

# Special issue introduction: Burial and the politics of dead bodies in times of COVID-19 (part 2)

Graham Denyer Willis University of Cambridge

gdw27@cam.ac.uk

Finn Stepputat Danish Institute for International Studies

fst@diis.dk

Gaëlle Clavandier Université Jean Monnet Saint-Etienne

Gaëlle.Clavandier@univ-st-etienne.fr

When the first wave of COVID-19 ravaged the world in 2020, we made a call for a special issue of *Human Remains and Violence* to document early experiences and reflections on the management of those who died from the virus. In hot spots of the pandemic in particular, the sudden surge in numbers of dead bodies overwhelmed often under-resourced and unprepared institutions of death care; new protocols of management of potentially infected dead bodies changed the usual procedures of forensic and funerary institutions and inhibited customary rituals of separation for relatives and friends of the deceased. Blatant cases of crisis and emergency measures and lack of death care hit the media on a global scale and created outrage and debates about the dignified management and disposal of dead bodies. Luckily, we received a very enthusiastic response to the call for papers, and the journal decided to publish two special issues on the pandemic, of which this is the second (see vol. 7.2 for the first special issue).

The first article in this issue is a mainly conceptual contribution in which Nicole Iturriaga and Derek S. Denman develop the idea of a spectrum of necropolitics, with extreme violence involved in politically motivated disappearances at one end and state negligence and abandonment related to the surplus dead of the pandemic at the other. Both forms of necropolitics interrupt death rituals, and both have the potential to fuel political opposition and unrest.

Carmen Rial's contribution focuses on the difficulties of mourning in Brazil, from the case of Yanomami people, whose dead would customarily be burned and where the enforced burial of COVID-19 victims converted 'good death' into 'evil death', to the case of the workers who transported the dead to closed-off cemeteries and tried to give families in poor neighbourhoods a chance to say goodbye by passing through their street, with a honk as a last goodbye. As Beltrán-Gil, Lopez-Cerquera, Reyes Muñoz, Sedano Rios, Maestro Martínez and Newberry Franco show in their contribution, forensic personnel in Mexico also tried to cope with the dehumanising impact of the COVID-19 protocols. These were unevenly and poorly implemented in the context of a pre-existing forensic crisis and under-resourced

**Graham Denyer Willis, Finn Steputat and Gaëlle Clavandier**

institutions, and the article documents the stress and fear of contamination affecting the forensic workers.

Analysing the experience of deathcare providers in Arizona in the United States (US), Robin C. Reineke shows how the US deathcare industry is unregulated and ambiguous, which has left the responsibility for care during the pandemic in the hands of overburdened funerary directors and forensic authorities. Thus, rather than being bureaucratic, routinised and grounded in law, the governance of the COVID-19 dead was somewhat 'slapdash, creative and grounded in care', with the risk of leaving some bodies to uncare and abandonment. In the last final contribution, Sally Raudon explores how Hart Island, New York's graveyard for people who cannot pay for their own burial, historically has slipped in *and* out of view in cycles of remembering and forgetting. Raudon suggests that the public outcry and protests that happened when the harsh realities of Hart Island were rediscovered by New Yorkers during the 'spectacular event' of the pandemic were due to the 'bluntly honest indifference' of the massed burials, with no pretence that, however neglected in life, people are valued in death.

Enjoy the reading.