

The Living Experience of Mortality Among Curriculum Graduate Students: A Heuristic

Inquiry

by

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### Abstract

Death is an ungraspable phenomenon that will grasp us all, and while humans may go to great lengths to avoid confrontations with death, it inevitably seethes its way into the psyche. The mortal condition of humanity warrants thoughtful and careful consideration, including the ways in which it is woven within curriculum studies. While research has explored how educators might best *deal* with death and dying in the experience of education, little research has focused on what death *is*. As such, this study aims to investigate the living experience of mortality among curriculum studies graduate students, and explores the implications of students' experiences of mortality for curriculum studies. This study approaches the nature of mortality from a depth psychology lens, examining how unconscious processes of mortality relate to experiences of paradox and human creativity, and inform the field of curriculum studies. Heuristic inquiry was utilized to investigate the living experience of mortality, seeking to explore the phenomenon through its phases of engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, and explication, arriving at a creative synthesis representing the nature of mortality. Data collection involved individual and group interviews with five curriculum studies graduate students and myself, before and after viewing *Chernobyl*, a mortality-themed televisual text. Data was analyzed based on the tenets of heuristic inquiry and was presented in the form of individual depictions, a composite depiction, and a creative synthesis which was then amplified through a depth psychology lens. The living experience of mortality among curriculum graduate students involved themes of paradox, an opportunity for becoming, a return to one's humanness, and a relationship to innocence, which are explored and discussed in terms of implications for curriculum studies. The findings from

this research assist in explicating a fuller phenomenon of mortality, while examining its implications towards a curriculum of mortality. This study might aid others in applying the findings of this research to applicable aims within curriculum studies and beyond.

*Keywords:* heuristic inquiry, analytical psychology, mortality, death, curriculum studies,  
graduate education

**Preface**

This dissertation is an original work by ©Nicholas Christopher Jacobs, 2024. The research project, of which this dissertation is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project: The Lived Experience of Mortality Among Graduate Students No. #Pro00113018, October 2, 2021.

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On patios, over beers, in laughs and falling leaves. In sunsets and twilight and crisp, quiet morning air. It is lovely to be alive, and even more lovely when the sacredness of these moments can be shared. To those who have come and gone, to those who have stuck around, and to those I have yet to meet; who inspire, desire, and, through encounter, continue to cultivate my curiosity towards the question that will always remain.

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**Epigraph**

*The birth of a human being is pregnant with meaning, why not death?*

—Carl Jung (1960/1975, §803)

## Chapter One: Becoming Curious About Mortality

### Introduction

Of the many events humans have the capacity to experience, death is one shared by all.<sup>1</sup> Many of us do not think that we spend much time contemplating our finitude, but “the fact that we die is the most important fact about us. There is nothing that has more weight in our lives... because it is the end of every other fact about us” (May, 2009, p. 4). Death presents itself as an existential mystery, a mystery present perhaps due to one’s inability to contemplate their non-being (Freud, 1926).

Do we, as humans, really *experience* death, or does death happen *to* us? Perhaps we experience everything up to our death, and death signifies the end of our capacity to experience, understood instead as the “impossibility of further possibility” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 294). We may understand death as the final limit of our lives, and this limit is what contains and, therefore, provides definition to what constitutes life, perhaps setting up our human experience as one of existential tension between the polarity of birth and death, being and non-being, or creation and destruction. The patient of an existential psychotherapist writes a poem that concludes aptly with the lines “Death is everything | And it is nothing” (Yalom, 2008, p. 15). The same psychotherapist (Yalom, 2008) describes living with the full awareness of death as staring into the sun, in that “we can only stand so much of it” (p. 5), while recognizing it is also a requirement for life.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, however, that despite our shared mortal fate, individuals and communities experience varying proximities to death depending on a variety of factors, such as displays of national power to maintain a fantasy of inviolability, and the experiences of Othering that occur across races, cultures, and geographies (Ruti, 2017). The strength of these factors relates to the level of protection from the awareness of death.

This initial chapter introduces my dissertation before situating myself methodologically, theoretically, and within my own experiences of mortality and the intersections of my identity and commitments. Finally, I discuss the significance and relevance of my research in relation to the discipline of curriculum studies and beyond.

### **Questions of Mortality**

This dissertation was guided by the following two research questions: *What is the experience of mortality among curriculum studies graduate students?* and *What might the implications of student's experience of mortality be for curriculum studies?* I addressed the questions by conducting a heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019) with five current curriculum studies graduate student participants—understood in heuristic inquiry as co-researchers—through an exploration of their living experiences of mortality. I interviewed co-researchers before and after viewing the television miniseries *Chernobyl* (Renck, 2019) as a means of increasing their mortality salience and exploring their experiences of mortality. I drew heavily from analytical psychology (originating with Carl Jung) and psychoanalysis, while also acknowledging and exploring various existential influences, such as Ernest Becker and the resulting scholarship on *terror management theory* (TMT).

The opening paragraphs of this dissertation reflect my own immersion into this topic of inquiry, an experience of “[living] the question in every sleeping and waking moment, in every thought, feeling, and sensation” (Sultan, 2019, p. 95). Delving into the seemingly unanswerable tension between death existing as simultaneously everything and nothing (Yalom, 2008) feels rather irreconcilable. Yet, I also recognize the importance of this

dissertation towards illuminating and explicating deeper understandings of the nature of mortality, and how the phenomenon is interwoven with curriculum studies.

To frame this research, it was important to contrast an understanding of mortality with an understanding of death. I have had many conversations with other colleagues and personal friends about the nature of my research study, and routinely people have responded with comments, questions, and suggestions around the nature or experience of death itself, as if an aim of this research is to ward off the threat of death or work towards extending life in some way. Neither of these aims reflect the trajectory of this dissertation, and as a response, I have changed the terminology away from ‘death’ and have instead opted for ‘mortality.’ I define mortality, the focus of the research, as “the state or condition of being subject to death” (Dictionary.com, n.d.), whereas death is understood as “the act of dying; the end of life; the total and permanent cessation of all the vital functions of an organism” (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Mortality is the recognition that we are living death all of the time. In response, this study is less concerned with exploring the experience of death—instead, the focus is on how the nature of mortality influences the broader human psyche and human condition, drawing connections to the field of curriculum studies. However, in order to investigate mortality, it was necessary to explore how it is we have come to understand the nature of death, to the degree one is able, in order to understand the effects of the event of death on our experiences of life and mortality. Throughout this work, I found it necessary to include discussions surrounding death, as I operated on the assumption that the nature of mortality cannot exist without a suitable recognition of the role of death. The term mortality is used synonymously with “death awareness” or “mortality salience,” although “mortality” is used to emphasize

when the awareness is implicit, and “death awareness” or “mortality salience” is preferred when the awareness is explicit.

While I acknowledge the transdisciplinary and extensive scholarship that exists on questions of mortality, I am primarily focused upon the overlapping disciplines of depth psychology and curriculum studies. Within depth psychology, I approached this work primarily through an analytical psychological lens, while significantly informed by psychoanalytic thought. If and when any digressions occur, I do so intentionally and purposefully, reviewing and critiquing such references in a way that helps to define the boundaries of the study and strengthen the position, direction, and aim of the research.

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. In Chapter One, I introduce and outline heuristic inquiry as my chosen methodology for this research, before sharing my initial engagements with mortality and introducing the theoretical and contextual grounds for this study.

Chapter Two explores the theoretical orientation for the study, further outlining the role depth psychology—both analytical psychology and psychoanalysis—will play as a lens through which the phenomenology of mortality will be approached.

In Chapter Three, I review and discuss relevant literature within the field of depth psychology and curriculum studies, identifying an important gap to which this study aims to attend.

Chapter Four further outlines and justifies heuristic inquiry as my chosen methodology, and discusses the role the televisual text *Chernobyl* plays in my research

process. This chapter also discusses the methods and procedures of the study, as well as relevant ethical considerations and (de)limitations of the study.

Chapter Five includes the presentation of the findings of my study based on the tenets of heuristic inquiry. It explores themes and outlines individual depictions, a composite depiction, and a creative synthesis reflective of the living experience of mortality among curriculum studies graduate students.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I discuss the findings of the research, returning to literature explored in Chapters Two and Three, and attempt to deepen an understanding of the nature of mortality, outlining several implications of mortality within curriculum studies.

### **Encountering Mortality Through Heuristic Inquiry**

I chose heuristic inquiry as my qualitative methodology given its “systematic and organized form for investigating human experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). This methodology investigates new meanings surrounding human phenomena as they are lived through individual lives (Moustakas, 1990).

Heuristic inquiry dwells within a social constructivist paradigm and assumes essential meaning to emerge through deep introspection about some phenomenon (Sultan, 2019). At its heart, heuristic inquiry is a phenomenologically aligned research approach that views inquiry “as a synthesis of science and art” (Sultan, 2019, p. 24) and that strives to explore and understand the experience of another (Moran, 2000; see also Sultan, 2019, p. 61). The early phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1945/2013) viewed phenomenology not so much as a number of systematic steps to follow, but as a way of being in itself. In a similar vein, Moustakas (1990) declared heuristics as its own way of knowing. As philosopher Martin



Buber (1923/1970) notes, “[a]ll actual life is encounter” (p. 62, as cited in Sultan, 2019, p. 65), and in this present study, I have attempted to connect with the encounter of mortality. I acknowledge the challenge of researching a phenomenon such as mortality that is in itself inextricable from life. One might say humans are always experiencing mortality as time draws us ever closer to our own end. Heuristic inquiry aims to unravel “the essential nature of profoundly human experiences” (Sultan, 2019, p. 76), and if “the fact that we die is the most important fact about us” (May, 2009, p. 4), I believe heuristic inquiry serves as the most appropriate methodology to approach such a significant human phenomenon.

For this study, I recruited five participant co-researchers who were curriculum studies students within a Western Canadian Faculty of Education. I was also considered a participant in the research, which brought the total number of co-researchers to six. The prime reason for choosing this population of co-researchers came from their position as being teachers themselves, and so I believed personal insights into their own experience of mortality might increase the depth, ease, and insight towards how what emerges might relate to how mortality influences curriculum studies.

As part of the research design, the co-researchers were asked to view the television miniseries *Chernobyl* (Renck, 2019) as a prompt to increase their mortality salience, understood as the extent to which one has death on their mind. As I will discuss more fully in Chapter Four, I conducted two open-ended individual interviews with each of the co-researchers—one prior to viewing *Chernobyl*, and one after—and a final group interview with all co-researchers. In heuristic inquiry’s aim towards “re-creation of the lived experience—that is, full and complete depictions of the experience from the frame of reference of the

experiencing person” (Moustakas, 2015, p. 310), data can, therefore, take on many forms, such as “examples, narrative descriptions, dialogues, stories, poems, artwork, journals and diaries, autobiographical logs, and other personal documents” (p. 310). The majority of the data for this research involved examples, narrative depictions, dialogues, and stories from co-researchers, and one co-researcher opted to submit a personal artifact as data. Heuristic inquiry and the methods used for this research will be further outlined in Chapter Four.

### ***Processes and Phases of Heuristic Inquiry***

While heuristic inquiry is imaginative, tolerant of the uncertain, and highly creative (Sultan, 2019), there are also important processes and phases that underlie the foundation of this methodology. The seven processes of heuristic inquiry each function to more fully enter, comprehend, and become one with the research question (Moustakas, 1990). They each function as a channel for the six phases of the research journey, where one or more processes are involved in each of the six phases. I came to view the six phases as important landmarks along the research journey, akin to points through which I passed on a map towards a destination. The seven processes functioned more so as my way of traveling—how I oriented myself to the journey. Implementation of one or more of the seven processes occurred throughout each of the six phases so that the processes and phases “work in concert to support the exploratory, introspective, creative, experiential, and relational facets of heuristic inquiry” (Sultan, 2019, p. 94).

**The Seven Processes of Heuristic Inquiry.** The work of Sultan (2019), building on the initial work of Moustakas (1990), explicates the seven processes of heuristic inquiry, making a point to encourage a certain level of chaos as one follows these processes “in

whichever order makes the most sense to you...determining your direction based on the needs of your research” (p. 81). The seven processes are: identifying with the focus of inquiry, self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, and the internal frame of reference, and are each explored below. It is important to note that these processes were not restricted to the data gathering and analysis phases of the research, and that many of these processes had already been a part of my journey prior to engaging in the research, as I had already been discussing and exploring the nature of mortality within myself and in relation with others.

The first process, identifying with the focus of inquiry, involves an immersion into the phenomenon in question as a means of understanding how myself, as well as others, might be orienting to, and interacting with, the phenomenon (Sultan, 2019, p. 81). The forthcoming narrative depictions I share in this chapter and reflective questions I have posed throughout this work reflect my identification with the focus of inquiry along with how others scholars, through the literature explored in Chapters Two and Three, have come to understand the nature of mortality.

The second process, self-dialogue, is understood as an oscillation between concept and theory, part to whole, and from individual to universal through taking a highly reflective stance throughout the research journey (Sultan, 2019). It involves an engagement with all of one’s “perceptual, emotional, cognitive, and sensory experience” (p. 85) of the phenomenon in question, which I have experienced throughout my research journey as a creative tension between the living experience of my own mortality and the theoretical understandings of death and mortality from various scholars and disciplines. My engagement with experience

and theory each bolster each other and reflect a process of my own becoming. Continuing to oscillate between these ways of understanding (i.e., theoretical understanding of literature and my own experiences) became the process of moving through my research journey. While I conducted research interviews, I was intentional about bracketing my own experience of mortality so as to not influence the nature of what is shared by co-researchers, while remaining cautious not to eliminate my own values as a researcher, recognizing that meaning is created through both internal (my own) and external (the living experience of my co-researchers) discourse (Sultan, 2019).

The third process, tacit knowing, lies at the base of all heuristic discovery and is comprised of both subsidiary and focal elements, where subsidiary factors are those which attract immediate attention and focal factors are those which remain unseen and invisible, contributing to the wholeness or unity of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). Moustakas uses the example of finding one's way to one's seat in a dark movie theatre as an example of how these two factors function. We use our feet to find our way up the steps, our hands to find where one seat or row ends or begins, and what we are still able to sense with our eyes and ears to orient ourselves. These sensory 'clues' are the subsidiary factors. Our ability to locate ourselves within the unity or wholeness of the overall sense of space is granted through the focal elements of tacit knowledge: "When we curtail the tacit in research, we limit possibilities for knowing" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 22). Returning to the movie theatre example, together we are able to utilize both subsidiary and focal elements to find our way back to our seat. The importance of appreciating tacit knowing in research helps to guide the researcher into potentially undiscovered directions and sources of meaning and gives "birth to the

hunches and vague, formless insights that characterize heuristic discovery” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 49). Using an example from this research, I continuously found myself attending to and making note of the extent to which the literature pointed to the nature of paradox in relationship to mortality. It was important to remain aware of this subsidiary factor, while acknowledging that the unity of the phenomenon is comprised of something more, and required other focal factors to help guide me towards a greater understanding of this unity.

The next process, intuition, Moustakas (1990) describes as “the bridge between the explicit and the tacit” and “the realm of the between” (p. 23). Intuition is required to integrate experiences in order to connect with the inner and outer experiences in the given present (Sultan, 2019). Intuition and tacit knowing function through a marriage of my implicit (intuitive) and explicit (observation and judgement) to inform a direction forward. My intuition informed my thinking and feeling about my topic through curiosities and hunches that I recognized within myself. It was important to attune my intuitive instinct throughout the interview process and guide the conversation, noting moments of insight during interviews when I felt one co-researcher’s experience might have connections to what was shared by another, or utilizing a felt sense throughout concept mapping specific and general themes that were shared by each co-researcher. Engaging with my intuition allowed me to follow any hunches that arose, as well as attend to my own reflective process in working with the data and throughout the study. Examples of these moves are shown throughout my co-researchers’ individual depictions.

The fifth process, indwelling, is considered a reflexive process requiring a sense of patience with the aims of exploring the deep nuances of the phenomenon in question in order to “unravel its essential qualities” (Sultan, 2019, p. 90). Moustakas (1990) understands this as a conscious and deliberate process where one “dwells inside the subsidiary and focal factors to draw from them every possible nuance, texture, fact, and meaning” (p. 24). Indwelling involves explicating the phenomenon as it is encountered towards a greater degree of depth. A lens of analytical psychology assisted in the process of indwelling, as such theoretical understanding sought to extend and deepen the phenomenon of mortality experienced by myself and the co-researchers by taking into account unconscious processes. This interpretive, theoretical work with the phenomenon can then provide a point of contact for myself and the reader to reflect upon how such theoretical understandings bring oneself back to their own living experience of the phenomenon.

Focusing is the sixth process of heuristic inquiry and is a concept developed by Eugene Gendlin (1978), an American philosopher interested in exploring bodily felt sense, and is involved with growth, insight, and change (Moustakas, 1990). Focusing involves inner and sustained attention in order to contact central meanings of some experience and enables the researcher “to identify qualities of an experience that have remained out of conscious reach primarily because the individual has not paused long enough to examine his or her [sic] experience of the phenomenon” (p. 25). Focusing helped assist throughout the interview process with co-researchers, where at times I was able to slow down what was being shared by a co-researcher in order for us to sit and allow a felt sense to arise within them, before sharing the nature of what had been evoked. As well, focusing informed my research process

even from conception, through deep reflection upon the literature I have explored and drawn connections and parallels between in Chapters Two and Three as well as the formulation of my research questions and attenuating to the phenomenon of mortality.

Finally, the seventh process of having an internal frame of reference “serves as a catalyst for the various processes of heuristic inquiry as researchers return, again and again, to seek within themselves a deeper understanding of their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, decisions, and actions” (Sultan, 2019, p. 92). Sultan cautions the researcher to maintain a balance between one’s own inner attunement and the intersubjective experiencing between myself and my co-researchers. To successfully negotiate this balance was to succeed in honouring the flow between the critical elements of introspection and relationality required for heuristic inquiry. I have come to understand that my own experience of life continues to invite me back, and back again, to where I began. In so doing, I encounter myself in more full, honest, and complete ways, while acknowledging this journey is never ending, until my own end.

**The Six Phases of Heuristic Inquiry.** Each of the below six phases represent landmarks along my research journey. While some phases have rather strict boundaries denoting where they begin and end, others, at times, blur and merge together in a living and organic dance representative of heuristic inquiry. As mentioned, each of the phases are facilitated through one or more of the above processes. The six phases are as follows: Initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis.

Initial engagement is the contact the researcher first makes with the topic in question and the engaged process towards formulating a research question (Sultan, 2019). Beyond

simply setting up the research through the formation of a topic and question, initial engagement underlies many decisions and phases of the research journey, such as the literature review, recruiting co-researchers, collecting and organizing data, generating themes, and evaluating/analyzing such themes (p. 95). Most notably, my initial engagement with the research question is reflected in my historical relationship to my mortality leading up to this research project, parts of which are shared throughout Chapter One. In effect, my initial engagement reflects my answering to the call of my mortal curiosity, and is explored through my personal reflections and intentional moves that set up my research.

Immersion refers to allowing the topic and research question to influence and affect all areas of the researcher's life (Sultan, 2019) and where "[v]irtually anything connected with the question becomes raw material for immersion, for staying with, and for maintaining sustained focus and concentration... wherever the theme is being expressed or talked about" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). As I pay attention to where immersion guides my focus—perhaps within myself or in people and places in the external world—I am asked to be reflective again towards my internal frame of reference and to hold balance between the important aspects of both introspection and relationality. An example of this "raw material for immersion" is shown in my forthcoming reflection in this chapter where, during a routine walk to work I found myself immersed in my topic of inquiry, leading to important insights and reflections to deeper understand the phenomenon of mortality and how it is experienced within me. Immersion also occurs throughout Chapters Two and Three where I utilized the processes of self-dialogue, intuition, and indwelling to engage with and set up the theoretical



framework for this research, and conduct a literature review of the relevant scholarly works related to my topic of inquiry.

Incubation is the next phase of heuristic inquiry, and allows for the seeds of the research process to germinate (Sultan, 2019) by the researcher “[retreating] from the intense, concentrated focus on the question” recognizing that “expansion of knowledge is taking place” by doing so (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). Moustakas uses the example of losing a house key to describe incubation. It is often only when one gives up on searching for the key and one’s attention becomes absorbed onto something completely different that the moment of insight—remembering where the key is placed—comes back into our mind. Incubation becomes a stepping away that “enables the inner tacit dimension to reach its full possibilities” (p. 28) that helps to clarify and extend the researcher’s level of understanding about the phenomenon. Incubation occurred both throughout the preparation of this document and leading up to the conceptualizing of this project. There are times when incubation occurs easily, such as the periods after a writing deadline or when I was able to go on a brief vacation. When it came to my research process, heuristic inquiry appeared to honour and place primacy on the incubation period when working with and analyzing research data, where new information, such as reflecting upon my interview transcripts, needed time to germinate.

Illumination is the phase in which unconscious knowledge generated in the incubation phase emerges to the surface (Sultan, 2019). Such knowledge becomes integrated into conscious awareness and can be elucidated by the researcher. Returning to the lost keys analogy, when insight reminds us where our keys are, we then remember what led up to the

last place we had seen our keys. In a sense, the knowledge itself finds us (Sultan, 2019), reinforcing the unconscious element of heuristic inquiry. This process occurred in numerous ways throughout the research, but perhaps most notably during my process of working with the data from co-researcher interviews where underlying connections and themes emerged from the data through periods of incubation and illumination.

Explication occurs after the relevant themes, qualities, and components of the phenomenon are illuminated (Moustakas, 1990) and the purpose of this phase of research “is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning” (p. 31). This process “requires that researchers attend to their own awarenesses, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and judgments as a prelude to the understanding that is derived from conversations and dialogues with others” (p. 31) and, consequently, speaks again to the importance of acknowledging an appropriate balance within one’s internal frame of reference and relationship with others. This phase of the research process is effectively where the dominant themes are developed and, as needed, re-conceptualized and/or revisited with co-researchers. The phases of incubation, illumination, and explication were closely related in my research journey, and represented the time I spent with my co-researcher’s data, taking periods of time to step away from the reflective work, and attending to the ways in which the various themes and connections emerged. The results of the incubation, illumination, and explication phases are most notably represented through the individual depictions and composite depiction in Chapter Five.

The final presentation of data is understood as the “creative synthesis” phase of heuristic inquiry (Sultan, 2019, p. 99) and is “an original integration of the material that

reflects the researcher's intuition, imagination, and personal knowledge of the meanings and essences of the experience" (Moustakas, 2015, p. 315). In essence, it reflects the process of integrating into a whole the various themes and understandings the researcher has gleaned from the phenomenon in question (Sultan, 2019). The creative synthesis can be expressed in a number of ways, such as a painting, narrative tale, poem, etc., but in effect it represents "a realization of the comprehensive essences of the topic of inquiry" (p. 99). The creative synthesis of this research came in the form of an image that represents the phenomenon of mortality, which I then amplified and explored through a lens of analytical psychology.

### **An Engagement with Death**

Such a nature of the lifeworld, then, reflects a curiosity and a call to this doctoral research. My initial theoretical engagement with death came from my encounter with the work of Ernest Becker and terror management theory (Becker, 1973, 1975; Solomon et al., 2015) several years prior to starting my doctoral program. It was a moment of deep and life-altering recognition (Badiou, 1998/2001), and introduced the impetus of my study.

Becker's original theories (1973, 1975), which subsequently led to terror management theory (TMT) (Solomon et al., 2015), proposed that the psychological weight of the awareness of our death is too great to handle, and as such, humans construct immortality projects to psychologically ease this burden. These immortality projects can take a variety of forms, with the most significant being cultural worldviews, understood as "a set of beliefs about the nature of reality that consists of morals and values that tell people how to achieve a personal sense of significance (i.e., self-esteem)" (Schimel et al., 2007, p. 790). The significance derived from an individual's worldview helps to extend one's life both literally

and symbolically and, consequently, eases the psychological weight of awareness of one's mortality. The purpose of immortality projects is to relax the existential anxiety that informs the ego that each passing second of our lives is a step closer to our graves. An example of a literal immortality project could be a healthy diet and exercise—one gains a level of self-esteem through working out and eating healthy by understanding that, in doing so, their physical life will last longer than, perhaps, a sedentary lifestyle and a poor diet. The recognition of an extension of one's life through such choices increases self-esteem while providing a buffer from the recognition of one's finitude. In a related way, symbolic immortality projects help ease the psychological weight of death through how we, as humans, are able to leave traces of ourselves in this world after we pass; for example, by writing a great novel that will exist beyond our death or through parenting, where we are able to pass our values down onto a generation that comes after us. Knowing that these values (along with some of our DNA) will exist after we cease helps to comfort us as we stare at the sun.

Although immortality projects provide healthy ways of functioning independently and interpersonally in the world (van Kessel & Burke, 2018), they are also the birthplace for many forms of "evil." Becker (1975) understands "evil" as arising from "man's [sic] natural and inevitable urge to deny mortality and achieve a heroic self-image" (p. xvii), such as the demonization and maintenance of one's power over other groups of people. When one group's shared immortality project collides with another's, the group in question can be marked as evil (van Kessel, 2018). Immortality projects can also be responsible for many forms of "evil" in the world, an example being soldiers who can aim their rifles at a stranger

and pull the trigger merely for the red, white, and blue patch sewn on their shoulder (Shen & Bennick, 2003). We are aware that soldiers are not placing their lives in danger for the literal patch on their army gear, but they are doing so for what the flag *symbolically represents*.

From a standpoint of terror management theory, the awareness of death can be seen as a fundamental ‘problem’ of human consciousness and, therefore, the broader human condition.

That the awareness of our mortality leads to the creation, maintenance, and perpetuation of our worldviews and the enactment of conscious and unconscious defences against such mortality salience inevitably opens space for the creation of evil when such worldviews oppose one another. Evidence of this dynamic can readily be applied to the realm of contentious and controversial topics in education and beyond (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2021; van Kessel et al., 2020; van Kessel et al., 2022; van Kessel & Burke, 2018).

While terror management theory explores how an avoidance of death can cause harm to humanity, researchers Vail III et al. (2012) challenged death awareness being understood in only “negative terms” (p. 303) and pointed towards how the same awareness of death can motivate individuals towards pursuing healthy virtues and fulfilling relationships. The researchers found that “when individuals perceive ways to actively improve their health (or reduce their risk), conscious death awareness can motivate deliberately healthy actions that reduce the (perception of) risk and remove the direct conscious awareness of death” (p. 306). Furthermore, they came to understand that conscious thought towards one’s own mortality can make individuals more likely to introspect about their own lives and reconsider goals (i.e., immortality projects) that are supportive and meaningful. As a result of their work, it

would appear that death can be in service of both good and evil, and the fine line between the two might be in need of deeper explication.

I understand that our awareness of death might be understood as a problem for which we never signed up; however, I am also curious how such a problem might be understood within the general fabric of the human psyche. As an example, the Buddhist scholar David Loy (2002) understands Becker's position in terms of the human experience of lack, where immortality projects attempt to function as an antidote to lack. For Loy, the most problematic duality is not life against death, but instead, self versus non-self. This tension results in humans unconsciously objectifying lack by projecting it somewhere in the world as a means of finding a sense of groundedness outside of oneself. "The problem with all objectifications, however, is that no object can ever satisfy if it is not really an object that we want" (Loy, 2002, p. 5), whereas self-consciousness, for Loy, is defined by one's ability to encounter their own inner ungroundedness as a temporal, finite being. Existential psychotherapist Yalom (1980) views this clash between one's own confrontation with their groundlessness and their simultaneous wish for structure as a key existential dynamic.

I am left to wonder if there is more to life (and death) than an evolutionary arrival into consciousness (and, by inference, death). To acknowledge that death frames life is to accept that death cannot necessarily be understood strictly as *the* existential problem, for it is also *the* necessary requirement for how we understand existence itself. Stated another way, if humans evolved into consciousness and, accordingly, into an awareness of death, humans simultaneously evolved into a similar awareness of life itself. Therefore, it might be more accurate to wrestle with an understanding that although the physical experience of death

destroys us, it is the idea of death that saves us (Yalom, 2008). The pivot between these two modes of approaching human mortality reflects an entry point for this study.

### **Brief Introduction to Analytical Psychology**

What began as my theoretical curiosity about mortality through Becker became a deep exploration about the nature of life and death through analytical psychology, particularly the work of Carl Jung (1875-1961), who was a Swiss psychiatrist and founded analytical psychology in the early twentieth century. Whereas the work of Becker and terror management theory appears to place the ego as the central place of meaning and significance—the conscious aspect of the psyche that is “concerned with the sense of a personal identity, the maintenance of personality and the sense of continuity over time” (Rowland, 2019, p. 13)—analytical psychology places far greater emphasis on unconscious processes. Strictly for the ego, death assumes a particular ending or finality; the expiry of the subjective “I.” Instead of a central focus on consciousness, analytical psychology acknowledges a symbolic life that functions as a language from the unconscious and that is capable of informing one’s conscious world and, in part, transcends the subjective “I.”

As I discuss more fully in Chapter Two, although Jung has been considered a mystic by some because of his interest in Eastern philosophy and spirituality, he was reluctant to label himself as such. This label of mystic is partially due to analytical psychology’s understandings of a teleological nature of the human psyche. In my experience, such a telos suggests that although there is a finality to our subjective experience of life, there is also a purposefulness we live towards that encapsulates such finitude. As a result, Jung’s life and

work offers an important view of the human condition and psyche and, in so doing, forms the foundational theoretical lens of this study.

Jung, and analytical psychology more broadly, has traditionally been considered within an essentialist paradigm (Marlan, 2021), viewing the human psyche as containing primary essential characteristics required to exist (Colman, 2018). Importantly, a shadow aspect of such a paradigm can therefore minimize individual and cultural differences which can lead to dangerous forms of racial, gendered, and classist oppression (Marlan, 2021, citing Childers & Hentzi, 1995). I agree with Marlan that “this recognition has led in the direction of abandoning essentialist assumptions with a certain gain, but also with a felt loss of foundations which has served as paradigmatic” (p. 61). Holding essentialism and relativism as opposites along a spectrum, Marlan (2021) importantly understands how fixation of thought on one pole versus the other quickly becomes problematic. As a response, it is imperative for “these polarities [to] represent a dynamic play in the alchemy of desire,” where the unique aspects of a single person must be honoured, while also understanding “how these particulars reflect and take part in the larger structural dimensions of human existence” (p. 61). My work proceeds with a sensitive acknowledgment of the importance of remaining within the dynamic play between these two poles, without arriving at a stark fixation at one or the other.

This view of reality parallels the interplay between “curriculum-as-plan” and “curriculum-as-lived,” noting that we cannot live solely at either of these extremes, and that the nature of reality is partially defined through a recognition of its opposite. Instead, it is perhaps necessary to explore how we might dwell within the tension between these poles



(Aoki, 1991). Such an ontology recognizes that a pure emphasis on the positivist/empiricist assumptions of determinacy, rationality, impersonality, and prediction cannot lead to a complete conceptualization of any of life's phenomena (Usher, 1996); however, they can offer important insights and directions to travel. Consequently, such an ontology is careful not to hold the nature of the world as one that can be understood simply as ordered, predictable, and lawful, but instead recognizes the importance of accepting processes and phenomena as open and indeterminate (Usher, 1996).

Analytical psychology deepens understandings surrounding how mortality is understood within the psyche. I acknowledge the many interesting trajectories that might be suggested by this work; for example, how the topic of death might be more thoroughly taught within education, how one might explore teacher identity through educator's understanding of their mortality, in what ways mortality-themed literature might be utilized within the classroom and/or curriculum, etc. Although each of these ideas are beneficial areas of research (that I hope my work inspires others to take up), the focus of my work lies with the investigation of the nature of mortality itself.

My theoretical explorations into the nature of mortality through analytical psychology and the work of Becker (1973, 1975) and terror management theory (Solomon et al., 2015) function in parallel with my own reflective self-dialogue (Sultan, 2019) with my experiences of mortality. The theoretical and experiential is "an oscillati[on] from concept to experience and back; from part to whole and back; from individual to general (or universal) and back" (Sultan, 2019, p. 85). Self-dialogue is a practice of delving deeper into my own reflections and experiences, carrying with me new theoretical understandings each time, which then

bolster my living experiences and reflections. I “return, again and again, to seek within [myself] a deeper understanding of [my] perceptions, feelings, thoughts, decisions, and actions” (Sultan, 2019, p. 92), akin to an ever deepening downward spiral into my own understanding of self, other, nature, and world.

### **Early Evocations of my Mortality**

Along these lines, there are two memories from my childhood that evoke emotional experiences of joy, fear, nostalgia, and wonder: an acute fear of death in my early childhood, and my experience of religion in my teenage years. Reflecting on these distant times, I am reminded of a profound sense of simplicity to the world. Can we ever experience the sheer joy today that we remember from our childhood? We may let out a slight chuckle when we remember some of the pain and hurt we felt as children that, at the time, consumed us, recognizing that such experiences may pale in comparison to the challenges we may find ourselves facing today. And yet, in those moments as children they were very real—the sadness, as well as the happiness, wonder, and joy, were perhaps more sincere and serious than we might ever experience today as we become more responsible, mature, aware of, and challenged by the world. The feelings from my childhood seem straightforward and raw, and I wonder what truths about oneself and the world exist within the simplicity of those carnal emotional experiences.

The following reflections are an exploration of these two memories from my past, now being brought into the present through this writing through the processes of indwelling and identifying with the focus of inquiry (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019), both ingrained ontological ways of being and orienting myself to the phenomenon of mortality.

*The Birth of Death*

According to my mother, I cried for the first six months of my life. I remember being told that one of the only times I was not crying was while being driven in a car (although I became upset again whenever we were stopped at a red light—the metaphorical significance of which is open to interpretation). As matured, I remained a very emotional individual. I recall my childhood as one with great frustration—a time where my emotional world welled up within me from moment to moment, yet I lacked the language to effectively communicate the felt complexity of what I was experiencing. When the world, my world, is one of great emotion, how could I make sense of it as apart from me? It was as though the world felt what I felt, and frustration came with my inability to articulate it so.

Along with an emotional childhood and my inability to express what I felt was affecting me, I also remember the challenges I had with sleeping. The birth of consciousness came with the birth of a mind that continued to churn and turn ideas back and forth, over and over in my mind. I hold a memory of being around the age of seven, where for a period of days I would be crying in my room at night. My parents would come to sit with me and offer words of care and comfort, yet their messages never brought solace. To the new realization that I would one day die, I would hear them say, “Yes, it’s true, but that’s not going to happen for a very long time,” or “That’s nothing you have to worry about right now.”

Although I cannot remember what brought about the stark realization within me at the time, I was struck with the recognition that I would one day die, and it was this recognition which brought about a nightly unease. My parents were not able to offer me any words to lift this anxiety. I realize now the significance of this moment in which my entire life was thrown

into a new perspective. Until this point, I had only an ever-unfolding horizon into which I was moving. Upon this realization, my life appeared to be placed on a linear path with a definite beginning and, at some point into the future, a most untimely end. It was, in effect, my initial exposure to dread (Kierkegaard, 1944). It was through the birth of my death at the age of seven that a new experience of time began to inform my life; one whereby I now existed along a trajectory into the future towards my end. Death was the furthest limit of my life—but a limit nonetheless—with birth being its opposite. As I presently write about this experience, I intuitively recognize that temporality exists in relationship with my experience of mortality. Although unaware at the time, I can see how I came to a new and deeper understanding of time in relationship to death. The birth of my mortality caused a rupture in my entire awareness of the world. What was occurring within my psyche? In what felt like perhaps my first experience of a conscious loss of innocence, I was separate from my world because of how temporary I now recognized myself to be. The awareness of my mortality thus threw time into the experience of my life, laying a path out before me upon which to travel.

### ***A Personal Immortality Project***

Years later, I recruited my father to take me to a Christian bookstore in order to buy my first Bible. I insisted upon a King James Version (KJV) translation. I remember having heard that if one were to read three chapters of the Bible every day it could be completely read in a year. Although I was unaware of my unconscious motivations at the time, this project would be one to not only ease the psychological weight of my awareness of death, but also show me what I needed to do in order to find a resting place for my soul for all eternity.

Fear of my own death changed through my re-conceptualizing of time by fitting into an existing system of symbolic immortality of religion (Solomon et al., 2015). My body would most certainly die at the end of my life, but I must not fear, for my soul will then reside in the eternal—an experience of timelessness where all will be made perfect. My initial jump into the world of Christianity might have been far less of what is considered a ‘calling,’ and more of a defence against the weight of the acknowledgement of my finitude thrust upon me as a child. An ability to explore and learn about the Christian faith and coming into a relationship with God protected me from having to live with the awakened reality that my life would end “back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever” (Becker, 1973, p. 26). While there are many reasons one might pursue religion (some not related to mortality), in hindsight, I now see my own pursuit functioning at least in part as an immortality project; Christianity provided for me a wellspring of meaning and significance for my life. Although I remained aware that I would still die, the daily effects of such awareness appeared to be muted through the focus that went towards the reading of the Bible and the praying that God would grant me a pleasant eternal life beyond my physical death, along with a game plan for morals and ethics in which to adhere so I could make such an everlasting life possible. The linear path upon which my life was projected due to the awareness of death was still present; however, the Christian faith offered a particular project in which to engage as a means of transcending such an untimely end to my physical being.

The emotional significance of this awareness-raising is best not to be understated—certainly, I am not the only one to have had a recounting of when my first awareness of death

entered the scene. Deeply affected and in his own process of indwelling, Jung (1961/1989) describes his own early life death awareness:

There was a fall downstairs, for example, and another fall against the angle of a stove leg. I remember pain and blood, a doctor sewing a wound in my head... My mother told me, too, of a time when I was crossing the bridge over the Rhine Falls to Neuhausen. The maid caught me just in time—I already had one leg under the railing and was about to slip through. These things point to an unconscious suicidal urge or, it may be, to a fatal resistance to life in this world.... People drowned, bodies were swept over the rocks. In the cemetery nearby, the sexton would dig a hole.... Women wept. I was told that someone was being buried in this hole in the ground. (p. 9)

I am careful not to err by painting every example I cite with a brush stroke of death; however, Jung's almost dreamlike reflections clearly deal with themes of mortality that played a significant role in his early memories. These memories of pain and death acknowledge the significance of the initial experience of one's mortality on one's life. Whereas I found myself defensively poring over religious texts, Jung (1961/1989) was taught a prayer by his mother that "gave me a sense of comfort in the face of the vague uncertainties of the night" (p. 9). Although he initially understood Jesus to be a "nice, benevolent gentleman" he quickly "began to distrust Lord Jesus" (p. 10) due to the connection he drew between Jesus and the religious funerals occurring in the nearby graveyard. He developed an early trepidation with death through recognizing the close association between Jesus and the Reaper, as symbolized by the graveyard. Later in his life, during a 16 year long descent into his own unconscious, Jung wrote of a source of wisdom stemming from the dead: "turn to the dead, listen to their

lament and accept them with love" (Jung, 2009, p. 344). Jung's early apprehension of mortality—along with my own—evokes a seemingly incongruent image of the Saviour and the Reaper hand in hand. Is it not the job of the former to save me from the latter? And, yet, my intuition suggests these apparent opposites exist in some relationship.

My ventures into Christianity went deeper. I began regularly attending church, reading the Bible, and praying. In ninth grade, at the age of 14, I had met some Christian friends who invited me to their youth group. I hold a very clear and distinct memory around this time in my life. I found myself reflecting upon my life and facing an important decision. I faced the decision of either continue down this path of religion and Christianity, exploring the nature of God and the role I played in relationship to Him, or I could, somehow, choose not to, and instead hold out for some other path to fill my sense of intrigue. I remember thinking that if I chose to pursue the path of God, I must accept that, at the end of this road, truth of whether or not God existed might not be found from such a pursuit. It was a decision to jump in and pursue such a path wholeheartedly, recognizing I might not find what I was looking for at the end. And yet, without a wholehearted pursuit, I would not be doing what was necessary in order to seek such truth. I chose to see where this religious path would take me. I acknowledge the vast importance of recognizing the choice I was faced with, and how it meant that I had not yet found what I was looking for—there had been no 'truth' at which I had arrived or obtained. Furthermore, I also acknowledge that such a choice was indeed a *choice*, suggesting there was some awareness within me that the nature of God could be something other than biblical dogma.

I remain curious about from where this youthful insight came. It was as if I was in search of some truth for myself and my position in the world; an awareness of needing to contemplate the potential consequences and sacrifices I might be making in such a pursuit. Although I did not realize it at the time, I now consider how unconscious factors may have motivated me towards such a decision—understanding that something beyond a pursuit of God was the real truth I sought, and my religion was, at least in part, an immortality project I had constructed to ward off my mortality salience while creating a sense of meaning and purpose for my life. The moment of insight seemed to originate from a place beyond what I understood as myself. The realization was, perhaps, an awareness from somewhere beneath and beyond me.

Both the birth of the awareness of my death and the meta-awareness that came amidst my decision to pursue the nature of God on a deeper level challenge a dominant western chronology. My awareness of mortality appeared to place my life along a chronological time, as I note this occurred relatively early in the development of my ego, making me curious about potential intersections between the perception of a chronological time and the birth of an awareness of one's mortality.

### ***A More Recent Encounter with Mortality***

Since these early experiences with mortality, I have gone on to complete a master's degree in psychotherapy and spirituality, and I currently work as a psychotherapist in a private practice that is located within walking distance from my home. I usually make a point to walk or ride my bike to work as often as possible in order to reflect on my work, experiencing nature after a day of being present with people in their experiences of living.



The following is a first-person reflection during one of my walks to work, involving the heuristic process of focusing, an act of "pausing and clearing" (Sultan, 2019, p. 91) in order for elements of the phenomenon to come into awareness. I will report in the present first-person as a means of keeping the experience close, and italicize in order to distinguish it from other writing.

**Reflection: Leaving Leaves.** *I am attempting to let sink in a deep recognition that I am finite. Not only is my body 'on the clock,' so to speak, but my entire life sentence here will cosmically equate to no more than the blink of an eye. Here I am, spending emotional and mental energy reflecting upon my educational pursuits, a random embarrassing moment from my past, and trying to remember those items I wanted to add to my grocery list...and for what!? I feel a brief and deep spark of anguish within me as I sit with the apparent meaninglessness of my existence, which is then quickly tempered with what feels like some form of inner chuckle. It is a familiar feeling—I am aware at how soon I will end. This sidewalk will outlast me. The chuckle is perhaps defensive, pointing to the utter lack of control I have about this 'life' sentence. I did not make a choice for it, nor do I have much of a say about it—all I do is move these limbs until time decides otherwise.*

*I let these emotions wash over and settle, noting the longing that remains. Longing for what? I am not sure, but I know that in the midst of the meaninglessness, even the meaninglessness itself is going to be missed. My eyes meet the leaves on a nearby tree. This tree and these leaves I have passed by many times before are now catching my attention. Yet, it is not this tree or these leaves that capture my gaze, but leaves themselves. In my death I will miss leaves—the way the wind helps them dance, the seemingly infinite sizes and shapes*

*and colours, the way the life and death of leaves signal to me the time and passing of the seasons. What fascinating little pieces of nature.*

*Yet, I cannot imagine that I will miss them in my death. I do not imagine I can miss anything in my death, as the capacity to ‘miss’ anything seems forfeited on the other side of life. In this moment that began with a reflection about my own death finds me at a place of longing for the exact thing I am experiencing. What an irony that this moment capturing a deeper awareness of my death makes me pine for the very leaves I am seeing at present. I am left wondering if the full presence of something can only truly be experienced in the capacity to imagine its complete absence. In what feels like collapsed time, I am reminded that the time before our birth and the time after death are identical (Yalom, 2008) and of the words of Yiassemides (2014): “time is transformed through the opposition of life and death” (p. 76).<sup>2</sup>*

I recognize how these newer senses, thoughts, perceptions and feelings begin to illuminate “new, previously unrevealed dimensions of the experience” (Sultan, 2019, p. 97) such as the apparent collapse of time. I intuitively connect the absence/presence duality in my longing for the leaves, and the imagery of Jesus and the Reaper together in the graveyard emerging from Jung’s early experience of distrust in Lord Jesus.

All of the events described in this section concern aspects of both time and the nature of consciousness and the unconscious. The birth of my death awareness placed my life on a

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<sup>2</sup> Ten months after writing this reflection, I reacquainted myself to the work of May (1975) who seemed to aptly explicate a similar experience in his own writing: “We may look at an autumn tree so beautiful in its brilliant colours that we feel like weeping; or we may hear music so lovely that we are overcome with sadness. The craven thought then creeps into our consciousness that maybe it would have been better not to have seen the tree at all or not to have heard the music. Then we wouldn’t be faced with this uncomfortable paradox—knowing that “time will come and take my love away,” that everything we love will die. But the essence of being human is that, in the brief moment we exist on this spinning planet, we can love some persons and some things, in spite of the fact that time and death will ultimately claim us all. That we yearn to stretch the brief moment, to postpone our death a year or so is surely understandable. But such postponement is bound to be a frustrating and ultimately a losing battle.” (May, 1975, p. 25)

linear conception of time near the beginning of the development of my ego, and in my teen years, I experienced a level of insight—perhaps originating from the unconscious—informing my conscious identity. If we are to consider all of the harmful effects death awareness has on the human condition—described in the next section—perhaps the human psyche is the necessary origin from which to begin exploring how we might understand the nature of mortality more completely.

### **Finding Myself**

I identify as a White, middle-class, able-bodied, cis-gender male who holds an undergraduate degree in psychology (Arts) and a master's degree in psychotherapy and spirituality. My doctoral work coincides with my psychotherapeutic work in both private and non-profit sectors. I have a history of working with individuals in therapy as well as group therapy, and as a practice, I am humbled at the ways in which I am able to witness and explore the nature of the human psyche through those with whom I am able to work. The approach I take in my presence with clients—one of compassion, empathy, and a deep sense of curiosity—nurtures a space of openness and potential for discovery, both intra- and interpersonally, as well as more broadly towards a depth of understanding about the human condition. Such an approach I also brought with me as I carried out this study.

### **Positioning the Research**

In the following section, I situate my research on mortality within curriculum studies. In the preceding personal anecdotes, I have introduced several thoughts concerning death and the human condition. How does the nature of mortality influence the human condition on a larger scale, and, more notably for this present research, how does mortality relate to our

pedagogical selves? This study aims to deepen an understanding of the nature of mortality, the applications of which may speak not only to how it is we learn and educate, but more significantly why, and to what end. The educational implications of this research may also extend beyond the field of curriculum studies, towards the question of how it is we come to experience ourselves during this “brief pause between the two great mysteries” (Jung, 1973, p. 485).

### *Curriculum Studies and the Graduate Student Experience*

Prominent Canadian curriculum scholar Ted Aoki (1991) contrasts curriculum-as-lived-experience with curriculum-as-plan, the latter of which is formulated by curriculum planners who “install” the curriculum within schools (p. 160). These curriculum planners are, in a sense, “condemned to plan for faceless people, students shorn of their uniqueness, or for all teachers, who become generalized entities often defined in terms of performance roles” (p. 160). The teacher can become a figure of authority through whom all information is known and provided, and information that, in turn, can kill uncertainty, curiosity, and wonder (Wallin, 2008). Trajectories of thought that reject the straightforward downloading of information into students are squeezed back onto the pathways ending in performance-based outcomes. The curriculum-as-lived, however, holds each student, lesson, and moment within the classroom as unique, and taking into account how the teacher shows up for each of their students in any given moment. As Aoki (1991) emphasized, in any given classroom there is a recognition that “indwelling in the zone between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived experience is not so much a matter of overcoming the tensionality but more a matter of dwelling aright within it” (p. 163).

My co-researchers were all curriculum studies graduate students from a Faculty of Education at the time of the study. My choice in recruiting from this population related to my own decision to enter into graduate school and resulting experience. As my friends were becoming more financially stable, settling into marriages, and having children, my curiosity and desire to continue with my education inspired me to pursue a different path and apply to graduate school. I was therefore a breaking from social norms relative to the trajectory of most of my peers. The decision to enter into a graduate program can be a life disruption and, in the context of terror management theory, a break from a particular worldview and set of immortality projects that help to defend against my own mortality (Solomon et al., 2015). Mortality salience—the degree to which we have death on our minds (Solomon et al., 2015)—increased as a result, and along with experiencing excitement, motivation, and inspiration, it also required a (continuous) confrontation with anxieties, challenges with self-worth, and isolation.

Because graduate school requires a letting go of past self-conceptions and taking a new identity within a new group (van Maanen & Schein, 1979) it can increase mortality salience. Such a new identity can also be inherently challenging, as one exists both as a student who learns as well as a junior colleague with growing expertise. This change can come at a cost, as a third of respondents from one study in the United States disclosed that they did not like the ways in which graduate school was changing them (Anderson & Swazey, 1998), adding to the socialization challenge experienced by graduate students. This statistic is less surprising when accepting that 92% of respondents from the same study said

that people within their department put their own interests first and that 70% said that faculty members placed primacy on their own careers rather than on the good of the department.

Not only does graduate school require breaking from particular social norms and encountering potentially undesirable socialization, but it can also be difficult to justify, with the United States reporting attrition rates at approximately 50% across disciplines (Nettles & Millett, 2006) (and higher numbers among underrepresented populations (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004, as cited in Gardner, 2008)). Along with high attrition rates and, for many, a less than lucrative job market, graduate students also have rates of depression and anxiety more than six times higher than the general population (Evans et al., 2018).

Despite the challenges graduate students face, and how such challenges are related to one's mortality, education graduate students are rarely asked about or encouraged to reflect upon such an existential element of their educational journey. While anglophone research focused on education graduate students has explored information-seeking behaviour and attitudes (Blummer et al., 2012) and how to develop students as both teachers and researchers (Byrnes, 2001), I have been unable to locate research that explores how curriculum studies graduate students understand their experience of mortality in relation to their graduate student experience. It is important to understand what relationship might exist between curriculum studies graduate students and their experience of mortality, given that it is both a neglected topic in educational contexts and a fundamental aspect of existence. Even in healthcare disciplines such as nursing and gerontology, where mortality is a more central concept, research has included how to grow such programs and evaluate their success (Haley & Zelinski, 2007) and how to address moral distress (Burston & Tuckett, 2012; Lamiani et

al., 2017), yet it has not directly and specifically considered the ways in which mortality influences and affects the graduate student experience. I have chosen to focus specifically upon graduate students in curriculum studies, because not only is that what is closest to me currently (as a curriculum student myself), but also because of the nuanced experience of this population being both teachers and students, which provided additional richness to the data.

My entrance into graduate school was a particular leap into the unknown. I sacrificed a salaried and pensioned role in order to explore a deep sense of curiosity and desire to continue with my studies. There has been uncertainty surrounding how I might make ends meet financially, what relationships might be strained or sacrificed, and what state my personal and professional health might be in upon finishing. Yet, questions also emerged throughout this process: How far am I capable of going? Do I have what it takes? Who will I be at the end? These existential questions have ebbed and flowed as I have navigated my graduate school experience, and reflect a confrontation within myself as separate from the particular social norms I have broken from that provide a sense of safety and insulation from my own experience of mortality. The unknown also speaks to a broader existential unknown, that is, the unknown of (non-)being in death. I recognize how we can work to create a sense of certainty within our existence through what we add to our lives: homes, relationships, careers, families, etc., as a means of bringing order to such existential chaos. Breaking from particular social norms at my age in order to undertake graduate studies becomes a reminder of my own mortality.

Although the explicit purposes of this study are to understand the experiences of mortality among graduate students and explore the implications of mortality for curriculum

studies, the findings of this research also assisted co-researchers in making sense of their experiences in graduate school through a deeper understanding of their mortality. Through interpreting their experiences psychologically, links might then be made between how mortality is understood within the psyche and how it is expressed within the field of curriculum studies.

### ***Context of a Pandemic***

The majority of this research project occurred amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In a sense, the Coronavirus brought out all the warts of humanity—it not only honed and amplified our individual anxieties and depressions, but also brought to the surface many interpersonal concerns regarding romantic partnerships, families, and friends. On a broader scale, the pandemic occurred during a climate of mass unrest in the United States of America and beyond, where some protestors argued that mask wearing is a violation of the right to breathe comfortably, while others argued for the right to breathe at all, after a police officer bore his knee into George Floyd’s neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds (Cramer, 2020).

I did not find it coincidental the level of intrapersonal, interpersonal, societal, and global challenges that surfaced during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic whispered throughout the world, and humanity’s inability to confront the uncertainties that come with this *Zeitgeist* swelled its whispers into screams. The world witnessed the collective trauma of the pandemic hijack the capacity for personal imagination, and transform these forces into the destruction of others (Kalsched, 2021). Yes, the pandemic was personal, racial, political, and economic. But it was each of these things because it was death; it was a death from



which the world had lost its insulation through the very institutional structures that have been collapsing. The global experience of COVID-19 showed some of the ways in which death appeared in life, and how humans responded as a result (e.g., Ramsden, 2020).

Curriculum theorist William Pinar (1974) traced the etymological meaning of curriculum to *currere*, meaning ‘to run the course,’ a term used in reference to an existential experience of institutional structures.<sup>3</sup> He emphasizes *currere* in how the curriculum is experienced, enacted, and reconstructed, placing primacy on curriculum as it is lived, rather than how it is planned (Pinar, 2011). *Currere*, as it will be understood in this work, “emphasizes the everyday experience of the individual and his or her capacity to learn from that experience; to reconstruct experience through thought and dialogue to enable understanding,” where such understanding “can help us reconstruct our own subjective and social lives” (Pinar, 2011, p. 2). Pinar and Grumet (1976) additionally note the connection between *currere* and the psyche; that to exist in political, social, and educational spaces takes psychic work, and that such work relates to self-understanding and self-development.

In exploring the reconceptualization of curriculum in the 1970’s, Wallin (2016) furthered the concept of *currere* by pointing to how the reconceptualization of curriculum highlights the ethics of how to live. How are we to ‘run the course’ of life? A question perhaps more simple to answer when we are so well-insulated by the institutional structures under which we have our existential experiences. Yet it was on the heels of a worldwide pandemic that humankind witnessed more death—and, therefore, life—in order to understand the running we are doing in life (Towards what? From what, and why?) and recognize the

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<sup>3</sup> Within this work I am utilizing only Pinar’s (1974) definition of *currere*, and will not be considering his use of *currere* as a method.

existential aim of such a race. Humankind was asked, in the present state of a humanity that has faced a collective death, ‘how do we run this course of life?’ when life itself is held together by death. Is an attempt to live without acknowledgement of death a course we *can* run? Death appears as the ultimate irony, as it exists as a potential finish line we are inevitably running towards, yet the finish line we are weary of crossing. “If only the living can die, only the dying are really alive” (Hillman, 1964/2020, p. 49), and, therefore, to know death is to know life. A failure to grapple with death becomes a betrayal of *currere*, and the current sociopolitical climate in a COVID-19 era is all the proof we need in order to acknowledge this idea.

Death influences and seethes into the curriculum-as-lived. In what ways does death inform, influence, and appear within this curriculum world and how we ‘run the course’ of our educational life and beyond? How does this deathly presence relate “to the Self in its evolution and education” (Pinar, 1975, p. 1)? The curriculum-as-lived becomes “an engagement with life that does not prescribe in advance either rote answers or instrumental approaches to curriculum” (Wallin, 2008, p. 312). Here, Wallin (2008) addresses inquiry-based learning (related to curriculum-as-lived) through the image of the monster,

The monster points to pedagogical opportunity, to unexplored terrain, points of curriculum departure, and new curricular understandings. Monsters teach, though their lessons might be difficult, calling us beyond our sense of firm footing in the familiar. It is in this way that monsters *demonstrate* the living and abundant pedagogical spaces in which we live as teachers and students. (p. 312)

A monstrous encounter is unnerving as it incites fear. Such can be the case surrounding knowledge within the classroom. It is no wonder we have come to understand aspects of learning as “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 1998, p. 2).

Exploring the nature of mortality is significant in its ability to offer a space “to see more of [life] and see more clearly” (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. vii). Accordingly, the educational implications of this research reach outside of *currere*. Speaking once again to the sociopolitical global climate during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was witnessed how the “evil” being enacted across the world is birthed from an increase in global mortality salience. I wonder if, in the cultural West, many individuals have yet to discover how to live when there is an increased threat of death. As a culture, perhaps many have forgotten that “life and death come into the world together; the eyes and the sockets that hold them are born at the same moment” and that “life matures, develops, and aims at death. Death is its very purpose” (Hillman, 1964/2020, p. 49). As pointed to in the outset of this dissertation, our world has been staring into the sun—and humankind is constantly being tested with just how much can be tolerated. What we can learn about death and our mortality from the human psyche becomes the point in which we greater understand the human condition.

### **Chapter One Summary**

Death is woven into the fabric of what makes us human, yet it is also apparent the capacity to (un)consciously deny this existential given. Death is an event that occurs to us all and comprises a fundamental component of the human condition; however, a level of darkness about the potential significance, meaning, and effects of this event on how we

understand life cultivates a curiosity within me that draws me to my research questions, namely:

- 1. What is the experience of mortality among curriculum studies graduate students?*
- 2. What might the implications of student's experience of mortality be for curriculum studies?*

In this chapter, I have introduced the design of my study and outlined how heuristic inquiry has guided my research journey. As part of the heuristic inquiry process, I then explored preliminary connections between these understandings of death and my personal relationship to my experience of mortality. Next, I spoke to the relevance of this research within curriculum studies, through the graduate student experience, and in the context of a pandemic. Such relevance sets up a bridge towards how this study might speak to the discipline of curriculum studies.

In the next chapter, I discuss the underlying theoretical framework that provides the foundation for my study, most specifically exploring the nature of death as it is understood within the theoretical backgrounds of both Becker/terror management theory and analytical psychology, while also drawing connections with how each of these positions takes up their theories within the field of curriculum studies.

## **Chapter Two: Theoretical Investigations into Mortality**

### **Introduction**

In order to take up this study's research questions, it is important to lay a theoretical foundation for how the phenomenon of mortality will be approached and analyzed. The first section of this chapter sets up an understanding of depth psychology concepts relevant to the nature of the study. The second section explores how depth psychology scholarship has taken up the nature of mortality, specifically through first investigating the nature of paradox in relation to mortality through alchemy and dreams. I then introduce the concept of the death drive as a psychoanalytic principle related to mortality and connected to curriculum studies. Finally, I address the nature of creativity in relation to mortality, consolidating the principles and theoretical positions necessary for the present study. Because heuristic inquiry is focused on exploring the living experience of phenomena, it is necessary to understand the theoretical foundation for how phenomena might be experienced by the psyche, in order to then draw connections between mortality as a phenomenon and curriculum studies.

### **Orienting to the Unconscious**

As previously mentioned, because the phenomenon of mortality can exist beyond one's conscious awareness, depth psychology offers a key lens through which to approach my research. Depth psychology takes into account unconscious factors of the human psyche and includes both analytical psychology and psychoanalysis. Through this lens, I outline a theory of the unconscious that informs this present research. As I will reinforce, my theoretical orientation, and therefore this study itself, is weighted towards analytical psychology, yet proceeds in recognizing imperative contributions from psychoanalysis. I use

the term “depth psychology” in order to honour the inclusion of both traditions, while staying true to the through line of analytical psychology for this dissertation.

### *The Nature of the Unconscious*

For this research, the ego is understood as “the complex factor to which all conscious contents are related...[that] forms...the centre of the field of consciousness...[and] is the subject of all personal acts of consciousness” (Jung, 1959/1969b, §1). The term “ego” has its origins from Latin, meaning “I” (Stein, 1998), and comprises the subjective experience of my personality through my senses, emotions, and thoughts. Importantly, “[t]he relation of a psychic content to the ego forms the criterion of its consciousness, for no content can be conscious unless it is represented to that subject” (Jung, 1959/1969b, §1). Such psychic content is understood through ego-consciousness, where one’s knowledge about anything about themselves is perceived through their ego. The ego is the subject upon which all psychic content acts.

While the significance of the ego is clear, it also sets up how I approach this research. Mortality is an element of existence the ego has an ability to defend itself against (Becker, 1973, 1975), and no matter how skilled the ego becomes at such defences, finitude prevails. Yet, the ego exists as the subject through which such unconscious material surrounding death and mortality is made conscious. In order to study mortality while such defences are down, co-researchers viewed the television miniseries *Chernobyl* (Renck, 2019), functioning as a catalyst to increase co-researchers’ mortality salience to then reflect more fully upon their mortality. I then analyzed data based on the tenets of heuristic inquiry, which I will further outline in Chapter Four.

I recognize how my own history reflects how my ego encountered mortality at an early age. The more complete understanding of my mortal self was a challenge for me to understand and integrate into consciousness, and so, understandably, natural defences, such as my adolescent exploration of religion, helped to protect my ego from further understanding and integrating the full role my mortality would play on my lived experience. Yet, despite the worldview I had presently accepted, I experienced a sense of intrigue existing beyond simply my faith, as though I recognized a religious worldview could not satisfy what I sought to understand. I view this moment as what Moustakas (1990) defined as “tacit knowing” (p. 20); a personal knowledge that I understood deeply, yet was not consciously aware of at the time, nor of what constituted such knowledge (Sultan, 2019). It was an experience of tension for my ego, or, stated another way, an aspect of the unconscious posing a challenge to the defence keeping my ego-consciousness safe and comfortable within my religious worldview.

The unconscious, in contrast to the ego and according to Jung, contains all psychic material not directly accessible by ego-consciousness. It is understood to have greater potential than the ego because it is considered the “prime source of meaning, feeling, and value in the psyche and is autonomous of the ego” (Rowland, 2019, p. 13). Being that it is “the portion of the psyche lying outside of conscious awareness” (Stein, 1998, p. 234), it is understandable how an “encounter with the unconscious poses a radical challenge to thinking...[and] to language” (Romanyshyn, 2013, p. 314) through the ego attempting to assimilate the new unconscious material as it crosses the threshold of consciousness (von Franz, 1992). A useful example here is dream imagery. When someone awakens from a

dream, they might have some awareness or felt sense that they dreamed, yet it is not until they connect to a particular dream image that they can articulate what they dreamed. Once they do, they might connect to more and more dream material, and, in so doing, their ego is assimilating unconscious material into conscious awareness. Further, if one is able to make an interpretation of the underlying meaning of said dream symbolism, it might lead to greater conscious awareness of oneself through an integration of such unconscious material with consciousness. Unconscious energy can communicate to the ego through the symbolic, understood as a language through which the psyche communicates to the body (Jung, 1974/2011). Succinctly put for the purposes of this research, “what is unconscious to me in everyday life is simply that which existentially is but remains unseen or unknown” (Craig, 2008, p. 271), such as the existential given of our finitude we might (un)consciously defend against.

Although it might be unsettling to acknowledge how much exists beyond one’s present awareness, it is also important to understand the unconscious as integral to human nature. Stein (1998), citing Jung, understands that “the whole world hangs on a thread and that thread is the human psyche. It is vital that we all become more familiar with it” (p. 2). To acknowledge the significance of unconscious aspects of the psyche is to loosen the rigidity of the ego (Doherty, 2017). Rowland (2005) recognizes the risk in failing to honour the significance of the unconscious when she writes, “[a]nything derived merely from rationality risks being profoundly inauthentic unless it also bears witness to the destabilizing presence of the unconscious” (p. 23).



Doherty (2017) also explores how the human psyche is created from and exists in intimate relationship with our planet and the cosmos, recognizing that deep inner growth at the individual level requires “facing the unfamiliar” (p. 8) within the unconscious and that “we are Earth in human form” (p. 17). As we individuate, we also facilitate the individuation of our planet and the cosmos, upon which we are integrally dependent (Eppert, 2021), accepting that humans belong to a larger mode of the universe (Doherty, 2017). Romanyshyn (2013) understands that to acknowledge the inexplicable presence of the unconscious is to accept that:

the human world is a symbolic creation, a transformation of nature into cultural texts whose symbolic character displays itself, for example, in the way in which an age builds its buildings, writes its stories, mythologizes archetypal moments in the human drama like birth and death, illness and aging, marriage and family practices, worships its divinities, and develops its arts and practices of politics, economics, medicine, education and so on. (p. 317)

This lens acknowledges how vital the unconscious is towards the role and function of mortality on the experience of being. Defence against mortality salience, therefore, becomes a compromise against being fully human through a valuation of the ego without an attempt at acknowledging the vast influence of unconscious processes. Such a position lies in contrast to Becker (1973) who believed that to live fully unrepressed from the reality of our existential lot would result in being “reborn into madness” (p. 66).

Furthermore, Jung distinguished between the personal and the collective unconscious, of which the personal unconscious is a more superficial layer than the collective unconscious

and is unique to each individual. The personal unconscious includes material that has once been conscious and has been repressed or forgotten and is largely understood and related to one's personal experience (Jung, 1959/1969a).

The collective unconscious, on the other hand, "does not...owe its existence to personal experience and consequently is not a personal acquisition" and whose contents "have never been in consciousness, and therefore have never been individually acquired, but owe their existence exclusively to heredity" (Jung, 1959/1969a, §88). The collective unconscious is thus a radically alive and magnetic force impacting all humans. Whereas the personal unconscious is unique to each individual's psyche, the collective unconscious is a "psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals" (Jung, 1959/1969a, §90). It consists of pre-existent forms known as archetypes, that Rowland (2019) understands as "non-specific meaning-generating impulses" shaped by historical tradition "while being neither the origin nor the determining source" (pp. 13-14). Archetypes, according to von Franz (1992), are "the psychic preconditions of our entire human existence, and we can go neither over nor around them" (p. 19).

The ego, personal unconscious, and collective unconscious all comprise aspects of the psyche, which includes both the conscious and unconscious psychological processes together (von Franz, 1992). Although some debate exists, for the purposes of this current research, the term soul can be used synonymously with psyche, acknowledging one of the defining characteristics is its teleological nature, i.e., that it is future-focused and goal-oriented (Rowland, 2019).

Jung (1954/1968) writes that “[o]ne does not become enlightened by imaging figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious” (§335). His statement helps to position the nature and trajectory of this research. As already explored, the awareness of one’s mortality brings with it a great amount of psychological weight. For the conscious ego it is understandable why anxieties surrounding one’s morality would be relegated to the unconscious and defended against. Yet if the human naturally proceeds along the path of individuation as suggested by Jung, such relegation succeeds only to comfort one’s consciousness at the cost of some unconscious energy. Jung (1959/1969a) describes the importance of such psychological balance between the conscious and the unconscious:

Conscious and unconscious do not make a whole when one of them is suppressed and injured by the other. If they must contend, let it be a fair fight with equal rights on both sides. Both are aspects of life. Consciousness should defend its reason and protect itself, and the chaotic life of the unconscious should be given the chance of having its way too—as much of it as we can stand. This means open conflict and open collaboration at once.... It is the old game of hammer and anvil: between them the patient iron is forged into an indestructible whole, an “individual.” (§522)

Exploring the nature of mortality is an attempt to enter into the dance between these psychic processes, and perhaps make conscious new aspects of the psyche as a means of understanding life and how it might best be lived *because* of death.

### ***Intentionality of the Psyche***

Regarding the psyche, Jung emphasized the role of archetypes, placing significance upon these “universal images common to the whole of mankind to be understood as aesthetic

forms with a transcendent intentionality” (Schenk, 2017, p. 3). He, therefore, “strove to stake out ground for the progressive and teleological aspects of the spiritual and religious functioning of the psyche” (p. 3). In relation to this dissertation, Jung’s theory of archetypes encourages one to consider that psychic life exists and functions beyond ego-consciousness. Stated another way, life (and death) is not contained solely within the limitations of the ego. In order to explore the nature of mortality, then, it is important to adopt a recognition that the unconscious, within which archetypal energies reside, can inform and influence conscious life.

**Life and Libido.** Jung conceptualized various animated structures of the psyche. He used the term libido, which he understood as hypothetical life energy (Jung, 1960/1975, §32), or, according to Stein (1998), “the life blood of the psyche” (p. 59). Using the metaphor of electricity, libido is the differentiation between being “on” and being “off” (p. 60). This energy, according to Jung, shares a relationship with physics in that it is governed by the same laws (e.g., energy is neither created nor destroyed, only transformed) and concerns the relationships between objects—in the realm of the psyche, the ways in which psychic objects can affect one another (Stein, 1998). This idea suggests there is an inherent relationship between the psychic and physical world. Jung (1960/1975) viewed psyche and matter not as independent parallel processes, but instead as being “essentially connected” (§33).

Libidinal energy has the capacity to move and flow, and activate different structures within the psyche. It also has a significant relationship to conceptions of life and death, in that libido actually arises from a tension between life and death forces (Jung, 1960/1975). Functioning psychically, “death and life are primarily symbolic representations of

primordially opposed energies that transform the psyche's energy" (Yiassemides, 2014, p. 76). Such is also the case when grounded in the physical, given that a human life is said to become animated and alive between the physical and opposite limits of birth and death. An understanding of libido and its relationship between the psychic existential givens of life and death appears to set up a paradox within which all of life is experienced.

### *The Self*

Jung, and analytical psychology more broadly, understands this active, libidinal energy to form the basis for its conception of individuation, wholeness, and the archetype<sup>4</sup> of the Self (Jung, 1959/1969b). This "intentionality of the psyche" (Schenk, 2017, p. 3) is thus concerned with human potential into the future, informing and encouraging the individuation process, understood by Jung (1959/1969a) as "the natural course of life—a life in which the individual becomes what he [sic] always was" (§84). The ego exists along an axis in relation to the archetype of the Self, "the God within us" (Jung, 1953/1966, §399), and the process of individuation involves the interaction and negotiation between the ego and the Self throughout the course of life (Kailo, 1997). The Self as a concept is an "ordering principle at the core of psychic life" and attempts to reflect "the wholeness of the human psyche" (Marlan, 2005, p. 212).

From such a lens, my experience as a teenager serves as an example of ego/Self negotiation in relation to my own process of individuation. Confronted with a decision to more deeply pursue a Christian faith at 14, I had an awareness that the pursuit had to be

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<sup>4</sup> A discrepancy is introduced in this work when trying to reconcile the theory of archetypes within an existentialist worldview that understands existence prior to essence. I acknowledge this discrepancy while also noting scholars who have argued that archetypes are not essential, but occur through complex relationships between mind, body, and environment. For a more in-depth discussion on this matter, please see Colman (2018).

undertaken wholeheartedly, with a recognition that this “God” may not provide the salvation the faith suggested. Along with a level of rational consideration about the choice—here understood through ego processes—there was also a level of intuitive sense that the pursuit was towards something beyond an understanding of the nature of God. Something beyond the pursuit itself was at play, which can be interpreted as an intuitive sense from the nature of the Self, “the God within [me]” (Jung, 1953/1966, §399).

The Self is more than one’s subjectivity, and within it, “subject and object, ego and the other are joined in a common field of structure and energy” (Stein, 1998, p. 152). Of transcendental quality not defined by or contained within the psyche, Jung’s idea of the Self equates to the idea of wholeness and is achieved “if a spontaneously unfolding psychic process is followed to its own logical end and is permitted to express itself fully” (pp. 155-156). The notion of the Self is important for this research in that, whatever ways one’s mortality is psychically defended against,<sup>5</sup> it is perhaps the case that such energy fails to be integrated into ego-consciousness and prevents this “spontaneous unfolding psychic process” to occur.

From an analytical psychology perspective, whatever awareness of death that may be present within consciousness constitutes a fundamental element of what makes a complete human. Jung writes that, upon an individual working to understand their inner world and move into closer relationship with the archetype of the Self, “there follows an integration or

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<sup>5</sup> I am inclusive of many theoretical perspectives that understand defence mechanisms. For example, defences can involve the repression of unsettling psychic material outside of conscious awareness or projecting such material to be held by some external Other, functioning like a hook onto which one hangs a coat (von Franz, 1978/1980). Specific to mortality salience, a terror management theory (TMT) lens views four categories of defences related to human behaviour: derogation (belittling others with differing worldviews), assimilation (attempting to recruit others into our beliefs), accommodation (appropriating elements of another’s worldview), and annihilation (destruction of the other) (Solomon et al., 2015).

completeness of the individual, who in this way approaches wholeness but not perfection, which is the ideal” (Jung, 1963/1970, §616). Jacoby (1994) paraphrased an element of Jung’s understanding of wholeness nicely:

Perfection excludes all that is shadowy, disturbing, and imperfect, whereas completeness or wholeness must, by definition, include all that is dark, shadowy, and imperfect. As a result, there is bound to be considerable tension between my drive toward perfection and my acceptance of the reality of my being, with its particular shadows and flaws. (p. 105)

Although there can be healthy understandings of perfection—ones that motivate and encourage one towards challenge and growth—here, Jacoby (1994) spoke to striving towards a perfection that, in turn, denies all that which is imperfect. Instead, Jung understood that to truly exist is to accept this tension of opposites within our soul—life and death, dark and light, good and evil.

Death, for Jung, does not carry with it a burdensome psychological weight. Instead, he believes that “death is psychologically as important as birth and, like it, is an integral part of life” (Jung, 1957/1967, §68). The tension between the polarity of life and death might explicate important insights surrounding the nature of creativity and the individuation process. As a result, engagement with one’s mortality might reflect an important aspect of individual development through the course of life, and can be considered alongside Vail III et al.’s (2012) acknowledgement that reflecting on the nature of one’s death can have generative outcomes, as I discussed in Chapter One.

Stated another way, an ability to integrate the nature of mortality into ego-consciousness reflects a practice of wholeness and is the way of the Self, which is Jung's interpretation of living in Tao, related to the ancient Asian wisdom tradition Taoism (Stein, 1998). Marlan (2021) understands that "the movement from the light of ego consciousness to the light of the larger vision of the Self in psychological terms is the work of Taoist alchemy" (p. 104) through bringing together the light of the Original and conscious spirit. The aim of the process of individuation is an affirmative answer to the question, "have the two lights become one?" (p. 104), representative of the union of yin and yang in the Tao.

It might be assumed that the process of individuation strictly occurs with and for the individual human psyche. However, Osterhold (2021) discusses the individuation process and death anxiety alongside terror management theory, commenting on how these concepts relate to cultural polarization and radicalization. The author notes that although Jung's concept of individuation has been criticized by some as engaging in a rather Western, indulgent form of individualism, he returns to Jung who recognized it instead as "a function of relationship to the world of objects, bringing the individual into absolute, binding, and indissoluble communion with the world at large" (Jung, 1953/1966, §275). Osterhold recognizes that barriers along the path of individuation may result in an individual coming to equate their own godlikeness with a universal validity through a projection of their own unconscious shadows. He uses the example of United States Democrats and Republicans who each may view the other as a particular form of evil, when at least a degree of their criticism and judgement reflects a failure to acknowledge the possession of similar qualities within themselves.



In conversation with terror management theory, Osterhold (2021) views the relationship between death anxiety and individuation as “complex and multi-directional” (p. 941). Defending against acknowledging our mortality can promote group conformity towards cultural polarization that can enact harm towards others, while it can also promote pro-social behaviours such as volunteerism and fundraising during times of heightened collective crisis. The author concludes by appreciating death anxiety as a “reality shaping” and “under-estimated force in psyche and world” (p. 942). Marlan’s (2005) discussions on the nature of wholeness perhaps resolve some of this complexity, where, on account that the psyche can acknowledge death, the process of individuation towards wholeness *must* include coming into greater psychological awareness of one’s finitude. To accept one’s individual inevitability while simultaneously accepting “the indissoluble communion with the world at large” (Jung, 1953/1966, §275) is an invitation to consider relationship and community being at the heart of the process of individuation. Stated otherwise, if the expansion of consciousness along this journey does not foster a greater degree of acceptance, compassion, and communion towards another—working to bring together as opposed to push apart—then perhaps an element of death anxiety has been left repressed and disintegrated from conscious awareness.

As a result of the collective experience of mortality surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, and the related cultural polarization and radicalization, Osterhold (2021) argues that death anxiety and mortality salience are at an all time high. Left unacknowledged and repressed within the psyche, death anxiety can become externalized in a form of othering that results in the polarization and radicalization to which the author speaks. Alternatively, the

psyche's ability to consciously recognize and integrate mortal awareness reflects a level of conscious expansion along the process of individuation, and reflects a dwelling within the greatest of existential opposites—life and death.

Osterhold (2021) succeeds in setting up a theoretical basis between analytical psychology and terror management theory, which is one of the only studies I have uncovered to do so<sup>6</sup>, and shares an aim with my research journey. Applying these theoretical perspectives to a study with co-researchers focuses the theoretical towards a living, experiential understanding of mortality which can lead to greater nuance surrounding how these intrapsychic processes relate to the individual and collective psyche while bolstering Osterhold's (2021) work, which I return to in Chapter Six.

Analytical psychology preserves that the whole is never merely the sum of its parts. The tradition acknowledges a spiritual nature of the human condition and its potentialities, and that we, as humans, are on a trajectory towards such potential. Such a telos also invites me to this research, for historically I have largely considered human mortality to be an unfortunate circumstantial element that comprises the human condition, whereas an acknowledgment of such a teleological nature of the human psyche invites and encourages greater curiosity, and it is in this direction that I intend to travel.

### **Death in Depth Psychology**

The following section explores key scholars interested in how depth psychology currently orients to the nature of mortality within the psyche. How mortality is currently understood through this lens can evoke a curiosity about the experience of mortality among

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<sup>6</sup> Kalsched (2021) also takes up this connection, which I introduce in the coming pages.

curriculum studies graduate students and what these implications might be for the field of curriculum studies as I approach the interview and analysis phases of my research journey.

Hillman and Shamdasani (2013), reflecting on Jung's own journey into his unconscious, echo his conclusion that "unless we come to terms with the dead we simply cannot live, and that our life is dependent on finding answers to their unanswered questions" (p. 1). Analytical psychology offers important contributions towards an understanding of the nature of death in life through the unconscious. The following section focuses on the theme of death within depth psychology in connection to dreams, alchemy, and the death drive, and reflects an oscillation between the heuristic processes of immersion and incubation (Sultan, 2019). This dual process involves providing a "sample [of] the vast array of information available about [my] research topic," while also giving myself time "to step away from the literature and allow the information [I] have received to brew" (p. 11).

### ***Mortality, Alchemy, and Paradox***

Analytical psychology explores the parallel processes of psyche and matter through the concept of alchemy and, therefore, can assist in understanding the nature of mortality in the psychic world through an understanding of death in the physical world. Alchemy was understood initially as a precursor to chemistry whereby individuals attempted to transform matter—for example, from lead into gold—before Jung began to explore similar principles psychically. He recognized that "alchemical operations were real, only this reality was not physical but psychological. Alchemy represents the projection of a drama both cosmic and spiritual in laboratory terms" (Jung, 1952, as cited in Marlan, 2005, p. 9). Stated another way, "the psyche mirrors matter" (von Franz, 1992, p. 18); the capacity for physical

transformation reflects a similar capacity for psychic transformation, based on the understanding that structures of the mind are related to and function within the same laws of the structures of matter (von Franz, 1992).

*Nigredo*, a beginning process in alchemy that reflects the process of decaying or decomposing, comprises the symbolic equivalent of the first stage of a descent into the unconscious (Marlan, 2005). This process may be reflected by the symbol of the *Sol niger*, or black sun, within the unconscious—an image Jung explored in his later writings on the subject of alchemy. This image of the *Sol niger*, along with such symbols as blackness, *putrefactio*, *mortificatio*, the *nigredo*, poisoning, torture, killing, decompositions, rotting, and death, are said to “form a web of interrelationships that describe a terrifying, if most often provisional, eclipse of consciousness or of our conscious standpoint” (Marlan, 2005, p. 11). As a parallel to alchemical processes, *nigredo* can represent a destabilizing force to the ego when an individual is overwhelmed with unconscious content, which can be experienced as suffering and grief when one comes to learn the illusory nature of past realities. For example, Kalsched borrowed the term *Umbra Mundi* from Stein (Stein, 2020, as cited in Kalsched, 2021) to describe the psychological shadow of death that overwhelmed the global consciousness at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was a parallel eclipse of collective physical trauma and a psychological trauma that “outstrips and disrupts the psyche’s capacity for representation” (Levine, 2014, p. 214) making it “impossible to formulate...new experience” (Stern, 2017, p. 501). The physical ending of life throughout COVID-19 is paralleled by the psychic death of creativity through trauma’s capacity to hijack the imagination (Kalsched, 2021). When the psyche is overwhelmed by death, it can

overtake the creative capacity of the soul. What is the human potential when death exists in balance with the psyche's recognition of life, and how might this intersect with the field of curriculum studies?

Marlan (2005) expertly explores an important alchemical element related to mortality. He notes that "[t]he black sun [or *Sol niger*] is a paradox. It is blacker than black, but it also shines with a dark luminescence that opens the way to some of the most numinous aspects of psychic life" (p. 5). I acknowledge, along with Marlan, that such a paradox is a departure from the modern world's tendency towards viewing white and black as opposites (p. 99) as well as a Western acceptance as light being separate from darkness (p. 97). This *lumen naturae* is the light of darkness itself, a collapse of the 'opposites' of light and dark, white and black, towards "a diurnal rhythm [where] the contrast is essential to consciousness" (Marlan, 2005, p. 93, citing Towbin).

Although modern Western society may understand light/dark and black/white conventionally as opposites, the recognition of these traditionally incompatible opposing phenomena coming together and existing in intersubjective fullness evokes a curiosity when considering the psychic importance of the black sun. This is an image Marlan (2005) finds to be "linked to the deepest issues of our mortality" (p. 3), especially through the acknowledgement that "blackness is not the end but the starting point for a subtle, almost inexpressible, light" (p. 90). What is the nature of this psychic light that we might begin to express through fuller and deeper acknowledgement of such a profound symbol of death? Might mortality itself present a psychic starting point in terms of *currere*, the running of the course of life (Pinar, 1974)? We can visit Kristeva's (1989) exploration of the black sun from

a psychoanalytical perspective for one such answer. Here, Kristeva explores creation through describing the story of an analysand named Isabel, who desired to give birth to a child amidst her own melancholia. Her experience is synonymous not only to the mythic parallels of the killing of life in synchrony with the birth of life—such as can be seen in Goya's (1823) *Saturn Devouring His Son*—but also towards the expression of the death drive (forthcoming), from which destruction is the cause of coming into being (Spielrein, 1912/1994). Marlan's (2005) exploration of alchemy offers important insights into the psychic nature of paradox related to mortality, and alludes to a creative potential lying within. Within the unconscious are images of this apparent collapse of opposites, here reflected in the nature of darkness and luminosity, then creating an eclipse reflective of a new starting point of becoming, as mentioned above. What is initially understood to be incompatible between death/life is now existing in a dynamic psychic harmony, where neither pole is overwhelmed by the other.

Although the ego might understand death to be an ultimate end, alchemical explorations suggest that mortality for the psyche in its entirety presents a beginning/ending couplet, reflecting a particular collapsing paradox between dark/light, death/life, beginning/ending. This idea deepens my curiosity surrounding the nature of mortality and how it might be lived through the co-researchers of this study. Although the nature of my dissertation does not directly involve exploring specific alchemical symbols with my co-researchers, themes of paradox emerged during the interview process with co-researchers that can be understood through such alchemical processes, which assisted in explicating the phenomenon of mortality and bridging connections to curriculum studies.

Elsewhere, Edgar Herzog (1983), a German psychotherapist, traced a similar collapsing paradox of death and life in his exploration into death symbolism through folklore and mythology. In his work, he explored ethnological and mythological material, focused on the psychological reaction to death of people throughout the history of Western culture. He then used dreams from individuals in psychotherapy to show how dreams of death images reflect the overall develop and maturation of the psyche. He arrived at an understanding that death images “show a deep and hidden knowledge of the polarity of death and life—of the fact that death is not only darkness, decline and ending, but also light, ascent, fulfillment and blessing of life” (p. 84). One can view life and death on a polarity, held together by a linear conception of time (where it would follow that no two points in time can ever touch), and yet such an exploration into symbols of the unconscious suggest there is more to this mystery than a simple beginning and end. Herzog ended his discussion of death with a caution: “it would seem to be one of those secrets of which man [sic] can only become aware for brief moments—and that when he does the revelation is so deeply disturbing that it cannot be grasped and permanently held” (p. 84), similar to Yalom’s (2008) analogy of staring at the sun.

The above alchemical reflections evoke a sense of humility for my own experience of existence. As soon as I touch the recognition of existence as a temporal collapse of opposing polarities, I notice my inability to ground my own thinking or feeling in anything concrete aside from an acknowledgement of the present moment. It is surely an experience of tension, but within it I am invited to wonder anew, and in so being, I connect to its creative potential. It is in this space I feel comforted by my own not-knowing. In this tension-filled space of

wonder I am curious and fascinated with how little one may know about the nature of mortality (and, therefore, existence), and how important it may be to evoke a deeper sense of wonder into what it means to be alive through a recognition of our death. For, to explore life and death is also to explore the nature of paradox, polarity, and linearity all collapsing and being held together by each other. Herzog's conclusion may also allude to a birthplace for creativity, to be discussed in a forthcoming section.

My intuition—the bridge between the implicit and explicit (Moustakas, 1990)—has continued to spark a curiosity surrounding the nature of paradox. I am enlivened by the literature surrounding it, especially in how I find it to relate to mortality. I am curious how two opposing things (or perhaps only opposing to the extent humans have come to language and understand them) can exist simultaneously together, in what, on the surface, appears to be idiosyncratic.

Importantly, Marlan's (2005) exploration of the black sun arrives at an important discussion in reference to the nature of the Self and as a response to my exploration of the nature of paradox. He writes, “[c]oncepts as well as symbols of wholeness and expressions of totality have a tendency to degenerate and move toward abstraction as idealized and rational conceptualizations that seduce us into forgetting that they fundamentally reflect an unknown” (p. 213). Although analytical psychology explores images and symbols, such as the mandala which symbolizes wholeness and the archetype of the Self, Marlan humbly admits a reality that easily gets lost along the way—that as theories surrounding the nature of the Self or discussions of wholeness are explored, the idea falls to the same fate as all ideas do; that is,



they lose their original mystery, awe, and unknowable quality, the very unknowable qualities that comprise their existence.

And so, Marlan (2005) expertly points to the shadow cast even by the archetype of the Self, arriving at an understanding of the non-Self, which is another name for the Self but “is founded in the recognition of the problematics involved in any representation of wholeness and a mark for the profound expression of this mystery” (p. 213). Here, he acknowledges the non-Self as “a darkness that is light and a light that is darkness” (p. 214), which, in itself, is a glimpse of *Sol niger*. There is a resonance in this conception of the non-Self casting its own shadow with Asian philosophies and religions that understand Nothingness as a fundamental aspect of psychological life (Marlan, 2005). Stated differently, “every psychological synthesis becomes in effect a thesis that constitutes a new antithesis” (Brooke, 2015, p. 99). The concept of Self, along with wholeness, is therefore an idealized concept, a “dream of totality” (Serrano, 1968, p. 50) of which Jung understood. The conception of psychic totality represented by the non-Self not only transcends the ego, but also encompasses death—the very non-being upon which Freud (1926) argued cannot be contemplated. Because this unknowable aspect of the (non-)Self is a part of its very essence, if one co-opts such a concept as an achievable goal or the end to which the means of life justify, it runs the risk of becoming strictly an ego-centric idea. To accept wholeness as an achievable end sets up the process of individuation as yet another version of an immortality project functioning to defend oneself against their inevitable end, as opposed to this “glimpse of *Sol niger*” (Marlan, 2005, p. 214). Examples of this might be seen when particular worldviews—religious or otherwise—prescribe a particular ethic of living that claims to

result in some sense of existential, emotional, or psychological ‘arrival’ (e.g., living in accordance to certain principles in order to gain entry to heaven where there is no suffering; believing having a marriage and children to be ‘the perfect life;’ making sacrifices for the ‘perfect’ career). Although in and of itself there might be nothing inherently wrong with accepting the path of individuation as an immortality project, one must then ask “from what is this project defending me?,” again subverting one’s ability to explicate the human psyche, keeping intact all of the awe, mystery, and wonder it contains.

### *The Language of Dreams*

I turn now more explicitly to the topic of dreams. Analytical psychology recognizes dreams as a language through which the soul communicates with the body (Jung, 1974/2011). The material existing within dreams has the capacity to inform the dreamer’s consciousness, thus offering opportunity to integrate unconscious material into the ego. Understanding dreams from this lens further elaborates the nature of paradox in relation to mortality.

The Swiss Jungian psychologist and scholar Marie Louise von Franz (1984/1986) offers a parallel discussion of how death is expressed, albeit not through alchemy, but through dreams. Through studying and interpreting the dreams of her patients, von Franz hints towards a recognition that, in some form, an aspect of the psyche continues after death. She arrives at such a conclusion through exploring the symbol of vegetation within dreams among those who are close to death. Such a connection is made between these dream symbols and the archetypal idea that vegetation returns from where it came, along with the Christian motif found in the book of John: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and

dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24, as cited in von Franz, 1984/1986, p. 10). What von Franz puts forth through her interpretations of her patients’ dreams echos not only this Christian motif but also alludes to the role of destruction as the cause of coming into being (Spielrein, 1912/1994). The archetypal matter, the dream symbolism, and their connection to myth found within the Christian faith, all offer a curiosity about some level of continuity in some way of the human psyche beyond the physical death of the body.

Continuing along this vein, von Franz (1984/1986) acknowledges a universal “*continuation* of the life process, which lasts forever and which is beyond the opposites of life and death” (p. 13). I find it to be a fascinating thought that although we might hold a logical understanding that life very clearly continues—as we experience this all around us in many ways through the changing of seasons and the birth and death of those around us, for example—it would appear, through what von Franz puts forth, that the subjective psyche is capable of holding an understanding of something more objective than strictly the subject in which it is contained. This position speaks to a transcendental element of the psyche—beyond simply the subjective dreamer and existing beyond the level of merely the personal unconscious. Recognizing that death is an event hinting towards these larger mysteries relates back to the larger purpose of this research—an exploration into the nature of mortality in an attempt towards deeper engagement with such mysteries surrounding the human psyche.

I am cautious in oversimplifying that life, in some way, merely continues after death, and am concerned that to accept such a belief might in itself be reflective of another immortality project to ease the weight of death on the ego. Canadian philosopher and

psychoanalyst Jon Mills (2006) offers what I believe might be the appropriate complexity to von Franz's position when he understands death as "an ontological category for unconscious experience that can never elude psychic existence" (p. 375). His position acknowledges that psychically we are living death all of the time—death lives and moves and breathes within the psyche and, consequently, is a psychological element of life itself. A question arises from such a recognition: How might one best live alongside their mortality throughout the experience of life? This question reflects an ontological shift away from the nature of how one best *cope*s with their mortality through (un)conscious defence mechanisms—as suggested by terror management theory (Solomon et al., 2015)—and that a life fully unrepressed from the nature of death would result in madness (Becker, 1973). *Coping* with death (i.e., what we ought to *do* about death) tends to be the major focus surrounding death in the field of curriculum studies, which I will discuss in the coming literature review. However, my dissertation attempts to attend to this ontological shift by exploring the living experience of mortality among curriculum studies graduate students (i.e., what *is* death). This investigation may then help to advance this line of questioning towards new possibilities within curriculum studies.

Von Franz's (1984/1986) analysis of dream symbolism leads to something similar to the image of the black sun—the opposite ends of two (supposed) polarities collapse into one. She finally cites a dream exploring how such a 'fight' between opposites is perhaps not a fight at all, but instead a more natural expression of the psyche:

Two prize-fighters are involved in a ritual fight. Their fight is beautiful. They are not so much antagonists in the dream as they are collaborators, working out an elaborate, planned design. They are calm, unruffled and concentrated. At the end of each round

they retire to a dressing room. In the dressing room they apply “makeup.” I watch one of them dip his finger in some blood and smear it on the face of his opponent and himself. They return to the ring and resume their fast, furious but highly controlled performance. (1984/1986, p. 21)

Taking both fighters together as one reflects the Self—the archetype of wholeness that comprises the unity of opposites. In connection to my present research, studying the experience of mortality among co-researchers might evoke similar tensions between conventional opposites such as life and death, and might connect to the nature of creativity and becoming related to the field of curriculum studies. Any ways in which tensions are identified, experienced, felt, and/or worked through by co-researchers—such as through felt emotions and reactions, associations to symbols within the text, memories recalled through viewing the text, dreams, identifications with particular characters within the text, or otherwise—provides important insights for this study while also reflecting a step in the “unfolding psychic process” (Stein, 1998, p.155) of individuation towards wholeness.

Von Franz (1984/1986) notes how repressed psychic material can have a tendency of breaking through into the physical within those who find themselves at the end of life, citing an anecdote of a lifelong virgin who uttered sexual obscenities in his final moments, or those who express less than friendly sentiments towards their ‘loved ones’ at their bedsides.

Arguing that such examples reflect a lack of this psychic unity between opposites, von Franz concludes that “[t]he more a person has already been engaged in the struggle of the inner opposites before the approach of death, the more he can perhaps hope for a peaceful end” (p. 23).

The above statement deserves not to go understated. What von Franz points to, as far as I can comprehend, is the significance of living towards a resolution of such inner psychic tension between opposites,<sup>7</sup> This idea can be reflected in many ways and situations; however, within this work I am speaking most notably towards a life that is held together in harmony with death, i.e., that one's conscious ego works towards resolving tensions surrounding death, and that efforts towards doing so perhaps move us towards more peaceful relations—both within our own psyche and also interpersonally and collectively.

To elucidate a greater understanding of the nature of paradox—as briefly described above and as considered through the nature of mortality—points again to a potential outcome of this work. How might this tension of opposites appear within curriculum studies? What might one learn about “indwelling between two curriculum worlds” (Aoki, 1991, p. 169) through greater understanding of the relationship between death and life, a process intimately linked to individual development? A deep exploration into the nature of mortality might influence how we approach this process, as well as other, important elements within the discipline of curriculum studies. It was important for me to attend to the symbolic throughout the interview process with my co-researchers, recognizing that what they share consciously takes root in their unconscious processes. Attending to not only the nature of what was shared, but also remaining open to what it might represent, assisted in adding texture to the interpretive work that was asked of this study.

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<sup>7</sup> I recognize that a complete resolution or reconciliation of such tension might very well be impossible, while noting the importance of acknowledging it as a theoretical possibility.

### *The Death Drive*

It is also important to introduce the highly relevant concept of the death drive in relation to the theoretical foundation for this work. Originating from psychoanalysis, it is a concept first introduced by Sabina Spielrein—a Russian physician and psychoanalyst—in 1912 that was later taken up by Freud in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920. It has been understood as a tendency for an organism to return to a pre-organic, inanimate state (Freud, 1920/2003, p. 38). The death drive suggests a primordial impulse towards death and destruction that can result in aggression or masochism (Freud, 1920/2003). It is set in tension against the drive towards growth and unification, resulting in the creation of a polarity between life and death (Mills, 2006). Freud went so far as to consider death existing within every experience of absence and presence or being and nothingness.

Freud's concept of the death drive has been taken up by many important theorists who came after him. Some have argued that it did not gain much acceptance within the psychoanalytic community (see Jones, 1964 for a discussion), while others argued that quick dismissal of Freud's theory of the death drive comes from an inability to grasp its complexity (Mills, 2006). As a result of the latter, it is important to the current discussion that such a position not be ignored. This absence/presence, being/nothingness couplet can most certainly be seen through the exploration of creativity in the next section of this chapter, where creativity appears to thrive within the tension of the opposing limits of existence, life and death.

Within the death drive is the curious path of paradox in relation to death. In her original work, Spielrein (1912/1994) recognizes that in the process of forming new life, the

cell of both a female and male come together, resulting in the death of each of the old cells. In other species, the creation of new life can result in the destruction of the adult through the process of reproduction. Death is, therefore, a requirement in order for life to occur, somewhat similar to the law of conservation of energy where energy is neither created nor destroyed—all must exist in balance, with energy flowing from death to life, and vice versa. This paradox is aptly captured in the title of her work, *Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being*; that being in itself requires the very capacity for destruction of such being, as present in and through the conceptualization of the death drive within the psyche. To accept the above is to align with the position of death as understood by Mills (2006), that is, that death is “an ontological category for unconscious experience that can never elude psychic existence” (p. 375). Death is within the psyche in the same way as life, existing “among the various complexes that struggle with each other for priority” (Spielrein, 1912/1994, p. 160). The work of Spielrein and Freud surrounding the nature of the death drive helps to set up the following exploration of the nature of creativity in relation to death, which can then have strong connections to curriculum studies, which will be explored further in Chapter Three.

### ***Death and Creativity***

The work of Rosemary Gordon (1977), a British academic and analytical psychologist, outlined a significant relationship between death and creativity. In her studies, she differentiated positive and negative symbols of death, and encountered negative symbols such as empty fruit, the severing of plants, drowning, etc., while also encountering themes of renewal through broader symbolism of the life cycle of plants, an old sower, a sea journey, etc. What she understood as a “whole iconography of death” (p. 114) within dream



symbolism supported her hypothesis that the “fear of death resides in the ego,” the same psychological realm that “serves the needs for individuality, separateness, achievement and relationship to the realities of both the outer and inner world” (p. 113). Here, Gordon effectively pointed to the importance of the relationship between inner and outer in relation to the function of death. Healthy ego development involves one becoming aware of one’s separateness from their external world. An inevitable result of such separateness is the acknowledgement of dying, understood here as “the loss of the ego” (p. 113). This separateness between inner and outer most certainly results in a tension, through the acknowledgment of one’s identity inevitably coming to an end while the world continues on. The existential psychotherapist Rollo May (1967) alludes to this tension when he writes, “[t]he human dilemma is that which arises out of a man’s [sic] capacity to experience himself as both subject and object at the same time” (p. 8, italics removed). A similar, perhaps more poetic sentiment, is offered by Becker (1975):

Man [sic] is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever. (p. 26)

Here I am reminded of my own experience of becoming aware of my mortality at a young age while my ego was becoming organized, resulting in my initial awareness of my finitude, and struggling to accept and integrate such a reality into my identity. An aspect of life, for Gordon, is thus to tolerate the egoic perception of separateness between one’s inner and outer worlds. The separateness is that which is threatened by death, suggesting that death (of the ego) implies a return, or union, to that which one came.

Gordon (1977) further connects death and creativity through the nature of paradox. Here, Gordon identifies that the creative process “seems to depend on man’s [sic] capacity to mobilize contradictory but mutually reciprocal qualities: activity and passivity; consciousness and unconsciousness” (p. 115). Arriving once again at the nature of paradox, “creativity depends on a person’s being able both to use his [sic] ego functions and to surrender his [sic] ego functions” which opens space for the experiences of “surprise, wonder, awe” (p. 116). The simultaneous utilization and surrender of ego becomes an allowing for something beyond our consciousness to emerge, yet can be understood as a death for the ego through its necessity to surrender. Creativity, for Gordon, is intimately tied to the psychological process of symbolization, which “involves the ability to experience the existence of links between objects which are also recognized as separate and distinct” (p. 118). The creative process is thus an experiencing simultaneously of what is both “individual and what is universal in any particular object or situation” (p. 118).

Shifting my gaze inward in a process of indwelling (Sultan, 2019) in relation to Gordon’s (1977) understanding of creativity, I acknowledge that I have an identity within a body separate from other bodies and identities, *and* I am part of the collective and universal, born into existence from the world through the most fundamental act of creativity. It is the world creating us, forming us into being, while recognizing we are required to always be a part of where we came. The process of forming and understanding an identity as separate from others and one’s world is psychologically reflected in the nature of one’s ego. Within the “I” of the ego (Stein, 1998) is an implicit acknowledgement of the separateness between me and you. Yet the origins of both your ego and mine come from a similar place and into

existence through a creative act. Life and death perhaps function as the greatest existential paradox, operating as the boundaries or limits within which existence itself occurs. And, if “psyche mirrors matter” (von Franz, 1992, p. 18), how death and life are encountered in one’s inner life might also have the capacity to express psychic creativity.

According to Gordon (1977), death “seems to be represented as a state of absorption in a union...which tends to preclude boundaries, differentiation and separateness” (p. 113). Such a statement offers clarity towards death being a return or an arrival. Freud understood earlier in his career that death is a goal of life itself (1920/2003), and Jung understood life energy, or libido, as resulting from the opposing life and death forces and directed towards the goal of a state of rest (Jung, 1960/1970). If death is to be understood as such, life carries one towards it through growth, development, and creativity. Gordon (1977) arrives at a hypothesis that those who are able to both die “well” and create well are “open and available both to the life forces as well as the death forces; and so they are available to the process of differentiation and integration on the one hand and to the process of de-differentiation on the other” (p. 122). Yiassemides (2014), in her work on time, understands the relationship to death and creativity similarly: “Death and life are primarily symbolic representations of primordially opposed energies that transform the psyche’s energy” and “through creative opposition wholeness is achieved” (p. 76).

In considering Gordon’s (1977) scholarship along with the above conceptualization of the death drive, I am reminded of my reflection on the leaves during my walk to work, arriving at a curiosity about whether the full presence of these leaves, or anything, can only truly be experienced in the capacity to imagine its absence. Perhaps the true joy of discovery

—or discovery itself—exists only through a possibility for absence. Both my personal reflection and the literature explored thus far reflects the trajectory of this work. I am curious how others experience their mortality and what insights can be gleaned through leaning into the phenomenon of mortality, along with implications might be explicated from such experiences for the field of curriculum studies. Importantly, themes of creativity emerged during my co-researcher interviews, which I will discuss more fully in upcoming chapters.

I believe the paradox between inner and outer, subject and object, and life and death, and the creative encounter that emerges in the chasm between, is beautifully explicated in the work of Maurice Blanchot (1981). Here, the French writer explores the Greek allegory of Orpheus and Eurydice, two lovers who are torn apart when Eurydice dies and is cast into the Underworld. Heartbroken, Orpheus implores the gods and is granted access to the Underworld in order to save Eurydice from death and return her to the world above, so long as he refrains from looking at her while guiding her back to the light. Just a moment before reaching daylight, Orpheus glances back at Eurydice and loses his lover forever.

The original myth is written in such a way to suggest that the Orphean Gaze was motivated by fear at the thought of losing Eurydice again, an emotion existing on one end of the existential opposites the *Umbra Mundi* forces us to choose between, as proposed by Kalsched (2021) above. Yet Blanchot (1981) offers another perspective; that Orpheus's motivation instead came from the opposite end of the existential polarity, a desire to see Eurydice in her completeness, inclusive of her being not just in the world but also as she exists below. Commenting on Blanchot's reading of the myth, van Manen (2014) writes, "the gaze of Orpheus expresses a desire that can never be completely fulfilled: to see the true

being of love, to see Eurydice in her pure invisibility” (pp. 141-142). Both Blanchot (1981) and van Manen (2006) explore how this myth relates to creativity through the creative act of writing, where “it is this veil of the dark that every writer tries to penetrate...one writes only if one has entered that space under the influence of the gaze, or perhaps it is the gaze that opens the space of writing” (van Manen, 2006, p. 717). The Orphean Gaze motivated by desire is not a desire towards death, but a desire towards encountering all that one is in its wholeness, which must in turn include its existence in death, within the Underworld.

It is here in the Underworld where the myth gives way to understand the creative act that thrives in the tension of opposites between life and death, the ego and the unconscious, and the inner and the outer. And what does it take to exist within this tension? May (1975) suggests that it requires courage to live in this tension within which the creative act is born, believing that “creativity comes from this struggle [between confronting death and rebelling against it]—out of the rebellion the creative act is born” (p. 31). To be clear, the creative act requires the loss of the loved object (Britzman, 2013); the separation and suffering of Orpheus and Eurydice is required.

### **Chapter Two Summary**

This chapter has laid the theoretical foundation for how my study has been carried out, focusing on how analytical psychology understands the nature of paradox and creativity in relation to mortality. The discussion aimed to provide a texture through which the remainder of the research might be understood, hopefully evoking a curiosity to how such themes might be expressed through co-researcher interviews and related to curriculum studies. In the next chapter, I will bridge these understandings with how the field of

curriculum studies has approached the nature of death, discussing relevant literature and identifying the need for my current research.

### Chapter Three: Death and the Curricular Condition

#### Introduction

The theoretical foundation outlined in the previous chapter explores the importance of mortality related to the human condition. Acknowledging that “curriculum theory and ethics are each concerned with the fundamental question of *how to live*” (Wallin, 2016, p. 39, italics original) curriculum studies *must* take into consideration such unconscious processes and their influences and effects upon the individual. Curriculum ought not to simply educate toward the ego’s end, but instead acknowledge that life—and *currere* itself as running the course of life (Pinar, 1974)—and death run hand in hand across the finish line. Depth psychology—inclusive of both analytical psychology as well as psychoanalysis—as it has been taken up within curriculum studies, has pointed to and strengthened the ways in which unconscious processes affect and influence the individual and pedagogy.

This chapter is subdivided into three main sections. First, I discuss and review the limited scholarship surrounding how the nature of death has been approached within curriculum studies. In the next section, I explore the intersection of analytical psychology and curriculum studies, focusing on a gap in mortality scholarship within this intersection. In the final section, I discuss the critical psychoanalytic scholarship that attends to the nature of mortality within curriculum studies before addressing how my study utilizes analytical psychology and psychoanalysis in tandem to effectively attend to the gap in scholarship surrounding the living experience of mortality among curriculum studies graduate students.

My literature search involved keyword searches within Google Scholar and Academic Search Complete through the University of Alberta Library. A search with various

combinations of the keywords “mortality,” “death,” “death education,” “curriculum studies,” “psychoanalysis,” “depth psychology,” “analytical psychology,” “Jungian psychology” revealed 68 articles and books I deemed relevant to review, the most relevant of which I take up in this chapter. Other works included in and informing my review have come through suggestions from others and my own independent reading.

The literature I reviewed rarely considered ‘mortality’ as a distinct field of study from ‘death,’ as I have importantly distinguished for this dissertation. Further, there is very little research focused strictly on mortality. As a result, the review leans towards taking up the nature of death and curriculum through the fields of death education and death studies—research areas focusing on the emotional aspects and issues of grief, loss, and bereavement. While I maintain the importance of differentiating between these two terms, I acknowledge how mortality is a living encounter with death—emotionally and psychically—and is therefore interwoven with the broader subject of death. As a result, reviewing the subject of death and how it relates to mortality serves to frame and locate the present study within the field of curriculum studies. Although not a fundamental aim of my study, I recognize as a result of this review the potential importance of providing a clear distinction between mortality studies and death studies within the literature, along with what new opportunities and possibilities might exist from a clearer distinction.

My process of this literature review most closely reflects a balance between the immersion and incubation (Sultan, 2019) phases of heuristic inquiry. While I spent hours searching, reading, and reviewing literature in the field, immersed in the scholarship surrounding my topic—I spent a similar length of time allowing the information to incubate.



Through writing several drafts of this chapter, the work that began as rather amorphous writing began to take shape, and with it, I found a greater degree of clarity forward in my conceptualizing and thinking about my topic. The process also involved a high degree of self-dialogue, constantly reflecting upon the new scholarship to which I was exposed, inviting me back to consider my own experience of the phenomenon, and back again to the literature.

### **The Scope of Death Within Curriculum Studies**

Over 40 years ago, psychology professor Fredric Agatstein (1979) made a call for death education to attend more to symbolic engagements with mortality as opposed to a reduction in anxiety surrounding death. His desire towards the symbolic paralleled what Jung called “the symbolic life,” placing central the role of the symbolic in “the intangible, unquantifiable, and delicate transformations of consciousness and emotion that transformative education promotes” (Mayes, 2016, p. 191). Agatstein argued the importance of thinking carefully about the nature of the relationship between attitudes towards death and the experience of mortality itself, critiquing those that study death with the aims of learning how to best reduce individuals’ death anxiety. Instead, “more attention is needed to a study of the phenomenology of the experiences expressed by the imagery and terminology of death and to the processes by which those experiences are adequately or inadequately given expression in attitudes” (p. 326), of which I relate to and frame as the study of ‘mortality’ as distinct from ‘death.’ Despite the age of Agatstein’s work, it would seem that too few scholars have taken seriously his call towards an exploration of what mortality *is* versus what we ought to *do* about it—most certainly within the field of curriculum studies. Decades after

Agatstein, Downey (2022) appears in agreement, and points to what he views as a general rule within education: “curriculum theory is more focused on life than death” (p. 18).

The single article I discovered in my review that does approach the nature of death phenomenologically warrants discussion in this chapter in order provide a further distinction between research that explores what death *is* as opposed to what death *does*, while setting up the important connection to curriculum studies. The article in question is written by psychoanalyst and scholar Peter Jevremović (2019), and in it he asks: How do we respond with language to the silence of death, a phenomenon characterized by ultimate absence? His reflection arrives at the following: “Being, mirrored in the face of death, is transformed. Death exiles death. New life triumphs” (p. 207). His noting of the paradox of inner confrontation with one’s mortality points to the curious thread that carries my interest in this topic. To confront my own mortality gives way to the most full experience and expression of life. The transformation of being in the face of death becomes the process of becoming, and, as Wallin (2016) asserts in curriculum theory being concerned with how to live, is therefore embedded within *currere* itself (Pinar, 1974).

Such appears the case for the confrontation with difficult knowledge within curriculum studies. Risking the uncertainty towards knowledge is an invitation to the unknown, and the process of learning is sometimes a violence destruction of what was once known. What exists for learning and *currere* appears to exist for life, and is summarized well by Jevremović (2019):

to live I must experience death, I must *accept the challenge—the tragic challenge*. If I wish to truly achieve a new beginning for myself, a new synthesis

of being and experience, I must go into the depths. Only when I am bold enough to face the tragic possibility that *I am not*, I appear as a *new and genuine man* [sic] to myself and others. Only when I openly confront death (and only when I boldly survive this confrontation)...will my life gain new quality. (p. 208, italics original)

Jevremović's (2019) work succeeds and aligns with the aims of my present study in that it explores the phenomenon of mortality. His work is grounded within psychoanalysis and focuses on the practice of psychotherapy, leaving a gap in the field for a similar phenomenological project related to curriculum studies. To explore the extent to which some of his above noted reflections appear within curriculum studies can help bridge and ground a deeper understanding of the nature of mortality within curriculum studies.

There are reasons for the absence of death playing a central role in the discipline of curriculum studies, despite how one might understand the entire discipline of Western education—and coloniality more broadly—as an immortality project in itself. The question of death for curriculum studies skews towards how to handle or manage death as it is experienced within education—either as it appears within the curriculum or in response to a loss within the school community. Although research understands that both parents and teachers should discuss death with children before they encounter it (McGovern & Barry, 2000) and that there is a need to support youth surrounding the topic of death (Engarhos et al., 2013), both parents and teachers report being uncomfortable talking and teaching about death as a general (and integral) part of life (McGovern & Barry, 2000). Broaching this broad yet inevitable experience within education is both complex and challenging. Holland (2008)

recognizes the social desire to protect children from the difficult emotions inherent in understanding and accepting death, potentially stemming from a belief of a lack of meaning surrounding death for children and that, consequently, they cannot understand it emotionally. However, it has also been recognized that the concept of death can be shaped by encountering death early in life, through the loss of someone close or through media and literature (Krepia et al., 2017), arguing that teachers and parents can help children form healthy understandings about the nature of death and dying. A level of skill in this area seems crucial given that a witnessing of death in childhood has been considered one of the most emotional and complex matters (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). The underlying question these studies seem to be asking is, *How do we do death in curriculum studies?*

### ***Attempting to Do Death***

How has curriculum studies attempted to *do* death? Some research has recommended that both parents and teachers avoid discussing death-related topics with children (Richardson, 1993, as cited in Lee 2009), in which case elements of loss, bereavement, grief, and the nuances of death become a form of “social knowledge” (Lee et al., 2009, p. 259) taught to children through various forms of media. One concern here is, for example, the possible misconceptions of death, such as it being only the ‘evil’ ones who die as a consequence for being bad (Lee et al., 2009), as is popularized in media entertainment. The disavowal of curricular topics on death contribute to its taboo status within the classroom (Testoni et al., 2020; Holland, 2008).

One reason for an absence of skill, comfort, or ability in allowing the topic of death to enter the classroom is a lack of knowledge, which might then result in limited competence

and confidence among teachers (Lynagh et al., 2010). However, one ought not to accept that death is best taught in hindsight after a child has experienced it—such as through the loss of someone in their personal life or the encounter of themes of death within the curriculum—which has also been a past belief of teachers (Engarhos et al., 2013). When students have been exposed to education surrounding death, it resulted in a reduction of anxiety surrounding death-related themes, encouraged authenticity and empathy, provided alternative perspectives on life, and, perhaps most importantly, offered “an opportunity to discuss something strongly heartfelt but rarely faced” (Testoni et al., 2020, p.1). Elsewhere, Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) have shed light on the complexities of exploring loss and grief related to death within curriculum studies and teacher education. Understandably, loss and grief within education and teacher training can be difficult, because this experience is one not easily faced, as “there is not much to do but patiently let its painful processes work upon and through one” (Eppert, 2020, p. 68). Yet, loss and destruction are everywhere—ecological and otherwise—and, so, it would seem important to make death within curriculum studies an “educational necessity” in order to avoid the denial and repression of the “potential pedagogical potencies of dark and difficult emotions” (p. 71).

Paul Brinich, scholar in the departments of psychology and psychiatry in North Carolina, acknowledged the opportunities school personnel have to support children who bring their experiences of death to school in the form of the immediate school “family” experiencing a personal loss. In his article (Brinich, 2019), he attempted to outline a psychologically sound and comprehensive plan of action for how schools can approach the inevitable nature of death for their students and the wider community. He concluded that

death presents a school with an important educational task, that generalities surrounding death tend not to be helpful, and that death is a “potent stimulant” (p. 231) of conscious and unconscious fantasies. The author cautioned withholding information from the school community, and argued that doing so allows for fantasy to fill in the gaps of whatever uncertainty remains. When it comes to educating about death, Brinich leans on the work of Furman, claiming that we can best understand death when we are most assured of our own safety (Furman, 1974, as cited in Brinich, 2019), but that safety, in part, paradoxically emerges from an understanding about death.

Brinich’s (2019) work follows a similar trajectory of most death education research, in that it works to understand how we best deal with, manage, and cope with the inevitability of death within schools. However, in following a similar path, it falls short in working to understand mortality—the living experience of death. In so doing, the author’s work points to the gap my study aims to fill while attempting to answer the call put forth by Agatstein (1979), that being an inquiry into what death *is* through examining the living experience of mortality. Deepening an understanding about this phenomenon might assist others to better understand how we might approach the topic of death within schools, the curriculum, and experiences of learning and life more broadly. Further, it opens space to discuss how experiences with death and dying within schools, and the curriculum, might provide opportunities to deepen one’s understanding of existence, rather than be viewed as mere hazards to be dealt with or coped through.

Research by Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) explored teachers’ perceptions and affective experiences of death education training. Their findings indicated that teachers

confronting a sense of uneasiness addressing the difficult knowledge of death was not new within school subjects. The authors advocate for enabling teachers to explore the affective complexities of engaging with death and loss in the classroom when such topics are brought up organically or within the curriculum. Understood from a depth psychology perspective, speaking through (and in spite of) the discomforts of the topic of death might ease some of the psychic conflict faced by such difficult knowledge. Yet, it is perhaps an important first step to reflect on how one approaches their own experience of mortality in order to learn how to do so within the classroom. My current study seeks to do just this: engage in a reflection upon one's own living experience of mortality. Doing so aims to create space for future considerations of how such psychic understandings might bolster the aims of addressing the topic of death within the curriculum. As an example, teachers encountering and moving through such discomforts and difficult knowledges (Britzman, 1998) themselves might assist and model capacities for students to do the same.

Other curriculum scholars have recently approached mortality within curriculum studies through the figure of the corpse as an object encountered through various curricular contexts, investigating “what a *dead* body can do for students' encounters with life and death across the curriculum” (Helmsing & van Kessel, 2020, p. 140, italics original). The authors explore the image and concept of the corpse as a curriculum of disgust, denial, dis- and remembering, and disruption, and how positioning the body beyond death “opens up new possibilities for thinking about relations between life/death” (p. 158). Although not responding directly to Stylianou & Zembylas' (2021) work, positioning the corpse front and centre within curriculum studies makes the disgust and denial the deathly discomforts they

see as important for teachers to explore and understand within themselves. The corpse “triggers uncomfortable and difficult knowledge(s), disruptive moments of learning in which the corpse becomes a curricular text” (Helmsing & van Kessel, 2020, p. 155). Their work extends to questioning how the topic of death in curriculum might be positioned in ways to assist not only in navigating grief, but to further cultivate understanding about the nature of humanity and the course of life itself (Varga et al., 2021, 2022). Their work succeeds in exploring how reminders of death—such as the corpse—can function as a pedagogical force and curricular text, and further inspires my own work to question the processes at play within the psyche of the subject as these confrontations with discomfort and difficult knowledge occur.

The attempts, inabilities, evasions, and refusals to have a “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2011, p. 1) with the curricular mysteries of death has resulted in a focus on what death can do for curriculum, ethics of how to approach the subject of death within curriculum, and what opportunities exist for discussions of death in curricular contexts. My research places central an attempt to understand the nature of mortality itself, rather than exploring how or what we ought to *do* about death. As I will show, this focus is also the identifiable gap in which my study aims to engage. A greater understanding of the nature of mortality may then offer other scholars increased capacity to explore how we might more comprehensively and ethically approach the nature of death within curriculum studies.



## **The Relevance of Depth Psychology to Curriculum Studies**

### ***The Symbolic Curriculum within Analytical Psychology***

The field of education has largely ignored analytical psychology (Shaker, 1982); however, what analytical psychology scholarship does exist related to curriculum studies has tended to focus on teacher education and teacher identity, leaving any discussion of the role mortality might play in such development much to the wayside (Shaker, 1982). Most notably for my research, analytical psychology has attempted to explore the nature of the symbolic within curriculum studies, which again alludes to Agatstein's (1979) call for a greater engagement with the symbolic when studying mortality.

Jung's direct work on education shone a light on the importance of the personal and psychological developments of the educator, recognizing the role the psychic complexes of parents and teachers have on the development of the child (Jung, 1954/1974). Much of analytical psychology scholarship within education followed in the footsteps of Jung's focus, with Jungian analyst and scholar James Henderson (1956) believing this lack of influence was the result of its focus being more concerned with adulthood and the second half of life. Despite analytical psychology's tendency to focus more generally on psychic dynamics and complexes within education, it offers some important contributions within curriculum studies related to my research questions.

Drawing a parallel between psychological opposites and the nature of creativity I discussed in Chapter Two and curriculum studies, Henderson (1958) noted how, in the teaching of history, children are "disinherited from both the dead and the living past" which interferes with the development of their personalities "because they have not yet discovered

how to face...a meaningless series of births and deaths from which there seems to be no exit into enduring significance” (p. 134). Without directly stating, he alludes to an important link between what lies within the curriculum and the development of the personality. It can be seen how a lack of direct engagement with mortality within the curriculum, along with teachers’ general unease in addressing the difficult knowledge of death within the classroom (Stylianou and Zembylas, 2021), prevents an integral part of life (i.e., mortality) from being encountered within the curriculum, and, how it can directly impact the psychological development of the student. Henderson points to the importance of tapping into individual creativity through inspiring hope as a response to the ever-present awareness of death within the curriculum, eluding to the nature of psychic opposites and creativity emerging from such tension.

As explored in Chapter Two, the symbolic is a means by which the unconscious communicates within the psyche, and one’s encounter with a symbol can therefore have psychological meaning and significance towards learning, growth, and the individuation process. Jungian scholar and curriculum theorist Clifford Mayes (2016) views the symbol as the catalyst that brings curriculum to life through its ability to generate multiple interpretations between subjects. He writes: “Education in the spirit of the symbol places a premium on not only *what* the curriculum contains but *how* each student experiences it in the classroom” (p. 198). The nature of the symbol is both universal and highly individual through the ebbing and flowing between the symbol itself, and the multitude of living experiences of it, leading to growth in the form of “emotional health, ethical vision, and a trajectory towards transcendence” (p. 198). The work of both Henderson and Mayes relates to my study in the

placing of importance of not only *what* is encountered within the curriculum related to mortality, but also *how* it is encountered. Stated otherwise, encounters with the psychological opposites of death and life within the curriculum might promote overall psychological development, and having educators able and willing to facilitate such encounters with a willing and careful ethic might help to foster such development.

Work related to the symbolic within analytical psychology and curriculum studies has focused on how symbols within myths and fairytales may act as a way of communication with students' early consciousness (Mitchell, 2005), how such tales can help to promote individuation while maintaining a sense of collective identity (De Paula, 2008), and others who have explored how the same symbolic world can influence and encourage the construction of professional knowledge within teacher education (e.g., Beattie et al., 2007; Dobson, 2009, 2011; Romanyshyn, 2012) and teacher renewal (Mayes et al., 2019). My co-researcher interviews, along with my own research process, evoked various symbolic associations as a result of the interview and exposure to the text, reflecting a symbolic engagement with mortality which was then able to be explored and interpreted, moving towards a deeper understanding of the nature of mortality itself. Symbolic engagement with mortality in this manner may then relate to both the process of constructing professional knowledge, and also more broadly the process of individuation towards the health, vision, and transcendence to which Mayes (2016) speaks.

Clifford Mayes is perhaps the most prominent Jungian scholar within the field of education, and while his work expands beyond curriculum studies towards education more generally (e.g., 1999, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2005b, 2009, 2016, 2019), In this chapter I

focus strictly on his contributions to curriculum studies. In his work *Seven Curricular Landscapes*, he outlines a holistic curriculum through seven landscapes positioned on a philosophical, educational, and developmental ladder: the organismic landscape; the transferential landscape; the concrete-affiliative landscape; the interpretive-procedural landscape; the phenomenological landscape; the unitive-spiritual landscape; the dialectic-spiritual landscape (Mayes, 2003c). Of specific relationship to my research are the latter two domains.

The unitive-spiritual landscape considers a transcendental nature of the human, where the concept of self begins to dissolve through the process of becoming. Encountering this space does not necessarily lead to a disconnection from self; rather, is a consideration of “the organic, interconnection of self, other, nature and cosmos as a dynamic unity in which—to use a Buddhist metaphor—each part reflects all the other parts” (p. 131). This approach to curriculum values the cultivation of intuition as an educational task towards the transcendent, similar to intuition—as outlined by heuristic inquiry—functioning as “the realm of the between” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 23). Mayes (2003c) considers this curricular landscape as largely unexplored territory within curriculum studies, perhaps partly due to a general lack of consideration of the role of death in *currere* and how it might relate to the consideration of the human being as a transcendent subject beyond the ego—something uniquely and intimately participating in infinite ongoing relationships with all things.

In the final, dialectic-spiritual landscape, Mayes (2003c) views the curricular goal being to help the student “discover *herself* as an eternal being in dialogue with other eternal beings” (p. 167, italics original), through an encounter with God as the Eternal Other. I

introduce Mayes' unitive-spiritual and dialectic-spiritual landscapes in order to highlight the timeless element of this transcendent nature, which connects to the transcendental nature of the psyche I introduced in Chapter Two. While Mayes writes of God in a general sense not tied to a particular religious worldview, "the God within us" (Jung, 1953/1966, §399) reflects the archetype of the Self and is representative of the wholeness of the human psyche, inclusive of death, and existing outside of time. These two curricular landscapes are thus expressive of *currere*'s relevance to psychic individuation, understood by Jung (1953/1966) as "a function of relationship to the world of objects, bringing the individual into absolute, binding, and indissoluble communion with the world at large" (§275). A particular symbol of timelessness emerged from the data of this study, which I expand upon in the forthcoming chapters and relate back to the experience of mortality and curriculum studies.

### ***The Importance of Psychoanalysis to Curriculum Studies***

Wolson (2005) understands psychoanalysis as a theory that considers the origins and continuity of human psychological existence, and in so doing, is important to locate its role within curriculum studies and my current research. Within curriculum theory, psychoanalysis offers "a language to consider how the fantasy formations of our earliest relationships shape the experience and representation of teaching and learning" (Farley, 2014, p. 118) through "stripping away...the psychic and social obstacles—unquestioned assumptions, conditioned responses, social biases, unconscious fears and desires, and blind emotional investment" (Taubman, 2012, p. 178).

Given that education has been named as one of the impossible professions (along with psychoanalysis and government) (Freud, 1937), psychoanalytic scholar Shoshana

Felman (1982) asks: “What are we teachers doing? How should we understand—and carry out—our task?” (p. 22). She continues that, from its very impossibility comes its potential: “it is precisely in giving us unprecedented insight into the impossibility of teaching, that psychoanalysis has opened up unprecedented teaching possibilities, renewing both the questions and the practice of education” (p. 22). In its ability to explore the dark unknowns of the psyche, psychoanalysis within education is both emancipatory—helping us understand and articulate our inner lives—and therapeutic—aiming to cure both illness and ignorance (Taubman, 2012). These two projects, the emancipatory and therapeutic, shed light on the sheer impossibility of the educational project, as it “never assumes it knows in advance what is best for the patient or student or what the outcomes of its endeavours will be” (p. 7).

**Death and Difficult Knowledge.** Deborah Britzman is a psychoanalyst and key curriculum theorist whose work highlights the psychic experience of learning. As discussed previously, Britzman has articulated ‘difficult knowledge’ as both the acknowledgment of human-initiated suffering (Britzman, 1998) as well as the challenging emotions one is asked to face in the context of rapprochement (Britzman, 2013). Such intrapsychic encounters may also present as a form of difficult knowledge between student and teacher, and, consequently, creates a site of inquiry into not only the work of education, but considers “a working through of education” (Britzman, 1998, p. 19). An aspect of what makes such knowledge difficult are the inner psychic conflicts that occur within the learner. While such conflicts “may be coarsened, denied, and defended against the time when the learner cannot make sense of violence, aggression, or even the desire” (p. 117), encounters with difficult knowledge may also reflect unconscious dynamics that animate teaching and learning (Pitt &

Britzman, 2003). Stated otherwise, learning requires a confrontation with an uncomfortable psychic unknown; understood by Farley (2014) as an “emotional death” (p. 119) fundamental to the landscape of education. As an example, Jennifer Gilbert (2009) approaches curriculum theory to understand how generational conflict and violence can function as a creative act—a site of such learning. She explores how “something of the past must be repudiated or destroyed in order for a future to be made or found” (p. 64). An encounter with such unknown breeds anxiety and is a function of chaos in the uncertainty of what exists on the other side of such destruction. Learning itself appears as an act of violence so as to construct something new—an ode to Spielrein’s (1912/1994) recognition of destruction as a condition for being and becoming. Bollas (1997) articulates this process nicely in concert with Gilbert (2009), understanding that intergenerational learning requires a violent destruction of the previous generation’s ideals in order to constitute its own ideals towards creating a new future.

Difficult knowledge and violent destruction are, therefore, a part of the psychic dynamic of learning, involving a crisis of representation between the external and the internal (Pitt & Britzman, 2003), forever calling upon the unconscious and wondering what simultaneously escapes awareness and still directs belief (Britzman, 2013). Here, the subjective phantasy of learning becomes enacted through the transferential dynamic between student and teacher and plays out as a paradox. The individual’s desire for certainty through learning from an authority figure (i.e., the teacher) is simultaneously a defence against one’s own uncertainty which can present as a challenge to authority (Britzman, 2013). What is more, as stated above by Bollas (1997) and Gilbert (2009), the representation of knowledge

and certainty appearing to be located within the figure of authority must be destroyed in order for the formation of a new future for the individual to occur.

Britzman (2013) argues that education must be affected by this uncertainty, and understands uncertainty as fundamental to the human condition. My approach to the above views the destruction of what was as a necessary requirement for the learning and creating of what becomes. In so doing, there is a psychic death—of ideals, beliefs, or loved objects that have been lost (Britzman, 2013)—which breeds an experience of uncertainty. Learning itself thus appears as a confrontation with one’s own mortality through the existential experience of uncertainty bred by death, well articulated by her question: “is it knowing education as an emotional situation or knowing emotional life as an education?” (p. 96). This irony Britzman locates within education and the human condition speaks to the representational conflict between the external and the internal mentioned above. Life is the experience of an education ending in biological death, affected with internal psychic experiences of death through the experience of education. My present study reflects its own site of inquiry, where an investigation into the living experience of mortality among curriculum studies graduate students may help to greater understand the role mortality plays in this existential and pedagogical paradox.

**A Return to the Death Drive in Curriculum Studies.** Peter Taubman has been a key curriculum theorist who draws upon the psychoanalytic concept of the death drive and explores its relationship to curriculum studies. Freud (1920/2003) claimed that the death drive “compels us to return to an inanimate or inert state” (p. 100) in order to explore its relationship to melancholia, a state he understood as one that could overcome the instinct



towards life and lead one to suicide. Within curriculum studies, Taubman (2017) bridged Freud's work with the insidious nature of the death drive within curriculum studies, where through the daemonic force of repetition compulsion, we are learning ourselves towards being reduced to numbers and machines; closer and closer towards the inert state to which Freud speaks. Although inanimate, inert, and melancholic, such a state might appear safe and predictable, since, "[e]xplorations beyond the curriculum-as-plan are often feverishly navigated back onto well-traveled routes toward outcomes known in advance" (Wallin, 2008, p. 312). This inert state becomes an institutionalized practice killing memory, history, and feelings, slowly robbing us of our humanity, "provoked and shaped by particular constellations of social and historical forces or by particular conditions" towards the creation of "psychic dead zones" (Taubman, 2017, p. 100). Within and beyond education, von Franz (2008) comments on a contemporary *Zeitgeist* that belittles the realm of feeling. Taubman deepens the concern when he asks:

Might not the compulsion to repeat, in which Freud initially located the death drive, be seen in the repetition compulsion of education, returning again and again to the same purported panaceas as a way to avoid the trauma of its inherent impossibility?  
(p. 101)

The creation and insistence upon the 'right answer' comes at the cost of dialogue and interpretive flexibility, and renders both teachers and students alike into numbered objects whose function it becomes to articulate all that is decided to be right, and in doing so enters melancholia in the form of inward depression or outward rage: "The rigour demanded by education reformers becomes rigour mortis" (Taubman, 2017, p. 103). Pinar et al. (2004)

name Taubman as a scholar whose work highlights the teaching moment as involving the interplay “between order and chaos, closure and openness, form and freedom” (p. 501). An absence of appropriate tension between these polarities results in the death of *currere*, whereas “[a]t the crossroads of intimacy and distance, public good and private desire, teachers and students meet” (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 539, referencing Taubman, 1992).

The death drive as a “psychic silence” (Taubman, 2017, p. 3, italics removed) exists both within and beyond the curriculum, and is explored in terms of melancholia by the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. Melancholia as an “abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that...lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 3) is introduced by Kristeva as a metaphorical black sun, a term I introduced in Chapter Two. In one of her illustrations of feminine depression, she too points to the role of the death drive. For the analysand Isabel in Kristeva’s work, the “black hole” was a space in which she found her home, “where she foundered as much as she replenished herself” (1989, p. 88). Through this anecdote, Kristeva explores that within the psychic black hole of melancholia and the death drive there remains an element of being, despite the loss that has occurred. Marlan (2005), in response to Kristeva (1989), accepts her position that this aspect of the metaphorical black sun is involved in “destruction as the inevitable outcome of creation” (p. 44), pointing towards the mythical origin of Saturn devouring his children. In a similar realm, it is not surprising that Isabel herself makes the decision to have a child during the darkest moments of one of her depressive periods (Kristeva, 1989), an act of creation amidst destruction. There is a similar allusion within the

title of Spielrein's (1912/1994) work, the first of which to explore the idea of the death drive: *Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being*.

Kristeva's (1989) anecdote elucidates and provides a physical example of Britzman's (2013) position on the psychic experiences of uncertainty and difficult knowledge within education. Isabel's replenishment and creation of life amidst her "black hole" represents a physical example of a psychic process involved in learning, as Britzman (2013) locates within the subject and as Taubman (2017) locates within the field of curriculum studies. If "the psyche mirrors matter" (von Franz, 1992, p. 18), death and learning appear as one in the same, given their necessary confrontation with uncertainty and destruction in order to become and create.

The experience of confronting uncertainty towards becoming can be one of great tension, yet tension appears necessary—and perhaps is the catalyst—towards the experience of learning. This process is what curriculum scholar Aoki (1987) considers necessary within an inspirited curriculum; "a quality of body and soul intertwining in their fullness" (p. 359). He cites the metaphor of a professional figure skater asked about his level of calm during a performance that resulted in a world championship: "No, I was not calm; calmness was not what I wanted. I was in tension—in a good tension that surged throughout my whole body" (p. 359). Taken psychologically, if *currere* is the running of the course of life, where the curriculum is encountered and reconstructed and involved in the process of becoming (Pinar, 2011, p. 1), to be alive is to live in appropriate tension between existence and non-existence—life and death—and it is in this tension where creativity emerges. From the tension there appears to emerge a transcendent third that is creativity itself. The same figure skater alludes

to the transcendent nature of his ego and experience of creativity when living in this tension: “I do not skate to music as if it were outside of me. I become the music. My skating is the music” (Aoki, 1987, p. 360). If the death drive compels *currere* to the grave, courage to encounter difficult knowledge towards becoming appears to speak to the appropriate paradox underlying the aim of this dissertation. The experience of becoming through engagement with *currere* is a psychically creative act, from which symbols of becoming may emerge from the unconscious, and may result in closer interconnection to self, other, nature, and cosmos (Mayes, 2003c), reflective of a dynamic and timeless unity of existence.

### **Weaving Together Analytical Psychology and Psychoanalysis**

Both analytical psychology and psychoanalytic scholarship have influenced and impacted curriculum studies (see Pinar et al., 2004), and explore the nature of psychological development towards how a life might be lived, within and beyond curriculum studies. For the sake of this dissertation, analytical psychology notes the importance of the symbolic in the experience of individuation, growth, and becoming, recognizing death itself as a necessary stage of growth (Kübler-Ross, 1975). Because death is a final state of rest for the psyche (Jung, 1960/1970), symbols related to one’s mortality can assist in understanding this phenomenon and how it informs the curricular experience and beyond, while reflecting a psychic experience of creativity itself.

The topic of death, perhaps one of the most challenging forms of difficult knowledge, is an aspect of the human condition represented by uncertainty that is psychically present throughout our lives. A parallel can be drawn between Britzman’s (1998, 2003, 2013, 2015) difficult knowledge—and its related psychic conflicts—and the tension of opposites

surrounding the creativity as explored in Chapter Two. The tension between the simultaneous utilization and surrender of one's ego functions is a requirement for the creative act according to Gordon (1977). This oppositional tension is reflected in Britzman's (2013) paradox of learning—the desire for certainty requires a succumbing to uncertainty, a psychic experience of death reflecting an “emotional response to [this] loss” (Farley, 2014, p. 119) of control. From a stance of the ego, death is reflective of the greatest existential uncertainty. What emerges from the above discussion is a position that learning and life are one in the same, where a confrontation with uncertainty is involved in both, and is psychically represented as its own experience of inner death. To repress the necessity of such a death, the educative project becomes the “rigour mortis” to which Taubman (2017, p. 103) speaks, resulting in a loss for the capacity to experience “surprise, wonder, [and] awe” (Gordon, 1977, p. 116) that can only come from an experiential tension involving one's mortality.

### **Chapter Three Summary**

This chapter set out to identify and explore a gap in scholarship surrounding how a phenomenology of mortality has yet to be seriously considered in relation to curriculum studies, justifying the present study. In it, I discussed and offered a distinction between ‘death’ and ‘mortality’ in relation to scholarship in the field and the aim of my present work, before reviewing work involving how the nature of death has been approached within curriculum studies. I then discussed how analytical psychology understands the symbolic in connection to curriculum studies, further addressing a gap in the field for the limited work intersecting mortality, analytical psychology, and curriculum studies. Finally, I discussed the important contributions of psychoanalysis to curriculum studies, exploring learning as a

psychic experiences related to mortality. In the next chapter I further outline and discuss the methodology and methods for my study, and explore the role of *Chernobyl* for the study, along with relevant ethical and procedural considerations.

## Chapter Four: Exploring Human Living Experience

### Introduction

In this chapter I expand on my discussion of heuristic inquiry introduced in Chapter One to discuss its relevant foundations and justify its use as the methodology for my study. I then explore the role *Chernobyl* will play in the research and discuss the text before providing an overview of the study procedure. From there, I describe the methods used for recruiting co-researchers and gathering and analyzing interview data based on the tenets of heuristic inquiry. I then discuss the relevant ethical considerations of this research project and describe the limitations and delimitations of the study.

### Investigating Living Experience

Heuristic inquiry was developed by Clark Moustakas (1923-2012), an American psychologist interested in investigating human experience. *Heuristic* refers to an inward orientation to oneself in order to explore the nature and meaning of experience (Moustakas, 1990). As introduced in Chapter One, heuristic inquiry grounds knowledge within the subjective experience and where “[t]he self of the researcher is present throughout the process and... [where] the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). Through discovery, such inquiry can deepen one’s knowledge of oneself and the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 2015). What is considered ‘data’ within this research, then, is located within myself and the co-researchers of this project, yet “the challenge is to discover and explicate its nature” (p. 13). Accordingly, heuristics places primacy on meaning, essence, quality, and experience as opposed to measurements, appearance, quantity, and behaviour (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985).

The psychotherapist Nevine Sultan (2019) published a text that outlines a specific methodology grounded within heuristic inquiry and based on the initial work of Moustakas (1990). She understands that we are immersed in aspects of heuristic research in simply being human:

We are ceaselessly assessing what and how we sense, feel, and think about certain phenomena, while checking in with others to learn if they are experiencing them in different, similar, or the same ways, and then returning to ourselves to process all this information toward a more cohesive understanding. (p. 3)

Through such an assessment in relation with others, heuristic inquiry involves both an inner orientation to oneself (Moustakas, 1990) as well as an external orientation with others in order to construct new understandings of shared experiences (Sultan, 2019). While I have discussed how my personal initial engagement with mortality has informed my research, this dissertation has provided the opportunity to interact with and encounter the phenomenon in new ways, namely, through engagement with experiences of mortality among other curriculum graduate students, in order to co-create new knowledge and understandings of the phenomenon of mortality.

### ***Choosing Heuristic Inquiry***

While in Chapter One I outlined the seven processes and six phases of heuristic inquiry, here I seek to briefly introduce readers to the core tenets of heuristic inquiry and how they inform my research journey. Heuristic inquiry was the methodology of choice through its phenomenological alignment, its acknowledgement of relationship being central to its process, and its openness to the organic, emergent, and creative.



**Heuristic Inquiry’s Relationship to Phenomenology.** As introduced previously, heuristic inquiry is a phenomenologically aligned research approach (Sultan, 2019) that accepts perception as the primary source of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013) and is a synthesis of both science and art. Broadly speaking, phenomenology is the study of “the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). It aims to uncover the essential nature of some phenomenon and describe it in a rich way (Sultan, 2019), while simultaneously acknowledging that true essence of any aspect of the human experience is always on the other side of language (van Manen, 2002). As I have outlined in Chapter Three, the vast majority of literature that discusses death within curriculum studies fails to explore any phenomenology of death, focusing instead on what one ought to do about death in curriculum studies, versus what death itself is. This position relates to Agatstein’s (1979) call towards a greater focus on the phenomenological when approaching research surrounding death. Given heuristic inquiry’s alignment with phenomenology, as a methodology it succeeds in approaching the living nature of death, i.e., within the experience of mortality of the co-researchers, making it an ideal methodology to investigate the phenomenon of mortality and attending to the gap in literature as I have explored in Chapter Three.

Although heuristic inquiry maintains a fundamental relationship to phenomenology—with some qualitative research method textbooks classifying it as a phenomenological method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2001)—it remains distinct. In terms of origin, heuristic inquiry originates from the field of psychology and does not itself have a grounding in philosophy like phenomenology, yet it still draws on phenomenological principles

(Mihalache, 2019). The focus is also different in that heuristic inquiry demands that both the researcher and co-researchers are able to live the phenomenon in question (instead of focusing purely on a phenomenon as separate from the human experiencing it). Further, the approach to the data varies in that phenomenology assumes the lifeworld is comprised of essential elements independent from the subject experiencing them, meaning that data is collected through the subject before it is explicated into an objective account of reality.

The results of a phenomenological investigation, therefore, involve a rich description of the lifeworld itself. Heuristic inquiry instead views the phenomenon as a part of the subjective experience, meaning the subject is always in relationship to the phenomenon. Stated another way, whereas rigorous analysis in phenomenology uses subjective data to provide descriptions of the lifeworld, heuristic inquiry recognizes connectedness and relationship, and, as a result, is a methodology where “the research participants remain visible in the examination of the data and continues to be portrayed as whole persons” (Mihalache, 2019, p. 43). Phenomenology may uncover some essential characteristics of lived experience, and does so through a relatively detached stance, requiring the researcher to ‘bracket’ “the various assumptions that might stand in the way from opening up access to the originally or the living meaning of a phenomenon” (van Manen, 2014, p. 215). As a result, according to Gabriela Mihalache’s (2019) work on differentiating these two methodologies, such bracketing results in a distancing from the phenomenon being studied. This approach can be helpful for many topics, but for topics too close to the researcher to allow for bracketing, a more subjective approach can be of greater benefit. Heuristic inquiry, on the other hand, requires “a subjective process of reflecting, exploring, sifting, and elucidating the

nature of the phenomenon under investigation...through intimate and authentic processes of the self” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40) and involves connecting with the phenomenon in question as it is lived through the researcher and co-researchers (Mihalache, 2019). My own process of “reflecting, exploring, sifting, and elucidating” (p. 40) began long before even recruiting co-researchers for this study and has been shared in the earlier chapters of this work, and will continue to occur throughout the remainder of the research process (and beyond). Where phenomenology studies *lived* experience, heuristic inquiry explores the *living* experience by grounding the phenomenon within the subject in whom it is experienced. Stated another way, “Phenomenology ends with the essence of experience; heuristics retains the essence of the person in experience” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 43).

**Living Death in Relationship.** As a result of heuristic inquiry’s simultaneous inward and outward orientation, it is important to recognize that I entered into this research from a different context than the other co-researchers, as I brought with me the paradigm from which I entered into this journey and the theories and literature I had already explored, which had influence on how this study proceeded. Because of such differences, it was important for me to remain as reflexive as possible, recognizing what I carried with me into my engagement with co-researchers, while also attending to and being present to the histories and sensory experiences the co-researchers also carried with them.

The relationship between myself and the co-researchers was therefore an important aspect of the study. While in Chapter One I acknowledged Martin Buber’s understanding of all life being an encounter (Buber, 1923/1970, as cited in Sultan, 2019), here I briefly expand.

Sultan (2019) references the work of Buber to distinguish between the I-Thou and the I-It relationship, where the preferential I-Thou interaction involves a true sense of self and developing intersubjectivity through how we are able to develop and share our selves with others through authentic relating. As Sultan elaborates, an I-It approach to research places the researcher in a power role where the co-researchers provide information to the researcher in order for the researcher to attain their goal (Sultan, 2019). However, an I-Thou relationship in research becomes a “highly creative process that enables one to truly view events or experiences through the Thou perspective” (p. 65) that blurs the distinction between the Other and myself and provides the opportunity for both to be transformed. Jung himself offered a parallel and alchemical insight on the power of mutual insight, discovery, and growth as a result of relationship when he wrote, “The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed” (2017, p. 57). The blurring deconstructs the power dynamic and the observer also becomes the observed (Krippner, 2015), where “I-Thou begins to look more like I∞Thou” (Sultan, 2019, p. 66), in a reciprocal exchange of both subjects observing and being observed. The I∞Thou relationship informs each of our beings through the reciprocal exchange that occurs in the relationship, while still acknowledging the boundaries that separate one from the other.

**Heuristic Inquiry as a Creative Endeavour.** Given that heuristic inquiry involves an inward journey towards the exploration of some phenomenon and is highly tolerant of creativity and uncertainty (Sultan, 2019), data can take many forms (Moustakas, 1990). It was, expectedly, important to maintain a high level of fidelity to the ways in which the experiences of mortality might be communicated and understood, while simultaneously

being open to many other potential possibilities. The majority of the data for this research involved examples, narrative depictions, memories, associations, and emotional evocations surrounding the experience of mortality from co-researchers, and one co-researcher opted to submit a personal artifact as data.

Utilizing a lens of analytical psychology to interpret the data of this study further speaks to its creative tolerance. I recognized that, in my position as a co-researcher, my own imaginative psyche played a central role in the analysis and creative synthesis of this research. Since our mortality is an experience we readily and (un)consciously defend against (Solomon et al., 2015) and that “[h]euristic inquiry...involves working with various dimensions of the psyche” (Sultan, 2019, p. 13), this lens assisted in deepening an understanding of mortality while simultaneously honouring the heuristic journey as a growth in my own self-awareness and self-knowledge (Moustakas, 1990).

### ***Rigour and Trustworthiness in Heuristic Research***

Given that heuristic inquiry is a qualitative research methodology within the human sciences, numeric correlations (e.g. p-values) or statistics cannot capture the validity of the research. Moustakas (1990) considers meaning to be the ultimate form of validity within this methodology. The question of validity becomes “Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one’s own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience?” (p. 32) with the final judgment being made by myself as the primary researcher.

There is thus a high level of responsibility placed upon myself to honour the significance of meanings that is discovered by this research, acknowledging along with Polanyi (1969) that validity is not based upon a strict sense of rules surrounding verification. It was critical that I engaged in appropriate member checking with my co-researchers, ensuring that my writing about their shared experiences was accurate. All co-researchers confirmed that my creation of their individual depiction was true and accurate to their experience, aligning with the importance Sultan (2019) places on rigour and trustworthiness/goodness.

### **Relationship Between Viewer and Text**

Because this research will involve engagement with a televisual text, it is important to discuss how the viewer-text relationship assisted in the overall aims of the study. As discussed earlier, the primary purpose of utilizing a text for this research served to increase the mortality salience of the co-researchers involved so as to open space for mortality to be explored from a place of greater depth and texture.

### ***Engaging Chernobyl***

The text I chose for this research is *Chernobyl* (Renck, 2019), a 2019 five-part television historical drama miniseries based upon the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Ukraine. The characters portrayed in the miniseries are based on some of the recollections of Pripyat locals as captured by Svetlana Alexievich, a journalist who interviewed more than 500 individuals over a 10 year period who were directly or indirectly involved in the Chernobyl disaster. She authored the book *Voices from Chernobyl* as a result of her work (Alexievich, 2019). The miniseries opens with the explosion of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power

Plant and follows various health care workers, first responders, political and government officials, and others, as they navigate the fallout of the catastrophic nuclear accident.

Immediately following the explosion in the series, a head engineer by the name of Anatoly Dyatlov downplays the severity of the accident not only to his colleagues, but also to a committee of executives, and falsely assures the committee there is no need to evacuate the city. The committee attempts to contain knowledge of the explosion from the Kremlin and the greater public as means of avoiding humiliation and criticism. Meanwhile, extremely lethal doses of radiation are continuously spewing from the core of the nuclear reactor. The first sign of the public threat of radiation to the public is shown in the series when a bird falls from the sky onto the sidewalk, briefly twitching before dying, while children pass by on their way to school. Evidence of the radiation is identified by Ulana Khomyuk, a nuclear physicist, who takes it upon herself to warn Valery Legasov, deputy director aiding in cleanup efforts, of a potential nuclear meltdown if certain precautions are not immediately taken. Busses arrive to the town of Pripyat with the announcement that the town is being temporarily evacuated. The busses are loaded with residents and drive off, while a pet dog who has been left behind chases after one of the departing busses. Ulana Khomyuk was a fictional character in the series, and represented a composite of the many scientists who were involved in both investigating the accident and speaking against the forces who attempted to minimize and silence the devastation caused by the nuclear meltdown.

While Dyatlov remains in denial about the extent of concern surrounding the explosion and nuclear meltdown, workers are ordered to sacrifice their lives for the state by attempting to drain water from the nuclear reactors and to dig a tunnel under the plant to help

prevent greater catastrophe. Vasily Ignatenko, a firefighter and first responder to the explosion, is hospitalized due to acute radiation poisoning, and his pregnant wife Lyudmilla makes her way to his bedside to witness his suffering and eventual death from the exposure. She later loses her baby to the effects of the radiation. As the death toll mounts, a scene shows Vasily, among others, contained within metal caskets that are welded shut, before being buried in a mass grave and covered in concrete to prevent radiation from leeching into the earth.

Evacuation efforts eventually expand and soldiers order residents to leave, yet an elderly woman milking her cows refuses to depart, claiming to have lived in the same place for the entirety of her life. The soldier then shoots her cow and forcibly removes the woman. Other soldiers are ordered to explore the evacuated areas of the town and shoot all of the animals, many of which who are pets who have been left behind, in an attempt to prevent further spread of radiation. Ulana Khomyuk continues to speak up about the true effects and dangers of the explosion and meltdown, and learns of safety breaches by Chernobyl plant management that likely contributed to the explosion. She insists on advocating for the truth about the incident to be told and for the proper parties to be held accountable.

The final episode of the miniseries follows the testimony and trial as a result of the mismanagement of the explosion and resulting meltdown of the Chernobyl plant. The trial exposes the Soviet government's responsibility of certain information that had been redacted, and that the disaster was primarily the result of secrecy and lies enacted by the state.

I chose this text because of its deep and engrained tone of mortality present throughout. The characters are forced to face critical decisions that pose a threat unlike the



world had faced until such a point in history, putting a vast number of human lives at immediate and serious risk. In response to the nuclear disaster, the viewer witnesses characters reacting and responding to a constant threat of death towards themselves and their loved ones, which evoked strong reactions related to my own sense of mortality. In my first viewing of the text—prior to choosing it for this study—while much of the subject matter was challenging and uncomfortable to watch, the constant dark imagery and symbolism related to death also brought to mind and body a familiar place I have encountered within myself; a place of contemplative solitude surrounding the nature of the world, existence, and my place in it. I felt connected to a deeper sense of my own values and what I place importance upon in terms of my priorities and relationships, as though through encountering the nature of mortality as exemplified by the text, I, too, felt more fully connected to the expanse of my existence from conception to expiration. Inspired by what the text evoked within me, I considered how it might function in a way to evoke a similar level of mortality salience in others.

The text also received a high degree of critical acclaim in the categories of performances, cinematography, historical accuracies, atmosphere, and tone. Each of these categories helped to create the overall sombre nature of the text which I believe aided in connecting co-researchers to their experiences of mortality. Although not intentionally chosen for this reason, the miniseries further evoked similar reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic for co-researchers. The text helped to elicit deeper connections for co-researchers in their inner world as they explored connections between *Chernobyl* and what was evoked within

them in the health concerns faced by our world during the pandemic, also relating to their experiences of mortality.

While I clearly had a desire to utilize *Chernobyl* for this project, I was also aware of the potential discomfort in exposing co-researchers to what might be an uncomfortable and emotionally activating experience. Noting the complexities of using this text for my own ends—as a stimulus to evoke mortality salience among others—I wanted also to honour the sensitivity and consideration of what co-researchers' experiences might be as a result of viewing this text. My position as a researcher is one of privilege where I was, in effect, exposing others to traumatic stories. It was important for me to attend to my position in relation to the text, and to my co-researchers, to ensure this was not an act of merely circulating trauma and reproducing stories of others' deaths as a text for my own means (Yaeger, 1997). In my experience of interviewing co-researchers, I consciously worked to approach each co-researcher's identity and history with a level of sensitivity, entering with the assumption that difficult and emotionally activating topics would be shared and discussed. I was clear with each participant about the nature of the text, and provided support in the form of mental health referrals in case their experience of engaging with *Chernobyl* resulted in unwarranted emotional discomfort.

It is important to note that it was not an aim of this research to provide any form of analysis of *Chernobyl*, or to directly explore the ways in which *Chernobyl* understands the nature of mortality. Because this heuristic inquiry was focused on how mortality is lived through co-researchers, any themes surrounding mortality had to be understood and interpreted through their expression by co-researchers. Although it was important to remain

open and aware of the ways mortality could be explored directly through the text, any form of analysis of the text directly would not align with the process or aims of heuristic inquiry, and therefore, was not considered for this study.

### ***Reader Response***

In order to further understand how the text functioned in my study, I turn to the work of American literature professor Louise Rosenblatt's (1982, 1938/1995, 2018) theory of "reader response" as well as the field of reception theory (Barbatsis, 2005) and media reception studies (Staiger, 2005). Rosenblatt (1982, 1938/1995, 2018) acknowledges a transactional paradigm between the reader and the text that breaks beyond a subject-object relationship with one's environment. Instead, she maintains, "the reader and the text are two aspects of a total dynamic situation" and, as a result, the meaning is located neither within the text nor the reader, but "comes into being during the transaction between reader and text" (Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 455). For Rosenblatt, and this present study, the 'reader' is created through the transaction with a text. For both Rosenblatt's transactional relationship and Sultan's (2019) understanding of the I∞Thou relationship, 'meaning' occurs in between this interaction (Rosenblatt, 2018; Sultan, 2019). The 'reader' and the 'text' are not separate entities, but something transcending each while encompassing both. While *Chernobyl* functioned as a tool to elicit co-researcher's mortality salience, their experiences of mortality were simultaneously involved in their relationship with the text. Through engaging with the text, space is opened towards consideration of "the sensations, images, feelings, and ideas that are the residue of past psychological events involving those words and their referents" (Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 458) that "stir up elements of memory [and] activate areas of

consciousness” (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). The reader, for Rosenblatt, is required to respond to what comes from within, i.e., the co-researchers’ (un)conscious psychological processes, informed by (un)unconscious aspects of oneself.

My research assumes it is the human psyche that generates meaning and being (Rowland, 2019). Consequently, a transaction with a text can be evidence of individual psychological processes, while also acknowledging that a work has the capacity to touch upon universal characteristics and aspects of the nature of humanity. The contemplative solitude and personal values, along with the difficult knowledge, I connected to during my first viewing of *Chernobyl* is therefore reflective of what is both highly personal from my own history, and perhaps is suggestive of shared, common themes in relation to the human psyche and mortality. Within this current research, the text functioned as a catalyst towards evoking such deeper elements of one’s unconscious in order to then be explored and explicated as expressed through the co-researchers’ living experiences, offering themes suggestive of a more universal phenomenology of mortality.

### ***Reception Theory and Televisual Texts***

Communication and media studies scholar Gretchen Barbatsis’s (2005) work on reception theory agrees with Rosenblatt that meaning occurs in the hyphen of the picture-viewer engagement. Such meaning encourages one to ask “how” something means rather than “what” it means (i.e., how it functions instead of just what it represents). Utilizing a depth psychology perspective within visual methodologies often involves exploring how scenes of fantasy and wish fulfillment are understood through theories of identification (Staiger, 2005, p. 171). For example, several co-researchers were drawn to the character of

Ulana Khomyuk from the text. They viewed her in admiration and saw her as “brave” because of her choices to stand up for what she believed was right against forces attempting to downplay and silence the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. Upon learning that this character was created as a fictional representation of many scientists who carried out her character’s role in the text and not a real person, co-researchers expressed a level of disappointment given her embodiment of such heroic qualities. Such reactions opened space to explore how they personally relate to these qualities within themselves, what memories they evoke, and how such emotions relate to experiences from their own histories. The hyphen, or site of transaction, is the catalyst for the psychological processes that are evoked within the viewer of the text. Through the theories of both Barbatsis (2005) and Rosenblatt (1982, 1938/1995, 2018), relationship is required for meaning to be produced. For the nature of this study, the meaning is produced, expressed, and understood through the conscious and unconscious psychological processes of the co-researchers.

Despite the differences between viewing a televisual text and a written text, there remains a particular psychic potential within the viewer in response to the viewed:

The subject is, in part, formed subjectively through what and how it ‘sees,’ how its ‘field of vision’ is constructed. In the same way, what is seen—the image and its meaning—is understood not as eternally fixed, but relative to and implicated in the positions and schemas of interpretation which are brought to bear upon it. (Hall, 1999, p. 310)

Rose (2012) points to Freud who understood scopophilia—the pleasure in looking—to be one of the basic drives within humans. I was curious how such a drive to look evokes and

encourages unconscious material, most particularly related to co-researchers' experiences of their mortality.

During my literature review, I found two articles that helped to articulate the function of the hyphen in the picture-viewer relationship in relation to my own research. The first was an article written by psychological sciences scholar Petitfils (2016), who developed an undergraduate course aimed at helping students explore their own coping mechanisms and agency in the face of their mortality through viewing the mortality-themed television show *Six Feet Under*. The course involved a structured viewing of the text along with a reading schedule that included works from within depth psychology. Although not a heuristic research project, the author alludes to the importance of the hyphen as the catalyst for meaningful psychological processes to occur. Petitfils concludes that his course has helped his students "reject death denial" and has led to important dialogue surrounding the nature of life as a result of such an encounter with a mortality-themed text.

In the second, Garrett (2011) explored how difficult knowledge in the form of injustice, suffering, and death is felt, experienced, and understood by student teachers in the viewing of the mortality-themed documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*. In his analysis, the author interprets how difficult knowledge can potentially get "routed" and "re-routed" in pedagogical environments, unconsciously functioning as a defence against a more honest encounter with one's mortality as represented through such difficult knowledges.

Each of these studies points to how televisual texts can function to evoke particular psychological processes to be interpreted and analyzed. Utilizing *Chernobyl* as a televisual

text for my study functioned in a similar way—with the opportunity to then analyze co-researchers’ living experiences of their mortality phenomenologically before interpreting their experiences from an analytical psychology lens.

Importantly, Garrett (2011) also attended to how he positioned himself in relation to his data, which warrants a necessary discussion for my study as well. Acknowledging that psychoanalysis is not a reflective endeavour and, therefore, that “one cannot analyze one's self” (p. 330), there appears a marked tension between the nature of co-created data through heuristic inquiry, and all of the creative ways the psyche has of eluding its own shadow. Stated otherwise, my relationship to the co-researchers’ data is far different from any relationship I could cultivate to my own, given the ways the unconscious “escapes through our spoken words and actions, without our knowing, but is also and always finding its way to the other people and other objects in our lives” (p. 326). Whereas heuristic inquiry views phenomena as accessible through being lived by the individual, depth psychology attends to the processes by which phenomena might be defended against being truly lived. Heuristic inquiry assigns meaning to the words of the co-researchers, whereas depth psychology acknowledges language as “an imperfection and inevitable approximation” (Lewkowich, 2019, p. 4) which pays heed to the construction of meaning occurring between the space of not only the reader-text, but also my position of researcher, working with the resulting data of such reader-text engagement (Rosenblatt, 2018). Each of these theoretical positions translates into certain methodologically idealized, yet unachievable, aims. As a (co-)researcher, then, I attempted to position myself within and between the tensions and complexities of these theoretical and methodological assumptions, while recognizing I am also embedded in the

research similarly to the other co-researchers, through attempting to explore and express my own living experience of mortality as a curriculum studies graduate student. In what Britzman (2000) understands as the work of mourning, it was important not to idealize either heuristic inquiry or depth psychology as *the* way of understanding or interpreting the data, but instead to accept my working with the data as “the working through of the ambivalence that such knowledge can bring” (p. 34). While these tensions might be viewed as impossibilities, I view them instead as (im)possibilities, given what new opportunities might be uncovered through researching within and between such complexities.

### **Overview of Study Procedure**

The following section provides an overview of the procedures and methods of the study, which involved the recruitment of co-researchers, how I set up and conducted preliminary, secondary, and group interviews, and a discussion of analysis within heuristic inquiry.

### ***Recruitment***

Co-researcher recruitment occurred within a Faculty of Education at a Western Canadian University. I received permission from the Research Ethics Board (REB) to advertise my research through word of mouth to graduate classrooms during the Fall, 2021 semester. My supervisory committee allowed me to attend their Secondary Education graduate curriculum studies classes and I provided two classes with a short presentation of my research. At the outset of each presentation, I handed each student a Letter of Consent (Appendix A). I received feedback from five students via email who expressed interest in



participating in the research. I chose not to recruit any more co-researchers after confirming the commitment of the initial five.

Although heuristic inquiry may involve only a single participant, a deeper and richer experience of the phenomenon can be achieved with a greater number of co-researchers (e.g., Drake, 2018; Gilbreath, 2018; Holt-Waldo, 2011; Rathmell, 2012), with some heuristic studies having up to twelve co-researchers. Because this research project aims at depth over breadth, I opted for five co-researchers in order to facilitate depth while not overwhelming myself with too much data.

My own position as a graduate student within this faculty made these co-researchers highly accessible and I have had many conversations with such students surrounding the nature of mortality. As I discussed in Chapter One, this population of co-researchers were mainly chosen as a result of their position as teachers themselves. Existing in the simultaneous roles of both students and teachers, curriculum graduate students provided a unique opportunity to access a nuanced layer of how mortality might function in relation to the experience of both teaching and learning, which speaks to the gap my research aimed to fill. The interview process evoked instances of co-researchers confronting difficult knowledges within their own histories, informing how those histories connected to their pedagogical practices. Further, many of the co-researchers had experiences with how to 'do death' in their classrooms—which I have outlined tends to be the main focus of death within curriculum studies (e.g., Brinich, 2019, Engarhos et al., 2013, Holland, 2008, McGovern & Barry, 2000, Sylianos & Zembylas, 2021). I believed that such personal and pedagogical

histories made curriculum studies graduate students an ideal population for approaching and attempting to study the nature of mortality phenomenologically.

As emphasized in heuristic inquiry, it is important that co-researchers are interested, cooperative, committed, willing, and able to work with the phenomenon in question (Sultan, 2019) and that each potential co-researcher feels they have a connection and relationship to the topic in question (Wertz, 2005). I communicated the need for co-researchers to be interested in the topic of mortality during my class presentations. The following questions were asked of each potential co-researcher who expressed interest in participating in the study, and were considered the inclusion criteria:

1. Are you willing to view the HBO Miniseries *Chernobyl* (5 hours time)?
2. Are you willing to discuss death-related topics and reflect on your own experiences of mortality?
3. Are you willing and able to commit to up to four hours of interview time and have said interviews audio and video recorded?

As a precaution, exclusion criteria involved not recruiting any potential co-researchers with whom I feel I have too close of a personal relationship. Several individuals who expressed interest in the study I had known previously, in which case I invited an open conversation to discuss what potential challenges or limitations might arise as a result of the relationship. In all instances, both the co-researcher and myself were comfortable proceeding with the research given nature of our relationship entering in to the interview phase.

### *Interviews*

Interviews, the typical means through which material is gathered in heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990), are encouraged to not be “ruled by the clock” but instead run by “inner experiential time” (p. 46). Moustakas understands Patton’s (1980) *informal conversational interview* as the style “most consistent with the rhythm and flow of heuristic exploration and search for meaning” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 47). This style of interviewing was utilized, while also strengthened by Sultan’s (2019) embodied relational interviewing and embodied relational listening, functioning as a “holistic, relational experience that honours the experiences of all who are involved” (p. 125). These interview styles are broadly characterized by themes of openness, interest, and curiosity (p. 135), while being an engaged and active listener and receiver (p. 126). I felt natural embodying these qualities as an interviewer as a result of my psychotherapy background. I recognized each co-researcher as an incredibly unique individual with a precious history, and each interview felt like a gift and opportunity to attend to a small piece of this history, which I found to be a tremendously humbling experience. I believe taking such a stance also helped facilitate openness by each co-researcher, nurturing a collective space to share openly and be collectively curious about the phenomenon in question.

Aligned with this approach, all interviews primarily utilized open-ended questions (See Appendix B for the General Interview Guide). Closed questions (i.e., yes/no questions) were used only when necessary, such as seeking specific clarification. During each interview, I kept a research journal to assist me in staying focused on the interview by being able to write down, by hand and on paper, potential questions I had for the co-researcher that

emerged while they were speaking, noting any changes in the co-researcher's body language, tone of voice, rate of speech, etc., that might provide insight into the co-researcher's experience. I also spent time after each interview reflecting upon my own experience of the interview and noting my reflections within my journal.

As mentioned in Chapter One, along with interviews, I also explored with co-researchers any personal artifacts that might assist with the research to the data collection phase. Although I could not guarantee that any co-researchers would be able and willing to contribute any personal artifacts to the research, I included a question (See Appendix B) asking each co-researcher whether or not they have a personal artifact related to their experience of mortality. One co-researcher submitted a photograph of a necklace as their personal artifact and signed an artifact release form (Appendix C) to consent for its use in the study.

All interviews occurred in person in a booked room on the University of Alberta campus. I audio recorded and stored all of the interviews on my laptop, which is password protected and encrypted. I used a secure electronic program for transcription during the interviews (i.e., Otter.ai app). COVID-19 restrictions did not prevent any in person interviews from occurring, despite including in my ethics application and interview plan a contingency protocol for online interviews.

**Preliminary Interviews.** It is understandable that co-researchers' mortality salience will increase as a result of engaging with the text and participating in interviews. Although this experience is known to be both consciously and unconsciously unsettling, it is a necessary aspect of the research and has been carried out in a great number of controlled

research studies (Solomon et al., 2015). As a means of both priming co-researchers for the increase in mortality salience, the first interview was conducted with each co-researcher before the viewing of the text and explored the co-researchers' reactions and personal associations to mortality. Some examples of co-researchers' reactions and personal associations included the following: reference to the death of someone in their personal life, reflecting upon past suicidality, reflecting upon the potential to find oneself in high risk situations, the contemplation of one's own death, etc. I believed it was important to carry out such preliminary individual interviews in order to have a greater sense of who the co-researcher is in relation to their own thoughts and emotions about their mortality. Throughout all interviews conducted, I recognized the importance of continuously orienting myself towards the co-researcher with whom I was interviewing, while also maintaining my attention on the phenomenon of mortality. I placed primacy on the process of self-dialogue (Sultan, 2019) throughout the interview process, recognizing the importance of orienting myself to the unique nuance and experience of each co-researcher in front of me, while sensitively allowing my own theoretical and personal journey of my mortality to evoke and inform the tacit knowledge and curiosity that motivated many of my questions in the interview process. Yet, it was also crucial that I bracketed away placing the human experience into any sort of theoretical understandings I had confronted through my research leading up to the interviews. Heuristic inquiry places central the experience of the phenomenon as it lives within the human, and so I made considerable effort to attune to the unique experiences of each individual co-researcher.

Given that interviews within the heuristic inquiry tradition rely on experiential time and are encouraged not to be governed by the clock (Moustakas, 1990), I scheduled each interview for one hour, but allowed for two hours in my schedule, giving the option for the interview to extend beyond the allotted hour if the interview organically requires more time. At the conclusion of each preliminary interview with each co-researcher, I coordinated and scheduled with the co-researcher our next interview. The second interview involved the same time schedule.

**Second Interviews.** Second interviews for each co-researcher were scheduled to give them each time to view the text, which were approximately two weeks from the preliminary interview. Second interviews involved an exploration of any moments, characters, and/or symbols or images that co-researchers felt strong associations towards, or that evoked reactions or strong associations with their own experience of mortality (See Appendix B). I asked co-researchers to have a journal with them while viewing the text (either written or electronic) in order for them to record any reactions, felt senses, or moments they feel are important to explore with me during the second interview that relate to their experiences of mortality. The journal was not considered data for the research, but instead simply used as a prompt during the second interview to remind co-researchers of moments of importance throughout viewing the text.

**Group Interview.** Snyder (2012), in her heuristic inquiry, stated that, in an ideal situation, she would have conducted a focus group after her individual interviews in order to have “all actively participated in the creation of a collective understanding of our experiences” (p. 161). Inspired by her work, I conducted a final group interview involving all

co-researchers and myself after all of the individual interviews in order to create a space for all co-researchers to share their experiences of viewing the text in relation to their mortality.

This interview also occurred at the University of Alberta and was scheduled when all co-researchers' schedules allowed. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed in the same fashion as the individual interviews.

### **Analysis and Theme Explication**

Analysis within heuristic inquiry begins during initial contact with co-researchers through my own living experience of the interview process, yet the more formal analysis involves identifying and illuminating themes from the raw data of the co-researcher interviews (Sultan, 2019). The themes are then explicated through the following: Individual depictions, composite depictions, exemplary portraits, and a creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). After completing the first three steps, it was my aim to then explore the nature of the data through an analytical psychology lens as an element of the creative synthesis. An image emerged as the creative synthesis, which was then amplified and interpreted.

Interpretation within the history of analytical psychology has multiple definitions (see Winborn, 2019), yet for the purposes of this study the function of interpretation will be broadly understood as “[seeking] to make conscious the unconscious” (Etchegoyen, 2005, p. 386). Winborn (2019) understands interpretation as “an invitation for the [co-researcher] to see their world in a new way” (p. 15). In the instance of this study, although there is no direct aim to assist in co-researchers understanding their lives in novel ways, interpretation instead aims to understand the experience of mortality.

Throughout the analysis phase of this research, I aimed to maintain a high level of reflexivity in order not to compromise the subjective depictions with theoretical explorations, and vice versa. It was important to deepen any data offered by the co-researchers by attempting to draw connections to the co-researchers' own personal experiences of mortality. As well, I remained open to the acknowledgment that analysis within heuristic inquiry may follow several different directions, and, accordingly, I attempted to stay open to any unique, organic, and emergent directions as they unfolded. This practice involved allowing co-researchers to explore memories, associations, or emotions that may have appeared to be tangential, and exploring how they are drawing connections between what they shared and how they experienced it relating to their mortality. I worked to suspend any of my own bias that might interfere with co-researchers making their own meanings of their experiences.

I further approached data collection and analysis with the recognition of the ways in which worldview defences (Solomon et al., 2015) emerged within the interview process and how they might inform the data and analysis of this research. Although one might understand worldview threat and defence as a limitation of the research, I recognize how an ability to name and understand these dynamics can offer important insights and understandings to the overall results of the research. I also noted the role psychic processes and defences might have played in how co-researchers explored difficult knowledges and their own histories, such as in terms of trauma and related defences (Kalsched, 1996, 2021; Levine, 2014; Stern 2017), projection (von Franz, 1978/1980), and intrapsychic aggression (Britzman, 1998, 2013; Bollas, 1997; Gilbert, 2009; LaCapra, 2009).



### *Individual Depictions*

Individual depictions “provide a holistic, detailed illustration of a co-researcher’s personal living experience” (Sultan, 2019, p. 151) of the phenomenon. In this vein, I reviewed all of the material from each of the co-researcher’s interviews while taking notes and “identifying the qualities and themes manifested in the data” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 51) of each co-researcher which comprised the initial formal analysis phase of the research process. For some, the phenomenon of mortality manifested in visible anxieties and fears, spoken concerns and curiosities, memories and associations, or otherwise. Any of these manifestations were important to note and explore within each of the individual depictions. Overall, individual depictions focused on the qualities and themes that encompass each of the co-researchers’ living experiences of their mortality.

Language is a critical tool in order to conceptualize the human condition, and I recognize that the symbolic world and language will simultaneously always fall short. Although the unconscious can communicate through language, it is always “the site of the untranslatable” (Benjamin, 1992, p. 144). As Britzman (2003) notes, language “hold[s] tensions between what is intended and what is signified” (p. 35), speaking to the role of interpretation within this research project. Within my research journey, the site of the interviews became the space in which such tensions were shown. Interpretation aims to deepen the understanding of what is shown, and in doing so, helps to explicate both conscious and unconscious processes.

After gathering all of the interview data from all co-researchers, I focused on one co-researcher’s data at a time, immersing myself in both their lived experience as well as my

experience of their interview process, attempting to deeply honour the I∞Thou nature of our relationship (Sultan, 2019). Listening to the audio of the co-researcher's transcript several times over the course of days, I attended to my inner experience in the form of curiosities, questions, themes or connections that I felt emerged from my experiencing and re-experiencing of their transcript. Here the heuristic process of tacit knowing was central, understood as the realm of the unknown known dimension of experience (Sultan, 2019), where I attuned to a sense of implicit (or tacit) understanding to inform my curiosity. I began to see potential relationships between anecdotes shared by co-researchers and their experience of the text, or how stories from their past might relate to their personal values or how they relate to others. These felt experiences I wrote down on Post-It notes and stuck to a white board in my home office. I would arrange the notes in particular groups, attending to how these organizations felt within me. At times a particular note felt out of place, and so I would group it alone, or with another set of notes. Other times, an arrow drawn between one group of notes and another would express a relationship between them, while keeping them separate in a way that tacitly felt appropriate.

After some time arranging and rearranging the Post-It notes, I would connect to an inner experience of settling—almost that of an arrival or confirmation—that I interpreted as a sign of saturation (Sultan, 2019) with the particular co-researcher's data. At such a point I began to write out the co-researcher's individual depiction, which emerged from analyzing the co-researcher's raw data, my own curiosities, themes, questions, and connections that came from my immersion in the data in the form of concept-mapping, and my experience of the interviews themselves.

When I had completed each individual depiction, I sent an email copy of the writing, along with a photograph of the concept-mapping to the co-researcher, in order for them to member-check and approve of the writing. I encouraged each co-researcher to provide me with feedback as to the accuracy of the writing, ensuring that what I had written aligned with their lived experience of their mortality. In several instances, there were some minor corrections in the form of language that required adjustment before the individual depiction was approved by the co-researcher. Once I received approval from the co-researcher, I would then begin the process again by immersing myself in the data of the next co-researcher.

### ***Composite Depiction***

A composite depiction “is developed through a process of immersion into, study of, and concentration on the experience of the phenomenon as presented by each co-researcher” towards “the qualities, core themes, and essences that permeate the experience of the entire group of co-researchers [being] understood and [constructing] a universal depiction” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 68). I completed this process by taking the individual depictions together as a group and once again immersing myself in the collective data “until the universal qualities and themes of the experience are thoroughly internalized and understood” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 52). During this step, I explored what parallel theoretical understandings emerged from each of the individual depictions, further pointing to how the lived experience of mortality functions within the psyche of the co-researchers. Do living experiences and theoretical understandings from one co-researcher align with others? If so, what might this mean for how mortality can be understood? If not, for what reasons might these differences exist? Drake (2018) understands a composite depiction in her own heuristic

inquiry as “an integrated, collective representation of the themed experiences of the co-researchers and presented as one collective experience” (p. 83). The purpose of the composite depiction is to assist in deepening my understanding of what core themes and essences (Moustakas, 1990) might comprise the phenomenon of mortality.

### ***Exemplary Portraits***

Exemplary portraits then explore several of the overall portraits “to reflect the uniqueness of those co-researchers’ experiences within the collective experience of the research team” (Sultan, 2019, p. 153). Exemplary portraits seek to “bring into focus the topic of inquiry as experienced both individually and collectively” in order to “tap into both personal and universal characteristics of a phenomenon” (p. 153). The identification of exemplary portraits occurs through selecting two or three co-researchers whose portraits most clearly exemplify the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1990) and aim to be presented in a way that “both the phenomenon investigated and the individual persons emerge in a vital and unified manner” (p. 52). Whereas the composite depiction focuses on the core themes and essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990), the exemplary portraits act to evoke both the individual and the collective.

After creating the individual depictions and a composite depiction from the data, I connected to an intuitive felt sense that exemplary portraits were not necessary for the analysis phase of this research. Upon reflection, the lack of necessity for the creation of exemplary portraits occurred for two reasons. First, given there are six co-researchers for this project, highlighting several as exemplary portraits was not necessary since I was already able to provide a high degree of depth within each individual portrait. Second, upon

immersing myself in the data and creating the individual depictions and composite depiction, followed by a process of incubation, I emerged feeling both a sense of satisfaction and saturation with the data, and believed to have several fruitful directions of travel with the analysis and overall aims of this project.

### *Creative Synthesis*

Finally, the creative synthesis of the research “is personal and allows you to transform the data from its original format into a creative and aesthetic illumination of your sense of the essential nature of the phenomenon” (Sultan, 2019, p. 155). This resultant step is meant to emerge from the previous steps and its aim is towards “explicating the *what* and *how* of the phenomenon following the analysis of all the data sets” (p. 155). Stated another way, the creative synthesis communicates the key features of the analysis. I remained open to a number of forms the creative synthesis of this project might take (e.g., narrative depiction, photograph, artwork, etc.). As an example, the resulting creative synthesis Snyder (2012) arrived at in her heuristic inquiry into the meaning and application of ethics in qualitative research was a metaphorical infographic expressing the necessity of balance between human factors and research methods within qualitative research ethics. Elsewhere, Drake’s (2018) creative synthesis took the form of a written poem, expressing her experience of midlife African American female graduate students at predominantly White institutions as a result of her heuristic inquiry process.

Sultan (2019) understands knowledge to be generated unconsciously within the incubation phase of heuristic inquiry, and this knowledge surfaces into conscious awareness in the illumination phase. Given the recognition of unconscious processes, illumination

within heuristic inquiry can be understood through analytical psychology. Jung (1971/1976) recognized that images and symbols can arise from the unconscious within a tension of opposites, and have a telos towards deepening one's understanding of some unknowable reality. "One might say that images and symbols stand in the "gap" between the known and the unknown, illuminate us, and point the way to our unique possibilities" (Marlan, 2021, p. 264), and symbols themselves have the capacity "to transform and direct libido" (Stein, 1998, p. 69). Elsewhere, Yiassemides (2014) summarizes Jung (1942/1948) and writes, "once faced with a paradox, a symbol can convey the contradiction much better than a logical argument" (p. 72), suggesting that a particular image or symbol representing the paradox might lead to deeper insights surrounding the phenomenon in question. According to Jung (1959/1969b), "at the bottom of every neurosis [there is] a moral problem of opposites that cannot be solved rationally, and can be answered only...by a symbol which expresses both sides" (§281). The linking of opposites through the emergence of an image relates to a fundamental theme within analytical psychology, namely, "the *coniunctio oppositorum*, the union of opposites, a bringing together of light and darkness into an illuminated vision" (Marlan, 2021, p. 2). Once an image emerges, one can engage in the process of amplification, which involves drawing on myth, religion, and cultural histories, to more fully reflect upon and deepen one's understanding about the image (Johnson, 1986; Stein, 1998) and how it relates to the phenomenon.

I was curious and hopeful that throughout my process of interviewing, analyzing, and presenting the data of this study, an image might be illuminated within my consciousness upon which I would be able to amplify, towards a greater depth of understanding about the

phenomenon in question. Thankfully, an image emerged during my analysis phase of the research, and that a presentation and amplification of the image would be an appropriate creative synthesis for this research. The amplification and the analysis and presentation of the data, reflects an answering of my initial research question for this study, i.e., *What is the experience of mortality among curriculum studies graduate students?*

Finally, I discuss my research findings and its implications, making sure to link my findings to field of curriculum studies, while acknowledging and discussing any other trajectories I see future related studies taking with my work.

### **Ethical Considerations of the Study**

#### ***Emotions and Mortality Salience***

Although this study posed a low risk to co-researchers, reflecting on mortality can be emotionally difficult. Theoretically, the utilization of the text functioned to enact worldview defences and increase mortality salience of the co-researchers, and it is understandable that difficult emotions might be experienced that could influence their behaviours (Solomon et al., 2015). Co-researchers were made aware of these risks—including the potential discomfort they might experience when viewing *Chernobyl*—and were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any point before or up to the end of the interview phase. Co-researchers were also provided with referrals for mental health support services on an off campus site if at any point they felt the interviews or text were too emotionally or psychologically upsetting. As a psychotherapist, I consider myself skilled in the ability to navigate emotionally challenging material, and I was ready to engage with the necessary skills in order to prepare co-researchers for and debrief any difficult or disturbing moments

experienced by them. That said, I also acknowledged my role strictly as a researcher, and not as a personal therapist to any of the co-researchers.

Just as there are risks with discussions about mortality, there are also potential benefits to reflecting upon one's mortality, as introduced in Chapter Two. Based on the work of Vail et al. (2012), co-researchers may experience an increased motivation towards pursuing healthy virtues and fulfilling relationships, while also potentially increasing one's level of introspection about their lives and reconsideration of goals that are supportive and meaningful.

Further, reflecting upon one's mortality can evoke psychic material that has existed within the unconscious of the co-researcher. For this material to be made conscious allows for the new material to then be integrated into the co-researcher's conscious awareness. This process reflects a step towards individuation, helping one to move towards "an integration or completeness of the individual, who in this way approaches wholeness but not perfection, which is the ideal" (Jung, 1963/1970, §616). It was possible that co-researchers might feel a sense of integration within themselves by engaging in this study. Some of these beneficial processes occurred for co-researchers, and are explored in the subsequent chapters.

### ***Confidentiality and Anonymity***

All co-researchers in this study were anonymized, both in the transcripts of the audio recordings and in future publications. I told co-researchers I would use a pseudonym to anonymize them in my writing, and they were given the option to provide me with one. I assigned a pseudonym to those that did not provide one. The co-researchers' first name, surname, age, and email addresses were collected to facilitate communication, but identifying



information will play no role in transcription or dissemination. I collected co-researchers' ages as I believed this information would be useful information during data analysis, given the focus on mortality of this research.

All of the collected data was stored on my personal laptop which is both password protected and encrypted. I am the only person with access to my personal laptop. All paper consent forms were scanned and stored in the same manner, with paper copies being shredded after being made digital. The data collected from this research will only be used for the purposes of this study and any future publications based on this work, and will be destroyed five years after the study is completed. After this time, all audio files, along with all electronic consent forms, will be permanently erased.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The particular population of research participants delimits the study. Co-researchers were curriculum studies graduate students within the Faculty of Education at a Western Canadian university, and this was the only criterion upon which co-researchers were chosen. As a result, the study is not directly interested in exploring results through any specific gender, sex, socioeconomic, or cultural lenses, although results may emerge in regards to any of these categories that warrant explication. As an example, I am aware of the ways in which power relations function in relation to the nature of the research through how the experiences of Othering can occur across races, cultures, and geographies (Ruti, 2017). Therefore, because of a co-researcher's gender, sex, race, etc., their experience of mortality might be expressed in a particular way or with a particular nuance. I was reflexive about maintaining a

stance of awareness and reflectivity towards each co-researcher in order to understand the ways in which such aspects of one's identity might influence their experience of mortality.

In regards to limitations, or constraints on generalizability, of this study, it will be natural to want to generalize the results of this study; however, the number of co-researchers and the specified criteria limit this study and so any generalizations or inferences made from the result will be purely speculative and theoretical. Further, I recognize that a limitation of the study is the research decision to include only one mortality-themed text. Such a reliance on a singular text (as opposed to, for example, having each co-researcher choose their own text), might influence and determine the experiences of mortality developed and expressed by the co-researchers. I acknowledge how each of these factors limit the work and I proceed cautiously surrounding any more general speculations surrounding the nature of mortality on the human condition.

University ethics were completed for this study and were approved in October, 2021. A copy of the ethics approval appears in Appendix D.

#### **Chapter Four Summary**

In this methodology chapter, I further elaborated upon heuristic inquiry as introduced in Chapter One, discussing the fundamental elements of this methodology, its relationship to phenomenology, and how it functions as an ideal methodology for addressing the research gap this study aims to fill. I then explored relevant tenets of reader response theory in relation to the study before justifying and discussing the role *Chernobyl* played in the research. I introduced how the data within heuristic inquiry is analyzed and presented, before providing

an overview of research methods for carrying out my study, along with relevant ethical considerations.

## Chapter Five: Mortality Among Curriculum Studies Graduate Students

### Introduction

This chapter provides a presentation of *the experience of mortality among curriculum studies graduate students*, thereby attending to the initial research question of this study. I present research data in the form of individual depictions as derived from each of the co-researchers' individual and group interviews, followed by a composite depiction, acting "as an accurate, vivid unifying representation of the core themes illuminated through each of the individual portraits" (Sultan, 2019, pp. 152-153; Moustakas, 1990), and finally a creative synthesis of the data, reflecting "[a transformation of] the data from its original format into a creative and aesthetic illumination of your sense of the essential nature of the phenomenon" (Sultan, 2019, p. 154). I then reflect upon the creative synthesis of this work towards discussing the implications of the findings in Chapter Six.

### Individual Depictions

As introduced in Chapter Four, individual depictions are a key component to heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990, Sultan, 2019). Each individual depiction was created as a stand-alone account of each co-researcher's experience of mortality through their interviews based on questions from the General Interview Guide (See Appendix B). Examples of some of the interview questions are as follows:

- Can you please describe any significant experiences surrounding death in your life thus far?
- How have you come to understand your own sense of mortality?
- Does anything come to mind when you contemplate your own death? If so, what?

- Can you please describe your graduate student experience thus far?
- Are there any ways in which your mortality functions in relationship to your experience of being a graduate student? If so, what are the ways?

Because heuristic inquiry focuses on the *living* experience of a phenomenon, I used individual pseudonyms for each individual depiction in order to provide the reader an opportunity to connect to the phenomenon through each of the co-researcher's unique personalities. Further, and per the tenets of heuristic inquiry, it was critical not to involve any theoretical interpretation throughout the individual depictions, staying true to co-researchers' perception being the primary source of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013). As a result, I was intentional in working to bracket out any theoretical understandings that might interfere with a description of the phenomenology as described by each co-researcher. Instead, the majority of any theoretical interpretive writing saved for the subsequent Chapter Six, where I discuss the findings of this research.

Given the autobiographical focus of heuristic inquiry, the phenomenon requires being accessed through the individual personality of each co-researcher, expressed and understood through perception, emotion, personal history, memory, and otherwise (Moustakas, 1994; Sultan, 2015). Some interview questions evoked many significant avenues to explore for certain co-researchers, while other questions did not result in enough relevance for inclusion in the individual depictions. Given heuristic inquiry's highly creative process, along with its embodied relational interviewing style, the individual depictions are not presented as a structured, orderly account of the answered interview questions, but rather a "holistic, detailed illustration of a...personal living experience of the topic" (Sultan, 2019, p. 151).

*Lauren*

At the time of the interviews, Lauren was a 27 year old, White, first year curriculum studies PhD student who taught junior high school at an upper-middle class neighbouring municipality.

In viewing *Chernobyl*, Lauren initially found herself challenging the historical accuracy of the text, almost providing a critique of the miniseries. Given her Russian and Ukrainian background, she connected to the Soviet mentality of “hid[ing] everything away” in terms of how the State attempted to suppress the significance of the Chernobyl disaster, viewing it as a form of state sanctioned violence. She identified being “pissed off” at the men who represented the State, and expressed a desire for Ulana—a nuclear physicist who spoke against such authority figures—to be a real historical character. She paralleled the dynamic between Ulana and the State to how authority figures function within academia. Lauren also found herself working to connect to the human impacts that were shown in the series, specifically pointing to the scene of the old lady milking the cow, the animals who were shot throughout the town, and the relationship between Lyudmilla and her husband and baby who died as a result of radiation poisoning.

These evocations from the text led Lauren to explore how a dismantling of her relationship with her father—who himself had been a proponent of state sanctioned violence—was involved in her own process of becoming in the context of her mortality. This process of becoming—understood psychically as the process of individuation—related to her experience of being a graduate student and the rather paradoxical nature of her identity as a student. The text also brought up an important theme of innocence for Lauren in relation to

mortality, initially explored through the animals who had been killed throughout the film (discussed further in the Composite Depiction).

Lauren described having a “very odd” relationship with her father in which “I’m parenting him in a lot of ways.” Working as a peacekeeper overseas, her father had been involved in operations that had threatened his own safety on numerous occasions throughout Lauren’s upbringing, which she viewed as confrontations with her own mortality, leading me to further explore her dynamic with her father. Their relationship helped Lauren establish a passion for social justice and citizenship education, yet she experienced a crisis in high school when a social studies teacher challenged her prior understandings of peacekeeping and, therefore, the idea of Lauren’s father as the hero both she, and he, had internalized. Grappling with what Lauren understood as a “worldview threat” after beginning to have such a heroic image of her father unravel, Lauren responded to such confusion by becoming involved in social justice initiatives that challenged the “hero complex” Lauren understood her father to have.

Around the time Lauren turned eighteen, her father vulnerably expressed a frustration about a current overseas mission where he felt as though “I’m not sure why we’re there. We should just let the place blow up. Let them all kill each other.” This experience was a pivotal moment for Lauren, where she witnessed “this idea of him that was being dismantled. It was leaving, and so in a way I had lost that main idea that I had about him for so long.” Lauren understood the next chapter of her life partially as a challenge and rebellion against her parents’ worldviews, through “rebuild[ing] my identity” towards an understanding of herself as “a completely different person.” It appeared that Lauren’s worldview—partially

constructed through an idealized image of her father—provided her with a sense of identity and meaning, and existing in contrast to an experience of uncertainty or chaos.

As a teacher and graduate student, Lauren understood her journey and identity as a constant state of becoming, while simultaneously recognizing “being in itself” as a life purpose. Yet, such purpose does not come with an arrival, for Lauren also acknowledged herself as someone who is “always seeking more” and, therefore, struggled to find happiness with where she was currently situated. In the context of her graduate studies, her struggle resulted in imposter syndrome, perfectionism, and a desire to “prove myself,” all qualities she recognized as “not good things,” yet things in which she took comfort:

I feel a degree of comfort with the fact that grad school is about asking questions rather than finding answers. Whereas I feel like in other aspects of my life it's always about solutions and answering...It's comforting [here] to know that I can just ask questions and not find answers and it'll be okay, and that's what everybody's doing. We're all just throwing around ideas and that's comforting, but in most other aspects of my life, and I think in most people's lives, people want answers. People aren't just okay living in the grey space.

As a PhD student, Lauren also understood purpose paradoxically, recognizing, “I do find solace in that idea that people think these great things about me, but it's also really problematic because that contributes to [imposter syndrome, perfectionism, and a desire to prove myself].” Along with solace, her studies brought her happiness and she felt supported and respected in her academic circle. I recognized the level of stability Lauren once found in her father's worldview, and how the rupture later required her to construct her own identity



apart from his. Her professional journey reflected an oscillation between the structured identities of educator and student, and the uncertainty of constant becoming, all stemming from what she identified as early encounters with her mortality.

Such paradox bleeds into Lauren's identity as an educator, recognizing that she shows up as a "completely different person" when she is in her classroom, compared to who she is when she is having conversations with her teacher colleagues, resulting in an experience of disconnection. Lauren reported feeling a deep connection to herself and her world through both teaching and learning, along with an experience of "perpetuating these same systems that I'm also a proponent of dismantling." This paradox resulted in a tension of identity for Lauren, identifying as both an educator and student, yet feeling unable to "advocate both those things in the same way [at my school]. Because I'm the only one that can see it. Everybody else can't." Within such tension, Lauren appeared to accept some responsibility for finding a home amidst the uncertainty of being; both in her own lived experience and in her identities as an educator, student, daughter, and friend.

Lauren struggled at first with the specific topic of mortality, to the extent she asked me for a definition of the term. Early on, she questioned what she might be able to contribute to the topic, stating that no one close to her in her life had died. Yet, as our conversation progressed, Lauren drew what I felt was an important connection: "I don't know. When I think about mortality, I do think about death, but I also think about humanness, and this idea of humanity, and [wondering] if grad school is making me more or less human...and I think that death would bring out that humanness." She then drew a deeper connection to relationality: "I feel like I'm getting at what it...means to...live in relation to people as well

as things when I'm here in this building or in the grad student mindset.”

Upon asking Lauren if she's had any moments where she feels deeply connected to her humanness, Lauren began sharing her experience of working closely with—and finding a deep emotional connection to—a student in her classroom with a history of trauma. “It's almost like I can see the violence of education manifesting in the student.” Although Lauren wondered if her connection to this student stemmed from her own saviour complex—perhaps linking back to the hero complex she witnessed in her relationship to her father that she had worked to dismantle—I had a hunch that something more was at play in Lauren's relationship to this student, perhaps that Lauren was having a vicarious experience of her student's mortality that resulted in her connecting to a greater depth of her own humanness.

Lauren's viewing of *Chernobyl* brought up the topic of innocence—initially through how animals were portrayed throughout the series—which was a concept in which Lauren admitted she struggled with in the field of education: “I don't see children as innocent.” Lauren wondered if society held an innocent view of children strictly because of their age, and if adults were “dirtying their minds with all of this social justice rhetoric that's potentially deemed as problematic for somebody in a developmental stage.” Lauren remarked that education itself has the capacity to remove innocence from those we educate. Further, she pointed to her experience of teaching as one where educators deem the “bad” children as those who are not innocent, whereas innocence continues to reside in those students who are deemed “good.” Here, for Lauren, there was a connection between the idea of innocence and that of purity, where through the living of life, both are removed—or taken away—as the individual becomes skeptical or questioning about themselves or the ways in which they

view the world.

I was struck by how Lauren's wrestling with the idea of innocence—something she admitted, "I don't know how to reconcile"—seemed connected to her own loss of innocence as a graduate student, and her early loss of innocence through the rupture of her image of her father. Lauren recognized after becoming a graduate student that, "I can't be the same person I was before and sometimes it makes me bitter." The empathic, caring, and supportive relationship to her student seemed to connect Lauren to an acknowledgment of her own experience of a lost innocence towards learning how to be in a state of "constant becoming" and seeking a home amidst the "grey space" of academia. It was, in my experience of Lauren, a grey space in which Lauren felt a deep connection to herself, through her teaching and learning, all of which was tied to a deeper purpose.

In the final group interview, Lauren shared the following: "This whole process [of being a co-researcher] hasn't really been about death. It's been more about what it means to be human." Elsewhere, Lauren wrestled with the idea of being human, tied to her identity and purpose as an educator: "How do we help children to become human?" She further applied a similar thought to her personal life in a statement near the end of the final interview: "I could maybe offer a little bit more humanness to certain situations."

### *Cindy*

Cindy was 37 at the time of the interviews, and a White junior high school teacher in her first year of her curriculum studies master's degree in Education. Cindy appeared to engage with my research from a nervous excitement, as though she desired to offer something insightful and purposeful to the project, while recognizing the extent to which she

might also deepen an understanding of herself through the process.

Cindy expressed a deep connection to the character of Ulana, whom she “admired” and viewed as a “brave” “badass White lady” who “does what [she] needs to get the job done,” which left her feeling “empowered.” Cindy also understood Ulana as a character who “sees humanity” throughout the series, which led to an exploration of the value she places on her own life. On a related note, Cindy too noted a theme of innocence in relation to the needless deaths suffered by the animals in the series, and shared how she values her own pet’s life over her own, leading to an important discussion of her relationship to her own death.

The moments in the series that highlighted evacuation efforts drew Cindy to connect to the measures taken in the face of the then current COVID-19 pandemic, exploring a distinction between medical directives versus political directives in relation to mortality and the value placed on human life. Cindy alluded to a scene involving workers who were intentionally exposed to severe radiation without fully understanding their role to relate to her experiences of teaching, learning, and imposter syndrome as a graduate student.

Cindy’s experience of anxiety existed through much of her history, disclosing that she has been a caretaker for her mother—an “agoraphobic hoarder”—while having a distant relationship with her father who, during her upbringing, “was a very scary person,” reflecting early experiences of her own mortality. As a result, “my Mom taught me that the world was a scary place. I never got a chance to see the world as a good place. I was never given that opportunity.”

For Cindy, teaching was closely linked to a purpose. Throughout the interview

process, I felt a connection between Cindy's experience of her upbringing and the purposefulness she connected to through teaching, along with a deep sense of responsibility for her role as an educator and human. "Now that I've learned what the world is like, now I'm responsible for that." For Cindy, "teaching helps me assuage things like white guilt and guilt I have about being privileged" and that "I'm taking something I feel implicated in and trying to take responsibility for it in this way." Cindy's purpose through teaching seemed to function as an antidote for the anxious uncertainty of her upbringing.

Emerging from the dynamic between privilege and responsibility at times is a "frustrated hopelessness" for Cindy. Although Cindy finds her identity as a graduate student as a comfortable place to exist, she also names it as "one of the most difficult experiences in my life," reflecting her experience of "frustrated hopelessness." When Cindy is not learning, "I'm not getting anything out of life," and she named the experience of seeking and questioning as "spiritual," connected to an "incessant curiosity" that she has lived closely to throughout her life. Perhaps Cindy's curiosity emerged from her frustrated hopelessness, and motivated her towards a love of learning. As a result, she found a place to exist within graduate school:

I feel like a five year old for the rest of my life in a great way. Maybe that's part of it. It makes me feel like this childish curiosity, and I found a route that lets me be this thirty-seven year old grown up that can still embody that childish curiosity that...kind of fills me up.

I had an image of graduate school being somewhat of a playground for Cindy, where "It's a safe space to be an imposter. It's a safe space to ask the questions. It's a safe space to want to

be that five year old filled with curiosity and nobody judge me for it,” while acknowledging that such an experience perhaps helped return her to, and keep alive, the thread of “incessant curiosity” that has run throughout Cindy’s life.

I held on to Cindy’s connection to these childlike, past conceptions of herself. Cindy shared with me a past identity she labeled as “Salad Dressing Cindy.” It was a period in her life when she felt somewhat “happy,” “mentally stable,” and “emotionally balanced,” to the extent that she placed value on being able to take the time to explore her enjoyment of cooking and preparing meals, all the way down to making her own salad dressing. More recently in her life, Cindy found herself “working through accepting the life I have now” and accepting who she was in the present, which required her to no longer strive towards being Salad Dressing Cindy. This grieving process evoked a deep sadness, as she attempted to feel worthy of who she was at the present time, somewhere acknowledging that to accept who she was today was a simultaneous letting go of—and perhaps dying to—Salad Dressing Cindy.

Cindy paralleled her viewing of *Chernobyl* with her experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. She saw the pandemic “as a great equalizer” which, she reported, left her “kind of thriving.” “For the first time the populace was feeling how I feel most days of my life,” and, as a result, Cindy felt more comfortable, understood, and connected to herself and the world around her: “You think the world is ending? I think it’s Tuesday.” Witnessing others live in closer relationship to their mortality provided Cindy with a connection to herself and her world.

Cindy identified escapism and numbing as a broad category for the ways in which she coped with “fear [being] an overarching emotion for me;” however, both her escapist

tendencies, along with the ways she identified as privileged, evoked guilt within her. From my position as a researcher, the relationship between Cindy's sense of privilege, her exposure to and experience of fear throughout her history, her resulting coping strategies and the emerging guilt, all formed a complex and self-perpetuating experience of anxiety that Cindy sees as central to her existence.

Perhaps as a result of the above dynamic, Cindy approached death with as rather comforting, viewing it as a relieving certainty. "Death won't let me down. I can depend on it in a way I can't depend on other people or myself. It might feel like an old friend or an ally; it might not be the enemy." I openly communicated to Cindy how beautiful of a line it was for her to share with me. We sat with it together for a moment, and I asked her how sharing it with me made her feel. Cindy was quick to acknowledge that she felt like "maybe something is wrong with me. Maybe something is broken in me." After pointing out to Cindy that these were both statements of self-judgement, and again encouraging her to spend some time to simply sit with the statement she had made, Cindy then shared the following:

It feels like drinking a warm cup of tea or doing a shot of whiskey.... Like when you said "let it sit with you," I feel warmth inside me. I feel it radiating slowly from my core to my extremities.... It makes me feel like I've actually made some progress.... I feel like that was a really honest thing to say. And it was a brave thing to say. And so I feel kind of proud of myself. Like, no offence, I don't give a shit that I said it out loud to you, but I feel really good that I can say that stuff to me. And I can feel that confidence in my identity and sit up a little bit straight about it.... And so I feel more certain in my identity, and accepting who I am. And it feels like I've made some

progress there.

***Michael***

Michael was a 29 year old, White, first year curriculum studies masters student, junior high school teacher, and former Infantry Officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. Related to his past experiences in the military, Michael was drawn to moments in the text where individuals committed themselves to “something bigger than you,” where workers were given minimal information and would sacrifice their own values, well-being, and lives, for a greater cause. This connection led Michael to explore how one picks the right cause for which to sacrifice aspects of themselves, and wrestled with whether or not such choices can be humanizing or dehumanizing.

Relating the above point to an experience of mortality, Michael viewed Ulana as “the real hero” of the series, who, interestingly, existed outside of the state sanctioned systems demanding sacrifice from the populous. Michael expressed hatred towards the bureaucrats in the series, which he drew a connection to the systems involved within education. This connection led Michael to explore how bureaucracy can lead to marginalization and oppression which can interfere with creative and generative forces within education.

Michael shared a memory of learning that his wife was pregnant as an initial experience of mortality. Upon hearing the news, Michael was afraid:

I suddenly was like...I'm going to get old, [my child is] going to get older.

Eventually I'm going to [die] and hopefully I've done a decent job so that [my child] can survive on its own. Eventually I'm going to die, and that scares the living shit out of me.



It appeared as though the fear, for Michael, was linked to a sense of temporality and purpose in relation to his mortality. The life of his child would stretch beyond his own, resulting in a requirement for Michael to provide for the child in the ways necessary to exist independently from Michael and his partner. Acknowledging an ending of his own life was a confrontation with the recognition that a life would extend beyond the temporal limits of his own, bringing into perspective a fuller experience of his own mortality and resultant fear.

The viewing of *Chernobyl* brought up many associations to Michael's past in the military which he related to his mortality. As a former Infantry Officer in the Canadian Armed Forces, Michael shared an experience during his time in training when his class was exposed to a threatening video. The film showed a marketplace with a convoy of three armoured personnel carriers and people milling about. Immediately, an explosion occurred and the screen turned white. The smoke began to fade, revealing the resulting wreckage and casualties:

And the point is you need to know that this is what you're signing up for. There's committing to the cause and saying that yes, you may be ordered into duty that you could get killed or kill someone. But we're telling you what that actually looks like. We're showing you what that looks like. And that made it incredibly real, and there were a lot of people in the room where you just read it on their face where they're just like "I get it."

Michael further described how, on weekends, fellow soldiers would engage in some "healthy release of stress for the week;" however, on the particular weekend after the training video had been shown, "you could tell the tone was different. There was a lot of quiet conversation

around, kind of like, “Are you still up for this? Am I still up for this? Is this what we thought it was?””

For Michael, the experience was a validation of his own re-commitment to his role in the Armed Forces, and Michael named commitment as one of his fundamental values. “You get this uniform, and then you get to wear it, and you’re part of something greater than yourself. And that’s just one of the best feelings you could ever describe.” The value of commitment, most notably experienced by Michael during his time in the Armed Forces, extends to other areas of his life, despite his most significant association to it was during his time as an Infantry Officer:

When I wake up and work an eighteen hour day I go to bed and think I earned that, and if part of this job leads me to have a day that is my last, then every single day that I’ve had that feeling I have earned it. And as much as I love what I’m doing now, I haven’t had that same experience since.

Commitment, therefore, closely aligned with purpose for Michael. In one of the hangars at a training facility for the Canadian Armed Forces, there was a constant slideshow playing of all of the service personnel who had lost their lives in the field, and it was an expectation that officers would “straighten up and salute” the wall whenever they passed as a sign of respect and commitment. Related to the hangar with the slideshow, Michael described a time during training when individuals were required to dress up in their “formals” in order to have your “death picture” taken, a term used “jokingly, because that’s the picture where it’s you in your formal gear, and if there was ever something to happen and they were releasing something, that’s what they would show.”

Living in accordance to the value of commitment appeared to offer Michael a profound purpose for his life. Attempting to reflect upon his own life in totality, he pointed to the importance of being able to look back upon one's life and be content with what has been accomplished, in order to also then look forward with a sense of inspiration towards what remains of one's life. Death, for Michael, did not function in opposition to life, nor did it exist on a spectrum. Instead, death and life "are two sides of the same coin," in that we experience life simultaneously with an ongoing recognition and awareness of our mortality. In a particular collapse of time, death provides a texture for life, and vice versa. This acknowledgement brought Michael to reflect again on his experience of fear surrounding moments of mortality: "[the fear] is not about death, so it must be about time." Temporality was woven throughout Michael's reflection on his own mortality.

Purpose and commitment were also values expressed in Michael's relationship to education: "My life exists to make other people's lives better in some way," and, "I think there's nothing more human than to sacrifice for the greater good, because that's how we have survived and evolved." Michael saw the capacity of being generative as an ethic towards both how to go about living life as well as his role as a graduate student and identity within education: "If what you give [to life] adds meaning, then it's generative," and, in regards to education, "When I think of education as being a generative force, to me, it has to be a part of making the world a better place." Such creativity in the form of a generative force seemed to juxtapose Michael's experience of bureaucracy within education—a system by which Michael felt frustration: "If we're not genuinely [in education] for the right reasons, a lot of people, I feel, use bureaucracy and positions to create a zone of conflict," which he

paralleled with the character Ulana in *Chernobyl*, who functioned against large-scale and harmful bureaucracy. Zones of conflict, here understood by Michael, interfered with the creative, generative force from which education—and perhaps life more generally—ought to function. Further, such bureaucracy might function towards providing comforts to some in positions of power, at the cost of the marginalization or oppression of others within the system. Purpose also functioned for Michael within his identity as a graduate student, and he understood the experience of graduate school as something fundamentally uncomfortable:

One of the things that kills me is the idea that you should come to university to hear things that we enforce and that we believe. That's bullshit. If you are here and you are doing this seriously, it will be uncomfortable and it will check you and it will make you sit down and go and think about that all day long.

### ***Kira***

Kira was a 28 year old, White, high school teacher and second year curriculum studies masters student with a political science background, and she enthusiastically shared an initial familial connection to Chernobyl and Ukraine at the outset of our initial meeting. She reported that her grandmother and mother were living in Ukraine during the Chernobyl disaster, and Kira explained how fortunate her family was to not have been as affected as they might have been were they situated in another area of the country.

A scene in which Lyudmilla watched her husband and the father of her child die “impacted me the most emotionally” and “evoked the most memories for me.” This evocation led to an exploration of deaths she had experienced within her own family of origin and how Kira found herself emotionally caretaking others, along with the impact this

has on her own values and understanding of self. It further led to an important discussion of her thoughts surrounding pregnancy and having a child, which drew strong associations to her experience of mortality.

Interestingly, Kira also attended to the scene of the old lady milking the cow, yet acknowledged that her identity was not connected to a sense of place in the same way as the old lady, wondering if this perhaps was related to the reality that she was the child of immigrants. Although not overtly drawn to a particular sense of place, Kira was moved by the scene of the bodies that expired as a result of radiation being buried in the earth under an enormous layer of concrete. She connected this to the natural life and death cycle of nature, identifying how, as a result of human efforts, there was no way for these bodies to be a part of that natural cycle, which evoked in her an image of the Uroboros.

Kira's initial connection to her mortality came from sharing that her grandmother had passed away the previous year from cancer. During her decline, Kira functioned as a caretaker for her grandmother, taking her to appointments related to her cancer treatments. She further disclosed feeling emotionally calloused as a response to not "emoting" a lot during difficult experiences in her life. "Watching someone shrink, physically, was weird for me.... Seeing this literal death happen was weird." On the other hand, Kira's response to the passing of her grandmother resulted in a level of empathy she felt, primarily towards her mother, as she experienced her mother grieve the passing of the relationship. "It makes me really sad to witness other people's suffering." Kira acknowledged her capacity for emotion, yet, in situations involving deaths in her family, "I go on autopilot and take control and try to be as helpful as possible. So I just don't have time to be emotional, and I don't want to have

that time because I'd rather be there for the people that need to actually be emotional about it.”

The scenes involving the loss of loved ones in *Chernobyl* significantly impacted Kira, and led to an exploration of a pattern of how she finds purpose through emotionally supporting family members in her life. “I get a lot of happiness through helping people, and that usually helps me to feel good,” which also seemed to speak towards a more general aspect of purpose in her life: “I try to organize what I'm doing in a way to make things easier on others.... I'm not just here to take up space.” Her role as a helper—caring for other's emotional worlds outside of her own—might also function as a way of avoiding her own emotional world. In exploring the passing of a family member to suicide a decade earlier, Kira shared with me, “I didn't want to feel emotional because I was just really pissed off at [him], and still am, ten years later.”

Her role as a helper, as mentioned above, helped Kira to experience happiness in her life, while also providing order. During more difficult times, she experienced a lack of control when order was more difficult to find. In these moments, absence was felt, which Kira named as a “hole,” that brought with it “discomfort,” “sadness,” and “numbness.” “Not being able to [help people] leads to that absence and that can lead to that sadness or lack of emotion in general,” as though her emotional world was not accessible—or perhaps safe to feel—when her external world felt chaotic.

Yet, relationships were also an important aspect of Kira's life that helped her to feel grounded, which she identified as feeling “like a stasis.” Relationships functioned for her reality to offer comfort as she moved through life with other people around her. Without such

a relational grounding, Kira returned to a lack of control within her existence, opening her again to this “hole” where discomfort, sadness, and numbness reside.

Kira disclosed that she does not experience fear or concern surrounding her own mortality. Instead, she focuses more on how her death might affect those around her. More so, contemplating her own finitude leads Kira to reflect on the many branches her life could take, which might be viewed as different potentials. As an example, in reaction to the death of a child in *Chernobyl*, Kira explored her ambivalence surrounding having a child at some point in her life:

I could literally be one day, ‘Yes, I want kids,’ and then the next day literally be like, ‘No, I’m not going through the body horror of having my teeth decay and getting my organs shoved up into my lungs because this child is growing inside of me.’ It’s that weirdness of like, I would be happy either way.

The thought of pregnancy—growing a life within—was its own reminder of mortality for Kira, that also spoke to the natural death and life cycle of humanity, which evoked an image of the Uroboros—a serpent eating its own tail—for Kira. This cycle of life and death Kira took a sense of existential comfort in, which alluded to her own identity as a teacher and potential parent. For Kira, both her role as a teacher and potential parent related to a desire towards being an active agent in making the world a better place for other people. Reflecting on a scene from the text in which human bodies were needing to be buried within feet of concrete in order to prevent the spread of radiation, Kira named how this human-created disruption interfered with the natural cycle of life and death.

As a graduate student, Kira explored the way her journey of study made her feel like

she was more active in her engagement with the world, while adding “texture” to her experience. “I like to push myself. I feel like it’s really limiting to just feel like things are going OK so I should just be happy with that.” For Kira, “[graduate school] is a way to broaden my own field of vision in a sense where I can engage with other points of view that I wouldn’t have known existed.”

### ***Sarah***

I was intrigued by the various experiences of mortality Sarah shared in her introductory email to me expressing interest in my research. When she arrived for the initial interview, it was our first time meeting in person, and I felt as though I was encountering someone soft spoken and introspective, with many stories to tell. Sarah was 40 years old, White, and a high school teacher and first year curriculum studies PhD student.

Similar to other co-researchers, Sarah disclosed that the death of the animals in the series affected her quite a bit, most notably in the association her made between animals and innocence. Somewhat related, the scene of the old lady milking the cow as also significant for Sarah, yet it drew strong connections for her towards the land and the earth in relation to her identity. For Sarah, this scene connected her to her grandmother and experiences she has had traveling the world feeling connected to her ancestors, which drew associations to her own identity and experience of mortality. In contrast, she explored how the effects of the Chernobyl disaster impacted nature and the earth as a result of human activity, and in so doing, resulted in an inability for people to be connected to the land in the ways they once were.



The scene of the old lady milking the cow also connected Sarah to her experience of imposter syndrome and feeling stuck at times as a graduate student. "Like a prisoner in your own body," Sarah likened these moments to her mortality in connection to her own history of suicidality and how these moments are held in tension with a creative drive that she has felt a strong connection to in her life.

Sarah recalled being 10 years old when she was exposed to discussions and learnings about illness from her family while her aunt was dying of breast cancer, which she reported as an early experience of mortality. After her aunt passed, Sarah recalled a level of curiosity towards seeing her aunt's posthumous body and, upon recounting this experience, was struck by the absence of personhood in what she was witnessing: "What made her a person was just gone." Sarah shared that soon after the passing of her aunt—and perhaps as a result of her Catholic upbringing—she attempted to communicate with her aunt and the dead, both through prayer and an act of writing a letter to her aunt and "reading this letter aloud [before] throwing it away into the wind." Although Sarah remarked that "I had this recognition [at the time] that maybe there was nothing; that maybe all of this I was just imagining," she also connected to the function of hope, in acts of prayer or the afterlife, that "functioned in order to make death maybe manageable."

At the time of the interview, Sarah experienced the idea of death as horrifying. "This idea that my consciousness could end still horrifies me," which further elicited helplessness, along with what felt like a paradoxical stance towards death: "Reminders of death have powers to move me out of my own nihilistic thinking," yet, "thinking about death can [also] create those nihilistic thoughts." Further, Sarah understood her mortality as "motivating when

I think I only have X decades left to live” while acknowledging that the thought of mortality provided a focus to her life, albeit, not in a peaceful way.

Sarah shared past experiences of her own suicidal ideation, and she grounded her exploration of suicide within a story during a time while she was studying in a masters program and came across a small crowd and an ambulance next to a town square. Sarah saw what looked like a male’s body with a blanket covering him. When she noticed an older woman who was a part of the crowd scream, she drew the conclusion that this man had committed suicide by jumping from the building, and that his mother was screaming after being informed by the police that this man was, in fact, her son. Her memory of this incident “still has this dark association for me. It kind of scares me,” yet, the fear for Sarah was not about the incident itself, but about the conclusions she drew from her experience of bearing witness to the scene:

What bothered me about that is that I immediately thought of this person committing suicide. And that was troubling to me because I have experienced in my life thoughts of suicide. And I think, at that time, too, it was something that was kind of in my mind...It profoundly shook me. I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Later, Sarah felt relief upon learning the cause of death was not suicide.

Suicidal thoughts emerged for Sarah at “times in my life where I’ve felt very frustrated with a lack of ability to do things [which has] interfered with attaining different types of success.” Such feelings then transformed into “a disgust with myself. And that’s where the suicidal thoughts start.” Anxiety also played a role in her ideation, which results in Sarah “getting stuck in a loop of thinking,” projecting herself into a future where she

believed herself as someone who only causes pain and suffering to those around her. Sarah captured her experience of suicidality in feeling “uninspiring to be alive.”

In regards to Sarah’s experiences of suicidal thinking, “what counters that are sparks of inspiration. A creative drive,” that functions towards “the possibility of creating the person that I want to become.” Here was where Sarah found identity within graduate school, a place functioning as “a different way to approach the questions that I had been grappling with before.” Such questioning was also closely linked to her identity:

I see myself creating or reconstructing myself through research that I’m doing. The more that I seem to learn and understand about different perspectives and different concepts and different points of view and theoretical frames, the more I’m able to make sense of my lived experience in a way that’s meaningful to me, and that makes [life] more manageable, or less full of despair.

Sarah experienced anxiety within her graduate student experience, associated with comparison to others and “from thinking about what am I supposed to be in this situation and trying to be something that...is not necessarily me.” It appeared to me that each of Sarah’s shared experiences of anxiety were deeply connected to her identity.

Being a second generation European immigrant, Sarah shared experiences of travel, land, and place that also seemed deeply tied to her identity, which was evoked in response to the scene of the old lady milking her cows in *Chernobyl*. Sarah shared a story of her travels when she was on a train in Poland and feeling as though she heard the voice of her grandfather who had passed away, noting the significance she felt of being in a place that her grandparents had left many years before:

It's almost eeriness in a sense, and I don't know whether it was just my imagination wanting to create a story where this felt like home to me, but there was something that felt like home to me. And I couldn't quite put my finger on what that is.

Sarah reported feeling "heartbreak or nostalgia" to think of leaving a place under the terrible circumstances in which her grandparents had to leave, once again drawing a connection between place and identity: "That departure severed something that you can never come back to;" "There's so much lost and I just see it as this big gap in my personal history;" "Having that connection to the land is actually something very powerful, and making that journey was powerful, and there's an important story there." Despite the heartbreak, there appeared to be a simultaneous connection to purpose in the severance, perhaps related to what inspired her within her graduate studies: "I don't know why I want to find more information out [about my family's history]. It stirs a curiosity."

Sarah shared with me another experience of her mortality that "fundamentally changed me as a human being." While studying in another country, she became aware that she was pregnant and made the choice to have an abortion, an experience that, at the time of our interview, she understood as "probably the most profound [experience]." She recognized that experience—both of pregnancy and abortion—as something quite strange:

To experience life, and yourself a host to life, and not understanding what that means, and then understanding what it means when it's gone. So to me, when I think about death, it always has to be connected to that experience. Because that's the only time that I actually felt the difference between something living and something dying.

Later on in Sarah's life, while having a conversation with a friend who had her own child, her

friend commented that to give birth is to see what you are really made of:

And when I think of abortion, I think the same thing...because you see what you're made of, and it's very humbling...in the sense of 'What are you as a human?' You're just reduced to this kind of fleshiness and helplessness and at the same time, recognizing that you are enmeshed in these dynamics of life—these stories and histories and beings that connect you to past and future.

Sarah chose to submit a personal artifact to the research. A picture was taken of the artifact, along with Sarah's own words in relation to it:

**Figure 1**

*A photograph of the St. Benedict medal*



*Figure 1: Photograph taken by Sarah*

Sarah: I have been told that the St. Benedict medal was often used during exorcisms or at the moment of death or for protection to ward off evil in times of darkness. Though intriguing, as a lapsed Catholic, I find myself irreverently positioned toward such religious musings. I can only grasp them metaphorically. This particular medal came to me with stories of its history—from a beloved friend who had received it from a beloved friend, carrying it with her from Poland to Norway and back again. And, when I was called back to a place I knew by heart, I carried it with me, wore it next to my heart—not to grieve, or sediment memory in despair, but to recall love and beloveds and what it means to live through difficult things—a kind of parting glass. I think of the liminal space of ritual that is said to emerge between what is no longer and not yet, shaped and being shaped by all elements partaking. She and I were parting, moving in different directions—toward other countries, people, activities, and uncertain futures. As I learned of my pregnancy, already pregnant herself, she sat with me ruminating, agonizing over the impossible choice I inevitably had to make, and after I terminated the pregnancy, she walked through the park with me, reciting Milosz's poems among rows of twisting elm trees. I think of the old growth forest of home—the smell of evergreen needles crushed beneath my boots—and realize it's time to leave. Walking the same route in the late spring with her son, she gives me the medal to accompany me into the next part of my journey.

*Nick (Myself)*

I was 33 at the time I engaged with *Chernobyl* for the sake of this research, and a fifth year curriculum studies PhD student. I was deeply moved in the ways animals were

portrayed in the series; however, I did not initially connect my experience to a theme of innocence. Instead, I viewed the animals as a deep source of knowledge and understanding, as though they held an awareness beyond that of the human characters in the film. The animals were a litmus test, and the first signal of eventual death, and I viewed them as a bridge between humanity and the earth. As a result, the portrayal of the animals shone a light on human ignorance throughout the series.

I was deeply disturbed by the scene of the metal caskets being buried in the ground and covered in concrete to prevent the leeching of radiation into the soil. It connected me to a profound emptiness, which I interpreted as a disconnection between myself as a part of nature. I interpreted this experience as mortality being a fundamental component of existence, and an inability to return to the earth reflected a disconnection from my own self.

The human characters fulfilled a necessary tension, where Ulana reflected the humanity of the film, and the characters representing the State represented death through their absence of humanity. I connected such experiences to my own experience of my graduate education, where I acknowledged the importance of a necessary tension between a rigid and structured system as a container for creative energies to flow.

Contemplating my own mortality regularly evokes gratitude and humility within me. When I move through my rigidly scheduled days, I may feel productive and competent, which grants me a sense of control and confidence over my life. I recognize the required tasks that take up space in my calendar, I reflect on my ability to accomplish the tasks, I execute the tasks, I feel accomplished. I rest. I repeat. Yet, when I am without structure, routine, and schedule, I find myself in what initially feels like an empty space. Here is the

space where I confront some sense of my mortality. ‘Empty’ space would then be an incorrect term, as there is actually much that exists within this space. As stated above, recently I tend to encounter both gratitude and humility within this space. Although there are other emotions here, including anxiety and melancholy, throughout my life I have come to connect most earnestly with gratitude and humility, and so I will choose to focus on these two emotions in this present writing.

Beginning with gratitude, in this space of my mortality I am most aware of my experience of being. I do not mean this as existence itself, but rather a deep recognition of my own existence. It is a space and a moment of reflection upon my own experience of being. I am here, more completely with myself. Gratitude emerges from this space out of the reflection upon my own existence, and what I can only seem to accept as the simultaneous experience of both absence and presence in the same moment. Such a reflective moment of self-awareness—an awareness of my own awareness—is a deep recognition of all that I am: thoughts that pop and sparkle in my mind like that of a fireworks’ display, each then quickly disappearing into the night; emotions that float through me like leaves on a stream flowing through time; a fleshy body that beats and pumps and breathes. Gratitude, in such moments, is a recognition that I am each of these, I am all of these, and I am none of these. Finally, it is an understanding that I am only none of these to the extent I am aware that I can be any of these, and I am each of these only so far as I realize I can be none of these.

On the heels of gratitude follows closely an experience of humility. For myself, humility evokes a measure of meaninglessness, insignificance, and freedom. Humility suggests a connection to my own origin—it is no wonder the etymology of humility traces



back to “earth” (etymonline.com, n.d.). In this space I am aware of my earth-ness; that I am “Earth in human form” (Doherty, 2017, p. 17). My experience of mortality therefore seems to involve a deep recognition of the Nature of my being—from which I came and to which I will go. Insignificance, upon reflection, is perhaps related to a recognition that my consciousness has no say in the matter of coming and going. I made no choice to begin, nor will I make a choice to end. It is not possible for me to be an active agent in either of these givens. I have been thrown into nature. Coming has happened, and going will happen, and will happen on Nature’s watch. Although on the surface this lack of control might appear quite constraining and anxiety producing—which I, too, acknowledge—there is a deeper liberation; that I cannot possibly impose on these existential givens, and so there is little matter about which to be concerned. I recall a deep, sorrowful ache felt while viewing *Chernobyl*, when people who had died as a result of the disaster were buried deep within concrete to prevent the leeching of radiation beyond what was necessary. The sorrow perhaps came as a result of the recognized interference with the natural cycle of coming and going, creating and destroying, life and death, that defines nature, caused by human intervention. To acknowledge the ways in which human intervention results in a denial of the process of nature to return the living to dead, and vice versa, evokes an emptiness (or perhaps absence) within me, yet without its opposing energy to hold it in tension. The resulting ache tends not to find reconciliation. Without the interference, I feel a connection not only to purpose for myself, but also to the natural rhythms of life.

In my experience of graduate school, my tenure has provided my life with a deep purpose related to my identity. I have come to realize that I am a profoundly curious person,

and graduate school has afforded the structure necessary to channel my curiosity professionally and educationally. Being able to have previous ways of thinking challenged and deconstructed is an uncomfortable experience, and I am growing more accustomed to the space such experiences create to view the nature of myself and the world from different perspectives. Such spaces can feel refreshing, humbling, and downright unsettling, as though they call into question the identity I, and my world around me, have consistently tried to convince me of throughout my life. As a result of the purposefulness graduate school has offered me, although I am excited for the day I will finish my degree, there is also a level of concern and anxiety with an anticipated purposelessness I suspect I will have to confront afterwards. There is a comfort in the purposefulness graduate school has offered me, along with a recognition that my graduate school experience helps me to work more effectively within the humanities and human services.

I recognize the ways in which my experience of mortality functions in relation to graduate school, most notably in how graduate school provides me a very certain space for incredible uncertainty to occur—a paradoxical relationship much like life itself. Graduate school, as an institution, seems to function as a container in the form of scheduled time, supportive mentors, buildings with classrooms, and otherwise. These elements comprise the certainties of being a graduate student. Yet, the experience of graduate school itself is profoundly uncertain. I tend to quip that graduate school is an experience of “unlearning everything I thought that I knew.” Graduate school, therefore, seems to be held together by each of these elements: the container that is the school, along with its requirements, policies, and otherwise; and within the container is the lived experience, full of uncertainty, anxieties,

discomfort, unknowing, creating, and becoming.

### ***Summary of Individual Depictions***

I connected to the vast uniqueness and nuance of each co-researcher's history and experience through reflecting on their individual depictions. Their encounters with mortality showed up in many different ways: the loss of those close to them, their experiences of meaningful relationships, how they constructed and connected to purpose and identity, moments of contemplating their own end, experiences of passion, and otherwise. My attention while engaging in their stories was always oriented to how such narratives, emotions, and experiences hinted at the nature of mortality, acknowledging the ways in which it perhaps textured all things, while simultaneously remaining rather elusive. Meaning generated in the form of each individual depiction was created not only through the hyphen between the viewer and the text (Barbatsis, 2005), but also through my own transactional paradigm with the data (Rosenblatt, 2018). In so being, I recognize how 'meaning' in the context of my study transcends each subject—the text, the viewer, and myself as the researcher—while encompassing all three. As a result, validity in the form of each co-researcher signing off on their individual depiction was an integral step in my research process.

I acknowledged the importance of not theorizing or interpreting what was disclosed by the co-researchers during the creation of their individual depictions, and instead taking their experiences as genuine to them, positioning myself as a researcher towards the underlying phenomenon in question. I would often notice myself take cognitive leaps towards how a particular theory or thinker might understand an underlying meaning of what

was shared, yet I worked hard to bracket such thinking (while making appropriate notes in order to attend to such thoughts later), recognizing that I would later have the opportunity to theoretically interpret their experiences.

### **Composite Depiction**

After constructing and presenting each of the individual depictions, I returned to the data for another phase of immersion and incubation. This return differed from my initial engagement with the data in that I aimed to reflect upon the more universal, shared themes of mortality uncovered by the co-researchers. Instead of working towards a deep understanding of each of the co-researcher's unique experiences of mortality, my reflection upon the data focused towards a representation of the "common qualities and themes that embrace the experience of the co-researchers." (Moustakas, 1990, p. 52). As a result, I purposefully removed co-researcher identities within the composite depiction quotations. This intentional move served to assist the reader in connecting to how mortality might be understood more universally, while still grounding the description of the phenomenon through direct quotations from the co-researchers. It also reflected a shift towards greater emphasis on my own experience of the data, where meaning would now emerge within the transaction between the data and myself (Rosenblatt, 2018). Given that heuristic inquiry is focused on living experience, I aligned with Moustakas' (1990) thinking to develop a written composite depiction that, in itself, is "vivid, accurate, alive, and clear, and [that] encompass[es] the core qualities and themes inherent in the experience" (p. 52). A composite depiction of the experience of mortality among curriculum studies' graduate students is below, based upon the following identified themes: mortality as an experience of paradox; mortality as an

opportunity for becoming; and mortality as a return to one's humanness. Finally, I explore the additional theme of innocence in relation to mortality.

### *Mortality as an Experience of Paradox*

The phenomenon of mortality appears to involve paradox. Mortality—the recognition of death—might simultaneously be a reminder of life itself. To speak of life is perhaps also, inevitably, to speak of death. Becoming might be a function of unbecoming, and to engage in either of these processes is both an acknowledgment of its perceived opposite, while also an absence of both. It is “two sides of the same coin” witnessed in a temporal collapse, often experienced as a tension between two seemingly oppositional energies. Existing outside of time, there appears an increased ability to encounter or confront each of these apparent opposites, while dwelling in the tension between. Slowing down and attempting to pause in such moments of mortality, which might even reflect a stopping of *kairos* (mental) time (Stern, 2017), might be a starting place for a more deep and true reflection of what comprises the nuanced components of such tension, and the experience of life itself.

An encounter with mortality is an arrival at a “place of solace” where “imposter syndrome” and “perfectionism” might also reside. Where one experiences “emotional callousness,” there is a simultaneous deep empathy for others, along with a greater capacity to witness another's suffering. Where one feels a deep sense of purpose and connection, there is also an acknowledgement of the ways in which one is “perpetuating these same systems that I'm also a proponent of dismantling.” Where one connects to their “incessant curiosity” is where they find themselves in “one of the most difficult experiences in my life.” Where death creates “nihilistic thoughts,” it can also “move me out of my own nihilistic thinking.”

where a “creative drive” towards inspiration can also be experienced. Absence and presence collide, appearing as one.

Confronting mortality is an experience of chaos, evoking fear and anxiety. The horror and helplessness of a potential perceived ending of consciousness, or an uncertainty about what occurs to consciousness after one’s demise, may invite one to create order and control over one’s experience, behaviours, and direction in life. The chaos of death in the future appears tempered by its paradoxical opposite: a desire for control and order over one’s present. Control, in this regard, can take on many forms. For some, it is a general motivation towards creative drives. For others, it is the taking of responsibility for oneself or others, a sense of purposefulness and caring for other people, an examination of potentials, or a motivational drive towards the contribution to a cause beyond oneself and one’s own temporal limits. The chaos of non-existence invites us to order our existence.

How might one understand this nature of paradox when death is experienced as its own form of certainty, order, and comfort? At times it would appear that death is a comforting option, “an ally,” or “an old friend.” To find comfort in death (not to be confused with an acceptance of one’s death) may open space for death to be an option in the form of suicidal ideation—an inviting of one’s own death. Such an invitation appears to arrive when order, certainty, and control are hard to create for oneself and where a “frustrated hopelessness” might take hold. When a “lack of ability to do things” bleeds into a valuation of one’s own concept of self, the self itself is called into question, where the idea of death becomes a comfort to be desired. In such spaces it appears that paradox is still at play, yet the “two sides of the same coin” have simply flipped. An inability to connect to one’s capacity

for control breeds anxiety—its own form of chaos-as-lived. When chaos-is-lived as an experience of anxiety, finding comfort in order might seem inaccessible, and is then projected externally onto the now relieving event of future death, which “won’t let me down” in the way one might experience a letting down of themselves in life. The paradox of chaos/order remains when “existence is so wretched that we are only too glad for it to end” (Jung, 1960/1975, §790); where death becomes a greater sense of comfort than the experience of life.

The paradox of mortality can be encountered psychologically, yet, abortion appears to reflect a physical example of the same phenomenon. Here, one might encounter both the “fleshiness and helplessness” of physicality, while also being “enmeshed in these dynamics of life—these stories and histories and beings that connect you to past and future.” The death within a life that occurs during an abortion might be understood as a physical example of the same psychological collapse of opposites in a moment of time that seems to comprise mortality as an experience of paradox. It is perhaps a physical experience of death in life that has the capacity to bring about fundamental change for an individual.

### ***Mortality as an Opportunity for Becoming***

An encounter with one’s mortality appears to be an opportunity for becoming. The recognition of one’s mortality brings a level of focus to one’s present. Perhaps through dwelling within the paradox of mortality, a depth of personal values, identity, and purpose emerges. Confronting one’s mortality results in a commitment to a cause greater than oneself; a reconnection to the “incessant curiosity” of one’s existence that had perhaps been brushed aside for many years in one’s life; a living in closer relationship to the identity of a “helper”

of others for whom ones cares, and an underlying motivation to “happiness” in one’s life; the finding of a “home” among the “grey space” of academia; a “creative drive” that functions towards “the possibility of creating the person that I want to become.” The space within a tension of opposites as a result of an encounter with one’s mortality rekindles one’s own values and connects one to their identity.

Mortality, therefore, has the capacity to remind us of who we are, informing us of values linked to our identity. Confronting death as “an ally” or “an old friend” not only connects one to their bravery, pride, and confidence of self, but also a feeling of being “more certain in my identity, and accepting who I am.” Mortality, as an aspect of human existence, (re)acquaints one to their place in existence—as a human being, grounded in a present moment of temporality that “connect[s] you to past and future,” and within one’s sense of self and identity. It is a seeing of “what you’re really made of;” a reminder of who you are.

The notion of becoming orients one to the future. Perhaps bolstered by a deeper connection to one’s innermost values comes a sense of clarity on what signifies purpose and meaning for one’s life and future. Purpose and meaning appear to be profoundly unique from person to person, and, for each of the co-researchers, both purpose and meaning tend to extend towards caring for others and playing a role in making the world a better place. “How do we help children to become human?” is a question that follows from an encounter with one’s mortality. For another, such contemplation leads to a consideration of the future potentials, or “branches,” one might take in their future. Another shares the “possibility of creating the person that I want to become,” towards “creating or reconstructing myself through research that I’m doing” in graduate school. Purpose can also function in the form of



pedagogy to “assuage things like white guilt and guilt I have about being privileged” towards “taking something I feel implicated in and trying to take responsibility for it in this way.”

Mortality, with the capacity to elicit fears and anxieties, also appears to hold the potential for a connection and motivation for meaning and future purpose in one’s life. It is curious to consider that mortality can invite one to consider their future in such notable ways, when the future is where one’s own death inevitably lives. Such a dynamic would appear to create an anxious paradox in itself: that in the contemplation of my own finitude, I connect to a fuller sense of meaning and purpose for my future; a future where my inevitable end lives, which I must once again encounter. The entirety of life points towards death.

Graduate school appears to function as a channel through which such purpose and meaning have the capacity to flow. One may have a broad sense of meaning in their life, or an intuitive sense of purpose, yet it may appear somewhat amorphous without the necessary structure. The structure of graduate school might be experienced as the “home” in which one can experiment with their own thinking and be challenged by the thinking of others, functioning as a playground for “incessant curiosity” to thrive, or a “grey space” where there are no certain answers, but only more questions to be asked. Such a “grey space” might then function as a comforting departure from the overly rigid and policy-laden schools at which one may teach, where there is less room for questioning, wondering, and curiosity to thrive.

### ***Mortality as a Return to One’s Humanness***

The contemplation of one’s mortality inevitably seems to bring into focus the experience of death, and in so doing, one encounters their humanness. Such an experience is grounded in some notion of time, perhaps through the recognition of life as a state of

“constant becoming.” Humanness is inextricably tied to the acknowledgement of our own expiry in death, and an encounter with mortality cuts through our worldviews that function as a protective layer of insulation from the full awareness of our finitude.

The connection to humanness unearths both a difficult reminder of the inevitable passing of our bodies, but may also provide an “existential comfort” in the awareness that one is ingrained in nature and is, therefore, a part of the natural cycle of life and death which proceeds beyond one’s own conscious acknowledgment of their life. There can be an uncomfortable emotional reaction—a “deep, sorrowful ache”—when one is disrupted from this natural cycle. A fundamental aspect of the human condition might not necessarily be an experience of life, but instead an experience of life as a result of death—that one’s consciousness is thrown into a fleshy body that engages in the brief cosmic dance of nature across time. An encounter with one’s mortality, perhaps as a result of living among a pandemic, can lead to one feeling more comfortable, understood, and connected to themselves and others in their world. To view a body absent of life, regardless of the result of senescence or the termination of a pregnancy, might cause an abrupt encounter with the physical nature of personhood (“You’re just reduced to this kind of fleshiness and helplessness”). This encounter might also carry with it a humility towards the limitation of the human experience as a result of the physical, and also point to how grounded the nature of the human experience is within time.

The dynamic cycle of death and life is perhaps most appropriately symbolized by the Uroboros—the serpent eating its own tail—which has been archetypally representative of “the self-fertilizing and self-devouring serpent, expressing the tendency of the unconscious to

initiate and sponsor the opus of renewal on its own matter” (Ronnberg & Martin, 2010, p. 704), “the basic mandala of alchemy” (Jung, 1953/1980, §165), “an all-embracing reality” (Yiassemides, 2014, p. 71) and “the meaning of eternity” (Jung, 1960/1975, §394). The Uroboros is a paradox in itself, through its engagement in a simultaneous process of creation and destruction—its continuous creative renewal is a requirement towards its own end. In so doing, the Uroboros exists as a tension of its own opposites—it is both creation and destruction simultaneously, for eternity. The text evoked a challenging emotional reaction for two co-researchers at the connection to how, as a result of human intervention, there is a natural disruption between this creative/destructive cycle of nature. Mortality, therefore, might invite one back to one’s humanness, as symbolized by the Uroboros.

A recognition of one's humanness can also be the recognition of another's, alluding to a relational aspect of mortality. Reflecting upon one's humanness tends to result in a desire to connect to the humanness of others, perhaps through being a caretaker, or experiencing a deep emotional connection to a student. Upon reflecting on their role as an educator in response to their mortality, one co-researcher posed the question “How do we help children to become human?” before later acknowledging, “I could maybe offer a little bit more humanness to certain situations.” The connection to one's humanness might then be seen as a relational offering to an Other; an empathic experience of desiring to care. However, it might also appear as a healing dynamic for one encountering their own mortality, seen in the seeking out of a friend with whom we might process our experiential and emotional world. Such relational experiences seem to be moments in which an individual might be able to take comfort in and to feel a sense of grounding within themselves. It would appear that a

connection to one's humanness is also a desire to witness the humanness of another.

### *Mortality and Innocence*

Each of the co-researchers explored their reactions to how animals were portrayed throughout the text. A bird dying and falling from the sky was the first evidence shown to the viewer of the effects the radiation from the Chernobyl power plant; a dog owned by a family was shown chasing after a bus filled with residents of Pripjat evacuating their homes; soldiers were sent into abandoned towns to shoot and kill stray dogs they fear might be affected by the radiation. Such imagery was mentioned and explored by each of the co-researchers during individual interviews and was related to a theme of innocence; and, it was during the group interview that this theme of innocence was extrapolated upon in relation to mortality, which was then connected to the educational situation and the experience of graduate school.

The natural cycle of life and death, as symbolized by the Uroboros, appears to relate to the theme of innocence, which appears intricately linked to mortality. The serpent devouring its own tail is in a constant process of dying and creating, destruction and renewal, representative of the process of nature. The interference with nature, as is grossly exemplified in *Chernobyl* through the human made nuclear power plant that melts down and wreaks havoc on the environment, is the result of human hands. "Look what we have done...it's this like global historical implication of humanity. It wrecked our lives, it wrecked the earth. Anything organic has tasted humanity in a very negative way." Culture itself, as put forward by Becker (1973), "opposes nature and transcends it. Culture is in its most intimate intent a heroic denial of creatureliness" (p. 159). The ways humanity aims to progress, is a

progression functioning as a psychological protection from the recognition of human finitude. “Man [sic] erected cultural symbols which do not age or decay to quiet his [sic] fear of his [sic] ultimate end—and of more immediate concern, to provide the promise of indefinite duration” (Becker, 1975, p. 3). The creation of culture and any attempts at advancing civilization reflect a denial of a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human, that is, that to be a part of nature is to die and to be forgotten. A human life is an aspect of nature itself, and in so being, a human life has an ending.

Co-researchers shared that the harmful effects animals had to experience were the result of humanity, and, as a result, their suffering was unjustified. The animals as a part of nature were innocent, and yet were subject to pain and death as a result of the acts of humans. Innocence appears to play a role in this paradox of being human: humankind has the capacity to destroy its own innocence through an aspect of being human. That aspect is perhaps the human attempt to deny its own mortality through avoiding one’s creature-like nature, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Stated otherwise, innocence perhaps functions as a recognition of one’s own inner-nature. Perhaps innocence becomes lost—assuming it is something that can or has ever been found—through the ways in which humankind attempts to transcend its own nature by defending itself against its own inevitable end. An attempt to transcend one’s mortality—to escape the natural cycle of life and death—is to believe in oneself as godly, that is, outside of nature. However, nature is a self-contained regulatory system reliant on both life and death—each are held together in tension by their opposite. Humankind is neither above nor below nature, but instead, grounded within it. As a result, humanity functions within the same cycle of life and death as the rest of nature.

In a related paradox, it was spoken to how innocence is lost through the experience of education, both as a teacher and a graduate student, where the experience of education might be understood as a removal of innocence. Graduate school also evoked “bitter[ness],” resulting from a recognition that “I can’t be the same person I was before.” Innocence can be lost through education; yet, it would also appear that innocence is lost simply through the experience of living. The extent to which one is exposed to the realities of humanity appears to result in a loss of innocence, in which case a space is created for education itself to impose violence through how it has the capacity to educate one out of innocence. However, what is meant by a “loss” of innocence? Who stakes the claim of innocence? Who maintains the stores of innocence, and who has the power to take innocence away?

Understood conventionally, youth appears related to innocence. Children are brought into life as innocent, perhaps as a result of having yet to have conscious awareness of the difficulty, strife, and recognition of death<sup>8</sup>. Infants new to the world might be considered closest to nature itself, and therefore, most innocent. Yet, the term “loss” of innocence suggests a particular politic at play. One co-researcher explored how education in the form of social justice rhetoric might actually be “dirtying [students’] minds,” suggesting that particular aspects of education not only have the power to impact innocence, but that to lose innocence can be seen as a “dirtying.” Another co-researcher reflected on what she viewed as an important reality: “[Innocence] can really only function for the people who have moved past innocence,” suggesting that innocence is not known by the innocent. Stated otherwise, innocence is bliss. Perhaps innocence, then, functions more so for those who are considered

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<sup>8</sup> In re-reading a draft of my dissertation, I realized I described my own early experience of a “conscious loss of innocence” in the recognition of my own mortality as a child (Chapter One).

to have “lost” their own innocence, and in so doing, there may be a politic of care associated with the relationship between those with a “lost” innocence protecting those within whom the assumed innocence remains intact.

Although not explicitly stated in the co-researcher interviews, it is assumed that we do not necessarily equate innocence and guilt as a binary—that one is either innocent or guilty—apart from perhaps those who find themselves navigating a criminal justice system. One might “lose” a sense of innocence as they move through life, mature, and become educated, yet, it would not seem that we deem such individuals then to have become guilty. However, the topic of guilt and responsibility is also shown throughout the text, where individuals attempt to assign blame at who the presumed guilty parties are, and to what extent they are responsible for the Chernobyl disaster.

In summary, the extent to which we are guilty is perhaps the extent to which we are humans attempting to arise outside of our own nature, to stretch beyond our mortality, and to, in effect, no longer be human or to deny an aspect of our own humanness. To return to innocence, however, might be to acknowledge the nature within oneself, and in so doing, to confront one’s own mortality. In exploring the topic of innocence and mortality, I am reminded of the closing line of the poem *IN PASSING* by Lisel Mueller: “as if what exists, exists | so that it can be lost | and become precious” (Mueller, 1996, appendix). Existence—life itself—is precious through its capacity to be lost. Here, loss can be understood as a death, and preciousness evokes a sense of its own innocence. When something is lost it can no longer be changed or marred by time. The various ways in which cultures honour their dead perhaps reflects a desire to protect them from any further “loss” of innocence. Death might

then also function as a return to the preciousness of innocence in the form of new, innocent, life again. Those aiming to protect the innocence of human life might find purpose in protecting humanity in its most human form—one that is deemed innocent and precious. The Uroboros comes full circle.

### **Creative Synthesis**

At the time of this writing, it had been 10 months since I first began conducting interviews with co-researchers and immersing myself in their words, reflecting upon my experience of our conversations, and repeatedly poring over transcripts, audio, and my own reflective notes. Throughout the process, I have tried to practice patience with what the experiences have evoked. There have been moments of illumination when new pieces of information seem to emerge and consolidate themselves with previous theoretical understandings or personal experiences. At other times I became frustrated with particular impasses of thought. In such moments, what emerged tended not to reconcile itself, and I would attend to my own experience of tension, while remaining curious about what had emerged and what it might have been asking of me and my attention. When this dynamic occurred, I indwelled once again in the process, attempting to bring with me the frustration, patience, and the newly experienced tension, to unravel what qualities might comprise the phenomenon of mortality. I came to recognize that although the processes and phases of heuristic inquiry might function in a circular pattern of returning again and again to the focus of inquiry, it was not a simple repetitive process. Instead, the cycle began anew with a new layer of depth, experience, information, and felt experience, as though each cycle helped to more accurately tune my own intuition. Returning to the process again—acknowledging it is



most certainly not a beginning—I brought with me a sharper intuition with greater acuity towards the phenomenon itself.

During this stage of my research journey, I had constructed and member checked each of the individual depictions, and was in the process of reflecting upon the emerging universal themes from the individual depictions. As I have shared throughout my writing, there had been a theme of paradox that appeared intimately linked to the experience of mortality that I had remained curious about throughout the research process, and that connected to many experiences of paradox the co-researchers shared with me. I contemplated the nature of opposites and the extent to which so much of my own lived experience existed within oppositional energies: my moments of joy are only joyous to the extent I can bear witness to my own and others' suffering; I am enlivened by my capacity for productivity only to the extent I can honour my need for rest; I benefit from relationships and community only so much as I am able to honour my time in solitude. Much of the experience of life within a moment of presence appears to exist within the tension of such opposites in what would seem to be a paradox.

I then experienced a moment of frustrated amusement at a realization that perhaps paradox is not paradoxical at all, but only experienced as such by the perceiver. Instead, life perhaps exists within the tension between two seemingly oppositional poles—each functioning as energies playing a role to sustain the appropriate tension. Paradox is not a problem to be solved, but instead is required as a condition for existence, therefore deconstructing the notion of the paradox. However, to deconstruct a paradox towards a logical conclusion rids itself of its paradoxical nature. In a sense, any attempt to understand

the paradox, becomes paradoxical!

The analytical psychologist Yiassemides (2014) summarizes Jung (1942/1948) and writes, “once faced with a paradox, a symbol can convey the contradiction much better than a logical argument” (p. 72), suggesting that a particular image or symbol representing the paradox might lead to deeper insights surrounding the phenomenon in question. According to Jung (1959/1969b), as I discussed in Chapter Two, “at the bottom of every neurosis [there is] a moral problem of opposites that cannot be solved rationally, and can be answered only...by a symbol which expresses both sides” (§281). I do not interpret this idea to mean that engaging in an attempt at interpretation or logical discussion is not worthwhile towards the aim, but instead that the symbolic may have the capacity to add a degree of texture, and can function as a metaphor which “involves the utilization of one conceptual or imaginal domain to map or articulate the experience of a different conceptual or imaginal domain... transfer[ring] meaning between domains of experience...linking realms in ways not previously seen” (Winborn, 2019, p. 37). Metaphor in the form of an image, therefore, “is not merely linguistic,” and can function as a “bridge between knowledge and feelings” as an “embodied experience” (p. 38). The image, functioning metaphorically, can help connect theoretical and philosophical understanding with embodied, lived experience. It has the capacity to bridge the cognitive with the somatic and experiential. I became curious about how mortality might be represented symbolically through an image.

As I continued to reflect upon the data from co-researcher interviews, my focus turned to the ways in which co-researchers seemed to find a sense of identity and purpose through their experience of graduate school. Explored in relation to mortality as an

opportunity for becoming, I connected to graduate school being a container for the curriculum-as-plan (Aoki, 1991), where the curriculum-as-lived had the potential to flourish within this structure of becoming. However, it appeared not to be a place where one solidified their identity or purpose, bringing about a sense of clarity and stability surrounding who they are—but instead that one’s exploration of purpose and identity through the experience of graduate school actually blurred the lines of what it meant to have a clear sense of identity. This process related to identity was described by each of the co-researchers:

Lauren: “It’s comforting [here] to know that I can just ask questions and not find answers and it’ll be okay, and that’s what everybody’s doing. We’re all just throwing around ideas and that’s comforting, but in most other aspects of my life, and I think in most people’s lives, people want answers. People aren’t just okay living in the grey space.”

Cindy: “It’s a safe space to be an imposter. It’s a safe space to ask the questions. It’s a safe space to want to be that five year old filled with curiosity and nobody judge me for it.”

Michael: “One of the things that kills me is the idea that you should come to university to hear things that we enforce and that we believe. That’s bullshit. If you are here and you are doing this seriously, it will be uncomfortable and it will check you and it will make you sit down and go and think about that all day long.”

Kira: “[Graduate school] is a way to broaden my own field of vision in a sense where I can engage with other points of view that I wouldn’t have known existed.”

Sarah: “I see myself creating or reconstructing myself through research that I’m doing. The more that I seem to learn and understand about different perspectives and different concepts and different points of view and theoretical frames, the more I’m able to

make sense of my lived experience in a way that's meaningful to me, and that makes [life] more manageable, or less full of despair.”

Nick: “Such spaces can feel refreshing, humbling, and downright unsettling, as though it calls into question a sense of identity I, and my world around me, has consistently tried to convince me of throughout my life.”

Although it may not be consistent among all graduate schools, this dynamic appears tied specifically to what it means to be a curriculum theorist engaged in curriculum studies. As Pinar (2011) notes, curriculum studies connects us to ourselves and to everyone else through complicated conversations that pose both pedagogical problems and educational opportunities. What furthers this complexity is the dual identities of the co-researchers, who exist as both teachers in the classroom and students in graduate school. While both roles take place in classrooms, I am aware of the tension and potential humility necessary to shift from the position of teacher to student within the same space. If “[t]he curriculum is a conversation complicated by the singularity of teachers and students,” (p. 6) the experience of being a teacher along with a curriculum studies graduate student appears to be fertile ground for discomfort and becoming.

It seemed that graduate school—in curriculum studies—was not so much a place where concepts of identity or purpose were solidified for the co-researchers, so much as they were challenged, deconstructed, or blurred. However, that underneath whatever ways in which identities and purpose was challenged, an aspect of being remained. The experience of graduate school afforded each of the co-researchers a profound opportunity to exist in ways that seemed to be fundamentally and newly creative and generative. Such raw creativity is

perhaps connected to the emerging theme from the data, where mortality is a return to one's humanness, in which case creativity here can be understood as a fundamental energy of existence itself. Further, the potential for such creativity was bound within the forms and limits of graduate school. Creative existence flowed within structure, and each appeared to be held together in a consonant tension.

I continued to hold this idea and relationship in my mind over the next several days. I contemplated the dynamics of paradox and how seemingly oppositional energies can not only be held together in a harmonious way, but how the opposite of each is required towards the definition of the other: order and chaos, psyche and matter, life and death. Certainly the experience of graduate school as explored by each of the co-researchers bore a relationship to the nature of life and death itself. I wondered if the experience of graduate school existed as somewhat of a fractal for the experience and relationship between life and death. The process of becoming occurs between birth and death in a similar way that the structure of graduate school can provide the form through which creative energy might also flow, as was described by the co-researchers. Life and death can be viewed in terms of a beginning and an ending, as can graduate school, where in the middle of such seeming opposites there is a creative and generative drive. While mortality most certainly brings its own set of challenges to the experience of life, it might also contain "powers to move me out of my own nihilistic thinking" and can be "motivating when I think I only have X decades left to live" [Sarah].

### ***River as Image of Mortality***

I came to view creativity in terms of the human psyche, and saw how concepts such as purpose and becoming are somewhat amorphous and profoundly unique to the individual.

In a sense, each are difficult ideas to grasp and understand, despite many considering these ideas as fundamental to living.

What sprang up in a moment of illumination was the image of a river, flowing both powerfully and gracefully between two riverbanks. While powerful, the image of the river in my mind was silent and strong; as though one could only note its power by stopping and noticing the speed of the water relative to the riverbank. It was a river that drew you in, but edging closer to its shores would spark caution so as to not get too close and risk falling into its flow. In the retreating daylight of autumn, it signalled the passing and transition of the day and the season; yet, its flow would continue as though it was time itself. I was immediately reminded of a book I had read several years ago by the existential psychotherapist Rollo May, who explored the relationship between human consciousness and limitation. For May, “consciousness is the awareness that emerges out of the dialectical tension between possibilities and limitations” (May, 1975, p. 114). He discussed the ways in which humans, as they develop from infancy, learn to separate self from other primarily through encounters with limitations, such as one’s physical form, the experience of hunger, and otherwise. “If there had been no limits, there would be no consciousness” (p. 114). Gordon (1978) makes succinct an implicit point within analytical psychology: “[P]sychological development, like physical development, proceeds *not* from chaos to order but from a state of relatively undifferentiated unity, through the process of differentiation, towards states of ever more differentiated unity” (p. 29). As one’s psychology becomes organized early in life, it does so in the world through the gradual acknowledgement of self from other. I understand who I am through an acknowledgement of where I end and you begin; I recognize how to care for my

own needs through experiencing the ways in which others cannot care for mine; I must limit immediate gratification for longer term fulfilment.

May (1975) continued his conversation by drawing his own connection to the metaphor of a river in relation to human creativity, after drawing the conclusion that the existence of limits is actually required for the experience of creativity itself:

The limits are as necessary as those provided by the banks of a river, without which the water would be dispersed on the earth and there would be no river—that is, the river is constituted by the tension between the flowing water and the banks. (p. 115)

The river in itself is defined by the ways in which it is limited. If a bank from the river were removed, it would cease to be a river and would lose the might of its flow. Its generative power is created through the ways in which it is limited. Stated otherwise, its limitation provides its definition.

The image of the river continued to inform my thinking surrounding mortality. I had a sense of how each of the co-researchers explored their ideas of purpose and identity within graduate school, and how such a journey seemed to be a fundamentally human act of creativity and becoming. “Creativity arises out of the tension between spontaneity and limitations, the latter (like the river banks) forcing the spontaneity into the various forms which are essential to the work of art or poem” (May, 1975, p. 115). I saw how purpose and identity were challenged in the experience of graduate school, and simultaneously how new understandings of purpose and identity were found, in a process of blurring form towards being re-defined once again. Purpose and identity here might be understood as the existential work of art or poem of life itself. I came to wonder how human creativity in all forms—most

notably here in the experience of graduate school for the co-researchers—might be understood as the flow of water between the banks of the river. It might perhaps function as an embodied, experiential form of creativity having the capacity to take on many shapes and forms, all within its own set of limitations. Human creativity requires its own form in order to flow, and might therefore be more appropriately understood through the greatest existential riverbanks—birth and death. Perhaps human birth and death—both physically and psychically—function as the existential riverbanks for the flow of human consciousness and creativity. Each shore faces each other in a form of opposition, similar to the nature of paradox, yet each functions to complement and define the human capacity for creativity that flows between. The shores both create and maintain the tension existing between the oppositional energies.

I further note how while the image of the river perhaps emerged from my own psyche, it was also resulting from multiple sites of transaction (Rosenblatt, 2018). What began as meaning-making interactions between myself and co-researchers transitioned towards meaning being generating through transactions between co-researchers-as-viewers and *Chernobyl*-as-text, and again through my experience as a researcher interacting with the data. All subjects (myself, co-researchers, the text, the data) represented a “total dynamic situation” (p. 455) from which the image of the river ultimately came forth.

### ***River as Creative Synthesis***

The emergence of the image of the river during my research journey continued to inform how I understood the nature of mortality as has been elucidated through the lived experiences of the co-researchers of this study. As I have outlined in my methodology, it is



important to amplify the image of the river towards deepening an understanding of the phenomenon of mortality. Returning to Jung (1959/1969b), “at the bottom of every neurosis [there is] a moral problem of opposites that cannot be solved rationally, and can be answered only...by a symbol which expresses both sides” (§281). Although it would be incorrect to understand the phenomenon of mortality as a neurosis per se, the existential tension of opposites between life and death most certainly represents a paradox, which creates space for “the unity of opposites, a bringing together of light and darkness into an illuminated vision” (Marlan, 2021, p. 2). The image of the river can now be amplified, which involves drawing on myth, religion, and cultural histories, in order to more fully reflect upon and deepen one’s understanding and psychological significance of the image (Johnson, 1986; Stein, 1998) and how it relates to the phenomenon.

In order to assist the reader in engaging with the river, I turned to DALL•E, an OpenAI artificial intelligence image generator, in order to create an image of the river (OpenAI, 2023). Interestingly, given the function of artificial intelligence software that creates new information—in this case, images—from what has historically been created and contributed to the internet by the hand of human creativity, the generative capability of artificial intelligence has archetypal significance. When prompting the software to create an image of a river, for example, it draws on the historical, and human, understanding of what has represented river-ness throughout time. I provided the prompt “a large flowing river with steep riverbanks and rapids in the autumn at sunset art” in order to ensure the necessary components of the river I wanted to amplify were shown.

**Figure 2**

*DALL•E generated river image*



*Figure 2: Image generated by DALL•E*

**Three Components of the River.** The image of the river is the creative synthesis for this research project, and reflects a symbol of mortality. It is important to note that a river involves multiple parts, similar to mortality in that it cannot be understood as a stand alone phenomenon. As defined in Chapter One, mortality is “the state or condition of being subject to death” (Dictionary.com, n.d.), in which case there must be an understanding of concepts such as birth, death, and life in order to conceptualize the phenomenon of mortality. I will

proceed by contending that mortality—the idea of death—represents one bank of the river, whereas its opposing shore is representative of its opposite, that being birth. Mortality is not understood in solitude; it functions in tension within two opposites—birth and death. As a result, it is important to amplify each element of the river, and understand the ways in which each of these components function in harmony towards a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of mortality.

To acknowledge one of the riverbanks is to simultaneously acknowledge another riverbank, existing on the opposing shore of the river. As mentioned in the previous section, each of these riverbanks are required to define the river and its flow. Without one of the riverbanks, water would not be contained and would spill in many directions, and the river would no longer be what it is. Each of the riverbanks are both the river and not the river. Such is the case for the water, which exists in relationship with the riverbanks in order to define a river as a river.

Understanding the river in its entirety—comprised both individually and of many parts—is important in terms of its function as an image of mortality. For the purpose of this research, the river functions as a *Gestalt*, an “image [sic] in which the whole is greater than the mathematical sum of the parts” (Schenk, 2017, p. 11), where one can come to a more complete understanding of the whole through an understanding of each of its parts. This principle of gestalt in relation to mortality was articulated by Michael, who understood death and life as “two sides of the same coin.” Each relies on and comes into existence only to the extent that its other components exist. Therefore, it is important to have an understanding of each component of the river in order to more fully understand the image.

*The Shores of Birth and Death.* Thich Nhat Hanh’s translation of the Heart Sutra, aptly titled *The Other Shore* (Nhat Hanh, 2017), explores an underlying aim of Buddhist practice towards liberation and freedom, discussing how movement towards such aims constitutes an emancipation from the entanglements within life that cause suffering. Further, that such liberation is achieved by way of insight as opposed to grace. Insight appears here as an inner reflective process, somewhat akin to the nature of reflecting upon one’s mortality that occurred during the interview phase of this research project. I am reminded of the ways in which Lauren’s concluding words, “this whole process [of being a co-researcher] hasn’t really been about death. It’s been more about what it means to be human,” and “I could maybe offer a little bit more humanness to certain situations” evoked a curiosity towards how engaging with one’s own death brings about a more complete encounter with one’s own humanness. In his interpretation of the Heart Sutra, Nhat Hanh writes, “if we are able to touch our true nature, then we transcend all fear, all anger, all despair, because our suffering is born from these notions: birth and death, being and nonbeing, coming and going, same and different” (p. 109). There appears to be an important recognition of our mortality in order to more fully embrace our humanity. That to live in close relation to our own mortality might be a requisite for a more whole experience of our own existence. Here I am not speaking about living in literal relationship to death—such as to invite loss and tragedy into our experience of life—but instead attending to the emotional and psychological recognition of our finitude.

Crossing to ‘the other shore’ of the river is a movement from birth to death, across the expanse of life that might be understood as the water flowing between the two riverbanks of birth and death. The crossing of the river has also been understood mythically as “an age-old

symbol of crossing over to the other shore, the land of the dead” (Ronnberg & Martins, 2010, p. 42). In Greek mythology, Charon was a man whose job it was to ferry the dead across the Rivers Styx and Acheron. Only those who had received the rites of burial were ferried across, and Charon would receive payment in the form of a coin that was placed in the mouth of the corpse (Britannica.com, n.d.). The rites of burial suggest there is a particular value to one’s life—that one might not live a life well enough to receive proper passage to the land of the dead. Such rites further point to a necessity of death, assuming one ought to live a life accordingly so as to be blessed with ferrying to the other shore. To die is to “cross over,” arriving at the shore of death. Without a life lived to a particular accord, it is suggested that one is not granted with death, and perhaps is then relegated to some form of purgatory, not fully alive, yet not able yet to make a home in their death.

There is also mythical evidence that points to a relationship between the physical and the psychic in relation to the river. The river Jordan is historically understood as a place of baptism into a new life in spirit (Ronnberg & Martins, 2010), where an old life can give birth to the new through a form of transformation. Such capacity for transformation also suggests a possible interaction between matter and psyche. The river functions as “a boundary between lands and between the living and the dead. Crossing is a transition and a metaphor for the possibility of traveling between the mind’s two shores, the conscious and familiar shore and the unconscious farther shore” (p. 42). Such metaphor reflects a mystery of death and, perhaps, points to deeper questioning about the nature of the unconscious. Further, one might consider the extent to which consciousness as a psychic energy extends beyond the physical limits of one’s life, where perhaps consciousness bound within a person returns to a

collective unconscious state after the ending of a life. It is interesting to consider how consciousness as libidinal energy might intersect with the physical nature of a human body in the formation of a life, reflective of a marriage between psyche and matter to create a human body. A clue here is offered in the words of Sarah, who remarked at the viewing of her posthumous grandmother that “what made her a person was just gone,” and the recognition of a distinction between psyche and matter as a result of her abortion. “You’re just reduced to this kind of fleshiness and helplessness and at the same time, recognizing that you are enmeshed in these dynamics of life—these stories and histories and beings that connect you to past and future.” In each situation there is an acknowledgment of the absence of personhood, where beyond life one becomes “this kind of fleshiness,” yet the presence of psyche alludes to perhaps a libidinal spark of life housed within the flesh, animating life.

A process of creation and destruction might therefore involve matter and psyche coming together in the physical creation of a human life on the shore of birth, navigating the waters of life, and “crossing over” to the shore of death, where consciousness might then return from where it came. Such a conceptualization suggests some aspect of transcendence—not of literal, physical transcendence of personhood beyond death—but rather a transcendental quality of the human condition, akin to what has been posited by Nhat Hanh (2017) surrounding the inner journey of insight, where “to go to the other shore is to arrive at the shore of liberation” where “insight sets us free” (p. 105).

*The Flowing Water.* How might one best understand the water of the river? It is channelled through the opposing riverbanks and water, more generally, is one of the most common symbols for the unconscious (Jung, 1963/1970, §364). Within a river it flows “as

Time itself...running its course” (Ronnberg & Martins, 2010, p. 40). One might then understand the flowing water of the river as channelled libido—“hypothetical life-energy” (Jung, 1960/1975, §32)—focalized psychic energy within the bounds of the physical structure of the human. Certainly we understand our consciousness to be formed along with our physical body during conception and birth, and understand the ending of our consciousness awareness to occur at the point of death. One’s conscious experience of existence and life happens between these two temporal points, just as the river exists between the two shores of birth and death. Libidinal energy is housed within the physical structure of the mind and body just as the water of the river is structured within its two shores. Just as the components of the river exist and function through a principle of gestalt where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, “it seems highly probable that the psychic and the physical are not two independent parallel processes, but as essentially connection through reciprocal action, although the actual nature of this relationship is still completely outside our experience” (Jung, 1960/1975, §33). Here, Jung suggests that although psyche and matter are distinct, they simultaneously function in a harmonic unison; the psychic and the physical come together in the experience of a human life, traversing across the river of life to ‘the other shore.’ As well, time, as represented by the flowing of the river, might best reflect the human experience of temporality as one crosses between the shores of birth and death, living in the tension of existence between these two opposites. Eppert (2009) notes that water, like time, cannot be stopped. Its power comes from its soft, mutable qualities that channel it towards the path of least resistance. She notes the Taoist concept of *wu-wei* to describe how

its power to carve even the toughest of rock is derived from its notion of flexibility through “moving *with* rather than struggling *against* the forces of life” (p. 198).

Yet, what makes up the qualities of this psychic water of life? For Jung, this psychic energy is comprised of “instinct, wishing, willing, affect, attention, capacity for work... specific achievements, possibilities, aptitudes, attitudes, etc.” (Jung, 1960/1975, §26). Although it is important to contain what does and does not comprise this libidinal energy, water might very well be understood as creative potential, recognizing that “everything that lives partakes of the quality of riveriness” (Ronnberg & Martins, 2010, p. 40). To be reminded of, or to live in close conscious relationship with one’s mortality, might then function psychically as a focusing of such life-energy towards these above stated elements of libido, as is clearly representative within each of the co-researchers:

Lauren: “I feel like I’m getting at what it...means to...live in relation to people as well as things.”

Cindy: “It makes me feel like I’ve actually made some progress...I feel more certain in my identity, and accepting who I am.”

Michael: “My life exists to make other people’s lives better in some way. I think there’s nothing more human than to sacrifice for the greater good, because that’s how we have survived and evolved.”

Kira: “I get a lot of happiness through helping people, and that usually helps me to feel good.”

Sarah: “Reminders of death have powers to move me out of my own nihilistic thinking” which is “motivating.”



Nick: “Without the [human] interference [with nature], I feel a sense of connectedness not only to a sense of purpose for myself, but also to the natural rhythms of life.”

Reflecting upon one’s mortality therefore appears to have the capacity to return one to a deeper sense of identity and purpose, and can be reflected symbolically through how the waters of the river are contained and flow. Libidinal energy is channelled through the psychic boundaries of birth and death, and appears to function broadly as life’s creative energy—towards a sense of identity, purpose, meaning, and relational capacity. To dwell psychically within the tension between life and death—working to hold both in tandem—appears to lay the foundation for creative potential to arise. This creativity, as expressed uniquely by each co-researcher, appears to carry with it themes of identity, purpose, and relationship. Although I am cautious not to over-theorize the phenomenon in this present discussion, I connect to how this creative drive might best relate to each co-researcher’s individuation process, “the natural course of life—a life in which the individual becomes what he [sic] always was” (Jung, 1959/1969a, §84). To appropriately dwell within the tension of life and death is to live one’s mortality, and in so doing, one lives in wholeness between the two greatest existential riverbanks. It is perhaps here where one invites the potential to encounter more full and complete aspects of purpose and identity.

I am further aware of how the illumination of the image of the river might reflect a libidinal spark of creativity within my own psyche. It is a symbol that emerged as a result of my own research process that fundamentally involved a dwelling and deep reflection positioning myself between these existential opposites. It might therefore be the case that

such an image will continue to assist (as it already has for the purpose of this research) in my understanding of my own identity and purpose as I pursue my own individuation process. The river image perhaps functions as an image unique to and for me, as well as one that might offer hints towards more universal understandings about how mortality functions within the human psyche more broadly.

On a related note, “the river reminds us that we can never rise above our source; all rivers flow downhill from their source” (Ronnberg & Martins, 2010, p. 40), pointing to a recognition of nature as the source of humanity, and the ending of humanity as a return to the source. The river as an image of mortality might reflect this reality as an impossibility to escape the inevitability of one’s finitude, and in so being, reflects a return to one’s humanness and nature. One cannot manage to move against the current of the river, nor, as understood by Heraclitus (n.d.), can we step in the same river twice. All rivers flow towards their own resolution, most often into an ocean, representative of “the deepest waters of the psyche” (Ronnberg & Martins, 2010, p. 36). In contrast to the flowing of the river towards its own end, the flow of the mightiest of rivers continue *ad infinitum*, and in so doing, represent the eternity of time itself. This observation further points to an explication of the relationship between psyche and matter, in the simultaneous acknowledgement of the ending of one’s life in death being part of the larger continuation of life through the Uroboric rhythms of nature. Libidinal energy is contained within the human psyche as one traverses from birth to death, where, perhaps, such energy then returns to the larger sea of psychic energy, to begin anew in the formation of another life.

### Chapter Five Summary

This chapter shared the analysis and presentation of the data of this study aligned with the tenets of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019) towards an answering of the research question *What is the experience of mortality among curriculum studies graduate students?* Engaging with the processes and phases of heuristic inquiry, each of the co-researcher's individual depictions were presented before exploring the overall themes of the research presented as a composite depiction. A creative synthesis was then explicated in the form of the image of a river representing the phenomenon of mortality among graduate students. The image of the river was then reflected upon and amplified.

The subsequent chapter will provide a discussion of the findings while integrating relevant theoretical perspectives towards exploring the second question of this research project, *What might the implications of student's experience of mortality be for curriculum studies?*

## Chapter Six: Toward a Curriculum of Mortality

### Introduction

Reflecting upon the river image in relation to mortality has been enlivening. I experienced a sense of confirmation by allowing the image to speak to me, as if over time it revealed new and deeper layers. This chapter reflects a further deepening of the image, in parallel with co-researchers' reflections on their own experience of mortality, by re-visiting and expanding my theoretical engagement with depth psychology, mortality, and curriculum studies as introduced in the previous chapters. Such a discussion continues to elucidate the phenomenon of mortality among curriculum studies graduate students and how mortality might function within the human psyche, pointing towards the second research question of this study: *What might the implications of student's experience of mortality be for curriculum studies?*

This chapter begins by briefly revisiting the nature of mortality as understood from an analytical psychology lens. I then highlight three co-researcher portraits that illustrate how mortality appears to function in relation to the general course of life and the process of individuation, drawing parallels to *currere*—the running of the course (Pinar, 2011). I will then explore and discuss three implications of mortality for the field of curriculum studies, before offering a reflective conclusion about my research journey.

### A Return to Mortality within Depth Psychology

Jung (1960/1975) understood life as a “nourishing soil of the soul” (§800) where “nature prepares itself for death” (§808), pointing to a telos of the human psyche. Similar to the temporal waters of the psyche, one finds oneself within time and flowing through the

natural course of life. Equating the flow of life as an energy process, Jung further recognizes this flow as irreversible and, therefore, directed towards a goal that is determined by a state of rest. From the standpoint of the ego, the natural flow of life finds all humans moving towards a state of rest in death, where we encounter the limitations in life that frame our existence and provide the flow of time towards our inevitable end, returning to grand oceans that represent “the deepest waters of the psyche” (p. 36).

Interference with the natural rising and setting of existence reflects a withdrawal from the life-process from a standpoint of consciousness, and hinders one from living within the present (Jung, 1960/1975, §800). Again, according to Jung, “the negation of life’s fulfilment is synonymous with the refusal to accept its ending. Both mean not wanting to live, and not wanting to live is identical with not wanting to die” (§800). From this standpoint, death appears to invite us at every moment to remain present to it, accepting that to live is also to die. How might life’s impasses pull one from the present and interfere with this “nourishing soil of the soul” (§800) and the very nature of *currere*? I offer three co-researcher portraits to help illustrate the ways in which mortality is woven into the individuation process and *currere*.

### ***A Moment of Mortality in Relation to Trauma***

Cindy shared her early experiences of a fundamentally fearful existence, originating from two sources. First, from her father who was “a very scary person,” and second, from her mother, an “agoraphobic hoarder” who taught Cindy “that the world was a scary place.” Feeling both threatened by her father and being taught how to protect and stay safe from her mother might be understood as a threat/protection couplet, functioning in tandem and

sourced by fear, impacting Cindy from early on in her family of origin. Understandably, safety would therefore be difficult to come by, and such a threat to existence is reflective of an early confrontation with one's mortality. Overwhelmed by mortality also reflects a fear of life, despite the extent to which it may be deeply desired.

Kalsched (2021) understands trauma as “a fact that we are all given more to experience in this life than we can bear to experience consciously” (p. 444). Traumatic experiences, from this standpoint, occur when the ego becomes overwhelmed, and can be understood through an existential lens of mortality. According to Stern (2017), trauma “freezes time, which makes it impossible to formulate certain kinds of new experience” (p. 501) if not processed and integrated into lived experience. Returning to the natural telos and energy of the human psyche, one can see how such early mortality-based fear interferes with the natural flow of energy towards an inevitable goal. Jung (1960/1975) writes that, for the human psyche early in life:

Longing for the world and for life, for the attainment of high hopes and distant goals, is life's obvious teleological urge which at once changes into fear of life, neurotic resistances, depressions, and phobias if at some point it remains caught in the past, or shrinks from risks without which the unseen goal cannot be attained (§798).

Significant experiences of fear early in life may well reflect a form of trauma, resulting in a psychological withdrawal from the natural life process, convincing an individual to value the protection of oneself over the connection with others. The placing of primacy on one's protection inevitably interferes with goal-directive energy, reflecting an impasse, interfering

with *currere* and life's natural generative creative processes.

This impasse is perhaps best reflected in Cindy's experience of guilt. She shared that she responds to "fear [being] an overarching emotion for me" with escapism and numbing, which evokes a deep sense of guilt for her. Escapism and numbing can here be regarded as conscious coping behaviours that function to protect and soothe from existential fears, yet it can be seen how such escapist tendencies reflect a "disturbance of a perpetual state of rest [i.e., death] which forever attempts to re-establish itself" (Jung 1960/1975, §798). Death, for Cindy, evoked a sense of deep comfort that she described as something dependable. It appeared as though death was understood by Cindy as a goal and a fulfilment, perhaps as a result of her early confrontation with it. The most significant moment I had in my time with Cindy came from her ability to sit in earnest with her recognition of death as a dependable comfort. I recognize only now how truly present she was able to be in that moment, outside of any guilt or escapist tendency of self-judgement or criticism she initially enacted as a potential means of protecting herself, which then afforded the following flow of energy:

I feel warmth inside me. I feel it radiating slowly from my core to my extremities....

It makes me feel like I've actually made some progress.... I feel like that was a really honest thing to say. And it was a brave thing to say. And so I feel kind of proud of myself. Like, no offence, I don't give a shit that I said it out loud to you, but I feel really good that I can say that stuff to me. And I can feel that confidence in my identity and sit up a little bit straight about it.... And so I feel more certain in my identity, and accepting who I am. And it feels like I've made some progress there.

Understood psychically, such a moment of presence in the presence of absence is a return to

the natural libidinal flow of existence, otherwise understood energetically as a state of equilibrium (Stein, 1998). I experienced this moment as one of Cindy momentarily becoming unstuck, where she was not exercising any self-criticism or judgement, but instead exercised “honesty,” “bravery,” “pride,” “confidence,” “certainty,” and “acceptance” towards herself, perhaps reflecting the formulation of new experiences from which trauma can interfere (Stern, 2017). To understand this moment as a state of equilibrium where libidinal energy thus finds a way to naturally flow once again is perhaps a psychological experience of dwelling between the two existential opposites of life and death. The words of Jevremović (2019) echo in my ears: “Being, mirrored in the face of death, is transformed. Death exiles death. New life triumphs” (p. 207). Cindy’s choice to radically accept the comfort she experienced from her mortality reflected a return to a state of equilibrium for generative life energy to flow, dissolving the impasse that her self-criticism and judgement—and perhaps fear—constructed.

I was further struck by how Cindy was able to transform early disruptive experiences in life into a sense of responsibility in her career as an educator. “Now that I’ve learned what the world is like, now I’m responsible for that.” Despite the ways in which her early life may have resulted in a particular psychic impasse interfering with her intrinsic generative creative processes, she functions in a role to inspire and nurture such creativity in her students. Although it is not my place to offer a suggestion as to the qualities and strengths Cindy possesses in order to succeed in such a role, it would appear these energies emerge from her ability to dwell within the tension of the two existential banks of the river.

Finally, there is an important connection that can be made between Cindy’s early



experiences of the threat/protection couplet to which she was exposed, and her experience in graduate school. I mentioned how early experiences might have functioned as a form of trauma for Cindy, which “outstrips and disrupts the psyche’s capacity for representation or mentalization” and, until the capacity for mentalization is possible, traumatic memories “remain locked within an ahistorical, repetitive process as potentials for action, somatization, and projection” (Levine, 2014, p. 219). A hint towards healing from this ahistorical imprisonment and disruption of mentalization was shown in Cindy’s experience of graduate studies in curriculum, of which she experienced as “a safe place to be an imposter. It’s a safe space to ask questions. It’s a safe space to want to be that five-year old filled with curiosity and nobody judge me for it.” Not only did Cindy emphasize the importance of safety she experienced in graduate school—the very safety she discloses lacking in her childhood—she also shared an image of being a “five year old filled with curiosity.” Perhaps this image of the curious five year old alluded to a time when Cindy could feel and experience true safety and curiosity. While not explicitly stated by Cindy, it appeared to me that her experience as a graduate student afforded the opportunity to which *currere* speaks—“to reconstruct experience through thought and dialogue to enable understanding. Such understanding, achieved by working through history and lived experience, can help us reconstruct our own subjective and social lives” (Pinar, 2011, p. 2). The nature and structure of graduate school—dwelling within the tension of the curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived—provided a necessary space for Cindy to encounter and become reacquainted with her inner curious five year old that perhaps had been lost along the way.

*Helping Others; Helping Oneself*

A related dynamic can be understood from Kira's experience. Kira disclosed that "It makes me really sad to witness other people's suffering," and as a response to such witnessing:

I go on autopilot and take control and try to be as helpful as possible. So I just don't have time to be emotional, and I don't want to have that time because I'd rather be there for the people that need to actually be emotional about it.

It appeared to me that Kira developed a pattern of taking on a helper role in her life, which produced a sense of happiness and purpose, while avoiding having to process some of her own emotional reactions to difficulties in life. Although of different circumstances than Cindy, Kira's struggle to work through her own emotional responses to life in the present might have resulted in them getting caught in the past, hinted at by her response to her family member's suicide: "I didn't want to feel emotional because I was just really pissed off at [him], and still am, ten years later."

Absence was felt when life became very difficult for Kira. It was also experienced when Kira felt unable to help people, suggesting that Kira found a great deal of purpose in being an educator and being able to bring about a sense of happiness in her life through her profession. Kira reported a lack of fear when it came to her own relationship to death, yet acknowledged that she was more concerned about how her death would affect others. I was surprised at the effort Kira put to avoid her own emotional world, and wondered how this apparent pattern took hold in her life. There appeared to be a great deal of care she put towards others in her life, including her students, but what about her?

Kira's orientation to others at the cost of her own presence invites a curiosity about the nature of mortality. Functioning once again from the assumption that "the negation of life's fulfilment is synonymous with the refusal to accept its ending" (Jung, 1960/1975, §800), Kira's avoidance of her own emotional world is perhaps reflective of an absence of a longing for the world and for life itself. Similar to Cindy, this might be understood as a state of disequilibrium. Existence can only be lived within the present moment, and so it would stand to reason that an inability to find oneself in the present functioned as a form of avoidance of life. Such an avoidance of one's experience of life might lend itself towards orienting their existence around others in the form of taking on a helping role.

How might Kira's graduate student identity fit within this pattern of being? Stated otherwise, what in Kira's life assisted in providing a sense of presence and return to an embracing of the potential for life's fulfilment? I found it interesting that Kira reported her experience of curriculum studies in graduate school resulted in being more actively engaged with her world and adding a sense of "texture" to her experience of life. "I like to push myself. I feel like it's really limiting to just feel like things are going OK so I should just be happy with that." I witnessed how Kira's exploration of her experience of graduate school never involved other people in her life. Instead, the experience invited her to be present with herself, explore what she felt called towards, and to move in a direction that made the most sense for her. It was a place for her to "broaden my own field of vision in a sense where I can engage with other points of view that I wouldn't have known existed." Kira's language suggested a connection to her own generative, creative impulses. From an energetic stance, an impasse appeared to be removed for energy to flow freely towards a state of equilibrium,

along the course of *currere* where creativity was then encountered, divorced from the responsibility Kira takes for other people in her life.

### ***Destruction and Becoming***

Lauren's experience offers another illustration of how mortality might function within the psyche and how it relates to *currere* and the individuation process. Exploring her relationship with her father, she described a time around the age of 18 where she recognized "this idea of him that was being dismantled. It was leaving, and so in a way I had lost that main idea that I had about him for so long," which led to her then rebelling against some of her parents' worldviews. Lauren reported this as a time when she was "rebuild[ing] my identity" towards an understanding of herself as "a completely different person," which can be understood as a creative act, yet, also as a point of psychic conflict within her.

Returning to the work of Gilbert (2009) as introduced in Chapter Three, the author discussed how generational conflict and violence can function as a creative act, grounded within curriculum theory. Understanding that aggression and violence exists both in the external world as well as originally inside the subject, she explores how "something of the past must be repudiated or destroyed in order for a future to be made or found" (p. 64). This dynamic plays itself out in the relationship between Lauren and her father. Where her father once helped Lauren establish a passion for social justice and citizenship education—an important aspect of Lauren's identity—their relationship came to a point of crisis when the psychic concept of him as a "hero" began to unravel. This experience of intra-psychic aggression, violence, and death within Lauren might reflect a form of difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998, 2013), where her own sense of identity could no longer be maintained

through the heroic image she held of her father. As a child, Lauren may have learned from her father as the “heroic” teacher, until the transferential dynamic between the two hit a point of crisis. Britzman (2013) understands such a moment as its own paradox between a desire for certainty sought from the authority, functioning simultaneously as a defence against one’s own uncertainty, enacted as a challenge to the authority itself. Thus began the experience of unraveling for Lauren in her relationship with her father.

However, such loss is also an encounter with the potential to animate teaching and learning (Pitt & Britzman, 2003). Bollas (1997) understands this psychic encounter as one in which “each generation violently destroys the previous generation’s ideals and objects; it is through this process of destruction, then, that each generation constitutes its own objects, through which to envision its own future” (p. 31). For Lauren’s process of individuation towards becoming “what [she] always was” (Jung, 1959/1969a), there was a requirement to destroy the objects and ideals of her father, represented within her own psyche in the form of loss to which she speaks. Such a process of becoming requires destruction, reminding me once again of the Uroboros, continually creating itself through its own destruction.

Destruction in this regard can be understood as a form of disruption that, according to LaCapra (2009), interrupts “a deadly compulsive cycle of repetition” towards “a radical, even total, rupture with the past” (p. 92), in order for new and generative aspects of identity to emerge. Both Bollas (1997) and Passerini (1996) understand the role of violence within such an exchange; that, for a generation (or an individual) to “become,” through a new act of creation, there requires a repudiation against the psychic production of helplessness and dependency (Gilbert, 2009), for Lauren, within the parental dynamic of her father.

Lauren psychically confronting and destroying these inner dynamics created by her parental complexes reflected a scene of rapprochement symbolizing “the pushes, pulls, and emotional boundaries of learning” (Britzman, 2013, p. 101), and assisted her in arriving at a place of “being in itself,” which she reported as offering her a sense of purpose in her life. Framed through a perspective of individuation, the capacity for Lauren to deconstruct elements of her father complex returned her to a space for her own generative psychic energy to flourish, while “being in itself” also invites its own anxieties in the form of fears, suggesting a tension of opposites within which Lauren resided.

The above portraits assist in conceptualizing the ways in which mortality is interwoven with the teleological nature of the psyche, along with how *currere* as the encounter with the curriculum can play a vital role in how “educational experience enables subjective and social reconstruction” (Pinar, 2011, p. 2). The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to addressing three implications for a curriculum of mortality that emerged from the co-researchers living experiences of their mortality: consciously acknowledging the paradox of *currere*; recognizing the capacity for creativity to emerge within a tension of opposites; and engaging with the timelessness of *currere*.

### **Two Sides of the Same Immortality Project**

The first implication for curriculum studies emerging from curriculum studies’ graduate students’ experiences of mortality involves consciously acknowledging the paradox involved in the running of the course. As much as the acceptance into a program—graduate school, for example—reflects a particular arrival and new identity (e.g., “PhD student”), it is simultaneously a rupture of one’s identity and understanding of themselves; a departure from

an identity past. While it is important to acknowledge (and celebrate) the arrivals involved in learning and becoming, it also appears emotionally and psychologically beneficial to openly acknowledge and make central the losses, mourning, and ruptures also present in such experiences. A discussion of the immortality projects that emerged from co-researchers' experiences helps to understand this implication.

As I introduced in Chapter One, curriculum studies graduate school might be understood as an immortality project for each of the co-researchers in the ways it afforded a sense of self-esteem (Becker, 1973, 1975; Solomon et al., 2015), where co-researchers felt a sense of identity through their position as graduate students (e.g., feeling good about being accepted as a "PhD student"). The journey might also reflect its own confrontation with mortality, a form of difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998, 2013) resulting from a considerable sense of psychic uncertainty. It can be a profoundly individualistic pursuit and journey, while simultaneously involving oneself in a significance and meaning that transcends oneself.

Reflecting on the nature of immortality projects throughout the co-researcher interviews led me to recognize a nature of opposites within the projects themselves. On one side of the coin, graduate school can be viewed as an immortality project that provided a sense of comfort through the self-esteem it offered: Graduate school was a structure where Sarah connected to "a creative drive" and "sparks of inspiration;" Cindy reconnected to a fulfilling "childish curiosity" within graduate school; Lauren found it as a home for her to "always seek more" and be okay with asking questions; it functioned as a space for Kira to feel more engaged in her world; I found it as a safe place to confront uncertainty.

On the other side of the coin, the self-esteem afforded by graduate school brought

about important encounters with oneself and reflected an opportunity for deeper reflection, learning, and growth. This intimate individuality was woven throughout the co-researchers' stories, and textured the above illustration of how confronting mortality can lead to a deeper understanding of Self:

Lauren untangled her father complex to become something initially unknown to herself, and experienced a “constant becoming” during her graduate school tenure;

Cindy's time in graduate school returned her to a potentially traumatic chapter in her early life and invited her to be the 37 year old curious child she perhaps never had the chance to be;

Kira's emotionally supporting of others while avoiding her own experiences of grief might be an invitation for her to work through her own difficult emotions on her journey of becoming, where graduate school appeared just the place for such work to occur, as evidenced by her statement, “I like to push myself. I feel like it's really limiting to just feel like things are going OK so I should just be happy with that;”

Michael found a deeper sense of acknowledgement for the necessity of discomfort in his experience of graduate school;

Sarah found her experience in graduate school as “creating or reconstructing myself through research that I'm doing” towards “making sense of my lived experience in a way that's meaningful to me;”

I found a space in graduate school to uncover the depths of my curiosity, unraveling the ways in which such curiosity will inform my becoming and future direction.

For ease of discussion, I will identify these two side of the same immortality project



as an arrival/rupture couplet. While I cannot generalize the experience to other graduate schools, or even graduate programs outside of curriculum studies, it appeared that for co-researchers their position within graduate school provided a particular comforting identity, *and* it was this very sense of identity that was ruptured through the learning and becoming experienced through the traversing of graduate school, perhaps resulting in an experience of “imposter syndrome.” Confronting mortality within these challenging experiences of difficult knowledge and unknowns of learning was reflective of the individuation process, understood where “[t]he experience of the Self is always a defeat for the ego” (Jung, 1963/1970, §778). The arrival/rupture couplet of this immortality project understood from a depth psychology lens reflects the simultaneous utilization *and* surrender of ego functions (Gordon, 1977), giving way to a fuller encounter with the archetype of the Self through the recognition of unconscious processes, of which Pinar (1974) views as a prime role of education: the evolution of the Self.

Osterhold (2021) wrestles with this complex relationship between the death denying effects of immortality projects and the importance of confronting mortality in the individuation process. He cites findings in social psychology that show the importance in facing one’s mortality, such as Park and Pyszczynski (2017) who found across studies that meditators tend not to show an increase in worldview defence when compared to non-meditators. Osterhold (2021) interprets these findings and argues that “valuing and practising awareness of one’s inner and outer experiences appears to be related to...mak[ing] the individual less susceptible to mortality salience” (p. 939). If death awareness can result in life-affirming practices, such as an increase in pro-social behaviours based on values such as

kindness and compassion within a culture (Newman, 1998, as cited in Osterhold, 2021) or choices that reduce perceptions of risk and improve overall health (Vail et al., 2012), then so too might be the case for *currere*. As evidenced by the difficult knowledges (Britzman, 1998) and emotional deaths (Farley, 2014) faced in the psychic experiences of learning, the running of the course of life is fraught with mortality. Curriculum studies might benefit by shining a light on the ways in which one's cultural and familial expectations (Osterhold, 2021) might skew towards highlighting the arrivals along the educational journey, in order to bring into appropriate tension a curriculum of mortality that embraces the mourning, loss, difficulty and uncertainty of *currere*. In other words, while accepting new identities—such as that of a graduate student—might provide a sense of self-esteem, without bringing to the foreground the experiences of difficulty that come along with such identities, individuals may not honour and process the difficulties that come along with such a journey. When not acknowledged, the difficult encounters with oneself that lead to growth and self-discovery might be defended against, and in so doing, might contribute to the high attrition rates across graduate schools (Nettles & Millett, 2006) and considerable rates of mental illness experienced by those in graduate studies compared to the general population (Evans et al., 2018). Experienced psychically, this tense space of difficult knowledge can hurt in any number of ways, yet it might also need to be “acknowledged, negotiated, and made conscious if any real awareness of the Self is to take place” (Marlan, 2005, p. 153).

For Buddhist thinker David Loy (2002), this deeper encounter with the Self is akin to confronting one's own sense of inner ungroundedness, as opposed to objectifying and projecting such lack into the material world in search of a comforting worldview and self-

esteem. What I consider as a deep human encounter with oneself is perhaps best captured by Eppert (2021) who describes such a moment as a challenge towards more openness—“to dances with the vastly unknown and unknowable” (p. 313) as a means of recognizing, rather than resolving, an inner sense of lack. Importantly, such encounters have also been considered atemporal and experienced as a liberation from the passing of time (Roy, 2007), which I will return to in a forthcoming section.

### ***Currere and the Coniunctio Oppositorum***

A second implication for curriculum studies coming from the co-researchers' experiences of mortality involves a recognition of creativity psychically emerging from a tension of opposites. Before bridging to curriculum studies, I turn again to analytical psychology to help introduce this implication.

I have alluded to the nature of paradox throughout my writing, not only theoretically, but also in my personal reflections on the nature of mortality and highlighted within the experiences of the co-researchers. I have also discussed how life and death might reflect the greatest of existential opposites and function as a frame for existence—and *currere*—itself. The image of the river helps to deepen an understanding of the nature of mortality through its ability to capture existence being held in tension between the two shores of birth and death, where the flowing water represents hypothetical life energy, understood as libido.

Jung alludes to the nature of opposites and the psychic goal of their recognition: “Ascent and descent, above and below, up and down, represent an emotional realization of opposites, and this realization gradually leads, or should lead, to their equilibrium” (Jung, 1963/1970, §296). The dwelling within opposites hopefully functions as a state of

equilibrium where libido flows and from where creativity emerges. Jung (1963/1970) understood this union of opposites as the *coniunctio oppositorum*, and reflects a “capacity to mobilize contradictory but mutually reciprocal qualities” (Gordon, 1978, p. 130). It is within this psychic space where a third might emerge in a creative form that is representative of both sides of the paradox; the union of opposites. The *coniunctio oppositorum* is therefore creativity emerging from the unconscious, where “the images and symbols stand in the “gap” between the known and the unknown” (Marlan, 2021, p. 264), bridging a gap between the conscious and the unconscious. The emergence of the image of the river might best represent my own experience of the *coniunctio oppositorum* as a result of my personal experience of reflecting on mortality throughout this study. It appeared as a third, in the form of an image, in response to my experience of dwelling within the tension of opposites between life and death throughout my research process.

Marlan (2021) deepens an understanding of the *coniunctio* beyond what I simply describe in terms of libido and creativity. He writes:

For me, the engagement of consciousness with the unconscious reveals not simply a unity of opposites, but a multiplicity of intentions that challenge and oppose one another, as well as pull psyche toward unification—a fire in the stone and an alchemy of desire. When these tensions are held together, they catalyze a symbol-making process that produces complex archetypal images that exceed rational categories. The intercourse and linking together of passionate intentionalities has alchemically been described as an erotics of desire, a *hierosgamos* or sacred marriage, that gives birth to what the Taoist alchemists called a spiritual embryo, an

image of rebirth and renewal, which ultimately leads to the epiphany of the secret of the Golden Flower—an unfolding illumination, a symbol of wholeness, and the goal of the work. (p. 2)

Understood psychically, an ability to hold two opposites together in conjunction has the capacity for creative potential within the human psyche, intimately linked to the individuation process, or, as what has been described by co-researchers as a process of becoming or being in itself. Such creative potential within the imagination can present itself in the form of a timeless symbol (Stein, 2016). It might further be understood as an integration of unconscious material with consciousness, where an encounter with mortality reflects a successful holding of the opposites of life and death in conjunction, where “consciousness experiences a widening of its horizon” (Jung, 1963/1970, §779). Such a widening of conscious horizon is perhaps most adequately illustrated by Lauren’s reflection about her process of participating as a co-researcher: “This whole process hasn’t really been about death. It’s been more about what it means to be human...I could maybe offer a little bit more humanness to certain situations.”

*Currere* and the *coniunctio oppositorum* has implications for curriculum studies. This has been illustrated by Aoki’s (1991) differentiation between the curriculum-as-plan and the curriculum-as-lived, where his call was for learning to dwell aright between these two curricular worlds. From an analytical psychology perspective, appropriate tension between these two curricular worlds provides the foundation from which creativity can emerge. A clear working example of this psychic dynamic plays out in how curriculum studies might approach the nature of questions and answers. Curriculum theorist Peter Taubman (2017), as

discussed in Chapter Three, described how the death drive within education has reduced education to a form of repetition compulsion and the humans to repeat the compulsion to numbers and machines, robbing the student of genuine encounters with creativity and possibility. Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1970/2012) paints a grim picture of this deadened educational encounter:

it turns [students] into “containers,” into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher.

The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are (p. 72).

For Freire, a result of this educational endeavour becomes a lack of critical consciousness required in order for students to develop into transformers of their worlds. The outcome of this banking model of education is oppression, here considered an inert education at the hands of the death drive. Such a model shines a light on a curriculum which places value on finding and accumulating answers to questions, without valuing the questions themselves. When the answer is what is valued and becomes the sole aim of education, questions are reduced and become viewed simply as barriers towards the ‘goal’ of education. Questions become but a means to an educative end that is the answer.

The *coniunctio oppositorum* within curriculum studies, however, invites one to place equal value upon the question and recognize that the answer and the question are one in the same. So much as the question and the answer are opposing forces, the *coniunctio* points to the existence within the forces of each. For to simply value the answer is to kill the uncertainty, curiosity, and wonder (Wallin, 2008) that formed the inspiration from which the

question first emerged, reflecting important elements comprising the wholeness of the psyche. If wholeness acknowledges the completeness of *currere* (and vice versa), it, by definition, must honour and acknowledge the uncertainty, curiosity, and wonder that calls us towards an *answering* of the question itself, and *questioning* in response to an answer. Pinar (2011) emphasizes the verb form of *currere* over its use as a noun, where the verb “emphasizes the lived,” whereas the noun “can convey stipulation and completion” (p. 1), and so too the shift occurs from the question and the answer to the experience of *questioning* and *answering*, highlighting what it means to *live* in the existence of questions and answers.

The Poet Rilke (1954) offers a rather eloquent description of the relationship:

[T]ry to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given [to] you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. (p. 27, italics original)

I use the straight forward example of questions and answers in an attempt to highlight that the *coniunctio oppositorum* of *currere* always asks us to attend to the other thing: when we step towards something, we are simultaneously taking a step away from something else, and both are worthy of our attention and an integral part of the journey. The *coniunctio oppositorum* in *currere* is an attempt to hold wholeness in order for newness to emerge. Although framed in terms of her analytical work, von Franz (1980) offers a similar view that can relate to educators, curriculum scholars, and the goals of *currere*:

We try to bring about a conscious attitude with which the person can keep the door

to the unconscious open, which means that one must never be too sure of oneself, never be sure that what one says is the only possibility, never be too sure about a decision.

One should always have an eye and an ear open towards the opposite, the other thing. That does not mean to be spineless, it doesn't mean just to sit there. It means to act according to one's conscious conviction, but still always having the humility to keep the door open and be proved wrong. (pp. 144-45)

A curriculum of mortality calls for scholars and educators to orient themselves to the curriculum with a recognition of the role of the unconscious in *currere*, and to “keep the door to the unconscious open” by always considering “the opposite, the other thing” (von Franz, 1980, p. 144-145). Such an orientation helps provide a form for *coniunctio oppositorum*, a unity of opposites from which creativity may emerge.

### **An Uroboric Curriculum**

The *coniunctio oppositorum* within *currere* is also reflected through Taubman's consideration of the distance—physically and emotionally—between teachers and students as a dialectic between two poles where each extreme requires attention without submission. “At the crossroads of intimacy and distance, public good and private desire, teachers and students meet” (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 539, citing Taubman, 1992). Although without explicitly stating, it is assumed that it is at these crossroads where creativity unfolds. It appears that within appropriate tension between such existential polarities there is an element of timelessness, which reflects a third implication of mortality when addressed within the context of *currere* and curriculum studies.



Teachers, in holding a responsibility towards mediating the tension between these polarities, also attend to the tension between the curriculum-as-plan and the curriculum-as-lived (Aoki, 1991). While gravitating too close to the planned curriculum runs the risk of robbing students and educators of their uniqueness (Aoki, 1991), killing uncertainty, curiosity, and wonder (Wallin, 2008), and creating “psychic dead zones” (Taubman, 2017, p. 100), the curriculum-as-plan also affords the structure within which the curriculum-as-lived can flourish. After all, the curriculum-as-lived as “an engagement with life” (Wallin, 2008, p. 312)—raw generative creativity—requires a structure under which the nature of creativity can be channeled, just as the experience of Self requires a physical body in order to be experienced. “[T]he Self in its evolution and education” (Pinar, 1975, p. 1), functioning as an infinitely unique enterprise rife with a capacity for creativity grounded within the present moment, demands a form and structure through which it is mediated.

In consideration of the greatest existential polarity—life and death—Yiassemides (2014) suggests that the dialectic between life and death symbolize the experience of time itself. Given its elusive nature, time can only be understood through the energy that captures its opposition—death—experienced as an ending of time for the ego. Stated simply, “[c]onsciousness created linear time, which brought with it death” (p. 76). Citing Gordon (1977), “both the life and the death forces, leads to greater attention to the potentially creative nature of conflict” (p. 111). The transformation of the psyche towards wholeness on the path of individuation can therefore be understood as an ability to hold the tension between death and life forces—while not submitting to either (Pinar et al., 2004)—that leads to a transformation of the psyche’s energy (Yiassemides, 2014).

Reflecting on the nature of (time)lessness returned me to reflecting on the notion of temporal collapse introduced in Chapter Two and that emerged in the data related to mortality as an experience of paradox, where I turn again to the image of the Uroboros. It has been suggested by Yiassemides (2014) that the image of the Uroboros can help to illuminate such a temporal inconsistency, holding both linear and non-linear time, along with both conscious and unconscious processes. Within a conscious, linear conception of time, the head and tail of the Uroboros represents a distinct beginning and end. One can trace the horizontal movement of the circle—and, therefore, time—as the head consumes the tail. However, within the unconscious realm of the image, a sense of direction is lost and the extremities “regain their archetypal unity” (p. 72); without the reference of the head and the tail, the serpent loses a sense of direction and temporality becomes non-linear, reflecting the magic of the image in its ability to contain the *coniunctio oppositorum*, the unity of opposites. I turned again to DALL•E in order to generate an image of the Uroboros to assist the reader in reflecting upon the nature of the Uroboros in relation to timelessness and mortality.

**Figure 3**

*DALL•E generated image of the Uroboros*



*Figure 3: Image generated by DALL•E*

Non-linear temporality, for Yiassemides (2014), recognizes an ability to observe various perspectives in the absence of a particular sequence. In so being, a sense of chronological, linear time is therefore excluded, and so the image of the Uroboros signifies a “non-linear multiplicity of perspectives” and a sense of oneness where “in a unified reality the past, present and future coexist and can be observed *simultaneously*” (p. 73, italics original). It is within the unconscious where this sense of timelessness exists, or, perhaps more accurate, where linear time is absent. In so being, there appears an element of timelessness involved in creativity and in mortality. Encountering one’s mortality is an encounter with timelessness—a suspension of *chronos* (Stern, 2017).

Relating to the field of curriculum studies, *currere* appears reflected by an experience

of timelessness through living in tension between the polarities of existence. This is effectively described by Aoki's (1987) understanding of what it means for a curriculum to be inspired, "a quality of body and soul intertwining in their fullness" (p. 359), and described by the professional figure skater who *becomes* the music when he skates, as discussed in Chapter Three. A *becoming* of the music suggests a transcendental quality of the ego, where one exists outside of their own conscious awareness, body, death, and, therefore, time. Here is the space for becoming and creativity to unfold. In the same article, Aoki (1987) views a school in service to the inspired curriculum as one that "emphasizes and nurtures the becoming of human beings. Such a school will not neglect "doing" but asserts the togetherness of "doing" and "being" enfolded in "becoming" (p. 361). It is seen how Aoki's position does not advocate for submitting to either side of the polarity, but instead notes the importance of the indwelling between.

An implication for curriculum studies, then, involves engaging with opportunities to honour the experience of being towards the process of learning and becoming within the curriculum. Roy (2007) attends to this idea through noting how the fragmentary experience of schools (e.g., the disjointed quality of school subjects) pulls us out of our bodies and back into a linear conception of time. Instead, he advocates for what he considers the mind-body continuum within the curriculum. Here, "we are no longer concerned with how to connect math to history, or science to social studies, but learn to see how both math and history are different expressions of the continuum of the body, mind, and *socius*" (p. 282, italics original). As an example, this approach to curriculum is reflected in what Nguyen and Larson (2015) (among others) consider embodied pedagogy, which involves awareness of body,

space, and social context as part of an “integrated curricular vision” (p. 332), here recognizing mortality as integral towards an integrated experience of life. This orientation towards curriculum studies is also reflected in Mayes' (2003c) unitive-spiritual and dialectic-spiritual curricular landscapes, which further speak to an element of timelessness in *currere* related not only to a transcendental experience of the ego, but also a consideration of “the organic, interconnection of self, other, nature and cosmos as a dynamic unity” (p. 131). The above reflects a fuller embodiment of *currere*, where a curriculum that attends to possibilities for students to have more moments of embodiment and encounters with themselves (Roy, 2007) might well help to nurture the space for the enfoldment of being in becoming (Aoki, 1987) without time and within oneself. Elsewhere, Mayes (2005c) equates the transcendent with a form of spiritual time, which, he argues, fosters opportunity for self-examination and self-reflection of both teachers and students toward greater understanding of their own underlying beliefs and vocational commitments.

The mind-body continuum is perhaps even harder to access within graduate studies and in academia more generally, where Eppert (2018) notes how the educator’s soul and spirit has been cast to the wayside for the sake of greater “efficiency, training, measurement, and technique” (p. 1) within the academy. The prioritization of such values within the industry comes at the cost of the educators themselves, of whom many enter the field in the pursuit of their passions only to become disillusioned, stressed, and mentally ill.

Interestingly, Eppert leans on the work of Berg and Seeber (2016) who note the experience of “time sickness” among faculty—the feeling of never having enough time. She (Eppert) promotes Berg and Seeber’s (2016) notion of the slow professor, one who embraces a sense

of timelessness in their work, honouring the process of their research rather than just the output, and accepting that values of rest and idleness are required for true creativity in the research process.

The above sections highlight several implications for curriculum studies as a result of the findings and analysis of this heuristic inquiry. While there remains much upon which to reflect, I hope other scholars within the field of curriculum studies (and beyond) might continue to engage with, trouble, and entangle their thinking within the curricular and existential (im)possibilities offered as a result of this work.

### **Reflective Conclusion: The End of Time**

Gordon (1978) understands the *coniunctio oppositorum* as a “capacity to mobilize contradictory but mutually reciprocal qualities” (p. 130), of which she views as a precursor for a creative process to occur. She further outlines the creative process as having four stages: a preparatory stage, an incubation stage, an inspiration or illumination stage, and finally a verification stage. In the preparatory stage, “conscious ego control and the differentiating functions predominate” (p. 131), and one tends to utilize their knowledge and skills to solve the problem at hand. The second, incubation, stage, Gordon quotes Whitehead’s term of sitting in “muddled suspense” (p. 131) with the problem, in which one might feel confused and so withdraws attention from the problem in order to sleep on it. In the third stage, there tends to be a moment of insight in which a new image, form, or idea suddenly occurs to the individual, and often occurs unexpectedly. Finally, the verification stage involves a period where the new ideas are “tested, organized and given relevant and appropriate form and expression” (p. 131). It is clear how functions of the ego are both required and surrendered in

a process of creativity. The seed of a problem appears in the psyche, yet it can only be sowed by the ego. The gestation involves a letting go of the problem itself in the form of withdrawal, and it is here where unconscious processes generate something new to arrive for the ego in due time.

I felt rather astonished in my encounter with Gordon's (1978) stages of the creative process, and am thankful that I did at this stage in my dissertation. Upon reading for the first time, I was intrigued with how similar her stages of the creative process were to Moustakas' (1990) phases of heuristic inquiry (i.e., initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, creative synthesis) that formed the foundation for my entire research journey. Despite Moustakas (1990) and Sultan (2019) not citing Gordon (1978) in their work, published 12 years prior to Moustakas', there is a clear parallel between their conceptions of the creative process, by which I am fascinated. I am coming to see how, through my own research process, studying the nature of mortality and confronting my own mortality are parallel processes, and this dissertation is the creative result of such a journey. Poring back through the texts outlining my methodology, I see how my highlighted notes hint at this insight when I was initially engaging with my topic of inquiry and immersing myself in the phenomenon. Sultan (2019) writes, "whether you are consciously aware of it or not, your central question is inspired and informed by your theory, and the opposite is also true." Further, "we can say that your central guiding question and your theory have a dynamic, interactive relationship and that together they inform and guide your entire research process" (p. 43). My death is being lived all of the time, and with death comes the capacity for my own creative process. In so being that I arrived at a capacity for creativity as a conclusion of

my research, I am becoming aware of the ways in which I began my research journey with the results of my research journey. I did not begin the journey thinking I would end at an exploration of the human creative process and its relationship to mortality, yet the creative process inspired the beginning of my journey. In so being, I began with the result, or, stated otherwise, the results informed the beginning of my process. The question and the theory both inform, and are informed by, each other.

This question∞theory relationship (Sultan, 2019) reminds me again of the Uroboros in relation to creativity and becoming. Considering timelessness in terms of a living, experiential moment of creativity might appear as a stretch; however, in recognizing the nature of existence beyond the singular human experience—acknowledging that humankind is “Earth in human form” (Doherty, 2017, p. 17) and a part of the overall individuation of the cosmos—timelessness becomes a reality more able to grasp. Eppert (2021) seems to touch on a similar position which she names as the “humanely unpossessable” (p. 322) that includes the wild places of existence beyond *and within* the human being, viewing Life as “infinitely creative, abundant moving energy, encompassing and also larger than life vs. death” (pp. 322-323). Life as energy that cannot be created nor destroyed—only transformed—transcends the nature of beginnings and endings and, therefore, birth and death. The “brief pause [i.e., life] between the two great mysteries [i.e., birth and death]” (Jung, 1973, p. 485) is perhaps a momentary channelling of energy within a human body for but a brief cosmological blink, before returning to the never ending dance of the (un)knowable.

The image of the Uroboros symbolizes time(lessness) and is thus an invitation for reflection upon one’s mortality. It further helps illustrate how the nature of human creativity



informed my own research process. Near the outset, I began familiarizing myself with heuristic inquiry, connecting to how the underlying ontology would inform the methods and direction of my research. I utilized conscious energy and ego functions in order to read, learn, and write my way towards a tacit understanding of the direction I wanted to travel, not knowing what would be at the end. I could consciously recognize that creativity was at play, yet was unknowing of what that meant or how it was fully informing my process. It was only during the night I wrote these words that I more fully understood the ways in which my unconscious was informing the direction of my process from the beginning. Creativity was gestating within the unconscious throughout this journey.

In writing on the image of the Uroboros and the collapse between past, present, and future, I was reminded of Sarah's experience of abortion. Perhaps understood as its own moment of creation∞destruction, she sought comfort from a friend who passed the St. Benedict medal along to her while she contemplated terminating the pregnancy. Sarah wrote:

I carried it with me, wore it next to my heart—not to grieve, or sediment memory in despair, but to recall love and beloveds and what it means to live through difficult things—a kind of parting glass. I think of the liminal space of ritual that is said to emerge between what is no longer and not yet, shaped and being shaped by all elements partaking. She and I were parting, moving in different directions—toward other countries, people, activities, and uncertain futures.

My research journey ends in an Uroboric arrival to where I began. I have traveled a great distance, yet nowhere at all. While I knew the nature of mortality was impossible to fully explicate at the outset of my journey, at the end I am connected to a depth of myself that

reveals itself to me more fully. It is perhaps similar to the liminal space shared by Sarah, finding oneself between two places. Or, perhaps it is a space between all things. A spacious inner place where I reside and resonate with gratitude—with humility. Within my own absence I encounter myself. Coming and going, becoming and unbecoming, engaging in the cosmic dance of creative existence for but a “brief pause between the two great mysteries” (Jung, 1973, p. 485).

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## Appendix A

### Letter of Consent

#### **Study Title: The Lived Experience of Mortality Among Graduate Students: A Heuristic Inquiry**

#### **Research Investigator**

Nicholas Jacobs, PhD candidate  
[email address]

#### **Supervisor**

Cathryn van Kessel, PhD  
Assistant Professor  
[email address]

#### **Background**

You are invited to participate in two individual interviews (each interview is roughly 1 hour), one before and one after viewing the HBO television miniseries *Chernobyl*. Both interviews involve exploring your experiences of mortality. Interviews will take place either in-person on the University of Alberta campus or virtually over Zoom, depending on current COVID-19 restrictions and your personal level of comfort.

#### **Inclusion Criteria**

In order to participate in this study, you must be able to answer ‘yes’ to the following questions:

1. Are you willing to view the HBO miniseries *Chernobyl* (5 hours time)?
2. Are you willing to discuss death-related topics and reflect on your own experiences of mortality?
3. Are you willing and able to commit to roughly 3 hours of interview time, 1 of which will comprise a group interview with the other participants of this research (5 participants total, plus the principal investigator), and have said interviews audio and video recorded?

#### **Access to Televisual Text**

The HBO miniseries *Chernobyl* is currently available on Crave and YouTube subscriptions, and copies are available at the Edmonton Public Library. If there are any barriers to accessing this media, please discuss with the Research Investigator.

#### **Purpose**

Interviews aim to explore your lived experiences of mortality. The data from interviews will be used to understand the nature of mortality within the human psyche and implications of mortality within the discipline of education.



**Study Procedure**

In the first interview, you will be asked questions about your personal reactions and associations to mortality as experienced in your life. You will also be asked about your experience as a graduate student, and if there are any ways in which you feel your mortality functions in relationship to being a graduate student. After the first interview, you will be asked to view the HBO miniseries *Chernobyl* and record any personal reactions and associations as they arise during the viewing of the text within a journal. These may include, but are not limited to: felt emotions and reactions, associations to symbols within the text, memories recalled through viewing the text, dreams, identifications with particular characters or experiences within the text, or otherwise.

A second interview will be carried out after you have completed viewing the text. In the second interview, you will be asked questions about any evocations you had throughout viewing the text. Any in-person interviews will be audio recorded and any interviews over Zoom will be video/audio recorded. All interviews will be transcribed using Otter.ai. The Zoom interview will be password protected for privacy. Please note that data stored on Zoom and Otter.ai servers are subject to laws of a foreign country, but the researchers will delete the data from the servers immediately after transcription is complete (within a week of the interview).

A final group interview will take place with all participants and the principal investigator. In this interview you will be asked to share any significant moments or insights through your experience of viewing the text. You will also be asked to explore any connections between your experience of mortality and your experience of being a graduate student.

**Benefits**

Reflecting on your own mortality may result in an increased motivation towards pursuing healthy virtues and fulfilling relationships, while also potentially increasing one's level of introspection about your life and consideration of goals that you might understand to be supportive and meaningful.

**Risk**

Because you will be asked to reflect upon your own mortality, you might experience uncomfortable emotions as a result.

**Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal**

Participation is completely voluntary. You can change your mind and withdraw during the study (before or during the interview) or have your data removed up to one week after your second interview. If you wish to withdraw, please contact Nicholas at [nick1@ualberta.ca](mailto:nick1@ualberta.ca).

**Confidentiality**

Your name will be replaced with your chosen pseudonym in the transcript. Digital information will be kept on a computer with password protection and encryption.

**Further Information**

- Your data will be kept on an encrypted, password protected computer. Five years following the completion of the study the data (which is all electronic) will be securely deleted.
- If you have any further questions, you may contact Nicholas Jacobs at the Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta.
- The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at [telephone number].

**Consent**

To participate in this study, the consent form attached to this document must be completed and emailed to Nicholas Jacobs at [email address].

Please sign the consent form on the page below and keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

[signature]

Nicholas Jacobs, PhD candidate

**CONSENT FORM**

Please complete the following form and email to [nick1@ualberta.ca](mailto:nick1@ualberta.ca) prior to your interview.

**Please circle ONE of the following options:**

- a) **YES**, I can answer ‘yes’ to each of the above stated inclusion criteria questions and consent (or, agree) to my participation in the research study, “**The Lived Experience of Mortality Among Graduate Students: A Heuristic Inquiry**”

*or*

- b) **NO**, I do not consent to my participation in the research study, “**The Lived Experience of Mortality Among Graduate Students: A Heuristic Inquiry**”

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name

## Appendix B

### General Interview Guide

#### Preliminary Interview Guiding Questions

1. Can you please describe any significant experiences surrounding death in your life thus far?
2. How have you come to understand your own sense of mortality?
  - To what extent is this understanding a result of the above-mentioned experiences?
  - What else might be informing your sense of mortality?
3. Does anything come to mind when you contemplate your own death? If so, what?
4. Can you please describe your graduate student experience thus far?
5. Are there any ways in which your mortality functions in relationship to your experience of being a graduate student? If so, what are the ways?
6. Do you own a personal artifact (e.g., personal journal entry, artwork, photograph) related to your experience of mortality that you would be willing to contribute to this study?

#### Second Interview Guiding Questions

1. Can you please describe any moments during your viewing of *Chernobyl* that were particularly significant or evoked reactions or associations with your own experience of mortality?
2. Can you please describe any symbols within *Chernobyl* that you felt strong associations towards?
3. Can you please describe any characters within *Chernobyl* that evoked strong emotional reactions for you?

4. Are there any ways in which your mortality functions in relationship to your experience of being a graduate student? If so, what are the ways?

**Group Interview Guiding Questions**

1. Could you describe any significant moments or insights you have experienced through viewing the text or reflecting on your own mortality?
2. Are there any connections between your experience of your mortality and your experience of being a graduate student?

**Appendix C****ARTIFACT RELEASE FORM**

<sup>9</sup>I consent to the Research Investigator (Nicholas Jacobs) taking a digital photograph of my personal artifact for use in the research study, “**The Lived Experience of Mortality Among Graduate Students: A Heuristic Inquiry**” and am aware of the ways in which the use of my personal artifact in the research study might limit my anonymity.

---

Signature

---

Date

---

Printed name

## Appendix D

### Research Ethics Board (REB) Notification of Approval



#### RESEARCH ETHICS OFFICE

2-01 North Power Plant (NPP)  
11312 - 89 Ave NW  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2N2  
Tel: 780.492.0459  
www.uab.ca/reo

### Notification of Approval

Date: October 1, 2021  
Study ID: Pro00113018  
Principal Investigator: Nicholas Jacobs  
Study Supervisor: Cathryn van Kessel  
Study Title: The Lived Experience of Mortality Among Graduate Students: A Heuristic Inquiry  
Approval Expiry Date: September 30, 2022

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

#### Approved Documents:

##### Consent Forms

[Letter of Initial Contact \\_ Consent.pdf](#)

##### Questionnaires, Cover Letters, Surveys, Tests, Interview Scripts, etc.

[Interview Guide.pdf](#)

Any proposed changes to the study must be submitted to the REB for approval prior to implementation. A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the REB does not constitute authorization to initiate the conduct of this research. The Principal Investigator is responsible for ensuring required approvals from other involved organizations (e.g., Alberta Health Services, Covenant Health, community organizations, school boards) are obtained, before the research begins.

Sincerely,

Theresa Garvin, PhD  
Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).*