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# Introduction

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**Abstract:** Death is universal, though it is experienced in diverse ways by different peoples and cultures. It has different meanings and implications to each community. Through reflection on death from various perspectives, we gain insight into the meaning of life. Death is a biological, social, and spiritual phenomenon and we explore those different meanings across time and place. It is about the body, but also the essence of one's being, and about the living who carry on the memories and the genes of those who passed. It is about the human endeavor to forestall death, our capacity for injustice in that search, and our humanity in coping with loss. Finally, it is about how we live on in the face of death as individuals who are intimately connected to one another through social ties and whose existence is disrupted by the disappearance of those closest to us. Death, in its ultimate rendition, creates life anew.

**Resumen:** La muerte es universal, aunque esta se experimenta de diversas maneras por cada sociedad y cultura. Desde una perspectiva global e histórica, la muerte tiene diferentes significados e implicancias para cada comunidad. Reflexionando sobre la muerte, desde diversas perspectivas, obtenemos una mejor idea del significado de la vida. La muerte es un fenómeno biológico, social y espiritual; y exploramos en este capítulo sus diferentes significados, a través del tiempo y el espacio. La muerte se refiere al cuerpo, pero también a la esencia del propio ser; además, a los vivos quienes llevan los recuerdos y los genes de aquellos que fallecen. Se refiere al esfuerzo humano para prevenirla; a nuestra capacidad para cometer injusticias con tal de evitarla, y a nuestra humanidad para hacerle frente a la pérdida. Finalmente, se trata de cómo seguimos hacia adelante pese a la muerte como individuos íntimamente conectados unos a los otros a través de lazos sociales, y cuya conexión se ve interrumpida por la desaparición de aquellos más cercanos a nosotros. La muerte, en su último acto, crea nuevamente vida.

The authors of this volume explore the role of death in our lives, how it is understood from various perspectives, and how it intersects with life: past, present, and future. Although neither the exhibition nor this volume can be completely comprehensive, we aim to illustrate a diversity of perspectives, behaviors, and beliefs. We live in a society that adopts an outlook in which nature is separate from humanity; this perspective views life and death in ways distinct from the religious and cultural perceptions of many other human groups past and present. For many in the US, death is a biological endpoint. It represents a specific moment in time in which life expires definitively and is bounded, a finite path with a beginning and an end. It is rooted in an empiricism that pervades our modernist view, rooted in science and medical knowledge as the overarching prospect of our time.

Yet, even in our own society, alternative perspectives on death pervade many of our understandings. And in societies across the globe, this empirical perspective of death as a finite moment in time, an end without renewal, and a fatalist viewpoint is challenged by both religious thought and lived realities of what happens to living beings as we move through death. For many, death is not an endpoint or a grand finality but has meaning much deeper in the cycle of life.

The exhibition built from this volume's scholarship leverages knowledge across cultures and the natural world to pose diverse answers to and vantages on several existential questions about death (see Miller and Whitfield in this volume). What is death? Do I have to die? What will happen to my body? What will happen to my spirit? How will my death affect others? Answers to these questions are not addressed sequentially in this volume, for every story has multiple responses to the questions about one's own death and that of others. Yet, certain themes represented in this collection address certain questions more directly than others. The treatment of the body, for example, reverberates in the essays on the biology of the life cycle and the performance of grieving rituals while the potential of the spirit has lasting invocation in the essays on religion, vitality, and life force.

This volume is organized around five thematic essays, each with four short case studies that elaborate on themes from the exhibition (Figure 1.1). The authors are leading scientists, Indigenous scholars, and museum professionals who have contributed to the exhibition as consultants, developers, designers, and co-curators or are museum curators themselves. Many of the objects displayed in the exhibition and photographed in exquisite form by exhibition photographer Michelle