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REVIEW ARTICLE

'Death is Not the End': Thanatology Today

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Bob Dylan, 'Death is Not the End', *Down in the Groove*, vinyl album (New York: Columbia Records, 1988).
Douglas Davies (general editor), *A Cultural History of Death* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), Hbk ISBN (Set): 9781472536266, 1728 pp., 6 vols.
Hugo ka Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), Pbk ISBN: 978-1-4780-1959-6, 288 pp.
Anne Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), Pbk ISBN: 9781478019848, 241 pp.

Death and dying are particularly fashionable areas of research following the global COVID-19 pandemic. However, the idea of death studies (also known as thanatology) has a longer history, dating back to the pioneering work of twentieth-century scholars such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Lyn H. Lofland, Ernest Becker and Philippe Ariès.[1] As many histories make clear, the idea of death has been a perennial concern across time periods, cultures, philosophies and religions. Of particular focus is the nature of mourning practices, the sick bed and death bed (including how the idea of the Good Death functioned and shifted across time), the nature of *ars moriendi* (the 'art of dying') and various secular and spiritual beliefs.[2] Underpinning recent death research is an attention to new technologies, including modernising crematoria (one example being alkaline hydrolysis, or water cremation), inequalities in death, the impact of corpse disposal on the environment, the development of 'green burials', ecological concerns about the death industry and the role of the digital in death and the afterlife.[3]

Drawing on interdisciplinary practice, the field now has specific scholarly journals, including but not limited to *Mortalities* and *Death Studies*; a number of well-respected scholarly podcasts (including The Death Studies Podcast); academic organisations, such as the Association for the Study of Death and Society; and, more widely, public-facing events, groups and activities such as the Order of the Good Death, the Death Salon and the Death Café movements.[4] At the same time, as Michael-Fox and Visser have noted, there is a distinct need to attend to inequalities in the academy, especially between the Global North and Global South.[5] The Collective for Radical Death Studies

[1]Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy & Their Own Families* (New York: Scribner, 1969); Lyn H. Lofland, *The Craft of Dying: The Modern Face of Death* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019, 40th anniversary edition); Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (London: Souvenir Press, 1973); and Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

[2]For an extended study of the Good Death in the nineteenth century, see Mary Riso, *The Narrative of the Good Death: The Evangelical Deathbed in Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[3]See John Troyer, *Technologies of the Human Corpse* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020) and Candi K. Cann, *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2016).

[4]See The Death Studies Podcast, accessed 1 November 2024, https://thedeathstudiespodcast.com/; The Association for the Study of Death and Society, accessed 1 November 2024, https://deathandsociety.org/. For an extended discussion of the Death Café phenomenon, see Jack Fong, *The Death Café Movement: Exploring the Horizons of Mortality* (London: Palgrave, 2017).

[5]Bethan Michael-Fox and Renske Visser, 'Mrs Death Misses Death (Salena Godden, 2021)', in *Death in the 21st Century: A Companion*, ed. Katarzyna Bronk-Bacon and Simon Bacon (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2024), 216.

explains that their mission is 'to interrogate the field of Death Studies to decolonize and de-centre whiteness while calling to radicalize death practices, all in theory and in practice from a variety of angles, i.e. our research, writing, community work, and professional careers'.[6] This tension between a radical and innovative death studies community, inflected by diversity and social justice, and one that is based in traditional scholarship, is a hallmark of the material considered in this review essay.

Given the increased scrutiny of death in our post-pandemic world, it is timely that a six-volume study of death and dying has been published. *A Cultural History of Death* covers an historical span of 2500 years, marking major European cultural shifts in the treatment of death and dying. This no easy undertaking, especially because the authors come from a wide range of interdisciplinary perspectives: archaeology, art history, literature, classics and history. One of the most thought-provoking aspects of these volumes is confronting the continuity with, as well as disparity from, the present day. Each of the volumes contain the same overlapping themes and chapter topics embedded in an historical period: Dead and Dying Bodies; The Sensory Aesthetics of Death; Emotions, Mortality and Vitality; Death's Ritual-Symbolic Performance; Sites, Power and Politics of Death; Gender, Age and Identity; Explaining Death; and The Undead and Eternal. The series is extremely useful for not only specialists in death studies but also non-specialists researching this rich tradition. Hence, I would anticipate it to be accessible to a range of scholars, from undergraduate through to postdoctoral. The volumes also make extensive use of illustrative material (in black and white), a welcome inclusion given the occasionally visceral and highly visual nature of much of the material discussed.

Volume 1, on antiquity from 500 BCE to 800 BCE, provides critical interventions in ancient Greek and Roman mourning practices, philosophies, burial traditions and ideas of memory and commemoration. Several essays remark on the challenges to classical scholarship in recovering belief systems associated with death and the afterlife, especially when many extant written accounts are fictional/mythical in subject.[7] Hence, Emma-Jayne Graham's chapter notes that 'reconstructing exactly what happened at the graveside during a burial at any period of Greek history is notoriously difficult'.[8] At the same time, discussions of inhumation and cremation provide a fascinating insight into the complexity of shifting conventions related to the disposal of corpses, usually outside ancient city environs. Closely linked to religious belief, but also the adoption of Greek culture following Alexander the Great's military campaigns, the customs around burying or burning the dead remained varied in the ancient world.[9] Penelope J. E. Davies explains that from early Roman times, 'death, burial and mortuary display were intimately connected with politics'.[10] Examples include Hadrian's Mausoleum, which is discussed at some length, invoking how the architectural design 'anticipated his posthumous divinity' and, by extension, legitimacy and dynastic control of ancient Rome.[11] By contrast, the idea of the 'bad death' hints at some of the key topics to emerge in later periods of death studies: criminal corpses, and/or those excluded from mainstream conventions of ceremony. This volume on antiquity also provides several correctives to scholarly assumptions made about the ancient world. Several authors reference how the Greeks and Romans – in contradiction to Cicero's claims – mourned their very young children, even though the infant survival rate was low (indeed, a similar correction has

[6]'Our Mission', The Collective for Radical Death Studies, accessed 1 November 2024, https://www.radicaldeathstudies.com/our-mission.

[7]Emma-Jayne Graham, 'Death's Ritual-Symbolic Performance', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 1, 'In Antiquity', ed. Mario Erasmo (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 76.

[8]Graham, 'Death's Ritual-Symbolic Performance', 76.

[9]Erasmo, 'Introduction', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 1, 'In Antiquity', ed. Mario Erasmo (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 2–4.

[10]Penelope J. E. Davies, 'Sites, Power, and Politics of Death', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 1, 'In Antiquity', ed. Mario Erasmo (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 84.

[11]Davies, 'Sites of Power', 99.

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been made about Victorians mourning their children).[12] Hence, Maureen Carroll notes that 'we cannot accept such texts written by elite men in Rome as an accurate reflection of what Romans of both sexes and all social classes felt about their children'.[13] Indeed, this is where the interdisciplinary angle of each volume, combining different types of record (written, archaeological), revises a tendency towards the study of elites present in the existing scholarship.

Several chapters in volume two, the Middle Ages from 800–1450, discuss how the period visualised death, particularly through monuments and images such as the *transi*, the *danse macabre* and the Encounter of the Three Dead and the Three Living. The volume's discussion of variations on these tropes across time, such as the *Danse Macabre des Femmes* (a fifteenth-century poem about the deaths of thirty-six women and girls) suggests a temporally comprehensive yet in-depth analysis across the volume.[14] Westerhof's essay turns to the idea of relics and explains the tension between the market for holy relics, sponsored by Rome in later medieval times, and the idea of the corpse as a source of pollution.[15] Along with the debates around *mons teutonicus* (removal of flesh from the corpse), evisceration, *Detestande feritatis* (Pope Boniface VIII's papal bull from 1299 prohibiting any separation of organs or body parts from the cadaver) and the rise of dissection to establish cause of death, there is a nuanced picture here of death, disposal and legislation in the later medieval period.

There are some small caveats here too. In his analysis of natural, judicial and violent death, Bruce Gordon states 'burning at the stake . . . was common for witches and heretics'.[16] I would have appreciated a bit more specificity here, as in my understanding, England did not burn witches (although Scotland and the continent did use this gruesome method of execution, commentators suggest witches were burnt in England only if found guilty of other crimes at the same time).[17] A little caution might be needed around such claims, especially as historical witchcraft has been broadly appropriated as part of a wider, contemporary 'occulture'.[18]

The value of revisiting our historical assumptions becomes especially apparent in Jill Bradley's article. She identifies how the first evidence of the female personification of death is to be found in a 1277 manuscript of *Le mirroir de la vie et de la mort*, an Old French vernacular poem written in 1266.[19] Here Bradley recentres women at the heart of cultural practices around death in the medieval period. Such symbology rethinks the stereotypical roles we commonly associate with women in historical death studies: caregiving in deathbed scenes and washing and preparing the corpse. Women are traditionally absented from the administration of death in religion, secular tradition and ceremony, including as funeral directors, overwhelmingly a man's profession until the latter part of the twentieth century.

The Early Modern and Enlightenment section of the series, covered in volumes three and four, marks one of the most dramatic shifts in European cultures of death and dying. As the previous volumes made apparent, the Christian preparation for death, through the *ars moriendi*, meant the idea of death was relatively ubiquitous. What constituted a Good Death, and whether intercession could

[12] Judith Flanders, *Rites of Passage: Death and Mourning in Victorian Britain* (London: Picador, 2024), 47–8.

[13] Maureen Carroll, 'Gender, Age, and Identity: Roman Funerary Commemoration', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 1, 'In Antiquity', ed. Mario Erasmo (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 117–18.

[14] Belle S. Tuten, 'Gender, Age, and Identity', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 2, 'In the Middle Ages', ed. Ashby Kinch (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 113ff.

[15] Danielle Westerhof, 'Dead and Dying Bodies', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 2, 'In the Middle Ages', ed. Ashby Kinch (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 35.

[16] Bruce Gordon, 'Explaining Death: Belief, Law, and Ethics', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 2, 'In the Middle Ages', ed. Ashby Kinch (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 138.

[17] See Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century Tragedy* (London: John Murray, 2005), 173–4.

[18] For the idea of occulture, see Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, vol. 1, 'Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture' (London: Continuum, 2004).

[19] Jill Bradley, 'Emotions, Mortality, and Vitality', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 2, 'In the Middle Ages', ed. Ashby Kinch (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 68.

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be sought for the dead, was of course a matter of contention for Catholic and Protestant communities, as Gordon emphasises in his chapter in volume two.[20] However, in the eighteenth century, with the heightened development of Christian non-belief, the value of moralising reflections on death (*ars moriendi*) was not so much interrogated as ignored among some peoples, though by no means everyone. The introduction to volume four (by Jeffrey Freedman) explains this was because of an emerging discourse of politeness as it was no longer appropriate to speak of death in the company of older people. This was also the period when a more private death evolved: the Good Death was now imagined as something that happened not as a communal experience but rather around the small family unit.[21] As a synthesis of wider eighteenth-century concerns with politeness, this was not quite the same as the 'conspiracy of silence' that would emerge around dying in the twentieth century, and there were still many instances – such as in some religious communities, and in legal discussions around wills – where the visibility of death continued.[22] Nonetheless, an avoidance of speaking about death started to emerge, and it does seem a missed opportunity that a discussion of 'death denial' is absent from this volume. Heavily influenced by Freud, Ernest Becker explained that the fear of death, and therefore repression, is pervasive in humanity, and that we overcome this 'by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man'.[23]

Edwards' contribution in volume three provides an important account of other thorny religious issues relating to death during this period, including 'theologically questionable beings widely believed to populate Europe'.[24] For instance, the role of the revenant dead (including but not limited to ghostly apparitions) provided a complex problem for Protestant theologians. As Edwards explains, 'without purgatory, . . . there was no theologically legitimate source for ghosts'.[25] There were some instances in volume three where I wanted to know more about the contexts under discussion: the introduction notes that 'prior to [the late medieval period], everyone had a "religion"; this was simply understood'.[26] I wondered about the dialogue between this volume and the first, on the ancient world, and whether atheism in antiquity is being considered as a form of religion here, or if the authors are thinking of secularisation and religion. It seems that such discussions offer a glimpse into possibilities for future extended research.[27] The volume does succeed in making certain submerged histories visible, offering an important contribution to the history of death and dying: it questions our focus on canonical writers at the expense of lesser known figures and supports a reassessment of Enlightenment attitudes to mortality. In addressing the contribution of women to Enlightenment attitudes towards death, for example, Joanna Stalnaker uncovers how the correspondence of women like Mme du Deffand and Mme Necker contributed to the thinking of major figures like Voltaire: these women thinkers influenced 'the way male *philosophes* thought about dying, and even the way they died'.[28]

The subsequent volume covers key cultural and social shifts impacting on death and dying 'In the Age of Empire', whilst providing thematic continuity with preceding volumes through the idea of the Good Death, the role of religion and, by this point, secularisation. The introduction to this

[20] Bruce Gordon, 'Dead and Dying Bodies', in A Cultural History of Death, vol. 3, 'In the Renaissance', ed. Gordon D. Raeburn and Thomas Ferguson (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 9ff.

[21] Jeffrey Freedman, 'Introduction: The Janus Face of Enlightened Death', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 4, 'In the Age of Enlightenment', ed. Jeffrey Freedman (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 12.

[22] Freedman, 'Introduction', 11.

[23] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (London: Souvenir Press, 1973), xvii.

[24] Kathryn A. Edwards, 'The Undead and Eternal', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 3, 'In the Renaissance', ed. Gordon D. Raeburn and Thomas Ferguson (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 139.

[25] Edwards, 'Undead and Eternal', 140.

[26] Nathaniel A. Warne and Thomas Ferguson, 'Introduction', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 3, 'In the Renaissance', ed. Gordon D. Raeburn and Thomas Ferguson (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 1.

[27] See Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016).

[28] Joanna Stalnaker, 'Emotions, Mortality, and Vitality: Two *Salonnières-Philosophes* Facing Death', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 4, 'In the Age of Enlightenment', ed. Jeffrey Freedman (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 68.

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volume addresses migration (including transportation as a form of colonisation) and illuminates imperial transportation as carriers of disease (and ultimately death). A focus on the evolution of disease (cholera, tuberculosis, influenza) and its control is mirrored by accounts of famine and the multitudinous wars that marked the period.[29] In subsequent chapters, we find contributions noting the emergence of statistical analysis, population studies and public health in causes of death;[30] the role of photography, new technology and material culture in memorialisation and sensory experience;[31] the way in which grief and emotional responses were expressed in different ways across social class;[32] missionary and colonial accounts of death rituals in sub-Saharan Africa;[33] and how the modern secular cemetery evolved through the development of sites like Père Lachaise (France), Highgate (England), Mount Auburn (United States) and Rookwood (Australia).[34] Hence, the volume is a worthwhile synthesis of the long nineteenth century. A notable highlight is Major's chapter, which not only provides a critical history of British rule in India but also several discussion points related to the specificities of sati, female infanticide and Hindu responses to colonial critique. Similarly, Bratlinger's chapter surveys the idea of mass extinction and what we would now understand as colonial genocide, considering Darwin's observations of Van Diemen's Land and several other examples. This chapter will prove an especially useful reference point to scholars considering ideas of the human and non-human, ecocriticism and its correlation with death studies. MacDonald's closing chapter on science and human remains offers a compelling account of what happens when bodies are 'turned into objects of knowledge' in anatomical science, as well as in the development of museum collections and public exhibition.[35] This contentious history uncovers social, racial and economic disparity, with doctors and surgeons justifying spurious racial classifications via anatomical investigation.[36]

The final volume in the series relates to the Modern Age and marks most clearly the period when death studies, or thanatology, emerged as a discrete set of (inter)disciplinary practices. Davies' introduction notes the seismic shifts in how death is experienced, including through digital technologies, commodity cultures, increased secularisation, the rise of hospices and care homes and debates about euthanasia. There is an appeal here to avoid a form of cultural amnesia around COVID-19, as societies and governments across the globe have yet to determine the full impact of the 2020–3 pandemic. Davies also espouses the idea of 'dividual personhood' in addressing the complexities of euthanasia. Here, the accumulation of a whole life of influences – familial, cultural, institutional – is brought to bear on the conflict around assisted dying in the United Kingdom.[37] In chapter two, Clinch draws on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and outlines how Wagner's philosophy and aesthetic provide us with 'ontologies of music and death', or 'what death *sounds* like'.[38] Tracing a path through composers such as Stravinsky and Britten, and concluding with the deaths of David Bowie, George

[29]Helen MacDonald, 'Introduction: Mapping Death in the Age of Empire', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 5, 'In the Age of Empire', ed. Helen MacDonald (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 16ff.

[30]Christopher Hamlin, 'Dead and Dying Bodies: Knowing, Counting, and Accounting', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 5, 'In the Age of Empire', ed. Helen MacDonald (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 17ff.

[31]Elizabeth Hallam, 'The Sensory Aesthetics of Death', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 5, 'In the Age of Empire', ed. Helen MacDonald (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 39ff.

[32]Julie-Marie Strange, 'Emotions, Mortality, and Vitality: Grief and Mourning in the Long Nineteenth Century', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 5, 'In the Age of Empire', ed. Helen MacDonald (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 61ff.

[33]Rebekah Lee, 'Death's Ritual-Symbolic Performance', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 5, 'In the Age of Empire', ed. Helen MacDonald (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 79ff.

[34]Thomas Laqueur, 'Sites, Power, and Politics of Death', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 5, 'In the Age of Empire', ed. Helen MacDonald (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 97ff.

[35]Helen MacDonald, 'The Undead and Eternal: Science and Human Remains', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 5, 'In the Age of Empire', ed. Helen MacDonald (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 154.

[36]MacDonald, 'The Undead and Eternal', 159.

[37]Douglas J. Davies, 'Introduction: Life-Death, Dividual Personhood, Trust, and Cultural Betrayal', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 6, 'In the Modern Age', ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 9.

[38]Jonathan Clinch, 'The Sensory Aesthetics of Death: From Victorian Dream to Digital Dead', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 6, 'In the Modern Age', ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 37.

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Michael and Prince in 2016, Clinch argues that the contemporary moment means celebrity musicians' deaths have moved into 'eternal, digital life'.[39] Erle also brings the series up to date by thinking about the genre of young adult fiction, and how far the idea of death as taboo is now outdated, especially given the wealth of literature published on the topic, for both scholarly and popular markets.[40] Pentaris and Petricola contribute a valuable perspective here on the contribution queer theory can make to death studies. I would have liked to have seen more material of this kind, as its importance cannot be underestimated, especially through the idea of 'disenfranchised grief'.[41] Here, the authors note how LGBTQ+ relationships might not be represented in traditional concepts of grief. They consider widowhood identities and how these are unacknowledged in wider society: we might think especially of gay male partnerships, and how such deaths have been associated with AIDS and sin in recent history.[42]

More generally, it would be fair to say that no cultural history, even one of this magnitude, can cover all geographies, regions and experiences. Even the most comprehensive account needs to have limits. Nonetheless, the series should either have covered the Global South more robustly, or signalled via the title that its focus would be limited to Europe. Instead, it provides a perspective from 'the Age of Empire' and therefore a colonial lens, which renders it entirely Eurocentric. A similar query might be asked of 'The Renaissance' as a volume title, rather than 'Early Modern' (especially as the volume editors discuss both terms in their introduction).[43] On occasion, authors attempt a more inclusive approach, such as addressing how the recommendations of Islamic philosopher Algazel (Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī) offer parallels to European models of medical treatment, considering Judaism as part of a wider discussion, or the albeit brief acknowledgement of the first enslaved Africans in the sixteenth century.[44] Susan Broomhall's article does a lot of heavy lifting in this regard, addressing early modern circumcision practices and the potential for risk, as acknowledged within the Jewish community at the time.[45] Bar-Levav also addresses early modern Judaism in terms of prayer, print and community.[46] By the time we reach the final volume, there is a sense of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, including accounts of immigrant communities in the Netherlands and brief vignettes of natural burials.[47] The fact remains that the vast majority of the series focuses on the Global North, and given the richness of death practices across the world, including in places like Mexico, Indonesia and so on, this is quite an omission. A title signalling the Cultural History of Death *in Europe* might have managed readerly expectations more effectively. Related to this point, LGBTQ+ communities also warranted greater representation in this expansive study. I pondered whether the diversity of scholars – across institutions, equality and diversity principles and indeed seniority – had been considered for the series, given that many contributors (though by no means all) seem fairly senior in their fields, and from broadly Anglo institutions (United Kingdom, United States and Europe). Despite these caveats,

[39]Clinch, 'Sensory Aesthetics', 56.

[40]Sibylle Erle, 'Emotions, Mortality, and Vitality: Female Empowerment in *Twilight, The Hunger Games*, and *The Fault in Our Stars*; Representations of Death in Contemporary Young Adult Literature', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 6, 'In the Modern Age', ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 59–77.

[41]Panagiotis Pentaris and Mattia Petricola, 'Gender, Age, and Identity: Approaching Thanatology from a Queer Perspective', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 6, 'In the Modern Age', ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 129.

[42]Pentaris and Petricola, 'Gender, Age and Identity', 129.

[43]Warne and Ferguson, 'Introduction', 1ff.

[44]Westerof, 'Dead and Dying Bodies', 32; Amy Appleford, 'Death's Ritual-Symbolic Performance', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 2, 'In the Middle Ages', ed. Ashby Kinch (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 81; Warne and Ferguson, 'Introduction', 4.

[45]Susan Broomhall, 'Gender, Age, and Identity', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 3, 'In the Renaissance', ed. Gordon D. Raeburn and Thomas Ferguson (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 100.

[46]Avriel Bar-Levav, 'Death's Ritual-Symbolic Performance: Prayer, Print, and Community in Early Modern Judaism', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 4. 'In the Age of Enlightenment', ed. Jeffrey Freedman (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 89ff.

[47]See Brenda Mathijssen and Claudia Venhorst, 'Death's Ritual-Symbolic Performance', in *A Cultural History of Death*, vol. 6, 'In the Modern Age', ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 79ff.

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these six volumes represent a solid introduction to death and dying across a range of subjects and will provide a useful reference point for students for many years to come.

Related to the continuing need for diversity in scholarship, including in death studies, exciting work is being conducted on death practices outside of Europe, as demonstrated by the scholars Hugo ka Canham and Anne Allison, who write about death in South Africa and Japan respectively. Canham's monograph, *Riotous Deathscapes*, is an exceptional, theoretically challenging and highly complex read for anyone interested in death studies, Black studies and rethinking the practices of the academy. The monograph in some ways provides an answer to *The Cultural History of Death*, posing a provocation about death, invisibility and power in South Africa. It is incredibly lyrical and has a prose style that exceeds the boundaries of convention with ease and joy. There is a combination of memoir, critical thinking and recovered histories, written in exquisitely elegant but sometimes non-standard prose, combined with high-level academic discourse. It is a dizzying and affective read.

Canham explains in the introduction that the theory of the book is 'distilled through a meditation and portrait of black life lived in the rural reserve'.[48] The role of the ocean, the river and the hill or mountain are pivotal in exploring African subjectivities: Canham frames these as 'place-based intellectual practices' that disrupt the idea of an urban African subjectivity.[49] The author explains that the book disturbs linear thinking, conventional ideas of time and hierarchies (especially in the Global North) and offers a self-narration 'in the double register of black indigenous storytelling . . . entangled with scholarly discourse'.[50] It partakes of several theoretical frames, including the work of Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Sylvia Wynter and a wealth of other Black studies scholars. In some ways, *Riotous Deathscapes* exceeds any attempt at categorisation and summary, and this is entirely the objective of the author. The central idea of the book is an articulation of 'Mpondo theory', which Canham characterises as follows: 'I'd begin by shielding the eyes to capture a quizzical look that is both orientated to the future and historically focused'.[51] A foundation of Mpondo theory is the idea of *ukwakumkanya*, of looking askance whilst being 'never fully knowable', which also reflects how the monograph has been intentionally written and structured.[52] *Ukwakumkanya* is experienced and practiced sensorially, whilst being fully embedded in the landscape, and we are invited to develop this skill to defy Enlightenment thinking, indeed the kind of thinking represented in many Western histories. A rootedness in place, whilst also accounting for diasporic experience, is one of the main objectives here: 'What does black studies, being-black-in-the-world, look like from an African village when read in relation to blackness in the diaspora?'[53] Canham emphasises that his objective is to complicate easy distinctions between indigenous and diasporic and offers instead a model of 'blackness as expansive rather than closed'.[54] Hence, Mpondo identity here covers 'Bantu, San and Khoekhoe who met on the land; and white, enslaved Indian and African shipwrecked castaways'.[55] This involves a dialogue with Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, or as Canham expands, a form of hybridity that 'unsettles the narrative of categorization and certainty' and allows for a different way of experiencing white life.[56]

The 'riotous deathscape' of the title in part references a scarred, under resourced and traumatised environment: in a literal sense this is where the dead of Mpondoland are buried, often in unmarked graves. But it is also a place of immense strength, where living occurs among the dead, and where

[48] Hugo ka Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 5.
[49] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 149.
[50] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 24.
[51] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 8.
[52] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 9.
[53] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 22.
[54] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 19.
[55] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 46.
[56] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987). See also Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 46–7.

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the deathscape provides a strategy of resistance: 'the earth that bears the dead is a space for black sociality'.[57] Notwithstanding the economic and social neglect of the Mpondo communities through colonial violation and apartheid regimes, through the AIDS epidemic and capitalist exploitation, the book also represents both literal and metaphorical riot as vibrant potential. For instance, in the case of adolescent young women, the riotous body becomes a resource for the disenfranchised and is implicated in queer eroticism. In Canham's thinking, 'queer' relates to bodies and sexuality but also exceeds narrow distinction: 'a queer orientation is to be positioned improperly in relation to dominant social codes'.[58] In the service of queering time, space, place and narrative, the text draws on several ancestors whose stories become a way of entangling ideas of past, present and future. This is a manifesto to resist the traditional, linear chronology in *The Cultural History of Death*. These figures include the following: Nongqawuse (chapter one), an orphaned prophetess who demanded the destruction of crops and cattle in 1856; Nontetha Nkwenkwe (chapter two), a seer and healer viewed as dangerous by colonial authorities; Clara Germana Cele (chapter three), who was said to have experienced spirit possession in her early twentieth-century girlhood; Sarah Baartman (chapter four), who was taken from her home in the Eastern Cape to be exhibited in Europe both during her life and post-mortem, only being repatriated in 2002; and Khotso Sethunsta (chapter five), whose wealth and influence were said to be derived from his communication with the spirit world. These figures are excavated not to rehearse trauma or 'melancholy compulsive returns' but rather to provide a 'cylindrical echo, which is to think with epiphenomenal temporality'.[59] This is a complex theory that argues that history, present and future coexist in the Black experience, and this also supports the idea of indigenous time.[60]

On the one hand, Black experiences of (often traumatic) death and systemic violence are brutally delineated throughout this intricate work, making this an important record for anyone thinking about mortality outside white, neoliberal discourses. But there is also significant material to support readers who are seeking new theoretical paradigms drawn from a wide range of critical theory: whilst practice-based methodologies have quite a lot of visibility in death studies (via counselling, medicine, nursing, palliative care, psychology), Canham's insistence on overturning hegemonic discourses allows scholars to think more widely about death and inequalities. For instance, in terms of ecocriticism, Canham speaks to the destabilisation of humanity's primacy and challenges the speciesism embedded in Western thought: 'Mpondo theory flattens the Chain of Being and calls into question the antagonism apportioned to black people and the natural world'.[61] Reading this unapologetic work highlights limitations in the death studies canon, as well as the possibility to think otherwise. Juxtaposed with more traditional scholarship, as represented in *The Cultural History of Death*, this is a radical and militant book that will force scholars to confront our partisan attention to linear/Western narratives.

Following a similar trajectory to *Riotous Deathscapes* in its attention to non-Western death practices, *Being Dead Otherwise* is a remarkable exploration into the shifting communities and cultures of death in Japan in the twenty-first century. It combines ethnographic research and interviews with literary and filmic analysis, alongside the main focus of the book: cultural anthropology. Taking a non-Western approach that has much in common with Canham's work, the book's introduction opens with an account of a traditional Japanese death ritual known as *kotsuage* or 'picking the bones'. According to this practice, following cremation, close family gathers, and holding chopsticks, they ceremonially place certain bones in an urn. However, as Allison clarifies, this tradition is under revision: it is now one of a range of outcomes for a deceased person in Japan and is becoming less common due to a number of social, economic and religious factors. At various points throughout the book, Allison also gestures to what the future of Japanese death and dying may look like. Noting how the traditional,

[57] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 171.
[58] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 26.
[59] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 143.
[60] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 18.
[61] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 162.

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familial model of managing the dead is in decline, the monograph participates in an analysis of Japan as a nation, asking 'What does it say – about a nation-state, a people, an individual once alive and now dead – when the management of grievability is in question?'[62]

Identifying the problem of 'unrelational society', Allison detects several cultural shifts that have impacted on death in Japan.[63] The development of middle-class aspirations, which resulted in relocation from rural areas to cities, means the upkeep of a grave (usually a familial duty) is no longer honoured. Similarly, the increased secularisation of Japan, with less honour accorded to the spirits of the dead and a broader decline in spirituality, have all problematised the customary ceremony of death: 'Japan is facing a crisis in its failure to handle the dead'.[64] Underpinning much of the analysis here is a reconfiguration of the family unit – there is a statistical increase in the unmarried, those who do not fit into a patrilineal lineage (such as divorced women) and those on the fringes of society, such as the homeless, friendless or precarious.

Chapter one outlines the histories of both Japanese death practices and social structures but also moves into the present. Allison summarises the role of Buddhism in constructing Japan's approach to death and dying, as well as Shintō as state religion, and attends to how ancestor worship became so central to Japan. Following Foucault, however, she notes how this is a history of the present and moves to the contemporary period: 11 March 2011 is a key date here, referencing the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami as well as the subsequent nuclear meltdown in Fukushima. Such large-scale tragedy compounded the problem of how Japan manages the dead.[65] Hence, chapter two looks at the emergence of the death industry in Japan. Whilst the global death industry is an important topic across death studies, this book is one of the first pieces to respond at length to innovations in the industry in the twenty-first century. Terming the shift a form of 'necro-animism', Allison explains how new rituals and practices have emerged for the dead, in part driven by businesses who have accommodated various contemporary shifts in society, such as economic downturn, or a high-paced capitalist-driven lifestyle.[66] They showcase their innovations at ENDEX, a convention/trade show held in Tokyo Bay every August: 'business is pitched to the lifestyles and needs of a consumer base experiencing an era of rising deaths, high aging/low childbirth demographics, and weakening parishioner and family systems (once the mainstays of mortuary management)'.[67] Similarly, conventional institutions, such as Buddhist temples, have adopted a 'diversification of belonging', where once they only served long-standing attendees. There is a poignant playfulness here too: one Buddhist priest now provides memorial services for robotic dogs, identifying 'what he saw as a sense of life transcending the human–machine border'.[68] This intersection of death studies and technology has profound implications for how we think of grief in terms of who/what is designated 'grievable' and how religion responds to new cultural forms.

In common with Allison's recognition of new death practices, chapter three explores how the 'unaffiliated dead' or *muenbotoke* have been cared for, through the establishment of different relationships between the living and the dead. This includes a not-for-profit innovation by Inoue Haruyo, who founded the Ending Center, which offers post-mortem services but also social activities and events where members gather, socialise and meet 'grave friends' who will be resting nearby.[69] These dead may be buried alone, or alternatively with a beloved pet, and the Ending Center ensures they are never abandoned. The founder of the Center terms this 'inclusive relationality', as distinct from those

[62] Anne Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 5.
[63] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 11. See also Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016).
[64] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 12.
[65] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 27.
[66] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 51.
[67] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 51.
[68] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 66-7.
[69] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 84.

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bonds formed by kinship relations. I find it particularly interesting that this model suggests an adaptation of the idea of 'continuing bonds', the much-vaunted theory in death and bereavement studies initially developed by Dennis Klass. In Japan, Klass has noted that continuing bonds exist as 'ancestor worship is an expression of human community that cannot be separated by death'.[70] By contrast, Allison's research suggests these familial obligations are being heavily revised due to socio-economic pressures. The idea of the Ending Center also suggests a revision of Ernest Becker's death denial thesis. In Japanese culture, people are confronting their deaths and preparing for them in new and strategic ways.[71]

Chapter four identifies the notion of 'preparedness' in death and dying, 'making the managing of death into a life activity'.[72] Allison argues that initiatives such as 'Total Life Support', spearheaded by Mikuni Hiroaki in 2008, provide a comprehensive service related to all the chores around death: by planning in advance, people can ensure their wishes are attended to but also that they are in no way a burden on wider society if they lack descendants. A similar initiative is the preponderance of death notebooks, or 'Ending Notes', in Japan, which assist in the preparation of a person's funerary care.[73] This is, as Allison argues, 'a particular engineering of the self: the responsible subject, managing tasks that once fell to others (namely family and kin)'.[74] Separately, this chapter also explores the concept of 'necro-animism' in detail: this is an attempt to humanise the dead rather than treating the corpse as mere organic waste.[75] Comparable ideas, such as Yokosuka City's 'premortuary plan and ending registration card', have a similar effect.[76] The agency and identity involved in all these plans result in what Allison terms 'My-death', or a self-fashioning based on ordering life, preparation and decluttering: this extends to possessions, including affective photographs or objects, but also commodities. Allison links this to the wider popularity of minimalist aesthetics espoused by Marie Kondō and to the availability of wider consumer choices around death and dying.

Chapter five discusses the role of clean-up workers in Japan. Opening with a theorisation of smell about death and decay unnoticed by the community, Allison provides a thorough account of *ihinseirigaisha*, the companies who manage the disposal of a deceased's belongings. This is a particularly affective chapter, detailing how workers carefully and empathically manage a deceased's possessions, even if the ultimate destination of such things will be the municipal tip. Of note here are the extraordinary dioramas of solitary death scenes made by Kojima Miyu. Some of these are suicides, others tragically lonely deaths, all of them drawn from the artist's experience as someone who worked in the *inhinseiri* business. The miniaturised but entirely graphic nature of these death scenes is an uncomfortable experience but is part of what Allison, utilising Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004), theorises as 'witnessing [the] unwitnessed dead'.[77]

Chapter six explores the materiality of the dead body, including what happens ontologically when remains like ashes are commodified into pendants or other objects. This also includes a detailed account of a conventional funeral: the traditional 'picking of the bones' and the idea of the deceased's status moving from one state of being to another. Whilst Allison notes this type of funeral is in decline, here too is an account of the smaller, family funeral that only includes immediate relatives.[78] There is also an emphatically neoliberal agenda in some of these processes. There is an extended discussion of the use and ethics of *zanhai* (industrial waste from crematoria): how this can be used

[70] Dennis Klass, 'Grief in an Eastern Culture: Japanese Ancestor Worship', in *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, ed. Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman (New York: Routledge,1996), 59.

[71] Becker, *Denial of Death*.

[72] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 101

[73] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 113.

[74] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 107.

[75] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 108.

[76] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 115.

[77] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 137. See also Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2020).

[78] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 156.

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as fertiliser, and how the metallic content (such as gold and silver) in human remains has market value.[79] This prompts Allison to conjecture that the border between human and waste is being renegotiated.[80] An additional consideration is the role of automated columbaria – 'techno-futuristic but nonetheless organized around a grave'.[81] These are columbaria where cremains are stored in a large warehouse facility and only delivered to a multi-use 'grave' when friends and relatives visit. This is the topic of chapter seven, where Allison records her several research visits to these progressive sites. She notes that such 'new-style death parks' underscore a tension between being 'mere matter' and securing a final resting place.[82] This, she argues, is a social prosthesis, filling in for the absence of prior familial and social networks that would provide care and management of the dead. The process derives from Toyotism (TPS or 'just-in-time' production based on consumer demand) and combines a conventional grave experience with a mass storage facility. Remains can be given a barcode, and in a particularly futuristic manoeuvre, the chapter argues that these graves also 'become data'.[83] In responding to a particular gap in Japanese death provision – related to pressures about space in urban environments, a lack of traditional family structures, economic need, the fear of solitary deaths – these sites are 'a way of mass housing the dead in a manner than maintains the traditional grave by using a just-in-time mechanism that allows thousands to share it'.[84]

In moving to this point, the book not only addresses the problem of dying in contemporary Japan but also offers a clear analysis of how Japanese society is moving towards several different models of mortuary care: this includes market-driven forces and neoliberal economies but also several very nuanced and particularly human responses to grief in a modern nation-state. In analysing these responses, Allison has provided a valuable, interdisciplinary exploration of modern death styles in Japan. As a contribution to scholarship, the book provides new anthropological material and extensive ethnographic evidence to demonstrate how societal shifts in demographics, technologies and beliefs/secularisation impact on death and dying. It provides a careful and sympathetic account of old customs, but its real contribution is an analysis of the problem and value of innovation in ritual, in corpse disposal and in storage.

Conclusion

The texts considered in the preceding analysis emphasise the vitality of thanatology today. Not simply a reactive response to post-pandemic sensibilities, these texts offer very different ways of thinking about death and dying. In the *Cultural History of Death*, there is a broadly historiographical approach, which follows a conventional linear history from the classical world to the present day. As a reference work, it is emphatically Eurocentric but nonetheless provides some valuable new critical thinking around gender and identity. By contrast, Canham's *Riotous Deathscapes* focuses exclusively on those neglected voices and provides an original contribution to knowledge in not only uncovering submerged stories of death in South Africa but also its manifesto for rethinking the academy's priorities and deploying an adapted idea of Black public humanities as an alternative way of addressing mortality: 'inscriptive practices, such as orality, the natural environment, ritual, family and community storytelling'.[85] By comparison, Allison picks up on Japanese death cultures, which in and of itself is quite a familiar topic to death studies scholars. In spite of this, the monograph captures a pivotal moment in Japanese mortuary practice. It uncovers new methods of remembering the dead in

[79] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 162.
[80] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 163.
[81] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 176.
[82] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 177.
[83] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 187.
[84] Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*, 190.
[85] Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 5.

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a changing society, influenced by technological innovation, secularisation and the decline of traditional familial bonds. At the same time, Allison captures how formal rituals are malleable and formulates how 'necro-animism' can be used to theorise such discourses. As a glimpse into thanatology/death studies at the present time, the books discussed here suggest the liveliness of the discipline, its criticality and its novelty.

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