Introduction

The year 2020 was marked by a pandemic that produced exceptional situations. It may still be too early for a comprehensive understanding of its implications, but with this special issue of *Human Remains and Violence* we seek to explore one particular phenomenon associated with the pandemic: the sudden surge in the number of dead bodies to be processed in the forensic and funerary systems in pandemic hotspots. Excess mortality rates give us an indication of proportion and of the challenge to these systems. In various countries, excess mortality rates for 2020 reached peaks of fifty to one hundred per cent or even more. These numbers are based on uncertain and highly uneven statistics, and, since they are national averages, it is reasonable to assume that the extra numbers of dead bodies to deal with in urban hotspots during peak times have been considerably higher. Numbers from New York confirm this assumption. There the number of deaths in 2020 was four times the average over the three preceding years. A more fine-grained analysis, based on weekly numbers from Italian municipalities in March–April 2020, suggests that the number of people who died in peak weeks in Bergamo was eight times higher than in previous years, surging from around 25 to close to 200 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants per week.

Taking our cue from Gilpin Faust, we ask what the ‘work of death’ is in the COVID-19 pandemic. Or, in other words, how material, symbolic and political economies of the management and disposal of dead bodies have been affected by the surplus of dead bodies in the first year of the pandemic. Starting our introduction with a look at cemeteries – the most visible site in the trajectory of dead bodies – and continuing with reflections on the shifting relations between death, politics and society, we will suggest that what seems exceptional is actually interwoven with, and in many cases reveals, the ‘norm’. In the following pages we point to some of the questions that emerge from this special issue, namely whether the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a changing relationship between state and capital in the government of dead bodies; how we can develop an analysis of death and the economies of dead bodies to take on board local and global perspectives simultaneously; and in which
ways the risk of infection due to the pandemic threatens the vital sociality associated with rituals of separation between the living and the dead.

In the remaining part of this article we introduce the contributions to this special issue and point to more specific, important observations that these pieces of scholarship bring out on issues of forensic work, identity, race and the long arc of inequality in pandemics. The contributions to this issue analyse specific conditions and effects in several national and historical contexts: Introducing the thematic of ‘race’, Thompson unwinds a story about Black gravediggers in nineteenth-century epidemics in the United States; Clavandier and her co-authors ask how professionals in the funerary sector in France and Switzerland were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the governmental counter-measures; Cruz-Santiago and Schwartz-Marin explore the intersection of COVID-19 and the pre-existing ‘forensic crisis’ in Mexico; and finally, Sanjurjo, Azevedo and Nadai ask how the suspicion that dead bodies are infected by COVID-19 affects rituals and spaces of disposal, but also how these patterns map onto former periods of ‘necropolitics’, involving slaves, indigents, terrorists and criminals. This special issue contains five contributions, including this Introduction. However, interest in writing on the topic of this issue of Human Remains and Violence (volume 7.2) has led to a sequel (volume 8.1), for which the articles are still under preparation.

The cemetery speaks

Cemeteries aren’t newsworthy. They don’t tell stories that are worth listening to. Unlike the dead, they don’t speak, they are rarely spoken for and they can’t face the cameras, red-faced, with the spittle of injustice for the dead. They aren’t easy to politicise. These places are axiomatic, produced by the status quo, materialised through ordinary social relations and formed in the banality of everyday political practice. Cemeteries are made and subsumed, too, by governance; as a result, they are bound to say what is already widely known: people die and there must be a place to inter them. Unlike the dead, who ‘are frequently the objects of contention and struggle’, as Vincent Brown puts it, the cemetery doesn’t tend to say what isn’t already known. Moreover, in the logics of modernity that have seen the disaggregation of death from life, from the city and from political discussion, the cemetery is not only not to be seen, but also contains nothing worth seeing. Made through and by the axiom, the cemetery is a dead-end for novelty. Why care about such a place, whose best quality is peace and quiet?

The COVID-19 crisis has reminded the world that nothing could be further from truth. In 2020, the cemetery became iconic, visible and shocking, a global aesthetic and looking-glass, landing repeatedly on the front page, above the fold, of newspapers around the world. In 2020 the cemetery found a voice. It now tells a story that people want to hear; burial is routine, fast, bureaucratised and, commonly, radically dehumanised and violent. This space is political, human and dynamic. Now you can see it for yourself: images of what Brown calls ‘mortuary politics’ reveal a multitude of aligned stories:7 long queues of people waiting to receive urns with the
remains of their loved ones in Wuhan, military trucks bringing coffins out of Bergamo, mass burials at the potter’s field on Hart Island in New York City and drones over Vila Formosa – a cemetery for the urban poor – in São Paulo. Yawning graves in the cemetery speak non-fiction about the pace of dead bodies outstripping the capacity of existing logistics, spaces and institutions with assumed responsibility for the proper management and disposal of dead bodies. This much death is a problem (Figure 1).

And yet, for all that COVID-19 has brought, an incipient attention to death politics – in morgues, forensics, hospitals, cemeteries – as novel now is illusory. The COVID-19 crisis is also – perhaps especially – a moment to examine how the exception is interwoven with the banal and the everyday. As Figure 2 suggests, the cemetery of Vila Formosa was not exactly an exemplary site of dignified burial, or peace and quiet, before it made the front pages during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020. Thus, interrogating ‘death materials’ and ‘death places’ like cemeteries, even in normal times, is revelatory of what is assumed, unspoken, banished, through medicalisation, liberal governance and political ordering. Images of cemeteries overflowing as exception implies that such processes are weakened, a temporary unhinging or destabilisation of liberal ordering. It does little to show patterns of continuity, change or rupture, or to reveal that, perhaps, burial and the treatment of human remains could be just as (or nearly as) deleterious as a norm, as also Sanjurjo, Azevedo and Nadai argue in this issue.8 Many have written of the ways that the condition of modernity is a project of hiding and obscuring, such that an exception

Figure 1  Washington Post front page for 2 April 2020 showing Vila Formosa, São Paulo.
both makes the obscured visible but also carries obliterating potential: everything else that is violently normal can be made to pale by comparison.9

In this vein, this special issue of Human Remains and Violence is motivated by a concern for the troublesome relationship between crisis, death, burial and political order as, always, bound up in continuity and change, exception and banality. Fast-travelling and globally shared images, as well as the anxieties associated with situations of surplus death, form the backdrop of this special issue. This collaborative project is rooted in an effort to take stock of the politics of dead bodies as they evolved in 2020 from the early days of the pandemic, and having, since, taken on a long, lingering and spectacularly splintered experience around the world. It is a modest effort to attend to the political vitality of an attention to mortuary politics from an exceptional moment without untethering its potential to obliterate how everyday mortuary politics matter and to inform what is currently being seen.

Death, politics and society

All death is political. The most apparently distant cases reveal a larger paradigm. Suicide – an individual act, committed by an individual upon themselves – may not appear to have much in common with the death politics of a pandemic. In medical terms, such an event is local, isolated and perhaps a question of an individual's estrangement from society or their madness. Suicide, though, is ever a question of power and sociality. As Katharine Sloan writes, analysing suicide is a necessary movement ‘between examining power – how the state and its representatives thought about and approached suicide – and subjectivity – how and why suicides committed a self-constructive performance in their act of self-destruction’.10

The analytical movement that Sloan points to, between subject and power, ruler and the ruled, traces a continuous (but often elusive) line of distinction between
the social constitution of power and the enactment of domination through the dead body and mortality – however it comes to pass. Here, death is the logical and philosophical cornerstone of a varied debate. On the one hand, scholars see death as the reproduction of domination; on the other, inquiry is concerned with death as a social paradigm and enactment. Regarding the first, death is overseen, shaped, bureaucratised and ordered, whether or not by the governance of a state. Legal acts and officious architectural renderings constitute the cemetery, as though arguing for better social order through the reterritorialisation of death. Nineteenth-century projects rooted in a changing epistemology of death were underwritten by medicalised affirmations of the need to keep the dead (and the living) in their place.¹¹

At the same time, cemeteries must be legitimate, what we might understand as ‘socially incorporated’: spaces that are used and assumed as though there were no better option. The hierarchical nineteenth-century cemetery projects, which removed death and its public sociality from the heart of the city, were sometimes rapturous and unpopular. In his detailed reconstruction of a ‘cemetery protest’ in nineteenth-century Brazil, João José Reis describes the tearing of a social fabric woven through the practice of commemorating death in local churches and their festive burial ‘brotherhoods’. A law banning churchyard burials and the opening of a new public-private cemetery that would dislocate the dead both to the spatial margins and into privatised burial generated a raucous riot that marched through the city while decrying the ‘death of the cemetery’.¹² Not that Salvador, Brazil is an isolated case, by any measure. In 1830s Guatemala, protests against the introduction of a similar law as a means of controlling epidemics brought down the country’s first liberal government.¹³

Outside such moments of social eruption that accompany structural change, the domination of death and human remains proceeds in less dramatic ways. The repertoires and doing the governance of death proceed in muted or concealed ways in bureaucratic routine, logistics and compartmentalisation. The project of governing death and human remains can be as dull as death is common, pushing a bureaucracy along as though powered only with kinetic energy.

The project of keeping death in its place does not mean that death is necessarily marginalised or extracted from view. Under liberalism, the presence of death and dead bodies in public or in public life is surprisingly common. When a dead body appears on the street or cannot be removed from a home, death can appear to be ungoverned or ungovernable, the product of ‘state incapacity’ to effectively rule. And yet a question often remains – how does the apparent ‘ungovernability’ of death become a category of intervention – or of usefulness, allowing for the reassertion of order?

Regarding the concern that scholars hold about death as a social paradigm, this is perhaps especially important where power disavows particular deaths but attends with laser focus to others. In the selective attention given to the investigation of material remains, or under the threat of burial in a communal pit, distinctive sociality and sense-making emerge. As Flavia Medeiros writes, it can make sense to see death amid disorderly violence not as a problem of power but instead ‘as a question

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Human Remains and Violence 7/2 (2021), 4–18

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of luck, or, chiefly, of bad luck." And yet others who live in a precarious relationship with death may develop the means to generate more certainty about life from death, such as organising burial associations. Here, Scottish Widows, newspaper boys, taxi driver unions, Jewish traders in the nineteenth-century South Atlantic and contemporary organised crime have surprising things in common in their concern for marginalised life as well as marginalised death, working as real or de facto forms of life insurance.

Anthropologists have long been concerned with the way that death becomes life and order, especially through ritual and sociality. Some have argued for an emphasis on the rituals of death and the symbolic constructions that are produced. Others have argued for greater emphasis on the constant remaking of political order through death, whether it be ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Still others point to the social life of dead bodies that endows them with transmaterial political potential.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically shakes up this long-standing discussion about the governance of death as both social and political. This, we suggest, is true in at least two ways. First, widespread and topical discussions of the egregious surplus death that the pandemic has wrought have tended to reveal the obscurities of domination while implying the obliteration of sociality alongside death. Families being held at a distance from dying relatives, anonymous burial and makeshift morgues trace the need for a new conceptual terrain on the sociality of death – notable in varied global terms. The absence of sociality did characterise funerals during the Ebola crisis, and one could argue that cases of disappearances and missing bodies produce similar limitations of such sociality, but the globalised condition of the pandemic holds stark differences.

Second, COVID-19 is an unprecedented global catastrophe that is simultaneously about global capitalism – which has allowed fluid transmission across borders – and a dramatic window on a multitude of local responses, variations and experiences with the management of death and dead bodies. Such a condition is unprecedented in transmissibility, global visibility and refractions on the relationship between death, politics and society. The COVID-19 moment not only requires renewed attention to the social and political paradigm of death. It also demands a global analytic that is capacious enough to see both how death works in a planetary condition and the variations within it.

‘Glocalising’ human remains

One way of approaching the COVID-19 rupture and its variations under the current global condition could be to attend to the antagonism between economic liberalism – capital, goods, and some people, must flow unhindered – and how it is secured by national political liberalism – borders matter, order is required, inequality creates value, political unruliness must be slowed. The ‘surplus death’ rupture of coronavirus elides these two long-developing liberalisms that otherwise must be held separate, lest their alignment reveal that the market is politics. The pandemic has made this elision obvious in at least two ways, and especially by revealing how death (a) makes profit for some, which must be secured, and (b) opens the door to
a ready supply of ‘on-demand’ logistics of death, at speed and scale, to manage the political disorderliness associated with surplus death.

On the first, dead bodies make money. They animate life insurance, generate public and private investment, bring about antidotes and vaccines and create trillions of dollars in ‘personal protective equipment’ expenditure, fiscal ‘stimuli’ and market intervention. The dead have accelerated a process that has given the internet economy primacy. With some exceptions and much variation, the pandemic has generated unprecedented political will to spend, and in ways that blur whether the objective is to deal with ill health or to tend to a sick economy – or some ethically slippery relationship between the two. In some countries, government spending focused primarily on economic life and its property holders; in the United Kingdom, for example, this meant all stimulus worked through business, employment and consumer spending, always meant as a catalyst for making citizens and businesses chip in to keep the economy fit. Elsewhere, governments attended in some measure to citizens by sending out periodic support cheques, but almost always at a level designed to keep people barely alive and their bills nominally paid – if at all. For all of this, and yet with 2.7 million ‘excess deaths’ from the pandemic, the stock market underpins ‘the hottest economy in decades’, as CNN has reported.

On the second, in most places surplus death has outstripped the ability of the state to contend with how death must be governed, investigated, regulated and ordered. With the institutions and practices of the government of death bulging at the seams – with great variation about whether such practices were coherent or performative to begin with – states have sought and found readily available quick fixes. Advanced globalisation – movement at speed and scale – brought the world an illness on a new scale, but it also provides the solution: instantaneous logistics for rapid transport, containment, storage and disposal. The devices of international trade – containers that maximise space and cold storage to extend consumption dates – designed to move goods seamlessly across borders and boundaries became ubiquitous in the parking lots and back alleys of specific state ‘death management’ buildings. Adjacent to places where bodies must be examined, made knowable and contained by medical examiners and coroners in medical-legal institutes the material constructions for the state’s government of death are augmented by the pace and fabrications of capital. Material constructions produced to the banal social and political processes within them, the walls of a medical examiner’s building cannot expand at a moment’s notice. Instead, to buttress the requirements of the government of death, temporary material – containers, truck trailers, refrigeration units, tents – are easily assembled or plopped down to make excellent space-saving use of property, commonly already constrained in dense urban contexts where the consequences of acute death are concentrated.

In this way, surplus death may be seen to reveal the mutual constitution of state and capital in novel ways. And yet, the temporary remaking of material spaces of death governance – patching government with globalised materiality – should not be seen as a temporary elision of state and capital. The governance of death is always a question of the way that the state makes use of capital, and capital of the state, making legible the conditions of knowledge, predictability and the need to ensure
differentiation in death – and life. Such was the remaking of the cemetery on classed
terms in the nineteenth century. Now, though, the dynamic materiality of eco-
nomic liberalism has been fastened together with the materiality of a slow-paced
and comparatively static political liberalism, where the production of space by state
and capital has been ruptured by its own internal contradictions, and, at the same
time, awkwardly mended by them. At the centre of this rupture and mending is
capital’s requirement for inequality in life and death and the state’s regulation of this
condition. The paradox is itself a very deep illness: under this political economy,
death must reproduce the inequality of life.

As the articles in this special issue reveal, the social and political practices of
regulation within locations where capacities are challenged are themselves reve-
laratory of what has and has not changed. With much opacity wiped away by the
pandemic gaze, readers have come to know that such death logistics are by no means
exceptional. In their contribution, focused on Mexico, Cruz-Santiago and Schwartz-
Marin ask what has changed – and what not – at the intersection of the COVID-19
 crisis and the pre-existing ‘forensic crisis’. This is how the Mexican government itself
has characterised the effects on the forensic sector of years of elevated homicide rates
and disappearances in the country. Due to this latter crisis, trailers, cold storage,
conduits and containers were already being affixed to state institutions to cope with
the conditions of death governance, which required coroners and adjacent workers
to move within death governance as, always, a quick fix. Constraints on property
and space in cities have meant, too, that these containers had to be constantly moved
through the city – in a performative dance with the requirement to contain death
in spite of an absence of space to do so. What did change, owing to the COVID-19
 crisis, was that morgues were suddenly out of bounds for citizens. This ‘froze’ the
forensic work of citizens who were relatives of the disappeared or dead in Mexico’s
war on drugs. They had for years engaged in a search for clandestine cemeteries
and in what the authors call ‘biorecuperation’ – the individual identification of dis-
appeared dead via biotechnical means (such as DNA) as a form of caring for the
dead. But the risk of infection and the barred access forced them to find other ways
of caring for their dead through digital proxies.

Within all these conditions, the social and political practices of forensics work
are distressed, as this and other contributions to this special issue show. Forensic
experts operate within a mitigated confluence of globalised norms of death investi-
gation, generated through institutions like the World Health Organization (WHO)
and ‘translated’ into national theatres of COVID-19 measures; and the investigation
of everyday death amid conditions of passive governments, the work of forensics,
is highly circumstantial. Normal struggles to identify, trace and autopsy for an
abundance of bodies – especially amid everyday violence – strike with great fric-
tion against the risk of infection and the uncertainty of dead bodies as infected,
infectious or not. A renewed demand for positivist certainty over the causes of
death amid the social construction of the rationales of death – always, already –
refashions the demands and patterns of disaggregation between the contagious and
uncontagious dead. Themselves steeped in global inequality, global norms of death
investigation descend into everyday worlds that are already heavily mediated by
Heroes and ritual in pandemic times

During the peaks of the COVID-19 crisis, overburdened health and death workers have been celebrated as the everyday heroes of the pandemic. In the public imagery, however, employees in forensic and funerary spaces have not received quite the same attention and status, reflecting the marginal position of funerary processes among contemporary health issues. Indeed, we are left to speculate if the modern, biopolitical regime makes it easier to celebrate health workers, who try to save precious lives, than forensic and funerary workers, who battle to process and dispose of the surplus of dead bodies in the wake of pandemics. While these workers have always had an embodied condition with death, new protocols and sheer workloads have forced them to confront a remaking of the clinical encounter with death, which is now dominated by a 'habitus of infection'. The nature of the body, though always infected and infectious, has been dramatically changed by COVID-19. Moreover, in countries like the United Kingdom, they've been told to never disseminate the work of this habitus, or its severity, lest they be relieved of their employment.

In their contribution to this special issue, Clavandier et al. ask how professionals in the funerary sector in France and Switzerland dealt with and experienced the first wave of the pandemic and the introduction of emergency protocols that accompanied it. Not only did these protocols demand that bodies were put in a closed coffin within 24 hours – in practical terms prohibiting post-death care of the bodies – but in addition, it was the impression of funerary workers that the prime interest of healthcare institutions was to have the dead bodies removed from their premises as quickly as possible. According to the authors, a main concern for funerary professionals during the first wave was to avoid a transition from a 'funerary' towards the 'mortuary approach' that often accompany emergencies of mass death. The latter is a purely technical and logistical approach to the dead that treats them as waste, which, for the funerary professionals, is highly risky in symbolical terms. Such a shift threatens to dehumanise their work and undercut their ambition to maintain good relations with the dead throughout the process.

Indeed, the precautionary principles dominating the protocols, in combination with the non-existent tests, reinforced the distancing of the corpses of the dead from their relatives, thus inhibiting rites of separation. Like the other contributions to this issue that deal with forensic and funerary professionals, Clavandier et al. point to the abiding struggle by these professionals to find ways to improvise and balance restrictions and guidelines with a human and empathic interaction with the dead as well as with the persons who have lost relatives suspected to be infected by COVID-19.

The importance of burial and other rituals of life–death separation have also been amply documented and analysed, including in the context of natural disasters with high numbers of dead bodies. International organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and WHO have repeatedly tried to debunk the myth...
that disaster dead cause epidemics and insist that states must ensure that dead bodies are managed according to prevailing ethical, social and legal norms. After the 2004 tsunami, psychologists made the case that identification and proper burial should be essential parts of psychosocial interventions. But epidemics are different because of the actual risk that dead bodies can pass on the infection to the living. This was the case during the Ebola crisis in West Africa, and of course during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The risk of infection also challenges people in charge of handling dead bodies during the pandemic as it challenges health workers. Michael Thompson’s revelation of the world and work of Bob Butt, a nineteenth-century African American gravedigger, amid a yellow fever pandemic shows startling parallels – and some divergences when compared to the current pandemic. After the flight of the White population from the town to escape the fever, Butt becomes a local hero whose survival while burying the dead amid a ravaging pandemic becomes framed as both heroic and biologically ordained. Here, as well as during cholera, pest or other pandemics, the topography of race rises out of a banal regime of inequality: racialised and dehumanised populations are made to deal with the proliferation of death – especially among populations long left to chronic illness, confinement and layers of morbidity. This is as though the racialised relationship between African American slaves and death made them particularly suited to doing proximate labour, such as burial.

Bob Butt is by no means a historical anomaly, nor does his provisionally elevated condition necessarily qualify him for full recognition as human – to be emancipated. The shadow of forced work emerges alongside the ‘gallant’ burial work of prisoners from Riker’s Island in today’s New York. In this space drones now show a similar unfree condition for prisoners burying the dead at Hart Island across the bay. During the COVID-19 pandemic the long-standing existence of a pauper’s cemetery at Hart Island has been rediscovered, along with its unfree burial workers, but with – again – little humanisation for those who bury.

The paradigm of burial and commemoration, and who has the right to authorise or deny it, is another crucial question emerging from this body of work that is deeply entwined with the denial of ritual. Governments and health authorities have approached the challenge of commemoration with much variation, some horrifyingly violent, others seeking attenuation of demands for (at least) minimal commemoration. In their contribution to this issue, Sanjurjo, Azevedo and Nadai explore the management of bodies during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, asking how the current patterns of death management map onto other historical periods. In Brazil, they argue, underreporting (and lack of testing) at the start of the pandemic became a political strategy with effects on state regulation. Following an ‘exceptional health rationale’, this produced a cloud of uncertainty and many (dead) bodies suspected of being infected with COVID-19, who had to be ‘pacified’ like former and contemporary groups of dangerous bodies of black slaves, the poor, the leftist terrorists and the criminals. It is not a surprise, then, that the cemeteries where the bodies of suspected but unconfirmed COVID-19 victims were buried.
(in the case of São Paulo), were the public cemeteries where criminals and indigents have been buried in ‘normal times’. Like the other contributions to this special issue, Sanjurjo and colleagues emphasise how the current pandemic has reproduced existing inequalities and racialisation in life as well as in death.

Conclusions

There are multitudes of prognostications about the afterlife of COVID-19, of whether it will end and what the implications may be. For scholars, thinking through this task is immensely complicated, conceptually, institutionally and in pinning down the legacy of something that may (or may not) end.

Will the COVID-19 pandemic give rise to conceptual developments or new themes/focus points in the analysis of the social and political life of dead bodies? Or, even more important, are there key ways that the treatment of death and dead bodies is to be (re)positioned in contemporary societies? Is COVID a historical anomaly – an ‘exogenous shock’, as an economist might say – or will it trigger, accelerate or demarcate new structural change?

Density of life, the function of cities and death in the global economy, the place of the cemetery in space and social life, are all positioned to change. But just as the de-densification of workplaces, of urban life and of urban consumption has changed – at least temporarily – new horizons are already being envisaged, including firms weighing the cost-benefit of carrying heavy exposure to material office spaces in exclusive cities. Or, as the World Economic Forum recently put it, ‘Unlike previous episodes [of economic crisis], however, this time around the misalignment does not stem from excessive leverage build-up, but rather from a sharp drop in both operating revenues and the overall demand for commercial real estate.’

36 Seen, too, from the perspective of a super-heating economy, something may not be kept entirely ‘exogenous’ here.

At the same time, perhaps mortality has returned as ‘the defining feature of human life’. Human exposure to death, ruptures of the marginalisation of death and fractured bureaucratisation of the governance of the terms of death and disposal have brought dead bodies, again, close to everyday life – both visually and viscerally. While scholars have well noted the gradual exemption of death from the industrialised city, and the cemetery from the city, too, the urban terms of COVID-19 death might also propel a new pattern of flight from the real or imagined spatial conditions of death and infection. Long a concern for urban planners, death and health in the city propelled all manner of new changes to the governance of the urban environment; from the ‘regeneration’ of blight – destroying racialised neighbourhoods – to the making of new ‘garden cities’ and suburbs from scratch, the trifecta of city–illness–space, is a long-standing pattern unlikely to be extraneous to incoming developments.

What, then, will COVID-19 produce? What are the productive effects of situations of surplus death? Perhaps they will serve to augment state capacity to manage death, forcing states to build in increasing ‘resilience’ to austerity-stricken and privatised health infrastructures, cemeteries and registrars. The question doesn't seem
to be whether surplus death and COVID-19 will lead to a recasting of the ‘public’ in public health but, rather, whether this will be toward a narrowing or an amplification – and on what new spatial and/or global terms. Surplus death could be pigeonholed to surplus populations, codifying populations that require care against redefining the terms of those that may not, accelerating the already prominent trend of policing and differentiated bordering in urban and global terms. Already the subject of absent attention, infection and insidious sequelae, such populations may be further cast as ‘risk’ factors of global death and illness, motivating a remaking of governance aligned with historical techniques of the (mis)management of life. When long-standing social relations and categories are suddenly recast as risk factors, governmental and biopolitical institutions have a long history of developing analyses, guidelines and legislation to contain or prevent the spread of epidemics. A pandemic revision of the terms of necropolitics, on global terms, would be devastating for the prospect equitable life in the near term.

On the other hand, if anything about the management of death has been made obvious over the course of the pandemic (thus far), it is that there is nothing particularly consistent about how death is managed, globally. The government of the pandemic has varied as widely as there are states, only occasionally with answers that are intuitive – much less predictable. Scandinavian countries diverged at poles. North American countries closed borders with each other for fear of the impacts of their varied responses. Latin American countries’ responses have been fractured, internally, by regional power, criminal governance and odd connectedness to the global economy – as in Manaus as a special zone of economic production.

Divining a pattern of borders is, for the moment, an exercise in speculative non-fiction, but this just underscores the point that this pandemic must be studied through simultaneously global and local lenses, and with a recognition of the interplay between rupture and continuity in an exceptional time. While it is still too early to make conclusions regarding the impact of the current pandemic on forensic and funerary sectors and its implications for the place of death and dead bodies in society and politics, the contributions to this special issue provide some stepping-stones for the following analysis and discussion that hopefully will unfold in *Human Remains and Violence*.

**Notes**


2 E.g. the UK in April 2020 and Mexico in July 2020. Spain reached 156% excess mortality in April 2020 (according to the latter database, but only ca. 80% according to Eurostat).
Graham Denyer Willis, Finn Stepputat and Gaëlle Clavandier


7 Ibid.


15 Scottish Widows is the name of an insurance company that was set up in Edinburgh in 1815 to support women and children who lost their breadwinners in the Napoleonic Wars.


18 See, for example M. Bloch and J. Parry (eds), *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Special issue introduction

20 www.ft.com/content/a2901ce8-5eb7-4633-b89c-cbdf5b386938 (accessed 13 April 2021).
28 G. Clavandier et al., ‘From One Body to Another’.
29 Ibid.
34 Examples are legion. For a recent case, see C. I. Briggs and C. Mantini-Briggs, Stories in the Time of Cholera: Racial Profiling during a Medical Nightmare (Oakland, University of California Press, 2003).
35 Sanjurjo, Azevedo and Nadai, ‘Suspect Bodies’.

