Series Editors' Preface

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About the series

Studying death can tell us an incredible amount about life. More specifically, it can illuminate a seemingly endless evolving relationship between humans and mortality. From sense-making and rituals around dying to how deceased persons are disposed of and even interwoven within human/nonhuman grief as ecologies shift, studying deaths not only deepens our understandings about loss and endings, but also of societies and culture. By attending to these matters, this book series seeks to shine a light on the cultural and social dimensions of death, exploring the wider contexts in which it is experienced, (re)presented and understood.

At a time when recognising the differences inherent in these broader sociocultural contexts has never been more important, the series adopts a broad use of the term 'culture' to enable us to bring together a rich multidisciplinary set of monographs and edited collections. We appreciate that the concept of culture has long been debated in several disciplines, most notably within anthropology, as well as contested in terms of how to optimally study 'culture'. While this series will acknowledge this, we do not seek to replicate some of these wider theoretical and epistemological debates. Rather, we want to open out 'culture' to include anthropological, sociological, historical and philosophical perspectives as well as drawing on media and culture studies, art and literature. By adopting such an open position to what culture is and how it can be known, we welcome both the sharing of new empirical work within the series as well as theorising about how engagements with death (re)shape understandings of what culture is, how it operates and what the future of culture(s) may be.

As social scientists spanning anthropology, sociology, criminology and cultural studies, and supported by an international editorial board that includes experts in death, dying and the dead our default position when thinking about death is typically two-fold. First, that death and dying are

inherently social; that is, they are not only about biological or material processes and endings. Second, by attending to and foregrounding 'the social' when it comes to death, issues of culture and cultural practices necessarily organically come to the fore. Such is the importance of culture to death, that the topic does not 'fit' neatly into one discipline over another. It is a truly interdisciplinary issue that affects everyone who has lived, is living, or will live in the future; all life on the planet; and Earth itself.

This series launched in 2018 with Emerald Publishing, but relocated in 2021 to Bristol University Press. The series represents a commitment to empirically building our collective understandings about death and culture across time and places, in monographs and edited collections. As editors, we want to take this moment to thank existing and previous editors and authors, the presses we work with, and the wider academic and professional communities that facilitate the flourishing of studies of death and culture. It is only through this collective endeavour that books like this can be made, read and built upon, and we are excited to see the series grow. We welcome enquiries about future volumes, and hope that you enjoy reading this book.

About the book

Death's Social and Material Meaning Beyond the Human is an edited collection by Jesse D. Peterson, Natashe Lemos Dekker and Philip R. Olson with nearly 20 international contributors. Central to this collection is an in-depth handling, and detailed accounts of the entangling, of social meanings and materialities of dying and death. And importantly, this is 'beyond the human' – the limits are not the physical body that dies and how people make sense of this in finite terms. But across the volume readers learn to think about wider ecologies, technologies, politics and ethics. As outlined in the Introduction by the editors, across the 13 chapters they have provided material to enable us to see and discuss 'new forms of deathly concern'. Specifically, recognizing death as something that affects the entirety of the earth system and requires a more-than-human interdisciplinary dialogue to fully appreciate and act within these new forms.

This is a timely contribution to the *Death and Culture* series. Not a month goes by without news reporting about global warming and the ecological emergency that looms large: potential of mass death projected on the now and future. And yet, societally and internationally we are still learning how to think about this beyond questions of climate-friendly action. There is a desperate need to find new ways of being within and part of the earth system than what we currently inhabit, and as this collection shows, how we die within it. These new ways must be pluralistic, inclusive and draw on multiple forms of knowledge. The detailed and careful articulations in the chapters of this book illustrate how we may begin to do this as well as why this is important.

From considering dying seas to COVID-19 to transforming the waste of corpses into trees, each section within the book shows what is at stake. Cleverly, the editors and authors do not assume that what is at stake is a given or universally appreciated, nor is it situated purely around a nature/culture binary. Instead, they expertly unfold how the objects of their study matter and the ways in which they are understood by people. Culture here is not a monolithic external factor. Within some chapters, culture is something that is made visible through practices and values, a collective that is both regularly repeated by individuals and changed over time. In other chapters, authors talk about 'deathcare cultures' that represent dominate modes, discourses and professions that exert power over what it means to be human and the importance of death in certain contexts. Across these, by taking a more-than-human approach, the entanglements between culture and nature are made apparent.

For those more familiar with more-than-human approaches to academic study, the mighty and humble fungi will not be an unexpected companion in this text. If at this point an eyebrow is raised querying what is meant by that last sentence, dear reader you are in for a treat that spans dinner plates to forest floors and afterlives.

Introduction

Jesse D. Peterson, Natashe Lemos Dekker and Philip R. Olson

The third and final plate of mushroom risotto arrived. We were seated together at a Stockholm restaurant on the eve of a workshop on death and dying titled 'Dying at the margins: A critical exploration of material-discursive perspectives to death and dying', organized by Natashe Lemos Dekker and Jesse D. Peterson, with funding provided by the KTH Environmental Humanities Laboratory as part of the Environmental Humanities for a Concerned Europe innovative training network. The multidisciplinary workshop would bring together 16 scholars from nine different countries to connect scholars around research exploring how dying 'bodies' – broadly understood to include humans, animals, plants, things and places – challenge natural and normative notions of a 'good' death. Joining Natashe and Jesse at dinner was Phil Olson, who would give the next morning's keynote address. It seemed fitting that each of us would settle on fungus to nourish our minds and bodies during our first in-person meeting. After all, fungi are a symbol of decay, dissolution and putrefaction, fruiting harbingers that, by confronting their observers with the transformation of death back into life, challenge the definitions of the living, dying, alive, dead, not-alive, undead, and more. Reflecting on this moment, we can say that it was this very challenge that brought us together.

Though the three of us operate in different fields – Jesse in environmental humanities, Phil in science and technology studies, and Natashe in anthropology – we confirmed over the course of the next two days of workshop activities that we and the rest of the workshop participants were asking similar questions about how materialities, practices and stories challenge and complicate standard human conceptions of death and dying. Such questions are deeply important, as death's social and cultural meanings in society underscore practices ranging from efforts to defer death to preparations for funeral and burial rites; from practices of grief and mourning to forensic efforts to understand the causes of death; and from intervening in the processes of death and decomposition to interrogating the agentic dynamics of death and decomposition.

Enthused by a successful workshop, we three organized a 2020 4S/EASST (virtual) conference panel on the same theme but with all new contributors, some of whom have contributed to this volume. At this conference, entanglements between human and nonhuman death emerged, again, as a central theme. The growing COVID-19 pandemic inflected much of the conversation at the conference, but presenters on our panel shed light on the ways in which individuals, governments and other interest groups negotiate with non-pandemic forms of dying, including the disappearance of loved ones, the loss of a child before birth, the inability to care for oneself due to dementia, the planned eradication of an invasive plant, the successive extinction of multiple species, and the death of a river or lake. While we all must face our own inevitable deaths, we also encounter the countless deaths of others throughout our lives. By meeting the messiness of death and dying, we, as scholars, hope to stay with the complexity of loss, grief, relief, struggle and release that attend our many encounters with the demise and cessation of all lives.

After a successful 4S conference we were approached by a publisher other than Bristol University Press about possibly creating an edited volume around the topics explored in our panel. Having enjoyed working together, and feeling now some optimistic momentum, we were keen to explore the possibility of editing a volume together. Our call for proposals was met by over 50(!) submissions, indicating considerable interest in the subject matter of our call. We deliberated collectively about which press we should approach with a book proposal, and settled on Bristol University Press, to which the 'Death and Culture' series had recently moved.

Framing this book

This book explores the social meanings and materialities of death and dying by attending to death as a state, an event, a process, and as a site for political, scientific, medical, environmental and ethical negotiations regarding the significance of mortality. But across all these investments, the book underscores the relationality of death, for the primary motivation behind this project is to articulate (both in the sense of stating and in the sense or establishing connections between) new forms of deathly concern that affect not only humans but the entire earth system and that necessitate new thinking and interdisciplinary exchange for situating death, and human relationships to it, in more-than-human terms.

Death studies typically take the death of the human subject as its object of study, thereby overlooking the wider networks of relations involved in social and natural processes surrounding death. Yet, as the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis have shown, human death intermingles with microorganisms, environmental conditions, developments in science

and medicine, and more. Additionally, as a result of anthropogenic changes to the planet Earth, humans must also deal with the nonhuman deaths we cause and the complicated material, emotional and practical consequences that the loss of nonhuman creatures and entities may entail. While death as a more-than-human affair – as a category built upon human emotions and knowledge, as well as human relationships with technologies, more-than-human beings and socio-ecological environments – has existed at the margins of death studies research, we see more scholarly attention devoted to the ecological, material and queer aspects of death and dying. For instance, the recent emergence of queer death studies challenges the primacy of human death as the only kind of death of interest as well as focuses on the 'necropolitics' surrounding the dead (Mbembé, 2003; Radomska et al, 2019: 5). Scholars working in this arena explore 'queer' bonds between the living and dead as well as 'queer' this relationship (Radomska et al, 2019: 6). They point to the epistemological and symbolic violence that marks some deaths as more valuable than others (Radomska et al, 2020). Additionally, scholars working in extinction studies look beyond the death of the individual human to explore how species extinctions – driven by humans – complicate and transform understandings of death, time and generations (Heise, 2016; Rose et al, 2017). While others working on environmental issues continue to explore the degradation of environments (Tsing et al, 2017; Lidström et al, 2022), the poisonous toxicities and wastes that infiltrate human and other creatures' bodies (Alaimo, 2010; Armiero et al, 2019; Muller and Nielsen, 2022), and the political, social and cultural moves which make some lives 'killable' (Haraway, 2008: 77–82; Beisel, 2010; Mehrabi, 2020). In the natural sciences, additional philosophical and conceptual conversations that define life as ecosystemic rather than organismic (Fiscus, 2001) or as flows of energy masses (Wei et al, 2022) also present unique formulations for application by scholars researching dying and death. Each of these various strands of research dealing with the death of people, places and other beings offers fruitful ground for extending human knowledge and practices surrounding the dying and the dead.

This collection brings these marginal matters into focus, centring discussion of the death of nonhuman others, the relational materiality of the human corpse, new narratives about the work of death caretakers, and newly emerging deathcare practices and technologies. The transdisciplinary and transnational character of this collection reveals how deeply human death is intertwined with the lives and deaths of nonhuman things, objects, places and discourses. By shedding light on deaths and dyings that exist in many unlooked-for places, this collection challenges death studies' focus on human death, as well as the norms that govern standard approaches to studying human death. Thus, this volume addresses urgent questions facing death research, including:

- What boundary work takes place to construct and maintain the categories of alive, not-alive, dead, dying and undead for places, objects and beings?
- How do modes of existing between life and death affect normative categorizations of the living, the non-living and the dead?
- What are the implications of reconfiguring understandings of death to a more ecological frame that accommodates more-than-human lives and deaths?
- How do such challenges alter ethical approaches and values attached to dying and death?

The contents of this book

This volume draws together diverse material-discursive perspectives on socio-ecological networks of the dying and dead. In addition to gathering a wide range of international perspectives – contributors hail from North America, Europe, Asia, Africa and Oceania – this collection showcases a range of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of death and dying from scholars doing cutting-edge research in death studies, feminist and queer studies, new materialism and waste studies, plant and animal studies, and non-Western or indigenous studies. In so doing, this volume broadens the scope of conventional research on death and dying, and focuses the discussion towards death as a more-than-human affair. Thinking and writing along the themes of mediation, care and power, the collection further challenges normative understandings and categories of life and death.

The organization of edited volumes always involves choices about how best to draw out certain contents by grouping specific chapters in distinct parts, and in particular orders. Recognizing that these choices always take place among a field of possible alternative arrangements, we have organized the book's chapters into three parts, which, respectively, highlight the themes of (I) ontologies and epistemologies of death and dying, (II) care and remembrance, and (III) troubling agencies.

Part I explores how scientific, technological and discursive practices mediate ontologies and epistemologies of death in human bodies, microbial soil communities, waterbodies, and at large scales. These chapters challenge normative understandings of death by exposing the complexity of material and creaturely forms of death and dying, and by critically examining relationships between individual and collective death. The chapters collected in this section also highlight new perspectives occasioned by new medical and funerary technologies, growing concerns about the harmful effects of anthropogenic climate change, and the interests of nonhuman organisms.

Grounded in fieldwork conducted in a Swiss forensic medicine department that is on the cutting-edge of new postmortem imaging technologies, Céline Schnegg, Séverine Rey and Alejandro Dominguez

explore ontological and epistemological negotiations between conventional autopsy techniques (*in situ*) and emerging radiological technologies (including MRI and CT scans). Their opening chapter reveals how new imaging technologies are taken up by radiologists and pathologists who are generating and responding to new forms of evidence – even new, onto-epistemic 'realities' of the dead body – as well as new forms of expertise in the morally and legally charged field of forensic investigation. While some postmortem imaging enthusiasts have proposed that new imaging techniques could one day replace conventional autopsy practices, Schnegg et al point out that, in practice, postmortem imaging tends to serve as a compliment to *in situ* examination, which, for the time being, retains its ascendancy in forensic investigation. In Chapter 2, Philip Olson, too, examines how the development and use of new technologies has challenged normative practices, and how those norms have pushed back against technology-backed challenges. Using discourse analysis to examine long-standing proscriptions against the 'commingling' of human remains, Olson argues that thinking about and designing for death at large scales has provoked a moral dialectic that moves between individual and collective death, and between anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives on death's meaning and materiality. Reconciliation across constructed scales of death and disposition calls for an alignment of human purposes and natural processes, Olson argues; and achieving this alignment, he concludes, may require explicit attention to collective deathcare policy. Collective death emerges as a point of interest in Serena Zanzu's Chapter 3 as well. Interrogating the exploitative instrumentalism that has dominated human–microbe relations in bioremediation practices, Zanzu evokes the 'microbial turn' as a means by which to 'problematize the human understanding of individuated death', and to make space for appreciating the (sometimes engineered) death of whole microbial communities. In bioremediation practices, the termination of invisible, microbial life is understood as 'destruction', but not 'authentic death', because microbes are reduced to tools or potential threats. Zanzu concludes that a microbiopolitcs of the invisible may generate new narratives of life and death that enrich microbial being with non-instrumental value. In Chapter 4, Jesse Peterson rounds out Part I of the volume by drawing explicit attention to the question of what sorts of beings or entities can live or die. Provoked by characterizations of the Baltic Sea as 'dead' or 'dying', Peterson illustrates how cultural and scientific representations of the sea contribute to an environmental imaginary of a dying Baltic Sea. Valuations of specific characteristics of the sea's water shape ideas about the sea's 'natural' state, and about 'unnatural' threats to those valued characteristics. Guided by an onto-epistemic pluralism that resonates with Schnegg et al's Chapter 1, Peterson notes that a dying Baltic Sea is one among many possible Baltic Seas, each of which consists of a different set of value-laden claims about its

water, and each of which could 'die' if that definitive set of characteristics undergoes substantial changes.

Part II (care and remembrance) focuses on the sociality of caring for, and disposing of deceased bodies, and the prominence of the body in processes of grief and remembrance. From banners that materialize the deceased in absence of the body (Bredenbröker, Chapter 6) and ambiguous relations between spirit and body (Sicilia, Chapter 8), to COVID-19 protocols for treatment of 'contagious' bodies (Yépez and Johnson, Chapter 5) and fears of mass burial (Holleran, Chapter 7), the chapters in this section provide insight into the cultural significance of deceased bodies. They show how the discursive and physical spaces occupied by the dead may transform relationships with the dead and among the living, in so doing probing into issues of affect, memory and responsibility. In different ways, all of the chapters deal with questions of containment and separation of dead bodies. Moreover, the chapters consider what happens when ethical obligations towards the dead cannot be fulfilled due to cultural, biological, institutional or temporal constraints. This exposes some of the values and expectations that underpin memorialization and notions of a good death, as expressed in funerary practices and postmortem care relations.

In Chapter 5, Rosa Inés Padilla Yépez and Anne W. Johnson reflect on the experiences of family members of people who died of COVID-19 infections in Mexico and Ecuador. Family members were in many cases prohibited from accompanying the dying person and from practising funerary rituals, which has had a detrimental effect on the mourning process. Yépez and Johnson relate this experience to the sanitary protocols that were enforced in funerary and healthcare institutions, and which were based on a logic of containment and separation. They argue that such protocols are a way in which states exercise power over the lives and deaths of citizens – a form of power that also faces resistance in the families' creative practices. Isabel Bredenbröker explores in Chapter 6 the cultural significance of obituary banners in Ghana. Based on fieldwork, they suggest that these funeral banners, which depict the deceased person and are placed centrally in the community, materialize the important position of the dead in social life. Their analysis of the changes in mortuary practices from colonization through to the present, reveals that the banners enable a good death for the deceased by blending indigenous and Christian ways of responding to death, which involves both separation from the body of the deceased and their continued presence in the community. Returning to COVID-19 in Chapter 7, Samuel Holleran traces contemporary fears of mass burial through an historical analysis of images of death and large-scale burials that proliferated in the media during the pandemic. Holleran juxtaposes these images and the fears they represent with emerging death technologies, such as *hakatomo* and human composting. Such alternative modes of disposition, he suggests, might be

understood as shifting the cultural perception of collective burial, although public reception and social and religious customs may hold their acceptance in check. Continuing in the theme of culturally problematized funerary practices, in Chapter 8, Olga Sicilia draws on fieldwork in Zimbabwe to describe the funerary protocols and practices for deceased spirit mediums. Sicilia shows that, as the deceased body is considered to incorporate both the person and a spirit ancestor, deceased spirit mediums are treated in a distinct way and separated from relatives. As in Yépez and Johnson's chapter, this separation and absence of the body means relatives struggle to mourn their relatives. Moreover, she relates this to the complexities and cultural (in)appropriateness of disgust in relation to the decaying body.

Part III brings together research on the human and nonhuman agencies that 'trouble' the world of the living. Ranging from seal population management, those who refuse to stay buried, legal definitions of human cadavers, and the promise for an ecological afterlife, chapters in this section raise critical questions regarding what objects and discourses influence dying and death and what benefits and consequences arise therefrom. They evidence how nonhuman agencies enacted by lungworms, television series, legal definitions and burial continuously interrupt and trouble our conceptions of death, who deserves to die, and what to do about the dead.

In Chapter 9, Doortje Hoerst looks at how lungworms enact biopolitical relationships in collaboration with scientists, veterinarians and the general public. Using a material semiotics approach, Hoerst focuses on the multispecies entanglements between seals, lungworm parasites and the Dutch rehabilitation scientists who are studying infected seals. In the matter of the life and death of these seals, Hoerst displays how the pragmatics of policy and the ethics of care place hold on how these veterinarians respond to seals dying from lungworm infection. Based on her anthropological data, she challenges an exclusive attribution of biopolitical power to human actors by revealing that lungworms, too, enact biopolitical power in ways that impact conservation care practices. In Chapter 10, Bethan Michael-Fox provides a look into how materialities of television apparatus and narrative function as a space where 'morbid' relationalities get enacted through an analysis of the French supernatural television drama series, *Les Revenants* (2012–2015). Drawing on feminist theory to provide a diffractive analysis, she points to how such relationalities issue practical and theoretical challenges to the dichotomies of 'alive/dead' and 'then/now'. That is, she shows us how the dead who return in this series upset notions of death as a final state and time as a linear construct and explains that these once/now dead characters draw attention to the diminished power and agency of the self in the face of the prospect of planetary extinction.

In Chapter 11, Marc Trabsky and Jacinthe Flore illustrate how the human corpse and the lucrative necro-waste extracted from it trouble the legal

frameworks that legislate the dead body. They illustrate how understanding the corpse through feminist new materialism breaks down and challenges the corpse as both person and thing. Instead, they argue, corpses ought to be considered as 'emergent material-discursive' phenomena and suggest that 'this re-conceptualization potentially can animate an improved regulation of the global trade in cadaveric tissue'. In Chapter 12, Hannah Gould and her co-authors explore the imaginaries of ecological afterlives, highlighting different burial practices that promise to convert the dead into trees or mushrooms. Thinking seriously with these beings, they highlight the differences in arboreal versus mycelial afterlives and point out how imagining the dead as angels is becoming more grounded and earth-bound. Doing so, they argue that vernacular values are caught up in and vivified by the biological forms and symbolic values proffered by these and other organisms that can have an ecological relationship with the deceased.

In Chapter 13, the book's concluding discussion, we summarize core findings across all sections of the book, suggesting future trajectories for transdisciplinary death scholarship. Focusing in particular on the various new relationalities explored in this volume, we articulate a number of the ecological, social and philosophical implications of the contributors' research. We hope the rich, interdisciplinary work contained in this volume will inspire deeper conversations about the complex socio-ecological dynamics of death, dying and deathcare that await the attention of scholars, practitioners and artists working across a variety of fields.

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