Everybody dies. Human societies nonetheless construct differing ways of handling the social crisis of mortality, reflecting the values, customs, attitudes, rituals, and institutions that define particular places. In one sense, deathways in the US South reflect universal instincts, and surely they are American ways of death. People in the South have long had particular ways of dealing with death, and these essays offer case studies of how the broader cultural context of the South has shaped death. Particular attention is given to ways creative expressions explore meanings of death. The rural and small town context of life for most Southerners through most of Southern history, for example, shaped reactions to death. As Mississippi writer Willie Morris wrote after attending his grandmother’s funeral in Yazoo City in 1967, people he saw were “immersed in a web of death, for death in a small Southern town is like death in no other place” (92). Deathways in the South often were broadly like those elsewhere, but Southerners just as often saw meaning in them that they attached to the region’s culture. Many themes resonate through these essays, often overlapping with each other and creating a conversation among the individual pieces.

As an opening to this topic, I draw from the memory of Dora Epps-McNair. I served as an expert witness in a trial in the 1990s that turned on Southern deathways, and the story of Dora Epps-McNair exemplifies many aspects of death in the South that make the region a particular context for experiencing mortality. This rural, religious African American woman from South Carolina went to the Duke University Medical Center for a medical procedure that resulted in her untimely passing. Under such circumstances, the state of North Carolina requires an autopsy, after which, in this case, the
funeral director who received the body was appalled at the damage done to the corpse, preventing the customary open casket funeral. The family pursued a civil case against the institution, after one family member had received a spirit visitation from Epps-McNair, who told her that she could not be at peace until some acknowledgement was made of what had happened to her. A jury verdict awarded damages to the family. I testified to the power of African American folklore’s belief on the need to preserve the body as a temple for the afterlife and the centrality of evangelical religious belief in providing a worldview on life and death.

Epps-McNair’s story touched on many recurring features of deathways in the South’s regional culture. Her family was Pentecostal, a spirit-filled religious variant of the region’s long dominant evangelical Protestantism, one that emphasizes bodily purity in preparation for a bodily resurrection in the afterlife. Death has been seen as a lesson for survivors on the need to “get right with God.” Funeral hymns, prayers, and sermons portray the peace of heaven, but they also urge listeners to contemplate the future. When the hour of judgment comes, will the mourners be ready to meet their Lord? Southern evangelical theology sees the death and mourning process as a trial, during which faith in God is tested. The afflicted family confronts the most basic questions of human existence and affirms the answers given to those questions by Southern religious tradition. Epps-McNair was from rural South Carolina, and African American folk life there goes back a long way, with inheritances from African sacred traditions and Southern customs of wakes and open casket funerals. Stories and sayings about death reverberate through everyday conversation. Various Southerners, according to folk teachings, have believed that when someone dies, a person should stop all clocks and cover or hide all mirrors. Deaths occur in threes. Folklore says a corpse must be carried from a house feet first. Images and themes of death pervaded early country music and the blues, which drew from oral lore. Epps-McNair’s story illustrates as well the perpetual tension in the South between tradition and modernity—a rural, religious family encountering a modern medical institution. Urbanization, industrialization, consumerism—these and other features of modernity changed the rest of the United States beginning in the late nineteenth century, but modernization came relatively late to the South. A section with deeply held traditional customs and ways encountered modern ways in the twentieth century, often with jarring results, including in deathways. The funeral industry and modern cemeteries posed challenges for Southerners holding fast to older ways of dealing with mortality that relied on family, neighbors, and church.

Dora Epps-McNair’s story is a haunting one, and her corpse and its cultural meanings provide a revealing introduction for this issue’s reflections
on death and Southern culture. A look at the South’s history suggests how death shaped historical events in the region. Early settlers in the Chesapeake and Low Country South Carolina lived in a death zone from the climate and microbes they had not encountered before as well as from deadly Indian attacks. The expansion of the South depended on the death of Native Americans, with the culminating tragedy of the Indian Removal in the 1830s resulting in countless deaths on the Trail of Tears. The antebellum South’s violence, from dueling among elites, frontier brawling, or plantation brutality toward slaves, resulted in dramatic, regionally specific examples of human deaths. The Confederacy’s massive death rates disrupted normal Victorian expectations of the “good death,” an idealized hope for a peaceful deathbed scene with family nearby. The Confederate cult of the dead for generations after the war anchored a backward-looking culture and buttressed Jim Crow segregation. Race relations could be a matter of life or death for African Americans in the South, with spectacle lynchings a dramatic and disturbing public presentation of death. The dead bodies of Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, and Martin Luther King Jr., among others, highlighted that death was often the cost for social change in the late twentieth-century South.

If death was tied in with historical forces and events in the South, it also reflected environmental and demographic features associated with the region. Yellow fever epidemics grew out of the environment, as did other hot zone plagues, while the region’s widespread poverty from the Civil War to the World War II weakened many of its people and brought early and often painful deaths. High homicide rates and infant mortality rates beset the South for generations—all creating the image of the region as an unhealthy place, environmentally and socially, a place whose people could not avoid death.

Appropriately to the Southern historical and environmental context, and the Dora Epps-McNair story, the corpse is a recurring figure in Southern cultural expression, as seen in the essays in this issue. William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* is one of the best known presentations of the dying and dead body in Southern literature, with its narrative of the Bundren family’s journey to bury mother Addie. Amber Hodge’s “The Casket in the Corpse: The Wooden (Wo)man and Corporeal Impermanence in As I Lay Dying” assesses the physicality of characters in the novel, which describes Addie as “a bundle of rotten characters,” and she sees those metaphors “as they relate to the significance of physicality, spirituality, and the feminine.” She shows how Faulkner “allégorizes wood to augment representations of mortality and selfhood.”

Victoria M. Bryan’s “William Faulkner in the Age of the Modern Funeral Industry” also examines *As I Lay Dying* and its central corpse figure of Addie, pairing it with another Faulkner novel, *Sanctuary*, portraying tensions
between folk traditions of death and modern ones, as represented by the funeral industry with its professional funeral director, funeral home, expensive caskets, and embalming—all representing what Jessica Mitford termed the “American way of death.” Bryan argues that the two novels illustrate “a progression of the commodification of death,” with Faulkner using corpses “to signify changes and disparities in the modern world.”

Rhonda Jenkins Armstrong’s paper, “Rewriting the Corpse in Suzan-Lori Parks’s Getting Mother’s Body,” argues that Parks’s intriguing novel channels Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying, as it imaginatively rewrites the Southern literary use of the corpse. African American history is understandably central to this text, as violence against the body—from slavery to spectacle lynchings—creates racial trauma, but when the Beede family goes west to reclaim their dead mother’s body, it is an act of resistance and an assertion of power in an oppressive society. Parks shifts Faulkner’s frame from the burial of Addie to the Beedes’s exhumation of Willa Mae. In exhuming Willa Mae’s body, the Beedes metaphorically confront the past, and thereafter they are able to conceive a brighter future. Exhumation allows the family to correct an historical injustice and achieve healing toward a brighter future.

Beverly Bunch-Lyons goes inside African American economic, cultural, and social history to show how black funeral homes played a key role in the African American community in the South. Her essay, “ ‘Ours Is a Business of Loyalty’: African American Funeral Home Owners in Southern Cities,” draws from personal accounts of seven morticians and their families from seven states, in a sweeping narrative that outlines the history of African American funeral homes from the early twentieth century to contemporary times. These accounts show the motivations of African American families to be in the funeral business, as well as the challenges they faced as among the most significant black entrepreneurs in the age of Jim Crow and beyond. The paper illustrates, as the author notes, “the powerful linkages between the personal, political, social, and economic lives of funeral directors and the communities they serve.”

Funeral directors had an intimate relationship with corpses, of course, but Abigail Lundelius Smith’s essay “ ‘Lay it All on the Table’: Death in the American South” shows that one material item, the table, was a tangible artifact of the material culture of Southern death that played an important social role for the section’s people in general. Smith imaginatively explores the relationship between death and the table, or more particularly, the “cooling board” where corpses in the South customarily lay before funerals and burials. The essay goes from early American deathways to tale-telling about the cooling board in blues music, African American folklore, and Southern literature. Smith argues that all of these customs and stories about life and
death meet at the table. She offers a close reading of Eudora Welty’s work, which often delights in using the table in two senses—the welcome table for dining can also become the cooling board at death. This convergence of the dining room table and the death table suggests a social site that unites Welty’s characters and, more broadly, Southerners in general.

Edward Clough’s essay, “In Search of Sunken Graves: Between Post-slavery and Postplantation in Charles Chesnutt’s Fiction,” argues that African American writer Charles Chesnutt dwelt on the physical site of burial, both in settled plantation landscapes and in the unstructured wilderness, places which gave African Americans a sense of communal identity. Tensions of displacement and rootedness hover around those gravesites, all the more painful because they are often located on the plantation, a site of African American oppression. Clough argues that “Chesnutt’s stories use gravesites to articulate the sustaining processes of memory” that can overcome pressures toward social oblivion for the powerless. The cemetery was spatially segregated but it “nonetheless also sheltered and sustained black traditions and family legacies outside of white scrutiny or interference.”

Religion has been central in shaping Southern attitudes toward death, and John Hayes’s essay, “Pleading with Death: Folk Visions of Death (and Life) in the New South,” explores the relationship between death and the working class in biracial, Southern rural religion. His careful contextualization of the song “Conversations with Death” places it in time and place. What seems like a timeless meditation on the inevitability of death was actually composed around 1916 in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. Its writer, Lloyd Chandler, drew from older European ideas of the Dance of Death, but the song is at heart a modern verse of alienation. As Hayes writes, “the song is a paradoxical medieval-modernist vision of death—and of the body, and of alienation, and of life in this world.” While early twentieth-century Southern evangelical Protestantism portrayed the stabilities of middle class religious respectabilities and hopes of a peaceful death and afterlife, working class, rural Southern religion—among black Southerners and white Southerners—portrayed death as a skeleton and rotting corpse and evoked the terrors of death for people with few resources in this world.

Gender was an important factor in how people experienced death in the South, and three essays portray women’s experiences. Caitlin E. Haynes’s “ ‘To Trust It to Another’s Hands—Another Love’: Deathbed Directives and Last Wishes of Elite Women in the Antebellum South” builds on historical studies of the high maternal mortality rates in the antebellum South, exploring how this reality affected elite white women’s preparations for, and confrontation with, expected death. Drawing on rich primary sources, Haynes shows that these women “took control of their own deaths, directed
funeral plans, and distributed cherished possessions.” Their planning for their deaths demonstrated “the limit of patriarchy by showing that women could assert authority within their relationships by making decisions about childcare, custody, and even future marriage partners for their husbands.”

Southern white women from the nineteenth century were central icons in Southern ideology, with Southern ladyhood representing the racial purity and spiritual superiority of the region. The memorial associations and the United Daughters of the Confederacy after the Civil War created a culture of mourning through cemeteries, monuments, and museums devoted to memorializing the Old South and the Confederacy. Travis Rozier’s “‘The Whole Solid Past’: Memorial Objects and Consumer Culture in Eudora Welty’s The Optimist’s Daughter” looks at Southern women’s changing relationship to the past in the post-World War I era, focusing especially on how the rise of modernity’s consumer culture altered Southern women’s relationship to the material environment. Welty’s novel imagines the tensions between tradition and modernity, portraying mourning, memorialization, and funeral rites in this changing twentieth-century context. The protagonist, Laurel McKelva Hand, returns to her childhood home to oversee her father’s funeral, one of the traditional duties of Southern women. She comes into conflict with her father’s second wife Fay, an untutored working class woman deeply engaged with the products of consumer culture, which enable her to fashion an identity different from Hand’s identity that is based in long social prominence with the material trappings of an elite family. By the end of the novel, Hand learns to rely on her family memories rather than on inherited material objects—like her mother’s breadbasket that she leaves behind, rooted in the nostalgic past.

Kodai Iuchi’s “Katherine Ann Porter’s Faithful and Relentless Vision of Death in Pale Horse, Pale Rider” focuses on the fictional women in the interconnected stories of one of Porter’s signature novels, which Iuchi argues is permeated with a romanticized glorification of death. These stories come out of the post-Civil War backward-looking Southern culture, and they portray the totality of death in the life of the characters. One of the essay’s contributions is to point to the importance of what the author calls Porter’s “storytelling of death” and “discourse of death,” seen in the Southern family’s obsession with the superiority of the dead ones and the Southern past. The Southern “discourse of death” is an apt descriptor for a region that often rejected what scholars call the modern attitude of the “denial of death” in favor of an obsessive preoccupation with it, through regional history.

Memorialization is a theme in several essays that shows how some Southerners preserved selective historical experiences as the heart of Southern collective memory. Joseph Kuhn’s “Speaking from the Earth: Allen Tate and the Poetry of the Confederate Dead” is a revisionist study that relates mod-
ernist poet Allen Tate to the post-Civil War poets of the Lost Cause memory who sentimentalized the Confederate war effort and its soldiers. Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead” is usually seen as a preeminent Southern modernist poem, as the alienated narrator is unable to identify with the nineteenth century Southern cause. Kuhn insists that “for all of the more sophisticated kinship of the ‘Ode’ with complex modernist works such as T.S. Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’ (1920), it is in the first instance an idiosyncratic offshoot of the elegiac poetry of the Lost Cause.” The essay analyzes that older poetry and its romanticized language, and Kuhn grants that Tate’s dense prose has little in common with that of the earlier poetry. Still, he draws from Robert Harrison’s theories about the “humic” grounding of life-worlds in the earth and applies those insights to both the elegiac Lost Cause poets and Tate’s work, seeing the graveyard as a “storehouse of memories” for both.

David Maxson’s “‘Just a Closer Walk with Thee’: Jazz Funerals, Public Memory, and Laying Hurricane Katrina to Rest” offers a very different take on memorialization, but one that shows how performative contemporary cultural practices can provide a venue for an African American community to assert a collective identity. It begins with President George W. Bush’s reference after Hurricane Katrina to the New Orleans tradition of jazz funerals as a metaphor for the city’s recovery. He referred to the “second line” of mourners, who become joyous after a casket is buried, suggesting a triumph over death and, in this case, the hope for a brighter future for the city. The essay brings our attention to the relationship between cultural trauma and death in the South and to ways that Southerners have coped with catastrophes. The essay makes a useful distinction between tradition-based second line jazz funerals, which are deeply rooted in the city’s African American neighborhoods, and the commodification of jazz funerals for contemporary tourists. Maxson carefully contextualizes jazz funerals and their relationship to working-class communities in the city, and the essay draws from theoretical works by James Young and Joseph Roach that show how jazz funeral practices resist Eurocentric memorialization. In the end, we learn that commemorative jazz funerals after Katrina reflect a need to memorialize an on-going trauma that has not healed.

Two photographic exhibits provide a firm footing for considering the importance of the visual to death in the South. David Wharton documents cemeteries across the South, from south Louisiana to the upland South’s Kentucky to the eastern South’s North Carolina. We see tombstones, crosses, mausoleums, and other material artifacts of memorializing the dead. Wharton analyzes the meanings of cemeteries and reflects on his own interest in graveyards, going back to childhood summers in North Carolina. Following that, I consider the simple church fan, a once-pervasive icon of religious life
in the South that prime businesses of death—funeral homes and insurance companies—once purchased and distributed to churches to remind worshippers that mortality lay ahead. I discuss the images on the front of the fans and also the accompanying text on the back, arguing that they represent a dynamic between traditionalism and modernity in the twentieth-century South.

Wharton and I teamed up to interview funeral director and Mississippi state legislator Steve Holland for this issue. Holland is a master storyteller who recounts some of his most memorable funerals, reflects on how he became a funeral director, discusses the business aspects of funeral homes, and considers such Southern cultural variables as religion, race, and rurality. Holland’s style is direct and earthy, and he pulls no punches in discussing his work. A southern sensibility and humane spirit come through his answers that reveal one mortician’s experiences.

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