

Durham University, Dunelm House, New Elvet, Durham



Durham  
University

CENTRE  
FOR  
*death* *life*  
STUDIES

9th-10th April 2025

# Closure

**D**igital  
**D**Eath

## ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

# Closure



*A single word can carry many meanings, speak truth, lies, cause confusion, grant wisdom or deception: is "closure" one such word?*

This conference has been organised by Prof. Douglas Davies, Dr. Georgina Robinson, and Fiona Cunningham, all of the Centre for Death and Life Studies and Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham, UK. It marks the conclusion of our European Union Collaboration of Humanities and Social Sciences in Europe (CHANSE) funded *Digital Death: Transforming History, Rituals, and Afterlife Project* (DiDe). The project has been led by Prof. Johanna Sumiala (University of Helsinki, Finland), Dr. Dorthe Refslund Christensen (University of Aarhus, Denmark), Dr. Adela Toplean (University of Bucharest, Romania), and Prof. Douglas Davies (University of Durham, UK). All four nations were supported by a team of researchers, including Dr. Anu Harju (Helsinki), Linda Pentikäinen (Helsinki), Dr. Mórna O'Connor (Aarhus), Anne-Line Holdgaard Lunding (Aarhus), Maria Chiribeş (Bucharest), and Dr. Georgina Robinson (Durham). You can learn more about the DiDe project at:

[helsinki.fi/en/researchgroups/digital-death-transforming-history-rituals-and-afterlife](https://helsinki.fi/en/researchgroups/digital-death-transforming-history-rituals-and-afterlife).

## Schedule

### WEDNESDAY (9TH APRIL)

- 12:30 - Registration opens
- 13:15 - Welcome with tea & coffee
- 13:45 - Conference opens
- 14:00 - Session One
- 15:30 - Tea & coffee break
- 16:00 - Session Two
- 17:30 - Day One sessions conclude
- Break until 19:00 - Free time to refresh, have dinner in Durham city centre
- 19:00 - Public Event: Special Lecture
- 20:30 - Drinks Reception

### THURSDAY (10TH APRIL)

- 09:15 - Session Three
- 11:00 - Tea & coffee break
- 11:30 - Session Four
- 13:00 - Lunch (provided)
- 14:00 - Session Five
- 15:30 - Tea & coffee break
- 16:00 - Session Six
- 17:15 - Concluding Remarks
- 17:30 - Day Two sessions conclude
- Break until 19:00 - Free time to refresh or to make the journey home
- 19:00 - Conference Dinner at Hatfield College



# OUR SESSIONS



## Session One

WEDNESDAY 2PM - 3:30PM

Simon Allen	<i>The Humanist Funeral Practitioner's Perspective</i>
Divya Jyoti	<i>Closure 'Work': Struggles against our mortality and its ethical implications</i>
Myra Giesen	<i>Rediscovering Ballast Hills: Closure and Reconnection</i>
Claire Warwick	<i>From Klara to Mars Rover: literary discussions of digital closure and Artificial Friendship</i>

## Session Two

WEDNESDAY 4PM - 5:30PM

Viola Clark-Gould	<i>Digital memorial as a means to closure: An inevitable failure in reconstructing the 'I'</i>
Georgina Robinson	<i>Expressions of closure through the National Covid Memorial Wall</i>
Hilary Grainger	<i>The Final Curtain? The Architectural Context of Closure in the Crematorium</i>

## Session Three

THURSDAY 9:15AM - 11AM

Johanna Sumiala	<i>Closure, rituals and mourning online - what would Victor Turner say?</i>
Dorthe Refslund Christensen	<i>Grief between closure and keeping doors open</i>
Adela Topelan	<i>Contours of Freedom: The Paradox of Closure in Life, Art, and Grief</i>

## Session Four

THURSDAY 11:30AM - 1PM

Heather Sutherland	<i>'Lived Experience' and 'Closure' - Work-in-Progress Research Reflections of a Suicide Bereaved Academic</i>
Maria Williams	<i>Can Near-Death Experiencers Have Closure?: The Difficulties in Returning to Everyday Life</i>
John Adams	<i>Closure and Connection</i>
Mark Borthwick	<i>Beyond the Good Death: Understanding Religious Opposition to Assisted Dying Through the Lens of Spiritual Closure</i>

## Session Five

THURSDAY 2PM - 3:30PM

Julian Horton	<i>Closure and Grief in Romantic Instrumental Music: Mendelssohn's String Quartet in F minor, Op. 80</i>
Jono Lethaby	<i>Latter-day Saint Temple work and obtaining celestial closure</i>
Lisa Temple-Cox	<i>No Closure: An artist's illustrated perspective on the afterlife of human remains in medical collections</i>
Fiona Cunningham	<i>Alkaline Hydrolysis (Resomation) and its implications for 'closure' in contemporary UK funeral ritual</i>

## Session Six

THURSDAY 4PM - 5:15PM

Brenda Mathijssen	<i>Human Composting, Closure, and the Perseverance of Life</i>
Tony Sumner	<i>Is my father dead? Must I delete him to achieve closure?</i>
Douglas Davies	<i>Levels of Closure</i>

## OUR SPEAKERS



### John Adams

#### ***Closure and Connection***



John Adams is a funeral industry leader, campaigner, and podcast host dedicated to transforming societal conversations around death. A fourth-generation funeral director and advisor to Child Bereavement UK, John has spent over a decade advocating for greater support and education on grief. As a past President of the National Association of Funeral Directors, John led a national campaign to introduce bereavement awareness into schools. His podcast, *Death: A Changing Industry*, has gained national recognition, providing a platform for open and honest discussions on death. In his talk, John explores the evolving role of funerals, the complexities of grief, and how society can foster meaningful connections through loss.

### Simon Allen

#### ***The Humanist Funeral Practitioner's Perspective***



Simon Allen has worked as a Humanist Celebrant since 1991, taking all ceremonies but specialising in funerals. As part of Humanists UK, Simon was one of a team of three members who wrote a new funeral training course, developed and delivered to over 100 celebrants in the 1990s. Observing and taking active part in the development of modern Humanist funerals in the UK across his 33+ years experience, Simon has documented the changes in photographs, papers and articles. His day-to-day work across over 102 crematoria, cemeteries and chapels in the South East of the UK has given him clear insight into how people say goodbye.

### Mark Borthwick

#### ***Beyond the Good Death: Understanding Religious Opposition to Assisted Dying Through the Lens of Spiritual Closure***



Mark Borthwick is a final year PhD fellow at the Open University, whose work intersects ethics, religion, and geographies. An academic and storyteller, he combines academic inquiry with storytelling practices, using narrative as a methodology for facilitating conversations about transformation, mortality, and place - creating dialogues that bridge environmental ethics and cultural understanding.

### Viola Clark-Gold

#### ***Digital memorial as a means to closure: an inevitable failure in reconstructing the 'I'***



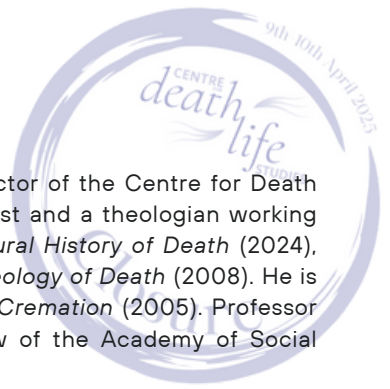
Viola Clark-Gould is a first-year PhD candidate at Sidney Sussex College of the University of Cambridge. She is supervised by Prof. Joseph Webster in the Faculty of Divinity, currently exploring material cultures and spirituality, focused on Jewish food traditions in contemporary Denmark. Viola's interdisciplinary background covers Theology, Jewish studies, Anthropology, and Philosophy. For this conference, she will be engaging with themes of identity and kinship as they relate to death in the digital sphere.

### Fiona Cunningham

#### ***Alkaline Hydrolysis (Resomation) and its implications for 'closure' in contemporary UK funeral ritual***



Fiona is a Research Associate currently engaged on a UKRI-funded Knowledge Transfer Partnership project between Durham University and Kindly Earth Ltd, investigating the cultural, social and religious barriers to the introduction of Resomation (alkaline hydrolysis) as an alternative to burial and cremation in the UK. Prior to embarking on this project, Fiona worked as an FBCA-certified cremator technician at Durham's busy city-centre crematorium, where she fostered an enduring interest in our relationships with, and responsibilities to, the dying, bereaved, and the dead.



## Douglas Davies

### **Levels of Closure**



Douglas J. Davies is Professor in the Study of Religion and Director of the Centre for Death and Life Studies at Durham University, UK. Both an anthropologist and a theologian working extensively in the field of Death Studies, he is author of *A Cultural History of Death* (2024), *Death, Ritual and Belief* (2017), *Natural Burial* (2012), and *The Theology of Death* (2008). He is also the editor, along with Lewis Mates, of *The Encyclopedia of Cremation* (2005). Professor Davies is a Fellow of the British Academy, as well as a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences.

## Myra Giesen

### **Rediscovering Ballast Hills: Closure and Reconnection**



Dr. Myra J Giesen is a Research Associate at Newcastle University's School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences. Her research spans human osteology, mortuary archaeology and heritage resource management, with publications that examine the curation of human remains and the conservation of open-air stone monuments. Her current project on the Ballast Hills Burial Ground (mid1600s to 1853) reawakens a mixed faith burial space in Newcastle upon Tyne (England) through creative community collaborations and open access initiatives that ensure its historical narratives remain freely available. She is also founder of the recently established North East Funerary Heritage Group.

## Hilary Grainger

### **The Final Curtain? The Architectural Context of Closure in the Crematorium**



Professor Emerita of Architectural History at University of the Arts London and Honorary Professor in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University, Hilary is the leading authority on the Victorian architect Sir Ernest George and the architecture, design and landscaping of UK crematoria. Hilary is Chair of The Cremation Society of Great Britain, Vice-President of the International Cremation Federation, Former Chair of the Victorian Society and Past President of the Association for the Study of Death and Society (ASDS), a Director of CAMEO and a Non-Executive Director of the London Cremation Company. Hilary was awarded an OBE in 2018 for Services to Higher Education.

## Julian Horton

### **Closure and Grief in Romantic Instrumental Music: Mendelssohn's String Quartet in F minor, Op. 80**



Julian Horton is Professor of Music at Durham University, and has taught at University College Dublin and King's College, London. His work focuses on the theory and analysis of nineteenth-century instrumental forms, with particular interests in the music of Bruckner, Brahms and theories of Romantic sonata form. In 2012, his article 'John Field and the Alternative History of Concerto First-movement Form' was awarded the Westrup Prize of the Music and Letters Trust. He is currently President of the Society for Music Analysis.

## Divya Jyoti

### **Closure 'work': struggles against our mortality and its ethical implications**



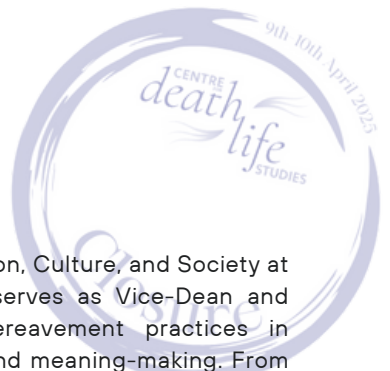
Dr. Divya Jyoti is a Lecturer in Department of Organisation, Work and Technology at Lancaster University Management School. Her research and work explore lived experiences of people in organisations and cities. She examines questions of 'sustainable development' and issues of responsibility and social justice in the context of 'global' production networks with a focus on 'voices' which shape the conversations and practices. Her work is informed by investigations of place, ethnography and autoethnography. More recently she is engaged in exploring how embracing 'fragility of human life' might inspire a reimagined world of organising. Alongside her research, she is also actively involved in activist and reform-orientated organisations.

## Jono Lethaby

### **Latter Day Saint Temple Work and Obtaining Celestial Closure**



Jono Lethaby is currently an MPhil Theology (New Testament and Early Christianity) student at Corpus Christi College Cambridge. His academic interests lie in Biblical Studies, Mormonism, and the interface between them. He is presently researching the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of John 21.20-23 within the Latter-day Saint tradition.



## Brenda Mathijssen

### ***Human Composting, Closure, and the Perseverance of Life***

Brenda Mathijssen is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Religion, Culture, and Society at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, where she also serves as Vice-Dean and Director of Education. Her research explores death and bereavement practices in contemporary Europe, with a particular focus on evolving rituals and meaning-making. From 2021 to 2025, she is leading a research project funded by an NWO Veni grant, investigating the emergence and significance of ecological death practices in the Netherlands, particularly nature burial and human composting.



## Dorthe Refslund Christensen

### ***Grief Between Closure and Keeping Doors Open***

Associate Professor Dorthe Refslund Christensen, Aarhus University, has been a key figure in establishing and developing Nordic research and collaboration in the field of Death Online studies. Dr. Christensen has published widely on grief practices and the everyday in relation to media, materialities and ritualizations and is the editor of the Routledge book series "Studies in Death, Materiality and Origin of Time" and the Emerald short format book series "Sharing Death Online".



## Georgina Robinson

### ***Expressions of Closure Through the National Covid Memorial Wall***

Dr Georgina Robinson is currently a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham, UK. With interests spanning the field of death studies, her research has principally concerned methods of body disposal and their popular acceptability, British crematorium management, the transformation of death and funerary practices in the digital age, and the public education of funerary choices. The impact of her work has been far reaching, and she has been invited to present her research findings internationally in academic, funerary, and public settings. In addition to her primary research and teaching work, Georgina is a Board Member of Durham University's Centre for Death-Life Studies, Council Member of the Association for the Study of Death and Society, Associate Member of the Death and Culture Research Network, and has undertaken research for the voluntary sector.



## Johanna Sumiala

### ***Closure, rituals and mourning online - what would Victor Turner say?***

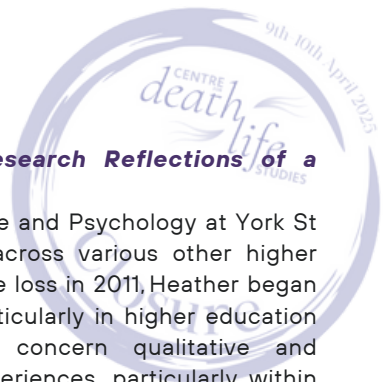
Professor Johanna Sumiala, University of Helsinki, is a Professor of Media and Communication Studies and a specialist in social theory, study of death and ritual and digital anthropology. Dr. Sumiala has published extensively in this research field (Sumiala 2021, 2003) Sumiala maintains an active role within the Finnish, Nordic, and European death studies networks. She has directed and co-directed several interdisciplinary research projects funded by the Academy of Finland as well as Kone Foundation and Helsingin Sanomat Foundation.



## Tony Sumner

### ***Is My Father Dead? Must I Delete Him to Achieve Closure?***

Tony Sumner is a Curatorial Fellow in the Institute for Medical Humanities at Durham University, UK. He is also the co-founder and CEO of Pilgrim Projects, an education consultancy specialising in open, distance and e-learning and healthcare quality improvement. In 2003 Tony co-founded Patient Voices, a programme which made it possible for patients and staff to become auto-ethnographers, exploring their own personal narratives of the consumption and delivery of healthcare and distilling them into first-person reflective digital stories. Patient Voices now houses over a thousand freely available digital stories and has won a number of awards, including the 2010 British medical Journal award for Excellence in Healthcare Education.



## Heather Sutherland

### **'Lived Experience' and 'Closure' – Work-in-Progress Research Reflections of a Suicide Bereaved Academic**



Dr Heather Sutherland joined the School of Education, Language and Psychology at York St John University as a Lecturer in 2024 after having worked across various other higher education settings since 2004. After experiencing sibling suicide loss in 2011, Heather began to explore research concerning mental health and distress, particularly in higher education settings. Heather's current (enduring) research interests concern qualitative and interdisciplinary explorations of mental health and distress experiences, particularly within higher education contexts and particularly where 'lived (*living*) experience' features for those conducting research. Also important for her is seeking to increase visibility in research of experiences of adult sibling suicide bereavement.

## Lisa Temple-Cox

### **No Closure: An artist's illustrated perspective on the afterlife of human remains in medical collections**



Lisa Temple-Cox's practice spans 40 years and encompasses a range of media. Her studio work is underpinned by an observational drawing practice informed by human anatomy, natural history, and botany. Much of this is museum-based, although she often works from her own collections at her rural studio. She has been commissioned by public organisations and private individuals, making artwork for institutions as varied as schools, hospitals, museums, libraries, and even public conveniences. She has also undertaken research residencies in Europe and the USA. Since 2015 Lisa has been employed by Colchester and Ipswich Museums Service, in a range of posts.

## Adela Topelan

### **Contours of Freedom: The Paradox of Closure in Life, Art, and Grief**



Adela Topelan is a Romanian researcher, writer, and artist based in Bucharest, specialising in Death Studies. She is a lecturer in Interpersonal Communication and Microsociology at the University of Bucharest. With a multidisciplinary background that combines sociology, philosophy, arts, religious studies, medicine and communication, Adela has written extensively on the socio-anthropology of death, sociological aspects of the sacred, cultural differences in thanatology, and various epistemological and theoretical challenges in the field. In addition to her academic pursuits, Adela exhibits her paintings and publishes poetry.

## Claire Warwick

### **From Klara to Mars Rover: literary discussions of digital closure and Artificial Friendship**



Claire Warwick is a Professor of Digital Humanities in the Department of English at Durham University. Her research is concerned with the way that digital resources, including artificial intelligence techniques, are used in the humanities and cultural heritage and in reading behaviour in physical and digital spaces. She has recently completed a monograph: *Digital Humanities and the Cyberspace Decade: A World Elsewhere*. She has led and co-investigated several digital humanities research projects, including the AEOLIAN network, which considered the potential for the application of AI to archives and cultural heritage. She collaborates widely, especially with researchers in Canada and the USA and gave the closing plenary lecture for the DH2016 conference. She has served on various advisory boards in digital humanities.

## Maria Williams

### **Can Near-Death Experiencers Have Closure?: The Difficulties in Returning to Everyday Life**



Maria Williams is a current PhD Candidate in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham, UK. Maria's research has primarily focused on Near-Death Experiences (NDEs), and the emotional vulnerability present in the process of communicating these often traumatic experiences. Further, Maria has considered the relationship between cultural symbols and interpretations held by Near-Death Experiencers. She is also interested in broader aspects of death studies, particularly the relationship between grief, disability, and neurodiversity.

# DOCTOR AND CERAMICIST DISCUSS THE CONCEPT OF 'CLOSURE'

9TH APRIL 2025, 7PM. DUNELM HOUSE, FONTEYN BALLROOM

**In conversation with Professor Douglas Davies (FBA), Dr. Kathryn Mannix and Julian Stair will explore the contested concept of "closure".** The conversation will be interactive, with plenty of scope for audience participation. We are absolutely delighted that these two talented individuals are uniquely brought together for this special event. To mark the event, a drinks reception will follow with views overlooking the River Wear and Durham Cathedral. Tickets are £10 for this public event, included within the full Conference package.



## Julian Stair

Julian Stair is one of the UK's leading ceramic artists, exhibiting internationally since 1982. From rites of passage to the daily touch of a cup, Stair's work celebrates the dynamics of use and the way pottery is intrinsic to human existence. His work encompasses the domestic and the monumental, the studio and the factory floor. Julian completed the first theoretical PhD in Ceramics and Glass at the RCA in 2002 and is now a leading historian of English studio ceramics. He was awarded an OBE for services to ceramics in 2022 and Yale University Press published the monograph *Julian Stair: Ceramics, Memory and Material* in 2024.



## Kathryn Mannix

Dr. Kathryn Mannix spent her medical career working with people who have incurable, advanced illnesses. Starting in cancer care and changing career to become a pioneer of the new discipline of palliative medicine, she has worked as a palliative care consultant in teams in hospices, hospitals and in patients' own homes, optimising quality of life even as death is approaching. Using her experience as a physician, psychotherapist, trainer and service lead, Kathryn presents stories that illustrate how we can better understand and prepare for death (our own or somebody else's) in her bestseller *'With The End In Mind,'* and then leads us through the art of Tender Conversations in her latest book, *'Listen.'*



## CONFERENCE DINNER

10TH APRIL 2025, 7PM. HATFIELD COLLEGE

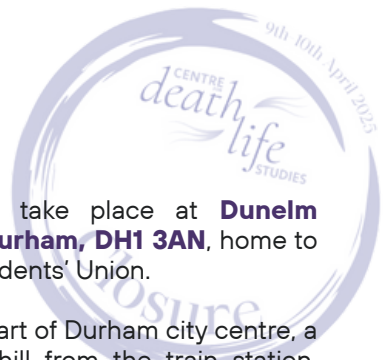
To mark the close of the Conference, and reflect on our experience, attendees are warmly invited to a three-course evening dinner at Hatfield College, just a short walk across the river from the Conference venue.

The cost of this dinner is £50. Advance booking is required through the Conference bookings website.





# ACCESSING THE CONFERENCE



The Conference will take place at **Dunelm House, New Elvet, Durham, DH1 3AN**, home to Durham University Students' Union.

The venue is in the heart of Durham city centre, a 17-minute walk downhill from the train station. Pay and Display parking is available along New Elvet, as well as in the nearby Prince Bishops' multistorey car park, with Pay By Phone options available. The venue is also accessible via most major bus routes.

A **ramp entrance** can be found to the left of the main entrance, with step-free access between floors inside provided via stairlift.

Limited on-campus **accommodation** is available for attendees at Grey College, South Road, for an additional charge of £56.25, bookable via the Event Durham website.

# THANKS AND STAY IN TOUCH WITH CDALS

Thank you so much for taking part in our conference and for contributing to this very special event. We wish you a safe and pleasant journey home.

We hope that you'll stay in touch with Durham University and the ongoing work of the Centre for Death and Life Studies.

You can receive updates on the Centre's research and events at the CDALS webpage, or by following our links on social media.



[@DurhamCDALS](https://twitter.com/DurhamCDALS)



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