Grave Matters
Engaging with the Corpses of Social Studies

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based upon ongoing research with
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“Historians are gossips who tease the dead.”

–(often attributed to) Voltaire
Social Studies & Death

- killing (e.g., The First World War death toll)
- murder (e.g., political assassinations, hangings)
- extermination & genocide (e.g., the Holocaust/Shoah)
- epidemics & pandemics (e.g., the Spanish Flu)
- life expectancies in historical times
- social death (e.g., undocumented migrants, the homeless)
“Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification… People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.”

—George Orwell, 1946, p. 7
Goal: Preventing death?

- engage with corpses, not euphemisms for corpses
- avoid cloaking the unpleasantness of death to the point that those corpses have lost their power to move us to action
- yet, we do not want to traumatize students
critical corpse studies

- **precarity** (Judith Butler)
- **biopolitics** (Michel Foucault)
- **necropolitics** (Achille Mbembe)
Whose deaths are allowed to be recognized and grieved? And, how are they grieved?

Although our insecure situation as finite creatures is common to all humans, we do not value each other as such.

“Precariousness is a universal of human life, yet we experience it in highly singular ways” (Ruti, 2017, p. 94).
biopolitics

- How we wield power to control and govern bodies
- Death is privatized and hidden
- Those in power control whose lives matter, who counts as “human” as opposed to those whom we can discard, dispose, and disregard
- Deaths of those not valued are rendered invisible, while the lives of those deemed “innocent” are hypervisible
necropolitics

- who is allowed to live, and who is left to die
- death is evidence for “the brutality of biopower’s incitement to life” (Puar, 2007, p. 33).
- Mbembe flipped Foucault’s theory: Power doesn’t ignore death, Power embraces the death of “others”
fetishization of evil
Ernest Becker

heroic quests to fight “evil”
necropedagogy

- Whose deaths are we examining in schools?
- What sort of corpses are we engaging with?
- more often than not: banal, idealized, and censored bodies (and these flatten our experiences with death)
banal bodies
If we stop to think about them, these bodies and what they represent are horrifying, but do we? How might we consider these horrors?

https://www.ushmm.org/collections/the-museums-collections/about/photo-archives/world-war-ii-liberation-photography
room full of shoes: odor of decaying rubber, no dead bodies per se, but effective at “jolting” us into the gravity of the situation
idealized bodies

- bodies become sacred and sacrosanct
- romanticizes death, and can justify war, conquest, and colonialism
- fuels, and is fuelled by nationalism

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sailor_%26_Girl_at_Tomb_of_Unknown_Soldier.jpg
adding complexity to idealized bodies
censored bodies

- hidden or removed from attention because they are not considered grievable
- our task, then, is to find these bodies in the curriculum and discuss them

Lenin’s Mausoleum obscures the deaths below

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lenin%27s_Mausoleum
Graves had been marked only by wooden crosses. These burned down and were never replaced.

Similarly, the deaths of children in residential schools is often censored in curriculum
dances with death

- How might we engage with corpses in respectful ways?
make banal bodies powerful again

- avoid “over-used” images
- always remember that each of those corpses were people like us who had family and friends
- sometimes the dead body isn’t as powerful as another image
- think of images more as experiences
- what must happen before images are shown? (i.e., emotionally prepare your students so they don’t feel the need to have a shallow engagement)
make idealized bodies more complicated

- avoid simplistic narratives
- don’t make someone’s death simply a “lesson” or a “sacrifice”—by justifying their deaths you foreclose grief
- consider how an idealized death might be covering up the deaths of those we tend to ignore
reveal censored corpses

- take the time to find the corpses that have been hidden in curriculum, and in society
- these bodies are often “inconvenient” to grand narratives of progress and nationhood, so they can be hard to find
- consider the public good of telling these stories
References


thank you!

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