

The First International Conference on *Critical South Asian Death Studies*

18th-20th of April 2024 | University of Münster
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Call for Papers (extended)

The long twentieth century has been regarded variably as a ‘century of death’ (Radomska et. al., 2019; Ericksen, 2012). Marked by several thanatological ruptures – wars, colonialism, environmental degradation, and geopolitical turmoils – the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries have witnessed a proliferation of academic literature inquiring experiences of death and mourning. Recent theories in Death Studies, which first took institutional roots in the 1970s, have been deeply concerned with the resonances of mortality, and their continued relevance in contexts of post/colonial capitalist extraction, climate crises, religious fundamentalism, symbolic violence, and global media dissemination. Yet, while much has been penned about the paradigms of death in the ‘Global North,’ there exists uneven temporalities in the academic reception of death, specifically in South Asian contexts. Death Studies as a discipline is widely conceived from within individualist, white Western hegemonies and through their appendant epistemologies that foreclose engagements with, among others, South Asian relationalities, belief systems, and established structures of mourning. *The First International Conference on Critical South Asian Death Studies* situates itself in this gap, paying heed to critical approaches to death, dying, grieving and end-of-life care in South Asia.

Indeed, Radomska et al. (2020) argue that current discourses in Death Studies are “often grounded in Western hegemonic and normative ideas of dying, dead and mourning subjects and bodies.” (p. 81). Similarly, Thacker & Duran (2020) posit that theories that frequently underscore the study of death stem from “white-centric, individualized, Western ideals of typical grief and bereavement” (p. 1). Normative engagements in Death Studies have left a conspicuous gap characterised by the assumptions of subject, relationalities, belief systems, and established structures of mourning. The same, thus, necessitates the mobilisation of critical, intersectional, and radical contextualisms that emphasize distinct bio-medical, metaphorical, cultural, and social forms of death.

As such, this conference situates itself within traditions of Critical South Asian Death Studies (CSADS), which operationalises such a lens to mark a departure from conventional death research and practice by centring the deep complexities of South Asia. Death, argues Wilson (2014), constitutes an integral moment of transition, both for the living and the dead, in different South Asian traditions. Particularly, performances of mortality simultaneously cater to the exercise of *necropower*, and exaction of *necropolitics* (Mbembe, 2003; see also Prakash & Kennedy, 2021). Coined by Mbembe in 2003, necropolitics refers to “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (p. 27). This becomes distinctly important in anthropocenic scenarios of planetary environmental degradation that transform

certain landscapes into unlivable spaces, and certain lives into ‘un/grievable’ deaths (Butler, 2004; Radomska et. al 2019). CSADS, then, attends to, in a norm-critical manner, the necropolitical agendas that underlie the concerns of positionality in South Asia. It calls attention to the varied socio-cultural, economic, political, historical, ethical, ontological and epistemological aspects that underpin South Asianness, with a distinct resonance to experiences of ‘marginalisation.’ Not only so, but it also centres empowering narratives of postcolonial reclamations, subversive necropolitics, non-textual spaces, and oral histories. As such, CSADS attempts to go beyond disciplinary bounds, paying heed to chrono-, bio-, and life-normative structures.

However, in centring ‘South Asia’, we, the conference committee, are aware of the conceptual problems that characterise the term. In cognizance of the constantly shifting geographies of the region, it would be fallacious to read cultures to be coterminous with territories. Demonstratively, the territories of South Asian states are porous, with thousands of individuals crossing them every day. Given this, territorial spatialities are characterised by uneven, contradictory and multidirectional sets of beliefs, institutions and discourses. This is furthered by deterritorialising tendencies of the South Asian Diaspora that delinks notions of the home/land, physical geographies and, ‘ageing in place’ (Venkatasalu et al., 2013). Thus, we refrain from prescriptive delineation in broaching South Asia, instead acknowledging the creative, critical and complex ways bodies can inhabit South Asia, and South Asia can come to label spaces and processes.

Attuned to the varied articulations of death, we invite a wide range of engagements that *may* develop on one of the following themes. The list is not exhaustive:

- Western biomedicine and Indigenous traditions
- Non-hegemonic Hindu and non-Brahmanic death rituals, beliefs, and practices.
- Media portrayal, the cultural industry, and death
- Death in the non-human world
- The death industry and the digitisation of death
- Thanatechnology and technological transformations in body disposal
- South Asianising palliative care
- Death, age and chrononormativity
- COVID-19, invisible deaths, and other illnesses
- Gendered deathcare and responsibilities
- Climate consciousness and environmental concerns.
- Death and South Asian intersectionalities (caste, class, gender, sexuality, age, religion, region, and other aspects)
- Death in South Asian Literature and Art
- Non-biological, social, cultural and political deaths
- Death in the South Asian diaspora.
- Queer deaths

Rooted in these contours, *The First International Conference on Critical South Asian Death Studies*, to be held on the **18th-20th of April 2024**, calls for interdisciplinary presentations and performances by scholars in all stages of their careers, artists, practitioners, professionals, and activists whose research, poetry, prose, short films, or original performances reflexively engage with regimes of power as manifested in death, dying, mourning and end-of-life care. In acknowledgement of differential capacities for movement and to ensure accessibility, the conference shall be held in a **hybrid** format.

What to Send?

If we have piqued your interest, then please send your **abstracts/proposals** (approximately **300 words**) to csads@uni-muenster.de by the **15th of October, 2023** (11:59 PM CEST). You will be notified of the reviewing panel's decision within 4-6 weeks of the deadline. We encourage interested individuals from **non-EU countries** to apply early in the interest of the smooth processing of visa requirements.

Upon the conclusion of the conference, we shall be exploring ways to further develop the momentum in inclusive, critical and transdisciplinary directions. This may include publications, associations, research, workshops, future conferences and more.

Works Cited

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