Death is, considered in its most basic elements, a simple phenomenon. An organism comes into being, it consumes and grows, and then, after a time, its growth is halted by its consumption by some other
organism, or by the inevitable return of its living matter to the inert through the process of entropy. Life could not be what it is without death (and vice versa) and the two make up the basic pair in the consideration of sentient matter. The overwhelming majority of the universe is, so far as we know, dead, and death is the destination of every living thing. So much for the straight-forward.

But death in the human world is something far more complex and far more charged with powerful emotional valence. At the most literal level, there is nothing more ubiquitous in human life than human death. Last year, more than 50 million people among the seven or so billion who are currently alive perished, whether from hunger or thirst, disease, accident, purposeful action by other human beings in the forms of war and murder, self-annihilation, or simple old age. This amounts to about one death per year for every 110 or so people on the planet, a figure that begins to sound rather more intimate. One might on this ground be inclined, absent other information, to think death should be something very close and readily available to the consciousness of the average human being, something reflected on with some regularity given its frequency. After all, human beings are probably the only living entities on this planet who are aware of death as a phenomenon and, more poignantly, aware that they themselves must, at some point, die.

But death is not present in the same way to all peoples, for different cultures and civilizations have taken radically different positions on the matter as a social reality. This course looks at death as a universal human existential issue and as a piece of human culture. It is inevitably both of these at once. Indeed, if we seek to investigate the meaning of death for human beings, we are led unfailingly to investigate culture: “Death is a revealer of culture. Even more than that, culture matters only because man is mortal” (Gaëlle Clavandier).

This will be a seminar in the true sense of that word: “A form of small group instruction, combining independent research and class discussions under the guidance of a professor.” Some of our meetings will be organized around readings; others will take as their focus some other materials (e.g., films, videos, and photographs) for us to discuss and analyze; still others, toward the end of the term, will be devoted to student research projects. I will not lecture; we will discuss, so be prepared for that.
Although the reading load is not particularly heavy, we will attend closely to everything we read, so you must engage with it carefully and thoroughly. You must be prepared to involve yourself actively in all class meetings (e.g., do the reading assigned, bring the book with the assigned reading in it to class for reference, etc.).

Attendance is essential in this course. To be in attendance in this class means not simply to be physically present, but to *be here now.* When John Lennon was asked to describe the meaning of the Beatles’ music in a nutshell, he replied “Be here now.” This is a simple yet powerful idea: to experience the moments of your life truly, authentically, fully, rather than walking about in a kind of half-present trance, failing to actually live life because one is constantly elsewhere, perhaps dwelling on a past that cannot be altered, perhaps anticipating a future that may not even come. Lennon’s idea is one I take as fundamental for the experience we share in our collective meetings in this class. I promise that I will be here now, and I ask you to do the same.

Being here now is not as easy as it might sound, perhaps especially in the present age. Much of the communicative technology that now exists in our world, and indeed many other elements of our contemporary culture work hard against being here now. Many people (including many students on this campus) seem almost never to be here now; they are too busy texting and checking Facebook and generally living in a virtual space presented to them by their portable communicative technology to actually be present in the situations of their lives. Additionally, too frequently, students do not adequately prepare themselves for being here now in the classroom because they do not rest properly and they wind up half-sleeping through classroom experience.

To facilitate being here now, *laptop computers may not be used in this class.* In my experience, laptops in the classroom encourage passivity and draw students away from what is happening in the classroom to other virtual entertainments. If you own a cell phone or other small communicative device, I strongly advise you not to bring it to class either. If you insist on doing so, it must be turned off.

For each class meeting, one of you will be given formal responsibility for taking notes and posting them to Blackboard. On these notes, I
expect a polished and elaborated document, not simply an outline or collection of bullet points, so you will have to be prepared to record a lot of information and also make some of your own elaborations and observations. As the number of students in the class is quite small, you can expect to do this for numerous class meetings over the course of the term. Your class notes from your assigned days are collectively worth 5% of your final grade.

A very large percentage of the course grade consists of the final paper and various related progress reports, which include a course journal you should begin keeping on the first day of class. This is where you should make numbered entries relating to your reading and thoughts on the course. If you do not begin your journal promptly at the beginning of the term and/or fail to make regular entries, it will inevitably negatively affect your grade. I will have a look at your journals several times during the term to see how you are progressing. In evaluating your journals, I am looking for

a) regularity of entries (i.e., the journal must minimally include one entry for each class meeting (28 total), each entry must discuss all of the reading and other materials discussed during that class meeting, and each entry must be completed before the relevant class meeting);

b) volume and substance of entries (i.e., the entries must be more than just brief and disorganized notes and they must demonstrate close reading of the relevant texts).

You are not limited to talking narrowly about the readings or what happened in class on a given day in your journal; you might also write down thoughts on how one could apply some idea from class to a contemporary event, or just record questions you have about something we have read or discussed in class. The point is both to document your most direct interaction with the ideas (i.e., notes on reading) but also to show that you are thinking a considerable amount about the course material above and beyond the act of reading itself.

An example of a course journal entry is attached. I will talk about course journals on the first day of class. Note that the course journal must be a minimum of 20,000 words over the term (and you should not quote texts you are reading in your journal beyond a few words here and there, i.e., the vast majority of the words in your journals should be
your own). As the journal will be collected for grading twice (once at mid-term, once at the end), you must produce at least 10,000 words in each half of the course. If your journal is less than this, regardless of the quality, it will be almost impossible to receive better than a C on the journal.

The final paper project includes two progress reports beyond the course journal as well as a class presentation (see the syllabus for relevant dates). Each of the two progress reports and the class presentation are worth 10% of your final grade (so 30% total). The course journal is worth 40% (20% for the journal from the first half of the course and 20% for that from the second half of the course). The final 25% is made up by the final paper, which must be a minimum of 6,000 words. We will talk in great detail about the paper throughout the term.

Late work is unacceptable for any but documented medical reasons. If you turn in work late without such documentation, you risk failing the course. I have no “late policy” as some faculty do (e.g., so much off for so many days late)—late work is simply not acceptable.

A final point: this is a no-paper class. In other words, do not hand in any assignments in printed form. You should hand in all assignments as text files that I can comment on and email back to you. Needless to say, you should be sure to back up your files routinely throughout the term, and you are fully responsible for doing this and for the consequences of not doing so (i.e., having your course journal disappear because your computer melted down and you didn’t back it up).

Books:

James Green, Beyond the Good Death
Antonius C.G. Robben, ed., Death, Mourning, and Burial
Sharon Kaufman, ...And a Time to Die: How American Hospitals Shape the End of Life
David Stannard, The Puritan Way of Death
Claudio Lomnitz, Death and the Idea of Mexico

COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to change as we move along):
(all readings to be completed before the class meeting indicated)

January 19 and 24: Conceiving of Death

Reading:  a) Green, chapter 1; b) Robben, chapters 1, 2, and 4

January 26: Learning of Death

Reading:  a) Green, chapter 5

January 31 and February 2: The Funeral Rites

Reading:  a) Green, chapter 2; b) Robben, chapters 17, 18 and 20

February 7 and 9: Grief and Mourning

Reading:  a) Robben, chapters 13, 15, and 16; b) Emile Durkheim on piacular rites (online); c) Mark Taylor on “Reflections on Dying and Living” (online): 

February 14: The Modern Western Way of Death

Reading:  a) Kaufman, chapters 1-2; b) Norbert Elias on “The Loneliness of the Dying” (online)

February 16 and 21: American Deaths: The Puritan Framework

Reading: a) Stannard, chapters 2-7

February 16: First Progress Report due in class

February 23 and 28: American Deaths: Hospitals, Doctors, and End of Life Dramas

Reading:  a) Kaufman, chapters 3-9; b) Green, chapter 7

March 1: Ways to Die: Suicide

Reading: a) Émile Durkheim on “Egotistical Suicide” (online)

March 6: Ways to Die: Murder

Reading: a) Leonard Beeghly on “Homicide” (online)

March 8 and 20: Ways to Die: Cancer
March 8: Journals collected for midterm grading

March 22: Ways to Die: Catastrophe and Accident

Reading: a) “Marking Death” (online); b) “Louisiana Roadside Memorials” (online); c) “Eastern and Western Ways of Dealing with the Bali Bombings” (online); d) “The Flight 93 Temporary Memorial” (online)

March 27: Ways to Die: War

Reading: a) Randall Collins on “The Dirty Secrets of Violence” (online)

March 29: Euthanasia: Choosing Death

Reading: a) “A Merciful End” (online)

March 29: Second Progress Report due in class

April 3: The Death Penalty

Reading: a) David Garland on “America’s Death Penalty in an Age of Abolition” (online)

April 5: Picturing Death: Death and Visual Media

Reading: a) Green, chapter 3; b) Alexander Riley on “A New Kind of Fear” (online); c) “Why Look?” (online)

April 10: The Horror Movie as American Death Obsession

Reading: Open Water; Cloverfield; 102 Minutes that Changed America

April 12: The Cemetery and Human Culture

Reading: a) Green, chapter 6

April 17: Death Cults (Halloween; Dia de Los Muertos; La Santa Muerte)
Reading:  a) “El Dia de Los Muertos in the USA” (online); b) “The Shadows of Halloween” (online)

April 19 and 24: Death as National Totem

Reading: a) Lomnitz, introduction, chapters 1-3, 8-11, and conclusion

April 26 and May 1: Student Presentations

Final Paper due on day of our scheduled final exam