Memento Mori Pedagogies:
Exploring the Teacher's Relationship with Death

By

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Dedication & Gratitude(s)

Dedication:
To my past, present, and future students
To my now and future dead

Gratitude(s):
I am so grateful for the baristas and bartenders at *Leopold's* in Madison, Wisconsin, and Roust (formerly known as Darwin's) in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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I cried often while listening, re-listening, re-reading, and writing this project. Sometimes, my tears were tears of horror and despair. Other times, they came from a place of gratitude, groundedness, and hopefulness. I am so grateful for the participants who shared their stories with me and for my students who share their stories with me every day. I believe deeply and strongly both in the new generation of young people becoming teachers and committing to the work and in those who are not young who continue to teach or once taught in classrooms every day. Thank you.

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Foreword

In the Spring of 2022, I worked as a site-based supervisor in Wisconsin's teacher education program. Meaning, I visited our student teachers at their sites and coached them on their teaching. On one visit, after being buzzed into the plexiglass-surrounded visitor center to observe a student teacher, the security guard, Stu, held up a hand. I waited before signing in. He hung up a phone, then hit several numbers, and picked up the phone again. He then informed me with perfunctory confusion that we were in a hard lockdown. *That was the police—armed and dangerous suspect in the vicinity*. *Hard Lockdown.* Immediately, I was aware of my extraneous and non-essential presence in the school. Not a teacher. Not a student. Just a visitor. Had I checked my email or put on some lipstick before leaving my parked car, I would not have been standing in this lobby at this very moment. And had Stu not buzzed me in, I could have gone back to my car and driven away. But he *had* buzzed me in, and so I asked why:

Didn't think. Recognized your face while I was on the phone and buzzed you in. In another context, I might have been flattered to be recognizable at all in this community, where I had been an outsider for years. But in this moment, flattered I was not. Realizing how close to the door I was, Stu beckoned me behind the security desk into a smaller room with a table. I surveyed the space as I had been taught in my years of teaching, closed the blinds, checked the door to be sure it was locked, and climbed under the table, taking out my phone to text my partner and my sister that I loved them and that everything would probably be fine, as I had done while I was still teaching public school. I wondered if the protocols were different in Wisconsin than in Massachusetts, where I had taught. But I was aware of the deep familiarity of the crouched

position I found myself in, like a piece of an old dance routine. A routine I had been happy to leave behind.

At that moment, I realized that I had let myself believe that because I left the classroom, I would not have to do “this” anymore. Somewhere in my associations, I had left lockdowns with being a classroom teacher. After leaving K-12 schools, I thought I would not have to deal with this feeling of risk or the low buzz of anxiety at my place of work. I felt guilty at my own disavowal. Then, I felt guilty about my years of unknown, illusory relief.

Back on campus, we had a seminar the next day with our student-teachers. More than a few of our students were placed at this high school, and, as student-teachers are wont to want, they demanded guidance. They asked: *What was their responsibility as the teacher? Is the expectation that I die for my students? What am I supposed to DO?* Our content lead instructor told students about the metal bat she used to keep locked up in her classroom. I heard another voice of a fellow supervisor tell the students about the moment he realized the potential risks in teaching and had a frank conversation with his wife about what to do if he didn’t make it because he told her he likely wouldn’t if someone were to threaten his students.

How did we arrive at this moment in teacher education and schools? This moment being one wherein the conversations that inaugurate young people into the profession involve considering and reflecting on one’s own untimely death. Or does it? Do we make space for that, and if so, how? What would happen to us in this moment if we did talk about death?

I thought of Deborah Britzman when she asked, “What does teaching do to teachers?” (2003, p. 25). What is this new landscape of “teaching” doing to teachers and their understanding of what it means to be a “teacher?” In the same introduction, Britzman also invokes what Walter Benjamin calls “brushing history against the grain”. Meaning, a way of looking that captures and uncovers the historical threads not necessarily in line with dominant narratives. What does it mean to “brush history against the grain” while looking at “teachers?” Britzman (2003, p. 25) writes:

> When we stop and look at teachers in this way—to see teachers as being shaped by their work as well as shaping their work—we are able to shift the discourse of teacher education from an instrumentalist belief in controlling and manipulating variables—an orientation based upon the suppression of subjectivity—to a dialogic discourse. A dialogic discourse can take into account the discursive practices and their social relationships that realize pedagogy and the lived experiences of teachers. Such a commitment requires implicitly the teacher’s presence and our own capacity to listen to the teacher’s voice.

To do this “brushing,” I had to find the grain. I wanted to go to what Britzman calls the “under-belly of teaching.” (Britzman, 2003, p. 25). To understand the complex and strange relationship to death and mortality in schools, I needed to see this “underbelly” of “the private struggles we engage as we [teachers] construct not only our teaching practices and all the relationships this entails, but our teaching voices and identities” (Britzman, 2003, p. 25). In *Struggling for the Soul*, Popkewitz, too, called his own work with ethnographic observations and interviews “against the grain,” and turned to interviews with teachers to better unearth the ways in which the present realities of teaching were constructed (Popkewitz, 2017, p. 135). I wanted to understand what this presence of death was doing to teaching and hear that in teachers’ voices.

And so, I had to talk to teachers.

I wanted to know:

1. *How did teachers experience/describe the current conditions for teaching that called to mind the awareness of death? Objects? Stories? Memories?*

2. *How did they believe experiences with death and thinking about death informed their pedagogies and what it means to be a teacher at this moment?*

3. *And finally, how might these stories, experiences, and understandings illuminate a path forward for teachers and those who work to support and teach teachers?*

The very framing of these questions owes its lineage to psychoanalytic histories of learning. When discussing what a deeper focus on psychoanalytic histories of learning could do for education, Britzman herself considered interviews with students who survived Columbine. When asked about the shooters, students struggled to describe them: "Words fail, because there is no difference between the word and what it signifies" (Britzman, 2003, p. 29).

Two decades later, I can say that reports of shootings and lockdown drills dominate our experiences far more than the shootings themselves. There are far more of us who live in fear of these incidents than those who have survived them. It is as if the words and understandings from second-hand reports have gained a life beyond their objects. The drills themselves and reports that propagate drills separate from the experience and become something in and of themselves – simulacrums separated from their former simulations – traumatizing and ongoing difficult phenomenon in their own right (Baudrillard, 1994).

It is as if we are in constant rehearsal and replay of survival attempts in the face of death. A constant passive rehearsal of waiting to hear if "it is real this time." These are the conditions for many public school teachers in the United States.

But while school shootings, or rather the fear of them, have the ability to be the entire subject of this project, they are not. Instead, I consider death much more broadly. For, born out of my earliest interview with former colleague and friend Charlie, I began to realize that death, its ongoing presence, and its relationship in schools stood to be something "otherwise." In bringing ourselves consciously closer in relationship to death, what new understandings might we unearth? If we invited death into our teaching practices and relationships or drew attention to the awareness of it, how might we understand teaching and our worlds differently?

"Positionality" Lights that Flicker

Despite my mother's large Italian American family that follows their funeral traditions with the fidelity of a Sunday sauce recipe, the ongoing relationship with my dead and death comes in large part from my father. Despite these familial connections and reverence for the dead, I should be clear that this topic did not feel natural to me.

I avoid horror films. I am not one for serial killer documentaries or true crime. I can barely handle hearing a second (or third) hand ghost story. Of course, this was an occasional obstacle in the work early on. While looking at 16th-century necromancy and occult manuals in Memorial Library's special collections, I will admit I found myself a little overwhelmed with a skin-crawling feeling and a sudden fear of something or someone just behind me. Sticking close to a friend and listening to Fleetwood Mac helped. And so, as a card-carrying "scaredy cat" and the still occasional member of the Scared of the Dark club, the topic of death and the dead might seem like an odd fit.

While I continued to revise and consider expanding a paper on Necromancy from the 2021 Bergamo conference, I visited my father in Florida for the winter holidays. Recently retired, he had made the classic New Yorker pilgrimage to the land of oranges to live the rest of his days near the ocean. Upon entering his new, smaller home, I saw the familiar, cramped, and crowded floor-to-ceiling pictures of our family, primarily dead members. I was met with the small shrines and offerings in the corners of the kitchen to his mother and father, just as he had in my childhood home. I was also met with flickering lights. In any room we happened to be in, so too would the flickering ceiling, desk, and string lights. No other electronics or devices seemed impacted. *Everyone's up and happy to see you home – very active tonight to see us together*, my father would say, pouring glasses of wine. Perhaps because I had my partner with me, or maybe because I had been thinking about death and resurrection technologies for months, I began to think anew about how my father and I had learned to be with our dead. I began thinking about how that relationship with death framed his life.

My father comes from a kind of folk-Catholicism that has little place in churches or politics. It is the kind of spirituality with dead relatives sitting at the table with you at any given time. Connections to these dead are cultivated with a fresh-cut flower, a burning candle that he keeps going at all hours, and sometimes even a little wine (red - Côtes du Rhône.). The relationship has changed, but their presence is apparent in his verb tense, fluidity, and frequency in which they are accounted for or deemed "present."

How did his different relationship with his dead/the dead determine how he moved through the world and understood his own life? How did a room, a house, or any physical space change

when imbued with the potentiality of a different kind of unseen presence impact his own experience? How did his understanding impact me and my own?

Indeed, my father's understanding of his dead, or what some might call ancestors, is not unheard of. But it is different from most people I know in my professional life. And it does impact how he moves through spaces and understands his relationship with the living. His relationship to death undoubtedly shifted my capacity to do this work.

So, under an infuriatingly playful flickering bedside lamp, I began to jot down notes for this larger project, one that could excavate and collaborate with how teachers understood their relationship to death and the dead in their pedagogies, something that would embrace different ways of being and knowing for us who are still alive.

Chapter One:
Playing with Difficult & Disavowed Knowledge and Object Relations
[Methods/Theory/Thinking Framework]

You remember too much,
my mother said to me recently.
Why hold onto all that? And I said,
Where can I put it down?

Anne Carson, *The Glass Essay*

Across the street from their playground, during recess, 5-year-old Priya watched as a procession of people in black carried a long box out from the back of the building and into the street. I heard this story from Reese, a first-grade teacher in Missouri.

Priya asked Reese in front of the many other children watching while playing,
"What's in that box?"

Reese, thinking quickly and wanting to be authentic and honest, said
"A body."

At that moment, Reese realized some of the children had perhaps never attended a funeral or were not familiar with the cultural tradition of the death ceremony they were seeing at the Catholic church across the street from the playground. This project spotlights the teacher's understanding of that moment, her role, and her reflections on what it meant for her to be a teacher in that instant. This work focuses on the thoughts, wonderings, or inner lives of teachers when they become aware of death's presence in their classrooms.

In the wake of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the increased and vital attention on Black life mattering, increased gun violence, and school shootings, this project seeks to understand an education living in and with the specter of death. Many have begun to focus on this necropolitical landscape's impact on the children within it, particularly how BIPOC, working-class people, and anyone's existence deemed otherwise from the norm struggle for support in these necropolitical systems (Wozolek, 2023). But few have looked toward the teachers and their understandings of the impact and formation of their work in the necropolitical landscape of education (Mbembe & Corcoran, 2019).

This project could be about Priya, her experience, and her classmates, who are playing across from a funeral and whose understanding of death is juxtaposed with their recess time. But this project is not about the students. Instead, we focus on the teacher – in this case, Reese.
Much has been said, and critical research continues to be done on children's experiences learning about death (Bonoti et al., 2013; Bowie, 2000). Less has been said about the teacher, teachers, and how the very idea of what it means to be a teacher might shift as the landscape around her shifts when death shows up in her work.

What might a relationship to death tell us about what it means to be a teacher in 2024? What might it tell us about teaching?

Why think about Teachers and Death?

After the initial onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the American Federation of Teachers Union (AFT), in partnership with the New York Life Association, put out a survey to better understand the impact of COVID-19 in schools. Surveying roughly 675 AFT members, they found that over 58% of teachers had experienced the death of a student at some point in their careers (NY Life Foundation et al., 2020). When the AFT and the New York Life Association first partnered to look deeper at bereavement work in schools in 2012, they found that 7 out of 10 teachers surveyed had experienced a student struggling with death, with just 7% reporting that they had some formal training on responding to the situation (NY Life Foundation et al., 2012). While teachers have long been ill-equipped and unprepared for the realities of supporting students with grief, the pandemic exacerbated and shed light on this hole in teacher training.

In education, when research shows a gap in the skills that teachers possess to best support students, researchers, scholars, and leaders scramble to close it. Re-training, professional development, and best practices come forward. Performing a vital job without much guidance or proper support can lead to stress, no doubt. But should we take the same approach to death as other parts of the profession? Research-informed practices can certainly be helpful, such as understanding how students might need different support based on their developmental stage (NASP, 2015). In this mad rush of assembling professional developments and best practices, I fear we lose the existential and ethical dimension of teaching that differs from, say, re-training teachers on phonics instruction or the power of math manipulatives. What is the teacher's experience in the heart of these dilemmas with death? Though illuminating, the AFT and New

York Life surveys only focus on how to get teachers to support students – not on the support of teachers themselves grieving a student or community member.

As we continue to work to support students with death, this project looks at how we can think more about the teacher. This project posits that we can look to teachers' experiences and their voices as a guide to thinking about the dimensions of pedagogy, definitions of what it means to teach today, as well as, of course, some practical movements toward supporting teachers themselves in addition to their students. Even the shift toward the practical is one not merely for the possible future support of students but also an intervention to support teachers in processing and thinking collectively about what the role of death, broadly defined, might play in their pedagogies and understanding of what it means to be a teacher today.

Before compiling new standards for competencies, I hope to cultivate space to think deeply about what working in relationship to death has and might continue to provide in our understanding of teachers and their teaching. My hope is that a mix of qualitative and philosophical work, such as the combination occurring in this project, can help inform, deepen, and even challenge the competency-based thinking and professional developments that may spring up to fill this need.

Thinking about Death, Broadly Defined

Though a major part of many experiences, this project does not center itself entirely on grief. The stories and thinking here consider death very broadly. Sometimes, the death mentioned is a pre-

mature, tragic, and unexpected occurrence. At other times in the project, death lurks on the perimeter as a possibility. And in some moments, death appears as the inevitable part of a world we share and merits exploration, just as it did with Priya at the playground.

And, more often in this project, the category of death exists not as an immediate occurrence but as an ongoing threat – whether through unsafe or unstable conditions of the school or the seeming ever-present occurrences and reports of school shootings – as it did with the teacher candidates at UW-Madison in the Spring of 2022.

I wanted to construct a project that took on death, broadly defined, to see what myriad responses teachers had and what thinking emerged across different kinds of experiences with death. The broadness of the category of death is reflected in the call for participants and the associative methodology used during the interviews themselves. This was a process that evolved from the initial conversations and experiences I had when exploring this topic initially in Professor Jill Casid's 801 course, wherein she encouraged us to spend time with an object, or visual text, to see what theories sprung forth as necessary to think with the object of study. While I had some frames of reference, I spent time thinking about death and talking with others to see what theories and ideas might be necessary and relevant.

Rather than retrofit my own specific understanding or ask for a specific experience with death, I found myself open to the possibilities of "what came up" when asking about a general awareness of death with the teachers who agreed to be a part of the project. One might understand this as a kind of associative interviewing. The openness to "what came up" and the nodes of their

association seemed authentic to the spirit of the project as an exploration and ultimately an offering of what possibilities a pedagogy informed by death could be that might surprise, unsettle, or disrupt the notions I had about death and education – and indeed this very thing happened. I sought to explore the following research questions.

Research Questions:

1. *How did teachers experience/describe the current conditions for teaching that called to mind the awareness of death? Objects? Stories? Memories?*

2. *How did they believe experiences with death and thinking about death informed their pedagogies and what it means to be a teacher at this moment?*

3. *And finally, how might these stories, experiences, and understandings illuminate a path forward for teachers and those who work to support and teach teachers?*

Orientation to this First Chapter

This first chapter offers an overview of the project, the methodologies, and the broader scholarly literature from which this work draws and joins. After I place this project in a necropolitical context and give an overview of the literature, I offer a window into the methodologies I used to construct the project and a case for why the qualitative methodologies used were essential to answer the research questions above. I also offer limitations of the project and suggestions for future studies here and later in the conclusion. You will also find a breakdown of my participants, their teaching locations, and other contextual and cultural information.

I then move back to go deeper into the methodologies described here that may read as "theoretical" and might be taken as a theoretical framework in a different style of project.

Necessarily, I do not split these but show how my methodological approach both constructs and reveals the theoretical understandings latent in my understanding of the phenomenon I am researching. More specifically to this project, this writing on object relations as a methodology shows how I understand meaning-making to be done when taking parts in relation to the whole.

I close this chapter with previews of the proceeding chapters and a conclusion on a suggested lens for reading and encountering the project.

A Project Born of Necropolitics: Defining "Necropolitical Conditions"

This project is necessarily framed, deepened, and made possible by Achille Mbembe's *Necro-Politics* (Mbembe & Corcoran, 2019; Mbembe & Meintjes, 2003).

Mbembe employs but necessarily expands on Foucault's notions of *biopower,* a historical and theoretical exegesis on the manifestations of power and its modes of operation (Foucault, 1990). When Mbembe takes up Foucault, Mbembe deepens the consequences of understanding that the ultimate expression of the sovereign resides in the power to decide who lives or dies. Whether reading Foucault or Mbembe, the power of the sovereign can be a hard concept for those who grew up in the U.S. to grasp. Mbembe draws examples from the Holocaust to illustrate the extremes of how a publicly sanctioned government, in that case, Hitler's Nazi party, held power over who was marked for death. The world of Nazi Germany may feel far away from our contemporary present. But current global atrocities and mass death events happening in Ukraine, Palestine, Israel, Myanmar, and Sudan are contemporary and ongoing as I constructed

this project and serve as contemporary and ongoing exemplars of certain populations being marked for death by a physical force greater than their own.

Violent colonization of space is another process in which we might see necropolitics. Though the United States lost its "sovereign" when declaring its independence from Britain, the very power of the sovereign embedded and re-established in a different assemblage of power made this nation-state possible by designating some people worth taking space and others not. The violent expulsion and attempted extermination of indigenous people continued and proliferated without the presence of a King or Queen. Despite not having a formal "sovereign," the U.S., with this deep history of colonization, enslavement, and many conflicts, wars, and ongoing involvement in armed international affairs, can and should be seen as a necropolitical force in of itself as well as something of a handmaiden of necropolitics for other countries.

It might seem extreme to compare or use the necropolitics framework for the public schools of the United States. But as the COVID-19 pandemic shook the sense of safety and exposed the physical precarity and value of life—specifically those of teachers and the categorization of people as "essential workers"—the framework seemed increasingly relevant. In other words, who do we mark not only for death but whose life can we tolerate risking? Whose life are we comfortable with in a state of precarity?

Similarly, as discussed in the second chapter of this project, the gun violence in and near schools and the coverage of these "school shootings" propagate a re-inscription of schools and the classroom as a place for potential violence. As a result of this inscription, the school remains a

site of potential death in the minds of teachers and students who must face and hold this internally every day that they are marked present. When I refer to *"necropolitical conditions"* throughout this project, I mean the conditions described above, conditions in which the state, through its relationship to the school, has continued to perpetuate, both in the lived day-to-day experience and in the psychic reality, school as a place wherein the viability of certain lives are contested and exist in a sense of both real and real-imagined precarity.

These conditions sprung from an entangled web of conditions, but most remarkedly: a backdrop of a history and ongoing present of racial and socio-economic segregation, failed education "reform," and the starvation of many schools of resources. Looking at these together, an outsider might look at the history and ongoing struggle of school reform in the United States and truly wonder if a diffused and ambiguous power has and continues to conspire against the working class, working poor, and predominately BIPOC-serving schools of our country. This, too, consists of the necropolitical conditions to which I refer across the project.

Conversations and Fields this Work Joins:

The conversations below, in concert with the literature I reference in chapters two, three, and four, offer an "otherwise" and different relationship to what the presence of death could do for teaching, the teacher, and those she teaches. This shift provided a clearer path forward for what interventions and conversations might be had in the world of pre-service teacher education, the subject of the final chapter.

I. The Inner Lives of Teachers, Psychoanalysis & Education

Overview

This work joins the scholarship that gave primacy to the inner thoughts of teachers, a scholarship that puts these ideas, nightmares, and phantasies of the teacher alongside the thinkers and writers who have considered these questions elsewhere in educational scholarship, philosophy, and history. These traditions and the thinking embedded within them make it possible to ask about teachers' inner worlds and their relationship to them, alluded to in the first two research questions:

1. *How did teachers experience/describe the current conditions for teaching that called to mind the awareness of death? Objects? Stories? Memories?*
2. *How did they believe experiences with death and thinking about death informed their pedagogies and what it means to be a teacher at this moment?*

Historically, this turn inward has been less popular in the United States. With the pressing outward demands on the teacher from the government, parents, and systemic inequality, not much time nor value might be seen for the inner lives of teachers or inner life at all. Conversations about the emotional or inner lives of teachers arise most when we discuss burnout, stress, and, of course, teacher retention.

How do we talk about what is not talked about in teaching? This is the larger research agenda I hope to follow in future work. This project, in my conception, could easily be applied to topics like eroticism in the classroom and other taboo topics that feel too difficult to voice.

This focus on topics too difficult to voice has deep roots for those who work in curriculum studies and psychoanalysis, wherein scholars attempt to grasp the ungraspable and ethereal parts of the inner ongoings of teachers, students, and anyone else caught in the crossfire of this thing called education (Britzman, 2003; Salvio, 2001; Taubman, 2007). Freud himself called education, much like psychoanalysis itself, "an impossible profession", one embarks on fully expecting less than ideal results (Freud, 1964, p. 238).

This idea from Freud acts as a locus point for many in the field of psychoanalysis and education, a field so flighty and difficult in its own right that Peter Taubman, a central contributor, published a book on this relationship titled *Disavowed Knowledge* (2011). This book brings together the marooned histories and failed romances of psychoanalysis and education in North America (primarily the United States). Taubman (2011, p. 33) begins the book with the "primal scene" of Freud's first visit to the U.S. and a lecture delivered at Clark University in Massachusetts, as if to ask, as many do in failed relationships, *why didn't we work out?* As with all relationships, the trajectory is complicated, and different perspectives abound. One way we might understand the trouble with education and psychoanalysis is to see it through psychology's casting out of psychoanalysis. As the post-WWII field of U.S. education aligned itself with a behavior-based and quantifiable way of understanding the human mind and our relationships to one another, psychoanalysis, like so many other ways of thinking and knowing, was shown the door (Taubman, 2011). This is not the whole story, but a portion of it is worth acknowledging to explain the uneasiness and shiftiness one encounters when bringing psychoanalysis into conversation with education. This history, in tandem with a crude misunderstanding of the role of sex and a refusal to see the critical, feminist, and anti-racist responses those who call

themselves psychoanalysts have continued to take up in response to Freud, are some of what I have seen play into a reluctance of dealing with psychoanalysis. (Though recent articles and pop culture suggest the times might be changing.)[1] The fate of psychoanalysis in education then, as Taubman constructs, is that of "disavowed knowledge." Taubman defines "disavowal" clearer in a later article with co-author Paula Salvio:

> In everyday usage, disavowal is generally taken to denote the denial of or refusal to accept responsibility. Psychoanalytic theory, however, offers a more complicated conceptualization of disavowal. Unlike repression, where one forgets and forgets that one has forgotten, the psychoanalytic concept of disavowal suggests one knows or is aware of something but prefers to keep that knowledge out of view, on the periphery of consciousness, and to act as if one did not know it.
>
> (Salvio & Taubman, 2020, p. 6)

Psychoanalysis, or rather the questions about the deep inner world of teachers that it promotes, then becomes a known invisible monster, a specter that no one dares or cares to see. For education, this might mean that many refuse to acknowledge an inner and deeper world of teachers and students – again, that which is unseen.

Like many other traditions of magic and monsters before it, psychoanalysis found and continues to find refuge in the field of literature and literary studies. Perhaps then, it is unsurprising that one of the larger contributors to this field has been Shoshanna Felman, a literary scholar working closely with the theories of Lacan in literary criticism to think about history, witnessing, and trauma (e.g., Felman, 1982). From Freud to Felman, Deborah Britzman (2003; 2006) has drawn heavily from these authors to plot the constellation of theories that outline Freud's "difficult knowledge" in education, a category I discuss as an essential part of my methodology for this

[1] In March of 2023, the NYTimes published an article titled "*Not Your Daddy's Freud"* that detailed a re-emergence of psychoanalysis in pop-culture, media, academic, and artistic spaces.

project in partnership with "disavowed knowledge" later in this chapter and throughout the project.

Britzman, whose work has profoundly influenced this project, is perhaps the most widely known figure in the field of psychoanalysis and education. Drawing on psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literary examples, the former English teacher, teacher education scholar, and psychoanalyst has carved out a field wherein we can inquire after what teaching does to teachers and the difficulty of education that comes from the trauma inherent in what it means to *know* (Britzman & Pitt, 2003). In addition, she has given attention to this inner world of the teacher, most famously in her ethnographic and philosophical work *Practice Makes Practice* (1991), wherein she suggests the presence of a "Hidden Pedagogy" in teachers:

> Rarely disclosed by teachers themselves and absent from the student's account are the more private aspects of pedagogy: coping with competing definitions of success and failure and one's own sense of vulnerability and credibility. Residing in the "heads" and "hearts" of teachers, and emerging from their personal and institutional biography, this "personal practical knowledge," or knowledge made from the stuff of lived experience is so intimately a part of teachers' enactments that its appearance as skills becomes taken for granted. Taken for granted as well are how their discursive practices come to express something about the structure of institutional life, and the ways in which power and authority are experienced there. (Britzman, 1994, p. 28)

Without her work, this project's conceptualization would not be possible. This "hidden pedagogy," or the stuff in the "heads" and "hearts" of teachers, is what I sew together in the third chapter and provide curricular interventions to elicit in the fourth. After examining the discursive responses to teaching in necropolitical conditions in chapter two, I present the voices of teachers and their own understandings of what is hidden in their pedagogies informed by death. This is not easy work to ask participants to do. Yet, in these moments of prompting and asking after

their relationship to death, I was ultimately asking teachers to look at themselves and their understanding of their values in teaching. In Britzman and Pitt's (2003) work describing their research process for researching difficult knowledge, we see the challenge of summoning teachers' understandings of themselves. In my methods below, I describe how a deeper focus on object relations and literal objects could more concretely conjure the conversations of changing values in education and answer some of the post-structural struggles with representation (Britzman & Pitt, 2003).

The work then, for anyone, but especially teachers, is the work of unearthing these pre-existing values and putting those values into conversation with new, emerging, and changing senses of the world. In an earlier article, *Is There a Problem with Knowing Thyself? Toward a Post-Structuralist View of Teacher Identity,* Britzman (1994) paints what this work might look like with a pre-service teacher. She reveals the danger of not acknowledging the person and principles that existed and continue to exist alongside and within a teacher's identity. Both a teacher's values and the teacher themselves are not born upon receiving their initial teaching license, nor do they stop shifting after they start going by Ms., Mr., or Mx. How do we go on working with pre-service teachers while understanding their complex and evolving value systems? Again, I attempt to describe my understanding of one path of doing this in chapter four, as I provide extension and discussion questions that may help elicit teachers' understandings of themselves and their work in relationship to death.

The work of unearthing values, while losing its psychoanalytic tenor, has been at the core of another field this project seeks to publish in: Philosophy and Education and Ethics and Education.

II. Philosophy and Education/Ethics & Education: Ethics and Education and the Values of Teachers

Overview

The other conversation that my research questions are both born from and find an intellectual home in is Ethics and Education, a burgeoning subfield of Philosophy and Education. I would argue that this field, particularly Ethics and Education, like psychoanalysis and education—is concerned with teachers' inner thoughts, specifically their values, decision-making, and development of ethical commitments in their practice. The field concerns itself with helping the actors in sites of education, and education-adjacent spaces think more critically about the impact of our decisions on one another. Much like other ethical subfields like *medical ethics* or *ethics of engineering*, Ethics and Education seeks to develop conversations about ethics for those working in education. Taken broadly, this work thinks critically about the ethical commitments of actors in education, be they teachers, professors, leaders, families, students, or policymakers.

Broadly, much of the field has concerned itself with weighing and considering options for the ideal path of action in continual unideal circumstances (Allen & Reich, 2013; Brighouse, 2015; Brighouse et al., 2018; Morton, 2021). While these bird's-eye policy conversations make up much of this field, so too do teachers' values and decision-making.

How this Project fits & Contributes

In chapter four of this project, I bring attention to affect, embodiment, and vulnerability to deepen an approach to ethics that might seem to absent the body. Educational Philosopher and former middle school social studies teacher Meira Levinson combined her interests by, at first, thinking about citizenship and democratic schools and now by putting a lens of ethical thinking to bear on issues in education. Preserving the influence of Rawls on her work and augmenting his theories of justice to include schools, Levinson and her colleagues have developed a style of ethical thinking grounded in normative case studies that push actors to consider how one ought to act when living in a community together (Levinson, 1999; 2012; 2015).

Levinson discusses educators' responsibility to "enact justice" in their roles within the school system (Levinson, 2015, p. 211). I comment on this framework in chapter four, where I consider Levinson's "phronetic approach" to this understanding of the ethical landscape (Levinson, 2015, p. 213). It is also the framework I adapt to include a focus on embodied ethical thinking in the protocols and suggestions offered in chapter four to answer my third research question:

3. *How might these stories, experiences, and understandings illuminate a path forward for teacher educators and teacher education experiences?*

Much of the case-based work in Ethics and Education consists of collections of normative case studies that consider both larger policy issues as well as a teacher's classroom issues. These cases ask readers, students, and professional communities to talk aloud about the values and principles at stake for them in the given case (Levinson & Fay, 2016; 2019a; Taylor & Kuntz,

2021). These cases are often published as a potential curriculum with accompanying resources to help with their distribution (Cirillo & Silverman, 2023). Having both participated and facilitated these conversations with university faculty, pre-service teachers, and my middle schoolers, these conversations can, when engaged seriously, act as what Butler and Althusser might call a simulated "scene of address," in which the values, commitments, and knowledge of oneself are called upon in a hypothetical educational dilemma that necessitates weighing competing and even contradictory values (Butler, 2005).

Perhaps the clearest example of valuing the inner life and ethical commitments to teachers in this field can be found in Santoro and Cain's *Principled Resistance* (2018). The authors illuminate how when teachers resist, protest, or reject institutional demands on themselves and their students, they are not merely doing this to resist but have principled commitments undergirding that resistance. The authors propose that "teachers' acts of principled resistance illuminate how they understand the fundamental responsibilities of teachers and the teaching profession" (Santoro & Cain, 2018, pp. 9-10). They open their volume by acknowledging how teacher resistance is often misinterpreted as "insubordination or recalcitrance" (p. 1). They position the volume in some ways as a defense of teacher resistance and a response to judgments of teachers who have taken action or refused to participate in a practice that would conflict with their values. "Principled resistance" by teachers is defined as a "necessary and ethical response to the mandates that conflict with their understandings about quality teaching and the role of education in a democracy" (Santoro & Cain, 2018, p. 1). It stands out as an example of case-based work that seeks to illuminate, honor, and defend that teachers do indeed have inner values and commitments that impact their teaching practices.

Certainly, moments of crisis and tragedy in communities can elicit and help reveal teachers' principles as much as a labor rights or curriculum dispute. I bring together this work on principles and ethical thinking with an attention to embodiment and vulnerability to help inculcate habits of mind that help new teachers join their values and their actions when talking about or responding to death. By adding and deepening discussion protocols to make space for embodiment and vulnerability, I hope to deepen the ethical tradition these protocols are based on.

I will also say here that I aim to join the scholars in Ethics and Education's commitment to the voices of teachers. Teacher interviews are less common in this field, and by bringing them in, I hope to show how doing so pushes and plays with philosophical thinking and provides guidance for future directions of the field at the intersection of philosophy and social science.

Conversations this work joins (and doesn't):

III. Death Education and Death in the Curriculum & Preparing Teachers to Respond

To explore my third research question (*How might these stories, experiences, and understanding illuminate a path forward for teacher educators and teacher education experiences?)*, I sought out a scholarship that sits at the intersection of death and education and curriculum for teachers on death. This proved difficult.

While preparing the materials for this project's IRB, I was required to assemble a list of resources and support given the heavy topics I would be asking my participants about in the interviews. In searching for mental health, death, loss, and grief hotlines, I found many for

doctors, nurses, hospice workers, and other professionals. However, I struggled to find one exclusively for teachers dealing with loss and thinking about death themselves rather than a resource to help them help their students. Perhaps it should be unsurprising then that much of these studies in death and education or death education ultimately focus on the students' understanding of their surroundings and the impact our necropolitical context has on students, but much less on teachers (Bonoti et al., 2013; Bowie, 2000; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018; Wozolek, 2023).

Where Britzman has caught on and continues to frame and hold the thinking of scholars is in Social Studies education scholarship that considers the difficulty of the topics and curriculum presented to students. For example, Social Studies and, at times, English Language Arts curriculum have written about the presence of death in the curriculum, the treatment of it, and the opportunities it presents to have deep and complicated discussions with students about death (e.g., Christ et al., 2022; Furman, 2020; Varga et al., 2021; 2022; 2023; Zembylas, 2021; 2022).

While the conversations with students encouraged here bring about the kind of close relationship with death, I am more specifically asking after how a relationship with death impacts the teacher and her thinking about her work and what it means to be a teacher. Even un-linked from the curriculum, various scholars have argued for the importance of a death education in schools (e.g., Bowie, 2000; Jackson & Colwell, 2001).

One of the few papers focusing on teachers' relationships more centrally (though it is ultimately to integrate more death education in classrooms) is from Zembylas & Stylianou (2022). They

ground their article in the early death education movement of the 1970s. Dan Leviton's field launching paper, "*The Scope of Death Education,*" which Stylianou & Zembylas reference in their work, calls for a death education in schools with objectives and goals for a healthy approach to death (Leviton, 1977, pp. 44-45). They later bring in another updated definition of death education but still see themselves as joining this field that supports teachers with tools to teach about death (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2022).

In contrast, I would like to move away from the movement of "death education," not only because of its more prominent focus on children and not teachers but because of the normative and prescriptive understanding of death it requires. In Leviton's 1977 paper, he necessarily calls for a death education that relies on a narrow and normative understanding of what death and the experience of experiencing death involves. He warns of the false idols of thanatology and mythology of death education (Leviton, 1977). Specifically, Leviton criticizes Black American funerary practices of celebrating life as a counter-productive "ostentatious" "mythology" in death education (Leviton, 1977, pp. 49-50). My project focuses explicitly on what Leviton might call "myths" or otherwise understandings of death that do not correspond to one normative tradition and welcomes different ways of understanding mourning, if mourning be present at all, to have a death-informed pedagogy. I aimed to be inclusive and embrace the various understandings and relationships to death that come up for the teachers who share their stories with me. I hope that future work could take a deeper look into how different cultural relationships to death could bring about different versions of death-informed pedagogy. In essence, this work could be seen as expanding what we mean by "death education" and moving

beyond just preparing to having conversations with students about death but supporting teachers in their own reckoning with mortality alongside students.

While this project does not aim to run counter to those efforts to incorporate death education into teacher education and humanities classrooms, it does offer a path I fear has been left unexplored, one that embraces the varieties of understandings of death and non-normative relationships to death itself potentially outside grief and outside of sole student focus.

Widening the Category of Death-Informed Pedagogies

The teacher focus of this project has more in common with the outpouring of recent scholarship on grief that centers empathy, showing of emotion, and tenderness on the part of the teachers (e.g., Ayers, 2015; Granek, 2009; Hurst, 2009; Lussier & Keller, 2021; Willer et al., 2021). I am trying to delve deeper into a relationship to collective mortality to further these conversations. Specifically, in chapter three, the findings from the teachers' stories had me seriously considering how we might consider death education apart from grief education. In other words, could we have a death-informed education, a pedagogy that presences the insights and ways of knowing in relationship to death without someone in our community having to die? Must we wait for tangible tragedy to understand the weight of our mortalities in education? Could embracing or presencing death more actively help summon the power of this mortality in educational spaces? I ask these questions with genuine curiosity and as a potential conversation to have with scholarship on grief and education. They seem in some ways to be answered by the

expansive and encompassing themes that arose from interviews with teachers, as discussed in chapter three.

Enveloping and Pushing Grief Pedagogy Literature to Include "Death Informed Pedagogy"

It is important to understand some of the relationships this chapter may have with writing and research that presence grief as an essential pedagogical tool for teachers and students. Grief-informed teaching, or grief and education, has gained attention, particularly in the face of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the summer of George Floyd protests. Teachers were not only losing students, community members, and their own loved ones, but seeing videos and stories broadcasting Black death at the hands of the police. Writing, research, and projects to document and understand the teaching happening during this time proliferated, though many had different and more specific definitions of death than this project that asked more generally about death in teachers' experiences (Willer et al., 2021).

The pandemic, while a large part of this project, is not the only relationship to death described. In a paper published in the journal *Ground Works,* an online journal from the Philosophy and Education Society (PES), *Mourning with Others: The Reorienting Practice of Grief*, Lussier and Keller (2021) wrote a brief article calling for a need to address loss and grief expansively. They wrote that educators and administrators needed to recognize the grief and deaths of students' friends and family during the pandemic, but also the grief for the time lost in school and as a community. They call for us to presence that grief more actively in the work of teaching in the wake of the pandemic. What does attention to mourning a year of school or dwelling in loss look

like? Lussier and Keller wrote that "in response to the pandemic, we cannot continue moving forward as if nothing has changed. The work of mourning requires that we look toward one another with care and concern. Many educators have already recognized the need to pause, reflect, and process the events of this past year" (Lussier & Keller, 2021, p. 5). While this was not an element of the loss or death that needed grieving in this project, Lussier and Keller might find parallels in how grief and death informed pedagogy in chapter three. This attention to grief leads to what they call a "care and concern" (Lussier & Keller, 2021, p. 5) and I call a deep "empathy and care". Based on the stories and understandings collected from teachers in this project, these are other categories of what I am calling a *Memento-Mori Pedagogy, a death informed pedagogy that encompasses grief informed pedagogies*

It is important to acknowledge, as I do in the first chapter, that there is much written about teaching students about death in the "death education" movement, as well as research and guidance on how teachers might talk about and work through grief with students because supporting students with their grief is a real and pressing need in education (Poole et al., 2022; MacArthur, 2022; Madden, 2021; Hurst, 2009). But these articles, while important, focus far less, if at all, on the impact of those conversations on teachers and teachers' reflections on their practice in light of working through grief with students. This, again, is a teacher-focused work.

More Emerging Work in Grief Pedagogy

Some alignment with the findings of this project could be seen at a panel at the 2023 AERA conference, titled, *"Grief as Truth-Telling: Uprooting the Violence of Schooling"* wherein Dr. Bettina Love served as a discussant (Love, 2023). The authors all explored issues specifically related to grief from or proximal to the pandemic. One of the three papers, *Grieving*

Disembodiment: A Radical Feminist Analysis of the Burnout and Pushout of Teachers of Color focused on grief and its relationship to burnout in teachers of color by creating dialogue spaces for those teachers to have together about their experiences, thinking more deeply about turnover and teacher retention and the physical toll it takes on them in their bodies (Cariaga, 2023). Another paper, *Black Grief as the Nexus Toward the Beyond: Toward Truth-Telling on the Social Toxin That Is School,* mourned the school system as a project worth saving, re-awakening and re-visiting school as a social death, particularly for Black and brown students and teachers, thinking about the school system as an extension of the plantation (Tiffani Mari, 2023).

The third paper from the panel, *Pedagogies of Love and Loss: A Portrait of Grief and Healing* focused on how making room for grief, particularly grief and anguish experienced by teachers of color and their students of color during Covid could be essential in navigating education spaces after such a traumatic time (Hannegan-Martinez, 2023). This last project shares much with chapter three in its tenor and aim to find what Martinez calls healing and what I would call reparative or re-fashioning. She offers "love," fostered in the strengthening of relationships during grief, "as a theoretical, pedagogical, and political practice for healing grief" (Hannegan-Martinez, 2023).While the focus of this project differs in a variety of ways, chapter three does describe the insights and care present in the wake of mourning a loss in a school community. Those moments of collective grief might support and bolster Martinez's initial conclusions that "love" could be a vital product and way forward from these moments of crisis, though "love" is not a word that came up in my interviews or my process. Again, while the focus of the project and my categories differ, I think it is essential to think about Martinez's approach as one that could fall under the umbrella of a death-informed or, as I call it later, *Memento-Mori Pedagogy.*

Methods & Data Collection

The Call for Participants and Advertising:

Participants for this project have responded to a "call for interviewees" about teachers' relationship to death in their teaching (call attached in the appendix). Participation screeners are purposely loose, identifying as being or having been a "classroom teacher" in the United States. Participants were advertised through my personal and professional networks, along with snowball sampling within those networks. Interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes over Zoom, with participants having the option to continue for 90 minutes and/or schedule a follow-up session.

Semi-Structured and Associative Interviews: Object Relations and Gestalt Approach:

As gestured to above, this project uses what might be most similar to what has been called associative and semi-structured interviewing (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Pitt & Britzman, 2003), asking participants to share what comes up for them readily and loop back to parts of the conversation as it strikes them and the interviewer. Some participants come in with specific ideas and stories to share and might ignore or only slightly incorporate some of the early promptings into what they share. Others respond directly to the portions of the questions in the semi-structured question protocol (see appendix for question bank and protocol).

To explore my first research question, the interview opened by asking about interest in the study and general ideas participants are coming in with about death and their awareness of death in teaching. I then asked specifically when teachers are aware of death and mortality in their teaching – what brings it up/when it comes up? Often, participants began sharing stories and anecdotes in this portion. Suppose participants did not come readily with stories from the first few questions. In that case, the interview can then span four different "areas:" curriculum, objects or physical parts of the classroom, relationships with students and colleagues, and feelings about death and its relationship to teaching. These four areas are announced before initial questions, so it is possible that teachers are still associating with them as pathways for their initial answers.

With initial stories and associations, I asked after participants' relations to these awarenesses or presences of death and how they impacted their teaching and understanding of what it means to be a teacher today to address my second research question.[2] But many times, participants made this connection to the impact on their teaching without my prompting. When relevant, I asked after the specific objects or physical things that teachers brought up that conjured the awareness of death. Other times, I asked specifically about the "story" or "memory" that seemed to act almost like an object or symbol of the awareness of death. The physical object might be something like a locking mechanism or an emergency bag that conjures the awareness of death. A non-physical object might be a traumatic lock-down drill incident or the memory of a student's death. A theory of object relations and group dynamics work together to bring about my understanding of this "methodology" wherein someone or something may hold a symbolic

[2] **Research question II:** *How did experiences with death and thinking about death inform their pedagogies and what it means to be a teacher at this moment?*

knowledge outside the self that one can be in relationship to (Bion, 1962; Klein & Klein, 1984; Winnicott, 2005).

I saw this as a pathway to deepening our understanding of the dynamics of "difficult" and "disavowed" knowledge and a potential research method. I asked about the relationships to these "objects" and frequently returned to them in the interviews. I often reflected the thinking I heard from participants back to them and asked about the changing of relationships to these objects that hold an awareness of death and then subsequently the relationship to the awareness of death (vis a vis these "objects") to their teaching. The re-presencing of these "objects" (or stories and memories) in the actual interviews but also in my writing about the interviews has roots in the Gestalt dream analysis, and other dream analysis, traditions wherein one puts *parts* in conversation with a *whole* (Perls, 1973; Sharpe, 1988). In these traditions, symbols, happenings, or messages in dreams do not have fixed meanings. Instead of telling a friend that dreaming about a snake is a bad omen, you might instead ask what snakes mean to the dreamer – or what role the snake had in the dream itself and then what the dream's relationship is to the larger context of the person's life. In both the interviews and the writing, I am putting small ideas, themes, and ideas in conversation with larger claims and ideas about the awareness of death in education. This is one path I am putting forth of doing research and writing that pushes the relational aspect in "object relations" work.

I was open and forthright about thinking with "objects" or "stories" that acted as objects during the interviews as I invited participants to think and re-think about them over the course of the interview. After collecting and cleaning up transcripts, I searched for insights, themes that link

across conversations, and ideas that push and propel the thinking about the research questions outlined about the relationship to teacher awareness of death in their teaching.

I concluded the interviews by asking about their own teacher preparation experiences and how what we had talked about might inform a teacher's education on death and education to help address the third research question[3] and as a gesture to make meaning across a larger trajectory of the participant's experience.

Data Collection & The Case for a Qualitative Approach

I had originally planned to interview up to thirty participants but found as I interviewed folks that themes such as struggling for agency or traumatic responses to simulation-style lockdowns began repeating. Another way to say this is that I found data saturation at seven and did another recorded interview to make eight total transcripts with many themes and ideas repeating across participants. Furthermore, given the lack of work done at the intersection of this topic using interviews with classroom teachers, I thought it better to go deeper into understanding of their experiences as individuals grounded in their own experiences rather than frantically assembling too many. Given the richness of the stories and anecdotes, I feared interviewing too many people would collapse the narratives they had offered into a more "survey" style approach, which is not the focus of this project but could be for future projects.

[3] **Research Question III:** *And finally, how might these stories, experiences, and understanding illuminate a path forward for teachers and those who work to support and teach teachers?*

The goal of my interviews was to capture as much rich description and narratives of free association as possible. The reason for such an approach was that the focus of this project on teachers' inner thoughts and reflections on their work. As a result of doing these interviews, I can imagine a companion or alternative study that employs a quantitative approach that asks participants to note instances of, say, traumatic lockdown events, student suicides, student or community member deaths, etc., with a rating scale of, say, how deeply it impacted their practice and where and when the incidents took place. Asking these questions as a survey might provide the kind of data to really flesh out the current "conditions" with statistical specificity and at a large scale that I speak about in chapter two. However, in order to properly explore these research questions that asked about awareness and descriptive understandings of impact and necessarily relational thinking, I felt it was necessary to get rich descriptive data from the participants aloud that might be harder to capture in a survey format or quantifiable by some scale. I did this by keeping prompts open and asking participants to "Tell me more about that" often. Even a longer form of writing or survey would miss the relational quality and juxtaposition of objects, stories, and memories that I, as the researcher, could re-presence for commentary in real time. Listening and transcribing these stories with the help of AI and my own ears gave intonation and emotional affect to the stories much harder to capture in say a survey format. At times, the participant and I both physically teared up in the interview, which I made a note of in chapters two and three when it occurred with quoted sections.

I wanted to do justice to the stories that were offered to me without crowding them within the narrow scope of this first project.

Limitations & Descriptions of Participants:

Initially, I thought I might expand this to other countries, but there seems to be something particular about the relationship to death in the United States and teachers right now that I wished to capture. After traveling internationally in the summer of 2022 to study psychoanalysis and mourning at the Sorbonne, many casual conversations with colleagues revealed to me how different the project would need to be (in participant size and scope) to make more ethnographic comparison-style claims.[4] So, instead, I stuck to the context my questions were borne out of and researched teachers' relationships to their awareness of death in the United States. My hope is that future studies can be expanded and tailored to other contexts and other communities outside the United States with questions about death that are more relevant to those contexts.

I should also mention that given the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and a rise in reports of gun violence and school shootings, the stories and awarenesses shared with me were indicative of the time in which they were collected.

In the years since Columbine in 1999, there have been 486 "school shootings" in K-12 schools in the United States, with 7 instances in 1999 and 12 in 2000, and then the number steadily increasing over the decades, with more dramatic upticks in 2018 and 2019 at 30 and 27 respectively (Woodrow Cox et al., 2024).[5] After 2020, the number went up to 42 in 2021 and 46

[4] I am grateful to my fellow participants and the convenors of the 2022 Summer Institute on Psychoanalysis and Politics, whose camaraderie and conversations helped deepen and push my thinking for this work.

[5] It is very difficult to get accurate "school shootings" data. The United States government does not track gun violence in schools with specific criteria. Articles from popular newspapers and the "Sandy Hook Promise" organization often make use of this "K-12 School Shooting Data base" (Riedman, 2023). The numbers I quote from the Washington Post include incidents happening

in 2023 (Woodrow Cox et al., 2024). This mirrored the general rise in gun violence that the U.S. experienced after the Covid-19 shutdowns (Katsiyannis et al., 2023). I have no doubt that performing this study a few years prior or a few years after might yield different anecdotes and stories. As I often discuss in the project, the phenomenon of constant lockdown drills and simulations of active shooters is new for many educators in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. But those just joining the profession in their early 20's have often grown up with the drills and awareness of threats since early elementary school. Expanding on this study to a much larger project might include targeted age ranges for comparison or a replicated study to consider how context has impacted the stories that participants felt compelled to share when responding to the call for interviewees.

Of note here are also the participants' identities. At the risk of being reductive, most of the participants featured here identified as white women and self-identified as middle class (see below). While the workforce of teachers has and continues to diversify, the majority of teachers in the United States are white women, and this sample mirrors that. Surely, a number of systemic and social conditions contribute to this, but BIPOC teachers have a 25% higher rate of leaving the profession than their white colleagues, with research attributing this to burnout stress related to hostile work environments (Mahatmya et al., 2022). I say this to say while our workforce of BIPOC teachers may be increasing, perhaps the conditions that would lead to retaining them are not yet widely present in K-12 schools.

during school hours when classes were occurring with multiple casualties – they do not include suicides, gang violence, targeted hits, or violence happening on campus but not on school property. The Riedman database includes all of these in data he complies and makes open to the public at: https://k12ssdb.org/all-shootings

Considering how participants' race and class demographics impacted the study without relying on stereotypes or assumptions is difficult. But considering that many women, particularly working-class and middle-class women, have been socialized to be caretakers, it may be important to consider as themes of agency and power to keep students safe often come up.

Themes of race and identity did come up across interviews, but reflection on the teacher's own racial identity and the identities of others was less of a focus - except in the case of Leanne. In our interview, Leanne spoke and reflected on her own identity; her mother's family identifies as Hispanic, and her father's as Italian American (see Leanne's information below). Leanne also spoke the most clearly to themes of race and power. It is possible interviewing more teachers who identify as BIPOC or hold multiple racial identities may have brought up more tensions and attention to race and power. This is just a wondering.

There was some diversity across the states and contexts that participants taught in, with participants mostly from the Northeast and Midwest, with the exceptions of Oregon and Missouri. Some identified with a blue-collar upbringing or a parent holding a blue-collar job.

All participants who answered a question inquiring about their faith indicated some sort of shift from their upbringing or added a complication. Most said they were spiritual in some capacity, though not formally practicing a religion. In some ways, this mirrored the example language I used to describe myself in the permission survey, which could account for this. I also wondered about the religious and spiritual identities of folks who were willing to talk about death. Perhaps

those who agreed to do this study were also those who had reflected on their spiritual inheritance and made a conscious reflective shift of some kind.

Below, I offer a table of the participants and accompanying contextual information to reference as you read their stories and their thinking in the proceeding chapters. Please note some of their names have been changed at their request.

Participant Table:

Name	Pronouns	State	Type	Grade	Subject	Years of Teaching at time of Interview	Culture	Spirituality
Nat	They/Them	WI	Suburban	Middle School (6th-8th)	Special Education	2	I grew up in Wisconsin, my parents are divorced. I am white and grew up middle class	I was raised Lutheran. I identify as Agnostic or Atheist now
Molly	She/Her	MI	Suburban	Elementary (4th & 5th)	All	3	I grew up middle class until I was 13, white, travelled, both parents college educated, both parents native English speakers.	I was raised Catholic but am non-practicing. I identify as agnostic/atheist/confused.
Josh	He/Him	MA	Urban	High School (9-12th)	English Literature	12	My parents are heavily assimilated Jews (assimilated into whiteness) from NYC/Westchester County; I grew up upper middle class in Western MA	Culturally Jewish; Buddhist-adjacent
Leanne	She/Her	MA	Urban	Middle/High School (8th grade for two years, the rest high school) Just became an assistant principal	Theater and English	10	I grew up in a heavily New York Italian American influenced household with a touch of Hispanic traditions; first gen college student; blue collar worker parents; mother spoke Spanish but not in the home, maternal grandparents spoke Spanish most of the time.	I was raised Catholic. I no longer practice. I do believe in the universe's intervention in our world.
Darcie	She/Her	ME	Rural	High school	History, Psychology, Civics, Current Events	4	I grew up in western Massachusetts, a rural but culturally rich area. My family was middle class and my mom was a teacher. Both of my	I was raised sort of Catholic (went to catechism but didn't do much else) now I'm an atheist.

							parents went to college and so did my sister.	
Mark	He/Him	ME	Rural	High School	History	4	White rural working class in Maine, first-generation college student; father retired Navy turned postal clerk, mother practicing homebirth midwife.	Loosely protestant until the age of 10, then largely secular
Reese	She/Her	MO	Urban/ Suburban	Elementary	General	12	I grew up in a white middle class family in Colorado.	I consider myself an EX-vangelical. I do not adhere to any particular faith tradition now, but identify as a spiritual person.
Charlie	She/Her	OR	Urban	Middle/High School	English	4	-----	--------

Thinking Deeper about Object Relations and Group Dynamics as a Methodological Approach

How does one study knowledge so difficult to hold that it is often disavowed? For this project, I brought together group dynamics theory to push on the psychoanalytically informed frames of "difficult" and "disavowed" knowledge to think deeper about the work of object relations both metaphorically and literally so that I might answer the question – if knowledge (such as the awareness of death) is so difficult to hold that it becomes disavowed, how might we presence that knowledge? How might a deeper engagement with object relations, or even objects themselves, reveal that difficult knowledge? In this case, how might playing with object relations help show teachers' own conceptions of their relationships with death in schools?

What do we do with difficult knowledge once it's no longer disavowed? Using "difficult knowledge," a psychoanalytic concept popularized in the field of education by Britzman and Taubman's employment of "disavowal" and "disavowed knowledge," the project frames death

and the dead's presence in a classroom as something often too difficult to hold or something placed elsewhere (Britzman, 2000; Love, 2017; Salvio & Taubman, 2020; Taubman, 2011). My work here then pushes the thinking behind both "difficult knowledge" and "disavowal" by considering the psychoanalytic lineages of thought from which they both borrow: by focusing on theories of group dynamics which are born of object relations, I ask – if knowledge is disavowed or too difficult to hold, *where* does it go (Klein, 1984; Winnicott, 2005). Or rather, *who* else takes it up (Bion, 1962; Wells, 1995)?

The answer became obvious in the interviews: sometimes objects, both literal and metaphorical, stored this knowledge, and other times, the teachers themselves.

This question of location serves as the operative lens in how I spoke with teachers, collaboratively thinking, looking, and bringing into awareness the objects, places, anecdotes, and people that hold the relationship to the dead and death. Through associative interviews (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Pitt & Britzman, 2003), we discussed and are discussing questions such as where and when did the presence of death emerge? Where did the awareness of death live if not in the mind of the teacher? What objects or features of the classroom and school catalyze their awareness of death? And how did those moments of presence and awareness impact how a teacher conceptualizes their own pedagogy?

In these narratives, my understanding of the relationship to objects, both literal and symbolic, takes cues from the early group dynamics theory and systems psychology theorists. The roots of this group theory stem from Wilfred F. Bion, whose own analysis and analytic supervision

happened with Melanie Klein, the mother of object relations. Bion (1962, 1989) and Alderfer (1977), mobilized the "group-as-a-whole approach" that remains popular in organizational psychology and systems thinking today (Bion, 1962; Wells,1995).

In this approach, a group is an organism, with its individuals playing parts that contribute to a whole. In Leroy Wells's field-defining paper that popularized the theory in organization and systems thinking, Wells writes that "the group-as-a-whole phenomenon assumes that individuals are human vessels that reflect and express the group's gestalt […] From this premise, an individual speaking or acting in a group is perceived as expressing aspects of the group's tacit, unconscious, and collusive nexus" (Wells, 1995, p. 114).

In the group-as-a-whole understanding, different individuals take up specific roles or functions for the rest of the group. Sometimes, these roles are pre-defined and task-based, like those in corporate team settings. However, the work of these group theorists, particularly that of Wells, has pointed us to the more nebulous and murky roles that we take up in a group. Perhaps a friend in a friend group is the one who keeps the group on time or is often the one to voice an awkward and uncomfortable truth. Of course, these traits might merely seem to be a function of one's personality. However, in the group-as-a-whole understanding, group theorists insist that context, group identity, and task matter. For example, consider the role of the "scapegoat," a member, cause, or actor often blamed for a problem for the larger group so that the group might hide from an uncomfortable truth or responsibility. To get at an awareness of these dynamics, Wells (1995) urges groups to ask the following questions:

> 1. What have the group members been asked to carry on behalf of the group?
> 2. What may be being deposited into each member on behalf of the others?
> 3. Is a group member who is identified as incompetent, inept, too aggressive, or too passive merely unconsciously being asked to carry these projected split-off parts and attributes for the group-as-a-whole?
>
> (Wells, 1995, p. 129)

Who or *what* then counts as a group member in the group that we call the "teacher?" In my methodological approach, I expand group-as-whole as a metaphor that allows me to consider not only the living participants of a classroom (students, co-teachers) but also the physical objects in a teacher's room as part of the teacher's teaching. In this approach, a teacher's classroom, and the objects in it also comprise the teacher's group. The projector, the whiteboard markers, the desks, and other facets of the classroom make up the members of her teaching team. These objects, be they human or not, might act as symbolic representations of the awareness of death or even symbolic containers of the knowledge too difficult to hold for the teacher alone.

By asking after the objects themselves as well as asking about the *relationship* to these objects, or what Bion (1962) calls in *Learning from Experience,* "k-links," or links to our own knowledge as the knower, we understand more about the relationship a teacher has to death in her teaching, the qualities of it, the context for it, and ultimately the impact of such an awareness.

I use "object" loosely and metaphorically here. While sometimes these have been literal objects in the interviews, sometimes specific experiences or moments become like an object in the narrative a teacher is telling – a time, day, or experience becomes categorized as an entity in that they are then able to have a relationship to it. Together, we are often able to refer back to a memory they evoked with a few words or indexing it with "the time with the ____." With this

object-like formulation, I was more easily able to ask about past, ongoing, and then revisited relationships to that experience, and the difficult knowledge becomes – if even illusorily – easier to hold [together]. This metaphorical understanding of object relations and the meaning we make with things, stories, and entities outside ourselves becomes an essential part of understanding the shift in relationship to objects and symbols from chapter two to chapter three.

Summaries of the proceeding chapters

Chapter II:

Tales of Teaching and Teachers Born of Necropolitics:

Bare Life" Teaching, Un-Grievable Lives, and "Hyper-real" Traumas

In short, this next chapter shows the reader the difficult and disturbing teaching conditions in a necro-political climate. The second chapter addresses research questions one and two (see above and below) by providing a discursive and descriptive understanding of the necro-political conditions that produce necro-pedagogical stances – or teaching stances born of a necro-political climate. The chapter pairs classroom teachers' voices with theoretical concepts to help codify and elucidate the nuances of the gathered themes. The chapter offers insight into the first question: *How did teachers experience/describe the current conditions for teaching that called to mind the awareness of death? Objects? Stories? Memories?,* by offering the physical and personal conditions of the participants in which instances and awareness of death emerged for them. The chapter uses the term necropolitics to describe the conditions in which teaching is happening (Mbembe & Corcoran, 2019).

The chapter bridges the descriptive nature of teachers' stories with a theoretical meaning-making that offers an exploration of research question two: *How did experiences with death and thinking about death inform their pedagogies and what it means to be a teacher at this moment?* Broadly, the chapter answers this with teachers' descriptions of literal physical conditions that threaten teachers' and students' physical bodily health, deprivation of agency, ongoing stimulation of survival responses from simulations and "hyper-real" traumatic experiences, and loss of life at risk of being deemed un-grievable (Baudrillard, 1994; Butler, 2010; 2018).
What results is a landscape of descriptions I call *Necro-pedagogies,* a kind of teaching born of *necropolitics*.[6]

An Orientation to the rest of the Project and Its Parts [Chapter Summaries]

Chapter III:
Consecrating the *Necrocene*: Teachers' Death Informed Pedagogies

Everything described in both chapters could be understood as a kind of Death-Informed Pedagogy. However, chapter three changes the focus of what such proximity to death had unearthed for the teachers I spoke with and could unearth for others in the field, what I call *Memento Mori pedagogies.*

While the second chapter showcases the negative and unsettling conditions of teaching born of *necropolitics*, the third chapter illuminates the surprising and meaningful insights that come with

[6] While I use the term *Necro-pedagogy* rather expansively to describe the kinds of teaching and learning conditions and experiences happening in a necropolitical society, Pellegrini also used the term "*Necropedagogy"* as a term to uncover the phantasies and nightmares projected life, death, and potential life everlasting of a child also in a necropolitical landscape (Pellegrini, 2008).

teaching that actively presences or teaches in the presence of death – or teaching in the *Necrocene*. This third chapter also explores my second research question: *How did experiences with death and thinking about death inform their pedagogies, and what it means to be a teacher at this moment?* But again – unlike the second chapter – the themes present here are of a different tenor.

This chapter's data was a profound surprise as I entered the exploratory interview stage. While asking about the difficult conditions of teaching, there almost seemed to be "another side" of the experience that teachers revealed – one that entailed a deepening and meaningful reconsideration of what it means to be a teacher in light of a relationship to death. This surprised me deeply and impacted the conceptualization of this project early on. I experienced this in my first exploratory interview and then found it repeated in some manner across many of the interviews. To say that this chapter offers the "positives" of teaching in necropolitical environments is too reductive; rather, this chapter offers a different way of understanding how humans make meaning in educational spaces in relationship to death, a phenomenon and tradition that humans across cultures and millennia have partaken in. Some of the traits of this death-informed pedagogy are deep empathy and care, a commitment to modeling difficult emotions for students, gaining comfort with the unknown, and conceptualizing the work and time spent in school as sacred and important. My hope is to adapt this chapter and the one before it for publication in a journal such as the *Journal for Curriculum Theory*.

Chapter IV:
Acting & Reflecting: Embodied Ethical Thinking in Normative Case Discussions

The final chapter seeks to squarely explore my third research question: *how might these stories, experiences, and understandings illuminate a path forward for teacher educators and teacher education experiences?* Informed by expressed lack of preparation and attention to the topic of death in participants' teacher education and training experiences, the fourth chapter hopes to offer a path forward for teacher-educators to begin incorporating conversations about death and explicit preparation for moments of community crisis into their curriculums. Rather than offer a set of best practices for talking about or working with death, this curricular intervention focuses on making time and space for new educators to consider the ethical and pedagogical ramifications of teaching in relation to death.

Building on a tradition of case-based work in the field of ethics and education, the chapter offers an amended protocol for discussing a case (see appendix) in which a new teacher must consider how to address her homeroom class the morning after a student's death while balancing guidance from administrators and the needs of her students. The chapter offers a brief orientation to the set of discussion questions often used in case-based ethics and education work while offering additions and considerations essential to the work of discussing and considering the presence of death in the role of the teacher.

These additions include a move toward "embodied ethical thinking," bringing awareness to the body and collective bodies' vulnerability in space (Roberts, 2023). The curricular intervention ends with a reflection and discussion of how to extend the teachers' learning and pedagogical

values beyond moments of crisis into the everyday. I also offer prompts for a discussion for new educators to explore if and how their definition of what it means to be a teacher shifts in light of this discussion on death.

My hope is to adapt this chapter for publication in a practitioner-facing philosophy and education journal such as *Ground Works,* potentially including a case along with it.

Appendix Contents:

The appendix of the project includes supporting documents that might be helpful for readers, such as the call for participants, the semi-structured interview protocol's question bank, and a full case for teacher educators and school leaders working with in-service teachers. This case tells the story of a school community experiencing the death of a student, which has circumstances that are possibly related to local gang activity. The case positions the reader and hypothetical teacher to contend with competing interests and values, much like many of the other ethics and education cases.

Conclusion:

A Hope for the Reader

As you leave chapter one and proceed to chapter two, my hope for the reader is that you read expansively, openly, and reflectively about what a project like this could mean in whatever you call your "work," whether that is the thing you do for money or something else:

Before reading the stories and their themes in chapters two and three, I ask and wonder for you and whatever your work means, be it art, law, cooking, or pest control:

- What objects, memories, or instances in your work conjure an awareness of death? Something or some specific time at work that reminded you of your or others' mortality?
- What does that relationship to that awareness feel like or look like?
- What does this awareness bring to how you approach your work and what you understand that work to be?
- How might you carve out space for collective conversations about these reflections that exist and persist in death's shadow?

Chapter Two:
Tales of Teaching and Teachers Born of Necropolitics:
"Bare Life" Teaching, Un-Grievable Lives, and "Hyper-real" Traumas

> *This essay assumes that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.*
>
> - Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*

Introduction:

Every morning in Maine, Mark unlocked his high school classroom door. Then he locked it again. He did this without closing the door to ensure it would be locked if he had to quickly close it again in an emergency. When I talked to Molly, an elementary teacher in Michigan, about her awareness of death and objects that conjured that awareness, she told me that the school's intercom system had recently broken. Acutely, she had been aware that this object, usually the first line of defense in notifying the school of an active shooter, was broken. When she sees it and remembers its need for repair, she thinks about her death and her students' deaths. Molly also cannot help but think of death when she sees the "boot" – a metal door barricading device in her room. Sometimes, Molly dreams about the "boot." She dreams of an intruder at the school and a mad dash around her classroom, only to realize that she has taken the "boot" home by mistake. After the sudden death of their principal, Nat, a special education support teacher in Wisconsin, told me how in the moments they were not thinking about death, their 1:1 designated student,

Cam, seemed to bring it up as if they were switching off who might be thinking about it, taking turns asking difficult questions, like, “when will I be over it [a death]" or quietly crying.

Teachers who responded to my call for interviews sometimes came with a story in mind. Other times, they came with just a willingness to talk, share, and reflect aloud some of their thinking about being aware of death and their own mortality while teaching. Sometimes, Darcie from Maine told me, these moments of awareness come up in a “flash” in her mind, like when her door used to remind her more frequently of a traumatic “swatting” lock-down incident because she once spied a man with an assault rifle through its window. When these thoughts pop up, Molly from Michigan told me, the awareness of death “takes a couple of days to rinse itself out and kind of compartmentalize […] But in a lot of ways, it’s always in the back of my mind, right? Like, it's always present.” In many of these conversations, objects, occasions, or features of the classroom come up naturally. In all of those conversations, I asked after these objects or specifically about them. Moreover, I asked about the teacher’s relationship to that awareness, what that awareness does to their teaching, and how they think about what it means to be a teacher today.

Part I: Framing the Chapter

Orientation to this Chapter

This chapter investigates and offers a collection of teachers’ understanding of their teaching in a *Necropolitical* landscape, i.e., a context in which the power over whose life is allowed to thrive or be excised does not rest with those living that life (Mbembe & Meintjes, 2003).

This awareness of death and the relationship to it in teaching in these conversations births what Britzman would call “difficult knowledge” for teachers (Britzman, 1998; 2000). Sometimes, this difficult knowledge was about the context and safety of the conditions of teaching – other times, how those very conditions begin to define how we understand teaching and what it means to hold this identity. That knowledge was and is difficult because, as Britzman says, when she alludes to Freud, it contains and re-creates a trauma in the very capacity we have to know it (Britzman, 1998, p. 118).

As a result, this project is about what we hold knowingly and unknowingly. It asks: when knowledge becomes too difficult to hold, where do we put it down? Or rather, what or who holds it for us? And then what might we do with these objects and the awarenesses contained within them? Sometimes, these objects are not objects at all but moments and anecdotes that we carry in our pockets that hold meaning for the teller. The following makes use of those reflections from participants to better understand the teaching born of necro-political conditions.

This is a way of looking that I took up when doing interviews and bringing together insights from them for this chapter. This chapter is part of a larger project that seeks to illuminate the inner worlds of teachers by talking with them about their awareness of death in their work. Specifically, this chapter aims to explore the following research questions:

1. *How did teachers experience/describe the current conditions for teaching that called to mind the awareness of death? Objects? Stories? Memories?*
2. *How did they believe experiences with death and thinking about death informed their pedagogies and what it means to be a teacher at this moment?*

While this chapter primarily focuses on the first question, it necessarily sheds light on the second – often in negative and disturbing ways. As a result of the difficult and distressing conditions that teachers described, the reflections and interpretation of what it means to be a teacher in the face of those difficult conditions revealed a definition of "teacher" that had little to no agency over her body or an illusory sense of inflated agency over the ability to ensure the physical safety of her students. The teacher, often positioned in the difficult space of negotiating demands and threats of physical and emotional harm, becomes a kind of de-facto defender – flimsily, much like a lock, or a door that is asked to do too much. I detail the offering of potential features of teaching born of *Necropolitics* below, but first, I outline some of the theories that became integral to making those features legible in my mind.

Difficult Knowledge, Necro-Politics, Grievable and Bare-Life

Researching and working with "Difficult Knowledge"

The project hopes to bring these conversations into a dialogue with a larger question about the state of teaching today as well as a death-informed pedagogy described in chapter three. In this *"necropolitical"* milieu of an ongoing pandemic, increasing climate disasters, and continued precarity for young people of color, the differently-abled, and working-class and working poor youth – or anyone a societal norm deems "otherwise" – death is a familiar threat (Mbembe & Corcoran, 2019; Mbembe & Meintjes, 2003).

Thus, a pedagogy that reckons with the role of death in the classroom has become urgent. But before understanding and illuminating that pedagogy, the interviews pointed to the necessity of

showcasing and reckoning with the "kinds" of death and the presence of death experienced by the teachers. The conditions and understandings of horrific conditions may be understood to be a research project on "difficult knowledge" (Brtizman, 1998; 2000).

This chapter pushes the familiar lens of "difficult knowledge" to frame preliminary findings on teachers' understanding of death's role in their pedagogies (Britzman, 1998; 2000). By "difficult knowledge," I mean knowledge that itself in its content, such as the United States horrific history of the enslavement of human beings or the Holocaust, is not just upsetting but disturbing to the knower as they learn and begin to know it (Britzman, 1998, p. 118). Britzman first introduced this conceptualization in her work in 1998 when describing the Diary of Anne Frank and its use as a pedagogical object. She expounded on her use of the concept later in the chapter, *"If the Story Cannot End: Deferred Action, Ambivalence, and Difficult Knowledge"* (Britzman, 2000). Having encountered and discussed the *Diary of Anne Frank* with young people and similar stories, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and reports – the unknown and unfinished quality of stories of real people can haunt and confuse students. The psychic resistance and difficulty incorporating the knowledge of genocide into how they understand the capacities of humankind is internally and psychically challenging for students as well as it is for the teacher to witness. However, it is this *witnessing* that others point to as an essential part of understanding the role of teacher in the face of the learner (Felman, 1982).

Both in curriculum studies and social studies education and the space wherein they overlap, scholars have given much attention to how we might teach difficult topics or begin to incorporate death education, a very "difficult knowledge," into the curriculum (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2021;

Varga et al., 2021; 2023a). Again, this work instead looks to cultivate a glimpse into how teachers themselves are understanding the presence of death and what the awareness of it does to their understanding of what it means to be a teacher.

Thinking with Theories: Necro-Politics, Grievable Life, and Bare-Life and Simulacrums

While *difficult knowledge* was operative in how I understood my research and how I approached talking to teachers about death, the concepts of "Necropolitics," "Grievable" and "Bare-Life" in addition to *Simulations* and *Simulacrums* sprung up from the research and the data. Again, in other words, I brought the lens of *difficult knowledge* to the work or tried to capture unbearable stories and conditions that educators were experiencing; it was the stories and anecdotes themselves that conjured these theoretical concepts. I reference them here so as not to jar the reader and to introduce the concepts in necessary constellation with one another before employing them below. I have referenced this mode in other places, but rather than bringing theory immediately to object or text, I wanted to allow the stories to speak for themselves and the concepts that were necessary to become evident after spending time with the object of study itself, in this case, the stories told to me. I experienced this approach to thinking in Dr. Jill Casid's visual methodologies course, where some of the earliest thinking for this project emerged.

Earlier in this chapter and throughout the project, I make reference to teachers working in a Necro-political climate or Necropolitical conditions. Necropolitics comes from Mbembe's work, in which a political system for its inhabitants are not determiners of their own capacity for life.

Rather, a power larger than them, a "sovereign," as Mbembe borrows from Foucault's conception of bio-power, has the capacity to decide whether someone lives or dies (Mbembe & Corcoran, 2019). Mbembe opened his 2003 essay with the following:

> This essay assumes that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power. (Mbembe & Meintjes, 2003)

In a landscape of schooling happening in the wake of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the increased attention on how carceral systems and schools contribute to racial, disability and cultural injustices, and heightened reporting of gun-violence and school shootings in the United States, teachers often do not feel in control of their students' and their own physical safety. This came across clearly in my exploratory conversations and then early interviews with participants.

A lack of control or agency over one's physical conditions for work was a theme present in my interviews but generally and clearest in the stories from Molly and Mark, detailed below, but this lack of control – or rather control assumed by a force outside the teachers' control – was a theme in many of the interviews and is the base condition for considering other theories like "grievable life" and "bare-life" (Agamben, 1998; Butler, 2004).

"Bare-Life", from Agamben's *Homo Sacer,* describes a form of life when a person is biologically still alive, but subjected to such horrid conditions of experimentation and torture such as those in the Nazi death camps that they are considered to be "bare-life" or the most minimal existence of life (Agamben, 1998, p. 91). I borrow this concept not to talk about the physical conditions of the

teachers, but of the kinds of pedagogy and teaching that is born in a necro-political condition such as Molly's. This seems to me to be an essential part of the project that could merit further exploration in subsequent projects in which teaching is stripped down to its barest form as "content" in what I call "bare-teaching" below.

Within these Necropolitical conditions, a kind of illusory play for control also happened, one influenced and provoked by the spectre of the school shooter and simulation theater of preparation for defense against one. This illusion of agency being that a teacher, unarmed and standing behind a locked door, could defend herself successfully and dependably against someone with an assault rifle is a kind of dark fairytale theater perpetuated to instill a myth of agency so that teachers may feel bolstered in their role of "defender" or "protector." In short, having a "plan" of any kind makes it easier to stomach the anxiety of potential threat. This came out of many of my conversations but mostly clearly with Nat, Darcie, Molly, and my initial conversation with Charlie – who all experienced drills that instilled a protocol or plan that they had to enact or even moments wherein they could not be sure if a drill or incident was "real" or not. As I discuss later in this chapter, far more teachers have had the experience of a lock-down in which they were uncertain of the veracity of the threat than a full-blown crisis event in which the loss of life occurred, such as a school shooting. This simulation has become a step away from the incident of the school shooting itself and has become what Baudrillard would call a "simulacrum" – I explain this in depth in Darcie's case later below.

Another essential theory that I thought alongside as a result of the conversations below was Butler's *grievable life.* In the wake of 9/11, horrific global events, and attacks on the intellectual

work of understanding the global acts of terror, Butler wrote her book: *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004). In it, she asks what makes a life valuable – losable – or even more specifically, "*grievable"* (Butler, 2004, p. 20). Butler writes,

> Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (Butler, 2004, p. XV-XVI)

This categorization was one I was deeply familiar with from my reading and work, but not one I expected to use when discussing the lives of teachers and children. One might apply the category broadly to many of the moments when life is taken for granted in these interviews, but specifically, it came up in moments wherein participants described obstacles to public mourning and an expression of public grief. This emerged clearly in my conversation with Leanne, a high school English and theater teacher and now vice principal, in which she described two different situations wherein a student's death was not publicly acknowledged due to circumstances or potential gang affiliation. In a different situation, Josh, a high school English teacher who told me about the loss of a former student to suicide, described a landscape in which he could not be sure how or where to mourn this student given the parents' expressed religious wishes to not acknowledge the death at school. Un-*Grievable life*, or rather the conditions that threaten the ability for life to be grievable in schools in many ways, is an important and drastic conclusion to underscore the potential impact of necropolitical conditions in schools.

Part II: Methods

Methods and Approach to Collecting & Presenting Stories

As discussed in the previous chapter, the following pulls together stories from nine conversations with classroom teachers about death and their awareness of death in their practice. In the representation of their stories, I tried to capture the tenor and expression of the stories in the teacher's voices by incorporating their quotes as much possible – rather than re-voicing and re-telling the stories. As a result, many "block quotes" are long. This is purposeful as I try to capture the peculiarities and distinctness of the teacher voices featured. I do this with a hope that the reader imagines the quotes spoken in a different vocal register or cadence. Perhaps with this approach to the block quotes, you, the reader might more easily be able to pause and remember that the stories, anecdotes, and reflections are coming from a different person and a different body with a different set of experiences. As indicated in the first chapter, part of the commitment of this project is to honor, center, and lift teachers' voices as they reckon with the existential and complex nature of their work too often categorized simply as burnout or stress. The call for interviewees referred to this – the over-use of the word burn out – specifically. This call can be found in the appendix, and the table of participants and their identifying information can be found in the chapter before this one. More details on the qualitative methods and their philosophical underpinnings can also be found in the previous chapter. As acknowledged earlier, the sample size most represented in the data is white women, though not entirely (see table). This mirrors the well-known statistics on the teaching force also having large percentages of white women. Being a white woman myself, I may also factor into who responded or trusted me as a researcher for this study. I had originally planned to interview many more participants, but after my initial interviews, I realized the richness and complexity of the stories that were told to me were at risk of being crowded out by a more "survey style" qualitative approach. This larger

scale approach would lose the fine grain and depth available to me and readers as we sometimes hold nine voices and their stories simultaneously.

Many of the conversations with teachers here involve meditations, stories, and anecdotes about their experiences with active shooter drills or thinking about their relationship to the possibility of gun violence in the classrooms. Friends and colleagues have a few times asked, "Why not seek out or try to find teachers who themselves have survived an active shooter experience?" My initial response to that question is that my project is not primarily about the death involved in school shootings, but the kind of death – expansively – that comes to mind for teachers. But also, as a researcher, I did not seek to harness the clear pain and suffering that has been well-documented by news outlets and media outlets in the wake of each of these events. It does not feel essential to questions that I am asking insomuch as the average teacher, despite the constant reports, has not and will likely not experience an active shooter directly. Most have an experience that, while not as dramatic as Darcie's swatting experience detailed below, simulates the lockdown experience during an active shooter with some uncertainty of veracity. Teachers told me they often felt an ambiguous and internal monolgue during drills: *I'm not sure if this is a drill, but we are being asked to do lockdown/evacuate/etc.* Without much information about the credibility of a threat, teachers are often called into action; this is an experience that many teachers have. As I say this later, this simulacrum of the lockdown becomes, as Baudrillard (1994) would call it, something real on its own terms, referred to as the "hyper-real".

Part III: Emergence of a Necro-Pedagogy & Descriptions of Themes

Themes of a Necro-Pedagogy – or Teaching Born of *Necropolitics:*

Below, informed by the stories and associations from participants, I offer a hypothesis about what I am calling here *"necro-pedagogies"* or teaching that is born in and of *necropolitics.* While I brought the lens of necropolitics, these "features" of this pedagogy are themes that were born out of the interviews themselves. Below is a list of these features, a short description, and reference to the stories wherein the feature came up.

1. **Physically Harmful Conditions:** Literal physical conditions that threaten teachers' and students' bodily health.
   (illustrated most clearly in Molly and Mark's stories)
2. **Loss of Agency & Desperation for Agency:** A persistent lack of agency or threat of a loss of agency over the physical and emotional safety of the conditions, and sometimes teachers scrambling with desperation to regain it.
   (Seen in many stories- mostly clearly here from Mark, Molly, Darcie, and Nat.)
3. **Simulation & Rehearsal of Survival Experiences**: Ongoing Survival simulations and rehearsals that blend with and become traumatic experiences wherein teachers and students are asked to "survive" and given the illusion of control.
   (Exemplified most clearly in Darcie and Nat's stories, but also informed by initial conversation with Charlie)
4. **Life deemed "Un-grievable":** Unrecognized and/or unsupported grieving of the loss of life that ultimately devalues the life lost and lives being lost in school communities.
   (Discussed across Leanne and Josh's stories of loss)

These conditions reveal an understanding of teaching that is born of necro-politics. This kind of necro-pedagogy is one that does not value life but instead favors a very pared-down version of teaching. I call this a "bare life teaching," a category I borrow from Agamben's *Homo-Sacer* to denote here a form of teaching that barely requires a living teacher for its existence (Agamben 1998). I borrow Baudrillard and Judith Butler across these categories to partner their definitions in order to clarify my own.

Molly

The Broken Desk & The Broken Chair – A "Bare Life" Teaching

Molly, an elementary school teacher in Michigan, began her first-round teacher training when her mother returned to school to be a teacher. An early career change with children of her own, Molly's mother would attend an intensive graduate program for teacher training in Michigan – much like the one Molly herself would attend years later. This was the story that Molly shared when I asked her to tell me about herself and her journey into teaching. Her mom had brought her into the profession.

But in her first year of teaching, Molly's everyday colleagues were a broken desk and a broken chair. In the 2020-2021 school year, Molly taught 75 fifth graders remotely from a school district's abandoned building. She graduated from her teacher education program and began teaching in the fall of 2020 and took a remote job to have the flexibility to care for her mother, who was recovering from a traumatic brain injury. However, due to district guidelines, Molly could not actually teach from her home. While her students zoomed in from their living rooms and kitchen tables, Molly would sit in an abandoned wing of a high school that used to "store every piece of furniture ever," as she told me.

When I asked if this was what she imagined when she signed up for a year of remote teaching, she replied:

> *Okay - no, no. I signed up for the flexibility. Not to be driving 30 min away from my home, right, to go to a room that didn't really have anything there. There was no clean water for washing my hands. I felt like I was making them dirtier. There was mold on the ceilings. Oh, my God! The only furniture I had was a broken desk and a broken chair.*[7]

What does this case show us about necropolitical teaching conditions in the pandemic?

[7] Block quotes from participants are italicized for ease of the reader, with some sections bolded that are particularly relevant to the accompanying analysis.

For Molly, the conditions of teaching and learning distilled and crystallized her district's main priorities for what would count as "teaching." Her situation, and the situation of so many remote teachers in the pandemic might help us ask: What does teaching become in an emergency condition? What is learning during an emergency?

Devoid of peripheral glances, side conversations, shared art supplies, and reading rugs, elementary school proceeded online. For many of us who taught or learned remotely in the pandemic, the question of what teaching or learning is seemed to haunt the edges of our screens. To discuss what schooling or education is without our bodies, is a topic much larger than this project can hold, but for Molly – I would propose that the first year of her teaching experience revealed a kind of *bare teaching*. Technically, Molly and her colleagues were "teaching," but it was in a compromised state stripped of the many hallmarks of the work. No shared space and physical community space, teaching that demands teachers to convey and cover "content" as the sole, if not driving force of the work – this is what I refer to as "bare-teaching."

This came up in passing for Molly when she discussed the pressure to create and convey "content" in the midst of these dismal teaching conditions – and that her colleagues faced even greater pressure. While Molly, the fourth-grade teacher, and their special education counterparts were stationed in this abandoned furniture storage area, her kindergarten colleagues were sequestered to a basement. Molly told me,

> People teaching K-3, their situation was honestly worse. They were all at the middle school in a big basement, like a room where technology, storage was… So they had moved all of the tech on the other side, and they all had their desks and computers in different corners of the room, teaching at the same time. So, you can picture that, right?

> Like kindergarten lessons and kids talking while other people are trying to create content and push it out - like - it was just insane, awful. So, I'm like, I can't work here, especially not teaching fifth grade - I need quiet. I have so much content that I need to - first of all I'm making it myself. I have, like, I didn't even really know about 'teachers' pay teachers' at this point, like I didn't have a budget for that.

Even amidst these inhospitable conditions, the pressure for "content" creation and conveying said content was immense. While the despicable conditions of work not only made this task difficult, the bareness of the conditions themselves revealed the nature of what teaching meant in this context or what kind of teaching was deemed, at minimum, acceptable by a power larger than Molly. The absence of the other situational aspects of teaching narrowed the chief driver of the work to content creation and content deliverance. I had heard this from many friends and colleagues during the pandemic, but the image of Molly, alone, trying to transmit knowledge over Zoom from a place that was hostile toward her very physicality is a harrowing one. While debates about in-person versus online learning went on as adults struggled with how to keep children safe from a mysterious new virus, Molly's physical being was absent from concern. Rather than allow her to "zoom in" from her own home with clean water, working chairs, and access to her mother recovering from a brain injury, she was physically required to be present in an environment hostile to her physical being.

Moving away from the larger threatening physical conditions of her pandemic teaching, I moved to ask Molly about her experience teaching elementary school students in person currently in a new district. When I asked Molly specifically about when she thought about death – she told me about the intercom being down. It was as if a member of her defense team had dropped out. Practically, this object was the messenger of potential death. And the protector or designated

defender after that threat was the “boot.” But what if the “boot” disappeared? Molly had nightmares about this.

> I have dreams where like someone's coming, and I don't know where everybody is or something's not working right, you know, like the boot isn't going in there right, or like I forgot it, or like I took it home. I took the boot home and forgot to bring it to school, which is hilarious because, like, I bring my microphone home all the time. But I'm like Molly, you're never going to bring the boot home. It's not something you absent-mindedly put somewhere. It's like it's not an expo marker in your cardigan pocket. Yeah, like, shoot. I took this chair home with me like it's not going to happen, but that's then, you know - the stress dream.

When Britzman writes about the incorporation and knowing of difficult knowledge, she references the “war within” (Britzman, 1998, p. 120). Molly’s stress dream, in which the boot is missing, seems to play out a nightmare in which nothing separates Molly from a potential school threat. The boot plays such a significant role representationally in Molly’s inner world that it shows up as an arbiter in her dream space. Consciously and unconsciously, the boot, in its relation to Molly, shows the classroom constructed as a place that needs a physical defender – with a sense of safety dependent on this physical object. Without it, Molly felt as if the role of defender fell to her. This mirrors some of the relationships that Mark (below) discussed in relation to locking his door each day.

Further Analysis of Molly: “Bare Life Teaching” & Physically Dangerous Conditions Defended by Objects

Molly is just one extreme example that indicates the range of experiences teachers had over the pandemic. Like any project, this one is contained in its historical context of when the stories were collected, and the thinking done. When external forces challenged the current paradigms and existence of “teaching” and “school” as we traditionally knew it, the leaders of Molly’s

district (desperate and likely frightened), and many districts around the country, created or at the very least accepted the conditions for Molly and her colleague's labor. This was enough for "teaching." Again, while this takeaway might feel specific to the pandemic, it is essential to document and remember this case for future states of emergency. With a construction such a "bare life" teaching, we might consider and wonder – what begins to pass as teaching and who does that passing serve? What parts of schooling are still given priority, and for what reasons?

Another way to consider deeply the physical and emotional impacts of what, where, and who the teaching and the teacher ought to be is through the "Boot." Thinking about the Boot and Molly's relationship to it instantiates and represents the need for a physical defense against a feared and projected threat. It clearly held Molly's awareness of death in its ability to create an illusion of safety. However, the boot is not an automatic device. Its success still depended on Molly, something that she became conscious of in her dreams, or more accurately nightmares, wherein she herself has lost or misplaced the boot. Still, even in this video wherein a lone elementary schooler successfully uses the boot during a lockdown, the success still depends on his execution of getting the boot in the right place at the right time (LockOut USA, 2018).[8] While Molly no longer teaches in a facility so harmful to her physically, the conditions and relationship to being a teacher still necessitate a defensive posture. As I discuss the prevalence of lockdown drill experiences compared to actual lockdowns later in this chapter, I should add here that Molly told me she taught not far from Oxford, Michigan, a city that had experienced a school shooting a few months before we spoke. This loomed large in her and her students' minds, giving the teeth

[8] Lockdown company's video: https://vimeo.com/293337450 (LockOut USA, 2018)

of reality to the boot's use in the face of what may have seemed like an anxious nightmare to others.

Mark:

Passing Thoughts of Death and Doors and Losing Agency

Mark was history and economics teacher at an independent high school in Maine. When I asked about when death comes up or pops into his head and if there were any moments or objects that held that awareness for him - he told me about locking his door.

> I mean, it [death] comes up; I mean, something that's interesting is that it, it comes up frequently, but so often that it's - **kind of like routine thoughts. Like every day when I unlock my door.** The key, my key turns to unlock the door. And then the, the, the thing that I do before I take my key out is I lock the door again so that my door is like standing open. I, I prop it open, but it's locked. And so that if I need to close it, I don't need to lock it to prevent someone from getting in the room. So that's just like every day I start my day with like, unlocking my door. And then I, what goes through my head is like, you know, maybe today's gonna be the day. And I like just lock it just to be, it's like a habit, you know? Um, so it's not a very dramatic moment of death, but it's just like, that's how I start my day and, you know, that sort of thing comes up… I**, I think those are like idle thoughts** of like, oh, like, what if, you know, what if something happens? And it, you know, there's most of the time it's like, oh, that's never gonna happen at my school. Um, but yeah, I mean, I think the thought of somebody, a student or an adult, like bringing a gun to school and, um, shooting people, like, yeah, **it's something that I think about a lot and it's, it happens so frequently that it's not a very urgent or serious thought.**

It might sound strange to a reader that this was not an "urgent" or "serious thought," but I could relate to this sort of peripheral and almost constant framing of the classroom as one that might need to be defended or a place to escape. I had experienced it in my own teaching and heard similar perfunctory matter-of-factness when teachers discussed their "plan" for escape: out windows, down stairwells, onto roofs. Nonetheless, I followed up with Mark to make sure I understood that it did not feel urgent or serious because it was such a frequent thought.

> Mark: Yeah. It's sort of, it's like, oh yeah, I should lock my door in case somebody wants to shoot me today. Like, you know, like that, it's like, that's not a very stressful thought to have. (awkward laughter)
>
> RC: I'm laughing because I relate so much because the image or the phrase that's coming to mind when you're saying this or is sort of, it's just part of the furniture of teaching. Would you agree with that?
>
> Mark: Yeah – right. (affirmative).

Mark worked at an independent school in rural Maine and felt, he told me, a bit insulated from some of the dramatic lockdown training and as well as other parts of being a teacher in the U.S. in the age of shootings and lockdowns.

Nonetheless, as he said, he thought about it a lot in "non-urgent or serious" ways. In other places, he called these "idle" and "routine" thoughts and the act of locking the door as "mental floss." There was a way in which the objects (lock – and later window) were teammates, as the "boot" was with Molly in holding the reminder of death and potentially acting as metaphorical containers of difficult knowledge but also literal potential barriers to the threat of death.

And not every colleague locked their door in the way Mark did. When asked about it, he told me he was a bit effusive and explained it away, even to make sure no one entered without his permission. This was not a lie, but not exactly the entire truth of the matter either. This was, as indicated above, just part of how Mark understood the climate and conditions of teaching today. This seemed not to be actively disturbing but indeed part of the landscape of being a teacher.

When I asked a little bit more about where he had learned lock his dooor, particularly because his colleagues did not share the habit, he told me "I think it takes me as much effort to do it as to

not do it." As I heard other teachers tell me, Mark had thought about his "plan" if there was an active shooting event:

> I've thought through this in my head, especially during, you know, during like designated - okay, everyone we're going to like, do a, a drill here. I think like questions like, would I - I'm on the first floor, but it's elevated. It's probably like 10 feet above the ground. It's like, would I like, go out the window? Would I have to help kids go out the window? I mean, probably, my sense is probably every teacher has had the, has thought about that, like what their plan would be.

Mark told me about another object or feature of his classroom this year that he felt similarly to as locking his door preventatively:

> M: And you know, like, I inherited a, I inherited a room from someone, I switched rooms this year, and my room is a wooden door that has a glass strip that's probably six inches by two feet or so, that has paper taped over it. And it was taped over it when I got there, and I just like didn't remove it. But I got the sense that like, I mean, it's possible that it was taped over so that when the door was closed, students couldn't peek in and be distracting from the hallway. But my assumption was somebody taped that over there so that if the door was locked, nobody could see in the room. Um, so I mean, I don't really know. I didn't, I didn't, uh, take it off.
>
> RC: Why didn't you take it off?
>
> M: Yeah. I mean, I think because it's the same thing, it's sort of, it's like, why would I take it off? You know, like, I'm just gonna leave it on there. It's, just like, an effortless thing. It's no work to do it, so why would I, you know, **I may as well just do it.**

These seem to be learned habits of mind and body in Mark's role as the teacher, part of his routine and ritual, but also his approach and understanding of what the role was in the landscape he found himself in. Some of which he brought in from another job. Before teaching in a traditional classroom, Mark had worked as an outdoor educator and still did during the summers.

He reflected on how he took some dispositions and learnings from that job, in which he was responsible for groups of people in "risky situations," into his work as a teacher. Specifically, the capacity to think ahead for the sake of physical safety had been carried into the halls of the

school. For example, ensuring a group had eaten enough could be essential on a trip if it began raining, and they might be more predisposed to slip if they were not properly nourished. Doing a cartwheel on a front lawn might not feel dangerous, Mark told me, but doing one miles away from medical care really ups *the risk* – something Mark took steps to avoid as an outdoor educator.

> You are in a situation where, um, even like minor things, like a small cut on the shoe, like a small cut on your, on your foot, um, can on a three-week expedition, a five-week expedition, just leads to a lot of problems. So that job has trained me to think a lot about all of the things that you do to avoid risk. Kind of like a pilot's checklist.

The comparison made here to that of a pilot is a powerful one. Failing to follow a checklist in air travel, can result in devastating consequences. Teachers, and those who work with groups – and leaders generally – would (or I think should) consider the safety of the people who look to them for leadership. This would be particularly important when it comes to children in the charge of an adult. But as I detail in the final chapter, the predispositions toward physical safety in teaching, the vigilance, and the "routine" thoughts about safety, all seemed to be conjured often in a landscape wherein school itself has been reported on so constantly as a place where people might die from violence – or potentially Covid.

Toward the end of our interview, I brought Mark back to the relationship that he had with these "blips" or small moments of being aware of death and the risk of death at school. In response to how that awareness defines or impacts what it means to be a teacher today – Mark discussed the conditions and conversations about returning to school during the Covid-19 pandemic and how he became aware that his personal safety was "not part of the equation." Mark understood his work in teaching to certainly be a "role of service" in supporting young people and loved "teaching siblings and older siblings" and being a part of a community long term. But in the

transition back to school, he watched as colleagues and friends at universities and in other sectors had a voice at the table in the decisions that were being made about their safety, a role he was not granted. Mark told me,

> And there's just been, there's been a lot of experiences over the last couple years where I was faced with the harsh reality that, um, **like maliciously or not, but that, um, my own personal safety was not part of the equation.** Uh, when it came time to like ending - you know, reopening schools. And that was part of the conversation for other people's jobs. And friends of mine, um, who were teaching at universities were able to participate in that conversation. And I think for me, the only choice I had was to take it or leave it. Like there was no, like, how can we make this work for you? It was sort of like - um, yeah.
>
> So, safety, I think safety is like a big reason why I'm like, oh, this, like actually in this, in this time, I think five years ago when I was entering teaching school shootings were like out there, **but I think it was the pandemic that really made me realize that yeah, that my safety was not part of the calculus of any of this**. And **it wasn't just theoretical, it was really tangible that, um, nobody's really thinking about me.** And if they're thinking about me, it's only like, there's an awareness of my impact, but there's no change in policy or change in practice for my impact.

When I interviewed Mark during his 2022-2023 school year, he had applied and was now weighing acceptances from several doctoral programs in education. He was frank about the struggles with guns in schools and Covid – not the risks themselves but the agency he lacked in making decisions to mitigate risk for himself and others that influenced him to leave the high school classroom.

He could, as he said, “roll his eyes” about school board members trying to control the curriculum and find ways to get around that control. But when it came to making decisions about his own personal and physical safety, Mark, understandably, took issue with this amount of control. Or, as he phrased it, “way too much power for them” and a fear of that:

> And I think there's a, there's some fear involved, there's some fear of like, there are some crazy people up there running for school board. And those are the people that are gonna decide like what I can, you know, sure - I think I can roll my eyes at the curriculum

> conversations. Yeah, those are the people that are going to decide what books we're going to have in school, and like, that's crazy, right? **But then [to also be] people that are going to decide my own personal health and safety, right? Like that is, that's too much power for them to have.**

Ultimately, the fear that Mark expresses here, about living and working in conditions wherein an authority makes the decisions about who lives and who dies – is one of necropolitics. Mbembe defines necropolitics as a condition that allows for "death worlds" or realms wherein what he calls the "living dead" no longer have control over the living conditions of their physical bodies (Mbembe & Corcoran, 2019). It might sound extreme to equate a school space to a "death world," but certainly Mark's felt experience of voice-lessness cannot be ignored.

Further Analysis: Mark and "Loss of Agency"

Whether a loss of agency was actually transpiring or the *feeling* of it *potentially* happening or about to happen – whether because of the constant amorphous threat of school shootings, lack of agency over disease exposure, or other conditions, teachers in schools are still feeling the precarity and possibility of their agency being taken from them, slowly, or completely in some anticipated nightmare future.

Mark had contrasted his school context with his summer job as an outdoor expedition leader. He also told me that in outdoor education, he often focused on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.[9] It was a relief, he said, to enter into that space in the summers between teaching, wherein everyone thought often and openly about tending to the basic needs of their group. I thought and still think

[9] Maslow's hierarchy of Needs is a pyramid representation of an understanding of the basic needs of humans that need to be met. It is a pyramid with physical needs being the lowest and most essential base of the pyramid, then stacking on top of that, feelings of safety, then eventually love and self-esteem (McLeod, 2007).

of how this is not how we treat teachers. Certainly, Maslow's hierarchy of needs was not considered by the leaders that okayed Molly's working conditions during the pandemic, wherein she was rather isolated and the conditions themselves unsanitary, while she ostensibly did communal work. It bears reminding the reader here that Molly agreed to an entirely remote job her first year (while so many schools were indeed remote) because she hoped to have the flexibility to take care of her mother, who was recovering from a traumatic injury. Instead, Mark and Molly faced obstacles in retaining their own agency in their working conditions. While it may seem extreme to go to a place of necropolitics, I bring these stories forward specifically to show readers what happened to teachers and their teaching during unstable conditions. Rather than imagining how teacher voices could inform or create new and unforeseen educational experiences, Molly and Mark instead saw the opposite, with their voices notably absent from the circumstances determining their labor. The absenting of teachers, not just the decision about their labor but conversations about the possibilities of their work, became a clear moment for Mark wherein he felt a lack of agency and a lack of value for his safety.

Next, we shift to a participant whose experiences and circumstances, in many ways, could later be seen as historically situated, a classroom scene framed by the experience of lockdowns. Darcie, below, in contrast to Mark and Molly, felt as if she was given too much agency in an experience that simulated a school lockdown due to an active shooter.

Darcie: Lock Down "Simulacrums" and their "Hyper-real" Trauma

Darcie teaches sophomore U.S. History. I talked to her in her fourth year of teaching at a rural public school in Maine. Someone else referred her to my call for interviews based on conversations they had about Covid-19 and because of a distinct lockdown "swatting" experience Darcie had.

Pretty early into our interview, Darcie told me about this "swatting" her school experienced, or as she said, "a shooting that wasn't a shooting."

On a "random Tuesday in November," during the first period, an announcement came over the intercom. They were in lockdown. And there was no mention of the word drill, which made Darcie wonder. Her students began to look out the windows that looked out onto the entryway of the school, where they saw various forms of police cars lined up, state, local – perhaps even secret service. With the Bush's having a property not far from her school, high-security officials seemed to be nearby often. Ambulances and fire trucks began to arrive, which is when Darcie, along with her students, began to think, "Oh, something is *truly* happening."

> And then I did not take any of the kids' phones. So, they're also getting information that was not true but is texted and Snapchatted and whatever to them of like, "Oh, and someone's just been killed in this part of the school, and there are bodies here," which some of that had been part of the [false] call that had gone into the police. So, we have no information because we got the one announcement that we're in lockdown. We see all these people coming into the building; the kids are getting all these messages, which, at the time, you don't know if it's true or not. It's not coming from a reliable source; you have no source of information that you can rely on.

Again, to clarify, there was no active threat or active shooter at Darcie's school. The school's administrators received information from the police that there had been/was an ongoing threat at

the school. Darcie went on to tell me more about her inner monologue and inner thoughts during this traumatic experience:

> *And at that point, I think because the kids are really starting to freak out, and I'm sitting there being like,* ***"What is my job here?" I am a person who does not really know how to protect this room full of 28 teenagers****. So, we make a little barricade from the door, and I get a couple of them to help me with that. And I try and shove the rest of them over in the corner. And we've gone through this whole new protocol of what we're supposed to do in these lockdowns of we're not just hiding in the corner, we have to be ready to go at any point. And we all assumed that that would mean that they would be communicating with us more, but they really weren't telling us anything. Because I mean, admin's doing their own thing, trying to figure out if there is an actual threat in the building, figuring out what to do with all these people.*

This narrative might sound very familiar to teachers who have been through drills or trainings wherein police shake doors or doorknobs. Leanne, a teacher in Massachusetts whose stories I share later, told me about these drills. And certainly, I myself have experienced the creeping wondering "if this is a drill or not" during a drill. Older readers not accustomed to this feeling during lockdown drills might recognize a familiarity with this wondering from fire alarms growing up. Many times, administrators would simulate the fire drill by calling it randomly without much warning to teachers and students, if possible. At least, in these instances, the drill participants take action by moving outside and ultimately and quickly revealing if the drill is indeed a drill. Unlike most fire drills or evacuation drills, participants in a lockdown drill are isolated and asked for a brief flurry of action, such as barricading a door, but then asked, usually, to be silent and move as little as possible contained to one location.

As Darcie detailed in her retelling of the experience, with an absence of information from the administration, she became increasingly aware of the murkiness of her own role in what felt like a life-threatening event for herself and her students. It became clear that the messaging they gave

about the protocol might not be followed – so the work of what it meant to be a teacher with these young people fell to her own inner world to make sense of:

> So, I can see it from their [the administrators'] perspective too, but in the moment, it was like, **are we all about to die? And what do I do about it? And am I responsible for these kids or not?** And how do I help the four that are crying over there and then the one who keeps trying to go over to the window and is giggling because he won't take it seriously? And the other one who's crying in the corner next to the one who's laughing really hard because that's her response to stress and just like how do I also handle the fact that I'm freaking out **and they're all looking to me to know, is this a real emergency? Is she worried that she's going to die?**

While these questions were born out of an experience that they would later learn did not indeed involve an active shooter situation but the phantom of one, that specter still brought out some of the same relational and difficult questions that teachers wrestle with today in the face of crisis events. What is the role of the teacher? And what and how is she responsible for these lives that are not her own? And how do these larger questions then instead come to live in the immediacy of the situation and the students, whether they need consolation, clarity, or just stability in the face of crisis.

More features of the simulated crisis were shared with a real one when Darcie and her students began to contact their loved ones, as one does when they fear a situation might take their lives.

> And I do remember texting at least my partner and saying, "Hey, we're in a lockdown. I don't know what's going to happen, but I love you." And just having that moment where it's like - I'm about to now make someone else really panic. And so, then he's starting to freak out somewhere else. And I think that that was a moment too where it was actually harder on the families of all the people that were in there because we figured out before they did that nothing really was happening because I think they locked down our cell service at some point so that there weren't as many people messing up the airwaves.

To add to this simulation of a lockdown experience, a SWAT team arrived with assault rifles, bringing, as Darcie noted several times in our interview: real, big, and very visible weapons into the school that made her feel more confused and alarmed. At the time, Darcie did not understand the people she was seeing were a SWAT team. They were not wearing anything identifying. So,

when one of them knocked on Darcie's door – she was unsure how to proceed. As Darcie told me,

> So, I don't want to let him in because I don't know who the threat is and if this is the person that's going to come and hurt all of us. So, I don't want to let him in but some of the students are saying, "That's the police officer, you have to let him in." So that was another moment where I was like, "**What is the right call to make here**?" And he basically just wanted to know that we were okay and that we weren't the room with any of the emergencies happening in it. So, I just gave him a thumbs up, and we're all good.

In her retelling of facing the SWAT personnel at the door, I heard Darcie feel the ambiguity and difficulty of making a decision in this circumstance. Without fully knowing what was going on or who this person at the door was, she felt the weight and difficulty of not knowing "the right call to make." Once the moment passed, she faced another decision point wherein she was unsure what was "real":

> *And he finally left and we got another email from one of the assistant principals that just said, "We want to know that everybody's okay because we're trying to figure out if there's a real problem. Can you tell me what room you're in and how many students are with you?" Which was another one where I was like,* ***"Is this a real email? Do I actually need to tell someone where I am and how many kids are with me? Or is that how they're going to find me to get all of us?"*** *Because you hear all of these stories, so every other possible situation that you've heard about on the news is going through your mind. And then eventually, I mean, also time felt like it was passing really slowly, but throughout this, we still don't know if anything's happening or not, except that we haven't heard gunshots or something. And it's a big school but not that big.*

Eventually, about 45 minutes after receiving that email, Darcie told me the principal and some police officers came to escort everyone to the gym. While she recognized and had more trust for the principal, this moment felt still part of the emergency. As they walked through the halls in a line to gym, Darcie and her students were asked to move with their hands in the air so the "miltary-looking people with assault rifles" knew they were not threats. This felt, in Darcie's words: "dystopian":

> *So, it's just the most dystopian thing. It's not like I'm getting PTSD flashbacks or anything,* ***but it is still hard even a few months later to be like, I have seen so many huge weapons in the school. You can't really unsee that idea of, yeah - just dystopian****. And so, we all get pushed into the gym, which I can see why they did that, but also all of the kids are still freaking out because they are like, "Great. Now we're all in one place if someone's going to come and get us and they can do it more easily." And then we have to wait there for a while. At that point, I think we found out that they decided it wasn't a credible threat, but they still bus us all to a separate gym and all the kids get sent home and then the teachers still have to go back in the afternoon to debrief.*

I heard Darcie use the word dystopian to describe a reality she saw before her, as if the order of the world reflected in the scenes of her work at a school was not what it should be. And yet, it was.

As I introduced earlier in this chapter, I made the conscious decision not to seek out those who had survived school shootings. First, because the project's purpose is not so narrowly focused on school shootings but a broader understanding of death and our possible relations to it. But second, because many more teachers do not have the experience of actually living through one of these crises. Instead, the stories I have heard are more similar (though still not quite as extreme in scale as you will see as a swat team showing up looking actively for injured or deceased students and their supposed killer) in that the experience involves a few minutes or longer wherein uncertainty about the veracity of the "lockdown" or evolving bodily threat is unknown. Many teachers, both those interviewed, such as Charlie initially and myself, as well as others, have the familiar experience of reaching out to loved ones just in case. Or wondering if they are making the right call to communicate with someone at the door and not sure if there are more steps for them to take next.

In this way, school lockdown drills have become traumatic experiences in their own right. Certainly, much research and reporting has questioned or asserted this very idea and is wondering if these drills may do more harm in their attempt to prevent harm (Schildkraut & Nickerson, 2022; Streeter et al., 2020).

A lockdown experience is either a drill or a defensive and preventive maneuver that a school conducts in case of a potential threat that is never realized. This "drill" experience has become a ubiquitous part of being a teacher for many. These experiences, or what I would call *lockdown simulacrums*, are no longer just a false lockdown experience but something in of themselves becoming what Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* might call "hyper-real" (Baudrillard, 1994). Their reality, born out of conditions of splitting with a signifier, offers an experience that is haunted by the spectre of a "real" experience of a school shooting, such that the experience, with or without the veracity of a threat, becomes a traumatic one. They have moved beyond being a copy and instead become a rehearsal for one's potential survival of death. Instead of staying as a shadow of the terrible actual crisis, they hold a place of trauma themselves. These experiences are haunted by the spectre of feelings, questions, and frightened responses one might have in the face of life-threatening events with students. It is as if teachers are being chased in a Halloween corn maze, without the knowledge that the whole thing is show – the very moment of uncertainty becoming something reinforced by the very real constant reports and stories teachers see and hear.

These *lock-down simulacrums* have the capacity to birth "hyper-real" traumas that have the potential to be ongoing in the bodies and minds of its inhabitants (Baudrillard, 1994). The trauma

I am referring to in Darcie's case is a questioning of one's physical safety as a teacher and one's responsibility to take on the safety of her students in a split second's notice.

After the event, I asked Darcie how often she thought about the experience and what reminded her of this during her day-to-day at school. She told me it was hard to forget, but she certainly felt its presence more when she first returned to school:

> Less now than they did right at the beginning. I feel like, at the beginning, it was very much. Like coming in the second day, all of the barricades were still up because we'd left so quickly. So, **I feel like even the door of my classroom,** I feel like that was where all of the threats felt like they were. It was a little bit anxious for a while or anxiety-provoking, but I think at this point, it's fine. **I feel like most of the things that end up making me think about it again are just like every other day when we hear about something happening somewhere else.**

Much like Molly and Mark, the door itself or the features of the classroom, like a lock or a boot that present as physical barriers to the space of the classroom, can be potential holders and reminders of death. And like many other teachers, the reports of gun violence at schools elsewhere can cause uneasiness and thoughts of and about one's own mortality in relation to their profession. But for Darcie, those reminders are not linked simply to an imagined hypothetical, but an experience that really did conjure her response to a life-threatening event. A kind of nesting doll of actual physical objects and metaphorical objects held the difficult knowledge. She reflected on her own thoughts in the moment and later on what it meant to be a teacher in relation to death – integrating this and holding this experience in relationship to her work more broadly:

> And I think even my students reminded me that in the moment I was saying, this doesn't happen in Maine. This has never happened before in Maine, and so it can't be real. We're going to be fine. And so hearing all of those... And it still hasn't, but hearing all of those

> other stories in the news constantly is usually what makes me remember like, **"Oh, right, maybe tomorrow I'll have another day where I'm not feeling as confident that somehow being a teacher means that I might not make it through the day."**

Unfortunately, given so many horror stories of mistaken identities and misinformation, I can imagine a world wherein this story ends without everyone safe and back at school. And Darcie could too. When they walked with their hands up past the officers with assault rifles, she could not help but be fearful of a student joking around and a fatal misunderstanding occurring. Even this experience happening at her school made the potential for an active shooter feel more real to her. Guns did not make her feel safer, she told me, and she herself was not someone used to being in a position of defense. But she also felt aware of how little control she had over the situation at hand. She wanted to portray stability and honesty for the students, but again, her awareness of her lack of control over the situation and her lack of physical ability to respond to a physical threat felt enormous:

> I mean, even on your average day, the kids are really paying attention to what I do more than I realize. And I knew I wanted to show... I was panicking, but **I wanted to show enough emotion that they knew that it was okay to be nervous and have emotions, and that it was a serious thing, but not so much that they didn't think I would be able to do whatever they needed me to do in the moment.** And I think beyond that, I've tried to be pretty open with them of like I don't know what's happening. I don't know what's going on. You have as much information as I have, **but just feeling bad that there wasn't any way that I could control the situation.**

While in the situation with students, Darcie was acutely aware of how much they were watching her. She was aware of a desire to “show” a kind of self or a way one might deal with crisis. This might sound strange to a reader who has not been a classroom teacher. But being a teacher involves a good deal of being observed, looked at, and analyzed far more than most individuals are accustomed to. Twenty-eight sets of eyes were on her. In this moment of crisis, Darcie

became aware of those eyes and the modeling she was doing as they, too, were feeling nervous. She wondered how she might actually respond to a physical threat as they watched:

> And thinking... if it... **if it came down to it, would I be one of the people who would be willing to... I don't … even get in the way of someone who's going to try and hurt one of these kids? Or is that... It's not who I am as a person at all, as someone who can't even throw things and aim properly** because that was one of the things that we've been practicing is make sure you've got... If you have a water bottle, you can throw that at the intruder, and then they'll know that, or they'll get distracted, and they won't be able to do what they're going to do. **I'm thinking I'm not capable of doing that. I'm not someone who's even really seen a gun in real life before**. **I am not going to know what to do in this situation. And is it my role to, at all costs, stop someone from trying to hurt these kids? Or is it also like I also want to protect myself?** That's something too. And so just really not quite knowing what the right decision was going to be.

In Darcie's reflections, there seems to be a kind of teacher or person who could handle the situation and one she identifies as one who could not. As Darcie said, she did not feel like "one of the people who would be willing to get in the way" of an attempt to hurt a child because it's not the kind of person she was. While the lack of control and agency about his own safety (particularly about Covid) was what Mark had identified as being a contributing factor to his leaving the classroom, in contrast, it seems as if the feeling of extreme responsibility for the physical defense and safety of her students in a crisis was what was most disturbing to Darcie. As many teachers, her skill set, as she self-depreciatingly described, is not in aiming projectiles or feeling confident and comfortable in the face of guns. But in all seriousness, the expectation that anything she would do would potentially be a major determinant of the students' survival felt like an impossible weight. This level of responsibility sounds unwieldy. The image of the teacher Darcie felt like she should be in that moment appeared as one potentially with uber-strength, a kind of clear confidence, a comfort with guns, and an ability and willingness to sacrifice her own life for her students.

Darcie's students did express appreciation for how she handled the situation and that she was honest about how much she knew and did not know. They appreciated that she comforted them and normalized feeling a range of emotions. She was aware she wanted to be a calm and stable presence as they watched her handle the situation. But as she said, throughout this, what was top of her awareness was a complete lack of control and uncertainty about her role.

Further Analysis: Considering Darcie's Case and the Impact of School Lockdown Simulacrum & Production of Illusory Agency

Readers might take Darcie's experience of a simulated lockdown due to a false threat being called in as rare. But in 2021 and 2022, a wave of them seemed to spread across the country. In 2022 specifically, NPR found that 182 of these false active shooter calls happened in 28 states between September 13th and October 21st (Yousef & McLaughlin, 2022). While the incident Darcie described happened just after this time period, the phenomenon of fake threats or unrealized dangers that provoke lockdowns in schools is hardly new. This pattern matched those of a similar false bomb threat phenomenon happening in public schools a year prior (Yousef & McLaughlin, 2022). While the ambiguous nature of the threat might seem particular to these false calls, many teachers and students engage in lockdown drills with little warning.

The ubiquity of lockdown and active shooter response drills have come to resemble the experience of going through a fire drill wherein students and many adults are unsure of the veracity of the threat. But instead of the immediate reveal of the false nature of the drill, students

and teachers experience an isolated waiting game in rehearsal of their own survivals. Above, I offer that perhaps we might think of these experiences as a kind of *Simulacrum*, with the experience itself being split from the thing it had originally set out to represent or simulate (Baudrillard, 1994). Rare is the actual survival experience of an active shooter. Instead, many teachers are likely to experience something akin to Darcie's empty threat – or a drill wherein they do not know the veracity of the threat. Spreading of this simulacrum has the result of inscribing and cultivating what Baudrillard might call a kind of "hyper-reality," a reality based in this kind of simulacrum that is separate from the experience itself (1994). That is to say, while school violence and active shooters are increasingly an issue in the United States, we might be careful to understand how not the experience of the violence itself but the preparation for that violence might be proliferating a different kind of pre-emptive trauma that impacts teachers and students' relationship to schooling.

This simulated threat is much more common, and Darcie's extreme experience provides us a window to understand the teacher's thinking and response in these moments. In other words, what habits of mind and understandings are born of these simulacrums? What and how does the role of the teacher come to be defined in the face of them?

In Darcie's case, we see a teacher who feels the weight of life-or-death experiences, as she considered constantly – "what's the right call?" Her reflectiveness and ability to question circumstances were surely an asset in her Social Studies teaching, but perhaps less in a moment of crisis.

She was also aware if even jokingly, of her own physical limitations in the simulations she experienced in lockdown drills before this incident. With much self-depreciation, she acknowledged her lack of success with projectiles or defensive maneuvers. Throughout the swatting incident, Darcie often commented how uncomfortable seeing assault rifles in school made her. Darcie constructed the idealized teacher produced in this hyper-reality seemingly out of her own perceived shortcomings. The image we get, in contrast to her own, is perhaps a brawny and over-confident figure, comfortable with physical defense and not fearful in the face of automatic weaponry. While that might sound extreme, this is the image constructed from an extreme, a hyper-reality – a reality based on something cultivated from a simulacrum, something separated from the thing it was once supposed to simulate. We might consider the impacts and life of this new image of the uber-strong teacher on who and what it means to be a teacher today.

Leanne: Good Death and Bad Deaths and "Grievable Life":

Leanne was a high school English and Theater teacher for 11 years in urban schools in and around Boston; this year, she became an assistant principal in a small city on the north shore of Massachusetts. Before that, she taught at two different Charter schools – one in the KIPP network for four years. For most of her teaching years, she taught high school English and Theater, except for two years wherein she taught 8th-grade writing in a small city just north of Boston, where we were colleagues.

When Leanne and I first began talking, she quickly categorized death in relation to school into two categories. What first came to mind for her was "students dying," with one specific

experience of her own student dying of cancer in her second year of teaching. The second category was a “larger, more looming threat [of death]” that felt much more serious and much more present in her role as a new administrator, a role she understood as being responsible for the entire building. This larger threat felt held by its place on her list of things to do that year: the “evacuation drill” for the entire school. It was as if remembering or being reminded of this drill was a reminder of the potential for a community-threatening event.

But the conversation that seemed most relevant to the teaching and pedagogies born of necropolitical conditions came from her reflections as an administrator after a recent conversation with a student. This trans-gender student and his family had moved to Leanne’s district from Boston hoping to find an accepting and celebratory place for LGBTQ+ young people (which her new district has a reputation for being). This, for various reasons, had not been the student’s experience. Chiefly, he confided in Leanne about how the school had not held a memorial, commemorated, or given any attention to an LGBTQ+ student who had committed suicide in the previous year. Distinctly, this student had wanted to make a bulletin board, and the administration (that Leanne was not a part of that year) had rejected it. Leanne could not fathom why, and, given the experience of having memorials for students before, she thought she should find out.

> And I was like, that's interesting. Like, I actually don't know why people wouldn't let you do that, or like, why there can't be a memorial. So, like, I can find out for you. And then in talking to my principal, he was the principal in H_____ before he was principal in S_____ and he had joined with this organization called Riverside. 'Cause H_____ has like a lot of gang activity. So, I guess he had a few deaths. And Riverside gave him like, here's how you deal with death in school. **So, my principal had told me he was like, the way Riverside describes it - it's best to do nothing, um, as far as a memorial goes. Because if you have a student who commits suicide or dies of cancer, right? Like, yeah, that's, maybe they, for lack of a better term, deserve a memorial. But if you**

> **have a student who dies from gang violence, like then you also have to make a memorial for them. And it's, he was like, it's just better to not have anything, um, than to have to like then explain to people why we can't memorialize the gang member versus the student who died of cancer. Um, and like, that's made me think a little bit, that's a really interesting perspective about how we talk about death with students and how we talk about trauma**. Like, their response was, well, we brought in a few extra counselors, and I think that's a pretty common response in most public schools.

Leanne went on to say that even bringing in extra counselors "for those who needed it" felt troubling and that asking students to take an extra step to ask for an emotional resource or self-advocate for time with the counselor went against many of the things she believed about to be the role of teachers and schools. She went on to think with me more about this issue of who gets commemorated and why by bringing in an anecdote from a colleague from a neighboring urban district just north of her present one:

> And then my colleague taught in L_____ before this, and she sort of chimed in and was like, oh yeah, well we, you know, we had a kid die who was part of the Latin Kings, and he basically was like – 'kids brought like all these posters and stuff of him to graduation. We had to tell them to throw them away or leave them on the stands or whatever.' And it was because he died of gang violence and like, this school doesn't want to, um, I guess, like, what's the word I'm looking for? Commemorate or, like, encourage people to be, you know [in gangs], and then I go into the whole, like, who's making that decision? Why does, why do - because it's probably a brown student, why are white people uncomfortable with brown students and their deaths?

I pushed Leanne here to make sure I understood what she was intimating, that administrations and local leaders might fear the glamorization of joining a gang, and the role identity was playing. I asked her how she saw this decision as an administrator and what she perceived the fear was in commemorating the death of a gang member, by asking her to tell me more:

> *So much of being an administrator is understanding the politics of a city or place. And to me, I'm like, yeah, we don't wanna encourage people to be in gangs, but we also want people to, um, grieve in the way they need to. And if that means you're showing up to your graduation with a poster of your buddy, then that means you're showing up to graduation with a poster! And like, you believe - what that says to me is students or families believe that that student deserves to be in that space for that amount of time. Um,*

> *and what it says to me as an administrator, I don't think anyone on my team would agree with me, but, I would probably encourage that to happen because kids need to feel like we hear them. Whereas this feels very much like this is a decision that an adult is making and "I know better than you." Um, or this is a decision that - it gives like this good and evil to death almost.*

Leanne attributed this to deeper societal dynamics at play. In her words this all "rolls back to race and power." I asked her to say more, was I hearing she was saying administrators, white administrators, were distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable ways of dying?

> And like, Yeah. And there's unacceptable ways and like gang violence is unacceptable. Gang violence is unacceptable, but like death is ... death is death and people lose people and people have connections to people and relationships. Um, and like, I actually do think the, the lack of allowing people to, or allowing students to do that does like roll back to race and power and like, um, how we see students and what their choices mean based on what they look like. Um, a kid might not be in a gang, but they're holding a poster of their friend, their friend 'cause it's their friend. Whereas the administration sees them as a gang member.

She then thought about her own head principal, someone she identified as white and middle class. She acknowledged he could have had plenty of struggles, but she told me this was not the point. She came back to her friend's story from another district, wherein the administration was white, making decisions about who was to be grieved for a population that was over 80% Latino, she said. Leanne herself identifies as Latina. Growing up in majority white spaces, she was always, but especially now, attuned to the faces in leadership and the decisions they were making for people who did not share their cultural background. Having had positive and healing experiences of grieving a loss as a school community, she struggled with the splitting hairs of whose life counted as grievable and how they came to be defined ("as a gang member") by others even in their deaths.

In our interview, I offered her Judith Butler's formulation, one that had become particularly operative during the Black Lives Matter movement of *"grievable life"* (Butler, 2004). Meaning

that we understand the worth and value of a life through our ability to grieve it publicly. "*A thousand percent,*" she said in reply. With the denial of this ability to grieve, the people in power, white administrators in Leanne's cases of her district and a friend's, were determining who counted in the public sphere of the community. Those in power decided who would not be memorialized in front of parents, friends, families, and the mayor at graduation. As Leanne said:

> Who's making the decision that this kid cannot be memorialized in front of his community because that's who's there, that's who's at graduation, not the mayor and the principal and all those people. Who does it make uncomfortable?

And why – why does this death make administrators – or anyone uncomfortable? Most deaths of young people are inherently discomforting in that they appear unnatural or strange, and certainly, the death of a child feels deeply unnatural. Understanding how deaths are dealt with or, rather, in some cases, refused to be dealt with or actively disavowed shows us what the leaders and the people in power in schools are able and willing to consciously bear. The risk of the young people we have worked with joining gangs can be/feel high in some communities. And much has been researched and written about that. If so, much of the identity of American schooling is precipitated on preparing young people to be active and upstanding democratic citizens, joining a tight community that offers financial dividends, support, and action through illegal and often dangerous means would be a direct threat to the kind of futures many who work in schools hope their young people attain.

Further Analysis: Leanne and Life Deemed Un-grievable in Necropolitical Conditions

While Butler can help us understand the impact and fruition of *Necropolitics* on schools by thinking about the impact of deeming a life un-grievable, Mbembe himself, in his later work, is

forthright that white supremacy and racialized oppression are the largest drivers of a necropolitical state (Mbembe & Corcoran, 2019). As Leanne reflected on the white administrators who made the decision not to have students publicly grieved or memorialized, she wondered if it made them or other people uncomfortable. In her words, she wondered, “Why are white people uncomfortable with brown students and their deaths?”

Discomfort and avoiding discomfort were themes she returned to a few times in considering the racial politics of the response to students dying in these communities. Of course, the death of a young person is an uncomfortable – strange – unnatural feeling. But what Leanne was intimating here was not just the death of a young person, but the death of a young brown person, being harder for the administrators to respond well to or something that, in their discomfort, they could not grapple with. As discussed above, we might attribute this to the manner in which they died being perceived as a threat to the community, as great precautions are sometimes taken with teen suicides and how they are reported. However, in the case of a student who may have joined in with organized crime activities, the focus seems to be on their actions during their life as much as the way or manner in which they died. If they become a “gang member” and die from any kind of violence, they die from “gang violence.”

In this latter case, perhaps the answer to Leanne’s question of *why* white people are uncomfortable with the death of brown children – in that specific instance, a child involved with a “gang” – we might see a discomfort with difference and with circumstance. This issue is not exclusive to people of who do not share a race or culture, but even those within who have little empathy and are fearful or activities that have claimed the lives of many young people who are

not supported well enough by the systems and the state. If those young people, perhaps as a result of failing social systems, chose to live in ways different than we might, do they not deserve to have their life valued? Or commemorated?

The experience of having a loved one join or participate in organized crime is a complicated feeling. As some youth living in and in proximity to poverty continue to see more opportunities for financial success and community within these crime networks than a school or traditional entry-level places of work. These young people might not attend school regularly or other community spaces such as church or other gatherings. Unsure how to grapple with that, they become a living dead status in a community that has decided to make them *un-grievable* as a defensive and protective posture for the other young people within them. What and how do we think of them while alive if loved ones are denied grieving them publicly when dead? In the construction of becoming un-grievable, again, it is as if their life ceases to matter. Rightly so, Leanne provides an important suspicion and attention to those who make that decision and do not share the culture or identity of those who died. Considering necropolitics and un-grievable life together, we see how power rests with those who continually determine the value of a life. If that act of valuing or not valuing lives, though complex in its nature and context, shows a pattern of white identity holders continually being the ones who decide who gets commemorated in a community – we all should be suspicious of white supremacy and racialized oppression.

Below, we see another case of a teacher struggling with the death of a student. Josh's story builds on Leanne's by urging us to consider: how might a teacher proceed when life is deemed un-grievable, not by the school leadership, but by the student's own parents?

Josh:

Teachers' Liminal Roles and Relegated Grieving Spaces

Josh and I spoke in his 12th year of teaching, much of which was spent at a small public International Baccalaureate school in the Boston Public Schools. He taught 11th and 12th grade English for most of the years at that school. Josh and I attended the same master's program for teacher preparation a few years apart and have been in each other's professional networks but have never worked together. We had the same English methods professor, who was an influential part of both of how we oriented ourselves to being a "teacher."

So, in our interview, when he quoted our former methods professor, I recognized the words immediately. He repeated Karl's warning about difficult things that come with teaching – that it, unfortunately, would not be "if" we lost a student to suicide but when.

Josh and I spoke about the familiar experience of losing a student in a community. Unfortunately, we knew the beats or rituals of students in Boston and Chelsea (where I had taught): the t-shirts, the stickers, the memorials, the shrines of stuffed animals, and the balloons. We knew the creation and carrying of remembrances of a fallen cousin or good friend.

I had spoken with Josh in the wake of different loss that did not mimic his other experiences. The older brother of a former student who had graduated was attending college nearby and had committed suicide just a few weeks before we spoke. This student who passed away, Michael,[10]

[10] Name changed

had graduated a few years before. But now, Michael's younger brother, Ned,[11] was in Josh's class this year. It had hit Josh much harder than he expected:

> I've lost other students, right? I think everybody loses students. You teach in Boston and kids die for a variety of reasons. Yeah, I've lost, I can't count the amount of students that I've lost. It hasn't been an overwhelming amount. I think it's: kid dies from gun violence, kid dies from car accident one, my kid's murdered two people and then is in jail. I don't know, it's a number of all sorts of things, but none of it hit me the same way, I think in part because, well, I don't know why. I think to know that a kid was really profoundly depressed when I taught him and then to be like, and he killed himself, is different from hearing this is a kid who was, well, a product of a victim of gun violence. And I mean, logically, I can be like, well, maybe in some ways that kid's circumstances were not profoundly different in high school than they are now who died from gun violence. But yeah, I think there was something about watching the way that there was basically no ability to mourn this kid.

For folks reading this, Josh's description of other students' deaths might sound blasé, but I did not hear it that way. He brought up a parallel incident of his seniors losing a friend from another school over Christmas and Josh knowing how to support them and counsel them into how to support each other during this difficult time. While I would say that neither of us learned any of that specifically during our Master's programs, there was a way that experiencing incidents like these enough, unfortunately, quickly teaches you a lot about how to support people well. But this felt different for Josh – different and substantially more difficult because of the request to avoid the memorialization of the student at the school.

> They [the parents] requested that we didn't do it at the school. We had a meeting early in the morning before school started, and my headmaster, who didn't know the kid, was like, you should just all know that Michael died. And the teachers who knew him, this was like, must've been class of 2018 or something. So, there's been a lot of change at the school. There were a lot of new teachers, and a lot of people just didn't know him, but it ended up being sort of a very quiet morning where it's like we didn't feel like we could; I wasn't supposed to bring it up with their kid - his brother.

[11] Name changed

For years, Josh had been accustomed to being one of the younger teachers at his school, if not the youngest. But the culture had changed. Much of the staff that had Michael were gone – and the few that were left felt barred from talking about it or bringing it up with his younger brother due to the parents' request. Without the ability to grieve in public, again, it was as if this life did not count. Josh felt strangely alone in the reality of the loss.

When I asked Josh if other students knew about the loss – he said likely not. Thinking of Michael's good friend from that year, Josh decided to email him a note to see how he was doing:

> No. This is what's so fucked up about it. I emailed his best friend who was the same year, Kyle. It [the message] was like, Kyle, I'm really, really sorry to hear this, and I hope you're doing okay. And he replied immediately, and he was like, 'you don't know how,' oh, now I'm tearing up. 'You don't know how meaningful it was that teachers were reaching out to me.' But I think what was so heartbreaking for me, honestly, was that this kid, Ned [the brother] came in for the rest of the week, still does, completely stone-faced, his friends didn't know, and I still don't think they know, and we were told, and I would've done this anyway, to give him an incomplete for the quarter, but I also don't know even how to engage him in a conversation about this because he seems to be so hesitant to engage in a conversation.

Josh reflected that this year, he had supported his partner during the loss of her mother. His partner also attended to a grief support circle in the evenings. She confided in Josh that while most of the people attending the meetings were experiencing the loss of a parent – one person who had been attending was a teacher grappling with the loss of a student. At the time, she and Josh both found this strange, but given his recent experience with a student's suicide, he began to rethink that. In putting together resources for this IRB and the follow-up resources after my interviews, I struggled to find a resource for grief-laden teachers grappling with deaths in their communities. I found hotlines for nurses, therapists, and veterans. I found hotlines for families,

for mothers, for fathers, and children. After searching, I found one singular hotline for teachers' exclusively, and when I called, they did not pick up.

Unable to participate in a shared grieving experience nor support the students close to the death, Josh felt at sea with his grief. The issue of *"grievability"* returns here, though a bit differently than how it applied to the cases Leanne described. Josh seemed to struggle with his place and how a teacher should grapple with the loss of a student if they are denied a community to grieve with. In many communities, this is clear cut – teachers are invited into grieving spaces and funerary traditions. But with Josh's student belonging to a religion that had different traditions for processing or understanding death that were very different from Josh's own – he struggled to understand what next steps he should take. Relating to his own growing up and his experience sitting Shiva and now identifying with Buddhist philosophies, his understandings and rituals for grief were radically different than the Jehovah's Witness tradition of his student.

Schools occupy a strangely at once central and liminal place in the worlds of our students. As teachers, we are both a part of our students' daily lives and integral parts of our students' experience in the world – and also still at a distance. There are many discrepancies in values between families and teachers that come up in curriculum and activities at school. But this discrepancy, a request for Josh not to address or draw attention to the death of his former student in this community, impacted Josh. He wanted to be respectful of their wishes and could find outlets and spaces outside of school to think about this, as difficult as that may be. However, over the course of our interview, he wondered if he had been making a mistake by respecting the

parents' wishes too closely. This came up when Josh realized it would be an issue when teaching *Hamlet*:

> *J: Well, can I just tell you, we just started Hamlet, and I'm terrified with that class to get to the part where Ophelia can't be buried in the cemetery. She's a suicide.*
>
> *RC: Because the student is in the class?*
>
> *J: Yeah! And I'm like, oh shit, this is a content warning that I do not know how to address.*
>
> *RC: What will you do?*
>
> *J: I'll probably say content warning suicide, and then maybe I'll check in with him. But we have not discussed it because he has been, I mean, you know. Also I think I've been following what his parents have said too much, and I think in some ways I need to check in with him. I'm realizing that while talking to you about this. I think in some ways - I don't think he's going to open up in that way.*

In bringing up the curriculum, in this case, *Hamlet*, and Ophelia's suicide, I felt the relational aspect of the object in Josh's life. The reminder of suicide, Josh's awareness of it, and its relation to his student were held by the curriculum. This reminder of death, specifically a kind of death familiar to Michael's brother, Ned, seemed to snap Josh back into his role as teacher. The role and his normal precautions with sensitive and triggering material would still apply to this student, clarifying the competing demands he felt from parents.

How should we think about Josh and these competing demands? This reflection above from Josh about whether he should have checked in with Ned earlier mirrored, in some ways, Leanne's issue with just having counselors on hand and requiring students to seek that support. Leanne, as discussed more in the next chapter, had made a commitment to helping students process difficult emotions. However, making that processing optional or requiring students to take extra inconvenient steps seemed problematic to her. And for Josh, not acknowledging or making any space – even if it were rejected respectfully – for this student seemed to go against his values.

Further Analysis: Josh & <u>Life Deemed "Un-Grievable"</u> Impacts

Taking a step back and looking at Josh's narrative, we might ask: what role should a teacher's values play? Specifically, how should a teachers' values factor into mourning? In particular, Josh's case highlights the liminal and strange role teachers can be relegated to in students' lives. At once, we are central. At other times, we are necessarily marginal. These seem to be important considerations in how we think about what and whose life we value and how we show that value. Leanne's recounting of a student's life deemed un-grievable at graduation clearly evoked themes of race and power – denying a young person representation and public mourning in a public assembly. Josh's case, in which he felt unable and unclear on how to publicly mourn this student, has similarities in its impact but different in its cause. The parents of this child asked that the loss not be acknowledged in public for religious reasons. But Josh's felt experience of not having a community to mourn or acknowledge the loss left him feeling at sea.

The "Un-grieved" life here had impact not just for the wider community, but for Josh. The site of public mourning becomes a site wherein the values of parents are put in stark contrast with the values of the teacher. In most situations, we defer to parents for the upbringing of their children. This intersection has felt increasingly contentious in the United States with the proliferation of parents' rights groups and combative school board meetings. However, between the "culture wars" of the '80s and Socrates being accused of corrupting the youth of Athens, such a disparity hardly seems new. Disagreements between teachers and non-teachers over the moral lives of their students is not unimaginable. With something as intimate as death, I understood Josh's

deference to Michael's parents. I also understood his hesitation to go against their wishes in acknowledging the death to Ned, Michael's younger brother. But without community or experience grieving the death with those who knew Michael, Josh's own experience with the death had been impacted by Michael's parents. Grieving a life privately is a very different experience than grieving a life in community. While we often think about how the difference in values between parents and teachers impacts the moral lives of students, what of the teachers themselves? And what about when these different values contribute to who we are and how much responsibility we have for one another?

Nat: "it's my role to keep you safe": New Understandings of Teacher Responsibilities in Necropolitical Conditions

Nat (they/he) works, primarily with middle schoolers who have autism, and Nat himself told me that they identify as an autistic educator and said that they tried to be open about this identity often as it deeply informs their work with their students. They worked at a middle school in a suburban district just outside the Madison area and were in a Master's program for Special education while working full-time when we spoke.

A connection of Nat's heard about my call for interviewees and connected us, knowing how much Nat has been thinking about death and their role in a school community after two very destabilizing events. In contrast to some of the other interviewees, Nat expressed with painful clarity how seriously they understood and took their job to be keeping the students on his special education load safe.

During the few months before I interviewed them, they had experienced two traumatic events in their school community. First, they told me about the experience of having to report a student whom other students feared (and found a TikTok indicating) would come to school with a gun. The distressed students approached Nat directly and trusted them to be the adult to get help. Nat did not take that trust for granted and felt a call to action from it. When I asked how they understood their job or what their job to be in the face of that moment, Nat replied:

> I felt really trusted in the moments of them telling me what was going on at my school. With a lot of kids, I tend to try to focus on building relationships. [That is] my first kind of line when I go in - when I went into schools, like my main focus in all of it is always building relationships. And I find a lot of kids tell me, sometimes really personal, really heavy or scary things, because they trust me a lot, **and so I just felt like it helped me understand that my job in the school is to take that information that they're giving me, and then for - I mean honestly to protect them. Like I feel like a lot of the times my job is to protect them, and like "if something bad is going on like I want to know, so that I can help protect you."** And in that moment, it really felt like there was a lot of responsibility put [on me], and like rightly so because I am the adult.

While this was not Nat's first time working with students, I will add here they were in their second year of being a part of a school community. Much of their reflections on their work seemed to be imbued with that reckoning:

> *But like [it was] a lot of responsibility, put on me to like, make sure this was handled, and it was handled correctly. And I think that it really - because sometimes, as a support staff, I feel sort of not unimportant, and like kind of minuscule on the scale of people in my school. But that moment made me feel almost like big to a point where I was like: I don't know if I can handle this, but it did like make - I mean - I just knew in my heart, and like I was close with the kid who posted the stuff on social media, so it was incredibly difficult for me to have to report him. I really didn't want to do that. But I was like, I know, that, for in order for him to get whatever help he needs, and in order for this school to remain a safe place like, I don't have a choice, I have to do this.*[12]

[12] A brief note to provide an understanding of my inclusion of Nat in this study with "classroom teachers." When I found out Nat was support staff, I worried about my own call and the limits that I drew around participation and criticism for including their voice in this project. But my own expansive understanding of the work of "support staff" or special educators and paraprofessionals is that often, but not always, they are young people who may be

The students who reported the concerning video to Nat were brothers. One of those brothers was a student on Nat's caseload, whom they spent much of the school day supporting and shadowing, Cam.[13] They also knew the student who posted the video well. And while the pressure to do the right thing was immense, Nat felt it, particularly in their role as a trusted adult, but also as "support staff." While the ramifications of the choice for Nat felt difficult because of their relationships and pressure to do well as a newer and more junior member of the staff, the choice and the path to help, while difficult, was a clear one. Nat would report it to the administration – to get help, and ultimately, and hopefully – this would be an important step to getting this troubled student help. Nat could easily promise safety in that they would take the steps necessary to do this when speaking with the concerned students who themselves reported the situation to Nat. It was difficult to muster the certainty and clarity for other risk situations that Cam specifically would ask about, the protocol for reporting this student was clear – but for an evacuation or active shooter – less so. The student wanted a concrete strategy partly, Nat thought, because of how his brain worked and how he moved through the world.

So, Nat would try to provide that stability because Cam and other students with phobias (different ones - say of accidentally being poisoned in science class) would need that certainty. Nat wished Cam did not live in a world where he would need this strategy; nevertheless, Nat tried their best to provide it:

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new to the profession or older people from the community, who sometimes, because of financial and institutional barriers to getting a teaching license, have not yet or will not get their teaching license. In this case, Nat was at school full-time while pursuing their special educator licensure in the evenings. And while some of these folks certainly do float in and out of a school without much impact, many, in my experience, are the life force of the school and the dependable adults that make up most of a child's interactions. Many identify as teachers, and they are – they teach. And students certainly see them that way.

[13] Name changed

> And so, I had thought about it in a very real way then, because he was asking me. Now, what would our plan be if this [a shooting] happened? Where would I meet you? What room could we go to like? Where can I? Where would I be able to find you so that we could be together, and he really wanted to strategize that out which he like - he shouldn't have to do that. But he does he. He feels like he does. And so, I think I thought about it in a very real way. Then, where I was like telling him I was like, 'okay.' But like, let's just if this, 'if this will make you feel safer. Let's make a plan like let's have a meeting place, like, you know if you and I,' we would talk about like how like the best strategy is to evacuate, and like I was like: 'If you can get out, you get out. You don't look for me. You don't look for your brother. You just leave 'and like, so, I think that I mean I have to for him because it's what he needs to feel safe is to plan as if it is going to happen. And that is really hard. A lot of the time to have [to think about] everything like that.

Nat, in their understanding of what their role is with young people, mustered what they could to promise certainty and a plan for Cam. Many teachers do this, and as discussed in other parts of this project, most teachers I spoke to for this project and outside have their "plans." In this moment, and in others, they expressed a deep empathy and compassion for how these thoughts might plague Cam and other students. When I asked Nat how, in turn, this impacted them, they talked matter-of-factly about the realization and reflection they had – they told me they thought about how they would likely "not make it" during an active shooter emergency.

Ironically, the experience that brought Nat closest to what felt like a lockdown, or a faux-lockdown experience was the loss of their principal. This was the second story Nat told me. On a random morning in January 2023, a car struck and killed their principal while she walked her dog. While their principal was noticeably absent, many district employees showed up. Staff and students were in the dark about the news until a vague announcement came over the intercom system asking all students and staff to report to their homerooms immediately and stay there. No other information was given. This unsettled Nat deeply as they said, "it still freaks me out to talk about it." Nat then sprang into action:

> So, I freaked out. I ran to Cam's Science Room, where I knew that he was, and I was like because I knew he would want me to be with him, because I didn't know what was - I didn't know what was going on, and I, like, you know - I grabbed his hand, and I said, come on, let's go. And I brought him downstairs, and the whole time he's like, now, are you okay? You seem really stressed? Are you okay, are you okay? And I was freaking out. I didn't know what was going on. I thought that, like, literally, there was someone coming into the school. And I was like, okay, like, let's go downstairs. I got down there before my co-teacher and, like before my supporting teacher or my, you know, the special teacher got down there, and there were kids like lined up outside the room, like all the kids from my advisory. So, I unlock the door. I went in, and she still wasn't down there, and I hadn't checked my email. So, I was like, you guys, get down, get under the tables. I'm gonna turn the lights off, and we're gonna like crouch down for a second.

With the absence of information, Nat went immediately into protector mode. With their understanding of an emergency present (especially when staff and students were given such limited information), they assumed the need to go into a lockdown because of an active threat. Nat's co-teacher would come in and turn on the lights. And then, while crying, she showed Nat a brief paragraph that had been emailed out to the entire staff with the news of the principal's death. Nat then, too, began crying, from both the news itself and from being relieved of the adrenaline-loaded fear of their own physical death of themselves and their students. The conversations that would happen as a school and a staff were transformative. With Cam, particularly, shouldering and sharing the grief and "difficult knowledge" alongside Nat – just as Nat did with them in different parts of their days together. More of the impact and learning from that loss will be discussed in the next chapter.

For some that I interviewed, literal objects would be the conjurers of the awareness of death. And though there were posters at Nat's school that gave the options one had to defend or survive during an emergency – Cam often acted as the conjurer of the awareness for Nat. Reporting his peer's video had considerably shook-up Cam, something that Nat worked hard to stabilize. But

in contrast, the death of Nat's principal considerably disturbed Nat, and the conjurer of that death and memory were not just their colleagues' grief process but their *students'* grief and curiosities, questions, and explorations of the tragic loss. Cam and other students would bring up the knowledge or questions and wonderings in moments when Nat was calm. On a day when Nat was late to school, Cam was terrified. This kind of terror is not exclusive to a school in *necropolitical* conditions. This was the fear coming from a kid who, like all of us, has and will experience death and learn painfully in real time that the daily existence of loved ones and colleagues is not an ongoing guarantee. Each day, we cannot be certain we will meet again in the same form as the day before. These moments of awareness from Cam stuck with Nat and their colleagues and the grief felt everywhere at times. Much like Josh's reflections, there were times too when Nat wondered who to talk to or how to process this grief – their principal was not a close friend or a family member. The death was reported on the news, but ultimately, it felt like an intense shared experience of the school community not available to the people outside it.

Further Analysis: Illusory Agency and Teacher's Role In Grief With Nat

Listening and re-reading many times about the commitment to protecting students that Nat felt- or the care that they expressed for Cam brought tears to my eyes, as it did theirs in the interview. The tangible and deep care they felt and likely still feel toward their students was moving but a very heavy thing to hold. Their understanding of their role as protector and authority to help keep students safe in school also brought tears to my eyes. Not only because of their fierce commitment to their students but also because of how uncertain and perhaps even impossible such a task is in the current climate. Certainly, there is much to do for those of us who work in

schools when it comes to creating an environment filled with adults who care authentically about students, are excited to see them, and make those students feel safe enough to confide and share their hopes and fears. But when it comes to defending against something like a school shooter – an albeit rare occurrence – a very real and anxiety-inducing specter – the feelings of agency and certitude in any strategy are at this time illusory. And again – despite the specter – a great and heavy weight still rests on Nat to provide that stability for their students. Just as they wished Cam did not need to think, re-think, and be plagued by the specifics of planning their escape – I wished Nat, a new teacher committed to their students and the field, did not have to think so hard and so much about this, either.

Part IV: Discussion:

Implications of Necro-pedagogies on Teaching: Pedagogy Born of Necro politics

Structural Conditions Impact

How might *Necropolitical* conditions impact teaching? And, as Britzman wondered when she quoted Waller, what might that "teaching do to teachers" (Britzman, 2003b, p. 25)? One might approach this question of conditions and impact quite structurally – what some might see as a Marxist approach by asking – what do my own conditions make of me?

In some of the cases described here, the physical and representational structural conditions of labor did impact and begin to define the teaching that was born out of them. As Molly was forced to teach in an empty building with water too dirty to wash her hands with and broken

furniture, her labor was not only removed from the communal proximity of her students (like so many other teachers during the pandemic) but her teaching and her role became defined and framed by the persistence of the physical school building – no matter its condition – no matter its ability to house students or not. The conditions for her teaching became so threadbare that we saw the very standards and understanding of what teaching was during that time reduced to "content." This was teaching in survival mode- or "bare-life" teaching.

Thinking structurally and physically about survival, one cannot help but think of Darcie and her "swatting" experience – a dramatic instantiation of the kinds of drills described by many participants and experienced by many teachers around the country. We must begin to ask, wonder, and think deeper about what and how a workforce of professionals trained and rehearsing their own fight or flight modes multiple times a year, sometimes without knowing if the experience is a "drill" or not, are impacted. Thinking about, again, the physical impacts or suspecting or waiting for a threat constantly – we might look to other examples of workforces or populations living in such expectancy. A different study could be done on the physiological effects of such a stance in schools with simulacrum-style lockdowns. Might there be correlated physical impacts of this ongoing stress?[14]

Discursive & Phenomenological Impact

On the other hand, it is not a physical condition that does not allow us to mourn a student publicly but a moral construction and judgment of a good and bad life that excuses such

[14] Other research has been done on the physical ailments of teachers related to their labor conditions – this article in the Atlantic makes use of a survey of teachers on their bathroom habits to understand better the higher rates of diagnoses of bladder dysfunction in teachers (Wong, 2015).

behavior. As Leanne and Josh described and puzzled through the logics and networks of meaning that policed and relegated grief – I could not help but be aware of the discursive and cultivation of moral judgment based on a kind of categorical representation of, as Leanne said, "good death" or "bad "death" or as Butler might say – the life we deem grieve-able or not. Surely, there are systemic and structural explanations for the relationship communities have with something like organized crime and gangs. Considering the taboo nature of suicide labeled by Josh's student's family's religion and the mixed and difficult feelings it caused in him – we might again challenge discursive categories of "good" and "bad" death or acceptable and unacceptable forms of death. In both situations, both struggled when to challenge or trouble a category describing not only a death but also a life.

In all of the situations described, we may think more deeply about what the reflection on conditions here – or the pedagogies born of *necropolitics* – mean for the very definition and shared interpolated understanding of what it means to be a teacher. As demands, tasks, and nature of what we are called to do shift – and we answer or hold collectively an understanding that a teacher belongs or can do the work described – we continue to take part in re-inscribing and cultivating a definition. In considering when life is "deemed grievable," in particular, we may see the boundaries drawn around what and who teachers and students are to one another.

In Butler's book, *On Giving Account of Oneself,* Butler makes use of Althusser's construct of "scene of address" as a way to understand our own relationship to affirming – and deliberately or not very deliberately continuing to construct an identity (Butler, 2005). As in – when we are called by name, we answer, thereby affirming our relationship to that name. Similarly in a court

of law, if I were to be accused of a crime that I did not commit but admitted to it in court - I have responded, upheld, and publicly re-interpreted what it means to be myself in that moment.

Thinking about this construction in the stories presented here, we can begin to see how continual work or performance of "teacher" in these conditions might, in some ways, help to re-inscribe, normalize, and support a definition of "teacher" that is accustomed to a world of *necro-pedagogy.* Thinking again about the Simulacrum and hyper-reality experienced by Darcie and teachers living in the scene of lockdown stress, we might see not only the physical impacts of stress but also the re-negotiation of the identity and projected understanding of what it means to be a teacher. In other words, we see a shift in the image of the teacher constructed by these moments. Laughably and seriously, Darcie showed us her own reflected insecurities in what she could and could not provide for students in a moment of felt emergency. In her self-professed lack of physical ability and certitude springs an image of a kind teacher uber-man, physically strong enough to fight off threats, steadfast in his decisions, and comfortable in the face of assault weaponry. This new image of the teacher might sound utterly fictitious, but as many have considered arming teachers and some teachers look to be trained in gun safety, we might reconsider how this outlandish phantasy might already be taking root.

What are we, or the teachers described here, to do in the face of such *necro-pedagogies* and teaching born of *necropolitics?* How do these new images of "teacher" factor into the work of supporting and understanding those who are new to the profession?

Notably, in this small sample of stories, it was not lost on me that Nat was the youngest and newest to teaching that I interviewed.

I wondered (but do not have the spread of data required, nor is my project interested in making such comparative claims) if Nat's deep response to the call of responsibility was something born of necropolitical conditions. Conditions they were exposed to at the end of their own schooling experience during Covid (they graduated from college in 2021) and one they entered into as an educator. When I asked about how these experiences of deaths, vigilance about students bringing weapons to school, lockdowns, and evacuations impacted how they understood their work in education – Nat confirmed this suspicion. They had known lockdown drills as far back as their own elementary school experience. This was schooling. This was teaching.

I am reminded of the conversation I took part in with a group of teacher candidates in the Spring of 2022, wherein they were discussing how often mentors had decried this as the hardest conditions of teaching they had seen yet – and that this was not normal. A year of students back full time but masked and socially challenged – a full year of uninterrupted teaching wherein students were not used to being in seats or school for this long. And for many teachers and teacher candidates that year at a particular high school - more bomb threats and hard lockdowns than they had ever experienced as students themselves. Their mentors were, understandably, worn out and exasperated in the face of a very challenging school year. But rather than join them in that exasperation - a few students countered it. This feared "new normal" of 2021-2022 was indeed the only year many of them had ever experienced as teachers. Normal was relative. When

I asked Nat what drew them to be a part of this study – they told me they hoped that someone might learn from their experiences because they certainly did.

Some might say you would answer the scene of address by refusing to answer the call of teaching or showing up "as teacher" in these moments. But I do not think, with the responsibility, commitment, and safety of children on the line, that many would do that, like Nat or many teacher candidates. Instead, they come to understand the very identity, role, and task of a teacher differently and respond to that call.

A shift in what it means to be a teacher or what it means to teach is difficult knowledge indeed . For many, the very act of integrating and knowing the shifted understanding of what it means to be a teacher traumatizes them.

For the teacher herself, this knowledge is so difficult, with the awareness of death presented and absented much like a constant disavowal – that the awareness and understandings are relegated to these "moments," "objects," or "stories" but not integrated into the everyday understanding of what teaching is. When the threat seems almost ever-present and the awareness that decisions are being made on behalf of your own bodily autonomy (Mark), then it is not uncommon to see those who long disavowed and then no longer disavow that knowledge to leave the profession.

We may try harder to integrate that knowledge. While I would hope to eventually end the call to ameliorate and defend against the conditions and the sort of instances described here by teachers, the sort of hopeful turn at this moment feels sentimental and unreasonable. While I wish and

hope and can point my own students toward organizing and activism to change the face of teaching – I am not so naïve to think that the conditions that render the experiences and spaces described are something that teachers themselves, administrators, and even local lawmakers are in full control over.

Instead, we look to a re-orientation and renegotiation of the relationships to death born or the same conditions, but with a different lens in this next chapter.

Chapter Three:
Consecrating the *Necrocene*:
Teachers' Death Informed Pedagogies

STONES (together): Eurydice wants to speak with you.
But she can't speak your language anymore.
She talks in the language of dead people now.
LITTLE STONE: It's a very quiet language.
LOUD STONE: Like if the pores in your face opened up and talked.
BIG STONE: Like potatoes sleeping in the dirt.

Sarah Ruhl, *Eurydice*

Introduction:

When I asked about how the awareness of death lived in her classroom, Reese, an elementary school teacher in Missouri, told me about the photo on her desk. The photo captured a former student, Allison, as she painted together with a friend when she was in Reese's first-grade class. A few years later, before graduating elementary school, Allison's life would stop in 5th grade. As Reese told me, Allison never made it to college or even high school. She did not grow up or get married. She had a very short life. But she did paint and smile and play with friends in Reese's first-grade class. That photo, Reese told me*, "grounded her"* to remind her that any week or any day could be a student's last in school. If it was, she wanted it to be a good one. She did not see the teaching as "*babysitting"* or "*getting through the day"* but as "*sacred"* and "*important*." What if we all taught that way, Reese asked aloud to me – not as if our kids were destined for college or a tomorrow but that "*this [time in school] is the most special thing we get*?"

What if we taught or thought about education with this very idea – a fragility – and potential that our time in school is not just vital to a future life but, as Reese said, “sacred and important?” What could an understanding of education be if not for a future but for a continuous and fragile present? What might change? Another way to consider what Reese is offering might be to flip Hannah Arendt’s theory of education. Central to that theory is that education rests on the premise of constant *natality* (Arendt, 2006). In other words, there are constantly new beings coming into our "world." But what might a theory of education look like rooted in *mortality?* In other words, how might we understand education with the knowledge that beings are constantly leaving the "world" in some form? When death is taken as constant and ever-present given, how might our approaches to teaching change?

As I explored my research question: *How did teachers believe experiences with death and thinking about death informed their pedagogies and what it means to be a teacher at this moment?*

I did not expect the kind of reflections offered above (and below) by Reese and others. What came forth in the conversations and the themes was a pedagogy that does not merely treat death as a potential threat – but as otherwise and constantly present. Death became the consecrator. Making the pedagogies and the school itself a place for something sacred, important, intentional, and not merely transitional.

This chapter brings together pedagogies and approaches to teaching described by teachers that did not fit with the tenor and understanding in the previous chapter – bringing these pedagogies together under an umbrella that I call a *memento-mori* or death-informed pedagogy.

Part I: Framing the Findings

Orientation to Where This Chapter Fits in the Project

In the face of necro-pedagogies from the last chapter, this chapter offers the re-fashioning and re-tooling of the objects, anecdotes, and memories that hold the awareness of death for teachers by the teachers themselves. It reveals what *OTHER* pedagogies might be born in the face of necro-political conditions that may birth educational experiences too difficult to hold. This chapter offers a different side of the experiences or, rather, the reflections and learnings that are not captured fully by an experience of teaching in necropolitics. In this way, the chapter continues to explore the research questions from the last chapter but offers a very different set of pedagogies and understandings from the teachers themselves:

How did they believe experiences with death and thinking about death informed their pedagogies and what it means to be a teacher at this moment?

This begins to explore and light a way forward for my third research question:

How might these stories, experiences, and understandings illuminate a path forward for teachers and those who work to support and teach teachers?

While this chapter's themes stand on their own or in partnership with my thinking – I use theory to help frame the teachers' voices rather than explicate them as I did at times in the previous chapter.

Much of the conversations about death and classroom objects delivered what I was expecting: an exhuming of what we might call "necro-pedagogy" or the teaching born of the "necro-political" context that we find ourselves in. In the previous chapter, I re-told stories of teaching happening alongside anxiety of death and bodily harm from violence, Covid-19, and exhaustion.

I concluded by reflecting that these conditions, structurally, discursively, and inter-personally, are changing what we might have previously understood it meant to be a teacher and that we should, potentially, alter our understandings and deepen our representations to depict these not universal but frequent instantiations. If we do not work to do this collectively, we leave teachers to do this work, of reintegrating the disavowed knowledge of their awarenesses of death into their practice, alone. Teachers need support and community as they do this vital work, and it is essential that those who support and train teachers are ready to do this. This is the topic of the final chapter. But before we explore that work, this chapter gives us a different image of what integrating difficult knowledge of death could do for teachers and their teaching practice.

Placing these Pedagogies in the Necrocene

Instead of thinking about our landscape as exclusively steeped in the Necropolitical, I offer the construction of the *Necrocene* as a way of holding and thinking about death differently and otherwise so we might birth new possibilities for a work done in the presence and haunted by the threat of death, but one that does not absent those threats (Casid, 2018; 2019; McBrien, 2016). In other words, it does not substitute or further disavow death for mere hopefulness.

Understanding the stories and reflections as coming from not only the *Necropolitical* but also the

Necrocene makes space for the strange, odd, and unknown parts of teaching alongside the ongoing presence of death (Casid, 2019).

In my exploratory conversations and formal interviews, I saw multiple teachers hold up their fists as they talked to me about readying themselves to defend their classrooms. I have heard about the degraded conditions and expectations during the Covid era - of a teacher teaching elementary schoolers online in an abandoned school with water so dirty one could not wash their hands with it, distilling teaching into its most "bare-life" form, wherein the transfer of information alone is prioritized, and the other embodied and contextual aspects of a teacher's relationship to her students are absented. I heard stories of teachers not feeling as if they had control over their own safety, much like the necro-political conditions that Mbembe (2003) described, wherein citizens are not responsible for who lives and dies. Unfortunately, while disturbing, I did not find the general collection of stories surprising – for in some ways it was these very conditions that helped propel me into asking classroom teachers about their experiences.

However, as I said, I also heard many reflections on objects and experiences in my early interviews that I did not expect, such as Reese's relationship to that photograph that opened this chapter. By illuminating these unexpected stories in addition to their necro-pedagogical counterparts, I was and am hoping to continue to see a different relationship to teaching and what it means to be a teacher conjured up by the awareness of death. Thinking about the "otherwise" possibilities for our relationship to mortality might find a home in Casid's use of the *Necrocene*,

an otherwise look at a necropolitical landscape, a different gaze amidst the focus of the Anthropocene. Here she describes her employment of the term, borrowed from Justin McBrien:

> Poaching and redeploying Necrocene promises not just to foreground but also to make palpable the presence of death in life, that is, of the ostensibly verdant life-world of landscape as scene of death in which we are positioned not as remote witnesses or only as mourners but also as the mortal vulnerable exposed among the killable and dead. This version of the Necrocene does not so much partake of the apocalypticism of certain nihilist versions of dark ecology but rather puts the focus on feminist, trans*, and queer interventions that redirect Anthropocene extremities of deep past and ostensibly still-remote futures to the present pressures of thinking and feeling with the turbulent unpredictabilities of mixed affects and entangled agencies, with the enwrapping of the wildly incommensurate, and the ruptures of not the reparative but of demands for reparation and revolution on the part of those entities, those forms of life, bare life, and not-life, and ways of being and becoming for whom the ostensible privileges of the status of the human have never constituted refuge, those for whom the imperatives to sustain and reproduce life have, rather, been the terms of slow death, and those whose very form or lack of privileged form is rendered unlivable, killable, and not even registered as loss, as grievable losses or deaths that count. (Casid, 2018, p. 239)

In this understanding of the landscape, of life happening on a "dying planet," death and mortality are inextricable from the world of those of us who have been "rendered killable" or "ungrievable" and who despite or rather in concert with these conditions find ways to re-fashion and retool the awarenesses and ways of being that come with being enmeshed with death (Casid, 2018). This re-fashioning or re-tooling is at the core of what I suggest as a *Memento Mori Pedagogy* below - a reparative understanding of what presencing death can do for the classroom teacher.

How this Data Emerged and The Different Story it Tells

During my interviews, the participants shared a myriad of experiences. To be overly simplistic, they often began with the negative (chapter two) and came to the complex understandings here in

chapter three. This shift often occurred in the second half or the end of our conversation. It sometimes happened when I asked what else or what the object or memory they described showed them about what it meant to be a teacher. I noticed it in my first exploratory interview with colleague and friend, Charlie. In our conversation, she brought me to a moment of her own reflection on a deeper conversation she had with her grandmother, who had been exploring her own relationship to mortality as she aged with intentionality with other older friends of hers. This turn toward a curiosity and inevitability of death paired with some of the curiosities I had about working with death from my coursework with Professor Casid in 801. Could saddling up beside death and walking alongside it – as we so often do without choice in a necropolitical climate – bring a different and otherwise way of thinking about the world?

Sure enough, the pattern repeated as I interviewed teachers. After an initial intake of disturbing conditions and difficult reminders – participants offered other and often unexpected reflections on what the awareness of death brought to their practice.

In the interviews, I asked after objects – physical or metaphoric that held an awareness of death. In other words, I asked if there were literal objects in the classroom that conjured an awareness of death for them. I also asked if there were moments, memories, or anecdotes that held this awareness – these being a kind of metaphorical object they might hold in their mind. After hearing about these "objects" in detail, I would ask about how their relationship to them impacts their teaching and understanding of what it means to be a teacher. Other times, the conversation meandered and found their way back to the "objects" through reflection and elaborative questions.

Characteristics of Memento Mori Pedagogy

Below, I think alongside insights and understandings from teachers, many who describe instances of teaching in the wake of an actual loss and some who describe and offer thinking from instances of hypothetical loss or different presencing of death. In many ways, this formulation brings together approaches advocated for in both grief education work and some of the work in death education while adding necessary new understandings born out of the stories teachers shared with me. I suggest in the conclusion of this chapter that we might call these findings a *Memento Mori* pedagogy, which means, in Latin, "remember you will die." This pedagogy acts as a larger umbrella to encompass and offer reparative and generative pathways as teachers find themselves in a state of *Necropolitics,* or as I borrow a term to re-frame it here, the *Necrocene* (Casid, 2018; 2019; McBrien, 2016).

Below is a list of some characteristics of a *Memento Mori pedagogy* or death-informed teaching in the *Necrocene* and some of the participants' stories they resonate across:

1. **Empathy and care** (*Seen explicitly in Molly's conversations with her students, Nat's colleague's attitudes, and Leanne's care for her students.*)
2. **A commitment to modeling difficult emotions** (*Illustrated by Leanne's experience with collective grief and Reese's commitment to the work she does with students every day.*)
3. **Sharing of authority** (*As seen in Darcie's experience most clearly with her students during and after the swatting incident and Leanne's work with students collectively.*)
4. **Grounding and Intention** in approach to curriculum and text (*Described most clearly in the curricular choices that Josh and Reese spoke about making.*)
5. **Gaining Comfort with the Unknown** (*Illustrated by Nat and Reese's experiences and reflections on their work with students when talking about grief and difficult topics generally.*)
6. **School as Sacred and Important** (*These are Reese's words, but I found them to be so powerful that I used them to open and close the chapter.*)

Another important part of this pedagogy that is to be acknowledged and lives throughout this chapter is that the work it calls for is remarkably present facing. The characteristics of a *Memento Mori Pedagogy* presented here call for its actors to practice immense awareness of themselves while also attending seriously to the people directly in front of them in the here and now. The work is done with other people with immediacy and relationality – two qualities that perhaps make it best suited for a classroom space.

Part II

Memento Mori Pedagogies: Expounded

1. *Conversations Following Incidents of Death: Seeing Radical Empathy and Care in Schools*

While I asked if it is possible for educators to teach and think about a death-informed pedagogy without a community member dying, I do so with an understanding that comes from the power of experiencing collective grief as a community. That understanding is, of course, informed by my own experiences. But more importantly, it comes from the stories I heard from teachers in the wake of losses. The kind of tenderness and care described by teachers coalesces and supports the work done in grief and education literature. Certainly, Nat, the special education teacher in Wisconsin, experienced this. When their principal died suddenly, the staff expressed a care and concern for each other unlike ever before, saying goodbye with more *drive safes* and *be carefuls* in the weeks and months that followed. This mirrored the “concern and care” urged by Lussier and Keller’s (2021) work on grief in education spaces.

And while I would like to think expansively about what "death" might mean in this pedagogy, the experience of grieving and collectively mourning after a loss is deeply impactful and an essential part of understanding *Memento Mori* pedagogy. I think it is essential to include these losses here to show the teachers' understandings of them in relation to how they thought about what teaching *is* or what their roles were as teachers in those moments. Particularly as they stand in contrast with the pedagogies born of necro-political conditions discussed in the previous chapter in which public grief and mourning rituals were limited. I also offer these stories, Molly and Leanne's, in addition to Nat's briefly above, partly because, in partnership with the other sections of this chapter, they show an "otherwise" dream of what teaching or a school community might be in relation to deaths that are grieved.

One such story came from Molly from Michigan, who began her teaching career remotely in a storage area of an abandoned high school. She told me the story of losing a 5th grade student to a seizure in that online year. I asked about how she handled the situation, and she told me of a conversation with the closest friends of the girl who had passed away. I asked her what she remembered of their conversation in the wake of that loss:

> Just pure empathy… I remember how beautiful it was to see… I just felt like, Oh my gosh! I am in the presence of pure humanity, like, this is it. This is what makes people people...I remember ending that meeting and being like having goosebumps and thinking like, okay, like this was, you know, this was not on the curriculum. This was not anything that we were supposed to do today. **But this was teaching!** This is a moment that these kids felt, heard, and valued, and they're not going to forget what that felt like.

During an incredibly difficult year of online teaching, it was this conversation that seemed to break the mold of the pressure of content-pushing and "bare-life" teaching that Molly was able to see her students and their capacities to hold empathy for one another as "beautiful". Molly makes a qualification here – that while this conversation was not "in the curriculum," "this" [the

conversation] was teaching." If we recall that in that year of online teaching, much of Molly's and her remote colleagues' experiences were distilled down to its barest form. It was a world in which what is understood and accepted as teaching was in Molly's words "pushing content" and devoid of a value of much else. So, it makes sense that this conversation would stand in stark contrast. It was a conversation that was not pre-planned or handed to Molly but something that she, as the girls' teacher, carved time out from their day to discuss. She followed up with the parents about the conversation. I want to pause here to focus on that – on Molly – and her choice to make space for this. In a world of online teaching – with a teacher whom students never physically met. One can easily imagine a stressed and distant educator who did not do what Molly did. When a difficult life experience emerged for her students, she greeted it, and modeled how one might make space for others in a community when experiencing something like an unexpected loss.

The word Molly used to describe the experience was like being "in the presence of pure humanity." Again, in contrast to the inhumane conditions that Molly experienced teaching, this experience of talking about the death of a student with that student's friend showed her another dimension of what "teaching" was. In reflecting on what the experience was like, Molly said students felt "heard" and "valued", things that require a real rooted and present-facing attitude. To make students feel truly "heard" and "valued", Molly could not multi-task. Molly could not start planning for tomorrow nor making lists, grading, or answering emails. She' could not worry about the curriculum they should be doing or what tomorrow will be like as a result of making time for this conversation. She was not having a conversation with these girls about the things they could have or should have done in the past. Instead, she was seeing, hearing, and making

their feelings about their friend being gone legitimate in the present moment. This might feel like a trivial or belabored way of explaining Molly's attention at that moment. But so much of the work of teaching consists of a future-facing orientation. Constructing a curriculum for students' "tomorrows" or planning for students' future lives permits an easy obsession with the future and hyper-criticality of the past or even present. And in a year in which she was under so much pressure to cover content, it is even more remarkable again that Molly made time in the here and now for these girls.

2. *A Commitment to Modeling Difficult Emotions*

Another example of a teacher – or rather an entire community – holding space to process and grieve a loss came from Leanne, a former English and Theater teacher in the Boston area who is now an assistant principal. In her new role in a new community, Leanne felt shocked to hear that a death by suicide of an LGBTQ+ student was not remarked on publicly for many reasons. But some of that shock stemmed from her experience in other communities. She told me she thought specifically about her time in a KIPP charter school in a tight-knit urban community just north of Boston. In her early years of both teaching and time at KIPP, she and the community experienced the death of a student from cancer. Leanne remembered parts of the experience vividly, particularly his wake, wherein she recalled her tears and shock at seeing a sixteen-year-old whose life was ended so abruptly.

But she also remembered that teachers used the space, routine, and rituals they already had in place as a school to talk, reminisce, process, and hold space in the wake of the loss. In addition to using the normal rituals and structures of the school to support students, her small school

community took the task of processing grief a step further and held a public memorial ceremony to mourn and celebrate the student. But part of what made any of this effective or supportive, Leanne reflected, were the bonds and strength of the community they were in (about 400 students total at the time). It helped that they were a small community but also that the school's leadership had required risk-taking and bonding activities early and often in the school year. In Leanne's words:

> When I think about how that impacted that community and how tight and bonded and it almost felt intentional that we were like sort of obsessed with each other. Um, like the school itself did a lot of work to make sure, before we started school, we all knew each other, and we were, we had these like, risk-taking experiences. So then when this really sad thing happened, it felt like there's a community there and you know, like we knew his family so, so well. And it was truly like, it hit, you know, it hit the whole community, and the whole community grieved together.

The entire community grieved together, again, not just in small spaces and advisory classes or joining in the family's rituals like a wake, but they gathered as an entire school with his family to mark this student's passing. It was thoughtfully planned and, as Leanne said, "authentic." When I asked her more specifically about this experience and what it held for her in the scope of her understanding of her own teaching practice and what the role of a teacher is, she focused again on the ability to respond authentically in a community:

> For me, I am somebody who thrives in the, as you know, thrives in the environment of feeling like they're a part of something. I mean, I guess most humans do. Right. So, thriving in a community where I felt like I was part of something. Yeah. And, um, it was authentic, and it wasn't just like, we're going to slap this together.

Thinking back to her time in her early twenties at KIPP, Leanne told me frankly that if you had asked her about her workplace at that time, she would have told you she hated it. Certainly, others have written on why many young people feel this way about KIPP charter schools (Lack, 2009). However, the amount of time and (corporate-funded) resources that were given to teachers and students to make time to build strong bonds together cannot be overlooked. This is

combined with a strict adherence to a daily advisory period.[15] Students were trusting and ready to talk about the loss of a fellow student with Leanne partly because they had experience using a circle protocol to talk about many difficult topics.[16] She could not remember the specifics of the conversation following the student's death, but she did tell me about its impact years later.

Just recently, Leanne saw on social media that a student from that year had lost her brother unexpectedly. He died in his early 30's, and Leanne knew the two were close. After Leanne expressed her sympathies in a comment, the student sent Leanne a direct message telling her the loss was hard, yes, but that she knew how to handle loss from her time in Leanne's advisory. As Leanne said,

> She actually referenced the time around when Jay[17] passed away... something around the lines of like, I've had practice of like losing people before and I'm grateful for what you provided for us at KIPP. It was like, I'm grateful for the spaces you provided us at KIPP because I could like feel my feelings. <laugh> Those are not her exact words, but that was the like, general message of it. Um, and like, isn't that what school is for? It's the place to practice where you're gonna do all the other shit that you do in your life and like, you're gonna encounter death at some point in your life.

A centralizing and ongoing question that seems to permeate education literature and undergird the very work of this project asks what Leanne does here rhetorically: what is school for? And in Leanne's understanding, what is school for, if not a place to practice the difficult conversations

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[15] Many schools have "advisories" or periods/blocks dedicated to socio-emotional learning and support for students. Sometimes this is organized half-heartedly as an additional 20- or 30-minute extension of homeroom or another class. But in the community that Leanne was a part of, this advisory period was taken seriously. Groups were much smaller than other classes because every adult in the building had an advisory block. Students were assigned an adult in the building and met with them daily as a group for their entire time at the school. These strong bonds and dedicated routine of meeting together were essential for their ability to discuss and process something as difficult as a student at their school dying.

[16] Circle Protocol: This can mean a variety of different things depending on the context. At a minimum in Leanne's context, this meant students were accustomed to sharing space in a circle frequently using something as a "talking piece," that would encourage them to give the floor to one speaker at a time.

[17] Name changed

and cultivate emotional intelligence and habits of mind one might need later in life? As discussed earlier, a central tenet of what a focus on death education might do for young people is to prepare them for a life experience that is certainly inevitable (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018; 2021).

But in keeping with a focus on the teacher and her inner thoughts, we might ask about the impact these conversations have on the teacher herself and her understanding of her role in those moments. While Leanne's modeling did impact at least one of her students later in her life, this was not the goal in the moment. In the moment, Leanne had hoped to make space for the actively difficult emotions of her students, but this was a reflection learned from handling difficult emotions and situations in front of students. The work was indeed twofold; it was both the present-facing work that needed to be done and, of course, had the potential to teach students later. But unlike many other future-facing tasks in education that students and teachers are required to do – say, test prep or even learning important study skills and writing skills for college – the "payoff" of having these conversations is felt in the moment of holding cathartic space in the present not just something you are doing for a later version of yourself.

Again, when Molly reflected on the conversation that she had with students, she mentioned that while this time was not "in the curriculum," she hypothesized that students would not forget what it felt like to be "heard" and "valued" at that moment. And certainly, Leanne's student did not forget. There is something here about the purpose of school but also the ability and role of the teacher to take action in honing that purpose in a moment of crisis, to be present, and to act to make these spaces and moments of processing a priority.

While Molly had to make time and advocate for space, Leanne, by contrast, was given that space by KIPP; it was as if her community was designed to hold and metabolize moments of crisis. What might this mean for how we understand what teaching is? Or what school could be in a death-informed pedagogy?

The curriculum, routines, procedures, and perhaps the teacher's autonomy to make a decision about what and how her time is used with students become essential. The teacher is the person responding authentically and empathically in these moments. For Leanne, the experience did not just crystalize how a community could respond to a death in the community, but it helped reveal the kind of values she wanted to embody in her role as a teacher and now administrator.

Looping back to think about how this past experience integrated into her whole understanding of her role as a teacher, Leanne told me it was a person who authentically builds connection and community for students:

> The whole check, the check-in thing,[18] like the reason that you build relationships with students, and I feel like this is the thing that young teachers need to know: of course, you build relationships with students because you want them to be successful and feel loved and supported and safe. But the real reason you build relationships with students is for when that thing happens, whatever it is to them, their parents are getting divorced, their grandma dies, their goldfish dies. It doesn't matter. Like whatever's big to them - can you be somebody who can hold that for them? Can you hold the space for them? Because that might not be happening anywhere else. Um, and that, that takes so much like, that lives in a conversation about teachers and self. Like, that doesn't necessarily have to do with death. But like, do you know yourself? Do you know how you react to things? Do you know your values? Do you know what you hold to be true so that you can be a supportive person for students? And do they see that authentically from you?

[18] Leanne uses the phrase “check in” here as a shorthand for making time for a quick social-emotion share out from every student. Even in a lighthearted way, this is an essential part of both of our teaching practices. I still do this with my Master’s students. Investing in relationships this way in a formal way is often a structure and space that can be helpful, particularly when something difficult is going on in our communities.

Leanne uses the phrase here, evoked in other parts of the project, as “holding space” as if the teacher becomes a container herself but also someone who helps to carve and create containers for the difficult experiences and “difficult knowledge” of life. Leanne draws attention to the need here for self-knowledge as a critical capacity for new teachers; this self-knowledge and, she said later, “self-awareness” seems essential to understanding if one is responding “authentically” to students and their grief and difficult emotions. The question of whether or not teachers must know themselves and what parts of themselves are able and available for students in the classroom is one that has been essential to understanding how we construct teacher education spaces and capacity building in the profession (Britzman, 1994).

In other words, what parts of ourselves and our identities must be negotiated to be a teacher now, in the year 2024? We will consider that question more deeply in the next chapter, bringing together the previous chapter and this chapter to inform a response.

3. Empowering Students and Sharing Authority

Darcie from Maine told me how she saw her students differently after a traumatic lockdown experience when their school was “swatted.” She saw her students take action, help build a barricade, reflect, and even voice their appreciation for Darcie’s response to the crisis. So, when two girls who worked at the local diner asked if they could bring a griddle in and make pancakes for everyone on their last day of class, Darcie found herself saying yes. Less like disengaged teenagers and more like responsible young people, the two girls made pancakes for everyone in the class. As a result of their experience in the lockdown, she reflected on how she saw her students in that class differently and her own willingness to share responsibility with them:

> **We don't give them a lot of opportunity to have power.** And I feel like there were a few moments in there [the lockdown] where I relinquished a little bit, because either I didn't know what to do, or because again, I'm thinking like, yeah, we just need something in those moments where I'm like, 'Yes, you kids can go stack this thing [the barricade] if that's going to make you feel better' …'Sure, you want to put that extra table up. Go for it,' and letting them have that space to comfort each other, or giving them that space to talk to each other, I'm not terribly authoritarian, but [not] seeing them kind of top down, **and having that moment where you're realizing they have strengths and can bring those to the table,** I think, is really powerful […] it is like especially with things like that breakfast at that moment where it's like - **You have the power to heal the community … and clean up.**

Looking back at our previous chapter, Darcie struggled to grapple with her own overwhelming responsibility in the face of a potential crisis and felt unsure about her own role with students. She wondered if she was making the right decisions. At times, she felt bewildered, having just as much information as the students in front of her. In this moment, Darcie described the acts of shared power in the dramatic moment of the swatting: letting students claim their own illusory agency in the illusion of the lockdown bit by bit, stacking a chair, moving a table. She connected these moments of sharing power to the experience of watching students make pancakes for their peers. Having students bring in pancake-making materials on the last day of a history class could be an anxiety-inducing proposition for many teachers. But Darcie conceded in part because the request came from "this class" – the class that she had gone through the swatting incident with. The pancakes become a bookend or a different kind of symbol for the kind of sharing of power that could happen, yes, when students and teachers feel afraid for their lives and are called to take defensive action. The pancakes allow a shift – to see that sharing of power not just as defensive but also as a capacity to act with communal care.

4. Death in the Curriculum – Accessing Grounding and Intention

An entire and different project could be consumed by how some teachers presence death in their curriculums or choose to teach about death. Much has been written on the opportunities,

specifically for books and literature, to open the door to a space wherein students can learn, discuss, and process how death operates for them in the world. Specifically, Cara Furman's piece, *Conversations about Death that are Provoked by Literature,* advocates and offers insights about choosing texts that might give students opportunities, should they take them, to have unscripted conversations about death with each other and their teacher (Furman, 2020). As discussed in the first chapter, much of the writing on death and education has occupied this space in social studies education research, likely because thinking deeply and often about how to portray human suffering and stories of war, brutality, and genocide is something that social studies teachers are no strangers to (Varga et al., 2021; 2023b). Out of my small group of participants, the teachers who seemed to reflect most on the place that death held explicitly in their curriculum were Josh and Reese. I bring their examples together, but they seem to embody two very different approaches to working with death in the curriculum. However, they overlap in that presencing death seemed to be a pedagogical choice that gave them an access point to re-integrate and avoid disavowal of the difficult parts of their own life, which they repaired and re-fashioned into something else.

So, I offer some glimpses from those conversations about teaching here because I think they offer a potential pathway for teachers who might use these conversations, lessons, and work with death as a kind of *memento mori* not because of the objects themselves but because of Josh and Reese's relationship *to* those texts or units on death. Choosing those texts revealed to the teachers themselves the kind of pedagogy and kind of teaching they may hope to hold themselves to if they were to incorporate death broadly as a subject their work with students.

In my conversations with Josh, he admitted that, in many ways, he considered the International Baccalaureate Literature class he taught to eleventh and twelfth graders to be focused on love and death. Josh told me:

> The joke that I used to tell about my course, which is a two-year course where we read 13 books, is that, depending on who I'm saying this to, I'll say either it's Love and Death or Sex and Death. And the syllabus for junior year is largely about relationships and the syllabus for senior year is largely about death.

This seemed to be a defining feature of how Josh thought about his work as a teacher – as a place where he could make space for students to have conversations about topics that deeply engaged them – like death and sex. Josh told me about a time in 2018 wherein he was teaching *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner, which is a story about a mother dying and the grief following it, as he supported his partner who was grieving her dead mother. He felt subsumed by the literature and the book, a way he often reads books, by "putting himself in it." He never told his students about the synchronicity because, to him, it felt a little inappropriate, and he likened it to the teacher that Ryan Gosling plays in Half-Nelson – an archetype that represented the self-interested and boundaryless, unprofessional teacher. When I asked Josh about how and when he chooses to share life experiences or difficult emotions with students, he replied:

> I was telling this to a student - I don't know why I was telling this to a student. There was a kid in my study hall, and I was like, 'the thing that you need to know about me as a teacher is that anything that I share with you, I am instrumentalizing for an educational purpose. And even this conversation that I'm having with you right now is instrumentalizing with you for an educational purpose. And it means that you ultimately do not see myself outside of that. And you think that you do, you don't.' And so, I do feel like there's a huge space for sharing difficult emotions in class. In part as a dude, as a, I don't know, sort of together-seeming person, I'm like, I would rather show that that's a way to be in the world and that that's a way to respond to literature and life. And pretending everything is rational is not great. So, I'd rather do that. But that's also very calculated.

A death-informed pedagogy would need to reckon with the balance and the kind of understanding Josh brings to his work with students. How much and when should one share? This might sound in opposition to the approach Leanne offered in a previous section, but I heard them acting in a similar vein. Leanne did temper her own acts of communal mourning – she said while she did tear up in front of her students when Jay died, she did not "fall apart" so she could still make space for students' feelings. Both Leanne and Josh seem to understand – whether in the wake of an actual death in the community or reading about one – that the conversations and thinking that happened after were moments to be used for student learning. Their approach, of being cognizant and careful of how much to share and when, gets at a tension I have felt with grief-informed work that does not seem to offer a limit on how much to share or when to limit the teacher's personal emotional responses in the classroom (Granek, 2009). While Granek's article specifically makes the important point of modeling the "cracks" and very real grieving process for students – it seemingly offers no limit. A critic of presencing death or grief in the classroom might misinterpret this work as over-presencing the teacher's emotions and personal life rather than her students – becoming the archetypal over-sharer that Josh feared becoming.

Josh's description of "instrumentalization" might seem clinical or strange, but I heard it differently as a teacher who strived to be incredibly intentional. In presenting death in our curriculums, we might harness this intentionality as an answer to potential critics who might see this work as an inappropriate therapy for a teacher by her students.

Another approach that a death-informed pedagogy by presencing death in the curriculum came from Reese, who taught death not as just a relational aspect of understanding (what happens

when someone close to me dies?) but as a part of the life cycle experienced by all animals and nature. Specifically, Reese did this with an interdisciplinary "Bones Unit" for her first graders. "You can't talk about bones without death," Reese told me. She brought in bones from a trip to Mexico that her daughter found on a beach and the students were all trying to wash chicken bones and bring them – "nasty," Reese told me, but very fun. Reese reflected on the meaning-making about death that students did in relationship to the bones:

> …certainly all the skeleton stuff and all of that, but, but it's like when you see a skull and crossbones, that symbolizes death. I mean, when you see that skull, it's a scary thing. But then kids were like, yeah, but it's kind of cool and spooky, too. Like, we're walking around with that all the time. You just can't see it. And then they have this like, really cool idea. So the essential question is, what is important about bones? And their [the students'] answer was, 'they last forever. Like, they're very hard to get rid of. And so, you can find bones from thousands of years ago. And that person died thousands of years ago, but we still like know something about them.' And so, they were like, 'well, yeah, you die, but there's a way that you live on, like your bones live on, and we can learn from them, and it tells a story.' And I was like, oh, that's so cool. Bones do tell a story, um, that that's what death does. It tells a story. Um, and so for some it was this comforting idea of the bones are, they're still there somehow. Like all of the rest of you decays and goes away, but there's something that lasts.

The bones here, perhaps in the clearest way, acted as an ongoing *memento mori* for the first graders to engage with in their inquiry unit. They hold the presence and inevitability of death but simultaneously act as an object that students can think with. Death becomes a part of the classroom. But why might a teacher, particularly one with so much curricular freedom, make space for such a topic?

While the bones themselves may have acted as a *memento-mori* for the students themselves, the unit and the students *thinking* about it acted as a larger *memento-mori for Reese,* who had been going through a very difficult time ending a relationship.

Like Josh, the place of death in the curriculum gave Reese an access point to be "real" and connected to her life. She told me about one instance in which she was going through a difficult time:

> … I was going for a walk with my daughter kind of through this time. We found this like dead raccoon in the, in the woods. And I was like, that is exactly how I feel. I just, I felt like my body was just like rotting, you know? So fast forward, I kind of moved through that, and I did the hard thing, and I ended that [made a major life decision] … But gosh, it was hard for a while. You know? It was a really hard time coming out of that and living through it with students. I mean, I was in class, and during some of that, I think it just made me feel like we can handle hard things. Um, I want to be more transparent. I want to be more real. I don't want to go through just smiling and just doing happy things all the time. Um, you know, I don't need to share every level of hardship with my kids, but I want to be real, and I want to be connected to that. I want to presence death and hardship, um, in myself, in front of my own children. Um, and in the classroom. It's a real connectedness to my own life that I think allows me to do that in the classroom.

Like Josh and Leanne, Reese talked about wanting to be able to talk about death and hardship in her own classroom, without, of course, telling her students "every level" or every part of her life. The commitment to bringing difficult knowledge into the classroom came in tandem with Reese's commitment to not stray from or avoid the difficulties in her own life. She wanted to face them head-on and be present in those moments. In another anecdote, Reese told me about a little girl in her class who had recently been placed with a foster family away from her birth mom. It was a loss for her, though not a death, but a real loss. While reading the book *Because of Winn Dixie*, they came to the section of the book in which many liquor and wine bottles are hanging from a tree, alluding to a character's problem with alcohol. Without much hesitation, the little girl shared with the class that her mom drank, and that was why she couldn't be with her anymore. Reese was surprised by this spontaneous share in the moment, but also thought it was important the student felt like she could share some of what she had been holding alone. The other 1st graders in the class had questions, "Drunk? Drank what?" they wanted to know. The

little girl explained that her mom drank alcohol, and she would get drunk. The students then asked their peer about what happened when her mom was drunk – and she answered (sleepy, mostly, she said). Reese wondered in this moment if she should cut off the conversation, but she stayed the course, and trusted her students and her own ability to handle and process wherever the conversation went. In her earlier years of teaching, she reflected, telling me she would have likely stopped the conversation earlier. But at this point, she knew it was important at that very moment that this student felt like she needed to share. And Reese trusted, even though she could not say exactly where the conversation was going, that she would walk with her students as their questions and curiosities came up and keep them safe in the process.

5. Accepting the Unknown

In the previous chapter, we met Nat, whose work with their student, Cam, in the wake of the school principal's death, seemed to share the load of thinking, grieving, and being aware of death in their day-to-day lives together.

After experiencing the sudden loss of their principal and then reporting an incident of a student displaying threats against the school on TikTok, Nat had been forming an understanding of what it means to be a teacher in the face of those experiences. In reflecting on the relationship between death and their teaching, Nat reflected that their experience with death at school helped them gain better comfort with the uncertainty and the unknown. They told me:

> I worked on also acknowledging when I don't know something […] if they ask me a really hard question about like death, or about grief like 'when do you think I'm going to

> be over it [grief]?'[…] I would just say, 'You know, I don't know, but I really hope that we can learn together. I'd really hope that we can learn that together through this. Like I am an adult, but I do not know everything, like, I don't.' And no adult does. So. I think that that's another thing this has really shown me what a gift that uncertainty can be in that, that it gives us an opportunity to learn and collaborate and talk through it together… That's another thing that I'm going to take through this is like it's okay to not know. It's okay to not know everything.

The experience Nat describes here is not just the grieving process but the relationship to grief and death as the educator. Much like Darcie's experience of seeing her students with more power and agency, Nat's experience also destabilized the teacher's position as an expert or knower. In the face of grief, death, or the constant potential for death, the precarity of life lays bare like an exposed nerve. Some educators and students might re-assert or demand control as a form of comfort; others instead could find themselves willing and embracing themselves traversing the unknown alongside students. What rises to the surface for me when re-reading my interview with Nat was their willingness to join with students. Saying, "*I really hope we can learn together"* in the face of the unknown models not only an honesty of inexperience but also a willingness to learn and learn in community with others about the unknown.

This "accepting of the unknown" is present too in Reese's story above, a willingness to walk and follow students into unplanned and unknown spaces in their thinking seems an important characteristic to working with death – a deeply unknown and mysterious part of our condition.

This might be the moment to think deeply about what a death-informed pedagogy can do that a grief-informed pedagogy might not. In an environment that constantly oscillates between the mechanisms for control and chaos – the classroom – could presencing death at least in the mind of the teacher free her from this battle? Death remains an inevitability, and while the tragic element of it is inescapable, mortality itself is not. And yet, the unknown remains.

This chapter opened with a quote from a section of Sarah Ruhl's play, *Eurydice,* in a stirring moment – Orpheus cannot communicate with Eurydice, and we, the audience, cannot understand her because, as the fake Greek chorus of stones tells us, "she speaks the language of the dead now" "a quiet language" as if "the pores on your face opened up and talked," "like potatoes sleeping in the dirt" (Ruhl, 2008). Even these similes aim to make the illegible aspects of death more legible. Understandably, we constantly seek to make the unknown known. But if we are to actively presence death, to carry it, to re-fashion it as an informer and an adviser to our practice, we might have to reckon with the deeply unsettling aspect of its unknowability.

6. School Itself as "Sacred and Important"

In this final section, we return to Reese and the picture of her deceased student that opened the chapter. While Nat braced themselves to be able to hold the unknown with students, Reese held that uncertainty in a different manner. We may not know when a student's last living day is, but we do have a sense that it will come. There is uncertainty in that unknowing and "fragility," but a certainty that mortality is something inevitable.

Here is Reese after I asked her about how and when thinking about death and mortality emerged in her awareness:

> I think about it, and I don't feel like super freaked out. Like, we're going to have a school shooter today. I'm not - it doesn't feel like that. But I do live with an awareness of how life is fragile. And, and some people tell me, this is really dark <laugh> that I think this way. But I really think about teaching, like, if this is this kid's last week at school, what is it? What is in it to make their life full and meaningful? And that erases all this stress around like, oh my God, it's the test scores or their reading level. Who cares? Nobody cares. This is the kid's last week on Earth, last month on Earth, last year in school. God, I

> want them to just be playing. I want them to have art. I want them to have life and beauty and good books and friendship and just everything good.

Teaching with this outlook certainly stands in contrast with the high-stakes testing and now "learning loss" makeup culture in which we find ourselves. Students spend much of their waking hours in schools. Elementary school students especially spend an inordinate amount of their lives with their teacher and their classmates – from about 8AM to 3 PM, 5 days a week. I did not hear Reese saying that reading or skill-building with children did not matter. Her inquiry-style multidisciplinary units were open as much as they were rigorous. She told me about her young students reading and memorizing Mary Oliver or a unit on winter.[19]

I heard Reese instead as using the presence of death as "grounding" in her work as a teacher. These *memento-moris* brought a gravity and depth to the time she spent with young people every day. A demand and focus on a presence that calls for a different kind of teaching that is not necessarily future-facing and embraces an unknown quality of life. A pedagogy that is different than functioning as a bridge for young people into the world but as a potentially singular opportunity for the potential that the time they could be here could be limited. It destabilizes the

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[19] ***Wolf Moon by Mary Oliver***
Now is the season of hungry mice, cold rabbits,
lean owls hunkering with their lamp-eyes
in the leafless lanes in the needled dark;
now is the season when the kittle fox
comes to town in the blue valley of early morning;
now is the season of iron rivers, bloody crossings,
flaring winds, birds frozen in their tents of weeds,
their music spent and blown like smoke to the stone of the sky;
now is the season of the hunter *Death*;
with his belt of knives, his black snowshoes,
he means to cleanse the earth of fat;
his gray shadows are out and running – under
the moon, the pines, down snow-filled trails they carry
the red whips of their music, their footfalls quick as hammers,
from cabin to cabin, from bed to bed, from dreamer to dreamer.
(Oliver, 1979)

very nature of the theory of education Arendt proposes in *The Crisis of Education*, wherein the constant birth of new people into the world is an ever-renewing driver for the need for education (Arendt, 2006).

School then becomes not a preparation for life itself but an experience that demands attention as an experience worth having. Conversations and learning within themselves are not preparatory for life outside the four walls of the school but are worth having for the lives of the students who exist both within and outside the school and transcend those boundaries.

Part III: Conclusions and Implications: A Memento Mori Pedagogy

Memento Mori Pedagogy, or a Metaphor for Death-Informed Pedagogy

Metaphorically, it was as if the original "object" (the awareness of death) was being re-tooled or refashioned into something else by these teachers. Rather than resulting entirely in a defensive stance with a lack of agency, these pedagogies described by the teachers are simultaneously vulnerable and incredibly attentional. These reminders of death were broadened and brought the reader close to how a teacher might make meaningful strides in their work to showcase time in school as important in of itself.

What might we call such a pedagogy?

Memento Mori is Latin for "remember you will die." This is the metaphor I suggest we use in pivoting and deepening our understanding of death-informed teaching presented in the teacher

interviews. This metaphor brings attention to both a literal and metaphorical re-fashioning of objects. *Memento Mori* is also a category for an object or visual representation of death, existing across cultures but going back at least to Roman antiquity and becoming quite popular during the Victorian era, wherein untimely deaths were frequent and "death culture" was popular. Skull jewelry, locks of a deceased one's hair, and other visually morbid trinkets served as reminders and pathways to presence the inevitability of death in one's consciousness in order to consider the daily on-goings of one's life in death's shadow (Lutz, 2011). Rather than being disavowed both physically and mentally from daily life, the elements of the macabre are actively presenced and conjured to evoke meanings brought on by their juxtaposition.

Consider Reese's photograph of her deceased student that she keeps on her desk. While the memory it depicts is a happy one – the feeling of sadness is not absent. *Memento Moris* are to not forget or lighten the mood about death. In using them to presence death in our awareness, we do not forget the power of death, but rather, deepen our relationship and even increase familiarity toward it.

What might a pedagogy, or an approach to teaching and learning, look like infused with the constant remembrance of mortality? What might we learn by carrying death close to us? What might we learn or see differently? The teachers interviewed here provide us with a few ways forward.

Must a death occur for Memento Mori Pedagogy? Relationship to Grief-Informed Pedagogies

As a result of these varied interviews, I have wondered if the focus on grief in these experiences demands, necessitates, or even requires a community member of the school or outside the school actually dying to call the pedagogies discussed above or the pedagogy I suggest below. Some of the stories I heard were intangibly bound to experiences of grief from a person who died in the community, but some were not. Some instead were laced with the acknowledgment of the potential for death and the awareness of inevitable mortality due to the trauma experienced in schools. Thinking again back to the previous chapter, while many teachers did not have experiences with school shooters, many more had experiences with lockdowns or simulations in which they constantly considered their potential deaths without actually having a death in their community. One paper I found that held space for a broader relationship to death came from those in the field of environmental education and ecological crisis studies in the United Kingdom. Affifi & Christie (2017) describe a culture that hides from the fact of death – both in denial of the dying state of the environment and the ever-present decay of ourselves. Their paper, *Facing Loss: Pedagogy of Death,* describes instantiations of death represented by cemeteries, sudden loss of life, the ongoing decay of the planet, and, of course, our own mortalities. This last category has the most common with the work offered in this chapter. In their paper, they, too, talk about humans guarding themselves against the knowledge of their own mortality, engaging with Heidegger to think deeply about how the acknowledgment of death has the potential to create meaning (Affifi & Christie, 2017, p. 1151). Their death pedagogy suggests a movement toward the arts and incorporating more death into the curricular, which this project does not

argue against, but is not as concerned with specifically, though I do think future work could collaborate and deepen these movements.

Again, I suggest here that it is possible for a *Memento-Mori pedagogy*, a pedagogy that presences an awareness of death, to be a larger umbrella to contain and connect these experiences with others not contingent on the actual physical death of a community member but instead with the knowledge of the being with and part of life in a *Necrocene*. In many of the cases described below, a physical death or literal death is still present, and yet it seems essential to make space for something more expansive – something that is about the possibility of what can be birthed when the awareness of death is held rather than disavowed.

Death-informed pedagogy or pedagogy that presences death is what I am calling a Memento Mori Pedagogy. It is an active, inclusive, and pro-active stance informed by experiences with death, as well as potentially preparing teachers to respond to deaths in the community—this last impact is not the sole purpose of the pedagogy.

Conclusion: Considering Memento-Mori against a backdrop of Necro Pedagogy

This project does not attempt to rectify or ameliorate the difficult conditions present for teachers but instead gives voice to them. The chapter preceding this one presented disturbing teaching born in *Necropolitical* conditions. It might be tempting to view this chapter as its antidote. I do not intend this chapter to act as a set of best practices or salve for the wounds inflicted in the previous. But I do think it is essential to consider the pedagogies of each chapter together.

This chapter makes two important shifts, both in shifting us to consider these stories not only born *of Necropolitics* but also in the *Necrocene*. And seeing the potential pedagogical stance that is created and could be further developed, a *Memento-Mori Pedagogy* lives alongside and is enmeshed at times with the *Necro-pedagogy* of the previous chapter. A kind of extreme hopefulness in the face of the descriptions of the previous chapter would just be a further disavowal of the "difficult knowledge" present for teachers teaching today.

Those ***Necro-pedagogical*** approaches to teaching are:

1. **Literal physical conditions that threaten teachers' and students' bodily health**
2. **A persistent lack of agency or threat of a loss of agency** over the physical and emotional safety of the conditions
3. **Ongoing simulations and rehearsals** that become traumatic experiences wherein teachers and students are asked to "survive" and **given the illusion of control**
4. **Unrecognized and/or unsupported grief** of the loss of life that ultimately devalues the lives lost in school communities

When thinking about these findings next to each other, we must again consider that while they represent different stances or qualities of the teaching present – these findings come out of conversations with the same teachers. These themes of a *Memento-Mori* pedagogy were not given in the same breath as descriptions of necro-pedagogical teaching. These were co-existing, co-mingling, and perhaps even existing in relation to or even dependent on one another.

Again, the characteristics of this ***Memento-Mori pedagogy*** are:

1. **Empathy and care**
2. **A commitment to modeling difficult emotions**
3. **Sharing of authority**
4. **Grounding and seriousness in approach to curriculum and text**
5. **Gaining comfort with the unknown**

6. **School as sacred and important**

Thinking about these characteristics wholistically, we see a pedagogy that lives alongside and in some ways challenges the pedagogies born of *Necropolitics* from the previous chapter.

I believe in the acuity and work of many classroom teachers. My initial stance with them is to trust their understanding of their students, their work, and the possibilities for their work. Instead of just providing best practices or immediate response techniques, though these are helpful, I want to honor the thinking and careful reflections coming from the teachers themselves about their work and the potentials of it when in the presence of or proximal to death.

These characteristics come from reflections on the experiences present in the previous chapter. It is essential then that we re-frame these objects and these stories, these moments that conjure up the awareness of death, not only as objects born of a necropolitical context but as pathways to consider a different pedagogical response. With this refashioning, as these teachers have done, could death not *just* be a frightening threat but also an essential and invisible coach to the work of teachers? Rather than responding exclusively with anxiety and fear, might there be another understanding of teaching alongside death that calls for embracing the unknown and each other differently? Rather than having these anecdotes and objects live in a trigger point in our memories, perhaps we could fashion these objects and stories into talismans - objects that we knowingly bring into our awareness, to give us power, ground us, and remind us of the kind of teaching we hope to do and the teachers we hope to be without someone in our community having to die.

The next chapter is informed by these two previous, with the thought that while we cannot fix conditions, we can advocate for an approach to supporting and training teachers to respond and think in moments of crisis with this pedagogy. The next chapter offers a a curriculum intervention wherein teachers might examine their own values, embodied responses, and understandings of what it means to be a teacher. Perhaps, by carrying our own *Memento-moris* that conjure our own awarenesses of death ourselves, we might begin to unearth these new ways of teaching and learning together rooted in our collective mortality, as we work to support teachers and leaders to continue to deeply consider their own.

Chapter Four:
Acting & Reflecting:
Embodied Ethical Thinking in Normative Case Discussions

> *There is a theory that watching unbearable stories about other people lost in grief and rage is good for you—may cleanse you of your darkness. Do you want to go down to the pits of yourself all alone? Not much. What if an actor could do it for you? Isn't that why they are called actors? They act for you. You sacrifice them to action. And this sacrifice is a mode of deepest intimacy of you with your own life. Within it, you watch [yourself] act out the present or possible organization of your nature. You can be aware of your own awareness of this nature as you never are at the moment of experience. The actor, by reiterating you, sacrifices a moment of his own life in order to give you a story of yours.*
>
> - Anne Carson, *Grief Lessons*

As teachers continue to live and work with students within the walls of the school, they continue to spend their lives within the current necro-political climate. With an increase in gun violence and different awareness of potentially life-threatening illnesses, the felt experience of *vulnerability* of teachers and students in the school grows apparent. *Vulnera* means wound in Latin. Maybe the better question to ask in trying to understand what it means and requires to be a teacher in this context is: What does it mean to care for the wounded – or rather – the wound-able? What does it mean to do this caring while being wound-able yourself?

There is a way in which this question is not new or unique to teaching at all, yet the capacities and competencies of what the role entails – and the relationship to students seem to have shifted as the conditions around it have.

In closing my interviews, I asked about participants' formal preparation for the role of being a teacher and if their programs covered a preparedness for addressing and working in the landscape of ongoing or fielding traumatic events such as a death. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, most told me this was not a part of teacher preparation at universities that participants experienced. Some mentioned that plenty of other difficult and important topics about inequity or race and identity were covered, but not death or how to handle conversations in the wake of death. Nor were they given advice or orientation on how to support themselves during a crisis.

How do we make space for these conversations in the already crowded teacher-education curriculum? How do we find time for them during the busy school day and overbooked professional development sessions for in-service teachers? How do we ensure that when we do make time for them, these conversations are helpful and not harmful?

Working in teacher education, I struggle with how I would square this clear need with the methods that many in the field rely on to support the development of new teachers – simulation and casework – and the heaviness and toll of such work. Casework generally involves pre-service teachers reading a short story based on real life, wherein they are asked to analyze the situation and brainstorm solutions as if they themselves or a colleague were facing the dilemma presented. Even in the cases that I have previously worked with – around equity, mandated reporting, drug charges, and the police – few have been as viscerally complicated as the stories that participants shared with me about the moments
they felt blindsided by the death of a student.

Potential cases for this work could be deeply disturbing in that they ask teachers to imagine the death of a student and then prompt them for responses and next steps. Some might see asking pre-service teachers to consider the hypothetical death of a student as an enormous imaginative and potentially emotionally triggering "ask" of Teacher Candidates, particularly those who spend their days at school sites and return to campus exhausted and a bit raw. The same could be said for in-service teachers who might benefit from using a case to discuss with school leadership how they might respond. While these conversations and training experiences may be intense, refusing to have them does leave teachers feeling unsupported or, worse, unseen in the potential or already present realities of their work. As for pre-service teachers, if they cannot partake in these conversations in the safe space of their teacher education classroom with a tight cohort community, likely in the final months of their program, where else can they?

Orientation to this Chapter & the Role of Emotion, Embodiment & Vulnerability:

In both classes that I taught the curricular intervention described in this chapter, there were tears. Multiple students cried. I teared up. Both my classes this year are accustomed to doing casework. I warned them early in the semester that we would cover this topic and explained the pedagogical purpose at length. This topic is something I felt they needed to be aware of and prepared for in some regard. Based on the interviews I had done and my experience with previous pre-service teachers, avoiding the topic of death felt negligent.

I had worked with and known some of my students since June 2023 and others since September, and I ran this case in the Spring 2024 semester. Both courses run over multiple semesters with consistent groups. Relationships between students and myself are strong. Still, I gave students ample notice, trigger warnings, and an option to opt out of this particular class. No one did.

The following are reflections on my role as their instructor, not as a researcher.

Some students could not imagine being in the situation described without crying themselves.[20] Earlier in the year, I had assigned a reading from bell hooks in which hooks calls for teachers to be the most self-actualized version of themselves to teach (hooks, 1994).[21] My students had internalized this across my classes as the need to do self-work and support themselves to be stable figures for their students. But these pre-service teachers were asking, what happens when we, the teachers, despite our best efforts, aren't ok, because the situation described here isn't "ok?"

How do we mourn in public? How do we lead and support students while we are mourning? How do we take care of ourselves? These questions are familiar to those who have read the previous chapters. These are the questions that come up for those new to the profession of teaching in relation to, particularly, the death of a student.

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[20] For some context: I have assigned this bell hooks reading, *Engaged Pedagogy* (a chapter from *Teaching to Transgress)* in nearly every class I have taught - mostly to interrogate the category of "self-actualization" of teachers but also to consider what work teaching requires of us personally. The assignment of this reading coincided with one class wherein we talked theatrically and often about classroom behaviors. I had been stern earlier in the year in lessons on classroom management, and I advised the new teachers not to cry in front of their students when they felt overwhelmed – something many of them, I realized later, took too seriously, and others were able to joke about in other moments.

[21] I assigned the chapter *Engaged Pedagogy* from *Teaching to Transgress*.

A Case Born from this Project:

In this chapter, I propose a curricular intervention that could support pre-service and in-service teachers in thinking more deeply and specifically about how they face moments of crisis and news of death in their school communities, particularly in the United States. Necessarily, this involves attending to and keeping an awareness of the complex emotional responses that come up.

For the purpose of this chapter and potential intervention, I specifically mean discussing the death of a student or community member as a case (included in appendix). I focus here because this seemed to be an unaddressed need expressed by participants that had potential emotional consequences and impact on the teachers, students, and their communities.

From the previous chapters, I understand the category of teaching and teacher education to currently exist and will continue to exist in a *Necro-political* climate as well as happening in the *Necrocene* (Casid, 2019; Mbembe & Corcoran, 2019). If this continues to be the reality of teaching for many teachers, we must provide opportunities for pre-service and early career teachers to ready themselves with potential actions, words, and responsibilities in relation to death and crisis in school communities. This charge is shared with other scholars, most clearly Stylianou & Zembylas (2021) wherein they call for more attention to the topic of death in teacher education programs in Cyprus. However, the work done in this article occurs outside the United States and is not specific to the loss of students and community members. While their article is

rooted in cultivating a deeper comfort and confidence in talking about death – the roots of their article are in a death education movement that is discussed in the first chapter. (This is a different set of literature that I do not wish to engage with because it does not address discriminatory and pejorative claims about Black American funeral traditions (Leviton, 1977).)

The curricular intervention offered is casework. This work involves a group reading a story or situation in schools, analyzing the situation through a particular ethical framework, and brainstorming real time responses as a path forward in addition to the deeper ethical issues and values the case conjures for its readers. Below, I talk more about the affordances of one popular approach to case work from the field of ethics and education and its ability to respond to those some of those expressed needs (Justice in Schools, n.d.; Levinson & Fay, 2016; 2019a).

The casework born out of the field of educational ethics asks actors to deeply consider the ethical implications of the decisions made in classrooms, school boards, and political offices. In this chapter, I suggest that by taking seriously the vulnerability of the subjects involved– we must, as Roberts suggests, “take embodiment in ethics seriously” and consequently take seriously embodiment as a dimension of *educational* ethics (Roberts, 2023, p. 5). This move would demand necessary additions to the current educational ethics protocol questions from Levinson, Fay and others . I include and provide the thinking behind those additions here in the second half of this chapter.

Readers might still wonder: What does this work look like? Sound like? How would we approach it with carefulness and intentionality?

Walking into a room of teachers and pre-service teachers doing this work, one might see the group read a case aloud, break into small groups to share thinking on a set of discussion questions, a sharing out of thinking, and even some roleplay to simulate the conversations and actions taken if one were a character in the case. Often, and in the approach suggested here, a facilitator would help the group debrief that roleplay and the rest of the discussion.

While I acknowledged earlier (and do throughout this chapter) the potential emotional risk of these conversations, I remain firm in that the potential risk outweighs the potential harm of never having them at all if teachers leave the conversations in class or department meetings feeling more prepared or, at the very least, more deeply informed about what their roles in school could entail.

Case-based work in Ethics & Education as an Avenue for Teachers to Think More about Death

I have found my Master's students most engaged when presented with and encouraged to think not just about cases in the classroom but asking them to stand and deliver their intervention, "next move," or "solution" to an audience of their peers. We take apart these situations first with the discussion questions that come from Levinson and Fay's work questions that are available in their casebooks an on their organization's website: *Justice in Schools* and are designed to analyze "*Normative Case Studies"* (Justice in Schools, n.d.). These case studies are used as pedagogical tools that contain "richly described, realistic accounts of complex ethical dilemmas that arise

within practice or policy contexts focused on a particular decision point in which the right course of action is unclear. They help diverse groups of people discuss challenging ethical questions in a nuanced and inclusive way" (Levinson & Fay, 2016, p.3). These cases are not born exclusively out of educational ethics work but a philosophy that is concerned with the social sciences or empirically engaged scholarship(Taylor, 2023).In a recent article that calls for the field of educational ethics to consider more seriously both the creation and use of these normative case studies, Taylor describes them as:

> a form of empirically engaged philosophy, in which case studies represent empirical phenomena in ways that highlight normative questions that emerge in those real-world contexts. Empirically engaged philosophy is a diverse area of inquiry that may involve, for example, applying philosophical concepts to analysis of what is at stake in empirical cases, examining the philosophical questions that emerge from empirical phenomena, and exploring philosophical questions through conducting new empirical research. (Taylor, 2023. p. 1)

The use of the cases that Taylor describes here draws on empirical cases because they potentially have application in those real-life situations from which the empirical details were pulled. The discussion questions in the protocol discussed here include a question on values as well as others that aim to bring out the philosophical and complex nature of the cases (Justice in Schools, n.d.).

Over the years of working with cases, I have experimented with colleagues to add "a second part" to the discussion questions wherein participants engage their assumptions about the world of the case so they might come to new solutions (Cirillo & Harouni, 2018). In working with pre-service teachers at both the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Harvard's Graduate School of Education, I found the need for a third or at least an extra dimension of the casework that accounts for this "theater style" experience wherein we connect students' experiences of their

emotions, their bodies, and their relation to one another to inform the solutions they come to in a case.

In chapter two, I discussed how the lock-down drill has become a phenomenon in itself, splitting from the event as merely preparatory and instead carrying its own impact and potential consequences for a community. It would be fitting to ask how we ensure that case work is not its own kind of "drill" experience. Might there be value in considering too how we might adapt lockdown drills to look less like they do currently and feel more like a case discussion? Casework, in the style that is recommended here, is necessarily and importantly distant from the real life of the classroom. While maintaining an urgency by asking for real steps forward and solutions, this case approach described does not involve live students, nor does it have to take place in the potential site of the crisis or tragedy.

Not including conversations and training at the pre-service level offers a disappointing alternative – one wherein teachers feel unprepared or blindsided by an element to of the profession they did not see or understand to be within the scope of their role or "part of their job." By providing teachers with the necessary support or even a "heads up" that thinking about death, supporting and talking about death, and understanding themselves and their students as necessarily vulnerable in schools, we stand to gain a workforce of teachers who have an expansive and deeper understanding of their work rather than those who push against conversations about death as not being a part of the role – or worse – teachers who ignore student deaths or deaths in the community entirely.

Understanding and Expanding the Teacher's Role & Acknowledging Its Limits

This all hints at the question that haunts most pre-service teacher education, what *is* the role of the teacher? "Is that *my* job?" is a refrain I have often hear from my students.

Teachers are, by no fault of their own, the first or early responders when students are processing issues of death and trauma in their communities or in their families. They should not by any means be the only responders. However, by nature of their position and time spent with students, they are often at the first site of news being broken or students actively processing and considering major life events that include death. Teachers are also put in a leadership position in case of an emergency lockdown. Students, rightly or wrongly, see them as holding responsibility for their safety in a situation. And teachers, rightly or wrongly, are made to feel often that their decisions in that hypothetical moment of crisis bear consequences on their and their students' lives. Again, certainly, teachers should not, as they sometimes do, hold the burden of this work alone. Counselors and social workers are far more equipped to process and take necessary measures to be sure students are feeling safe and secure as they grieve, confront fears of death, and are not alone in thinking deeply about their lives. But teachers are, by design of the school day, present at nearly all times.

Teachers are often the first adult a student sees in the morning. Students, particularly elementary school students who remain with their sole teacher for most of the day, spend enough waking hours with this adult to rival parents and care-takers. Using pre-service teacher training and in-service teacher support as a mechanism to help codify this dimension of teaching could help to

clarify a teacher's role and the place this work holds within that role. Teachers, by nature of their complex work demands are asked to play multiple roles simultaneously and often pre-service teacher support involves orienting and supporting students as they navigate the real competing demands of their job (Justice in Schools, n.d.).

Negotiating Competing Demands in Less-than-Ideal Circumstances

Imagine a middle school math teacher arrives and learns mid-week of a death in the community that rattles her students. However, this teacher is also acutely aware of state testing that will begin at the end of the week that has real consequences for her school's resources and her professional practice goals that determine her tenure status in the district. Should she and her grade-level colleagues scrap test prep plans? How much "business-as-usual" is important to maintaining a sense of normalcy for her students? What structures and supports outside the classroom beyond saying "counselors are available" are important to ask school leadership for to ensure both the emotional support and academic success of these students? Might they ask to post-pone the test?

We need not just consider hypothetical but consider the real competing demands. Thinking back to the stories shared specifically in chapter two. We saw how Darcie made real-time decisions about how to keep students safe and negotiate to share her authority with them during the "swatting" incident at their school. Or we might consider Leanne's reflections about how and when to talk about a student's death if that death posed a threat to the community – be it gang

violence or a suicide. Similarly, Josh struggled with whether to discuss a former student's suicide in his community due to the student's parents' religious requests.

I give these examples not to turn teacher education into a multivariable word problem but to illustrate that formulas and best practices are not the way forward. There is no one answer or singular piece of guidance that will help a new teacher navigate these competing demands and potential avenues for action. The thinking and navigation of these issues are necessarily context- and community-dependent. They are also dependent on the teachers themselves, their values, and their capacity for action.

There is something particularly difficult about the teacher's role in supporting their students and their colleagues and taking care of themselves in the face of a death or working alongside the ever-present and potential threat of death. So much of teaching is a helping profession – one that teachers cannot perform without taking proper care of themselves. Often, these demands of care for the teacher's self and her care for her students are put in tension with one another.

As stated in this chapter and in other places, this project seeks to contribute to the field of ethics and education, a field that, in many places, sees itself as advising and acknowledging the reality of making ethical decisions in unideal circumstances (Brighouse, 2015). Unideal circumstances are, unfortunately, the ongoing state of education. If circumstances were more ideal, teachers would not be living and working in necropolitical conditions and forced to have teaching born in such conditions wherein their own bodily autonomy and safety are often compromised.

Using Cases to Develop Principles & Experiment with Pedagogies

At a minimum, we might construct conversations, curriculum, and facilitation approaches that encourage pre-service and in-service teachers to uncover and develop the moral and ethical principles that drive their work and to experiment with new pedagogies and ways of being a teacher. Doing this work of elucidating and being clear about principles could, in turn, help teachers as they navigate decision-making in unideal circumstances. In their edited volume, *Principled Resistance*, Santoro and Cain make the case that teacher resistance or action is misinterpreted as "insubordination or recalcitrance" (Santoro & Cain, 2018, p. 1).

They position their volume in some ways as a defense of teacher resistance and a response to judgments of teachers who have acted or refused to participate in practice that would conflict with their personal values. "Principled resistance" by teachers is defined as a "necessary and ethical response to the mandates that conflict with their understandings about quality teaching and the role of education in a democracy" (Santoro & Cain, 2018, p. 1). Here, I suggest that we use casework as a space for teachers to not only practice habits of mind that help them navigate the continually less-than-ideal circumstances of schooling in the United States but also as a process to clarify the principles that drive their actions and their work. We might help teachers who know their own principles deeply but are also strong in their reflective habits of mind to adapt and negotiate the competing demands on their time.

Another way to understand the value of case-based work is how it acts as a site to solicit, experiment with, and analyze teachers' pedagogies. The previous chapters showcase two

different approaches to teaching born of *necropolitical* conditions and of the *Necrocene.* Those pedagogies, what I call *necro-pedagogy* in the second chapter and *memento-mori pedagogy* in the third chapter, could also be deepened and complicated by teachers' discussions during casework. By generating potential responses to a situation and reflecting and analyzing the values and principles behind those responses, teachers might collaborate on new and unforeseen dimensions of a pedagogy that responds to death not covered in this project.

Adapting Discussion Protocols & Including Attention to Embodiment

The case attached in the appendix outlines one scenario inspired by the participants' stories collected as part of this project and my own experience, most specifically the story and problem posed by Leanne in the second chapter: what happens when those with authority are limiting public mourning and grief?

In this case, a young man dies from gunfire on a basketball court after missing school on and off during his 10th-grade year. The student is rumored to have been affiliated with a gang. And because of that affiliation, the administration formally asks teachers to limit the discussion of his death. The case ends with a hypothetical "you" the "teacher" facing your homeroom wherein some may know the news of this student's death and others may not. The hypothetical you is also aware of a cousin of the student being in the class and limited time to address them before the bell rings. The case asks readers what they might actually do in this scenario, what they might literally say to students, and what next steps they might take.

These few sentences distill a complex scenario born out of my own experience and Leanne's as a kind of grief word problem. Even hypothetical characters deserve more complexity and nuance. So, at this point, I urge the reader to read the case before proceeding. The case itself is filled with more contextual elements to ground the reader in the specifics of the community but purposely without so many details that readers could still project themselves and their own experiences onto it. The case is written without a clear or immediate solution – with competing demands in less-than-ideal circumstances – much like those that teachers experience throughout the profession.

Below, I provide the "Parts" of the discussion and the thinking behind each question for facilitators. After reading the case aloud or independently, I generally break participants up to discuss each part in small groups and return in between to share out as a large group before moving onto the next section of questions. The questions begin with part I, which borrows from the popular normative case studies discussion protocol. Then, I detail the thinking and inclusion of a middle part, or *"an attention to embodiment,"* that is missing from normative case study discussions but potentially essential to considering a crisis response topic. Finally, I show a third part – attention to assumptions that I believe to be critical to any case discussion.

The following case is reprinted here in part and adapted for this project with permission from the CIRTL network. It is taken from a facilitation guide I wrote to normative case study discussions in the college classroom (Cirillo, 2022):

Part I:

(Adapted from Levinson & Fay, Justice in Schools Normative Case Study Discussion Protocol)

Question	*Thinking Behind the Question* & **Particulars to the Case Included Here**
1.What is the dilemma(s) the case presents?	*This question asks the group to grab hold of the variables and conditions that make the situation difficult to ensure group members are indeed speaking about the same problem. Without this, you may find group members speaking past one another. Multiple dilemmas might very well emerge from the discussion and the group may choose to approach one or multiple in the course of their work together.* **For this case in particular, group members might reckon with not only the dilemma of how to respond (what to say) in the first moments of homeroom but also how and if the days' lessons and activities should be adapted. Other dilemmas might include how to communicate with parents, families, and staff in light of the events.**
2.Who are the stakeholders? ***ADDITION:*** **What is your role, and how are you understanding your role in the dilemma?**	*This question asks who might be impacted by the issues in the case and help reveal others actors who could help with the dilemma presented. This essential step deepens the world of the case for the group and may prove to help with creative solutions later in the discussion. While it is easy to list the characters mentioned in the case, it is much more difficult to extrapolate further. For example, considering the community members and students outside the immediate school context or unmentioned peers might expand the network available to take action in a difficult situation and cultivate a deeper understanding of potential impact.* **The additions of "role" of the reader is an essential addition born out of the conversations I had for this project and my ongoing work with pre-service teachers who often experience role confusion. Specifically, I thought about Darcie's experience and reckoning with the limits and bounds of her job during the swatting incident or Nat's relationship to responsibility at their school as stories that revealed the importance of role and reflection in a crisis.**
3. What values are at stake?	*This question may prove tricky for some. The role of this question might be to reveal the reasons why the case is important to the group and its members. Groups might go deeper into what the values named mean and why they matter. For example, one group member might feel that "fairness" is an important value at play while another might feel "inclusivity" is operative. While there are always multiple values at stake, group members might find discussions about values and their relationship to one another fruitful for their community and future work together.* **This is an essential question for developing and working to understand the values and principles important to teachers. It is also essential to understanding the pedagogies at work in a community in the face of potential death – whether they be *necro-pedagogies* born of *necro-politics* or what *memento-mori pedagogy* born of the *Necrocene* – or something else entirely.**
4. What might be the best course of action for actors involved?	*Depending on the length of discussion of the previous questions, this question could get short-changed for time. When facilitating the discussion, the facilitator may need to take on the role of demanding a decision and immediate action steps from the group that might now be less ready to commit to a decision. A facilitator may keep a firm time limit and ask small groups or group members for their*

What are other steps for both the immediate future and beyond?	*decision. However, you choose to do this, coming to some sort of immediate decision is essential. Acting out that decision is essential part of the embodied approach to case work discussion described here.* **Sharing the responses to this question In the case included for this project, this would entail participants in a case discussion to come to the front of the room and perform their potential**

Typically, after discussing these questions in small groups, I ask my students to return to the large group to share out highlights and tensions from their discussion and move us to the concrete steps they would take in question 4. After building trust and community with a group over time in the semester, I ask students to volunteer to "act" out the final question. The students then take turns acting out potential actions and reactions to the choice point offered at the end of the case. This acting brings me to the addition in the next section – essential to understanding and working with cases that involve crisis or, specifically – death.

The Case for Including Embodiment and Vulnerability

Before coming to assumptions and expanding our understanding of what is available in the world of the case to find new solutions (the final section of questions), I have found it important to attend to the body of the actors. I ask specifically how they feel when delivering a solution or attempting to de-escalate a parent or providing comforting words.

Sometimes, a more general question is appropriate to offer after an actor: *where are you right now?*[22] As in, can you orient us to what you're thinking and feeling in this moment? Sometimes,

[22] I borrow this question from Houman Harouni, with whom I have been grateful to collaborate and learn over many years.

I ask this second question directly; other times, it is unnecessary, and students speak freely and quickly to provide insight. *"I felt nervous, my heart is pounding*, *I felt shaky."* It is important to ask questions of all actors, ones playing students or audience members as well – how did it feel when _____ said _____ to you? Sometimes, we find it important to trade places, sit, stand, and change physical stance and proximity because in a classroom setting the body is as present as the words.

As stated earlier, while it is important for students to try acting themselves, it is just as important for them to bear witness as others do it. How did that make you feel watching so-and so- say/do x? What and how can we understand the values and feelings being enacted in this moment?

In moving toward or rather bringing in a focus on "embodiment" in ethical thinking, we join various traditions that consider the body or the very fact of having a body an important part of ethical thinking that can be absented by moral and political scientists. In a more recent article, *Taking Embodiment Seriously* (2023), Roberts tells us that Rawls is often a target of this critique, and it should be noted that, indeed, Rawls is a large influence on many of the philosophers of education who have cultivated the field of Ethics and Education.

Others in the intersection of the field of philosophy and education and teacher education do comment and interpolate meaning with interruption in simulated and real teaching experiences to reveal important reflection points and have underscored the role of reflection and pausing in practice to consider, sometimes theatrically, how and what is happening for a pre-service or in-service teacher (Furman & Larsen, 2019; Kavanagh et al., 2022; Schön, 1983). An attention to

embodiment and vulnerability might deepen and speak in concert with the intense and public moments of learning that some of their approaches call for (Furman & Larsen, 2019).

Fineman, whom Roberts draws from, brings forward an understanding of vulnerability that comes from embodiment:

> Vulnerability initially should be understood as arising from our embodiment, which carries with it the ever-present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune from mildly adverse to catastrophically devastating events, whether accidental, intentional, or otherwise. Individuals can attempt to lessen the risk or mitigate the impact of such events, but they cannot eliminate their possibility. Understanding vulnerability begins with the realization that many such events are ultimately beyond human control. (Fineman, 2008, p. 9)

Bringing forward the concepts of vulnerability as a path to understanding the importance of embodiment here is not to over-emphasize the frailty of teachers or students specifically. The aim of this discourse is not to pity or create an abject lower class of population in need of voracious protection. Such rhetoric can be found in the mounting arguments about arming teachers in schools – a physical defensive solution that some might come to with a different understanding of vulnerability. Butler's own work on grievability, instrumental in describing and codifying teachers' experiences in chapter two, stems from an understanding of the vulnerability of life – all life (Butler, 2004; 2010; 2018). But like many of Butler's ideas – this, too, has been taken out of context. In 2020, Butler published *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethical-Political Bind*, and Verso, the publisher, excerpted the introduction on their site in which Butler restates their thesis on vulnerability to not be about specific "vulnerable populations" or for vulnerability to become a category that one can mobilize to describe populations that one must take defensive and even potentially violent postures to "protect" (Butler, 2020). Instead, Butler reasserts that vulnerability, as constructed in their writing, is a shared condition by all life living inter-

dependently in order to have their basic and bodily needs met. This vulnerability is rooted, ultimately, in the physical and fleeting frail nature of our bodies. This affective experience then becomes essential to how we understand our ethical actions in moments of crisis. Below are the discussion questions that reflect this thinking.

Part 2 Embodiment Questions

Facilitator Note: *You might just begin by asking, "What's coming up for you right now, or how did that feel? Walk us through it" at the moment just after "acting" out a potential response.*

Question	***Thinking***
1. **(For the actors) How did you feel when you performed your response? What were you aware of physically in your own body? Emotionally? What questions or new ideas came up for you in that moment?**	*After acting, praise and appreciation should be given to the actor who took the risk in front of colleagues and peers to try a potential solution.* *Sometimes a lot of emotions come up for the actors and it can be hard to check in with themselves after being in front of the room. The questions on the left and above are suggestions. Actors might offer freely their own reflection on how they felt in the moment, but also might need some coaching and prompting. You might ask them about what they noticed about how they felt, heart rate, gaze, body language. You as the facilitator might offer some noticing's as a way to give data to help an actor reflect initially. Example: " I noticed how you stepped forward or clasped your hands- do you remember what you were thinking in that moment? What were you hoping to convey?" (You might even ask them – much like a theater teacher to do the same action again without words.)*
2. **(For the Audience/Students) How did it feel when ____ said/did _____? What were you aware of physically in your own body? Emotionally? What questions or**	*This is essential for the actors and all watching to understand if their was alignment in the impact of a potential action on the part of the central actor. Sometimes the person "playing" teacher may think they're leading with empathy – but their audience is not feeling that.*

new ideas came up for you in that moment?	*It should also be noted that audience or faux students can also be well-springs of information when it comes to coming with new ideas or "trying it again." Often participants who were not the central actors will then raise hands to try it the same action or a new one differently after initial attempts were made. These second attempts after these reflections are often incredibly generative and experimental.*

3. (For all) How might our felt experience during this interaction inform our future actions?	*Understanding and working with the possibilities for actions collectively is an essential part of this case discussion. This reflection section gives rise to the potential pedagogies and hopes for the future actions they will take. A part of this work is necessarily in its hypothetical nature- constructing a kind of fantasy of the teacher a participant hopes to be or believes they **should** be in response to an ethical dilemma. These fantasies – be they far from reality of a teachers' practice or not - are far from useless. Instead, as indicated earlier, they act as a specific site in which the teacher can work to self-define and cultivate the kind of teacher she wishes to be – closing even a small gap between the fantasy and reality of that image in the future.*

I think it is important to note here that not every group will be comfortable "acting" out their potential responses or words in front of the class.

When discussing this case with two classes of pre-service teachers this year, they struggled with how to respond and face students after this hypothetical tragedy. Having practiced cases with angry parents, difficult administrators, and student disruption, this case and its tenor stood apart. Reflecting on the difference, I watched as my students struggled to bring forward concrete words or phrases that they would use in front of a room of students.

One group, despite being incredibly comfortable with the embodied process described here and accustomed to acting and speaking about their feelings readily, could not bring themselves to act out their words. They discussed some sensible class formats, wherein students could have the option to check in with the teacher privately, journal, and distract themselves with business as usual. One pre-service teacher challenged the world of the case by asking if they could call the principal and ask for an extended homeroom for advisor time with the deceased student's homeroom. But they could not bring themselves to try to say the words in front of a hypothetical class.

One student bravely attempted to address the class, but it felt as if the words fell apart in his mouth as he spoke them. The room felt expectant and ultimately critical of what could possibly be said in the face of such tragedy with the knowledge that something, if this were to occur as the case provided, would need to be said. For class that day, we had read Elizabeth Dutro's (2013) *Towards a Pedagogy of the Incomprehensible: Trauma and the Imperative of Critical Witness in Literacy Classrooms,* wherein she describes spending time in an elementary classroom as the teacher working to provide language and support for the tragic and traumatic moments, collaborating through writing to support young students to develop the language to describe the incomprehensible moments of difficulty in their lives. Words fall short in the face of the things we can barely comprehend. Or rather – without language for these difficult moments – we cannot begin to comprehend them at all.

These questions that attended to embodiment seemed to save us from our verbal selves. When I asked students how they felt in their bodies hearing their classmate's words or how the actor

himself felt saying them, we could begin to have a conversation again. We identified the importance of making a group feel safe and supported in a way that gave students agency and finding ways to let students feel seen.

In closing and reflecting on the experience, one student recalled that maybe she did not feel prepared with the magic words of what to say, but she had a better sense of how to *be* in these moments of tragedy.

Part II: <u>Reflection Questions:</u>

Necessarily, it is important to provide students with a way to make meaning from these difficult moments. As we saw in the previous chapter, experiences with and awareness of death can, at times, have transferable and powerful impacts on daily pedagogical approaches – not just crisis moments. A lot comes up in even these hypothetical moments. As discussed previously, these case studies can provide important moments wherein teacher candidates and in-service teachers collectively reflect on the pedagogies born of these experiences. I would call these death-informed or *Memento-Mori* pedagogies*,* even if the death is hypothetical.

Facilitator Note: *I suggest giving students a few silent minutes of journal time with these questions before asking them to share out.*

Question	*Thinking*
1. **Reflecting on this experience and discussion of this case – what are some approaches you might bring to your teaching generally on all days, not just those with crises? What principles or values might you strive for in your pedagogy?**	*This moment is the moment wherein participants can collectively codify and reflect on pedagogies in the face of death or difficult experiences in teaching. Just as the chapter before this one showed the various approaches to pedagogies born of difficult knowledge, this moment could be one in which teachers build and reflect on their values collectively and pro-actively.*
2. **How might this experience inform your understanding of what it means to be a teacher?**	*Giving participants time to reflect and integrate what the difficult knowledge means for their understanding of their profession and their work collectively can be powerful.* *Without this moment of reflection and collective witness of this reflection, we risk a slipping into a disavowal of difficult truths about what it means to be a teacher.*

The responses to the reflection questions from my fieldwork class could have easily fit into the participants' interviews. They seemed to be clearly their own forms of *Memento-Mori* Pedagogy. After discussing the case, the takeaways for their teaching practice – not only on days of crisis – were to center their students and who they were both outside and inside the school and to create a trusting community wherein students could ask their teacher and each other what they needed from one another. Other reflections revealed a real reckoning with the role of being an adult and the immense responsibility of creating a stable and safe environment – all days of the school year.

Conclusion:

Preparing & Supporting Teachers for the World as Is – Not as We Wish It Were

These curricular interventions, wherein pre-service teachers or in-service teachers discuss a hypothetical death, can have the potential to feel emotionally exhausting and even be a frightening experience for the young people who have just committed to joining this profession.

Not every pre-service teacher who comes to a licensure program is in their early 20s, but many are. Often, these young folks are just out of college or changing careers from something that was not child-facing. Some will be getting their first post-college job after completing this program.

Reckoning with the responsibility of other people's children can be a sobering and terrifying charge for these young people. That reckoning happens often all year in a teacher education program. But reckoning with that responsibility in a landscape that does not value emotional support systems and deems certain lives "un-grievable" and unvalued is even more terrifying and sometimes happens after graduation. The heaviness of the conversations in these case discussions cannot be overstated.

Critics of this approach could argue that it cultivates another traumatic simulation experience, similar to a lockdown drill. I, myself, have worried about this. But on reflection, there are several differences – the first being that this case discussion, when in teacher education programs, often can happen away from school sites and on a university campus. This provides a physical separation that can help to hold a different stance – a reflective and critical one that pre-service

teachers are often asked to hold on university campuses. Second, it does not rely on student presence to make the experience possible. No actual K-12 students were required to be present or a part of this discussion. If anything, this discussion and its attention to the details and work of teaching is intentionally teacher-focused.

Why not prepare teachers for what continues to be the realities of the work? Teacher education, like so many other places of learning, can feel paralyzed by the question – do we educate for the profession as we think it should be, or that we hope it might be? Or do we educate for the realities of the job as it is? How do we honestly and openly prepare teachers for the often inhospitable and exhausting conditions of work?

When faced with issues like teacher retention and teacher shortages, it can be tempting to avoid difficulties like death in education or showing new teachers a world inhospitable to their students and their work. As teacher educators, leaders, and supporters of teaching, incorporating these difficult topics could be an essential step in responding to these issues. Rather than participating in a fantasy of what the world or work of teaching should be, we might instead cultivate spaces and provide opportunities for teachers to reckon, incorporate, and make meaning out of the teaching that happens in relationship to something as difficult as death. The stories collected in this project and the pedagogies codified show how classroom teachers understand the difficult necessities of the profession as well as its creative possibilities in the face of death – gathered from real teachers. We might trust that pre-service teachers could come to similar intentional, careful, and reparative approaches to education and, in time, likely come to new, unforeseen, and otherwise ways of teaching and learning in the face and in relation to death.

Afterword:
Re-fashioning the Owl:
Reflections on Relationship to Symbols in Death and Education

Only in silence the word,
Only in dark the light,
Only in dying life:
Bright the hawk's flight
On the empty sky.

Ursula Le Guinn, *The Wizard of Earth Sea*

For half of this year, I let two little stone owls watch me sleep.

This was difficult for me.

I don't dislike birds. My family has an affinity for chickens. Roosters can be mean, but their feathers are soft. I know because they have trusted me enough to pet them. But owls, like hawks, and other birds of prey are dangerous. They eat small prey that hardly seems small – even small dogs. They do not seem to belong to a flock. They do not seem to have to follow the other bird rules.

I am spooked by owls. Their hooting ubiquitous when night falls in a movie. My father used fake great horned owls in our yard in lieu of scarecrows growing up. Yellow eyes glowing. Plastic body at attention. Squirrels and other tomato thieves beware.

Many cultures share this association (Fernandes, 2022). I have read that some people of the Ho-chunk Nation, formerly of the Winnebago tribe, whose ancestral and sacred lands on which the University of Wisconsin-Madison perches, hold owls in similar regard (Hele, 2012). Children

were told owls were watchers (Hele, 2012, p. 241). Owls, particularly owls seen during the day, are representative of death (Hele, 2012, p. 241). An omen.

In a television series that chronicles the misadventures of Muscogee Youth in Oklahoma, *Reservation Dogs*, several episodes blur out the eyes of plastic owls on a character's porch, protecting the second-hand viewer from their gaze, as if the eyes of the owl were a kind of indecency necessary to pixilate for one's protection. The move feels both comical for the knowers of the joke and deadly serious about being considerate of viewers.[23]

I had not intended to find the two stone owls. Wandering home through the streets behind Harvard Square – I spied a sign for an estate sale. Just a few streets back from Mt. Auburn Street. More than the sale, I wanted to go into one of these houses that existed at least a century before my own family came to this country. Okay, that sounds awfully grand. What I wanted to do was snoop.

Snoop, I did. Through a winding staircase and an old kitchen. Up servants' stairs and down to a basement with a place still reserved for a hearth. Wallpaper everywhere. I ignored the doilies and walked past the sparse furniture left far out of my price range. I got the creeps in an upstairs linen closet and decided to make my way back to the ground floor. Glassware picked over. So were the books. Except for two bookends. Two little owls, perched on little stone books. Yellow eyes. $20.

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[23] In an article recounting a panel in which Sterlin Harjo, the show's central writer and showrunners, said this about that scene with a laugh: *"In the case of the owl, for a lot of Native people, it can mean a bad omen, or death, a messenger of death," he explained. "So, out of respect for that, we blurred the eyes because we didn't want to have Native people seeing an owl every time they turned on the show"* (Ayala, 2022).

I bought them. Not for me. But for a friend, HJ, whose family is dear to me and who I know prizes owls. They adorn his walls. They hold a special place in their family's mythology as reminders of the adorable book, *Owl Babies,* in which three fluffy little owls wait anxiously for a mother owl to return (Will she? Reader, she does!).

I didn't remember when this friend's birthday was, but I'd tuck them away for when the time was right. The time was February, I later learned. HJ, would be over for dinner or glasses of wine far many more times before February. Where would they go in the apartment until then? With little storage or private space in my open-concept living room, the only safe place was the bedroom. It didn't feel right to stick them in the closet where they could get knocked or broken. But any other place they would be in my sightline. I took this problem comically seriously.

Here I was, writing about death and calling for a closer relationship with it, and I couldn't meet their gaze.

Relationship to Objects

How we come to hold the memories, experiences, and yes, sometimes – even literal objects – creates a nest of meanings within us.

This project has, at its core, rested on the idea that meaning is made between two points – between knower and object – between thinker and thing. Sometimes these objects have indeed been physical objects, such in the case of Molly and the "boot" from chapter two and Mark and a locked door. Or Reese and the photograph on her desk. Other times, these objects were

metaphoric – a memory, a story that the thinker developed and redeveloped a kind of relationship to.

My hope is that in reading chapters two and three, readers can hold the multiplicity of meanings, relationships, and worlds born out of a proximity to death in education. Teachers face a real darkness in the field in both the literal physical conditions of teaching and the immense emotional work that comes from working in a complex system hoping to aid and support young people in a necropolitical world. As I bring this project to a close, young people are showing their awareness and sensitivity to televised and social media-captured mass death events in the Middle East with protests. In these moments, death-informed pedagogy seems undoubtedly present. Many young people in the U.S., particularly college students, are experiencing a painful awareness of watching a population, in this case, Palestinians, marked for death repeatedly and reckoning with their own country's involvement in those necropolitical conditions. Rather than reproaching, arresting, and suspending the students for violation of campus policies, educators and administrators might see this genuinely as an incredibly complicated but also real and live pedagogical opportunity for themselves and the college students that is collectively informed by death.

There is also, in thinking about teaching in the *Necrocene*, possibilities for teaching and meaning making not yet known to us. My hope is that the work presented here might illuminate a path forward for playful work with symbols and relationships to those symbols.

This is not a benign toothless hopefulness but a graciousness to see the worlds in which some teachers have found themselves teaching in and find ways to think deeper and more critically

about what happens internally for them. The work of teaching remains difficult, interdependent, and communal. Like all forms of physical assembly, it is necessarily vulnerable in its call for embodiment.

In chapter four, I focused on those who work with normative case studies and teacher educators who work with new teachers. I hope that we will continue to reckon with the physical and the felt as deep dimensions and possibilities for our work supporting the journeys of new teachers and teachers who have been in the profession for many years.

A Call for More Research on Death, Teachers' Stories, and Difficult Knowledge Interview Approaches

This project is very much an initial attempt at constellating stories from teachers on this topic. The hope is that with some publication, other researchers might be moved to continue to bring personal testaments from teachers that showcase their inner thoughts, reflections on their lives, and ways of knowing as central pieces of understanding the landscape of education.

Because of the exhausting demands on their time and the psychic horror that results in beholding some of the most disturbing dimensions of teaching, teachers are not always able to negotiate or renegotiate the meanings of the symbols and containers of difficult knowledge. Teacher educators, researchers, school leadership, and those teachers who are up for the task need to continue to develop intentional and careful approaches to this work that still center teachers' insights and thinking. This work is: working with these symbols at their full depth and darkness – in which shadows make it possible to see the light around them – could bring deeper attention to the thinking that happens for teachers when they hold and integrate difficult knowledge.

Teachers are, yes, arms and arbiters of the state, but they are also poised to think deeply and critically about their work as they are the ones steeped most deeply within it. When researchers and writers are not spending a day at the school, and policymakers are not on a day trip – it is the teacher who remains.

Though one of the potential strengths of this project might be seen to be the rich and long interviews of each teacher allowed by the small sample size, the clearest limitation of this project remains its size and, therefore, its narrow representation of identities and cultures in the teachers themselves. A much larger study that focuses less on descriptions and teachers' thinking may capture the landscape of necropolitical teaching conditions with more specificity over much distance and more diversity.

An even larger study might compare the stories of retired teachers and those just joining the profession to think deeply and discover where in the constellation of what it means to be a teacher has shifted and what has remained.

Considering an extreme case like Molly's teaching conditions during the pandemic, we might look to those larger surveys on the physical conditions other teachers faced during the pandemic and other moments of crisis to see just how prevalent these are. A large survey-style study could provide pathways not just for policymakers but also for union leaders to use data for the basis of interventions and workplace demands.

I have also wondered, what other methodologies might birth more complex and varied stories?

Thinking more deeply about the interview and research methodologies we construct to capture and make use of the difficult knowledge that teachers witness, hold, or disavow could also be the future of more work on death. We might need more creative, emotive, and affective methodologies – such as associative drawings, doodling, picture association, or even dream journaling to capture the full spectrum and ephemeral parts of a teacher's inner world. In future iterations of this work or other projects on teachers' inner worlds, I hope to experiment with such methods.

Returning to the Owl & Bringing Death Close

During what felt like the longest months of the pandemic, my partner, J, tracked a family of baby great-horned owls in Vilas Park in Madison. Tracked, perhaps, evokes too much adventure. Most days, he walked daily through the park, listening, waiting, and watching. I joined often. Every interaction with a passing birder in the neighborhood stood as a vignette of precious social interaction in a time when we had almost none in person except with one another.

Sometimes, the owls proved difficult to find. But the crows did not like them and, as a result, squawked when the owls were near, providing a good tip-off to their location in the tall trees.

Unlike other birds, the owls stuck around in the cold, dark, midwestern winter. And on a Christmas night walk, away from our families, we saw the mother and two former owlets take flight. She flew from house to house. Swooping. They followed. We also followed. Unspoken between us, we wondered where she might land. Whose house would she visit to bear her omen?

From telephone poll to apartment roofs, we followed her out of the park and across a few blocks. Until she seemed to pause. She stopped atop a house near the burial mound park in the neighborhood. The house belonged to an older woman with two elderly shih-tzus, whom I looked forward to seeing out for (short) walks.

We stood. We watched. They watched us.
Was it her time, J wondered aloud to me. Were these three here for the woman and her little dogs too?

A hard pit in my chest formed, and I found myself terrified, saddened, heart sinking. The presence of death in 2020 felt almost predictable - a constant event.

I think now how, at that moment, the symbol of the owl had overtaken my consciousness. Any complex relationality gone. The owl had collapsed into death. There was no owl. There was barely an "I." Only death. And death loomed.

And then the door of the house opened. The woman's daughter in town – came out to see what arose such a clatter. Three owls on the roof? A bit of Christmas magic?

Maybe the owls were arriving on the eve of a death. Maybe not. Maybe they were not just omen bearers but fluffy escorts or perhaps dark reminders. Companions of the night. Maybe in their

meaning-lade darkness, they brought a bit of levity, strangeness, and unexpectedness with their visit, much like death itself. Maybe they held something we could not.

I spent time with the little stone owls this year. But I was grateful to give them to its intended owner when the time came. They had not lost their spooky association. But I had brought the little death bringers under my roof into my room. They reminded me often that I could hold death close and feel how my world shifted under their weight and around them. And they would be an excellent birthday gift.

A call to carry and work closely in relationship with death might feel like an impossible task as we emerge from the pandemic. But rather than conjure death again alone, we might look to those whose work must hold its presence in community.

If we continue to study how some teachers, in their work, their thinking, and their teaching, hold an instantiation of a relationship to death, we might learn more about the meaning-making that happens between ourselves, objects literal, and metaphorical, when knowledge becomes too difficult to hold.

Working intimately with the constant specter of death - bearing the full difficulty of it - allows us possibilities not seen otherwise. By working with death and not against, a school might transform from a transitionary holding place from which one must escape to a place where the work is "sacred." We might bring death close, not to rob it of its teeth or claws, but to capture and work within and along its darkness, so we might see more clearly that which is light.

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APPENDIX ITEM 1: Call for Interviews

Call for Interviews

CALL FOR INTERVIEWEES:
For a book long project on Teachers' and their thoughts about Death

- ***Are you presently teaching in a K-12 Classroom or have recently left teaching?***

- ***Are you willing to talk about how and when you think about death in your role as a teacher and if or how it impacts your teaching?***

In an ongoing pandemic, near constant reports of school-shootings, and other ongoing violence, teachers are often faced with the realities of death in their lives and their students' lives. Too often this is captured as merely "stress" or burnout." This project hopes to uncover some of the nuances of teachers' inner worlds.

Lend your voice, stories, and thinking about this topic by participating in a 60-90-minute interview via zoom, phone, or in person.

Visit LINK to sign up and learn more.

Semi-Structured Interview Opening and Question Bank

APPENDIX ITEM 2: Semi-Structured Interview Question Bank

Hi, thanks so much for agreeing to share your thoughts and your stories with me today. This is part of a larger project on teachers' relationships to death and how it impacts their teaching, their relationships, and their pedagogies.

The interview is semi-structured and will cover four areas:

1. **your curriculum,**
2. **objects or physical parts of your classroom,**
3. **relationships with students and colleagues,**
4. **and your own feelings about death and its relationship to teaching,**

But feel free to share whatever comes up for you. You are welcome to share general stories or anecdotes that you associate with or feel are relevant to any and all of the questions.

I understand this can be not easy to talk about for some folks or even triggering. If there's a moment in the interview we need to pause or take a break, please let me know. The interview is set for 60-90 minutes. I'll stop us at 60 minutes and check in. But if you'd like to follow up or add to anything you've said, we can do a 30-minute follow-up session.

If talking about specific colleagues or students, I ask that you use a different name or a term that identifies the person based on their relationship to you (e.g. colleague, student, school administrator, friend, etc.) But I will do my best to take any specific identifying information out of the transcript if you forget. Again, I'm really grateful for your willingness to share your thinking.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Intro:

Tell me about yourself, what, and where you teach.
How long have you been teaching?
Could you tell me a little bit about what drew you to be a part of this project?
Do you think about death, dead, or mortality often while teaching or in relation to teaching?
When do you think about it? How and when does it enter your awareness? Where/when does it live?

(in pilots, there's a lot that comes up with this question- so I anticipate many follow-ups here from spontaneous anecdotes that often hit some of the following categories, but I intend to move through the categories as needed to give the interviews some structure and support.)

1. ***Curriculum/Classroom***

How does death come up in your classroom teaching? (Tell me more about that)
How often or how do you work with the dead or death in your classroom and curriculum?

What is this like (just words on a page/pictures in a book/text or something else?)
What is student awareness like of death/the dead in the curriculum?
(if it comes up) *Do you treat dead historical figures or dead authors differently than live ones? Do your students (treat them differently)?*

2. ***Objects/Locales***

Do particular objects or parts of your classroom or school bring death into your awareness? (Tell me about that/those)
Any images or artifacts that hold this meaning for you?
Are there particular locations in the school or the school community that you regularly see on your commute or in your life that have death entering your awareness?

3. ***Students/Colleagues***

Does/How does death come up in your classroom with your students?
When or how has death or the dead become a part of the conversations with students, community members, and colleagues?
When and how were the moments expressed?
When, if ever, are you reminded or made aware of death while teaching?
When does death enter your awareness while teaching?
Can you tell me about those experiences? How have they impacted how you think about what it means to teach/be a teacher?
Are there conversations about death or dying you've had with a student that has stuck with you- could you tell me about that?
Are there personal moments from your life that have impacted how you think about death and teaching?

4. ***Their Own Feelings***

What is your own understanding of your relationship to death and your dead?
How do you think about death? What comes up for you when I ask that?
Do you <u>feel</u> like inherited cultural understandings of death and the dead impact how you think about teaching?
Are you afraid of death?
Stories or moments when/where this is expressed?

PANDEMIC (if it comes up):
(If focused on the pandemic)
Did you think about death in relationship to teaching before the pandemic? If so, when.
How has this _____ shaped your relationship to teaching and your pedagogy or philosophy of teaching?
Has it/how has it impacted your relationships with students, colleagues, and the community?
Did your view of what teaching is change as a result of the pandemic etc.?

SCHOOL SHOOTINGS (if it comes up):

How does a report or reporting on school shootings impact how you think about death and teaching?
Do they? If so, how, change your relationship to being a teacher?
How do these reminders or reports change your understanding of what it means to teach?
How do the training/ or the ways death or potential for death is talked about in relation to these trainings impact your view of teaching?
Was this a part of your training in learning to be a teacher?
Has your view of teaching shifted as a result of these tragedies? If so, how?
How do they impact your relationship to your teaching and what it means to be a teacher?

LOOPING BACK to Objects, Moments, and Anecdotes (anything from above)
How do they impact your relationship to your teaching and understanding of what it means to be a teacher?

Being sure to close/loop with the following:
Does your relationship with death impact what it means to be a teacher, and if so how?
Did anyone in your teacher training, graduate school, or prep programs cover this topic?
What do you wish someone told your or prepped you with in regard to death and being a teacher?
How might a teacher prep program or teacher educators do better in helping teachers prepare for the relationship to death in their profession?

APPENDIX ITEM 3: CASE & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

You are a 3rd year teacher at a small high school in a smaller city 40 minutes north of Boston. Last year, you taught 9th grade English, and this year10th grade looping with many of your students. The school uses a cohort model for core classes. As a result, you have strong relationships with at least a quarter of most of your classes.

Most families are working class or working poor, many of whom have just recently come to the country and are getting on their feet navigating the systems here. The majority of the community is Latinx, with some Black American families and newcomers from other countries who have come to live with family. The schools often act as a point of contact for connecting them with housing support, job opportunities, and other assistance programs in the community.

Staff turnover is high in some positions, such as counselors, social workers, and math teachers. The school of about 700 students has one social worker who acts as both a social worker and a counselor after one retired last year and was never replaced. The admin are relatively new in their positions but have taught in the community for at least a decade.

Opportunities to make money above minimum wage around the city have been scant. The city itself is small, and while it neighbors a larger city, public transit in and of the city is limited and slow. This made it difficult for young people without cars to chase opportunities outside the city. Because of the lack of financial opportunities for young people and other factors, organized crime and "gang" activity have been high in recent years. Veteran teachers explained the risk as a serious risk for many students, particularly boys who had older cousins or brothers already involved.

Nevertheless, the community is tight-knit. Students have known each other for a long time, and cousins and neighbors fill your classes. Many students attended middle school together and knew each other's families well. Most students walk to school together and home, stopping in town for Dunkin Donuts after school. Parents prefer students to walk together or not at all. Some of your female students report running home if an older sibling or could not meet them after staying for later extracurricular activities because their parents had cautioned them heavily against walking alone at night.

The year has been a jovial one for the most part – your students have fun and trust you as their teacher. Some days can be rowdy but they generally know what to expect from your routines and rituals that are consistent. Students begin each day with a writing check-in – answering open or funny questions for the first 5 minutes of class and sharing for the next 5 minutes. They transition to the mini-lesson or reading for the day- often a short story or chapter with some writing component. You end class with shout-outs as often as you can. Shouting out students who work hard and letting students shout out each other for work in class or reaching important goals outside class.

Art is a big part of your literacy classroom and many students love to draw. Earlier this year, students worked on a map of their city after studying the map that Odysseus followed on his journey and the obstacles he encountered in The Odyssey – adding their own symbolic obstacles drawn on a big mural on one side of the room. They spent the previous month constructing multi-media campaigns for causes in the city they cared about, constructing arguments in writing and design to convince local leaders to act on causes students care about – such as more green space, more streetlights, and zoning for more food carts near the high school (a favorite during lunch).

You teach an advisory period to your homeroom class every other day – the school alternates between A days and B days, with A days having extra time for advisory in the mornings. Your homeroom consists of 10th graders, many of whom you had in your homeroom as 9th graders, a nice consistency that the school looked to build when possible. Sometimes, you set goals in advisory around school and career. Other times, it's more personal, with students reflecting on the non-academic parts of themselves they are proud of and celebrating those too. Research shown at PD described the importance of students feeling like they can be their whole selves at school – such as being a good brother, helping their grandparents, volunteering more at Church, etc.)

About halfway through the year, one student, Jeffrey, a lanky boy with short hair and a big laugh, stopped coming to school. His attendance was sporadic in 9th grade and then even worse now in 10th. His grades were poor. Having to repeat most of his credits this year, he lost access to electives. He barely passed into 10th grade English, but it was the only subject he was close to passing – so you and the other teachers reasoned it would help keep him engaged with his peer group if he could stay with them for at least one period.

Jeffrey had a love/hate relationship with the security guard, Daniella, a tough and loving older woman who had just recently become a grandma to an alum of the school and was an aunt to a few juniors and seniors. Jeffrey would wander the halls more than many, and Daniella would cajole him back into classrooms in English and Spanish, threatening to tell his aunt, whom she knew from church.

In class, Jeffrey would crack jokes and put down a few lines of classwork, but he wouldn't do much. Other kids would laugh at his jokes, but not pay him much mind. Mom was always apologetic when you called but said she couldn't ever get him to do well in school. You had heard in other classes that he sometimes heckled the male teachers and did even less work. Jeffrey seemed less negative in your class. As a member of your advisory group this year and last, you knew him well. He would often be a bit moody after you called his mom, but he'd rebound and work a little harder for a day or two for you than he did previously. In 9th grade, Jeffrey would sometimes come in during lunch and make up a few pieces of work, often trying to impress some girl that he was "taking school serious." You'd bring out the missing journal prompts and praise him for his commitment. He hadn't done that once while in 10th grade.

When he stopped coming to school this year, you called home and left voicemails talking aloud to him in Spanish and English so his mom could understand, too. Cynthia, the social worker, did a home visit, and Jeffrey's mom explained that Jeffrey was out with his cousins doing business.

She tried to get him to stop to go back to school, but he wouldn't stop. Kids in school tell you that Jeffrey is in _____ [prominent gang] now. [24]You can't tell if it's just talk. Or if it's real. Some students clarify and say, "he's just selling." You're not sure what to believe. Kids stop coming to school for so many reasons and kids love to gossip. But you know it's not impossible. Raul, a quiet, sweet, and straight A student, is a cousin of Jeffrey's in your same homeroom. He tells you he hasn't seen Jeffrey at church or his aunt's in ages.

One evening in early March on an unseasonably warm day, you get a bunch of texts on your phone from some girls you coached in Volleyball last year. Jeffrey's dead, they tell you. Shot on the basketball courts. You're unsure if it's a rumor, so you check Twitter and text a few colleagues, who also begin texting you. Unfortunately, they seem to be hearing the same thing, and police reports confirm a shooting in a park near the school wherein two deaths have been reported. Police and the city are asking people to stay off the streets, as often happens when there are deaths or gunfire reported.

You arrive at school the next day to find many of your colleagues looking like you do– unrested and exhausted from not sleeping after hearing the news.

Some students are sharing details in whispers, and three run up to you as soon as you enter the building, waiting outside with their breakfasts to ask you if you heard what happened. You say you have and ask how they are doing – they seem more intent on sharing the news then processing in this moment, so you make your way to the principal's office. She asks how you're doing. But you wonder how she's holding up - after transferring from a middle school before this, you know that she knew Jeffrey since the 5th grade; you know she must be broken up but seemed restrained at the moment. She tells you that, assuming there will be a funeral, one representative from each grade will be excused from school to attend and that she assumed it would be you, given your position as his homeroom teacher. She let you know she was here to support you and that they would send the entire staff an email for support information. She says to you multiple times to reach out if you need anything.

You put your stuff down in your classroom and open your email:

Dear Faculty & Staff,

As you have likely heard, yesterday in the early evening, a shooting occurred at the 4th Street basketball courts. A passing car shot at those on the courts, and a student of ours, a 10th grader, Jeffrey Ortega, lost his life, passing away at the scene. It goes without saying that this is an extremely troubling event for our community and that our hearts and prayers are with Jeffrey's family.

Given the recent events and Jeffrey's involvement with organized crime activities in the area, the superintendent has asked that you keep the discussion to a minimum and direct students

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[24] Originally I had written this with MS-13 here, based on my own experience and experience of one of the participants. However, depending on the context, culture, and experiences of teacher candidates – the specificity here can be too resonant with them.

immediately to the extra counselors we hope to have available starting tomorrow. We do not glorify this kind of involvement in our community.

As we have done before, a representative from each grade level team and specials will be allowed to miss school to represent our community at the funeral. I will share the wake and funeral details as I have them.

Please be in touch with me and the counselors tomorrow as needed.

Thinking of you all today-
Principal Pascucci

Reading your email 15 minutes before the start of homeroom, this was far less guidance than you anticipated receiving before seeing students. Some, you saw on the walk to your classroom, looked forlorn. Many faces of your volleyball girls were tear-stained. One of Jeffrey's cousins, Raul, is in the homeroom and, unbelievably, is in the hall and at school today. Some students seem not to know or are at least not acting as if they know.

Should you share the news at the beginning of homeroom? What did discussion, at a minimum, mean? Homeroom starts in 15 minutes and is 15 minutes long. It's a B Day, so you do not have advisory (an extra 30 minutes). But you will have an ELA class with your homeroom directly after.

What should you do? What will you say? Next steps after homeroom? What will you do in other classes?

What might you do for yourself after school ?

Questions – Part 1 (Levinson & Fay Protocol)

1. *What is the dilemma(s) that the case characters face?*

2. *Who are the stakeholders? What is your role, and how are you understanding your role in the dilemma?*

3. *What are the values and principles are at stake in the decision?*

4. *<u>What EXACTLY might you say to students at this moment?</u> How do you open class? Next steps? Plan of action?*

<u>Feeling/Thinking/Embodiment:</u>

ACTOR: If you tried acting out your solution in front of your fellow students – how did you feel in that moment? What was going on emotionally and physically for you?

AUDIENCE: If you were an audience member at any point listening to a peer try out a solution - how did you feel in that moment? What was going on emotionally and physically for you?

<u>Reflection Questions:</u>

Reflecting on this experience and discussion of this case – what are some approaches you might bring to your teaching generally on all days, not just those with crises?
What principles or values might you strive for in your pedagogy?

How might this experience inform your understanding of what it means to be a teacher?

APPENDIX ITEM 4: SUPPORT AND RESOURCES GIVEN TO PARTICIPANTS AFTER INTERVIEWS:

Mental Health and Supportive Resources

- **Teacher Support Helpline** *The helpline is a confidential space where educators and youth support professionals can get support and guidance. Under the supervision of Dr. Norman Blumenthal, the helpline is staffed by a team of experienced school psychologists and mental health professionals, available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one support, and links to professional help and resources as needed.*

  718-686-3230 New Hours for the 2022-23 School Year:

  Monday-Thursday: 12pm-2pm; 4pm-6pm; 9pm-10pm.
- Grief Support and Hotline for those who have lost a loved one to suicide: https://friendsforsurvival.org/
  (916) 392-0664/ Toll Free: (800) 646-7322

- Link to Online Support/Group Chat for those who have lost a family member

- BlackLine ***This resource is divested from the police*** 1-800-604-5841 - *BlackLine provides a space for peer support, counseling, witnessing and affirming the lived experiences to folxs who are most impacted by systematic oppression with an LGBTQ+ Black femme lens.*

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline/National Crisis Hotline (800) 273-8255
- Call your local Hospice provider for immediate grief counseling and referrals to other local grief counseling in your area