AMST 430/830:
Political Bodies: Contemporary Issues in Death and Dying in the United States
Spring 2020
Mondays, 6:30-9:10pm
Location: Seabury 128
13 weeks

Course Description

Death is an inevitable aspect of life, but practices of death and mourning vary culturally. How do we die in the United States? How does this compare to other areas of the Americas? What is a "good death" and how is it culturally understood and constructed? This course explores the many dimensions of death and dying in the United States from the evolving conceptions life-saving medicine to the alternative funeral industry and cultural alienation from dead bodies. It covers the inequities of death investigation and the social ramifications of the "CSI effect." Students learn about recent key milestones in the politicization of death such as the AIDS crisis, the #blacklivesmatter movement, the passage of the North American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, and the mass disappearances of undocumented migrants crossing the US-Mexico border.

Note on Sensitivity and Participation

While in many cases, academic research might require a degree of objectivity, in this course we will endeavor to do something a bit different. We will be in conversation with many authors who take cases firmly against depersonalizing death or alienating ourselves from emotion. Not only that, but most of us have dealt with death in one way or another and this subject matter may be triggering. But, we will also need to strike a balance and this balance will ultimately be iterative—up for conversation and debate through the semester. My aim is to create a space where we can talk about our experiences with death, but without requirement to do so. We will discuss grief and mourning and memory, and maybe aspects of this course can be both a social science education but also one that can be directly applied to students’ lives.

In a more direct way and given the topic, students who need to step out of the classroom at any time may do so without explanation. Finally, students are invited to raise issues of sensitivity either within the classroom—this will often be very much within the scope of our academic discussions—or directly with me through email, during office hours, or in a prescheduled appointment.

Learning Objectives

- Students will develop a nuanced understanding of forensic, political, intersectional, and cultural issues in the field of contemporary death and dying in the United States.
- Students will develop a comparative perspective between death and dying in the United States and issues faced elsewhere in the Americas.
- This is a writing intensive course. Think of writing as an exercise, and as the semester progresses you should be writing more clearly—from summarizing to critically assessing complex information. Your writing assignments will likely become useful reference
materials as you consider methods, approaches, and core texts. These skills have direct application both within and beyond the Academy.

- This is a reading intensive course. You will be expected to read quickly but with thorough comprehension, such that you can come to class prepared to exhaustively discuss multiple reading assignments that potentially span hundreds of pages with insights that go beyond the texts. You will be able to take these skills with you after completing course for use in both academic and real-world scenarios that require you to quickly and efficiently assess complex data.

- You will come away from this course with a working understanding of an array of social science and historiographic methodologies and a sense of how and where to apply them.

- Finally, an objective of this course is professionalization of students—including but not limited to refining public speaking, use of professional software, data analysis techniques, and writing.

**Required Texts**

- Roach, *Stiff*
- Doughty, *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the world to find the good death*
- Edkins, *Missing: Persons and politics*
- Gawande, *Being Mortal*
- Auchter, *The Politics of Haunting and Memory in International Relations*

**Class Structure and Assignments**

As undergraduates and graduate students will have different work loads and expectations within this course, notes about these different expectations will be underlined and highlighted throughout the syllabus.

Students will be assigned about 200-300 pages of reading per week, and each class will be oriented as a seminar style discussion. Students should come to class prepared to discuss the readings’ themes and based on prompts distributed by the instructor. The classes will be divided between lectures presented by the professor and seminar style discussions based on student participation.

For certain weeks, students will have some choice and flexibility with reading assignments. One or two readings may be mandatory for all in a given week, but then students will choose among the remaining readings with specific instructions for graduates and undergraduates each week. Look for the underlined and highlighted notes. What this means for you: Not everyone will have read each of the texts. Any given week, you may be expected to present a summary and brief talking points from the texts for your peers. This should encourage you to come prepared accordingly to each class.

**Formatting Instructions for Written Work**
Papers should have 1” margins, 12 point Times New Roman font, be double-spaced, and printed in black ink. You are not assigned a reference style, but you must be consistent to a chosen style throughout your papers.

The first page of each written assignment should contain (single-spaced): your name, the course and section number, my name, the date, and your email address. This will be followed by one space and an essay title. All essays must have titles. Sub-section headings that divide and map your argument are also encouraged, where appropriate.

Discussion Leaders
Students will lead reading discussions for weeks 3-13, with exceptions of weeks 8 and 9. For each of these weeks, two to three students will work together to come up with questions to guide class discussion based on readings. I encourage your discussion points to query the validity of the thematic framing of the content, the rigor and shortcomings of the author(s)’ methodologies and source material, and the social and policy implications of the content, as well as specific points of interest. I will pass around a sign-up sheet the first week of class for students to commit to two weeks of discussion of their choosing.

The requirements are the same for graduates and undergraduates.

Cemetery Analysis Project, due 4/6
During the Spring Break and the following week, students will conduct surveys of the historic Cedar Hill Cemetery located one mile from campus (you may also do similar projects in other equivalent locations pending instructor approval). The cemetery is open to the public during business hours and I have coordinated with the staff so they are aware of your project and presence. It is not expected that you will survey the entire grounds of the cemetery, but that you will make a selection of an area of the cemetery, or devise a sampling method that will constrain the scope of your focus.

Using the assigned readings as guides as well as archival material made available through the Cedar Hill Foundation (or equivalent) students will choose a particular thematic focus in coordination with a survey method—we will discuss these further during class—to conduct analyses of historic cemeteries as sites of contemporary and ongoing cultural production. Your focus may include (but is not limited to) offerings at tombstones, offerings at celebrity graves (of which there are a few at Cedar Hill), comparisons between offering types, artwork on tombstones, tombstones with epigraphs, or tombstones from certain time periods. Be creative, and feel free to discuss your focus in advance. Feel free to incorporate archives and other research to the extent applicable.

Before the beginning of class on 4/6, submit a write up of your investigation that should be a minimum of four pages NOT including photographs or works cited. You will be expected to include a minimum of two photographs that showcase aspects of your analysis. This write up should include an explanation of your thematic focus and why you chose it, your sampling method, and your findings. Include information about the number of tombs you surveyed and other research methods you employed—like archival research.

Memento Mori Short Response, due 4/20
Based on the readings we complete for the unit on “Material Culture and Memory” students will write a 3-5 page short essay on a specific memorial object of importance to them. This can be a personal object, or something of national importance. You should include a note on your relationship with the object(s)—why you chose it/them, and also some notes on the history of the object(s), and how their meaning(s) shifted. When and how did they become memento mori?

**Student Presentations**

From the first week of April, we will begin scheduling blocks of 5 students each to present on their final project research. Students will each give 10 minute final presentations on a topic that aligns with or matches your final paper topic. This may be the theme of your report or research paper, but it does not have to be; it may cover one aspect of your final paper, or a related topic that did not make it into your final paper. Students are expected to prepare a short PowerPoint (or comparable visuals) with a minimum of 5 slides. Your presentation should follow this basic structure, to be replicated in your final paper:

1. **thesis statement**—explain your question or motivating argument;
2. **statement of significance**—explain why your topic is important;
3. **theoretical framework**—did you select a theoretical framing to help make sense of your topic (may not be applicable to all);
4. **methods**—explain how you choose to address the topic or answer the question you posed; and finally,
5. **findings**—explain what you found.

We will follow each of your presentations with a ~5 minute question and answer session, during which time, we as a class will also provide feedback about your chosen methodologies and arguments. You will then have about two weeks to submit your final paper, so these presentations should contribute directly to your writing. I will consider how well you adapted any feedback when I grade your final paper.

**Graduates will give 15 minute presentations**

**Final Paper**

Your final paper should be on a relevant topic of your choosing. You MUST communicate your topic with me before spring break—no later than 3/12. Given the diverse styles of the American Studies Department, you may use a citation style of your choosing, but you are expected to be consistent. The Purdue Online Writing Lab ([https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html)) offers a fantastic style guide.

Undergraduate students must write a 3,500 word research paper (including works cited/footnotes) (about 15 pages) on the topic of your choosing in consultation with the professor. This will be due the day of the scheduled final (May 8). You will be required to schedule a meeting with the professor before week 10 of the course to discuss your proposed topic.

**Graduate requirement:** 6,000 word research paper, including works cited and footnotes.

**Grading Breakdown**
Grading will be based on class participation, fulfillment of writing assignments, and discussion leading. Grading will be broken down as follows:

*Same for graduates and undergraduates

Class participation: 25%
Cemetery Analysis: 15%
Memento Mori Paper: 10%
Final Presentation: 15%
Final paper: 25%
Discussion leading 1: 5%
Discussion leading 2: 5%

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Intellectual integrity is the cornerstone of good scholarship and good learning. Plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated or excused. There is no mitigating circumstance, ever, for plagiarism. Whenever you draw upon somebody else’s words or ideas to make a point, give them credit. Plagiarism is more often the result of haste or carelessness than it is the result of deliberate dishonesty. As such, make sure to clearly distinguish and attribute your thoughts from those of others, in your writing and your note taking. If you are ever unsure, it is better to err on the side of caution and provide a citation.

Students of Trinity College are held to the Student Integrity Contract. Students should be familiar with the principles outlined by the contract and must understand and respect the intellectual property of other people. Your work will be graded according to the rubric designed by your instructor. Cheating and plagiarizing will be dealt with according to university guidelines. A plagiarized essay will result in a failing grade for the course. Only original work, done by the student, should be submitted to the instructor. Plagiarism, cheating, or other incidents of academic dishonesty will be reviewed and reported as outlined by the Academic Affairs Committee. Their rules and procedures can be read here: [http://www.trincoll.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/StudentHandbook.pdf](http://www.trincoll.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/StudentHandbook.pdf)

COMMITMENT TO A DIVERSE AND RESPECTFUL ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

The topic of this course is a site of intense political controversy. The intention is to foster an engaged and diverse intellectual community on foundations of good faith and mutual respect. On the one hand, this course is oriented for us to engage very directly with controversy with the expectation that we will not always agree and that our disagreements are potentially sites of learning. Different experiences, educational backgrounds, and identities will inform our perspectives. As we confront controversy, I am obligated to state that I expect us to engage these issues as mature and intelligent adults committed to maintaining a respectful and focused intellectual environment. Personal attacks on any member of our community will not be tolerated. Bigotry in any form is unacceptable.

RESOURCES
**Academic Accommodations:** Trinity College is committed to creating an inclusive and accessible learning environment consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you have approval for academic accommodations, please provide notification electronically using SARC Online during the first two weeks of the semester or a minimum of 10 days prior to utilizing your accommodations. Following notification, students are required to meet with faculty to further discuss implementation of accommodations. If you do not have approved accommodations, but have a disability requiring accommodations, or have questions about applying, please contact Lori Clapis, Coordinator of Accessibility Resources at [Lori.Clapis@trincoll.edu](mailto:Lori.Clapis@trincoll.edu), 860-297-4025 or refer to the Student Accessibility Resources (SARC) website: [https://www.trincoll.edu/StudentLife/StudentAccessibilityResources/students](https://www.trincoll.edu/StudentLife/StudentAccessibilityResources/students).

**The Writing Center:** You are encouraged to use the Writing Center, staffed by specially trained Writing Associates, to improve your writing—no matter your skill level. I suggest taking your writing projects to the Writing Center several times during the process of composing. To reserve an appointment via the online scheduling system use: [https://trincoll.mywconline.com/](https://trincoll.mywconline.com/). The main Writing Center is in room 109 of the English House at 115 Vernon Street. For more information about hours and Writing Associates, please visit: [http://writingcenter.trincoll.edu](http://writingcenter.trincoll.edu). Drop-ins are welcome.

**The Library and the Watkinson:** The Trinity College Library offers resources far greater than you might expect at a college of this size. Beyond a quiet place to study, CTW and Interlibrary Loan provide access to books from libraries in across Connecticut and around the world. The Library is an especially hospitable place for researchers like you. The library’s research guides are a great place to start for any subject ([http://courseguides.trincoll.edu](http://courseguides.trincoll.edu)). The research librarians are also kind and wonderful people who will help you with just about any assignment, from crafting historical questions to finding and evaluating research sources. Jeff Liszka ([http://courseguides.trincoll.edu/jeff](http://courseguides.trincoll.edu/jeff)) is the librarian assigned to American Studies courses, but you can make appointments and visit with any of them.

The Watkinson Library maintains a renowned rare book, manuscript, and archival collection that has just about every kind of primary source material you can imagine. ([http://www.trincoll.edu/LITC/Watkinson/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.trincoll.edu/LITC/Watkinson/Pages/default.aspx)) The library is free and open to the public. If you choose to use the Watkinson, I recommend you go in person to speak with an archivist there, but the more specific your questions the more helpful they can be.

**Health and Mental Health:** The Health Center (TCHC), located in Wheaton Hall, offers health care for all Trinity students enrolled in at least 2 classes. The center is licensed by the state of Connecticut as an Outpatient Clinic and is a primary care office, similar to your home physician's office. Urgent and emergent care is referred off campus to local providers. They are affiliated with Connecticut Children's Medical Center and can coordinate subspecialists with home providers as needed. In case of emergency, call 911.

Phone: (860) 297-2018

You can find more information here: [http://www.trincoll.edu/StudentLife/HealthWellness/health/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.trincoll.edu/StudentLife/HealthWellness/health/Pages/default.aspx).

**The Trinity Counseling and Wellness Center** provides a full range of counseling and psychological services to all students who desire assistance in coping with personal and
emotional difficulties and social relationships. All services offered by the center are free, and all contact with members of the staff is privileged and confidential as provided by law. The center is located at 135 Allen Place, accessible from the Campus Safety parking lot in the gray and white building near the handicapped ramp at the back of the lot. In case of emergency, call 911.

Phone: (860) 297-2415

You can find more information on the Counseling and Wellness Center here: http://www.trincoll.edu/StudentLife/HealthWellness/counseling/Pages/default.aspx.

**Instructor Office Hours:** Please come to my office hours as often as you would like. I encourage you to come with specific questions or issues to discuss. Feel free to email me to schedule a separate time if my office hours do not fit your schedule.

**Email:** I will attempt to answer all of your emails promptly and attentively. From Friday at 5:00 pm until Monday at 9:00 am I will be off-line and will not respond to emails. During the week at reasonable hours, feel free to email me with questions and concerns related to the class. Please attempt to keep some decorum when using email.

Please check and use your Trinity College email account. I will use that email address to distribute additional materials, handouts, make announcements, and schedule office visits.

**Course Moodle:** PDFs of readings will be available on our course Moodle. They will be uploaded to correlate with each week and will mirror the syllabus. Though I do not anticipate any changes to the syllabus, if this does occur it will be announced via email and reflected in the Moodle.
WEEKLY THEMES

Week 1 (1/27): The Dead Body—An Introduction
- Roach, *Stiff* [ALL]
- Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, Introduction and chapter 1

- OPTIONAL
  - Popular Mechanics, “What Happens When You Get Cremated”

Week 2 (2/3): The Body that Disturbs—The limits of the human
- Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, Introduction
- Doughty, *From Here to Eternity*, Ch 3
- Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, Chapter 1

- McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, Ch 5
- Dawdy, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Zombies and a Decaying American Ontology

Week 3 (2/10): Grief and mourning
- Rosaldo, “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage”
- Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, Introduction, pp. 81-89
- Butler, *Frames of War*, Introduction
- Cacho, *Social Death*, Introduction

- OPTIONAL:
  - Online summary of Judith Butler’s conception of abject materiality
  - Yancy and Butler, *New York Times*, What’s wrong with all lives matter?

  Undergraduates: Select 5
  Graduates: ALL

Week 4 (2/17): Abandoned to Death
- Foucault, *Foucault Reader*, Right of Death and Power Over Life
- Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 1-12, p. 28-29 (section 1.7), p. 82-84 (section 3.2), p. 131-134 (section 2.3 and 2.4—skip footnotes)
- Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, Introduction
• Schepers Hughes, *Death without weeping: The violence of everyday life in Brazil*, Introduction, Chapter 6

Watch documentary: *How to survive a plague*

Everyone will read Foucault, Agamben, Povinelli, Schepers-Hughes

Undergraduates: Choose additionally either Hughes et al. or Squire

Graduates: ALL

• OPTIONAL:
  o LeGuin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”
  o Harris, *NPR*, “Study Puts Puerto Rico Death Toll from Hurricane Maria Near 5,000”
  o Braun and McCarthy, *Environment and Planning D*, “Hurricane Katrina and abandoned being” [opinion article]

Week 5 (2/24): *Forensic justice and its discontents*
• National Research Council, “Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: A Path Forward”
• Mirzoeff, *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter*, Ch 3
• Lowery et al., *Washington Post*, “Where killings go unsolved”
• Schulz, *New Yorker*, The history of final forms
• McGinnis and Foege, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Actual Causes of Death in the United States
• Crossland, *Signs and Society*, “Forensic Afterlives”
• International Red Cross and Red Crescent Society, “Operational Best Practices Regarding the Management of Human Remains and Information on the Dead by Non-Specialists, For All Armed Forces, For All Humanitarian Organizations” (SKIM ONLY)

Note: Lowery and McGinnis & Foege are short readings

Watch documentary: *Frontline*, “Postmortem” [podcast]

• OPTIONAL
  o *New York Times The Daily*, “There’s no going back: How family history websites have been used by law enforcement” [podcast]
  o *New York Times*, “The Living Dead”
  o *Washington Post*, “Even if you’ve never taken a DNA test, a distant relative’s could reveal your identity”

Week 6 (3/2): *Do the dead have human rights?*
• Mbembe, *Public Culture*, “Necropolitics”
• Clark, “Keep your hands off of my (dead) body: A critique of the ways in which the state disrupts the personhood interests of the deceased and his or her kin in disposing of the dead and assigning identity in death” *Do not read footnotes—mostly legal citations*
• Schwarz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago, *Social Research*, Pure Corpses, Dangerous Citizens

Read one of the selected opinion articles on involuntary organ donation from the *Journal of Medical Ethics* (1-2 pages each) [Moodle]

Everyone will read Mbembe, Moon, Clark, Dongoske, NAGPRA Summary, and one selected article from *Medical Ethics*
Undergraduates: Choose additionally either Crossland or Schwarz-Marin & Cruz-Santiago
Graduates: ALL

• **OPTIONAL**
  o *Latino USA*, “All they will call you will be deportees” [podcast]
  o *The Guardian*, “The Geneva Convention can’t cope with this crisis. Time for a rethink”
  o *Washington Post*, “For the U.S., a frustrating history of recovering human remains in North Korea”

**Week 7 (3/9): Missing Bodies**

• Edkins, *Missing: Persons and Politics*, Introduction, Ch 1, 5-8
• Bille et al., *The Anthropology of Absence*, Ch 2
• Reineke, *Naming the Dead: Identification and Ambiguity Along the US-Mexico Border*, Ch 3
• Rosenblatt, *Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science After Atrocity* [selections]
• Ohlson, *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Geography*, The political afterlives of Mexico’s disappeared

**Everyone will read Edkins and Reineke**
Undergraduates: Choose two additional readings
Graduates: ALL

Watch documentary, *Las Madres: Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*

• **OPTIONAL**
The Guardian, “Mexico in the drug war: A cemetery of bodies with no story, and stories with no body”
The Atlantic, “On the trail of missing American Indian women”

3/12 LECTURE BY ZOE CROSSLAND, 5-6PM (extra credit offered for attendance)

SPRING BREAK

Week 8 and 9 (3/23 & 3/30): Places of Death—Cemetery Analysis Project
(see above for assignment details)
- Griffith, Beliefs and Holy Places: A Spiritual Geography of the Pimeria Alta, Ch 5
- Baptist, Mortality, “Diaspora: Death without a landscape”
- Dethlefson and Deetz, American Antiquity, Death’s Heads, Cherubs, and Willow Trees: Experimental Archaeology in Colonial Cemeteries
- Cherryson et al., A fine and private place, Ch 4
- Laqueur, The Work of the Dead, Ch 5 [selections]

- OPTIONAL
  - PBS, POV, “El Velador: Los Jardines de Humayo Cemetery” [documentary available via course reserves] (see also, interview with director online, https://www.pbs.org/video/pov-el-velador-filmmaker-interview-natalia-almada/)

Week 10 (4/6): The Body as Material Culture
*Robin Reineke will join us in the first hour of class via Skype for a Q&A.

*Student presentations
- Reineke, Naming the Dead: Identification and Ambiguity Along the US-Mexico Border, Ch 2
- Maguire and Rao, Bodies as Evidence, Introduction
- Sofaer, The Body as Material Culture, [selections]
- Colwell, Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits, [selections]
- Keenan and Weizman, Mengele’s Skull
- Verdery, The Political Lives of Dead Bodies, [selections]

Everyone must read Reineke, Keenan and Weizman, Verdery
Undergraduates: Choose two additional readings
Graduates: ALL

Week 11 (4/13): Material Culture and Memory
*Student Presentations
- Hallam and Hockey, Death, Memory and Material Culture, Introduction
- Harrison, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, “War mementoes and the souls of missing soldiers”
• Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, [selections] [Moodle]

• *Handbook of Research on Disaster Management and Contingency Planning in Modern Libraries*, “Response to the unthinkable: Collecting and archiving condolence and temporary memorial materials following public tragedies” (select pages only)

• Doss, *Mortality*, “Death, Art, and Memory in the Public Sphere: The visual and material culture of grief in contemporary America”

• Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, Introduction, Ch 6

Watch documentary, *Objects and Memory*

**Everyone must read Hallam & Hockey, Colwell, Handbook, and Sturken**

**Undergraduates: Choose one additional reading**

**Graduates: ALL**

• OPTIONAL
  
  o Estatieva, *NPR*, What Grief Looks Like: Documenting the Mementos Left After School Shootings (Photo Essay) [Moodle]
  
  
  o Review the Connecticut Archives online repository of memorial materials from the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting [URL to be provided]

**Week 12 (4/20): Being Mortal**

*Public Lecture by Patrick Richardson, APRN—A palliative care nurse from Trinity St. Francis Hospital. Lecture will take place from 5-6pm before class and afterwards, Patrick will join us in the first hour of class for a Q&A.*

*Student presentations in second half of class*

• Gawande, *Being Mortal*

• Fasson, *Public Culture*, “Humanitarianism as a politics of life”

• Doughty, *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the world in search of a good death*, Chs 1, 4, 8

• OPTIONAL
  
  o *Hidden Brain*, “The Ventilator” [podcast]

**Week 13 (4/27): Ghostliness and Haunted Places**

• Auchter, *The Politics of Haunting and Memory in International Relations*, Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5

• Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects*, Introduction

• Dawdy, *Patina: A Profane Archaeology*, Ch 3

• Gordillo, *Anthropologica*, Places that frighten
Everyone must read Auchter, Bergland
Undergraduates: Choose one additional reading
Graduates: ALL