

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

Death has become removed from much of our social lives and only ever returns as an intruder. This course reacquaints you on friendlier terms. Every story about death is secretly just a love story of practices taken to care about another person – and the ability to understand death is the ability to greater undertake those actions. This interdisciplinary seminar examines the humanistic, social, and economic value of death while supporting death literacy. Students will look at extended deathways that bodies undergo and how these intertwine mourners, social institutions, environments, regulatory bodies, deathcare workers, and the bonds of a community. Students will also explore themes of aging, emotion, symbolism, and the dead body –acquiring basic knowledges ranging from end-of-life planning to grief allyship and osteological forensics. Through these multipronged lines of inquiry, the course will equip students with greater death literacy and the ability to carry on informed conversations about death back home.

Learning Outcomes

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

- Trace out the mortuary processes departed persons undergo in different communities
- Uncover the workings of death professionals behind the scenes
- Widen the range of emotionalities that revolve around death
- 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

Tracing Deathways 60%

Prepare to Die, Death Literacy Portfolio 30%

Participation 10%

Tracing Deathways: Many people experience death as the termination of a person. However, death rites do not begin and end at death, and social death does not always accord to biological death. In this assignment, students will trace out the “life of death” of the dead body. Students will examine the greater “deathway” or steps a body or person goes through in the process of dying for each host country. Students will outline a deathway of interest from each country, and present it in written, idea-map, or flowchart form. Students will link the important death professionals involved in each step of the deathway. Finally, students will write a 150-250 word reflection on the “life of death” around the dead body, determine the practice most instrumental in defining a “Good Death”, and provide a rationale why. One deathway will be completed for each country (4 @ 15%)

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 Death Literacy Institute and The Groundswell Project to reinforce death literacy and support end-of-life planning. (30%)

Week 1:

- **Part 1: Death Literacy Self-Assessments (5%)**
 - Week 1: Complete the [Death Literacy Index](#) and write a one page memo in which you set personal learning goals for the semester.

- **Part 2: Advance Directive Forms (10%)**

- Search for the Advanced Directives for your state. Advance Directives are legal documents that allow you to communicate your end-of-life care decisions ahead of time. In the US, these often vary by state and require notary to complete. Human Services departments of the State Government should have a list of these documents available for download.
- Complete relevant portions of these forms and include in your package. Forms may (but won't necessarily) include:
- Draft an "[Emotional Will](#)" and include in the package.
 - Living Will
 - Do-Not-Resuscitate (**Optional**)
 - Designation of Health Care Agent or Medical Power of Attorney
 - Statutory Durable Power of Attorney
 - Declaration of Mental Health Treatment
 - Other state specific forms

Week 13:

- **Part 3: Death Literacy Self-Assessments (Revisited) (5%)**
 - Repeat the [Death Literacy Index](#) and write a memo comparing 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. Upload a short 1-page outline of your reflection and death literacy plan.
- **Part 4: Emotional Will (10%)**
 - Draft an "[Emotional Will](#)" and include in the package.

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.

Grading Scale

94-100%	A
90-93%	A-
87-89%	B+
84-86%	B
80-83%	B-

77-79%	C+
74-76%	C
70-73%	C-
67-69%	D+
64-66%	D
below 64	F

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 [Library resources and research support](#), [Disability Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) 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.

Readings Key:

Required Text – This reading will be part of a class discussion

Recommended Text – This reading reinforces and clarifies a site visit or guest lecture

Further Reading – This reading expands on topics that may relate to individual student interests

Reference – This reading is a classic work or database whose content may be referenced in class

MODULE #1: NEW YORK, NY

Session 1: Rise of Death Denial

Death denial, death anxiety, death avoidance, sequestration of death – what is it? Death is in crises in the Global North and many people are searching for the reasons behind the abnormality and a new way forward. Death denial is a cultural production arising from historical practices around death and dying that continue into the present. Death denial is the central concept that drives a move towards healthier deathways and the formation of the critical death studies field. This session will look at the onset of death denial in history and explore other ways of death that have existed in the American past.

Recommended Texts:

- Shannon Lee Dawdy (2021) - American Afterlives: Reinventing Death in the 21st Century (pp 10-19)

Further Reading:

- Walter, T. (2019). The pervasive dead. *Mortality*, 24(4), 389-404.
- Deetz and Dethlefsen 1967 - Death's Head, Cherub, Urn and Willow

Session 2: History of Death in New York

This sessions explores the death care industry, formal death practices, and history of death in New York to form a foundation for comparison and synthesis in cross-cultural death studies. Much of this history will be taught through cemeteries. "Cemetery" captures a wide variety of spaces and purposes in the history of New York: from public gathering places, to solemn religious grounds, to the domain of grave robbers and ghosts, to one of the greatest tourist attractions in the country. This session will look at the history of New York through its cemeteries and how urban development was very often driven by death.

Recommended Texts:

- Why the Brooklyn Queens Border is Filled with Dead People? *New York Times*
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/27/nyregion/why-the-brooklyn-queens-border-is-full-of-dead-people.html>
- Baugher and Winter 1983 Early American Gravestones - Three cemeteries in New York
<https://archive.archaeology.org/8309/etc/gravestones.html>

Learning on Location

- Lower Manhattan Cemeteries
- Green-wood Cemetery

Session 3: 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. This session will also overview the basics of end-of-life planning in the American deathcare system, and introduce students to an array of death professionals and death literacy advocates that can aid in their quest for a better life of death.

Recommended:

- Death over Dinner: <https://deathverdinner.org>
- 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. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/07481187.2021.1894268>
- 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. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1177/0030222815612602>

Learning on Location

- Death over Dinner with guest chaplains
- Guest Speaker – End of Life Choices talk from the Association on Aging in New York
- Conversations with a Death Doula

MODULE #2: GHANA

Session 4: Culture and Death Industry in Accra

Death in Accra will make you rethink old tropes of how the modern interfaces with the traditional. Accra hosts funerary institutions that accommodate and bolster the cultural practices they serve. As a regional home to the Ga community, Ga rites are also sites of teaching new generations and sites not only of death rite but death learning. This session will look at the deathways of Accra to understand how death rite becomes an expression of a culture, and a place where communities and cultures reproduce themselves. It will also introduce students to new private and public emotionalities surrounding death rite.

Recommended:

- Bonetti, R. (2019). Living coffins and death among the Ga of Ghana. In *Death across cultures: Death and dying in non-western cultures* (pp. 167-192). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Further Readings:

- Video: Coffins with Character (1998). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqW1emGq_So&t=28s&ab_channel=JourneymanPictures
- Video: The Dancing Pallbearers of Ghana. (2021) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_apjp1hZM&ab_channel=VICE

- Potocnik, M., & Adum-Kyeremeh, K. (2022). Transformation of Ga death and funeral rites in Accra, Ghana. *Africa Today* 68(3), 89-106. <https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.68.3.05>.

Learning on Location

- Transitions Funeral Home
- Ga Funeral
- Fantasy Coffin-maker
- Guest Speaker – Deathcare policies by Dr. Twrefour

Session 5: Community-Building and Political Economies of Death

Kumasi is the cultural hub of Ghana and capital of the Asante homeland. Weekend funerals are must attend events as people funeral-hop and swell the crowds that honor the dead. Death can diverge between celebrations of life for departing elders to honor-bound rites for the tragic passings of the young. Asante funerals are where community bonds are strengthened but not without immense costs – some of which people are happy to pay and some of which they must. Students will examine a different kind of deathway in Kumasi that brings people together with spectacle orchestrated in service for both the dead and the living.

Recommended Texts:

- Adinkrah, M. (2022). “If you die a bad death, we give you a bad burial:” Mortuary practices and “bad death” among the Akan in Ghana. *Death Studies*, 46(3), 695–707. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/07481187.2020.1762264>
- Boateng, A. (2012). Socio-economic transformation of Akan funeral rites in Ghana: The changing process. *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*, 65(4), 281–297. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.2190/OM.65.4.c>

Learning on Location

- Funeral in Kumasi
- Guest Speaker – Funerals in Ghana by Mustapha

Session 6: Continuing Bonds

Griefwork in death studies has undergone major shifts in understanding within the past few decades. While originally a Western-centric model of achieving “closure”, interjections from researchers of other cultural backgrounds have emphasized the importance of death rites in

transforming relationships – many of which continue long after death. However, such continuing bonds do not always end in healthy relationships with the dead but could represent hauntings and pathologies. This session will explore griefwork and grief allyship and interrogate how they may become culturally rooted.

Required Texts:

- Klass, D., & Steffen, E. M. (2017). "Continuing bonds in bereavement". *New directions for research and practice*. (Selections)

Recommended Texts:

- Parkinson, Brian. "Emotions are social." *British journal of psychology* 87.4 (1996): 663-683.

Further Reading:

- Chiao, J. Y., Harada, T., Komeda, H., Li, Z., Mano, Y., Saito, D., ... & Iidaka, T. (2009). Neural basis of individualistic and collectivistic views of self. *Human brain mapping*, 30(9), 2813-2820.
- Chiao, J., Li, S. C., Seligman, R., & Turner, R. (Eds.). (2015). *The Oxford handbook of cultural neuroscience*. Oxford University Press. (Introduction)
- Cheon, B. K., Im, D. M., Harada, T., Kim, J. S., Mathur, V. A., Scimeca, J. M., ... & Chiao, J. Y. (2013). Cultural modulation of the neural correlates of emotional pain perception: the role of other-focusedness. *Neuropsychologia*, 51(7), 1177-1186.
- Immordino-Yang, M. H., & Yang, X. F. (2017). Cultural differences in the neural correlates of social-emotional feelings: An interdisciplinary, developmental perspective. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 17, 34-40.

Reference Texts

- Kopytoff, I. (1971). Ancestors as Elders in Africa. *Africa*, 41(2), 129-142.

MODULE #3: MEXICO

Note:

Fall students will observe the Day of the Dead in Oaxaca

Spring students travel to Mexico City and study archaeological/ancestral sites

Session 7: Death and Culture in Mexico

Mexico is said to have three totems: the Virgin the Guadalupe, Benito Juarez, and Death. Death cultures in Mexico are vibrant and numerous, but share a common attitude of an intimate familiarity with death. These unique death cultures of Mexico derive from its unique history – from the survival of indigenous lifeways, to the need to organize communities during the Mexican revolution, and the works of artists and poets in the early 20th century. Death has become diffuse throughout Mexican culture and not restricted to clinical spaces. Mexico provides an opportunity to examine cultural systems defined by marked anti death denial. Students will explore how death is talked about in Mexico and its deep integration with Mexican National Culture.

Required Texts:

- Lomnitz, C. (2005). *Death and the idea of Mexico*. Zone Books. Chapter 1
- Brandes, S. (2003). Is there a Mexican view of death?. *Ethos*, 31(1), 127-144.

Learning on Location

- Death and Dying in Mexico by Nadia and Gustavo

Session 8: Deathways in City and Community

Deathways in Mexico vary by region, cultural context, and even by differences in city and community life. Deathways in Oaxaca city and other urban centers may diverge from those of the numerous autonomous communities who exemplify resistance-as-culture. Autonomous communities like Guelatao prize counter-hierarchical social structure and healthy deathways are manifestations of good governance – they are part of how the community serves its citizens. Central to this is the question of how deaths become personalized and how they are part of shared community systems. This session will compare the deathways and their wide support systems through two examples in the Oaxaca region.

Learning on Location

- Death in Guelatao – Gustavo and Nadia
- Guest Speaker (Paola) – Death in Oaxaca City

Session 9: Art, Symbols, and Ancestral Deathways

Mexico is home to not one culture but many. The histories of these cultures come together but must also be recognized as distinct strands with their own character and ways of death.

Students will visit the ancestral sites to modern Mexico and Zapotec cultures. Students will also learn about how deathways of the ancient past are incorporate into the death cultures of today. Finally, students will examine ancient examples of death-becoming-culture with the emergence of butterfly and bird iconography for the reincarnating dead.

Recommended Readings:

- Winter, M. (2002). "Monte Albán: Mortuary Practices as Domestic Ritual and Their Relation to Community Religion." *Domestic Ritual in Ancient Mesoamerica*.

Reference Readings (for more background on the archaeology):

- Wilkinson, R. G., & Norelli, R. J. (1981). A biocultural analysis of social organization at Monte Albán. *American Antiquity*, 46(4), 743-758.
- Joyce, R. A., Rodriguez-Shadow, M. J., Plunket, P., Winter, M., & Lopez, C. M. (1994). On Engendering Monte Alban Tomb 7. *Current anthropology*, 35(3), 284-287.
- Perez-Florez, M. (2024). A Teotihuacano in Monte Alban. *Mesoamerican Osteobiographies: Revealing the Lives and Deaths of Ancient Individuals*
- de León, R. H. P., Feinman, G. M., García, N. M. R., Nicholas, L. M., Allier, J. L. R., & Celis, P. G. R. (2017). Differences in the classic period mortuary treatment of adults and children in the Valley of Oaxaca. *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, 13, 744-750.

Learning on Location:

- Mitla
- Monte Alban
- Teotihuacan (Spring)
- Forensics/Osteology Workshop (Spring)

MODULE #4: INDONESIA

Session 10: Deathways of Indonesia

Death in Indonesia is as diverse as its islands and people. From Balinese cremation ceremonies to Torajan funerals, death practices across Indonesia reinforce community and cultural identities. In many cases, the line separating life and death is permeable, as evidenced in contemporary practices handling the death body and represented through traditional arts. Deathways in Indonesia are diverse because the intersections of social life are diverse – religious belief, community obligation, individual roles, and economy.

Students will examine different manifestations of these social currents through an examination of death rites from multiple communities.

Learning on Location

- Surabaya Cemeteries
- Trunyan Cemeteries
- Guest Speaker – Cremation in Bali with High Priest

Further Reading:

- The Bali Times. (2015). Mepasah, Funeral Tradition of Trunyan Village. <https://www.thebalitimes.com/travel-culture/mepasah-funeral-tradition-of-trunyan-village/>
- Ottino, A. (1994). Origin myths, hierarchical order, and the negotiation of status in the Balinese village of Trunyan. *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde*, (3de Afl), 481-517.
- Jero, N. W. J., Lochan, A., Surpi, N. K., & Seriadi, S. L. N. (2025). Corpse exposure and cosmological ecology: Ritual, space, and death in an indigenous mortuary landscape. *Life and Death: Journal of Eschatology*, 3(1), 15-28.

Session 11: Forensics and the Departed Body

The earliest ethnographies on post-mortem death rites come from Java, Indonesia. These early accounts foreground the role of post-mortem processing, or the continued manipulation of and engagement with dead bodies long after departure and initial funerary service. As expected from this history, Indonesia also has a more strongly developed forensic tradition. Here, students will encounter the work of forensic scientists and learn about the decomposition of the human body in relation to burial rites.

Required Readings:

- Knüsel, C. J., & Robb, J. (2016). Funerary taphonomy: An overview of goals and methods. *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, 10, 655-673.

Further Readings:

- Knudson, K. J., & Stojanowski, C. M. (2008). New directions in bioarchaeology: Recent contributions to the study of human social identities. *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 16(4), 397-432.
- Robb, J., & Harris, O. J. (Eds.). (2013). *The body in history: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the future*. Cambridge University Press. (Selections
- Robb, J., Inskip, S. A., Cessford, C., Dittmar, J., Kivisild, T., Mitchell, P. D., ... & Scheib, C. (2019). Osteobiography: the history of the body as real bottom-line history. *Bioarchaeology international*, 3(1), 16.

Learning on Location:

- Forensics Lab at Airlangga University

Session 12: The Deathcycle of Tana Toraja

Tana Toraja is famous for its elaborate death cultures that involve not only animal sacrifices but the display of human remains as part of lengthy extended deathways. These deathways incorporate heavy post-mortem social traditions where the dead are reincorporated into living communities at multiple points. They are also exceedingly costly, which means they may drive the entire lives, livelihoods, and social interactions of Torajan people. Students will learn about Torajan death practices and explore the deeper social negotiations that inspire them.

Required Texts:

- Selections from *Life and Death: The Lost Culture*

Learning on Location

- Tana Toraja sites
 - Pasilliran
 - Batu Lemo
 - Tampang Allo
 - Rambu Solo
 - Loko Mata