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.