

INTRODUCTION

Connective Histories of Death

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Death connects. Its inevitable yet unknowable nature has intrigued and compelled people across time and place. A confrontation with death—be it the loss of a loved one or our own mortality—is a certainty that awaits us all. The presence of death has recently, again, connected people worldwide in new ways, as we face the growing global death toll caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite being the “great common denominator,” death can be hard to pin down. While the feelings and actions evoked by death vastly vary, being shaped by intersectional factors ranging from the intimate to the structural, death, nonetheless, induces feeling and action. While death can be destructive, its impact can also clearly be seen in the ways it has motivated the constructive. Death creates and re/shapes meanings, relationships, spaces, and practices.

The articles in this special issue have evolved out of presentations at the February 2020 “Histories of Death” International Symposium held at the University of Turku. The idea for this publication, much like for the symposium, was to see what types of connections, overlaps, and disparities may arise when historical studies of death across places and centuries are considered together. Rather than framing this collection as a work of *comparative* history, we see this as the forging of a *connective* history. Following the conceptualization of Marianne Hirsch, this issue takes “different starting and

reference points” but “aims to think divergent histories alongside and in connection with each other” (Hirsch 2012, 21). The potential of such an approach is great, as “*connective* reading...moves between global and intimate concerns by attending precisely to the intimate details, the connective tissues and membranes, that animate each case even while enabling the discovery of shared motivations and tropes” (Hirsch 2012, 206). By bringing together these articles, we aim to make connections between some of the many feelings, places, and experiences that intersect death.

In recent years, we have seen an exciting expansion of death and grief focussed dialogue, publication, and programming that has connected academic death studies, death care professionals, and the public in new, meaningful ways. These articles and the preceding “Histories of Death” symposium, as part of Samira Saramo’s Academy of Finland funded postdoctoral project “Death and Mourning in ‘Finnish North America’,” are a response and offering to these developments, to consider more fully the historical trajectories that have led us to this point. At the symposium, each panel was concluded with a paper that brought the theme to the present day. Such an approach successfully facilitated discussion about change and continuity, and made connections between participants’ historical research and lived experiences. This special issue, likewise, offers such bridges to readers. Our understandings of death come with long and complex histories, shaped by culture, place, time, power, and identities. By explicitly connecting the study of histories of death with the rich, interdisciplinary field of death studies, we further our understanding of how meanings of the “good death” are continuously constructed, negotiated, and contested, and the ways intersectional social factors—class, migrant background, religion, sexuality, gender, and even non/humanness, among others—shape access to mourning and “dying well.”

By bringing together research with rather different starting points, the articles collectively encourage us to see the *connective histories of death*. The following explorations and analyses reveal varied and interwoven traditions, ideologies, and institutions that have shaped our experiences. They initiate a dialogue about the different ways people have approached dying, death, and mourning from personal, everyday,

cultural, and political perspectives. Through their differences, the articles help us to avoid the perils of reductionism and anachronism that can accompany overly generalized histories of death. Despite the range of times, places, and approaches represented in this special issue, it must be acknowledged that this work is in no way exhaustive or comprehensive in temporal or geographic scope. In fact, it is focused primarily on death in the (loose and messy category of) “Western Tradition.” May this limitation, then, serve as a call to continue broadening the work of connecting histories of death.

Death, like life, is often envisioned as a journey (admittedly even to excess). Here, through the progression of articles, we move from the external spaces and communities of death toward interior feelings, both emotional and sensorial, demonstrating the multiple and often nuanced ways they overlap, make connections, and intersect along the way. This connective, rather than chronological, journey is a work of sense-making, a hermeneutic process that creates connections between experiences and feelings, between life and death. Indeed, as Immanuel Mifsud reflects in the final piece of this issue, the process of writing the thoughts of a dying man revealed that the only way it seems possible to communicate meaningfully about loss and death is through evocations of life. Each article in this special issue offers a window onto lives that sought to understand and manage death and dying, and they connect with one another through a mutual (hermeneutic) exploration of how people prepare for death, mourn death, and represent death. Travelling zig-zag across early colonial New Spain, seventeenth-century Lithuania, medieval to twenty-first-century United Kingdom, and modern day Iceland and Malta, bringing us to deathbeds, crematoria, funeral processions, and memorial services, readers of this special issue will take a journey across multiple spatial and emotional *deathscapes*.

Deathscapes, as popularized by Avril Maddrell (2010) and regularly built upon by the scholarly community of death studies (Maddrell and Sidaway 2010; Hunter 2016; Nash 2018; Saramo 2019, 18–19), provides an ideal frame for understanding how death and mourning are “inherently spatial” (Maddrell 2010, 123). During times of dying, death, and mourning topographical and emotional-affective spaces are re/claimed and

re/created (Brant, Metcalf and Wildgoose 2020, 7-8). As Maddrell and Sidaway (2010, 2) have shown, “experiences of death, dying and mourning are mediated through the intersections of body, culture, society and state, and often make a deep impression on ‘sense of self’, private and public identity, as well as ‘sense of place’ in the built and natural environment.” For the individual, spaces where death and/or dying occur assume a unique significance; meanings of places may be partially or completely re-ascribed. On the collective level, deathscapes often foreground a shared sense of place. Embodied memory and affective engagements are entangled in the negotiation and navigation of deathscapes, be they physical, virtual, or even psychological.

Although this special issue analyzes death and grieving primarily from human perspectives, several of the contributions encourage us to make connections with the more-than-human. In her “Histories of Death” symposium keynote, “Pet Cemetery: Love, Memory and Grieving for the Animal Dead, 1880-1970,” Julie-Marie Strange argued that while pet cemeteries showcase the anthropocentrism of pet ownership, they also offer a significant site for examining physical and imagined “spaces of feeling.” As such, pet cemeteries are the spatial expression of memorial affective practices and, thus, they indicate the creation and bolstering of emotional communities beyond the human—uniting human and animal in “queer intimacies” (Herbert 2019). This special issue brings “spaces of feelings” that are small, private, and intimate together with city- and society-wide networks of feeling (see Figlerowicz 2017, 14; Flatley 2008). The contributions join in broader efforts to challenge the exclusionary notions of subject within the field of death studies and urge a rethinking of how and who/what we mourn for (see for example, Radomska, Mehrabi and Lykke 2020, 86). The issue further contributes to queering our views of death by addressing both the material and environmental dimensions of mourning and grief.

The map of this special issue is vast and varied. We begin in seventeenth-century Vilnius, Lithuania, where Povilas Dikavičius vividly describes funeral processions twisting through the streets, passing by churches, seminaries, and nunneries. The sound of church bells and the raised voices of crowds accompany and contribute to building

our view of a cityscape that teetered between peaceful multifaith community belonging and reluctant and even antagonistic coexistence. According to Dikavičius, the potential for clashes between different Christian denominations was particularly present during the planning and performance of death and mourning. The custom of accompanying the deceased to the burial place with a funeral procession equated to a *de facto* appropriation of streets and squares by that particular community of mourners. As Dikavičius compellingly demonstrates, when such visual and aural spatial acquisition (albeit temporally limited) was replete with explicit symbols and markers of religious identity, broader political-religious tensions were brought to the fore, and violence was a more likely result. When, instead, funerary rituals highlighted more secular (often guild-related) imagery and sounds, clashes were rarer. In this context, the movement of ritual items, caskets, and mourners required rigorous social, political, and spatial mapping and planning. The case of 17th-century Vilnius demonstrates how deathscapes play integral roles in the negotiation of community, belonging, and the making of the *polis*.

Whereas Dikavičius highlights public mourning in a delimited local landscape, Arnar Árnason and Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson's article demonstrates how the specific and local geographical site of the "late" Icelandic glacier Ok expanded to become a multi-sited deathscape of global significance. In this way, the case study of Ok provides a view of death "unbounded" (Frihammar and Silverman 2017). Their contribution analyzes the extension of public mourning to the more-than-human within the Western historiography of death studies. Árnason and Hafsteinsson read the story of Ok through the lens of "ecological grief," or the emotional response to the destruction caused by climate change. They analyze the case of Ok by turning to Cunsolo Willox's (2012) invitation to mourn and *work through* the death of natural phenomena, insofar as such grief may result in effective actions to curb climate change. That is, the celebration of Ok's life and the public mourning of "his" death mobilize emotions that, in turn, may activate public discourse to protect the non-human world. Árnason and Hafsteinsson show how Ok's death, as inscribed within the anthropocene, brings to the surface questions about continuities, ruptures, and changes in experiences of mourning and

“grievability” (Butler 2004 and 2009) in what Anna Reading has termed the *globital* (Reading 2016).

When connected with one another, these articles show how “spaces for the dead and dying are a reflection of the changing conditions of the living” (Kong 2016, xv). Gian Luca Amadei, likewise, reflects on such changing conditions, turning our attention to early twentieth-century London. Amadei connects the close links between new technologies for disposing of the dead and the rapid development of the urban *techné*. The growth of the population resulted in the pragmatic outward expansion of the city’s borders and the development of the underground, but these new suburbs, connected to imaginaries of romantic nature, were also meant to fulfill psychological and physical needs of “modern” urban people. New technologies, practices, and attitudes toward the dead—through the building of crematoria and the popularization of cremation—occurred in tandem with these changes to the configuration of London’s cityscape. The analysis brings human-oriented feelings and practices surrounding death into close contact with technology and the environment. Amadei analyzes the interconnections of these new, “clean”—and even “beautiful”—developments and technologies, but takes a perhaps surprising entry point: the very personal and emotional correspondence of George Bernard Shaw. The entirety of the letter is provided at the beginning of the article to allow readers to gain access to Shaw’s voice and pacing, complementing Amadei’s analysis. Through Amadei’s reading, Shaw’s letter becomes emblematic of how—to quote Maddrell (2016, 170)—“death and bereavement produce new and shifting emotional-affective geographies, whereby artefacts, places and communities can take on new and heightened significance.”

Shaw’s letter about his mother’s funeral and cremation at the then new Golders Green Crematorium in the new Golders Green suburb allows Amadei to move between an analysis of the (internal) emotions associated with funerary experiences and their (external) geographical features. By overtly encouraging readers to engage with both the spatial and the emotional, Amadei’s article serves as an effective middle point for this special issue, bridging its two primary themes. Yet, more subtle overlaps of space and

emotion can be found in the entirety of this collection, and, arguably, in the whole of historical studies of death. Julie-Marie Strange (2010, 129) has identified that “much of the history of dying seems to be typified by attempts to divest dying of fear and to bring it under some form of human control.” Such attempts could be summarized as addressing the place and feeling of death. By defining where and how death is to be made visible, be it corpse disposal, or funeral ceremony, procession, or commemoration, these spatial negotiations, as demonstrated by this issue’s articles, are clear examples of attempts to control death. The prevalent attempts and desires to manage and comprehend the feelings arising from dying, death, and grief—fear common among them—provide further evidence of efforts at control.

David Harrap and Emily Collins’s contribution asks us to consider how historical understandings and approaches to dying, grief, and mourning may offer practical guidance to the management of death today. Recognizing that beneficial end-of-life “spiritual care” has proven difficult to integrate into medically-oriented palliative care in today’s multicultural, multifaith, and increasingly secularizing United Kingdom, Harrap and Collins turn to fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century English *ars moriendi* literature for tools and inspiration. Their reading of the *artes* foregrounds how death has been perceived as frightening, difficult, and in need of being appeased, even when its presence was arguably closer to the everyday than today. Thus, their analysis highlights the ongoing need to prepare for death and the accompanying challenge of understanding how to best facilitate and support this process. Instead of calling for a reproduction of *artes* practices, Harrap and Collins make evident their potential as informative tools to reflect on and enhance modern healthcare strategies. They suggest that the two-part *ars moriendi* framework for spiritual care, which first tackled the dying person’s fear of death and then moved on to their (religious) preparation for death, may hold a key to facilitating and supporting “dying free” and “dying well” today. In order to integrate “spiritual care” lessons from the *artes*, Harrap and Collins note the requirement of imagination and flexibility in the design of end-of-life care plans.

As Harrap and Collins encourage a contemporary open interpretation of the analyzed *ars moriendi*, Jacqueline Holler demonstrates that these prescriptive texts were also not always simply accepted *as is* in early colonial New Spain. Though European and Spanish ideals of “dying well” (*buen morir*) had been integrated into colonial life in Mexico by 1600, ordinary people and even clergy resisted the hegemonic conventions of the *artes*, and turned to their own strategies and emotions to confront death. While the *artes* provided instruction on how to control the emotions associated with death and thereby control death, Holler’s research demonstrates that the emotional register of the “good death” provided by the *ars moriendi* often proved too narrow in the context of an everyday where death and even “bad death” were a constant feature. Instead, through Holler’s case study analysis, we see a multitude of emotions about the dying and the ways deaths could be seen to encompass aspects of both good and bad death, all at once. Within the ambiguity, we see moments of simultaneous grief and consolation (Maddrell 2018, 50). In Holler’s case study of a death at sea, we also see the ways that emotions serve as reactions to events (death in this case), but how emotions also cause events (the beating of the priest) (Ahmed 2004, 4; Boddice 2018). In this way, colonial New Spain provides a useful case for examining the contestation of what Sarah Ahmed has termed “affective economies” (Ahmed 2004, 8). By utilizing Inquisition documents and the remarkable autobiographical account of the mystic Madre María Magdalena, Holler successfully brings to view deaths and individuals that we rarely gain access to and highlights a unique Mexican culture of death that predated and looked rather different than the image of the Day of the Dead, which has come to popularly typify Mexican attitudes toward death.

Following the five research articles of this special issue, we present a concluding poetic intervention by writer and poet Immanuel Mifsud. After a brief situating note by Mifsud, readers are given the opportunity to engage with the thoughts of Leli, a dying man—as envisioned by the poet—in both the original Maltese and the translated English. The selected excerpts from the 276 line poem, *A Modest Requiem for Leli*, give us glimpses of moments and people from Leli’s life, which he retraces and recollects (and

re-collects), in his final days (Armstrong 2004, 133; see also Tamboukou 2017). Nostalgia arises as the poet imagines Leli's life. With a different rhythm and a more emotional vocabulary, Mifsud is able to convey the sense of loss, of displacement, and regret for a lost "homeland"—or, in this case, as Leli prepares to die, a living life about to be extinguished (Boym 2001, 3). The poem allows us to explore how the feelings, memories, and places of life, dying, and death may be conveyed differently through poetic language and hendecasyllabic meter.

While we are presented in this issue with excerpts of the poem in written form, it is interesting to consider the multiple lives the poem has led and how the form further impacts the emotions elicited. Take for example, that in its theatrical adaptation, the protagonist, the dying man Leli, became a life-sized wooden puppet manipulated by the actors. Remarkably, according to Mifsud, many viewers expressed having felt powerfully captivated by the "humanity" of this puppet and emotionally moved by his painful onstage transition through illness and death. Leli-the-puppet became alive in front of the audience and touched them in unpredicted ways. Through the dying of Leli—be it in written, oral, orchestral, or theatrical form—Mifsud has offered the audience a mirror that allows us to smile and cry, rekindle memories, and foretell the future that ultimately connects us all.

At the heart of this special issue is an exploration of the many entangled connections that arise when we try to understand the long paths of death and its reverberations for individuals and communities alike. Starting with the "Histories of Death" International Symposium and leading to this collection, we have witnessed how death encourages us to think multidirectionally and intersectionally about its meanings, practices, and legacies, and how it urges us to nurture a dialogue between the past and the present, from one tradition to another. We have, likewise, seen the inspiring potential that emerges from extending our scholarship and our mourning to the more-than-human. Taken together, this issue's articles contribute to building a connective map whereby the shared emotions engendered by death and mourning are brought together. Continuing along the issue's trans-temporal and trans-spatial "journey", we look forward

to seeing where such connections across times and places will take the histories of death in the future.

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