"Staying with the Trouble" of Death

Jessica Lussier
The University of British Columbia

> Grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying … Without sustained remembrance, we cannot learn to live with ghosts and so cannot think.
>
> —Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*[1]

In "Thinking with Death: An Educational Proposition in the Interest of Publicness," Juliette Bertoldo aims to explore new grounds for rethinking education's relationship with death "as a crucial task for facing times of extinctions."[2] She considers what it might mean to learn *with* death, rather than "against it," asking how we might "formulate renewed conceptions of death beyond finality and dualism in order to open up pedagogical possibilities in a more-than-human world."

Her paper unfolds in three phases. She first describes some common representations of "death" in Western public discourses. She then identifies a possible conceptual shift for *relationally* engaging with death by drawing on posthuman perspectives such as those from Rosi Braidotti and environmental humanities discourses. Finally, returning to the question of education, Bertoldo asks how we might "think with" death by accepting mortality and bringing ourselves to acknowledge (rather than avoid) death's existence. In doing so, we are reminded of our relationality, our entangled nature with all that lives and dies on this shared planet and, potentially, our responsibility within it.

I see two main movements happening in Bertoldo's paper. She contends, and I agree, that many of our modern death narratives and practices often result in a form of "death denial," where we are shielded from the emotional pain (and work of mourning) that death may cause. Bertoldo describes this avoidance of death as "uneducational." Thus, her first claim is that we must move toward "accepting death," refusing to look away or ignore its existence. Accepting death, for Bertoldo, is a necessary step to "recognize our embed-

dedness in more-than-human worlds." In this acceptance, we are confronted by our own mortality, and our inherent vulnerability. Echoing Rosi Braidotti, Bertoldo seeks to extend this sense of vulnerability to more-than-human others, to build an "affirmative ethic."

Within my response, I seek to build upon Bertoldo's important discussion of death and education by considering what it might look like, to use Donna Haraway's terms, to "stay with the trouble" of death. Drawing on Bertoldo's discussion of "death denial," I use John Dewey's conception of "miseducative" experiences to describe this refusal to acknowledge death. In coming to face death, I propose that we must learn to mourn deaths of all kinds, so that we may reorient ourselves to the world left behind after loss.

Amidst troubling histories and precarious futures, Donna Haraway has suggested that we "stay with the trouble" of our relations by asking how we might learn to live and die well together on our damaged planet. Working from a background in biology, philosophy, and zoology, Haraway is interested in finding new ways of relating to the earth and its inhabitants in the aims of multispecies environmental justice. She writes: "Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent responses to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places."[3]

Bertoldo's paper troubles the multitude of death and loss due to pollution, wildfires, flash floods, poisoned waters, and other ecological disasters. She aims to stir up responses to these devastating events that, for far too long, have gone unacknowledged, even denied. The Covid-19 pandemic brought death and loss to the forefront of our minds. However, amidst the immense amount of loss over the pandemic, losses due to climate change and other forms of ecological degradation continued to stretch almost invisibly across the globe. In a 2021 piece, Rebecca Solnit reports that, in roughly the same period 2.8 million human lives were lost to Covid-19, another 8.7 million were lost due to air pollution caused by the burning of fossil fuels.[4] While we often acknowledge (and mourn) lives lost due to the pandemic, deaths due to climate disasters, habitat and land destructions, toxic waste spills, and other pollutants, continue to carry on in the background.

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Bertoldo describes avoiding death as "uneducational," because avoidance looks away or disengages from realities. Here I find Dewey's conception of "miseducative" experiences helpful. For Dewey, every experience we undergo modifies not only ourselves, but our subsequent experiences. These experiences build upon one another, resulting in habits that affect our patterns of perception and actions. A "mis-educative" experience is one that "has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness: it may produce lack of sensitivity and responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are arrested."[5] Staying with the trouble requires exactly that, *staying with* something, despite the trouble, the emotional turmoil, or discomfort that may arise. In "accepting death" we are tasked with the educative task of facing loss, acknowledging what once was, is no longer. 8.7 million human lives *really were* irreversibly lost due to air pollution, and losses such as these will continue without intervention. To look away or deny deaths such as these is miseducative in that it invokes a form of "callousness," a refusal of responsiveness, and ill-prepares us to engage with other future, similar losses.

Refusing to "think with" death insulates us from the relationality inherent in our living and dying. While decentering the human subject in death narratives, we humans cannot renounce our responsibility and ongoing contributions toward rising death tolls. As Samantha Deane describes,

> Humans are not unique because they have agency nor because they have minds. Humans are unique because they have the capacity and obligation to think in association and communication about the ways in which they impact the process of living and dying well with others.[6]

Thinking of death relationally requires recognizing agency, mortality, vulnerability, and perhaps even subjectivity beyond the human. Doing so highlights the entangled nature of our relations, presenting a new lens that may reorient our educative responsibilities in attending to ecological devastations. By rethinking education's relationship with death, Bertoldo seeks to build intergenerational solidarity, aimed toward the purpose of passing on a livable world to future

generations. Education's role in "passing-on" this shared world, Mario Di Paolantonio describes, involves looking *toward* one another, "engaging the past and present with 'something more' than itself … with a trans-generational beyond or sense that for us to meaningfully survive we must 'pass on' rather than merely repeat (the Same)."[7] This passing-on is aimed at the collective goal of sustaining and forging a common world. To deny death is miseducative as it distorts our perception of what is actually happening in our common world and looks away from events that require responsiveness. Bertoldo asks her readers to reflect on the role education might play in attending to ecological devastations, asking, "What if death turned into the pedagogue to face rather than to flee?"

Here I ask—*can* death act as pedagogue? Or is it instead our reaction to death that presents a pedagogical possibility? I propose that the *educative* response to death, "staying with the trouble" of it, requires us to face death and loss through the mourning process. Mourning invites us into a knotted world of shared living and dying where we may dwell with loss to appreciate how the world has changed and how we must change to renew our relationships.[8] The "work of mourning" is described by Sigmund Freud as a form of "reality-testing," wherein the mourning subject, bit by bit, faces the reality that the lost object no longer exists.[9] This process may be familiar to those of us who have lost a close loved one or opportunity, but how might one grieve for, say, the ongoing extinction of a species? What might it look like to "accept death" in the case of the migratory monarch butterfly, whose western population has declined by an estimated 99.9%, from as many as 10 million to 1,914 butterflies between the 1980s and 2021?[10]

Mourning is not solely reliant on one's emotional closeness to loss. Instead, mourning may serve as recognition of loss in our common world and how that loss ripples out to touch others. Issues such as biodiversity loss, air and water pollution, and soil degradation highlight how the fate of humans and more-than-human others are intertwined. For those of us that hold a concern for "passing-on" a habitable world, it is important that we recognize how many kinds of death threaten this common world. This involves a refusal to "look away" from death when it touches us. For some, this may mean not forgetting

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the lives of animals consumed in school lunches.[11] For others, it may involve studying the close relationship between human food consumption and declining populations of pollinators like honeybees.[12] Staying with the trouble of these types of deaths involves not looking away from intensive agricultural practices, increased use of pesticides, and the hazards of anthropogenic climate change that contribute to such losses.

In her paper Bertoldo points to the multitudes of human and more-than-human deaths that have been left out of mourning narratives, not recognized as grievable losses. She challenges her readers to attend to our shared vulnerability with not only other humans, but more-than-human others susceptible to the effects of climate change on our shared planet. I echo this sentiment and propose that to "think with" death, we must turn toward the messiness of loss and invite practices of mourning for deaths of many kinds. In this process we are challenged to transform habits and behaviors, adjust our emotional responses, and learn to respond to a changed reality. Rather than succumbing to despair or leaping forward into hopeful salvific futures, as Bertoldo described, staying with the trouble of our precarious present invites "an opportunity for building new modes of social solidarity manifested in holding space for caring, responsible gestures towards the vulnerable dying-other."

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