

**SOCI 330: Death & Birth
Syllabus for Fall 2023**

Professor Catherine Tan
(She/Her/Hers)

Class meeting:
Location – Blodgett Hall 309
Tuesdays at 10:30pm to 12:30pm

Email: ctan@vassar.edu
Office Phone: (845) 437-5509
(Do not call me. I never pick up.)

Office Hours
Blodgett Hall 304D
Tuesdays and Thursdays between 3:00pm-4:00pm

Course Description

Births happen every day. And unless you're a turritopsis doohmii jellyfish, death is inevitable. While we may personally care about certain births and deaths (our own and those of people we care about), they are not inherently significant events. So, what makes these events special? This seminar will explore the social nature of birth and death, primarily in the context of the United States. How do we make sense of and attribute meaning to birth, death, and... the beyond? How do these things organize social roles and responsibilities? How do social inequalities shape birth and death? Whose births/deaths are made to matter? Throughout this seminar, students will conduct their own research projects and engage with sociological research, film, literature, and art to investigate the stuff between conception and the afterlife.

Course Structure and Assignments

Required Books

If for any reason you are not able to access these books, please contact me.

Almeling, Rene. 2011. *Sex Cells: The Medical Market for Eggs and Sperm*. Univ of California Press.

Bridges, Khiara. 2011. *Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of Pregnancy as a Site of Racialization*. Univ of California Press.

Doughty, Caitlin. 2017. *From Here to Eternity: Travelling the World to Find the Good Death*. Hachette UK.

Kalanithi, Paul. 2016. *When Breath Becomes Air*. Random House.

Kaufman, Sharon R. 2015. *Ordinary Medicine: Extraordinary Treatments, Longer Lives, and Where to Draw the Line*. Duke University Press.

Littlejohn, Krystale E. 2021. *Just Get on the Pill: The Uneven Burden of Reproductive Politics*. Vol. 4: Univ of California Press.

Timmermans, Stefan. 2006. *Postmortem: How Medical Examiners Explain Suspicious Deaths*. University of Chicago Press.

Waggoner, Miranda R. 2017. *The Zero Trimester: Pre-Pregnancy Care and the Politics of Reproductive Risk*. Univ of California Press.

Office Hours

“Office hours” are times reserved outside of our usual class meetings for students to say hello, have tea, and discuss and/or ask questions about the course materials and concepts with me 1:1. While you are not required to attend office hours, I *strongly encourage* students to see me *at least twice* during the semester even if you do not have a specific question (I will start the conversation. It will not be awkward, I promise). If you are unable to attend scheduled office hours, please email me to set up individual appointments.

Assignments and Points

Class Participation*	25
Research Project One	50
Research Project Two	50
Total	125

*Class participation includes engaging in discussions, asking questions, attending classes/fieldtrips.

Research projects

The course is divided into two units: death and birth (hence the title of the course). At the beginning of each unit, Professor Tan will share the research project description. Students will have the entire unit to think about and gradually work on their project, reading and collecting data. Both projects will focus on a specific issue/theme of their choice. In addition to outside research and learning, projects must meaningfully engage with readings, concepts, and content from the course. All projects will include a paper that is 5-10 pages following the formatting guide (below). At the end of the course, one of your two projects will be printed in the course journal, which will be available for pick up at the start of Spring semester.

Formatting

Please give yourself enough time to make sure that your assignments are in compliance with the formatting expectations before turning in your work. When in doubt, use THIS syllabus as a model. If you have trouble making this format changes on your word processing program, please consult with the college tech services.

- Font: Times New Roman
- Size: 11
- Margins: 1-inch all around
- Left alignment
- Single-spaced
- Consistent in-text references and bibliography (I prefer ASA or Harvard citation styles)

Classroom Etiquette

Engagement

Maintaining an academic, respectful, and honest classroom environment is a collective effort. I am relying on you to please:

- Arrive to class on time.
- Be respectful of others’ ideas and arguments. This means providing space for fruitful debate.

- Allow speakers to complete their comments/questions before sharing your own thoughts. You do not have to raise your hand to speak, but please do not interrupt each other.
- Complete and submit your assignments on the days they are due.
- You are allowed to use your laptop/tablets for taking notes.
- Improper use of laptops and cellphones will impact your participation grade.

Email Policy

You may email me any time/day, but please do not expect an immediate response. I try to respond to emails within 24 hours. If you do not hear from me within 24 hours, please follow up. I only reply to emails Monday-Friday (so, I might not respond to emails received on Friday until the next Monday). In your email subject line, include the name of the course (i.e., SOCI/STS 330). In the body of your email, please use a proper address (e.g., Dear Prof. Tan) and signature.

College Resources & Policies

Title IX Reporting Responsibility and Resources

Vassar College is committed to providing a safe learning environment for all students that is free of all forms of discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. If you (or someone you know) has experienced or experiences any of these incidents, know that you are not alone. Vassar College has staff members trained to support you in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, helping with legal protective orders, and more.

Please be aware all Vassar faculty members are “responsible employees,” which means that if you tell me about a situation involving sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, or stalking, I must share that information with the Title IX Coordinator. Although I have to make that notification, you will control how your case will be handled, including whether or not you wish to pursue a formal complaint. Our goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available to you and have access to the resources you need.

If you wish to speak to someone privately, you can contact any of the following on-campus resources:

- Counseling Service (counselingservice.vassar.edu, 845-437-5700)
- Health Service (healthservice.vassar.edu, 845-437-5800)
- Charlotte Strauss-Swanson, SAVP (Sexual Assault and Violence Prevention) director (savp.vassar.edu, 845-437-7863)
- SART (Sexual Assault Response Team) advocate, available 24/7 by calling the CRC at 845-437-7333

The SAVP website and the Title IX section of the EOAA website (eoaa.vassar.edu/title-ix/) have more information, as well as links to both on- and off-campus resources.”

Academic Integrity

Academic dishonesty is a very serious matter (cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, etc.) and will be dealt with accordingly. Students should expect a failing grade for the assignment/exam. The incident will also be reported to the Department Chair and the Dean. For more information on academic honesty, please refer to this link: <https://deanofthecollege.vassar.edu/documents/college-regulations/j/>

Academic Accommodations

Academic accommodations are available for students registered with the Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity (AEO). Students in need of disability (ADA/504) accommodations should schedule an appointment with me early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course that have been approved by the Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity, as indicated in your AEO accommodation letter.

Textbook Accessibility and Affordability

Vassar students often report challenges accessing and affording required course materials. The College is committed to ensuring that every student can participate fully in the curriculum, regardless of financial need. The [Movement for Affordable Textbooks \(MAT\)](#) website highlights a variety of resources – financial, library, departmental, and peer-to-peer – that can help [students](#) navigate the costs of textbooks and other materials.

Course Schedule

This schedule indicates the themes and readings of each week and any assignments due. This schedule is tentative and may change to reflect our progress as a class.

Each week’s assigned readings must be completed *before* class. Please be prepared to discuss the assigned readings in class/online.

*NOTE: Readings may change (except for the books)

Week One **Introduction to SOCI/STS 330**
August 29 Review syllabus

 **PART ONE: DEATH** 

Week Two **The ethics of extending life**
September 5 **Monday night movie at 7pm: *Hope Frozen – A Quest to Live Twice* (2019)**

Kaufman, Sharon R. 2015. *Ordinary Medicine: Extraordinary Treatments, Longer Lives, and Where to Draw the Line*: Duke University Press. (Introduction, Chapter 1, one chapter from Part II (you will be assigned, see Moodle), 5, 6, 8, Conclusion)

WATCH BEFORE CLASS: *Hope Frozen – A Quest to Live Twice* (2019) 1hr 15min

Week Three **End-of-life**
September 12

Kalanithi, Paul. 2016. *When Breath Becomes Air*. Random House. (ALL)

Kerr, C. W., J. P. Donnelly, S. T. Wright, S. M. Kuszczak, A. Banas, P. C. Grant and D. L. Luczkiewicz. 2014. "End-of-Life Dreams and Visions: A Longitudinal Study of Hospice Patients' Experiences." *J Palliat Med* 17(3):296-303.

Slater, Lauren. 2012. "How Psychedelic Drugs Can Help Patients Face Death." *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/magazine/how-psychedelic-drugs-can-help-patients-face-death.html>

Hargreaves, Henry. 2016. "No Seconds." <https://henryhargreaves.com> *you have to scroll about half way down.

**Week Four
September 19**

Bereavement and grieving

Visitor: Matilda Garrido, death doula

Monday night movie at 7pm: *The Farewell* (2019)

Bandini, Julia. 2015. "The Medicalization of Bereavement:(Ab) Normal Grief in the DSM-5." *Death studies* 39(6):347-52.

Gross, Nora. 2023. "# Longlivedaguys: Online Grief, Solidarity, and Emotional Freedom for Black Teenage Boys after the Gun Deaths of Friends." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 52(2):261-89.

Bravo, Vanessa. 2017. "Coping with Dying and Deaths at Home: How Undocumented Migrants in the United States Experience the Process of Transnational Grieving." *Mortality* 22(1):33-44.

Frost, Julia, Harriet Bradley, Ruth Levitas, Lindsay Smith and Jo Garcia. 2007. "The Loss of Possibility: Scientisation of Death and the Special Case of Early Miscarriage." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 29(7):1003-22.

Jones, Sandra J. and Elizabeth Beck. 2007. "Disenfranchised Grief and Nonfinite Loss as Experienced by the Families of Death Row Inmates." *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 54(4):281-99.

**Week Five
September 26**

Determining death

Visitor (tentative): Julia Bandini

Timmermans, Stefan. *Postmortem: How Medical Examiners Explain Suspicious Deaths*. University of Chicago Press, 2006. (Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2, see additional assigned chapter on Moodle, Conclusion)

**Week Six
October 3**

After life (I)

Doughty, Caitlin. *From Here to Eternity: Travelling the World to Find the Good Death*. Hachette UK, 2017. (ALL)

Vassar Ghost Tour on Thursday 10/5/2023 at 5pm

Field Trip on Saturday 10/7/2023 to The Rubin Museum of Art in NYC

**Week Seven
October 10**

After life (II): The living(?) dead

Prickett, Pamela J. and Stefan Timmermans. 2022. "'If No One Grieves, No One Will Remember': Cultural Palimpsests and the Creation of Social Ties through Rituals." *Br J Sociol* 73(2):244-58.

Bonsu, Samuel K. 2007. "The Presentation of Dead Selves in Everyday Life: Obituaries and Impression Management." *Symbolic Interaction* 30(2):199-219.

Eaton, Marc A. 2019. "Manifesting Spirits: Paranormal Investigation and the Narrative Development of a Haunting." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 48(2):155-82.

Listen: <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/793/the-problem-with-ghosts>

Ohlheiser, Abby. 2022. "What happens when you donate your body to science?" *MIT Technology Review*.

<https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/10/12/1060924/donating-your-body-science-body-farm/>

Rubin, April. 2023. "Honoring the Body Donors Who Are a Medical Student's 'First Patient.'" *New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/31/science/donor-bodies-medical-school-appreciation.html>

RESEARCH PROJECT ONE DUE

Friday, October 13th at 11:59pm on Moodle (Prof. Tan feedback October 27)

**Week NOPE
October 17**

October Break!!!

 PART TWO: BIRTH 

**Week Eight
October 24**

Birth control

Littlejohn, Krystale E. 2021. *Just Get on the Pill: The Uneven Burden of Reproductive Politics*. Univ of California Press.

**Week Nine
October 31**

Preconception care

FIELD TRIP TO LOEB @ 10:30am

Waggoner, Miranda R. 2017. *The Zero Trimester: Pre-Pregnancy Care and the Politics of Reproductive Risk*. Univ of California Press.

**Week Ten
November 7**

The genetic materials market

Visitor (tentative): Skye Miner

Almeling, Rene. 2011. *Sex Cells: The Medical Market for Eggs and Sperm*. Univ of California Press. (Introduction, Chapter 2, 4, 5, Conclusion)

Miner, Skye A. 2019. "Demarcating the Dirty Work: Canadian Fertility Professionals' Use of Boundary-Work in Contentious Egg Donation." *Social Science & Medicine* 221:19-26.

Extra:

Haridasani Gupta, Alisha and Dani Blum. 2022. "Hope, Regret, Uncertainty: 7 Women on Freezing Their Eggs."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/23/well/family/egg-freezing-fertility.html>

**Week Eleven
November 14**

(In)fertility, assisted reproductive technology, and global impact

Delaunay, Catarina, Luís Gouveia, Mário JDS Santos, and Rita Morais. 2023. "(De) Bonding with Embryos: The Emotional Choreographies of Portuguese IVF Patients." *Social Science & Medicine* 321: 115770.

Bell, Ann V. 2010. "Beyond (Financial) Accessibility: Inequalities within the Medicalisation of Infertility." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 32(4):631-46.

Smith-Cavros, Eileen. 2010. "Fertility and Inequality across Borders: Assisted Reproductive Technology and Globalization." *Sociology Compass* 4(7):466-75.

Vora, Kalindi. 2013. "Potential, Risk, and Return in Transnational Indian Gestational Surrogacy." *Current Anthropology* 54(Supplement 7):S97-S106.

Rexer, Gala. 2021. "Borderlands of Reproduction: Bodies, Borders, and Assisted Reproductive Technologies in Israel/Palestine." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44(9):1549-68.

**Week Twelve
November 21**

Pregnancy (I): Testing, seeing, and choosing

Rapp, Rayna. 1999. *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America*. Routledge.

Saxton, Marsha. 2006. "Disability Rights and Selective Abortion." *The Disability Studies Reader* 2:105-16.

Hutchens, K. (2021). "Gummy bears" and "teddy grahams": Ultrasounds as religious biopower in crisis pregnancy centers. *Social Science & Medicine*, 277, 1.

Extras:

Kliff, Sarah and Aatish Bhatia. 2022. "When They Warn of Rare Disorders, These Prenatal Tests Are Usually Wrong." *New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/upshot/pregnancy-birth-genetic-testing.html>

Ciesemier, Kendall. 2022. "Leave My Disability Out of Your Anti-Abortion Propaganda." *New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/31/opinion/disability-rights-anti-abortion.html>

**Week Thirteen
November 28**

Pregnancy (II): Race, racism, and reproduction

Bridges, Khiara. 2011. *Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of Pregnancy as a Site of Racialization*. Univ of California Press.

RESEARCH PROJECT TWO DUE

Friday, December 8th (Friday) at 11:59pm on Moodle