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Cultural and Social History Special Issue

Distant Communications: Beyond Death

The death of distance. No borders. The placeless society. The global village. The shrinking world. Anything, anywhere, anytime.¹

Writing in the 1990s, H. Couclelis suggested that the present technological era had created the 'death of distance'.² Writing after rapid developments in print and telecommunications during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Couclelis's argument was also made prior to widespread access to the internet, a phenomenon which has again changed the ways we experience and perceive space, time and place. Mobile phones, video conferencing, and the age of email have made communications almost immediate, with people able to speak to each other across the world at the touch of a button – and a good Wi-Fi connection. This theory of the 'death of distance' appears to be even more relevant than when it was first proposed.

Has distance truly died? For in many ways, modern societies are more distant than ever before. Individuals apart from one another can interact with each other almost instantaneously, but this does not necessarily negate the feelings of distance, with video

¹ H. Couclelis, "The Death of Distance," *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 23, no. 4, (1996): 387-389, 387. 'The death of distance' originated with F. Cairncross, "The death of distance: a survey of telecommunications," *The Economist* 336, no. 7934, (1995): 5-28.

² *Ibid.*

calling not able to fully replace emotional and physical needs and desires.³ Concerns over miscommunications, worries over the health and wellbeing of loved ones out of sight still exist within modern societies.⁴ Online, there is still the issue of language barriers, with the most common shared language, English, only being understood by 15% of the world's population.⁵ This is complicated by the emergence of distance or social media languages, with some, such as emojis and other forms of text, having slippery meanings that can both help and hinder communications.⁶ Some societies are not part of these technological developments, through choice, coercion or poverty.⁷ Distance still exists and is an integral part of distant communications.

This special issue explores the timely theme of 'distant communications' but from a very specific vantage point. It draws on perspectives of the dead, the bereaved, and the grieving, to consider how perceptions about death and the 'afterlife' reflect understandings about distance, time, space, and separation. In light of recent events and the ongoing digitalisation of life and rapid changes in communication, continuing to explore the history of distance, the way we communicate, and the effects this has on social and cultural responses to death, advances our understandings of human relationships in life and in death, and the intersections between these two states, in many ways. Interdisciplinary in scope, with methodologies ranging from social and cultural history, media studies, anthropology, and literary theory to

³ Carman Neustaedter and Saul Greenberg, 'Sharing Living, Experiences, and Intimacy over Video Chat in Long Distance Relationships', in Neustaedter, C., Harrison, S., Sellen, A. ed., *Connecting Families*, (London: Springer, 2013): 37-53.

⁴ See R. Edwards, B.T. Bybee, J. K. Frost, J. K. Harvey, & M. Navarro, 'That's not what I meant: How misunderstanding is related to channel and perspective-taking', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 36, 2 (2017): 188-210.

⁵ James Curran, Natalie Fenton, Des Freedman, *Misunderstanding the Internet*, 2nd Ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016): 8.

⁶ Hannah Miller, Daniel Kluver, Jacob Thebault Spieker, Loren Terveen, and Brent Hecht, 'Understanding Emoji Ambiguity in Context: The Role of Text in Emoji-Related Miscommunication', *Proceedings of the Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 11,1 (2017): 152-161

⁷ James Curran, Natalie Fenton, Des Freedman, *Misunderstanding the Internet*, 2nd Ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016): 7-8.

material culture and visual analysis, and death studies, the issue uncovers a new and integrated relationship between distance, communication, and death. The articles examine responses to death and the afterlife in different social and cultural contexts, ultimately asking how and why we continue to ‘speak’ to the dead, as well as probe the ways they continue to speak to us. As an issue, the questions we ask relate to so-called ‘Western’ predominantly Anglo-phone, Christian cultures of communication ‘beyond death’. We recognise and appreciate that many non Judeao-Christian belief systems in global contexts have deeply entrenched and enduring ideas and ‘deathways’ which exist upon an intricate communicative relationship with the dead, as well as ancestors, and spirits, for example.⁸ This is a rich and relatively neglected area of study in the intersecting fields of death studies and death histories, and we encourage further insights to emerge from these articles as a point of departure, but it is not our primary focus. The key issue at stake in our issue is, rather, to show that ‘western’ cultures we have so quickly consigned to unhelpful and rigid organising categories of ‘secular’, ‘modern’, ‘agnostic’ and ‘scientific’ are actually strongly revealing of manifold micro-interactions with the deceased in everyday contexts, that do not immediately align with these categories, and which strict divisions between societies of the ‘living’ and of the ‘dead’ cannot account for.⁹

⁸ Particularly prominent examples include the First Nations Peoples of the Americas and Oceania. For the North American context, see Gerry R. Cox, *Sociology of Death and the American Indian* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022). For the Australian context, see Katie Glaskin *et al.* *Mortality, Mourning and Mortuary Practices in Indigenous Australia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008). See also, more generally for historical global perspectives, Erik R Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010). There are also hundreds of various cultures, peoples, ‘tribes’, communities and religions which have their own connections and relationships with the dead, outside of the hegemonic western understandings of death, which we do not have space to list here.

⁹ For examples of studies which set out this western view of death and mourning, see See Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and Family in England, 1480-1750* (London: Clarendon Press, 2000) and Phillipe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1976).

Distance can be a positive experience, as it can be productive for encouraging actors to actively create opportunities for intimacy within relationships and forces time and space to be dedicated to regular communications. The effort of long-distance relationships can sometimes mean that care and feeling are more actively rather than passively received. Whilst there are numerous studies attesting to this historically, it is only truly turning to the attention of historians now to make these connections between past communication methods and present societies, with scholarship on modern communications largely sitting within media, communications, and computer science.¹⁰

With these ideas around distance in mind, we turn our attention to an area which merits further discussion in relation to distant communications: death, the deceased and human relationships surrounding these two interconnected entities. We suggest that where distance does remain, most enduringly, over time is in, and through, death. The articles here investigate the various aspects of this dynamic between death and distance through memory, materiality, relationships, and the supernatural as they pertain to the development of understandings of death and existential distances in ‘western’ societies and culture. As William Merrill Decker has stated, communication tools, such as letters, offer ‘practitioners the means to cultivate intimate relations across space and to affirm a continuing distant presence under conditions of mutual absence’.¹¹ ‘Mutual’ has particular relevance for us in

¹⁰ For an example of a historical analysis of anxieties surrounding distant communication see Rachel Bynoth ‘A Mother Educating her Daughter Remotely through Familial Correspondence: The Letter as a Form of Female Distance Education in the Eighteenth Century’, *History*, 106, 373, (2021), pp. 727-750. For media and communication studies, see James Curran, Natalie Fenton, Des Freedman, *Misunderstanding the Internet*, 2nd Ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); R. Edwards, B.T. Bybee, J. K. Frost, J. K. Harvey, & M. Navarro, ‘That’s not what I meant: How misunderstanding is related to channel and perspective-taking’, *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 36, 2, (2017): 188-210; S.L. Storch and A.V. Ortiz Juarez-Paz, ‘The Role of mobile devices in 21st-century family communication’, *Mobile Media and Communication* 7, 2 (2019): 248-264; Gary M. Olson & Judith S. Olson, ‘Distance Matters’, *Human-Computer Interaction* 15, 2-3, (2000): 139-178.

¹¹ William Merrill Decker, “Longing in Long-Distance Letters: The Nineteenth Century and Now,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Letters and Letter-Writing*, eds. Celeste-Marie Bernier, Judie Newman and Matthew Pethers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016): 147-167, 147.

our study of distant communications in death. Death is often an undesired absence, a forced separation between the living. Life has ended and bodies decay, relationships end. Our set of articles offers points of departure with which to consider how individuals, both alive and dead, seek ways to be distantly present and mutually absent in society both in this life and the beyond.

In particular, this issue interrogates the relationship between distance and death further. In what ways, for example, has distance shaped societies and how does it continue to do so in the modern era? Is distance enlarged, extended, ‘stretched’, or more pervasive in death or in the experience of the death of the self and others? Have various communication technologies of the past and present bridged distance or have they exacerbated distance felt between human beings? In returning to these questions about Couclelis’s ‘death of distance’ from a new perspective, this issue introduces the inverse ‘distance of death’ to make sense of some of the impacts of distance on human relationships with the dead, and their experiences of dying and death.

Death is often conceived as a finite separation in western societies, an unbridgeable and final parting with human life. Our issue challenges us to consider a social and cultural history of communications with the dead that grapple with various distances. For us, distance is a multifaceted concept, relating not only to geographical and physical distance but also emotional and cultural distance in the sense that one is separated or absent or ‘disconnected’ from someone or something. We seek to understand the experiences of individuals and communities in the past who have engaged in meaningful communication with the dead and in doing so overcome distance. We pay close attention to the continuation of conversations between the living into death, and conversations between the living and the dead. The issue

proposes that a history of communications between the dead and the living, and amongst the living about death and the dead, can reveal new insights into social and cultural issues from the early modern period to the present day. Our articles present different, new, and original types of communication with the dead, through letters, objects, texts, shrines, and other sources which complicate our relationship with the dead. Death is not as finite as we have perhaps been led to assume. Indeed, most accounts rest upon Whiggish narratives of the gradual but unpreventable march towards the divorce of living society from that of the dead.¹² Our issue suggests that beyond the popular, sensational and identifiable ouija boards, crystal balls, and phantasmagoria, communicating to and with the dead occurs in everyday life in a number of forms and channels, and the voices of the dead are stitched into the fabric of daily life.¹³

Distant communications have historically generated different modes of social and cultural interaction. Writing letters, circulating texts, reporting news, sending gifts, and transacting business and trade, have all worked to negotiate temporal and geographical distances throughout time. Communication technologies have what media theorists call ‘disembedding’ functions that shift people, ideas and materials away from the local, linking them up to different and ‘larger’ kinds of ‘time-space distances’. Yet alternatively, they can also facilitate the continuation and maintenance of more intimate relationships and new forms of interiority across time and space.¹⁴

¹² See Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and Family in England* and Ariès, *Western Attitudes Towards Death*.

¹³ For studies which examine Spirituality, especially in its golden era of c.1870-1945, in relation to western attitudes towards death, see Georgina Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England, 1850-1939* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010) and Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Graham Murdock, “Communications and the constitution of modernity,” *Media, Culture and Society* 14 (1993): 521–539, 529, 534; see Murdock also for the ‘disembedding’ concept: Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1984).

Historians have shown how communications associated with bereavement and broader death cultures were not solely literary or textual, but could also be oral, visual or material, depending on cultural, religious, class, economic or social status.¹⁵ Material objects have long been important stimuli for emotions associated with death and human responses to it, within a variety of cultures. Shrines, gravestones, tablets, memorials and items buried in graves themselves can proffer a physical and tangible plane between the living and the dead, giving death and the dead ‘visibility’.¹⁶ Nineteenth-century photography could elongate human bonds beyond the period of a life, freezing memories of the dead to be returned to or revisited over time. Portraits of the dead continue to exercise agency in families often through family photographs and albums, becoming ‘important to larger family narratives’, family identity, and the way families reckon with their history and origins.¹⁷

What perhaps has not been fully conceptualised is the means through which specific social and cultural experiences, such as death and mourning, are shaped through distance and distant communications. There is further work to do to understand how the science, spirituality, and culture around death and mortality, in multiple cultures, religions and communities globally, as well as human emotional responses to our own and others’ mortality, are produced out of the desire to overcome distance; to move into, speak with, or experience ‘the beyond’.

¹⁵ Julie Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2001): 6-7.

¹⁷ Stanley B. Burns and Elizabeth A. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty II Grief, Bereavement and the Family in Memorial Photography American and European Traditions* (New York: Burns Archive Press, 2002); Racheal Harris, *Photography and Death: Framing Death throughout History* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2020): 12; Katie Barclay and Nina Javette Koefoed, ‘Family, Memory, and Identity: An Introduction’, *Journal of Family History* 46, no. 1 (2020): 3-12.

Whilst we recognise that there are various cultures and religions across the world that have a much closer relationship with the deceased, especially through, for example, strong ancestral and ritualistic bonds, here, we begin this work by considering how within the Western World, in particular, humans have both removed or distanced death from social and cultural life and most importantly, how they bring it back into focus in everyday life, navigating the distances surrounding death and the ‘afterlife’, to re-engage the dead. As Douglas Davies notes, ‘until very recently, most civilisations have speculated about a life after death, expressing discontent with the everyday world of mortality and describing alternative environments into which they believe people pass when they die’.¹⁸ ‘Imperialist’ notions of progress and scientific advancement have largely created a rupture over time as ‘western’ and European societies in the modern period go to ever greater lengths to discard the traditional modes of ‘communicating’ with the dead in everyday life.¹⁹ Twentieth and twenty-first-century processes surrounding increased bureaucracy, secularisation, ‘modernisation’ and ‘medicalisation’ meant that death gradually became ‘taboo’, ‘*hidden* or even *forbidden*’ and ‘removed from the family, church and community and processed instead by impersonal functionaries’.²⁰ Yet the issue complicates this neat decisive narrative of a gradual detachment from death and the dead in the ‘modern’ world, using communication as a lens on which to view societies, groups and individuals who maintain regular or everyday attachments with the dead. Through historical analysis, it asks how the dead or dying have been viewed, presented and dealt with in the past, and how the dead have ‘spoken back’, maintaining an often eery, sometimes comforting, presence in the lives of the living and

¹⁸ Douglas Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017 [1997]): 99.

¹⁹ Douglas Davies, *A Brief History of Death* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005): 56.

²⁰ Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death* (London: Routledge, 1994): 9-22, 23.

demanding to be felt, heard, imagined in the very societies where they have believed to be most silenced or ‘suppressed’.

Indeed, there is a large and rich field of death studies that investigates how death has been experienced over time and where or in what ways this overlaps with the emergence of ‘modernity’. Traditionally historians have made use of typical timelines that stress an early modern ‘memento mori’ culture of fixation and fear around death, which developed into a nineteenth-century Victorian glorification of death and intensification of mourning rituals, petering out to a twentieth-century, modernistic repression or ‘denial of death’, in line with the rise of science, secularisation, and the decline of religion as just mentioned.²¹ Revised studies challenge or provoke questions about the usefulness of these neat and linear theories of the progress of secularisation. They account for different belief systems, the ‘re-enchantment’ of the modern age, and the importance of various spiritualist movements in sharpening and re-organising human relationships to the dead. Indeed emerging work has revealed how spiritualism and mysticism, and other modes of connecting ‘the beyond’, have been part of the way societies handle and approach issues and anxieties associated with modern life or technological or social change.²² Here the authors continue these threads, invoking the idea that death can provide opportunities for developing and testing new forms of social interaction. Death can offer opportunities to say what needs to be said, to finally

²¹ Hannah Malone, “New Life in the Modern Cultural History of Death,” *The Historical Journal* 62, no. 3 (2019): 833–52, 833–836; Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death Over the Last One Thousand Years*, trans. Helen Weaver (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983); James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004 [2000]); David Cannadine, “War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain,” in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981): 187–242.

²² George M. Johnson, *Mourning and Mysticism in First World War Literature and Beyond: Grappling with Ghosts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 7; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Rachel Patrick, “Speaking across the borderline: Intimate connections, grief and spiritualism in the letters of Elizabeth Stewart during the first world war,” *History Australia* 10, no. 3 (2013): 109–128; Marina Warner *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

express long-held feelings or unspeakable thoughts, to air grievances and settle conflicts, all of which find expression and meaning through distant communications.²³

Part of this task is scoping out the various technologies and mediums that individuals and societies have used to make death more manageable, and to visualise, interpret and grapple with death, the dead, and the 'beyond'.²⁴ Through history, art history, death studies and media and communication studies, we have a clear understanding of how some people and groups have previously responded and continue to respond to death differently, how they perform and channel grief through forms of commemoration, memory-making, ritual and other modes of creative expression. Mourning has traditionally been sentimentalised in modern Western societies, structured around a set of ideals or expectations for mourners to be close, intimate, and united in a shared grief for the dead. With reference to separated, migrant or diasporic families, Laura Ishiguro, however, argues that it is important to recognise how distance is a 'fundamental part' of mourning rather than an obstacle or 'hindrance' to satisfying or fulfilling mourning practices.²⁵ Part of coming to terms with death is facing up to human mortality, confronting death as the 'ultimate' form of distance. Psychological, literary and material practices or tools have been developed over time as ways to exercise control over how we die and how we are remembered. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Drew Gilpin Faust, and Stephen Garton amongst others have suggested that grief, particularly that which is sudden or pathological, deeper and more prolonged, through experiences of war, suicide or violence, can be productive in the creation of material and textual culture.²⁶ A 'literature of

²³ Johnson, *Mourning and Mysticism in First World War Literature and Beyond*: 17.

²⁴ Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2001): 7.

²⁵ Laura Ishiguro, "How I wish I might be near: distance and the epistolary family in late nineteenth-century condolence letters," in *Within and Without the Nation: Canadian History as Transnational History*, eds. Karen Dubinsky, Adele Perry and Henry Yu (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015): 212–227, 219.

²⁶ Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, "'Broke in Spirits': Death, Depression, and Endurance through Writing," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 17, no. 2 (1996): 70–86; Stephen Garton, "The Scales of Suffering: Love, Death and Victorian Masculinity," *Social History* 27, no. 1 (2002): 40–58, 41, 48; Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of*

grief’ includes condolences and letters, and life-writing such as diaries or memoirs, providing outlets for individuals to seek solace, release emotions and bond with other mourners, but we also suggest that these documents attempt to forge pathways to the dead, to reach past death and find meaning in an ‘afterlife’.²⁷ Faust has suggested that the ‘bereaved struggle to separate themselves from the dead through ritual and mourning’.²⁸ The articles in this special issue argue that this is partially the case. The authors show that the dead were part of a close relationship of co-existence with the living. Their historical subjects were not separating themselves from death but utilising distant communications to render death imaginatively and physically palpable and present in the world of the living.

The physical environments, landscapes and architecture of cities, towns, villages are also built through society’s relationship with death, and the politics of these spaces draw from the memory of the dead in many ways. Thomas Laqueur, Judith Butler, and John Troyer, have demonstrated compellingly that politics determine who and how we grieve, that commemoration is a political act charged with ideas about nationality and belonging.²⁹ Distance and death was especially politicised in the way the British and wider European imperial regimes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, imported and imposed specific evangelical, bourgeois mourning rituals and ways of dealing with the dead in colonial contexts. In upholding these traditions around death, they could harbour and extend imperial myths about western superiority and morality, draw sharp lines of racial and cultural

Suffering: Death and the American Civil War (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 30; Alex Mayhew, “‘A War Imagined’: Postcards and the Maintenance of Long-Distance Relationships during the Great War,” *War in History* 28, no. 2 (2019): 301–332, 308; George M. Johnson, *Mourning and Mysticism in First World War Literature and Beyond: Grappling with Ghosts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

²⁷ Riney-Kehrberg, “Broke in Spirits”: 72.

²⁸ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*: xiv.

²⁹ Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); John Troyer, *Technologies of the Human Corpse* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

distinction and erase indigenous knowledge, tradition and ‘deathways’.³⁰ We also seek to show that different types of distances and the need to communicate across them, reinforce and strengthen people’s will to literarily, materially and psychologically connect with the dead, which we recognise also involves acts of racial and political inclusion and exclusion from dominant or national narratives of loss and grief.³¹

As the authors show, death leaves traces everywhere. It is the ‘residue’ and remnants of a life lived and of relationships made.³² As such the methodological possibilities for this special issue have been wide and varied, but we have tried to capture some of the most innovative approaches to the themes of distant communications and death through the following articles, to suggest how these two frameworks might best work together. As many scholars have explained, the potential problems of enquiring into the private or personal life of grief and loss is that it is ‘impossible to enter’, that communications and other texts are constructed or artificial forms, or otherwise entirely inaccessible in archives.³³ Here, authors Rosie Whitcombe and Jack Orchard work closely with the materials that do survive, unpacking language, structural devices and other epistolary conventions in letters, for instance, to suggest how the rituals and habits around writing could acquire new significance in or be shaped around death and attachments to the beyond. Clodagh Tait, and Ella Sbaraini and

³⁰ David Arnold, “Deathscapes: India in an Age of Romanticism and Empire, 1800–1856,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 26, no. 4 (2004): 339–53; David Arnold, *Burning the Dead: Hindu Nationhood and the Global Construction of Indian Tradition* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021); Lyndon Fraser, “Death in nineteenth-century Australia and New Zealand,” *History Compass* 15, no. 7 (2017): 1–14, 2; Harold Mytum, “Death and remembrance in the colonial context,” in *Archaeologies of the British: explorations of identity in Great Britain and its colonies, 1600–1945*, eds. Susan Lawrence (London: Routledge, 2003): 156–173; Robert Travers, “Death and the Nabob: Imperialism and Commemoration in Eighteenth-Century India,” *Past & Present* 196, no. 1 (2007): 83–124; Elizabeth Buettner, “Cemeteries, Public Memory and Raj Nostalgia in Postcolonial Britain and India,” *History and Memory* 18, no. 1 (2006): 5–42.

³¹ On these questions of imperial identity and memorialisation see, Ellen Smith, ‘Widows, Violence and Death: The Construction of Imperial Identity and Memory by Women in Mourning across British India, 1857–1926’, *Gender & History* (2023).

³² Simon Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 4.

³³ Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 8.

Pedro Falk, show how ‘private’ texts or personal experiences intersected with legal bureaucracies and systems around death in the past, as well as anthropological study and popular culture, which made private beliefs and often private or social relationships with the dead a subject of public scrutiny. Some of the articles also tread new ground in moving our frame of analysis away from sources or studies pertaining to the elite or middle class. They use stories and folklore as well as material forms and assemblages, often working from a paucity of sources to piece together a broader historical terrain, inclusive of working-class or popular landscapes of death.

The issue opens, chronologically, with Beth Debold’s critique of early modern historians’ approaches to wills and the probate process between 1500 and 1700. She begins our discussion of distant communications beyond death by questioning whether historians have fully engaged with the concept of wills as emotional documents, in reference to the early modern period. As sites for emotional expression, wills, she contends, speak across life-death divides as materials utilised for ‘transitioning into death’. She explores probate records from London and the southern English counties from this period to understand how we might better understand testators’ attempts to speak through and beyond death to their executors via the medium of the will. Arguing that wills have previously been regarded as formulaic, Debold offers a way of working with legal documents that highlights their performative qualities in three connected areas, including the will-maker’s concern to establish and continue relationships with the living through bequests; the social control they sought to extend over the living through these bequests, and attempts to ‘ensure the survival of their memory’. Like many of the articles will go on to show in this issue, individuals produced forms of distant communications to calculate and manage how their environment, families, and communities would respond to their deaths and readjust in their absence.

Sbaraini and Falk write of these kinds of social repercussions of a different genre of writing, suicide letters, in two different cultural and temporal contexts: nineteenth-century England and early twentieth-century Brazil, highlighting both the commonalities and differences in the types of consequences that suicide letters could cause in these societies and in the 'beyond'. They offer up an experimental methodological approach which addresses what might seem radically different contexts, times and spaces but in comparative ways. The scarcity of sources has led them into a productive collaborative relationship. Suicide letters are understandably relatively rare, but this has brought them into conversation, to draw out the rich possibilities of working together to explore what *is* available. The cultural taboo of suicide in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries meant communications between the living and the dead held particular messages, especially of identity, emotion and reasoning. Both examples show the agency of the letter as a mode of communication beyond death, a way to speak more frankly than in life and the idea that the consequences for the deceased were rendered insignificant, freeing up expression, but on the other hand, their memory was also at stake in what they said, who they addressed, and in what ways their meanings might have been received.

Many of the articles highlight how the deceased still impact the world of the living, in some cases long after they died. The authors across the issue reveal instances of intimately personal communication but also collective communications with the dead, and some forms of contact were designed to address those grieving the deceased, rather than to communicate with the deceased themselves, many of whom were brought together through their connection to the deceased. There is also tension in these communications between their competing place in the public or intimate domains, as well as the blurry relationship between the public and private

nature of these communications beyond death. Sbaraini and Falk note that one author of a suicide letter addressed God directly, speaking to a higher power whom he believed would meet him beyond death and asking for forgiveness. Thus, whilst Sbaraini and Falk note that some of these communications were able to express themselves with greater clarity of position and frankness due to their lack of earthly consequences, others were seeking retribution from those they would meet after they died and whom they believed would decide their soul's fate. Yet the authors also show that suicide letters could sometimes be published after death, acquiring further reach and influence than perhaps what was available to them whilst they were living. Through letters individuals 'speak posthumously' and persist in maintaining relationships with the living beyond the act of suicide. The article is particularly striking for what it reveals about the specificity of many of these communications, either to the deceased or specific members of the family or society that the deceased were communicating with.

Unlike our other authors, Jack Orchard has challenged conceptual understandings of death. Conceptual frameworks of hauntology and the spectral are invoked to draw out the ways the social, political and cultural forms and character of the dead continue to haunt the living and the ways that futures which never happened continue to haunt the present, transforming our understanding of time and presence. Orchard discusses the specific concept of 'astral projection' in the epistolary sense to discuss codes and symbols as emotional 'affective labour' to bring correspondents into imagined relationships that overcome and refute distance. Death and haunting was used inventively by eighteenth-century women to intervene in the communications of the living amongst themselves to create new spheres of activity and belonging. He shows that epistolary incomprehensibility could create intimacy between recipients through the emotional work undertaken to decipher the meanings of the letter. The

Bluestockings created alternative worlds and spaces within their correspondences, to create different forms of imaginary worlds and intimacies which disrupted reality. Orchard takes the concept of distant communication beyond death to actually address worlds which cannot truly exist and the death of ideals, desires and hopes in the 'real world', ideas that can only be explored in other temporal spaces. Letters were the vehicles utilised by the bluestockings to achieve this. Orchard also considers the use of death and 'the imagined grave' as a space to escape societal restrictions and give a sense of liberation. Here, Orchard examines how the living imagine death and create their own spaces to live and communicate as if with the 'freedom' of death. He depicts death as a freeing and liberating mode of communication and interaction.

Epistolary temporal distance is also extremely important in Rosie Whitcombe's article. She shows that the crossover or overlap of letters with those from the deceased when they were alive can often come after the news of death, especially if relatives and friends were far away. She offers a radical interpretation of the letters and letter-writers during the Romantic period in the early nineteenth century. She considers the benefits of letters interpreted, delayed, or sluggish. Slowing down communications, she shows, offered consolation through the medium of the condolence letter, a literary form which provided much consolation, preparation and a sense of calm before death, as well as working as an important tool for negotiating relationships both before and after the death. Whitcombe reflects on personal relationships but these can also be positions of negotiation for more remote figures such as upon the death of a politician, monarch or other figure in a position of power: there is often a jostle for power at such points and the need to refresh or redefine relationships. Whitcombe's article considers not just communicating beyond death but how to communicate death to

others at a distance, advocating for communications which build up to the news and enabling emotional preparation and foresight.

She begins her article with a single letter from the Romantic poet John Keats, written to his brother in America, informing the absent family of a recent death. She explains that distant communications could assist the articulation of a 'good death' and alleviate anxieties about a family member's condition at the point of death, but that the time-space constraints of distant communications were critical to the emotional reception of news or reports of death. She asks, 'at what point does the immediate communication of information stop consoling, and start exacerbating, our grief?' Philippe Ariès motioned towards a shift in the social study of death at this time from concern and preparing for oneself for the afterlife towards imagining and supporting the grief of others. Keats's letters of condolence mitigated his family's distress, provided frequent health updates and also utilised the language, form and practicalities of writing transatlantic letters to lessen the disturbances that death could yield. Whitcombe, like Orchard, discusses imaginings as an escape from the reality of death and as a way of managing disease. Keat's personification of 'illness' is revealed to be a coping mechanism, one which distanced the ailing person from the illness itself and treated it as a separate entity, to be analysed, even mocked and scorned. However, the reality of death turns Keat's writing into obligation, suggesting that this creative imagining was only possible when death itself was an abstract concept and not the reality being faced.

Moving away from the chronological order of the issue for a moment, Eleni Eldridge-Tull also draws out epistolary strategies in the confrontation with death, but in twentieth-century wartime contexts. Specifically, she highlights a genre of writing termed 'last letters' which shows men's maintenance of different relationships akin to their 'masculinity' during the

second world war. She has uncovered letters from RAF Bomber Command airmen which were written in anticipation of being sent in the likely event of their death during the conflict. She explores and compares how letters from ‘sons’ to their parents were framed differently to letters from husbands to partners and children, asking how their identities as sons, fathers, husbands and servicemen affected how they addressed their own imminent mortality and the responses of their family to this. Last letters enabled the serviceman to reflect on, she writes, ‘the prospect of a future in which he would no longer exist’ and attempt to console and prepare his family in expectation of his absence, and importantly, to negotiate his identity according to the varying registers of family, masculinity, and nationality that were in flux during the fraught context of war. She concludes her piece with a consideration of how last letters were shaped by prevailing spiritual and religious trends, through which the men could make sense of their own morality in the broader circumstances of war and national service. The last letter was not only a source of communication teetering between life and death, but it also operated as a site for men to actively consolidate their masculinity and openly grapple with their premature death and absence in the lives of their family. Last letters are an acute form of distant communications beyond death, which, as Eldridge-Tull demonstrates clearly, allowed her subjects to imagine death and alleviate its effects through text.

Where Orchard, Whitcombe, and Eldridge-Tull show that death reconfigured distance through text, Clodagh Tait examines folk everyday and intergenerational stories and memories as well as oral cultures surrounding the dead and their continued existence in life. She explores nineteenth-century traditions in Ireland and the Irish diaspora around supernatural apparitions at the time and place of an individual’s death. Irish apparitions suggest that the dead and living were in contact not only during death but in advance of the imminent death of a loved one and bridged the geographical distance between people through

their ability to appear in front of those many miles, and in some cases countries, apart. Other articles in this issue also show that letters in particular, which traversed different temporal planes, were written with the intention to ‘appear’ or make oneself visible or manifest in the physical space of their correspondent. Communicators in the past, like those explored by Tait, often transformed temporal boundaries and interacted with others in advance of their concerns that the recipient could already be dead before receiving news, especially from those at war, overseas, ageing or unwell. Dreamed or imagined spaces were places to connect to the dead or to create worlds beyond the living one.

These kinds of communications could be emotionally stressful and traumatic, with some apparitions displaying the reality of death on the body and person. Thus, whilst some of these communications were forms of escapism, others were emotionally shocking and began individual and collective grief-work. That there is a form of kin-keeping, as Tait refers to it, at work across many of these beyond death communications, shows the importance of communication between not just the dead and the living but the collective communications of those left behind to make sense of death. Often women would lead families and communities in kin-keeping by sustaining and preserving these beliefs, by telling stories, acting as informants and aiding the emotional responses of others. In both Orchard and Tait’s articles it appears that women were empowered or carved out new spaces for themselves in death cultures and communicating to the beyond. Significantly, Tait’s article shows how the supernatural and belief systems were central to different forms of communication between the living and the dead. In the case of apparitions, many tales set a precedent for these spectres to appear at the point of death, causing recognition of the messages the apparition was communicating. There is also a sense of Irish migrants wanting to connect to their homeland and these apparitions were seen as a comforting message of their desire to return

home, even at the point of death. Beyond personal, familial and communal memory-making, Irish apparitions offer a lens on social and cultural experiences of nationality and emigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Significantly, there is still a sense of communication with the dead in present-day social media. In the digital world, accounts of deceased people and their wider media footprint exist posthumously, and the deceased are often still contacted. For example, Facebook and Twitter accounts of people who have died are oftentimes still active and their friends and family continue to respond to them. In bringing this issue up to the present day, Robert Bednar offers insights from media and communication studies, and the material and visual culture of death. He argues that there is a history connected to modern roadside shrines, which are seen as spaces where people can communicate with the deceased of an accident, and that they do not just operate as places of remembrance but *actively* as places of communication. The dead are pervasive in everyday life, kept alive through these shrines which act in some senses like forms of media, as ‘platforms for communication’ rather than just proxies for the deceased. Shrines, in his view, are more than just spaces of representation and reflection for the person lost. Bednar’s article highlights the ongoing relationship that we have with the dead in the twenty-first century, and suggests that in many ways, media has altered our perspectives to suggest that the dead ‘are listening’ and that they ‘exist’ in some form to be communicated with. Interestingly, Bednar’s article highlights that many strangers communicate directly with the deceased and their families, usually in cases of tragic or premature death such as car accidents, whilst identifying themselves as strangers: distant but invested. His article maps out human desire to share sympathy and consolation amongst strangers, and to those whose death was untimely, immediate and violent, across the divide between life and death.

Importantly, Bednar also shows the tangled links between virtual and physical shrines and sites of memorial, a technological development which complicates the collapse of distance, the bridging of distance and its endurance over time. The immediacy of social media connects many to the site of a crash and in some ways bridging the dead back to the living. However, shrines require continual attention over time. Effort is required to keep the bridge going and sustain interest between visitors to the shrine and the dead who linger there. The addition of messages over the years shows the need to connect the dead to the living through direct messages, long after the incident of death, adding again to the idea that the dead are listening and able to connect to the messages and the emotions communicated within them. Bednar's article reminds us that in many cultures, the deceased are not distant or remote 'others', divided from us by an unreachable afterlife, even in the 'modern' world.

Supernatural visions, shrines and letters are used in this issue to show that the deceased have corporal forms, and that many societies accommodate them in different ways. The articles look beyond dominant Anglican and Catholic interpretations of death in relation to the afterlife, heaven and broader eschatology. Rather they often locate alternative knowledge systems and responses to death, intimating at the omnipresence of death and the dead, and show that in everyday contexts the deceased interact with the living, hear them and intervene in their social lives. Throughout this issue we consider the interplay of the histories of religion, spirituality and communication systems and infrastructures, understanding how different forms of communication underpin much of human belief and spirituality. That others can write for the dead is also seen in one of the roadside shrines. Yet in Bednar's example, he also writes of a poem written from the deceased to those mourning his loss. In this discussion of communications beyond death there is a noticeable cacophany of voices here, of those speaking to, about, for, through, and crucially, with the dead and their material remains.

We envision readers of this issue going away with a deeper understanding of how individuals in the past have used various communicative forms, from writing to material things, and from memory to digital and social media, to lessen the distances created by the life-death divide, and relieve the contextual anxieties associated with dying from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries.