report. The paper critically examines how the commission form mediates the politics of restitution, reparation, and compensation in postcolonial contexts. Preliminary findings suggest that, as a technology of power, the inquiry commission fragments state responsibility by producing "legal truths" about violent child deaths, while simultaneously imparting "agency" to bereaved families.

Workshop: Power in health and care research: a case of epistemic injustice

Wednesday 17 June, 7pm – 8pm

Amanda Roberts

Patient involvement in research is often constrained to the role of data provider or advisor on pre-set agendas (Mader et al., 2018). Although collaborative approaches to health research challenge this restricted view of patients' worth in knowledge creation (Beresford, 2013), patients living with a life-limiting illness are rarely involved. It is suggested this results from low confidence in how such involvement would benefit individual or research team (Johnson et al., 2021). However, it could be argued that individual patients are denied the opportunity to contribute effectively to an understanding of end of life by a failure to recognise the legitimacy of their lived experience (Barker et al., 2020). This workshop will explore the proposition that in some health and care research teams, some forms of knowledge are valued more than others, making the research less effective.

Graphic medicine uses comics to communicate the experiences of multiple actors - patients, carers, families and healthcare providers (Wombles, 2021) – including issues of power imbalance (Glazer, 2015). Taking the comic book 'Anyone can co-produce health and care research ... A little book about knowledge and justice' (Roberts, 2025) as an example, this workshop will explore how comics can be used to challenge the belief that one person's way of understanding and talking about a subject is more valid or worth more someone else's. The workshop will also support participants to create their own short comic to illustrate their beliefs and experience around power and death in their particular context.

Day 2: Thursday 18 June

Keynote Panel: Dying as a Martyr; Negotiating Memory, Morality and Power

Thursday 18 June, 9am – 10am

Aroob Alfaki, Abdirahman Edle Ali, Yumna Masarwa, Narges Emami

Martyrdom (shahada), particularly within predominantly Muslim communities, offers distinctive lens through which death is transformed from a biological endpoint into a moral, political and social force. Islamic discourse on martyrdom commonly distinguishes between those killed while resisting perceived oppression or transgression; and those who die through specific forms of suffering such as drowning, pandemics, medical procedures, or death during childbirth. While the latter category has historically been contested, the former has always deeply been politicized, rendering martyrdom a relational and context-dependent claim rather than a fixed religious perception.

In a world in which mass mortalities are a direct result of increasing forms of violence—starvation, armed conflict, deprivation of care, martyrdom increasingly functions as political vocabulary for interpreting loss and legitimizing struggle. This roundtable aims to unpack how dying as a martyr is socially constructed, mobilized, and contested across socio-political contexts. Drawing on comparative reflections from Iran, Palestine, Sudan and Somalia contexts, the discussion explore how martyrdom shapes collective memory, anchors moral authority, and is instrumentalized within religious and political conflicts. By examining who is recognized as a martyr, who performs this recognition, and to what ends, the roundtable interrogates martyrdom as a site where power is asserted, challenged and negotiated. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on death, sovereignty and moral economy by showing how claims over the meaning of death can reinforce political authority while simultaneously unsettling dominant forms of power. The session begins with brief remarks from the discussant's reflections from four different context, followed by an open discussion

About the Speakers

Aroob Alfaki – University of Bath (Sudan); Aroob Alfaki is a PhD student at the University of Bath and a staff member at the University of Khartoum, Sudan. Her research interrogates the socio-political transformations that have unfolded in Sudan following the December 2018 revolution and the outbreak of war in 2023. Her work is particularly concerned with the socio-cultural ramifications of these transformations, examining

how they reconfigure the Sudanese social fabric. She focuses on everyday practices as sites of analysis, including food-based solidarities, death and burial rituals, and forms of peacebuilding from below. Through this lens, her research contributes to broader debates on conflict, social resilience, and grassroots responses to political upheaval.

Abdirahman Edle Ali – University of Nairobi (Somalia); Abdirahman Edle Ali is a co-investigator on the research project "Everyday Politics of Famine." He is a researcher on humanitarianism and famine in the Horn of Africa, focusing on how displacement, climate change, and governance intersect in borderland contexts. His work explores the political economy of aid and the moral and material logics of humanitarian response, grounded in fieldwork across Somalia and Kenya. His recent academic work appears in *Africa Spectrum* (2026), *The Journal of Eastern African Studies* (2026), *International Affairs* (2026), *Security Dialogue* (2022) and the *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2023). Abdirahman has collaborated with Durham University, Clingendael, Swisspeace, the Life & Peace Institute, DIIS and PRIO. He is completing a PhD at the University of Nairobi on the politics of Somali diaspora humanitarianism.

Yumna Masarwa - Institute for American Universities (IAU) (Palestine); Yumna Masarwa is an Associate Professor and the Director of the School of Art at the American College of the Mediterranean (ACM)/The Institute for American Universities (IAU) in Aix-en-Provence, France. She was trained as an archaeologist and Islamic art historian. Since 2018, she has been conducting multi-sited ethnographic research in the Mediterranean city of Marseilles focusing on burial and body repatriation among Algerians, and Muslim tombs in French cemeteries.

Narges Emami – University of Tehran (Iran); Narges' research examines grief among families of individuals killed in post-revolutionary Iran, with particular attention to how mourning is shaped within the sociopolitical context of an Islamic regime. Her work focuses on the post-death period, analysing how mourners redefine and reconstruct their relationships with the deceased

Papers: Knowledge and authority 1

Thursday 18 June, 10.10am - 11.10am

Rest in Empire: Colonial Control Over Pacific Deathways

Amy Henry

This presentation examines how colonial and missionary interventions have reshaped death practices in the Cook Islands. Drawing on Virgilio Enrique's theory of colonisation, which frames empire as a project of demoting and criminalising indigenous knowledge and spiritual practices, it traces the impact of sanitising ancestral deathways.

The Cook Islands, a former British protectorate and now a state in free association with New Zealand, has faced restrictions and laws on traditional death practices since the arrival of the missionaries. These restrictions served to inhibit or punish outward displays of death practices and grieving, making way for more acceptable, palatable practices for the Western gaze. Examples include the ‘Blue laws’ introduced by the missionaries to punish acts of sorcery and unacceptable displays of grieving, such as visual displays of male grief for a non-spousal female, deemed an act of implied adultery. Statutory laws prohibiting traditional, often spiritual health practices, and modern laws determining the proper time and type of name a child may be given, effectively limiting the practice of death names (ingoa mate).

Across the Pacific grieving practices that connect the world of the living to the world of the deceased have been restricted. This presentation traces the impact of these restrictions and the unique adaptations employed by the people of the Cook Islands. By tracing these transformations, this presentation reveals the mechanisms of colonial power over deathways and the persistent agency of indigenous communities to maintain connection to their ancestors.

The power of law: medico-legal death investigation

Imogen Jones

One way in which power is asserted over our lives – and deaths – is through the use of law. Law’s authority can be found in almost all areas of our responses to death. But as is so often the case, it is when we find ourselves in conflict that the power of law becomes evident. In this paper I discuss one of the arenas in which law exerts power in death: the medico-legal death investigation.

I argue that death investigations not only authorise and exert power over the deceased body itself, but also the experiences of all of those impacted by a death. These are important examples of the state asserting its power to control us, even in death. The impact does not, however, end there. In this paper I show how law’s demands for ‘facts’ place pressure on medical professionals to provide evidence and conclusions in a manner which is at odds with their own claims to authority. To demonstrate this, I draw on original empirical evidence from interviews with pathologists who conduct medico-legal autopsies. I show that they are keen to resist and limit credibility damaging challenges, especially during legal adjudications. In particular, by emphasising the importance of opinion over fact, they contain the power of law and assert their own authority over responses to death.

Empowering the grieving to establish new traditions in the landscape of East End

John Harris

Founded by Thomas Cribb in 1881, T. Cribb & Sons remains the sole surviving independent funeral home in East London's diverse Newham area. A recognised purveyor of funerals for generations of East enders, we have remained true to our founding roots but have been both witness to, and agent of, helping more recent arrivals to London's east end establish their own culturally important rituals. Now managed by the fourth and fifth generations of the Cribb family, T Cribb & Sons has stood witness to the way in which Asian, Eastern European, African, and other communities have brought their own important identifies to funerals. The UK is richly diverse and funeral providers must adapt and indeed learn how old rituals and new can stand side by side to create a truly inclusive way of seeing death, ritual, and grief.

As many long-established families migrated from the East End to Essex from the 1960s, our commitment to the conservation of tradition was important but the arrival of families wishing to honour their own traditions became equally vital. Over the last 145 years, T. Cribb & Sons has seen the changes within the industry perhaps as few other funeral providers have. This session will explore why de-acculturation is key, and how empowered communities are influencing key trends in our industry.

Papers: Marginalised life and death

Thursday 18 June, 10.10am-11.10am

Asylum, Death and Power

Tony Walter

The UK grants asylum to those “unable to live safely in their own country because they fear persecution there.” The ultimate persecution is to be killed. In 2023-4, through a local support group I befriended asylum seekers residing on the Bibby Stockholm, a barge moored 1 km from my Dorset home. Hearing their stories, and reading the refusal letters many received from the UK Home Office (HO), I learned how power shapes both why they seek asylum and whether it is granted. Several men fled because they had received direct death threats from powerful actors (state, military, civilian, family); a few had experienced assassination attempts. Many asylum claims hinged on the death of, for example, a family member, co-religionist or political co-activist, at the hands of powerful actors; this death caused them in turn to fear for their own lives, and to flee. This paper sketches i) the actual or feared deaths that prompt asylum claims, ii) the HO's power to decide whether or not a claimant's story is true and/or entitles them to

asylum. Rejections might a) dispute the facts of the story, or b) accept the facts, but dispute that the claimant's subjective fear of being killed is well-founded. For objective evidence on the country, adjudicating officials consult the HO Country Policy and Information Notes (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/country-policy-and-information-notes>). These notes exercise considerable power; if they contradict a claimant's story, it is likely rejected. In sum, the asylum process is often driven by death and power.

Examining The Contradictory Power Structures Surrounding Deaths In Psychiatric Detention

Carly Speed

From the inception of the asylum system in England and Wales, through to the present day psychiatric hospital system, patients continue to die in contentious circumstances. The role of power underpins every element of these deaths, from the circumstances of the deaths, the inadequacies in the inquest and investigation systems and the lack of involvement and concern for bereaved families. Here, power is seen to be discriminatory, oppressive and marginalising. It allows there to be a distinct lack of knowledge and understanding of such deaths and it renders a deafening imposed silence surrounding some of the most vulnerable members of society. However, the silencing and lack of accountability surrounding these deaths has continually been challenged from numerous directions, including bereaved families, legal practitioners and coroners. In turn, this allows for the issue of deaths in psychiatric detention to be considered from a different perspective relating to power. Here, power is not entirely one-sided. Instead, it is a force of contestation and resistance. Such challenges have considerably changed the narratives and discourse surrounding deaths in psychiatric detention and a number of these strands will be critically explored within this paper.

Regulating Deaths in Detention: Vulnerability and the Atomisation of Harm

Laura Haas

People in custody are often positioned at the margins of society; largely removed from the public eye and forgotten – until people die. Deaths in detention may briefly capture public attention, as in the cases of Sean Rigg, Olaseni Lewis, and George Floyd, yet the racialised and gendered nature of these deaths, and the systemic inequalities underpinning them, rarely endure as objects of political or public concern. Over the past few decades, inquiries into deaths and discrimination in custody in England and Wales have produced extensive recommendations, yet the criminal justice system remains in a performative cycle of crisis, inquiry, and institutional amnesia. Deaths in

custody are unevenly patterned along lines of race and gender. This persistence of harm and inequality sits uneasily alongside the UK's dense landscape of criminal justice detention oversight. This paper asks how and why deaths continue to persist in criminal justice detention despite this expansive monitoring infrastructure. Drawing on qualitative document analysis of nine key statutory and voluntary sector reports addressing deaths, gender, and racial inequality in custody, I argue that the language of vulnerability plays a central role in this regulatory landscape. Vulnerability does not merely operate within dominant state narratives but is also mobilised within counter-narratives produced by oversight bodies that ought to scrutinise and challenge harmful practices in custody. This vocabulary atomises harm and foregrounds individual vulnerabilities while obscuring the systemic, intersecting inequalities through which deaths in custody are produced, thereby contributing to their reproduction, rather than disruption.

Papers: Knowledge and authority 2

Thursday 18 June, 11.30am - 12.30pm

'Afraid of a Hard Death': Assisted Dying, Power, and Everyday Moral Reasoning in Mass Observation

Kathryn McEwan

Contemporary debates about assisted dying in Britain are often presented as responses to new demographic pressures and medical technologies. Yet the power dynamics shaping these debates, who defines suffering, whose voices are heard, and what alternatives are made visible, have deeper historical roots. This paper revisits 1994, when assisted dying entered a new phase of parliamentary scrutiny, to explore how power operated differently in elite policy discourse and everyday moral worlds. Drawing on Mass Observation correspondence from the 1994 Death and Bereavement Directive, the paper examines a disjuncture. While parliamentary debates expressed confident institutional and medical authority about palliative care's capacity to eliminate suffering, ordinary citizens articulated visceral fears of prolonged dying, dependency, and institutional neglect. Contributors frequently described assisted dying as a means of reclaiming control over a "hard death", framing autonomy as resistance to medical, religious, and state authority.

References to hospice and palliative care were almost entirely absent from public accounts. This reveals a profound asymmetry of knowledge and access. Elite discourse exercised epistemic authority by positioning palliative care as universally available and sufficient, while citizens imagined dying in contexts where such alternatives were

invisible or inaccessible. Assisted dying thus emerged not as a choice among forms of care, but as a response to anticipated powerlessness.

By centring ordinary voices rather than parliamentary debate, the paper demonstrates how power operates through the distribution of knowledge, access to care, and whose imaginaries of suffering shape policy. These historically rooted power asymmetries continue to structure contemporary assisted dying debates.

The power of language: exploring the experiential, relational and ontological erasures of 'grief'

Jane Ribbens McCarthy, Korina Giaxoglou and Lystra Hagley-Dickinson

Indigenous scholars have drawn attention to the overwhelming power and significance of language in coloniality/modernity, bound up with racialised capitalism. Rather than 'worlding the world', the increasing global dominance of the English language 'words the world' (Mika et al, 2020), asserting an unspoken universal ontology. In the context of death and its aftermath, in the everyday continuing relational lives of the living, (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2023), and conveyed also into responses to the climate and ecological emergency (e.g. Wollersheim, 2026), uses of the keyword 'grief' increasingly dominate the framing of human experience in regard to existential crises, both personal and collective. In this presentation, we will explore some of the limitations of this keyword 'grief', embedded in powerful individualistic and therapeutic discourses and ideological associations, and illustrate some of the experiential, relational, epistemological and ontological erasures that are the consequence.

Writing the Dead: Colonial Power and the Historical Knowledge of Death on the Eastern Cape Frontier

Lari Hallows-Welman

Recent calls for the decolonisation of knowledge have unsettled the authority of Western archives in the production of historical knowledge in formerly colonised societies. In South Africa, scholarship such as June Bam's 'Ausi Told Me' and Hugo ka Canham's 'Riotous Deathscapes' has shown the potential of "alternative", or indigenous archives in the production of historical knowledge. However, this paper takes seriously the problem that some archives cannot be recovered, and an "alternative" history cannot be produced. Drawing on death as an analytical lens, this paper examines how colonial power shaped what is known, and recorded about death. With a focus on the Eastern Cape frontier in South Africa as a site of first encounter between a number of population groups, this paper traces how notions of power structured the production of knowledge about death and the colonial "other". This paper argues that this power/knowledge has consequences in the present, including conflicts around end-of-

life care, and failure of public health interventions such as during the COVID-19 pandemic to account for multiple ontologies of death. Through situating death within colonial relations of power and knowledge, this paper contributes to broader debates on death and power, and offers a theoretical foundation for the decolonisation of death studies in South Africa.

Papers: Death past and present

Thursday 18 June, 11.30am-12.30pm

Spectacle Without Consent: Anatomists, “Giants,” and the continued abuse of power over the dead

Lucy Hyde

From the late eighteenth century, human “giants” occupied a uniquely vulnerable position within British anatomical science. Figures like Charles Byrne (1761–1783) and Patrick Cotter O’Brien (1760–1806) were intensely sought after by anatomists, not in life as patients, but in death as specimens and spectacle. This study examines the anatomists’ obsession as an enduring abuse of power by scientific authority over marginalised bodies, repeatedly overriding and ignoring consent, autonomy and dignity in life, death and long afterwards to the modern day.

Drawing on historical accounts of Byrne’s attempted sea burial and O’Brien’s elaborate efforts to prevent dissection, resistance to anatomical appropriation is revealed and refusals ultimately ineffective. John Hunter acquired Byrne’s body despite his explicit wishes, and his skeleton remains in the Hunterian Museum more than two centuries later. O’Brien, though initially protected from dissection, was later exhumed during disturbances to his burial site and subjected to post-mortem examination not once, but twice - repeatedly returning to anatomical scrutiny long after any scientific necessity could reasonably be claimed.

Anatomy functioned, and at times continues to function, as a study where power is exercised through prolonged possession, display, and reinterpretation of human remains. The anatomist–giant relationship may be the most extreme, but exposes how curiosity became a legitimising force for coercion, transforming exceptional bodies into enduring scientific resources. By tracing these violations and their afterlives, this study reframes early anatomy as a practice in which abuses of power were not isolated acts, but institutionally sustained to this very day.

The Doctor too many for Death: Satirising power at the eighteenth-century deathbed

Dan O'Brien

The eighteenth deathbed was a place of a contested authority with different ideas competing for relevance. In an age of increasing medical knowledge and innovation, there was still the inevitability of death. The dying individual was therefore caught between the demands of medicine, religion as well as law and this was perfect material for the satirists. This paper examines how the satirical depiction of the deathbed imagines this struggle between competing influences on the experience of death. It also considers how the inevitability of death was both a challenge to these authorities power and as a motivating influence.

Inequality in life and death for people experiencing homelessness

Glenys Caswell

People experiencing homelessness have little power over their own lives or deaths. In 2025 a report commissioned by Crisis concluded that on any given night 300,000 households were experiencing homelessness in England. Families and single people found themselves stuck in unsuitable temporary accommodation such as hostels or bed and breakfasts, sleeping on sofas, or sleeping rough. In November 2024 the same report estimated that around 4,667 people were sleeping rough on England's streets. Life on the streets excludes people from many of the necessities of life: a place of warmth, comfort and safety, access to food and water, somewhere to maintain hygiene, somewhere to rest and sleep, an address from which to work, study, socialise and access services. One inevitable consequence of such exclusion is that people experiencing homelessness suffer poor health and die young, on average at 43 years old for women and 45 for men. Causes of death are predominantly deaths of despair - drug or alcohol related or suicide - or from physical diseases such as cancer or heart disease which may have been undiagnosed until too late for effective treatment. Drawing on documentary data from an ongoing project, this paper will demonstrate how the marginalisation endured during life continues after death, in the ways in which homeless deaths are sometimes hidden within the administrative system. It suggests that greater accuracy in regard to the numbers of homeless people dying and better understanding of the circumstances will assist the campaign for social justice for people experiencing homelessness.

Papers: Loss: human and non-human

Thursday 18 June, 1.50pm-2.50pm

Geographies of death during famine

Abraham Diing Akoi and Gisma Musa

In this paper we explore how the different geographies of famine impact dying and death's aftermath during famine, and how these geographies change the memories and 'grievability' of those who died. Some famines 'cover the whole earth', such as the 1998 famine in Sudan. At such times, people feel they cannot escape them, with large excess mortality in certain areas. Families might not have the strength to bury, and local authorities or warring parties instead dig mass graves as much to prevent disease outbreaks, and not necessarily to provide dignity. Other famines are characterised by mass migration with people often dying on the way or dying from exhaustion as they flee the direct violence that causes famine. These roadside deaths are often devoid of any burial with loved ones sometimes not even knowing where the body is. Furthermore, humanitarian aid centres draw people together, often creating urban-like gatherings of people, disease outbreaks, and new concerns with death and the bodies of the dead. This paper explores these different geographies of death during famine based on qualitative interviews in 2025 in South Kordofan (Sudan) and Jonglei State (South Sudan). The paper discusses famines since the 1980s and includes discussion of the 2024 famine in the Nuba Mountains (Sudan).

The Emergence of Ecological Grief From a Transformative Phenomenology Inquiry

Lucja Lange

This presentation explores the relationship between power and ecological grief through a transformative phenomenological project conducted with Erasmus students reflecting on the extinction of non-human animals. Situated at the intersection of environmental humanities, critical phenomenology, and affect studies, the project investigates how young adults experience, interpret, and are changed by confronting irreversible ecological loss.

Ecological grief is often framed as a private emotional response to environmental degradation. However, this study approaches grief as politically and relationally structured. Through guided phenomenological exercises, reflective writing, and dialogical sessions, participants were invited to encounter extinction not as distant data but as lived, embodied meaning. Their accounts reveal how grief is entangled with power at multiple levels: the historical power of humans over other species, institutional power shaping whose losses are recognized, and the felt powerlessness individuals experience in the face of planetary-scale destruction. At the same time, the project uncovers grief's transformative potential. When supported by collective

reflection, grief shifts from paralyzing despair toward ethical responsiveness and a reconfigured sense of agency. Participants describe moving from abstract awareness to felt responsibility, from individual sadness to shared mourning, and from passive witness to a desire for relational forms of action.

By foregrounding lived experience, this study argues that ecological grief is not merely a symptom of crisis but a site where dominant structures of power can be perceived, questioned, and potentially reoriented. Transformative phenomenology thus offers a pedagogical and political space in which mourning non-human loss becomes a practice of reimagining human–more-than-human relations.

What autonomy? Power, structure, and agency in assisted dying

Christopher Lyon

This presentation challenges the narrative of autonomy in assisted dying by exploring the nature and loci of power within the EAS frameworks of various jurisdictions. Contemporary advocacy for euthanasia or assisted suicide (EAS, often generalised to assisted dying or AD) often champions the principle of individual autonomy, presenting a narrative of ‘choice’ in when and how individuals die, for reasons that may include mitigating unacceptable physical or mental health issues, social deprivation, or a wish for a bespoke or ritualised death. Whilst this discourse centres personal agency, in most jurisdictions the practice is medicalised and governed by complex intersections of the criminal law, public policy, private advocacy, institutional norms and standards, and interpersonal dynamics, which constrain some choices and enable others. This inherently relational context empowers decision-makers other than the patient. Evidence shows that these clinical and non-governmental actors and institutions wield significant interpretive freedom, influence, and discretion in the application and provision of death process that may conflict with policy intentions and the law. A close look at the structural and procedural context of EAS in different jurisdictions thus shows complex and entangled power relationships that call into question the legitimacy of the prevailing choice narrative of EAS.

Papers: Institutions

Thursday 18 June, 1.50pm-2.50pm

Bureaucracy at the bedside: institutional power, end-of-life companionship, and the afterlife of paperwork

Albert Sobilo

End-of-life and bereavement are often imagined as intimate, relational experiences. In practice, they are also shaped, sometimes quietly, sometimes forcefully, by institutions:

hospitals and hospices, charities, commissioning arrangements, and the administrative systems that surround care. These structures can offer essential containment and protection. They can also exert power through gatekeeping, time limits, documentation, risk protocols, and the narratives they privilege about what a “good death” and “healthy grieving” should look like.

Drawing on practice-based reflection from grief counselling, bereavement support volunteering and over two years as an end-of-life companion in a local hospital hospice, this paper explores how institutional power is experienced at the bedside and then carried into mourning. I focus on three everyday sites where power becomes visible:

(1) access (who gets support, when, and on what terms),

(2) language (how forms and professional talk shape what can be said and what is silenced), and

(3) temporality (how organisational pace and scarcity collide with the slower, human pace of dying, caring, and grief). I also attend to inequality: how social location, culture and literacy influence who can navigate systems and who is left with additional distress.

Rather than arguing against institutions, I suggest ways practitioners and organisations can notice when care becomes regulation, and how small shifts in language, pacing and relational practice can restore dignity and agency under conditions of profound loss.

Conflicts of power in voluntarily stopping eating and drinking (VSED)

Aly Dickinson and Jagna Feierabend

In the UK, voluntarily stopping eating and drinking (VSED) is a lawful choice to bring forward death. In the absence of other options, it gives people with mental capacity who want to escape present or expected future suffering an option for their end of life. For an individual who has been left feeling disempowered due to a decline in physical abilities or quality of life, VSED can constitute a meaningful choice of taking back control. But VSED only gives a person the full power to decide how to end their life theoretically. In practice, if a person chooses VSED, much of the control over what it may look like or even if they can fulfil their choice depends on other parties involved in the process.

Our paper examines cases of VSED in the UK and how power shifts away from the individual wanting to choose VSED to other parties. A person's GP constitutes one key party, as he is likely to be asked to provide healthcare during the process, but may refuse. Reasons are lack of understanding of the legality of providing care to a patient

during VSED, a lack of experience in regards to VSED or institutional issues in healthcare, such as being time pressured. Professionals but also someone in a person's close network, may also morally object and try to stop the person. In our paper, we equally discuss cases where those people who hold power help a person fulfil his wish, for instance, by building a committed team to support them during VSED.

Counting Deaths, Producing Invisibility: Data, Medical Neglect, and Mortality in Greek Immigration Detention

Adriana Fili

Deaths in immigration detention are routinely framed as exceptional events, yet they occur within institutional settings characterised by chronic medical neglect, inadequate healthcare provision, and limited oversight. Despite their severity, such deaths remain poorly understood, resulting in significant gaps in how mortality in detention is documented, interpreted, and made visible.

Drawing on police statistics alongside original empirical research on deaths in immigration detention, this paper examines how mortality is rendered legible through official data practices, and what remains excluded from view. Focusing on cases involving medical neglect and delayed or inadequate healthcare, the analysis shows how deaths are frequently detached from the conditions that produce them, reclassified as individual medical events, or absorbed into broader categories that obscure institutional responsibility.

The paper argues that deaths in immigration detention are not merely undercounted but are actively shaped by practices that normalise neglect and limit the possibilities for accountability. By treating medical care failures as administratively routine rather than structurally harmful, official data systems contribute to the invisibility of death as a consequence of detention itself.

By foregrounding the tension between empirical evidence of harm and its representation in official statistics, this paper contributes to critical studies by demonstrating how infrastructures participate in the governance of death. More broadly, it highlights how the production of statistical invisibility functions as a form of institutional violence, shaping whose deaths are recognised, how responsibility is allocated, and which forms of state harm remain politically contestable.

Workshop: Emotion, Power and Creative Grief Practices in the Shadow of Non-Finite Loss

Thursday 18 June, 3.10pm-4.10pm

Amelia Seraphia Derr

Within many contemporary grief contexts, particularly ambiguous and anticipatory loss, emotion is often regulated, muted, or rendered illegible by medical, social, and institutional structures of power. Caregivers, people with chronic or terminal illness, and others living in non-finite grief frequently describe emotional experiences that are constrained by expectations to be resilient, grateful, composed, or silent. This 60-minute workshop examines self-archiving as a creative grief practice that disrupts these dynamics by restoring emotional agency to those living inside extended, uncertain loss trajectories. Drawing on autoethnographic research as a parent-scholar living with the chronic threat of child loss, I introduce self-archiving as a practice that redistributes emotional power by enabling individuals to witness, curate, and legitimize their own affective experiences. I show how self-archiving reconfigures power relations that shape emotional expression in grief and offers a counter-practice to the self-judgment and discursive boundaries that often discipline grief emotions. As a creative method, self-archiving allows griever to legitimize emotions that are often dismissed or pathologized, challenge normative expectations of “appropriate” grief, and preserve small traces of meaning, connection, and testimony in circumstances where futures remain uncertain.

During the session, participants will explore how structures of power shape the legibility or erasure of grief emotions; engage in brief self-archiving exercises; and consider how creative documentation can function as resistance, meaning-making, and care within clinical, community, and research contexts. This workshop highlights how creative methods illuminate the entanglement of emotion and power in experiences of death, dying, and non-finite grief, offering a framework for supporting emotional agency within ongoing loss.

Roundtable: Death Studies Futures: Thinking Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries

Thursday 18 June 26 3.10pm-4.10pm

**Sarah Wagner, Ruth Toulson, Sarah Richardson, Ann Neumann, Barbara J. King,
Robin Reineke**

This roundtable convenes five authors from the forthcoming Cambridge Handbook for the Anthropology of Death (May 2026) to reflect on what we study – and how we study – when we study death, dying, and the dead. Among its aims, the volume considers what the fields of death studies and the anthropology of death might gain by bridging scholarly conversations in adjacent (sub)fields, e.g., medical anthropology, anthropology of post-conflict societies, science and technology studies, memory

studies. Through a sampling of the volume’s ethnographic breadth, we draw on multiple research contexts to theorize death in novel ways: from Singaporean “necropolitics of the ordinary” (Toulson) and negligence within the US nursing home industry (Neumann) to the forensic work of identification at the US-Mexico border (Reineke), activist resistance against impunity in Colombia (Richardson), and the phenomenon of animal grief with its disruption of notions of human exceptionalism (King). Inspired by Hans Ruin’s notion of “being with the dead” and Thomas Laqueur’s “work of the dead,” we think – and invite debate – about where the field(s) are headed and what questions we are not yet ready to answer.

To find out more about and to order the book, visit: www.cambridge.org/9781316510568 and enter the code TCHAD26 at the checkout for a 20% discount!

Papers: Transitions

Thursday 18 June 26 4.30pm-5.50pm

‘My Body, My Choice’: Direct Action in Death Care

Emma Moormann

Death care is profoundly political: options for dealing with our bodies after we die are prescribed and limited by (inter)national laws, local regulations and political climates. Those who desire change may lobby for new death care practices with policy makers, attempt to exert political pressure through the media, or simply vote for parties whose political agenda aligns with one’s preferred practices. This talk explores another, hitherto overlooked strand of death care activism: direct action. This kind of activism involves people “taking power for themselves”, through their own immediate activity “rather than through the actions of others” (Sparrow 1997). Death care direct action, I propose, is a form of radical death care activism in which people seek to exert direct power over the method and performance of body disposal.

The talk analyses various historical and recent cases of death care direct action around the world to obtain a preliminary taxonomy of such activism. Firstly, I explore which people engage in this kind of activism. While other kinds of this traditionally anarchist style of activism are typically performed by the disenfranchised, I show that death care direct action is surprisingly often undertaken by members of more privileged groups. Secondly, I take a look at the diverse motivations and values behind acts of death care direct action, such as bodily autonomy, distrust in existing institutions and care imperatives. I finish by discussing what policy makers and practitioners may learn from those who seek to ‘take back the power’ to care for their dead.

Right to Die: Ageing, MAID, and Neoliberal Necropolitical Logics in Canada and the UK

Bethany Simmonds and Hermanpreet Singh

The rise in countries considering assisted dying legislation since the 2010s has been noticeable in the Global North, with twenty one countries and states across America and Australia having legalised assisted dying since 2013. Indeed, Canada passed ‘Medical Assistance In Dying (MAID)’ in 2016 and in the United Kingdom (UK) the ‘Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill’ passed its third reading in the House of Commons in June 2025 and is currently going through the House of Lords scrutiny process. Interestingly, this rise in calls for the implementation of ‘right to die’ legislation has coincided with intersecting structural conditions, including a growing ageing population, and austerity economic measures in the Global North, and more recently a global pandemic. This paper explores age-related power dynamics within the context of assisted dying legislation in both Canada and the UK through different sociological theoretical lenses including (neo-)Durkheim, Foucault, Mbembe and Agamben. It critically examines the implementation and expansion of MAID in Ontario, Canada, focusing on how assisted dying is situated within broader necropolitical logics that shape decision-making, care politics and perceived social worth of older persons. In doing so, the paper offers a sociologically grounded glimpse into the political future trajectory of assisted dying in the UK, should it continue along a similar legislative path, raising critical questions about autonomy, choice, and the governance of death in ageing societies across the Global North.

Advancing a decolonial and intersectional framework for understanding contemporary mourning and its creative expressions

Rayanne Haines

In line with the conference theme, this paper examines the ways in which colonialism has shaped, constrained, and reconstituted intersectional grieving practices, with attention to women’s culturally specific ritual expressions surrounding death and anticipatory loss. Through literature review, immersive ethnography, and semi-structured and unstructured interviews, the research investigates how rituals from historically marginalized or maligned religions, such as Vodou and Wicca, offer alternative epistemologies that challenge dominant Western, patriarchal, and colonial institutional frameworks of mourning. By foregrounding women’s lived experiences, including the gendered burden of care and the psychosocial effects of prescriptive

grieving norms, the project interrogates how colonial and patriarchal legacies continue to restrict agency in both communal and individual engagements with grief.

The paper is further informed by the researcher's personal navigation of anticipatory grief during a parent's end-of-life trajectory, highlighting the cultural taboos surrounding death discourse in Western contexts and the persistent misinterpretations of culturally diverse grieving practices. Drawing on the assertion that rituals function as socially cohesive and collectively learned practices (Durkheim, 2024) and building on the argument that well-tended rituals support adaptive coping in periods of instability (Kübler-Ross, 1973), the research situates creative and emergent grieving practices as critical interventions in reconfiguring kinship, community, and meaning-making.

Ultimately, this paper will contribute to the dissemination of interdisciplinary insights into global grieving traditions, feminist non-institutionalized death-related coping strategies, and the enduring influence of colonial and patriarchal structures on women's mental health. The paper advances a decolonial and intersectional framework for understanding contemporary mourning and its creative expressions.

Power Over Death: Haitian Vodou, Zombies and the Politics of Dead Bodies

B Laboy

The proper handling of death is vital not only for the dead themselves but also for the living. If the dead are not dealt with care, horrible things can ensue. Due to horror media, the figure of the zombie has been distorted and sensationalized, yet in Haiti, the figure is so much more. The making of a zombie happens when a sorcerer-priest, or a bokò, captures a person's spirit after they died in order to force the body to do their bidding. The act of turning a corpse into a zombie is done either as punishment for the life lived by the departed or because of the maliciousness of the actor themselves. In Haitian Vodou, two ceremonies are conducted to ensure the dead are truly dead, do not turn into zombies, and have proper eternal rest. The first is the Dessounin ceremony, performed shortly after death, and the second is the Kase-Kanari ceremony, held a year after death. In Haitian Vodou, death is not the end but is the doorway to something new. This new can either be restful or torturous, as is in the case of the zombie. In my paper, I will discuss Haitian Vodou's zombie phenomenon and the politics of dead bodies in Haitian culture and religious life. The paper will explore themes around agency of the dead body, abuses of power on the part of spiritual authorities, and the power of the dead and dead bodies for Haitians and practitioners of Vodou.

Papers: Material culture and language

Thursday 18 June 26 4.30pm-5.50pm

Who Decides Where Grief Belongs? Memorial Benches and Public Remembrance in England

Anna Malpas

Who decides where grief and memorial practices belong in public? This paper examines memorial benches in England as places where grief is shaped, regulated, and negotiated through everyday policies and bureaucratic practices. Memorial benches are common features of parks, public spaces, and rural landscapes, often understood as personal gestures that also serve a wider public good. In practice, however, they are governed by a patchwork of local or organisational policies that vary widely in terms of installation location, permitted wording, how long they may remain, and at times, whether they are permitted at all. Drawing on ethnographic research with mourners, local councils, and bench makers, this paper explores how the absence of clear or consistent regulation produces unequal access to public remembrance, shaped by local rules, institutional interpretation, and discretionary decision-making. It also documents how mourners respond to these constraints through small but meaningful acts of agency, such as attaching unofficial plaques, materially altering benches, or adding personal memorial objects. These practices reveal mourning as an active process that involves navigating, negotiating, and sometimes quietly challenging institutional power and claims to ownership over public space.

By focusing on memorial benches as everyday infrastructures of remembrance, this paper highlights how power over death and memory can be exercised through ordinary, 'common-sense' bureaucratic systems, rather than dramatic policy interventions. It shows how acts of remembrance can reshape public space by bringing emotion, care, and attachment into conversation with regulation, and demonstrates how grief actively shapes the landscapes in which memory is materialised.

Voluntary Gravedigging, Power and Agency in Rural Ireland

Ciara Henderson, Damien Brennan and Elaine Moriarty

In 2011, a sign was posted in a West Cork graveyard informing the people who lived there that they would no longer be able to bury their dead without professional, certified intervention. This local Irish government edict was not well received by the community.

Despite the extensive legal and bureaucratic framework governing Irish burial practices, rural communities continue to mobilise locally to perform gravedigging as a voluntary,

unpaid collective act. In doing so, this paper contends that voluntary gravedigging represents a form of everyday resistance.

This case study of a small, remote Irish community demonstrates that voluntary gravedigging persists as an active social practice through which community members reproduce and reinterpret inherited structures of obligation. Even with the structural transformations shaping contemporary Ireland, and the professionalisation of death care, voluntary gravedigging as a mortuary practice challenges the rigidity of bureaucratic and commercial conventions in death care. Burial becomes a shared social responsibility and in doing so, communities assert their competence in managing death, and collective identity in contemporary rural life.

The Ethics of the Funeral Eulogy: Lies, Omissions, and Perceived Falsehoods

Sarah Carter-Walshaw

If the eulogy is indeed the final, public word on the life of the deceased, particularly in front of so many witnesses in attendance (and perhaps more in an era of livestreamed services), it would be reasonable to claim that there is a responsibility on the writer - and on those contributing - to provide as full a picture of the deceased as is possible in the time allowed.

However, not all aspects of the life of the deceased might have been positive. A reluctance to “speak ill of the dead” or a view that eulogies should be a positive commentary on the life of the deceased, might lead writers, or those providing information to the writer, to omit to mention certain aspects of the life of the deceased from the eulogy - or even to lie. Further, differences in experiences of the deceased might lead some mourners to perceive some parts of the eulogy to contain falsehoods, but that are not considered such by the writers or those that instructed them.

In this paper, I intend to explore the ethical implications of lies, omissions, and perceived falsehoods in this unique context, and consider if there are any moral responsibilities attached to those that knew the deceased in writing - or advising the writer of - the eulogy.

Mobilizing Freedom: Black Funeral Directors and the Power of Professional Vehicles

Deborah Strehle

On June 6, 2020 in New London, Connecticut, U.S.A., over a thousand people gathered to protest police brutality after George Floyd’s murder by a police officer twelve days prior. Among the protesters was a hearse. Demonstrators taped to it the names of Black

people killed by police. Lauren Gee, the funeral director who brought the hearse, said that some may have been surprised to see a hearse used in protest; nevertheless, its presence seemed to resonate with many there. Gee's use of her hearse to express grief and demand justice fits into a longer history of Black funeral directors' activism using their professional vehicles.

This presentation analyzes how Black funeral directors leveraged the power of their profession, in particular hearses and limousines, to protect the living and the dead during the U.S. civil rights movement. Since the rise of the automobile, the sight of a sleek, black hearse has represented loss and mourning but also, in Black communities, the growing power of the Black middle class. Black funeral directors have used their vehicles to meet the diverse needs of their communities. In a segregated economy, they deployed these vehicles for many purposes: during funeral celebrations but also to ferry the sick and injured to emergency medical care, to mobilize political participation, as means of transportation and protection, and even to escape white vigilante violence. This presentation demonstrates how Black funeral directors harnessed their professional power to enact an expansive view of Black flourishing.

Interactive session: Agency and empowerment through embodied grief companionship

Thursday 18 June 26 7pm-8pm

Eleonora Ramsby Herrera

It is pithily said that 'power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. Perhaps this maxim is incomplete and needs a suffix, such as 'abuse of power', or 'unconscious use of power'.

Power is also a neutral concept; it just is, power is power. In human communication, however, it can be problematic, and this difficulty is compounded when there is a meeting between one who is thought to be in need and one designated as a care provider. In my work as a grief companion, published in both print and moving images, I have been guided by the foundational qualities of attunement and trust. These qualities enabled me, using my own autonomy and authority, to first explore and then express the impact of grief on my inner and outer self.

Thus, the power I brought to my collaboration with others was both invisible and apparent. The strength of this power manifested as an expanded version of each of us, one neither could have created alone. It was a classic case of the sum of the parts being greater than the individual components.

This 60-minute session will include:

- A short movement exercise
- Presentation of our film "What Lies Beyond"
- Reference to our published work
- Time for reflection on the experience of doing, watching and making sense

Day 3: Friday 19 June

Papers: Knowledge and authority

Friday 19 June, 9am-10am

Bodies as Evidence of the Future: Centenarians, Transhumanist Discourse, and the Power of Death Narratives

Chenyang Guo

Transhumanism increasingly reframes death not as an unavoidable endpoint, but as a technological problem to be solved, positioning extended life as evidence of mastery over mortality. Within these future-oriented narrations, centenarians are invoked as symbolic bodies that seemingly validate a denial of death. This proposed study examines how centenarians are discursively constructed within transhumanist imaginaries, and how these constructions reflect and reproduce power dynamics in cultural understandings of death. Drawing on the sociology of death and the body, this study will conduct semi-structured interviews with ten centenarians in China to explore how their lived experiences of aging, vulnerability, and proximity to death contrast with transhumanist narratives that celebrate longevity as evidence of transcendence. By juxtaposing embodied aging with technologically infused future imaginaries, this study interrogates how power operates in shaping whose stories of death and life are made visible, and whose are abstracted. This study aims to contribute to debates on the power of death narratives and the governance of mortality in an era of life-extension discourse. It highlights the sociopolitical implications of framing extreme old age as evidence of humanism potential rather than as lived confrontation with mortality.

I Have a Mouth, But I Won't Eat: a Case of Voluntary Stopping of Eating and Drinking

Kieran Kejiou

Background: Voluntary stopping eating and drinking (VSED) is an uncommon, patient-led means of hastening death. Its symptoms are uncomfortable and may result in an undignified death. We report the second case of death hastened by this means, medically unassisted and provoked by progressive frailty and existential distress.

Case: A 78-year-old, frail lady presented with poor appetite, expressing hopelessness, reluctance to engage, and suicidal ideation. On examination, she was undernourished and unable to care for herself without help. Blood tests and brain scans were normal. Repeated psychiatric assessment revealed no true psychiatric symptoms. She was treated for a presumed depression, although existential distress and personality disorders were considered. Antidepressants were unsuccessful. She continued to decline nutrition and medication, dying after four weeks.

Conclusion: Patients such as ours may seek assisted dying as one, if not the only, available way to exert power over their own existence. They should therefore be assessed early for existential distress. Incoming assisted dying legislation in the UK makes no provision for frail, non-terminal patients wishing to relieve existential crises by hastening death. There is no evidence supporting the denial of assisted dying services to this patient group. Clinician unfamiliarity with VSED and lack of clear guidelines may lead patients to pursue VSED unsupported and without advice on alternatives – limiting their capacity for informed choice. Further supported dying research is therefore urgently needed to support their dignity and autonomy at the end of their lives.

Society toward Suicide: Biopower, Responsibility, and Death in Japan

Norichika Horie

This paper presentation re-examines suicide in Japan from the perspective of power. It begins with Émile Durkheim's formulation of suicide as a "social fact." While Durkheim explained modern Western suicide as egoistic or anomic through statistical correlations with social indicators, suicide in his framework remained an individual act: socially conditioned, but not a death imposed by power.

Building on this distinction, the paper turns to Michel Foucault's concept of biopower to analyze how life is governed through statistics and interventions into variables such as unemployment and health. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's notion of homo sacer, it examines how societies draw implicit lines between lives that must be protected and lives that may be allowed to approach death. From this perspective, suicide is shaped by power relations that regulate who should live and who may be left to die.

Against this theoretical background, the paper explores the specificity of suicide in Japan. Many Japanese suicides—especially among older adults—are closely linked to

illness and a perceived burden on others. Rather than fitting Durkheim's model of egoistic suicide, these cases extend a logic closer to altruistic suicide. Psychological approaches such as Thomas Joiner's interpersonal theory capture experiences of burdensomeness, but remain focused on individual perception and under-theorize power.

Finally, the paper argues that under neoliberal conditions and intensified self-responsibility, social empathy toward suicide declines, and death is increasingly produced as the outcome of cost-cutting, self-destructive survival strategies, suggesting that Japanese society as a whole is moving toward suicide.

Papers: Loss and its impact

Friday 19 June, 9am-10am

Deconstructing Grief across Cancer Caregiving and Bereavement: A Constructivist Grounded Theory

Ananya Bajaj

Background and Methods: While the informal caregivers of cancer patients are often tasked with a series of responsibilities during the illness trajectory, entailing their central role in cancer care, the discourses around their experiences of proximal engagement with the dying individual remain meagre. Abundant literature discusses the notable prevalence of anticipatory and prolonged grief among this population. However, the nuances of their experience of both non-death and death-related loss extend beyond these binaries. Another key consideration is negotiation of the resulting grief within a societal context marked by rigid grief and mourning prescriptions. Hence, this study investigates the lived experiences of diverse forms of grief among informal caregivers and bereaved family members from India. Their semi-structured interviews were analysed using Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory analysis.

Results: Two themes emerged. Theme 1: The making of death: experiencing cumulative loss across the illness trajectory describes a cascade of losses caregivers encounter. It highlights that the grief of caregivers was not confined to the moment of death but embodied the accumulation of prior experiences. Theme 2: The negotiation of grief against conventional norms reports the caregiver's experience of societal regulation of grief. It indicates the implicit social hierarchy of grief based on relationships with the deceased, defining the permissible temporality and intensity of grief.

Conclusion: Caregivers' grief was shaped by intersecting power structures: societal norms that define "appropriate" grief manifestations, academic and clinical models

that emphasise resolution and risk persistent disenfranchisement, and institutional care practices that prioritise patients while marginalising caregivers' emotional needs.

Death and loss in co-housing communities – negotiating freedom, care and conformity in a Swedish context

Annika Jonsson and Cathrin Wasshede

This presentation is based on an interview study with predominately older adults living in co-housing communities in Sweden and explores negotiations brought about by the death of residents. Sweden is time and again declared to be the most individualized country in the world and co-housing projects are, in some respects, sites of resistance. Even though members of co-housing communities have their own private spaces, they share many areas and are expected to be involved in activities such as cooking, eating together and taking care of the facilities. In co-housing communities with older residents, members also face practical, relational, emotional and ethical issues connected to the deaths of co-residents on a somewhat regular basis. This necessitates negotiations regarding how much help and support residents are expected to provide while someone is dying, what personal boundaries should be respected, when and how grief can, or should, be shared with others, and so on. At the deepest level, these negotiations concern ideas and ideals connected to personal freedom, care and conformity.

The presentation explores these negotiations in relation to the Swedish context, where many people learn to appreciate and, to various degrees, expect personal autonomy. At the same time, they navigate gendered norms (not least when it comes to caring for others), marginalization due to class or ethnic background etc. The negotiations taking place in co-housing communities in Sweden convey this complexity and reveal important things about processes where people handle death and loss together.

The Power of Parenting a Baby Who Has Died

Helena Morais

The death of a baby can alter our perspective of the world and its “natural” order. It is an event that most consider to be so unsettling that they avoid talking about it altogether. Leaving families to feel isolated and silenced, as if their child never existed and their right to parent completely dismantled.

Most socio-political and cultural structures discourage conversations around loss, believing that continued bonding or remembrance will intensify suffering. In reality, denying parents this right can invalidate their experience and leave them with regret in addition to grief.

There is power in choosing to actively, unapologetically continue to parent a baby who has died, whether publicly, by creating a legacy that supports the wider community, or privately through pictures, keepsakes, rituals, and ongoing bonds.

Drawing on insights from parents, scholars, and practitioners, this session will examine the radical power of "parenting out loud" after loss. It invites audiences to reflect on their own biases in relation to baby loss and to question cultural norms, gender roles, and religious beliefs that silence bereaved parents. The session also explores why baby loss is associated with shame, guilt, and embarrassment; how medical and cultural language can minimise or dehumanise these babies; and what history can teach us through key figures whose continued relationships with their children challenge dominant ideas about death and parenthood.

Papers: Babies, children and young people

Friday 19 June, 10.15am-11.15am

How Child Death can Empower Action: Data, Voice, and Prevention

Sylvia Stoianova

Child death is often understood solely in terms of loss and tragedy, yet it can also become a catalyst for action, learning, and change. This paper explores how child death is mobilised to empower action through the work of the National Child Mortality Database (NCMD), focusing on how evidence, lived experience, and narrative combine to influence practice and policy.

Drawing on a range of NCMD outputs, including the Prevention of Future Deaths report and published thematic work, the paper uses selected topics as case studies to examine how individual child deaths contribute to national learning. It considers how the Child Death Review (CDR) process transforms personal loss into collective evidence, and how this evidence is used to identify modifiable factors, shape prevention agendas, and support system-wide change.

The paper also reflects on the role of bereaved parents and families in this process, including examples where parents have established charities or advocacy initiatives following the death of their child. These cases highlight how lived experience, when combined with national data, can generate authority and influence, enabling families to engage with policy, research, and public discourse.

Rather than treating child death as an endpoint, this paper positions it as a site where power operates through knowledge production, narrative, and prevention. By examining how action is enabled, and sometimes constrained, through data, reporting, and voice,

the paper contributes to interdisciplinary discussions about death, power, and the ethical responsibilities involved in turning loss into learning aimed at preventing future deaths.

Grieving Divergently

Erica Borgstrom

Social norms are known to be powerful – influencing what behaviours or responses are expected, accepted, and stigmatised – including around loss and grief. People’s learning about social norms and grief often begins in childhood. Some have claimed that grief is a universal experience, which carries with it unsaid normative assumptions about how people may perceive and experience. However, neurodivergent people may experience and respond to bereavement, death, loss and grief in ways that diverge from social norms, and there is a diversity within these differences. For example, their emotions, behaviours and grief timelines may not map onto social norms and societal expectations. This can lead to neurodivergent people being excluded from death-related rituals, others assuming they lack empathy or are too emotional, their behaviours being misinterpreted by others who may not recognise them as grieving, and/or their grief being pathologised. Not conforming to social norms can also cause them to internalise shame or guilt.

This presentation focuses on the concept of ‘grieving divergently’ as a way to understand this intersection of neurodiversity, loss and grief, and social norms. Drawing on recent scoping research about bereavement experiences of neurodivergent children and young people, it will discuss current understandings of what ‘grieving divergently’ looks like, explanatory frameworks for such divergence, and existing examples of inclusive bereavement support. Lastly, it will suggest possible avenues for further exploration and work in this area.

Co-creating death literacy with young people: Reflections on power and agency from a participatory research study in Canada

Amarens Matthiesen, Ryan Kent and Nika Rovensky

Death literacy refers to the knowledge and skills that make it possible to understand, gain access to, and act upon end-of-life and death care options. Young people, however, are rarely positioned as active contributors to death literacy-related knowledge, conceptualizations, and skills. Rather, young people are often perceived as passive recipients within adult-led educational and research structures and concepts.

This paper presents a case-based example of youth engagement in a national research study on pediatric palliative and end-of-life care in Canada. Drawing on Childhood Ethics and an associated recognition of young people’s (relational) agency, we offer reflexive accounts from youth co-researchers and adult team members on the process of co-creating death literacy through research. Youth engagement in palliative and end-of-life care research is framed as a practice that actively produces, promotes, and expands death literacy.

Team member narratives shed light on how power operates through research roles, institutional norms, and knowledge-making practices. Youth researchers described gaining new knowledge of death, dying, and grief, while also identifying tensions linked to adult authority over research agendas and outputs.

We propose that death literacy should be conceptualized as a relational, intergenerational, and participatory practice that is shaped by power dynamics across generations. By foregrounding youth as co-creators, this work reframes death literacy as an embodied process of ‘doing’ knowledge together. The paper concludes with implications for public health, palliative and end-of-life care research, and institutional approaches to youth engagement in research.

Papers: Resistance and representation

Friday 19 June, 10.15am-11.15am

State at the Dock: Mobilizing public sentiments and thriving public sphere in the aftermath of death

Sayendri Panchadhyayi

In Kolkata, India the sexual assault and murder of a young female doctor inside a public hospital triggered shock and fear among the residents. This was disconcerting as citizens felt if a woman is not safe in her workplace, in a state-funded institution, then women are not safe anywhere. This incident shed light on occupational hazards, safety and integrity at the workplace and the greater responsibility of the state in protecting its citizens. Retaining similarities to another similar incident of Nirbhaya in 2012, both these incidents, in its intensity and monstrosity, stoked the deepest conscience of the citizens and sprawled into a movement — Reclaim the Night (locally known as meyera raat dokhol koro). This public mobilization, especially among women, is not merely a political epoch against sexual violence. It seeks to destabilize the fundamental premises, gazes, and discursive practices that perpetuate misogyny, gender inequality, and casual sexism—factors that escalate to heinous manifestations like rape and battery. Reclaim the Night was marked by women across age groups coming together to rise against the systematic and structural patriarchy and silence of the state. Organic

solidarity was evident as autorickshaw drivers who were transporting the protesting women to the protest site refused to accept money. This paper aims to engage in this mobilization of the public in the aftermath of Abhaya's (as named by the public to maintain anonymity) brutal death, hinting at the potency of a tragedy to weave solidarity and the politics of memorialization — enduring the resistance struggle and embodying the values held by the deceased, often remembered as a martyr. These tragedies lend a powerful cadence to the populace, compelling them to emerge as citizens who assert and occupy the public space that otherwise remains a mirage for women.

Framing Death as Victory: Death as the Ultimate Spectacle of Military Power

Tal Morse and Sara Kopelman

The display of corpses in the media during wartime is a profound exercise of political power, serving as a mechanism to legitimize violence and signal sovereign triumph. This paper addresses the conference theme of "the power of death and dead bodies" by examining how visual representations of war casualties are weaponized to construct narratives of victory. Drawing on the 2024 case study of Yahya Sinwar's documented death, the research analyzes the strategic interplay between governments, militaries, the media and digital platforms in the "managed visibility" of death imagery. The study highlights a fundamental paradox: while Western culture traditionally treats the corpse as a taboo to be concealed, the political claim of victory often depends on its exhibition to satisfy a public "appetite for bodies in pain" (Sontag, 2003), humiliation of the enemy and prove dominance. By comparing historical "victory images"—from the sanitized Iwo Jima flag-raising to the suppressed "Highway of Death"—the paper demonstrates how power and dominance are negotiated through the selective mobilization of these taboos.

In the digital age, this power dynamic is further complicated as decentralized platforms like Telegram bypass institutional gatekeeping, allowing raw, graphic images to circulate as "symbolic trophies". This paper argues that the "victory image" functions as a simulacrum of power, substituting visual spectacle for material reality. Ultimately, the study illuminates how the visibility of death remains a site of intense political struggle, where the dead body is transformed into a signifier of authority and collective memory.

Laughing at Death: Humor, Mortality and Decolonial Power in Contemporary Visual Culture

Marko Stamenkovic

We think we know death. We fear it. We avoid it. But can we laugh at it? And in laughing — what do we do with power? This paper explores how contemporary visual arts

mobilize humor and mortality in order to challenge established structures of power, knowledge and colonial memory (or its afterlife). Drawing on the curatorial research for the international exhibition *To Die Out Laughing* (2017), which juxtaposed laughter and death across global contexts, I argue that humor constitutes a form of counter-power: it unsettles normative frameworks of life/death, center/periphery, and rational/non-rational, thus opening up spaces for decolonial agency and knowledge-reconfiguration. Starting from a critical reflection on the “incongruous assemblage” of comedy and mortality (James Beattie, 1779), I investigate three interrelated dimensions: (1) the power of the dead and dead bodies — how humor can animate, re-animate or configure the “dead” as agents of memory and resistance; (2) coloniality and the post-colonial condition — how laughter and mortality are intertwined in global histories of violence, dispossession and survival; (3) the epistemic power of humor — how comedic disruptions shift what counts as knowledge, who holds it, and who laughs last. Through case-studies drawn from the works by artists from four continents, I show how artists deploy humor in relation to death to intervene in capital-colonial logics, reveal hidden social violence, and re-envision mortality as a site of collective, creative power: decolonial and counter-colonial alike. [<https://todieoutlaughing.wordpress.com/>]

Roundtable: Power, Autonomy and Incapacity: Rethinking Future Decision

Friday 19 June, 11.30am-12.30pm

Power, Autonomy and Incapacity: Rethinking Future Decision

Kirra Moser, Nola Ries, Victoria Shepherd

Adults can plan for future decisional incapacity, and end of life, through Lasting Powers of Attorney and Advance Directives - legal mechanisms intended to uphold autonomy and ensure decisions reflect an individual’s wishes, values and preferences. Yet, these practices reveal complex dynamics of power and multi-level risks. This roundtable examines how power is negotiated, transferred, constrained and misused in anticipatory planning and, how it may be rebalanced to better support individuals’ agency.

The session features three presentations (around 15 minutes each) followed by an interactive discussion with attendees. Professor Nola Ries, Faculty of Law, University of Technology Sydney, will analyse the tension between the theoretical empowerment offered by anticipatory legal rights and the practical realities in which decision making power shifts to others in ways that may undermine agency. Kirra Moser, Behavioural Scientist and Visiting Fellow CDAS, will present an innovative decision support tool intended to help optimise proxy selection by reducing risks and potential biases and

promote more equitable power relations. Dr Victoria Shepherd, Centre for Trials Research, Cardiff University, will address the vital but under examined domain of advance planning for research participation, exploring how individual preferences intersect with ethical, institutional and familial power structures.

Together, the session offers interdisciplinary insights into how power shapes planning for incapacity and the end of life. We invite participants to consider reforms and practices that promote agency, reduce vulnerability and support more relational approaches to future decision making. We will also examine emerging challenges around advance planning and proxy roles in contentious decisions such as assisted dying.

Roundtable: The Struggle for Power over Death in Digital Afterlives

Friday 19 June 26 11.30am-12.30pm

Patricia Živković, Leah Henrickson, Nevana Jevremović, and Edina Harbinja

This roundtable explores the emergence of so-called “griefbots” — AI systems designed to simulate communication with deceased persons — from the combined perspectives of media, law and philosophy. Griefbots are increasingly framed as tools for comfort and emotional continuity, yet they also redistribute power over death, memory, and relationships between humans and non-human systems.

The roundtable explores how griefbots reconfigure practices of mourning by introducing a sort of ‘absence of death’. We ask whether these systems empower grieving individuals by offering new modes of remembrance and care, or whether they risk reshaping grief into a technologically managed and governed process. What kinds of emotional agency are produced when non-human systems speak in the voice of the dead, and how does this affect concepts of authenticity, personhood, and relational power?

The discussion will also focus on power relations embedded in the governance of post-mortem data. Who controls digital remains? How are consent, personality rights, and data protection negotiated after death? What forms of surveillance, commercial exploitation, or psychological harm may arise from the platformisation of grief, and who will have access to digital immortality and who will not?

The session will be conducted as an interactive roundtable with structured audience participation, using short scenarios and prompts to encourage collective reflection. Participants will be invited to contribute disciplinary and personal perspectives. Rather than offering definitive answers, the roundtable aims to map key tensions between

technological power, emotional practices, and normative frameworks and to critically explore how power over death is being redistributed through griefbots.

Roundtable: Cursus Rerum: (Post)human conflicting cultures of loss in the Anthropocene

Friday 19 June, 11.30am-12.30pm

Christopher Lyon, Sarah Bezan, Jesse Peterson, Naomi Pendle

This roundtable examines the implications of conflicting contemporary visions of loss. Prevailing ‘Anthropocene’ discourses of the environmental crisis are framed as losses, describing rapid observed or projected extinction, decline, or degradation of species, ecosystems, and landscapes. From the perspective of even moderately deep time, however, most species that have ever existed are now extinct, as are many of the landscapes, ecologies, and cultures that lived with them. Loss, death, and extinction are the norm, not the exception. Yet, in practice, contemporary approaches to loss are polarised and paradoxical. Policy, science, and activism often attempt to “stop-loss” nature through conservation, genetic editing, and species resurrection, amid counter-arguments for accepting these losses as transitions to new ecologies. Simultaneously, social fractures are emerging around human mortality where some movements embrace “green” burials, whilst others invest in postmortem digital avatars and anti-aging technologies. Similar tensions exist between those seeking to control the time and manner of death through assisted suicide, and those embracing natural death. What emerges is a conflict between ecocentric visions of loss as natural processes to be embraced, and technocentric, managerial visions where loss is a failure to be controlled, directed, and ultimately escaped. These competing cultures have profound implications for how we negotiate a changing biosphere, the limits of healthcare, policy, and technology, and human and nonhuman existence in a changing world.

Keynote talk: Bombs, Boats, and Bodies: The US “Department of War” in an Era of Exceptionalist, Maximalist Cruelty

Friday 14 June, 12.40pm-1.30pm

Sarah Wagner

With its secretary pledging an era of “maximum lethality, not tepid legality,” the United States’ current Department of Defense has alternately threatened and waged wars across the globe. How might we – as humanists and scholars of death – understand the logics of brutal exceptionalism underwriting the Trump 2.0 administration’s campaign to

exert geopolitical power? In this paper, I offer a partial answer by exploring the spectacular display of celebrated death through the juxtaposition of bodies recovered with bodies erased. Tracing the evolution of the US military's forensic scientific mission of war dead accounting in the wake of the Vietnam/American War, the 2008 overturned ban on photographing the repatriation of fallen service members' remains, and the aerial strikes on Venezuelan boats in the Caribbean, I analyze the role of visibility in this shifting domain of dead body politics. The triangulation illustrates the enduring necropolitical efficacy of making certain dead count and others disappear in the ledger of state power, at the same time that it exposes a new era of brutish cosplay where extrajudicial death has become the visual cue for strength, not a blemish to conceal.

About the speaker

Sarah Wagner is Professor of Anthropology at George Washington University. She is the author of *To Know Where He Lies: DNA Technology and the Search for Srebrenica's Missing* (2008) and *What Remains: Bringing America's Missing Home from the Vietnam War* (2019), and co-editor with Sarah Richardson and Ruth Toulson of the *Cambridge Handbook for the Anthropology of Death* (2026). Her research focuses on post-conflict societies, memory, national identity, and forensic science, and, most recently, on COVID-19 death and mourning.