



# **Dying to Know: Interdisciplinary Seminar on Death**

IDST 3500 (4 credits)

### IHP Death & Dying: Perspectives, Practices & Policies

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

#### **Course Description**

This interdisciplinary seminar examines the humanistic value of imagined and memorialized death while supporting death literacy. Students will engage with diverse texts/media that reflect, shape, and challenge attitudes toward death and dying. It will also examine death within subcultures, including informal death practices, roadside memorials, memorial tattoos, and virtual in memoria. Counterbalancing these texts will be experiential learning opportunities to provide practical information about death, dying, and bereavement. Through these multipronged lines of inquiry, the course will equip students with the functional knowledge and skills to integrate end of life planning into their life plans (if not their career plans).

#### **Guiding Questions:**

What does death mean to different people? What are the implications of socially-mediated death? Why and how is death memorialized and monetized? How can we engage in productive dialogues about death and dying? How can you be an ally to those who are grieving? How can you make a living in the business of dying?

#### **Learning Outcomes**

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Evaluate the benefits and disadvantages of dark tourism
- Analyze how creators, musicians, and artists use death to make meaning
- Interpret the meaning of death from the perspective of death care workers
- Utilize social media and digital media to normalize contemplations of and conversations about death, dying, and bereavement
- Assess personal death literacy skills
- Make informed decisions about end-of-life planning
- Synthesize diverse approaches on death and dying from various disciplines, experiences, and cultural contexts

### Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English, but students will be exposed to vocabulary related to course content through in-country expert lectures and field visits in a wide range of venues and regional locales.

#### **Instructional Methods**

SIT's philosophy of education is rooted in the experiential learning model, which drives the design of this class. Each module allows for experience, reflection, and application. Experiences range from critical analyses to student-led discussion circles that are framed by readings, multimedia texts, lectures, and discussions. Reflection occurs throughout the learning process in various forms, such as formal written assignments and reflexive components in papers/projects. Through reflection, students are encouraged to become aware of their process of learning, to make sense of their experiences, and connect the learning acquired on the program with previous experiences and information. Application activities reinforce learning by practicing communication skills, experimenting with theories, and preparing to transfer learning to future contexts.

#### **Required Texts**

Articles on Course Reserve

#### **Assignments and Evaluation**

Signs of Death, A Social Media Challenge 10% Dispatches from a Dark Tourist, The Podcast 40% Interview with a Deathcare Worker 10% Prepare to Die, Death Literacy Portfolio 30% Participation 10%

**Signs of Death, A Social Media Challenge:** Signs of death surround us to the point that we can easily become anesthetized to death rather than sensitized. This course intentionally asks students to slow down and smell the funeral lilies. Using an agreed-upon social media platform (Snapchat, Instagram, or TikTok), students will create and respond to (non-lethal) challenges that ask participants to contemplate the signs of death they encounter in their physical and digital spaces. Each student will create one challenge and participate in all the challenges issued by their fellow classmates. Sample challenge: celebrity deaths that feel personal. There will be a minimum of 2 challenges per week. Students will sign-up for a challenge slot.

**Dispatches from a Dark Tourist Podcast:** In this course, students will have the space to critically examine dark tourism as they participate in activities that fit under the broad category of dark tourism. To encourage deep reflection on the ethical considerations of memorialized and monetized sites of death, students will produce and contribute segments to a course podcast: "Dispatches from a Dark Tourist." Working in small production teams, students will produce, upload, and promote their original episode. Episodes should run between 20-30 minutes and may incorporate music, dialogue, and other audio in compliance with Fair Use. Note: Students may use their challenge as the topic of their episode.

**Interview with a Death care Worker:** For this assignment, students will interview a death care worker (from caregivers to gravediggers or anyone else whose profession has them acquainted with grief) and share their story in the style of "Humans of New York." These stories and any accompanying photos will not be shared beyond the confines of our class unless granted permission from the individual profiled. Students may interview a death care worker from one of our program locations or one from their own community. These interviews have a rolling submission date; submit your interview when you complete it prior to the end of the semester.

**Prepare to Die, Death Literacy Portfolio:** Death literacy is an important life skill that most people learn by experience rather than formal education. This course aims to change that. Students will create a portfolio consisting of several self-assessments and documents. Index is a 29-item questionnaire designed to measure understanding and knowledge of loss and grief, death and dying, and end-of-life planning. "Your Final Checklist" and "Your Emotional Will" are resources developed by The Groundswell Project to reinforce death literacy and support end-of-life planning.

- Part 1: Death Literacy Self-Assessments
  - Week 1: Complete the Death Literacy Index and "<u>Your Final Checklist</u>" and write a memo in which you identify gaps in your knowledge and death care skills and set personal learning goals for the semester
  - Week 13: Repeat the Death Literacy Index and "<u>Your Final Checklist</u>" and write a memo in which you compare the results from weeks 1 and 13, evaluate your progress in meeting your goals, and outline how you will continue to strengthen your death literacy skills after the program concludes
- Part 2: Draft "Your Emotional Will" and reflect on the process of composing it

Attendance and Participation: Due to the nature of this experiential program, full participation in all classes and program activities is required. Students may not voluntarily opt out of required program activities. Valid reasons for absence – such as illness – must be discussed with the program director or other designated staff person. Absences impact academic performance, which may impact grades. Excessive, unexcused absences could result in program dismissal. Alternative work for absences will be expected.

**Note on Late Assignments:** IHP programs integrate traditional classroom lectures and discussion with field-based experiences, site visits and debriefs. It is critical that students complete assignments in a timely manner to continue to benefit from the sequences in assignments, reflections and experiences throughout the program. Extensions may be granted on a case-by-case basis with approval from the Program Director. Requests must be made in writing and at least 12 hours before the posted due date and time. Students who do not submit their work within the extension period will receive a failing grade.

<u>Grading Scale</u> 94-100% A 90-93% A- 87-89% B+ 84-86% B B-80-83% 77-79% C+ 74-76% С 70-73% C-67-69% D+ 64-66% D F below 64

## **Program Expectations**

In order to make the most of the opportunities presented in program, communicate respectfully, prepare for student success, and demonstrate best possible engagement, SIT has the following expectations of students:

- **Content Considerations:** The texts and activities you will encounter in this course delve into sensitive topics that may be emotionally and intellectually challenging. Our classroom is a space where we can engage with challenging ideas, question assumptions, and navigate difficult topics with respect and maturity. As possible, I will flag content and activities that are especially graphic or intense, so we are prepared to address them soberly and sensitively. If you are struggling to keep up with the work or participate in the course because of the nature of the content and activities, you should speak with me and/or seek help from counseling services.
- Learning Community: Respect differences of opinion (classmates', lecturers, local constituents engaged with on the visits). You are not expected to agree with everything you hear, but you are expected to listen across differences and consider other perspectives with respect.
- **Presence.** Show up prepared. Be on time, have your readings completed and points in mind for discussion or clarification. Complying with these elements raises the level of class discussion for everyone.
- **Engage**. Ask questions in class. Interact with the lecturer. These are often very busy professionals who are doing us an honor by coming to speak.
- **Be Honest.** Comply with academic integrity policies (no plagiarism or cheating, nothing unethical).
- Store Your Work: Keep several copies of your work as back up and keep one copy accessible to you through an online forum, such as an attachment in your email, the course learning management system, or cloud-based storage. This way your work will always be available despite technical issues. Lost files, deleted drives, or computer crashes are not excuses for late, missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use**: Cell phones and other personal electronics can be used for taking notes and other class activities. Off-task usage is not acceptable. You may be marked as absent for habitually using them for something other than classroom activities.
- **Course Communication:** Course documents and assignments will be posted on the learning management system, Canvas. Although the course calendar provides a broad overview and the general sequence of work and assignments for the course,

what we accomplish in class will vary, and revisions to the calendar will be posted at the course site. You will need to check the course site regularly. You are responsible for letting me know about any network-related problems that prevent you from accessing or submitting assignments.

• **Recording Policy:** To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use. Documented academic accommodations may supersede this policy.

### **SIT Policies and Resources**

Please refer to the Policies section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as <u>Library resources and research</u> <u>support</u>, <u>Disability Services</u>, <u>Counseling Services</u>, <u>Title IX information</u>, and <u>Equity</u>, <u>Diversity</u>, <u>and Inclusion</u> resources.

### **Course Schedule**

\*Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs

Note: This is a suggested sequence of modules and topics. Faculty should appropriately adapt how these topics are taught and select local texts, case studies, guest speakers, and site visits that are relevant to the context and CGI. This course framework is designed to be adaptable to local context.

# MODULE #1: NEW YORK, NY

To understand what death means, we will explore diverse perspectives and practices as manifested in a major US city. Through an exploration of death literacy, the death care industry, dark tourism, informal death practices, and popular and artistic representations of death in the US context, we will have a foundation for comparison and synthesis of approaches and perspectives.

## **Session 1: Death Literacy**

Death skills are essential life skills. This session introduces death literacy within the broader death education movement: what it is, why it is important, and how to increase your death literacy. We will also do some housekeeping: form Dispatch groups and set the production schedule and sign-up for Challenges.

Required Texts:

- Death over Dinner: <u>https://deathoverdinner.org</u>
- Leonard, R., Noonan, K., Horsfall, D., Kelly, M., Rosenberg, J. P., Grindrod, A., Rumbold, B., & Rahn, A. (2022). Developing a death literacy index. *Death Studies*, 46(9), 2110–2122. <u>https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/07481187.2021.1894268</u>

Learning on Location: Small group dinners with a guest death care worker to facilitate Death over Dinner conversations.

Assignment

• Prepare to Die: Complete the Death Literacy Index and "Your Final Checklist" and write a memo in which you identify gaps in your knowledge and death care skills and set personal learning goals for the semester

# Session 2: Dark Tourism I, The Spectacle of Death

The places we go and the things we will see in this course and on the overall program position us as dark tourists, even though our objectives are academic. We need to acknowledge, critique, and define for ourselves what it means to engage in dark tourism and how to do it respectfully. To do this, we will study the purpose, forms, and ethical considerations of dark tourism and our role as dark tourists.

**Required Texts:** 

- Light, D. (2017). Progress in dark tourism and thanatourism research: An uneasy relationship with heritage tourism. *Tourism Management*, 61, 275–301. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2017.01.011
- Video. Staintin, H. (2023). Tourism and death- the rise of the dark tourism industry. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMCVoL1DfAM&ab\_channel=TEDxTalks
- Levitt, L. (2018). Culture, Celebrity, and the Cemetery: Hollywood Forever. Routledge.
  - Chapter 1: Locating cultural memory
  - Chapter 3: The Celebrity Cemetery

Learning on Location

• Q&A with dark tourism providers, <u>Boroughs of the Dead</u>

Assignment

• Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

## Session 3: Death is a Joke

Gallows humor, morbid humor, dark comedy. These are various names for a type of humor associated with grim, taboo, or painful subjects. This session investigates how humor is used, effectively or ineffectively, as a coping mechanism when we are confronted by the reality of death.

Required Texts:

- Wilson, D. M., Bykowski, K., Chrzanowski, A. M., Knox, M., & Errasti-Ibarrondo, B. (2022). A scoping research literature review to explore bereavement humor. *Current Psychology* (New Brunswick, N.J.), 1–12. Advance online publication. <u>https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03033-x</u>
- Grandi, A., Guidetti, G., Converso, D., Bosco, N., & Colombo, L. (2021). I nearly died laughing: Humor in funeral industry operators. *Current Psychology*, 40(12), 6098–6109. <u>https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00547-9</u>
- Lambert South, A., Elton, J., & Lietzenmayer, A. M. (2022). Communicating death with humor: Humor types and functions in death over dinner conversations. *Death Studies*, 46(4), 851–860. <u>https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1716883</u>

Learning on Location

• Movie Night: dark comedy, students' choice: Heathers, Better Off Dead, Death at a Funeral, Weekend at Bernie's, This is Where I Leave You, Afterlife of the Party, Wristcutters: A Love Story, Swiss Army Man, Still Life, Life after Beth, Bodies, Bodies, Bodies.

Assignment

• Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

## Session 4: The Science of Death, Not as Seen on TV

Depictions of imagined death pervade art, film, theater, television, and podcasts. While these depictions perform artistic and cultural work, contributing to how we understand death and dying, they are not necessarily bound by the laws of science. This session provides a counterpoint to imagined death by focusing on what death means from a scientific and practical perspective. What happens to the human body after death? How are bodies prepared after death in current US practice? What happens during an autopsy?

Required Texts:

- Video: Insider Science. (2019). What Happens To Your Body 100 Years After Death. <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-rDtvVRLJA&ab\_channel=InsiderScience</u>
- Video: Wired. (2023). Mortician Shows Every Step a Body Goes Through at a Funeral Home. <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv\_SuYmu8DY&ab\_channel=WIRED</u>
- Video: Insider. (2020). Autopsy Expert Breaks Down 11 Autopsy Scenes In Movies: How Real Is It? <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuKJUhM7JpA&ab\_channel=Insider</u>

Learning on Location

• Site visit to NYC Office of Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) as part of their <u>Public</u> <u>Education</u> mission.

Assignment

• Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

# Session 5: Crossing the Rainbow Bridge

Some of our first experiences with death are related to the death of a beloved family pet. This session explores the practices surrounding the mourning and memorialization of a deceased canine companion, feline friend, bewinged bestie, or other non-human confidant.

**Required Texts:** 

- Harris, R. (2019). *Skin, Meaning, and Symbolism in Pet Memorials: Tattoos, Taxidermy, and Trinkets*: Vol. First edition. Emerald Publishing Limited.
  - Chapter 3: Memorializing Animals: Meaning and Mourning
  - Chapter 6: In the Skin: Memorial Tattoos

Learning on Location

• Tour: Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, Westchester County

Assignment

• Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

# MODULE #2: GHANA

Arguably, no country on earth knows how to put the fun in funeral like multiethnic Ghana. But, not far beneath the massive contemporary funeral culture lie national and geopolitical legacies of death and dying. From this rich context, we will explore the same themes as we did in NYC from a Ghanaian perspective, gaining insights into how death is understood, represented, practiced, and memorialized.

## Session 6: Our Business is Death I

Because of the nature of their work, death care professionals hold unique perspectives on death and dying that are both contextual and universal. We will have opportunities to listen and learn from those whose business is death.

Required Texts:

- Dartey, A. F., Akortiakumah, J. K., Titiati, P., Kwao, E., & Nyande, F. K. (2021). Work conditions of the mortuary attendant in Ghana: A qualitative study. *Inquiry* (00469580), 58, 1–10. <u>https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1177/00469580211060263</u>
- Video: Coffins with Character (1998). <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqW1emGq\_So&t=28s&ab\_channel=JourneymanPi</u> <u>ctures</u>
- Video: The Dancing Pallbearers of Ghana. (2021) <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2\_apjp1hZM&ab\_channel=VICE</u>

Learning on Location

 Site visit: local funeral home tour and conversation with a Funeral Home Director / Mortician Assignment

• Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

## Session 7: Death is a Song

Classical, popular, and folk music are rife with references to death. This session focuses on death in song and funeral songs to learn how this artistic medium and cultural practice is used to honor the dead and sustain the living.

Required Texts:

- Adinkrah, M. (2023). Anti-suicide themes in popular Ghanaian music: A focus on Nacee's Yewo Nyame A Yewo Adze. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Culture*, 9(3), 102-110.
- Otchere, E. D., & Dordzroi, J. D. (2020). Popular emotions in popular music: the highlife experience. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 7(3), 76.
- Asirifi, A., Komla Gene, S., Anane, J., & Fauzi Rahman, S. (2023). Music and its impact on socio-moral values in contemporary Ghana: The case of Ashanti people of Kumasi. *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, 6(10), 613-624. <u>https://doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v6i10.1645</u>

Learning on Location

• Guest Speaker: death in Highlife or Hiplife music

Assignment:

- 1st Dispatch according to the production schedule
- Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

## Session 8: Dark Tourism II, Ghana

Learn about the present by learning about the past through UNESCO heritage sites that memorialize the Atlantic Slave Trade. Memory, memorialization, monetization. Recognition and reckoning.

**Required Texts:** 

 Mowatt, R. A., & Chancellor, C. H. (2011). Visiting death and life: Dark tourism and slave castles. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38(4), 1410–1434. <u>https://doiorg.reference.sit.edu/10.1016/j.annals.2011.03.012</u>

### Assignment

• Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

# MODULE #3: INDONESIA

In Indonesia, traditional and contemporary artists and creators mediate life and death through their craft, informed by their diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds.

# Session 9: Our Business is Death II: Indonesia

Different cultures, different perspectives, similar work.

**Required Texts:** 

Mas'amah, Adu, A. A., Bunga, B. N., Liem, A., & Kiling, I. Y. (2023). Death, funeral rituals, and stigma: Perspectives from mortuary workers and bereaved families. *Pastoral Psychology*, 72(2), 305–316. <u>https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1007/s11089-022-01053-9</u>

Learning on Location:

• Guest speaker, mortuary worker or other death care professional

Assignment:

- 2nd Dispatch according to the production schedule
- Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

# Session 10: The Horror of Death

Popular culture is an active space for imagining death and its possible meanings. This session focuses on the intersection of death, grief, and horror narratives across media film and and video games.

Required Texts:

- Davis, C. S., & Crane, J. L. (2015). A Dialogue with (un)death: Horror films as a discursive attempt to construct a relationship with the dead. *Journal of Loss & Trauma*, 20(5), 417–429. <u>https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/15325024.2014.935215</u>
- Kocurek, C.A. (2015). Who hearkens to the monster's scream? Death, violence and the veil of the monstrous in video games, *Visual Studies*, 30:1, 79-89, DOI: 10.1080/1472586X.2015.996402
- Noer, A. R. (2021). We choose what to fear in Indonesian horror cinema. Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Communication & Business (ICCB 2021), Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3900259 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3900259
- Sutandio, A. (2023) The final girls in contemporary Indonesian horror films: reclaiming women's power. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 10:1, 2186593. <u>https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2186593</u>

Recommended Texts:

- Millar, B., & Lee, J. (2021). Horror films and grief. *Emotion Review*, 13(3), 171–182. <u>https://doi.org/10.1177/17540739211022815</u>
- Adiprasetio, J., & Winda Larasati, A. (2023). Deconstructing *Pocong*, the Indonesian sacred ghost: A diachronic analysis of Mumun (2022), Indonesian contemporary horror film. *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, 1–20. <u>https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/10509208.2023.2230116</u>

Learning on Location

• Movie Night @ Puri. Indonesian horror film with English subtitles.

Assignment

• Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

# Session 11: The Art of Death in Balinese Traditional Arts

Artistic renderings of death reflect cultural and philosophical interpretations of what it means to die. This session examines how death informs artistic expression and how artists represent death.

**Required Texts:** 

• articles provided by local faculty

Learning on Location

- Visit with local artists to learn about their craft and the theme of death in their work.
- Students will also have the opportunity to create their own memento mori.

Assignment:

- 3rd Dispatch according to the production schedule
- Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

# MODULE #4: MEXICO

Mexico's death culture is so unique and omnipresent that it is easily associated with national identity. At least for tourism purposes. We will continue our study of how death is imagined, practiced, and memorialized in a country that ranks high on death literacy.

## Session 12: Dark Tourism III, Mexico

This session continues our exploration of dark tourism as we investigate the economic benefits, ethical dilemmas, and complexities of the dark tourism industry in Mexico.

Required Texts:

- Hasian, M. A., Maldonado, J. A., & Ono, K. A. (2015). Thanatourism, caminata nocturna, and the complex geopolitics of Mexico's Parque EcoAlberto. Southern Communication Journal, 80(4), 311–330. <u>https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/1041794X.2015.1043138</u>
- Speakman, M. (2019), "Dark tourism consumption in Mexico City: a new perspective of the thanatological experience." *Journal of Tourism Analysis: Revista de Análisis Turístico*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 152-168. <u>https://doi.org/10.1108/JTA-09-2018-0028</u>

Assignments:

- 4th Dispatch according to the production schedule
- Interviews with a Deathworker (final submission date)
- Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

# Session 13: A Taste of Death, Funeral Food

Oaxacan cuisine has a well-deserved global reputation for its complex flavors and contemporary interpretations of traditional preparations. This extends to its funeral food. This session is all about the importance of food in Mexican funerary customs.

**Required Texts:** 

- Cann, C.K. (2018). *Dying to Eat : Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Food, Death, and the Afterlife*. The University Press of Kentucky.
  - Starters: The Role of Food in Bereavement and Memorialization
  - Chapter 3: Sweetening Death: Shifting Landscapes of the Role of Food in Grief and Mourning
- Video: Caitlin Doughty. (2021). Funeral Foods From Around the World. <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K50lcPuB8Zk&ab\_channel=CaitlinDoughty</u>

Learning on Location

• Cooking class

Assignment:

- 5th Dispatch according to the production schedule
- Challenges, according to sign-up sheet

## Session 14: Our Business is Death III

Even the culturally death literate need support in having conversations about death and developing good grief allyship skills.

Required Texts:

- Miles, L., & Corr, C. A. (2017). Death cafe: What is it and what we can learn from it. Omega: Journal of Death & Dying, 75(2), 151–165. <u>https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1177/0030222815612602</u>
- Caroline Lloyd. (2018). Grief Demystified : An Introduction. Jessica Kingsley Publishers
  - Chapter 1: What Is Grief?
  - Chapter 2: What Do You Say to the Bereaved?

Learning on Location

• Conversations with an End-of-Life Doula

Assignments:

- Prepare to Die: Repeat the Death Literacy Index and "Your Final Checklist" and write a memo in which you compare the results from weeks 1 and 13, evaluate your progress in meeting your goals, and outline how you will continue to strengthen your death literacy skills after the program concludes
- Prepare to Die: Draft "Your Emotional Will" and reflect on the process of composing it