PEDAGOGY OF THE DECEASED:
THE CEMETERY AS A CLASSROOM FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND HOPE

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

As individuals and as communities, how do we learn to recognize that death contributes to life? The purpose of my research is to explore how matters pertaining to death and mortality can teach us to connect everyday personal experiences with issues of injustice, violence, and ecological crisis. Working with Freirean critical pedagogy in conjunction with key insights from the North American death education movement, my research lays groundwork for an innovative “pedagogy of the deceased” whereby humanizing praxis (as per critical pedagogy) can be integrated with death-inclusionary praxis (as per death education). By way of contextualizing and embodying this integrated pedagogy of the deceased, my research includes a place-based component (based in Waterloo, Ontario) involving a group of eleven people who participate in a series of Cemetery Café meetings in two local cemeteries. While recognizing the very wide array of funerary traditions (cremation, burial, sky burial, etc.) including many traditions in which the significance of mortality does not depend on any particular site, my research focuses on the cemetery as one particular place in which community-based education can be usefully facilitated. The Cemetery Café includes discussions, embodied learning activities, individual reflection, and group brainstorming about how the cemetery can foster community development and hope. Datasets include one-to-one interviews, group-generated flipchart papers, photographs, individual homework
assignments, and my own researcher field notes. Following an integrative-interpretive approach, I first analyze the “who” of the pedagogy of the deceased by asking who gets to participate in this pedagogy. Secondly, I analyze the cemetery as a classroom, including consideration of how the cemetery can be a place for embodied learning. Thirdly, I analyze what kind of consciousness is cultivated within this pedagogy, and I explore the relationship between human mortality and critical consciousness. In line with the aforementioned analytical work, I conclude by looking at (1) Indigenizing the cemetery and our view of mortality, (2) establishing teaching cemeteries (along the lines of teaching hospitals), (3) advancing an ecological approach to death and cemeteries through such practices as green burial, and (4) working and hoping for an end to violence.
Land acknowledgement

This research project was conducted on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples. This territory comprises the Haldimand Tract, the land promised to the Six Nations that includes six miles on each side of the Grand River.

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

As individuals and as communities, how do we learn to recognize that death contributes to life? More particularly, is there something about human mortality that makes a positive difference when we are facing injustice, violence, or ecological crisis? The purpose of my research is to explore how matters pertaining to death and mortality can teach us to connect everyday personal experiences with the experiences of community writ large. As the title suggests, my research is pedagogical and my primary task has to do with investigating the cemetery as a place for community-based education. The cemetery is not the only place for what I am calling the pedagogy of the deceased, but it is a place with greatly unexplored potential, a uniquely pedagogical site where we can learn how the words “deceased” and “hope” might be spoken in the same breath.

To inquire about how death contributes to life is to pose a problem. For some people, the problem is a no-brainer because, whether based on religious belief, cultural tradition, or philosophical conviction, death most certainly enriches life. For others, the problem is a non-starter because death is quite simply depressing. My approach is more along the lines of problem-posing education (Freire, 1970) wherein the problem itself can be endlessly generative and frustratingly difficult at the same time, and grappling with the problem can lead to new awareness and a readiness to act for the sake of liberation. Paradoxically, while naming endless generativity, my approach is also to acknowledge an indisputable limitation that sits at the heart of the matter – namely, both the prospects for new awareness and the readiness to act are circumscribed by mortality. Accordingly, my research is about learning to enter and then problematize the cemetery as a site of liberation and limitation.

Core Research Questions

I began this chapter by asking two open-ended questions about how death might contribute to life, and these questions will be retained as part of the overall generativity of the research. Indeed, these two questions beckon me to share some of my own personal experiences relating to death in the next section, and later in the concluding chapter they will
orient key aspects of my consolidating work. Nonetheless, the task of educational research calls for certain rigour, especially in the framing and articulation of the core research problem, and so I devised three core research questions that provide a more sophisticated approach to researching death’s contribution to life. Their sophistication has to do with a strategic unpacking of the research problem as inferred in the title of my dissertation. Thus, my dissertation seeks to thoughtfully engage the following three core research questions:

1. Who gets to participate in the pedagogy of the deceased?
2. How can a cemetery classroom lead to community development and hope?
3. What is the relationship between human mortality and critical consciousness?

The first core research question carries an obvious allusion to Paulo Freire’s well-known book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) which is to indicate at the outset that this inquiry will have something to do with a connection between or, perhaps, a merging of critical pedagogy and death. The question infers the existence of a unique teaching and learning environment (i.e. something to do with death) and thus the Freirean allusion leads to an opening of the field of meaning, an encouragement to conceive of and organize a classroom around “deceased-ness”. Yet, the allusion to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* also means there is another question lurking ahead: Is being deceased somehow comparable to being oppressed? Is death a problem? Is the state of being deceased a kind of oppression requiring liberation? Engaging these questions will be key, and my research leads us toward some conclusions that may be unexpected in this regard. Also, this first research question asks about the who of the pedagogy; it raises issues around participation, agency, and subjectivity, all with the presumption that the cemetery is a place where we get to learn (rather than, “In the cemetery? No way I’m gonna be seen there…”). Who gets to participate? Is there any meaningful way in which the cemetery classroom includes those who are no longer living? Or in the pedagogy of the deceased, is something different intended for the word “of” – for example, pedagogy for the deceased, or pedagogy about the deceased? Moreover, how is a pedagogy of all the deceased (referring to something shared by everyone who has died) the same as or different than a pedagogy as reflected in the particularities of group X, Y, or Z whose members have died? Do some individuals or groups
get to participate” differently than others, and on what basis? Does the question presume certain circumstances under which a person dies, or does it presume certain ways of memorializing a person’s death?

The second core research question is meant to pose a pedagogical problem while at the same time co-locating the context of the research (cemetery) and the action-oriented purpose of the research (community development and hope). The question begins with “How can” as a signal that the study is exploratory and that there may well be multiple answers to the question – i.e. multiple ways of enacting this pedagogy. Given that the pedagogy is toward community development and hope, the research will need to clarify what is meant by these terms and, moreover, why additional terms such as social justice are fitting clarifications for what the pedagogy is aspiring to achieve. This will set the stage both for quite practical matters about how to facilitate cemetery-based learning, how to devise embodied learning activities, and how to involve participants in the process (along the lines of community development), as well as for theoretical matters at the intersection of mortality, hope, community development, and the innovation of critical-pedagogical praxis. To speak of a cemetery classroom signals yet another important matter about how much the endeavor encompasses pedagogical work in any type of cemetery as compared to certain kinds of cemeteries or, indeed, to other sites and practices surrounding the care, interment, scattering, preservation, or memorialization of human remains – for example, cremation-based pedagogy, pedagogy based in a funeral home, or a pedagogy of grief and bereavement. Finally, there is another embedded question here about the way in which participants themselves add to one another’s experience of the cemetery classroom, and so the research needs to attend to additional issues such as how some participants’ cultural or religious views about mortality may become important points of resonance or tension for other participants or, indeed, how a relative lack of awareness of culturally-diverse views about mortality can impact participants’ ability to make sense of death in a globalized world.

The third core question (regarding critical consciousness) again references Freire in his work on conscientization (1970; 1974; 1985), this time posing a somewhat more theoretical question, but one that we could see as being nested within the first two questions vis-à-vis the extent to which participation and community development are premised on critical consciousness. It is not a question that can be answered categorically; nevertheless, it
provokes important reflection about why and how human mortality might be related to the cultivation of critical consciousness. Proceeding with a Freirean understanding of critical consciousness as something that can only arise when people participate collectively in the parallel processes of humanization and liberation, human mortality might be regarded as an inconvenient, rude interruption of this process. However, by posing the question in terms of a relationship between mortality and consciousness, I hope to encourage dialogue and reflection about the possibility that mortality may be, in fact, an integral component of humanization. Thus, the question becomes a basis on which to explore the dialectic between liberation and limitation, between human subjectivity as embodied by people who become conscious of and then change history, and human subjectivity as embodied by people who, when conscious of the categorical limitation on their change-making capacity, forge their collective consciousness within this limitation. Put another way, while Freire’s conception of critical consciousness might be described as “amortal” in the sense that it does not take account of the mortality of the oppressed or of any other group, this core research question encourages reflection about how critical consciousness can be enhanced (or at least problematized) by the finitude of life.

In order to engage these three questions, I selected a qualitative research approach involving an action research methodology and a conceptual framework that brings together Freirean critical pedagogy and insights from the field of death education. A primary component of the research includes pedagogical and collaborative work with a small group that met in two publicly-owned cemeteries in Waterloo (Ontario) for a participatory initiative called the Cemetery Café. The participation of this group is reflected in a cluster of datasets that are described and analyzed in later chapters, including semi-structured interviews, photographs, collaborative note-taking, and individual “homework assignments” based on the cemetery meetings. As well, my own personal fieldnotes become an additional component of the research.

As previously noted, the purpose of my research is to explore how matters pertaining to death and mortality can teach us to connect everyday personal experiences with the experiences of community writ large. In this vein, one of the ways I frame this research is by naming several death-related experiences that were formative in my own life. As will become clear, encounters with death are personal for sure, but they also can have the effect of linking
personal experience with large-scale social and political realities. The following section traces several of my personal experiences from seeing a dead cat to touring a bomb shelter, and from flushing a goldfish down the toilet to holding the lifeless body of my father-in-law. Describing these various experiences is one way to set the stage for learning about how death contributes to life.

**Encounters with Death are Personal**

As a child growing up on a farm, I knew about death. From the dead flies on the windowsill of our farmhouse to the spectacularly rotten corpse of a bird lying in the tall grass behind the barn, I was familiar with at least a few kinds of dead bodies. Sometimes death arrived in singular, melodramatic occasions, such as the time my mother made soup out of a rooster that had been recently strutting around the yard. On another occasion, I was biking along the gravel road near our house when I came upon a dead cat that had been thoroughly disemboweled by a passing car. I stopped my bike, stared at the long section of intestine sprawled across the gravel, and then hurried home to tell my brothers about the roadkill. Sometimes death came in repetitive fashion, like when I owned a succession of goldfish that lived in a small aquarium beside my bed. Each died after a relatively short life, and then the solemn task was always the same: I took the plastic net in hand, scooped the lifeless fish out of the aquarium, and flushed it down the toilet.

As I look back on those childhood days, I scratch my head about things I did not witness. We had beef cattle for at least one or two years but I have no memory of any of them dying, nor do I have any memory of being concerned about what happened to them after having been loaded into a large truck and then carted away. When our dog (not a purebred) gave birth to eleven puppies and we could only find homes for some of them, my father took the remaining ones behind the barn and did them in with a shovel. I knew he had done this but I did not watch.

As much as these childhood experiences demonstrated that all living things eventually die, none registered at the deeper level where a human being truly appreciates the impermanence of life. Assuming that we each get to that deeper level at some point, we encounter the kinds of questions noted above: How do we learn to appreciate that the
impermanence of life contributes to and enhances life? What happens if, collectively-speaking, we learn to embrace death? As I explain in the next few pages, these are pedagogical questions that have far-reaching significance for local communities, for socio-political systems, and even for the planet, but I begin by demonstrating why tackling these questions often begins in a very personal way.

I was about ten years old when I came to really know about death. Several times every year, my extended family would gather at a large and enchanted summer cottage in the Muskoka region of Ontario. Mealtimes at this cottage were often drawn-out affairs as sixteen or twenty of us sat around a very long dining room table, with my two grandparents usually presiding from the head of the table. I enjoyed observing all the adults as they talked – there were quirky dynamics among my aunts, uncles, parents, and cousins, and I listened with fascination. As the sun went down and the somewhat dim overhead lights illuminated the dining room, I would listen to my grandmother’s stories about her childhood in Russia, or my uncle’s description of memorable incidents from his dairy farm. I felt affection and awe toward these family members who led such interesting lives.

One evening after supper, I got up from the table and walked into the next room, but for some reason I stopped and turned around. As I looked back through the doorway leading into the dining room, I could see the adults sitting at the table. There was nothing unusual about the way they were interacting but something made me see them differently than before. Suddenly, a new thought crossed my mind: all of these people are going to die. My mother, my father, my grandpa and my grandma, all of my aunts and cousins – they will all be dead someday. Perhaps this sudden awareness of mortality was prompted by something mundane like the dim overhead light which made the room feel like dusk. Or perhaps someone had just finished telling a life-and-death story. (Indeed, my grandparents had many such stories involving a blissful childhood in the Mennonite colonies of Ukraine then being utterly destroyed by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the anarchy that followed.) Interestingly, this sudden awareness of mortality did not instill fear or anxiety in me. Rather than, “Aaargh! My life is ruined because my family members are all going to die!” it was more along the lines of, “Whoa! Death! That’s big!” This memory has always come back to me as a moment of wonder – even reverence – rather than a moment of dread. I look back at this experience as the first time I really began to grasp the significance of death. Yet, as impactful as this
childhood experience was, I regard it as an amazing gift that I was not seeking. What if one proactively looks for the significance of death? What does it mean to intentionally welcome the impermanence of life?

After becoming an adult, I had a number of experiences in which mortality was closely linked to social justice and political conflict, and in which I needed to choose how to respond in light of these linkages. For example, in 1995 when I lived in Guatemala for a summer, I had the privilege of one-to-one Spanish language tutoring, and my teacher was a big-hearted Indigenous K’iche’ man who was quick to engage in discussions about social justice, economics, and liberation theology. One day as we were walking together in Guatemala City, we came within about sixty feet of someone who had been shot outside a private residence after what appeared to be a burglary attempt. There was blood oozing out from the side of the lifeless body. Strangely for me, my teacher was not surprised and disturbed the way I was; evidently he had seen this sort of thing before. Our Spanish class that day did not involve vocabulary or grammar. Instead, my teacher showed me how to intentionally respond to death with sober reflection on the links between injustice and gun violence.

Another example occurred when I travelled to Chiapas (Mexico) in the late 1990s with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT for short – a violence-reduction project of the peace churches). As a member of a North American delegation, I travelled to the village of Acteal which was the home of a pacifist group calling themselves Las Abejas or “The Bees”. In this village in 1997, members of a paramilitary group massacred forty-five people during a prayer service. Our delegation listened to residents who told stories of fleeing into the trees as their friends and family members were cut down by automatic rifles. Then they took us to the place where they buried the dead, and they showed the tall “Pillar of Shame” sculpture that had been erected in the community as a commemoration of the forty-five victims. The words accompanying the sculpture explained that these deaths were linked to the fact that the community had been advocating for justice and struggling for liberation. Especially in that context of armed conflict in the later 1990s, I saw that these deaths were thoroughly politicized, and from the survivors of this massacre I learned something about the cost of choosing nonviolence in the face of violent repression. I also learned an unbelievable lesson about how death feeds life: Members of Las Abejas explained that “The Bees” turn blood
into honey, and this honey is carried into the world as a way of advocating for peace. It was their way of explaining what they felt to be their peacemaking vocation, and it was a powerful lesson about being proactive in the face of death.

Also while working with CPT, I travelled to Iraq in February of 2003; this was about a month before the US-led bombing began in what became known as Operation Iraqi Freedom. After arriving in Baghdad, our CPT delegation joined a coalition of peace activists called the Iraq Peace Team which coordinated nonviolent demonstrations, held press conferences with international media, and advocated for a diplomatic solution rather than military engagement. We visited the infamous Amiriyah bomb shelter where, during the first Gulf War in 1991, hundreds of people sought refuge from the bombing. Although they knew that the shelter was used for protecting civilians, US military commanders instructed two fighter jets to drop laser-guided bombs on the shelter which incinerated more than 400 people. As our delegation walked through the remains of the shelter, I saw the massive hole in the ceiling, the twisted re-bar, the smashed cement (see Figure 1.1 below). Most of all, I thought about those hundreds of people who died in that spot, and I felt dismayed as I toured this place of safety that, in a split second of violence, was turned into a strange kind of cemetery. Mortality, politicized anger, carnage, memory – all were together in one place, and yet so too was the fierce will to avert such war again. Indeed, in that same part of the city we visited a religious leader who described the deep compulsion he felt during the bombardment to make candles and distribute them through the neighbourhood as a sign of hope. In the midst of colossal death, he felt the impulse to embody life and he chose to act on that impulse.
These personal experiences from young adulthood brought me face-to-face with larger political realities, and these realities taught me in paradoxically ways about how death can contribute to life. But what about my own mortality? How do I learn what it means to anticipate my own eventual death? A more recent experience provided the beginnings of an answer to this question, and this answer (or the inkling of an answer) forms part of the basic design of the research project outlined in this dissertation.

In the early spring of 2012, my father-in-law Wendell was dying of prostate cancer that had metastasized into his pelvis and femur bones. He and his wife Bonnie had been living with my family for almost six years – they occupied an annex of the house where I lived with my wife and three children. I loved and respected Wendell. He was an unstoppable

Figure 1.1 – Inside the Amiriyah bomb shelter in Baghdad, Iraq
storyteller, a fun-loving husband, father, and opa, and an endlessly hospitable friend. It so happened that he always prided himself on his physical strength, but the cancer was more than his strength could handle. He struggled with more and more hellish pain and his body deteriorated in multiple ways. We were caring for him at home, and so his dying affected all of us completely. He was scared and anxious. One time he said to my wife, “I don’t know how to do this!” Indeed, where does one learn how to die? And the rest of us wondered: How do you care for someone who is in their final days? Where do you learn how to accompany the dying?

I was in the room when Wendell died and that moment will stay with me forever. From seeming to be so anxious, suddenly he became remarkably calm. I saw a total change in his eyes, his breathing became quite slow and then, after a final inhalation, his breath was gone. It was an unfathomable moment, and such a relief (from the pain)! Since he died while sitting in a wheelchair and we wanted a “wake” in the bedroom, we decided to move him to the bed. It was decided that I would do the transfer, and so I wrapped my arms around and picked him up in a bear-hug so as to move him onto the bed. This was another moment that I will never forget – the feeling of his dead weight, the sound of air being pushed out of his lungs as I embraced him, the setting him down on the bed, the simple yet ceremonial way that we arranged his arms on his chest. The process was tender and meaningful and, in retrospect, I marvel at the experience of holding my loved one’s dead body. I reflect on the meaning of “laying someone to rest”.

At some point in those final moments, did Wendell learn how to die? Did he welcome death? I do not know the answer to that question, but I know that my relationship with him in life, including his dying and death, taught me something about what it means to welcome and to be welcomed. He was endlessly welcoming of others, and then death welcomed him; he was always the one to give a genuine hug, and then an embrace helped him to be laid to rest. I was very, very sad after Wendell died, but his death also left me with a strange sense of reassurance: When I die, I thought, surely I will be carried by others. Surely my relatively short life will contribute in the longer-term scheme of things. Surely there is a kind of honour, grace, or dignity in the eventuality of death, and this is the “inkling of an answer” that forms part of the basic design of this research project.
After Wendell died, his body was cremated and then his closest family members brought his ashes into a wooded area where he used to play as a boy. My personal journal entry from that day contains this description: “We opened the urn of Wendell’s remains and scattered them around in the woods, in the creek, in a groundhog hole, all around. We took ashes in our hand and sprinkled them. I held ashes and little bits of bone and dropped them on the ground. The wind blowing through the trees. A thin place. Thank you.” (Note: in some traditions, a “thin place” refers to a sacred place or an unusual occasion when the veil between heaven and earth is thin.) Although my research is cemetery-focused, this personal story about scattering Wendell’s ashes is to acknowledge in a preliminary way that my “inkling of an answer” can be about the meaning of death as memorialized in places other than cemeteries and in ways of sending humans into or toward their final rest other than burial.

I cannot know if I will ever hold another person’s dead body. Metaphorically, in recent years I have started to “carry” people in their final days as part of my volunteer work with a local hospice organization; this involves carrying in the sense of accompanying the person who is dying and shouldering some of the physical, emotional and spiritual load when the person’s own family members are feeling exhausted. These have been rich experiences that bring together what I feel is the sacredness of life and death with the practicalities of how to be present with someone who is in a palliative phase. One of the clearest examples of this sacred practicality, or practical sacredness, is the experience of holding the hand of someone who is dying. It is such a simple act, but one that has unique power to connect people. To foreshadow something of the Freirean approach that lies ahead, my experience of holding hands in a palliative setting has not just been a one-way expression of care. I also receive something from the other person, and I continue to ponder what this means. In describing how dialogue works in an educational setting, Freire contends that “[t]he teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is [herself/himself] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (1970, p. 67). In the thinness between life and death, holding hands has been a powerful kind of embodied learning for me, and I wonder what it means for me to be “jointly responsible” with the person who is dying. In the context of any place or event relating to death (crematorium, funeral home, cemetery, site of violence, roadside
memorial), I wonder what it means to be “jointly responsible” with those who are dead, and what it is that we can do together.

One other formative time was during two years that I worked as an occasional celebrant for a local funeral home; I was one of several people who were called upon to plan and lead memorial services for families who either did not have a faith community or did not want faith language within a memorial service. Of the many powerful experiences that stay with me, two incidents relate to the issues of violence and cultural specificity as engaged within this research. On one occasion, I was working with a family to plan a memorial for a man who had taken his own life. Suicide was difficult enough, but the situation worsened. During a meeting with three of the family members in the funeral home, I stepped out of the room to get some papers when I heard a commotion. I returned to the meeting room to find the family members shouting at each other, and one person was physically restraining another from throwing a punch at the third person. According to the one brandishing her fist, the other family member was to blame for driving the man to his death. After some tense moments of de-escalation, and after one person took a much-needed break from the situation, we agreed on a plan and the memorial service came together. That incident left me with an appreciation for how death can involve a complicated mishmash of violence and grief, hopelessness and gratitude, brokenness and seeming redemption. Most vivid for me was that terrible moment when I returned to the meeting room when it looked as though one person’s death was about to instigate physical violence. Why does one person’s lack of hope lead to another’s impulse to lash out? I cannot answer this question in a satisfying way, but the question forms part of the impetus for researching the connections between death, hope, and violence.

The second incident unfolded in a beautiful and constructive direction, although it challenged me in a very important way. After an elderly woman died, her children requested a memorial service that would reflect how members of her family followed both Christian and Buddhist traditions. After some consultation, we agreed to incorporate two passages of Christian scripture as well as a verbal explanation of their Buddhist belief that the memorial service would assist the woman in having a safe and pleasant journey from this life to the next. In accordance with their Buddhist tradition, we agreed that there would be an extended time in the service when a traditional mourning song would play through the audio system
while family members could come up to the casket one-by-one in order to express their wishes for the deceased. As the service got underway, my opening remarks included a statement to the effect that we were standing at the confluence of two spiritual rivers where the tradition of Christianity and the tradition of Buddhism somehow flowed together, but in retrospect I think I was very wrong. Although I heard a few comments after the service about how well the two traditions had been woven together, I thought about the haughtiness of my confluence-of-rivers imagery, as though in my role as celebrant I could facilitate the creation of one big, all-inclusive river. While I understood what it meant to read scripture passages from the Bible, I could only begin to imagine, through my very limited perspective, what the extended time of weeping over the casket meant to the family members, and I did not understand any of the words of the mourning song that was being played through the audio system. This woman’s death brought us to a mysterious place beside two rivers that flowed differently, and in different directions. Even to wax eloquent and declare that both “rivers” consist of water might be too simple, too presumptuous. This incident is relevant to my research because it speaks to the challenge of how to name and celebrate different traditions and different practices surrounding death as potentially co-existent rather than deserving of “confluence”, and it highlights the important choices I make as a researcher that have the effect of revealing, hiding, homogenizing, or celebrating differences.

I share these death-related experiences to illustrate something of the process of not only becoming aware of mortality, but also realizing that contexts marked by death summon us to respond intentionally, personally, thoughtfully and, in many cases, with sensitivity to the social and/or political dynamics implicated in these contexts. By some extraordinary grace, perhaps there are moments when we know exactly what this response should look like, but more often than not I believe this is pedagogical terrain in which we must learn and re-learn our way. Moreover, I believe that this process of learning involves the acquisition of knowledge that matters not only for individuals – each of us as we grapple with our own mortality – but also for local communities, larger societies, and even for the planet itself. As will become apparent in the coming chapters, to gather people together in a local cemetery is to convene a thoroughgoing pedagogical effort in aid of this knowledge. In actuality, the cemetery can be a classroom for community development and hope.
The Personal is Political is Ecological (and is Limited)

On one level, I initiate this exploration of mortality and cemetery-based education as a doctoral student enrolled in an accredited Canadian university. On another level, my research emerges from my particular identity as inscribed by racial, social, cultural, and economic location. In my prior academic work, as I explored the fields of peace and conflict studies, religious studies, women’s studies, and adult education, I was accustomed to naming my identity as a white man with middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied experience. The ordering of these words became important because of my belief in the primacy of racism and sexism as the predominant structures of injustice within which my own reality was one of privilege. Over the years, I started to understand the importance of additional analyses vis-à-vis physical ability and educational privilege. In what order should these descriptors be placed? Is one of my privileges more important than another? Moreover, to what extent does one or more of my identifiers pose an insurmountable barrier for understanding a particular context or researching a certain issue? The point of asking these kinds of questions is to admit the ways in which my thinking, my writing, and my view of the world are shaped by my social location. It is to say that the personal is political.

In light of my recent studies in the fields of death education and critical pedagogy (to be reviewed in the next chapter), I feel a strong compulsion to augment my social location in this way: I am a white, middle-class man who will die. Or in this way: I am a white, male, middle-class mortal. They roll off the tongue differently, and each clarifies the matter with a slightly different nuance. The first highlights the agency that causes my dying, including scenarios in which I die “of natural causes” or by disease, or through the circumstances of an accident. The second highlights the inherent identity of being mortal, or being a mortal. The point is that my mortality matters; my mortality affects how I experience the world and how I see my role.

Whereas scholarship used to proceed as if the race or gender of the scholar had no bearing on the matter at hand, it is now widely-recognized that one’s social location most certainly shapes one’s experience and one’s capacity to understand the world in profound ways (e.g. Butterwick, 2011; Tupper, 2014; Kelly and Bhangal, 2018). Whereas the hallowed goal of some research, imbued with a positivist approach, has been an objective view that
works best at a distance from the messiness of individual experience, my own assumption is more along the lines of those who point out the inescapability of human experience within any theory- or practice-based inquiry.

Likewise, until recent times there has been little recognition of human mortality within the world of scholarship, and those studying death and dying have had to work hard to have their work recognized (Schim et al., 2007; Doka et al., 2016). For all intents and purposes, the life of the Western mind has been almost completely amortal – that is, the pursuits of scholarship, research, and intellectual curiosity have proceeded as if human knowledge can expand irrespective of when, how, or if humans die.

My assumption is that death is not a rude interruption of an otherwise unbounded quest for knowledge. Quite to the contrary, I see death as part of life, and I see mortality as something that shapes the human capacities for knowledge. Human culture intimates something of this truth; although people fear death in some important ways, nevertheless death has been among the most inspiring muses of all time. Indeed, within the field of death studies, analysts have disagreed about whether our North American culture is death-phobic or, on the contrary, if our culture has consistent and even increasing fascination and respect for death (e.g. Tucker, 2009; Zimmermann and Rodin, 2004; DeSpelder and Strickland, 2013). The truth probably involves deep ambivalence, but my assumption is that this ambivalence can be gradually replaced with constructive and positive regard.

Thus, beyond this particular research project, my aim is to contribute to a re-mortalizing of society. As will become clear later in my exploration of Freire, I believe that this re-mortalizing is an inextricable component within the broader project of humanization and, therefore, that death carries a kind of dignity. I am still learning what this means in my own life and in the grander scheme of things.

One way to go about this learning is to enroll in the school of the seasons. For example, I started to write this dissertation in the autumn when dying leaves were falling from the trees and the temperature was making a steady decline toward the coldness of winter. It was another annual proof of the fact that even though living things die, their deaths are not without utility or beauty. To gaze at the death of things in any season is to see how truly awesome is the grammar of death. Not only leaves, but entire trees fall to the ground. Animals reach their oldest age or are cut down in natural predation, and so they succumb to
the earth. Plants die and rot into the ground. Humans, too, come to the end of their lives and die, and they can be witnessed being as majestically dead as any autumn tree lying among the stumps and mud puddles of the forest floor. With this perspective on mortality, I believe the substantive truth that the personal is political becomes enlarged in both biological and metaphorical terms to the point where we can legitimately claim that the personal is political is ecological. My mortality means that my identity is joined with that of any other living thing, not in the sense that my life is worth the same as a wild animal or a tomato plant (although some religions or wisdom traditions would say as much) but that in the acknowledgment of a particular, shared limitation (death), my participation contributes alongside the participation of other living things. This may sound overly grandiose or wrongly poetic, but it represents a preliminary articulation of an important lesson that we can learn through cemetery-based pedagogy, the implications of which can be integrated into the hope-filled work of community development.

I started this section by indicating that my research emerges from my particular identity as inscribed by racial, social, cultural, and economic location. After broadening out to an ecological view, now I come full circle in order to clarify why the particularity of my own cultural experience matters for this research. If I were content with generalizations, I could invoke a sociological perspective about how “[i]n a multicultural society like Canada, which is made up of many diverse ethnic and religious groups, there are considerable variations in cultural definitions and guidelines regarding dying, death, mourning, and grieving” (Northcott and Wilson, 2017, p. 107). Without disputing the accuracy of this description, I know that identity and background affect how we see the world, which is why “mere descriptions” of ethnic diversity should not be issued casually. This is why I feel it is important, with Visser (2017), to acknowledge that “all accounts in death research are to some extent subjective, thus it is essential to be forthcoming about both one’s cultural background and personal experiences which inevitably affect the research. Although there is a tension between transparency and navel-gazing within reflexive accounts of research, this is something that deserves more attention” (p. 12). I grew up assuming that when someone died there would be a certain kind of funeral service held in a church, that certain words of comfort would be said to those who were grieving, and that the deceased person would be buried in a cemetery. I have since gained a much broader perspective, and yet my view is still...
limited. To be clear, I am highlighting why my particular experience is important insofar as it limits my capacity to notice, understand, and celebrate the death-related experiences of others, as well as my capacity to “get” even the experiences of people with whom I share many death-related assumptions, values, and practices in common. In how I research the pedagogy of the deceased, the personal is political because my personal experience is limited. I will return to this point in the methodology chapter in order to be forthcoming about how my subjective, culturally-specific perspective shaped the way I facilitated the research.
Practical and Theoretical Importance

Among the various moments of learning examined in the following chapters, there was a particular scene in the first meeting of the Cemetery Café that hints at the practical and theoretical importance of this project (see Figure 1.2 below).

Out of context, the photo begs several questions: If the headstones along the back indicate that this is a cemetery, why are there chairs, tables covered with tablecloths, mugs, and plates in the middle of a cemetery? What are the people talking about? And why would anyone need a flipchart easel in a cemetery? One way to summarize my research is that I am investigating a pedagogical design that would obviate the need to ask the preceding questions because the community relevancy of the cemetery as a site for learning would be more taken for granted. Nevertheless, within mainstream Canadian society, to speak of the cemetery as a site for learning might elicit anything from bewilderment to macabre humour, accompanied by more questions: The cemetery as a site for learning about what – ornithology or
philosophy? Genealogy or criminal forensics? And if this is a site for learning, why are the people standing at a distance? Was there a problem? Will they come back?

Indeed, the photo presents an unusual meeting place that speaks of contrasts. We see both hospitality (tablecloths and mugs) as well as abandonment. The people in the background seem to belong together, and yet they appear to be engaging in an activity that does not belong in the setting. Regarding the specific setting of the cemetery, the photo alludes to people both here and not here, living and dead, present and absent. Broadening our view even more, we notice the very large tree that is dropping its leaves, succumbing to the change of the seasons, while the blankets and winter coats suggest the human desire to avoid or mitigate seasonal change. Finally, with the knowledge that this particular portion of the cemetery is known as the “free cemetery” or indigent cemetery where the burials were of people on the margins of society, the photo draws our attention to various socio-economic circumstances by which the cemetery includes both marked and unmarked graves. Thus, we wonder to what extent any of these circumstances of marginalization are mirrored in the land of the living, perhaps even in the specific group of people standing in the background: Are any of these people experiencing marginalization?

The importance of my research has to do with intentionally coming into this unusual meeting place with a pedagogical approach and with a vision for community development and hope. The pedagogical approach recognizes that in this unusual meeting place where life encounters death, where power encounters limits, and where we struggle to come to terms with mortality, not only can learning take place, but this learning can contribute new ways of building community.

In very practical terms, my research contributes innovative strategies for teaching and learning in a cemetery; there are lessons here for those involved in popular education, community-based learning, embodied learning, and outdoor education. My research also lays the groundwork for new, inclusive ways of utilizing cemeteries for more than “just” burying dead bodies; there are lessons here for urban planners, ecologists, and those in the very niche profession of cemetery design. Moreover, as a relatively commonplace and accessible setting for members of any given community, cemetery-based pedagogy provides quite specific tools for engaging topics that are on the minds of many people – for example, medical assistance in dying, end-of-life ethics, the aging of the population, the meaning of life in the
face of planetary crisis, and so on. Especially given the teaming-up of cemetery-based pedagogy and critical pedagogy, my research offers practical tools for engaging life-and-death issues. It is worth noting that these practicalities constitute a direct challenge to what has become, in effect, a neoliberal approach to death whereby the cemetery is defined either as a site of commercial activity vis-à-vis the buying of burial plots, the selling of memorialization, and the professionalized transactions of funeral rituals, or as a site of failure in the sense that all human vulnerabilities as well as death itself should be overcome through constant technological, commercial, and medical innovation and control. In the words of Clack (2016), “[f]oregrounding death enables a set of values to emerge that challenge neoliberal constructions of success, resulting in a different understanding of what it means to flourish as a human being” (p. 125).

In general terms, then, my research contributes toward three proposed innovations at the intersection of adult education and death education:

**Three Proposed Innovations**

Firstly, what I have already identified as a “re-mortализing of society” carries certain ontological and epistemological innovations that pertain to adult learning theory. In particular, I will demonstrate that the Freirean tradition holds some unfinished business in terms of how mortality relates both to the process of humanization and to the fostering of critical consciousness, and I devise a theoretical framework for specifying this relation. This will lead to an insight, along the lines of critical social theory, about the ways in which mortality can be understood alongside other aspects of social location. All of this amounts to a kind of “proof of subject” in more than the obvious sense of a “proof of concept” or “proof of topic” – that is, the proof comprises more than important evidence about how organizing educational events in a cemetery is methodologically, pedagogically, or politically worthwhile. In fact, the proof is of a humanized and mortalized subject (those two descriptors are interdependent) whose protagonistic vocation is rooted in community and oriented toward justice and well-being.

Secondly, in part based on Freire’s ontology of hope (Freire, 1994), one of the implications of cemetery-based pedagogy is a deepened understanding of why the ontology
of death (which, interestingly, many would regard as bearing a message of hopelessness) carries the prospect for life and for that-which-could-be. This ontology of death goes together with an epistemological proposal for how we regard the human capacity for acquiring and carrying knowledge in light of human mortality – i.e. re-mortralized knowledge. On this point, the theory and the practical come together because the welcoming of that-which-could-be must stay in consonance with the practicalities of teaching and learning in death-rich places such as hospice rooms, cremation pyres, funeral homes, cemeteries, and culture-specific wakes, all the while being attentive to how matters of social location such as gender, race, and class affect how (or if) we are able to acknowledge that death contributes to life.

Thirdly, in conjunction with the preceding epistemological point about acquiring and carrying knowledge in light of human mortality, I propose that this pedagogical work also carries a fairly pointed ethical imperative vis-à-vis how our re-mortralized knowledge informs the choices we make when it comes to injustice, conflict, and violence, along the lines of the open-ended question from the start of the chapter. I am mindful of both the constant supply of news reports about violence, war, and unimaginable cruelty, let alone the personal stories each of us may have about loved ones who died as a result of intentionally violent acts or accidental violence. In this regard, it is vitally important to be clear about the trajectory of my research. By mounting an extended, scholarly analysis of the cemetery classroom, my intention is not to lift up death in a way that fails to acknowledge the true horror that it can be. My trajectory is not meant to create a shield from the realities of war and violence. (Indeed, as I discuss the pedagogy of the deceased or the concept of a “good death”, those who have witnessed violent death are among those with the prerogative to decide if my research is naïve, callous, or stupid.) Rather, my intention is to research the pedagogy of the deceased, as well as the re-mortralized practices and knowledge therein, in order to wrestle with how human mortality can make a positive difference when we are facing injustice, violence, or ecological crisis. Especially as the research delves into issues of participation and “agentive involvement in the cemetery”, the trajectory carries an ethical implication in terms of how mortality influences the ways we choose to engage injustice, violence or ecological crisis. In crass and simplistic terms, some people choose to be “agentively involved” in the cemetery by perpetrating lethal violence on others (whose bodies are then buried or whose ashes are then scattered in the cemetery). In this regard, the cemetery is a
place in which the fine details of intrapersonal, interpersonal, regional, and even international conflict, both past and present, remain on display even if in a veiled way. As some of my personal storytelling already suggests, my bias and commitment is toward peacebuilding and nonviolent approaches to conflict, but it remains to be seen what sorts of ethical lessons the pedagogy of the deceased might hold with respect to violence and nonviolence.

At the end of the day, I see my research as cultivating a spirit of hope among participants, and that this shared spirit will embody something of the truth of Freire’s words: “I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope” (1994, p.8). These words leave me with a puzzle. On the one hand, I understand human existence as including birth, living, dying, and death, each in its time. On the other hand, I am beginning to understand the timelessness of the human struggle for justice and community, and the formational role of hope within this struggle. In the company of others, the cemetery is one place to learn more about this puzzle.

Outline of the Chapters

The outline of the chapters is as follows: Following this introductory chapter, **Chapter 2** provides a literature review including a variety of sources from the fields of critical pedagogy and death education, and my endeavor will be to show how these fields intersect and give rise to important theoretical and practical tools that will be useful for coming to terms with the pedagogy of the deceased. An important part of the groundwork in this chapter is about probing both the complex, dialectical relationship between life and death, and the cemetery as a site for hope. This last point involving hope becomes particularly intriguing because in the cemetery hope is simultaneously uttered in the context of funerary ritual, stolen from those who mourn a loved one, written fancifully in headstone inscriptions, diminished by the experience of abandonment, and intensified by the realization that one human life can, indeed, make a difference in history. **Chapter 3** explains my methodological approach, including summaries of my epistemological approach (including preliminary treatment of embodied learning), research design, specific research methods, and analytical approach. In this chapter I also introduce the basic parameters for the Cemetery Café project which figures prominently in the research. **Chapter 4** begins the analytical work...
by focusing on the research participants and the issue of agentive involvement in the
cemetery, followed by Chapter 5 focusing on the cemetery as a classroom for embodied
learning and community development. This is where issues around welcome and lack of
welcome become prominent in terms of how (or if) the pedagogy of the deceased can be
hospitalable to the diversity of human experience. Chapter 6 focuses on the characteristics and
dynamics of consciousness associated with the cemetery classroom as well as some of the
ways this consciousness can be facilitated. Through Chapter 4, 5, and 6, based on concepts
from the literature review and through my own analytical approach, I make sense of the
various data in order to build a sustained answer to each of the three research questions. In
Chapter 7 I briefly summarize the whole project in retrospect, and I present four Courses of
Action that directly relate to and extend the claims I develop in Chapters 4 through 6.

Although my writing is geared primarily for Canadian scholars of adult education,
especially those interested in critical pedagogy and community-based learning, my hope is
that it contains useful material for those who work in the fields of community development
and death education. Indeed, there are a few places where I even advise something along the
lines of, “death educators should pay attention to this issue…” and “the field of community
development needs to include this kind of analysis…” . These sorts of assertions assume
intelligibility and commensurability across disciplines of theory and practice, and yet I
readily acknowledge that for those who approach the following pages from disciplines
outside of adult education, the meaning of certain concepts or terms may be unclear. I have
tried to write with openess and clarity so that my ideas can be accessible to a variety of
people, but inevitably there will be places where I assume too much, where I invoke
terminology that deserves more explanation, or where my analysis simply does not carry an
idea far enough. Especially with regard to these places, I think of a basic lesson that I learned
over several years of attending the annual conference of the Canadian Association for Studies
in Adult Education (CASAE) – namely, the value of thoughtful, creative work offered
boldly, yet in a spirit of collaboration and with a readiness to be challenged by others. Thus, I
offer my writing with humbleness and yet with great hope that my small contribution will
add something into a much larger community (of practice and of theory) that will reach far
beyond my own experience, my own understanding, and my own efforts.
It is important to briefly clarify what my research is not attempting to do. Although my interdisciplinary approach will include some sociological insights, I am not attempting to use the cemetery as a means to expound on twenty-first century Canadian attitudes toward death per se. Only where such attitudes become relevant for the elaboration of cemetery-based pedagogy, my research can be described as having a sociological dimension. Somewhat similarly, I am not attempting to enter into a psychological or spiritual study of death and mortality, although there are ways in which my research must be attentive to psychological and spiritual attributes of the awareness of mortality. Finally, my research is not attempting to analyze the economics or the political governance of death and cemeteries (whether municipal or otherwise). Participants in the Cemetery Café clearly comment on such realities, but these end up being parenthetical remarks within the flow of things. This research is pedagogical. It is about examining the prospects for learning about community development and hope in the cemetery.
Chapter 2  
**LITERATURE REVIEW**  
Exploring Critical Pedagogy and Death Education

Toward the end of the first chapter, I described the importance of my research as having to do with intentionally coming into an unusual meeting place (i.e. cemetery) with a pedagogical approach and with a vision for community development and hope. Heading toward the cemetery in terms of pedagogy, community development, and hope reflects my interest in how death contributes to life and how human mortality makes a difference in terms of injustice, violence, and ecological crisis (the open-ended questions posed at the very beginning of the dissertation). With an eye to engaging the three core research questions pertaining to the participants, the classroom, and the consciousness of the pedagogy of the deceased, this chapter reviews selected literature from two fields that do not normally interact – namely, critical pedagogy and death education. In addition to reviewing these two bodies of literature and identifying areas of overlap (see Figure 2.1 below), I also take note of several supplementary themes pertaining to community development, hope, cemeteries, and embodied learning.

![Figure 2.1 – Overlapping fields of critical pedagogy and death education](image)

First, pertaining to critical pedagogy, I will survey Freire’s work especially for the important way in which it orients the political purposes of education for social justice. Consonant with and yet not bounded by the Freirean tradition, literature that explores community development and hope provides additional context for my research. Second, pertaining to death education, I will explore literature from the field of thanatology (the study of death, dying, and bereavement) as well as a number of sources that deal with the historical
and cultural significance of the cemetery. As indicated at the beginning of the introductory chapter, I believe that both the general acknowledgement of human mortality within death education and the specific, place-based potential of the cemetery as an educational site appear to be uniquely compatible with the aims of critical pedagogy. The methodology and analysis chapters recount my efforts toward testing this belief.

Since there is almost no existing literature examining cemetery-based pedagogy from the perspective of critical and/or social theory, the bringing together of critical pedagogy with anything relating to death, cemeteries, or human mortality represents quite uncharted territory. In fact, my review of the literature reveals that only one somewhat similar approach can be found in two journal articles by Moon, one of which advances the idea that “[t]he activities and objectives of lifelong learning cannot occur in existential isolation (detached from the mortal condition of learners) but, by necessity, find their worth under the constraint of life’s finitude” (2009, p.316). An important part of this worth is what Moon calls a “teleological function” whereby death, contrary to the tendencies of our thanaphobic culture, necessarily rouses the human conscience. Moon warns that “[i]f mortality, an impregnable developmental parameter that may impose itself at any time, is neglected in the realm of lifelong learning, this then renders the framework of nurturing maturity and growth in adult learners to fall short of being comprehensive” (p. 319). By way of a proactive approach, Moon outlines a provisional framework for a “pedagogy of mortality” that can “foster clearer purposefulness of being human by emphasizing our fatal nature” (2010, p.326). In broad terms, this pedagogy involves urging adult learners to learn about life by encountering the lessons of death. “All mortals inhere liminal borders that are insurmountable [and yet] there is immense education within and because of these borders” (ibid.). This approach appears to be a strong basis on which to explore the intersection between critical pedagogy (or adult education more generally) and death education, although Moon himself acknowledges that his is a largely theoretical formulation in need of empirical research. Indeed, within my research this “pedagogy of mortality” is a forerunner in very general terms, but there is virtually no follow-up in the existing literature, and neither are there practical suggestions for how to operationalize the pedagogy. While traversing some of the same philosophical terrain as Moon’s pedagogy of mortality, one of the distinctive features of the pedagogy of the deceased is the insistence on making the questions concrete and historical: Where are the
deceased in our community? Who is deceased, and under what specific circumstances did they become so? Another feature has to do with making the questions personal: Does the fact that I will be deceased make a difference in the way I participate in my family, my work, and my community? Thus, moving forward with the terminology “of the deceased” makes for a more historicized and agency-attentive pedagogy.

It is important to clarify a few parameters for the literature review: First, I will be utilizing English-language sources that originate mostly from North America and the United Kingdom. A notable exception is the use of Freire who wrote many of his books in Portuguese; I use English translations of these sources. Working with North American, English-language sources presents an obvious set of limitations, in particular because of the vast diversity of pedagogical and cemetery-related approaches from other parts of the world that will not be considered in my work. Second, by design, most of my sources originate in the academic world. The section dealing with death education is an exception, partly because so much death-related literature has been emerging from the popular press in recent years. Third, my focus on cemeteries creates a significant limitation vis-à-vis followers of cultural and religious traditions for whom the cemetery is either absent from the landscape or, at least, insignificant for conversations about death and mortality. This is to say that the dead need not be buried in a cemetery; among a wide variety of practices worldwide, they can be burned on an outdoor pyre, placed into a “sky burial”, put through a freeze-drying treatment called promession, or donated to a medical school. This will be considered later in the section on cemetery-based pedagogy, but suffice it to say that among a great variety of death traditions, this project focuses on the full-fledged yet fairly narrow band of death-related experiences that involve cemeteries. Finally, I approach this review with a thoroughly interdisciplinary lens. Having spent previous years of my academic life in the field of peace and conflict studies – this is a field that encompasses political, economic, ethical, sociological, religious, historical, and cultural perspectives on human conflict – I take it as a given that ideas and experiences can be helpfully understood through the use of multiple and sometimes dissimilar tools from a variety of disciplines. A strength of this approach is the illumination of the subject with various lights from various angles. A weakness of this approach is the potential for interdisciplinary work to begin sprawling far beyond what can be manageable. To guard against such sprawl, and in recognition of the theme of limitation
that will figure prominently later on, my goal is to zero-in on the primary contributions from critical pedagogy and death education, each in consideration of the cemetery-based pedagogy introduced earlier.

Within any field, the way scholars invoke “the literature” could imply that the literature is a singular, ageless thing. In this dissertation, focusing on mortality helps to distinguish a kind of bequeathing that is going on within the multi-voiced fields of critical pedagogy and death education – the grappling with and handing on of ideas within the living and dying of individual authors. From this perspective, my attempts to grasp the literature become a very small part of a larger conversation taking place through time, and the richness of this conversation owes something to the fact that even the great foremothers and forefathers of the field can only contribute for a limited time. Fittingly, the active writing style valued by scholars (i.e. using strong, present-tense verbs) creates an apparent contradiction when my review says, “In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire makes the point that…” even though Freire himself has been dead for more than twenty years. On the one hand, this is just scholarly convention, but on the other hand it hints at a key issue within the pedagogy of the deceased – namely, the true reach of the indomitable yet limited human subject.

**Critical Pedagogy**

The field of critical pedagogy stretches into many areas of practice and theory, not only in the realm of education, and the field has well-surpassed the point of being a niche for radicals or progressives only. Indeed, as Malott (2011) notes, “rigorous critical pedagogical approaches to education, while still marginalized in many contexts, are being used in increasingly more classrooms for the benefit of student learning, contributing, however indirectly, to the larger struggle against the barbarism of industrial, neoliberal, militarized destructiveness” (p. xxiii). Although the nature of this “benefit” may be recurrently contested through time and space, the proper demand is that “we put the security, happiness, and freedom of all life first and foremost exposing the quest for wealth as the ridiculous and insane disease that it is” (p. xxv). Later in this review, in light of key insights from the field of death education, we will consider the extent to which “security, happiness, and freedom of
all” pertains, by virtue of finitude being an integral part of life, to the reality of death and the context of the cemetery, and this consideration then lays the groundwork for a specific cemetery-based research project in which learning is co-located through a critical lens and within the context of a cemetery.

It is worth noting two reasons why I selected critical pedagogy as a primary approach for this research, especially since one could just as easily configure a “cemetery classroom” through the lens of genealogy (teaching and learning about ancestry), history (teaching and learning about demographic and social changes), social psychology (teaching and learning about funerary traditions), or even ecology (teaching and learning about the flora and fauna in a cemetery). First, although these other kinds of pedagogies will intertwine with my research, critical pedagogy advances a social theory that directly engages with the social, economic, political, and cultural dynamics at play within a given context (Shor, 1993; Darder, 2015; Vossoughi and Gutiérrez, 2017). Thus, in trying to figure out how experiences of justice and injustice connect with or are present in the cemetery context, critical pedagogy welcomes a set of socio-political critiques for which other kinds of pedagogies would not be well-equipped.

Second, critical pedagogy constitutes a thoroughgoing project that goes much deeper than the characterization of teaching methods (McLaren, 2015). That critical pedagogy cannot be reduced to a straightforward technique can be frustrating if one wants to “try it out” the way one might, for example, introduce kinesthetic learning into a classroom. Indeed, as Hinchey (2004) notes, “to the chagrin of many traditionally educated teachers, critical theorists and educators have no standard curriculum and pedagogy to offer….Instead, each teacher must develop individual praxis by first analyzing his or her own context and then designing appropriate, context-specific curricula and strategies” (p. 20). Rather than offering a method, we might think in terms of critical pedagogy consisting of a methodology or approach that makes foundational claims about such things as the agentive nature of humanity, the trajectory of history, and the social construction of human consciousness (Kincheloe, 2007; Darder, Baltodano, and Torres, 2009). Moreover, critical pedagogy features a vocational, unrelenting pull toward community and social justice which become both the means and the ends (Gist, 2015; Vossoughi and Gutiérrez, 2017). The process of facilitating this pedagogy nurtures community because it brings people together in the
present and, simultaneously, it aspires to bring about deepened community in the future (Ife, 2013; Ledwith, 2016). Likewise, the process of facilitating this pedagogy requires a justice-minded approach in the present – addressing power differentials, hearing marginalized voices, dealing with privilege – and, simultaneously, it seeks a world of greater justice in the future. By exploring a Freirean approach to education (along with concomitant ways of working with the collectivity and historicity of knowledge) it will become clear that both the pursuit of community and the commitment to justice contribute groundwork for hope. Such groundwork makes it possible to teach and learn about another world that is possible, and to work to bring that another world into the present world. This work is truly human work that is comprehensive in theory and in practice, which is why my review of critical pedagogy will zero-in on humanizing praxis as a defining category.

**Paulo Freire**

Paulo Freire is one of the most influential educational philosophers in the birth and expansion of critical pedagogy. From his watershed *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to his numerous other books and articles that articulate both pedagogical theory and historical practice in places like Chile, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and his native Brazil, Freire’s work inspires subsequent practitioners and scholars of education as well as many others in seemingly disparate fields. Although most of Freire’s work focuses on pedagogical issues, his writings are picked up with great enthusiasm by those studying post-colonial theory (e.g. Giroux, 1993; Thomas, 2009), occupational therapy (e.g. Battaglia, 2016), medical education (e.g. DasGupta et al., 2006), interfaith bridge-building (e.g. Byrne, 2011), and hip-hop culture (e.g. Williams, 2008; Akom, 2009). In situating Freire as a primary source for my research, I acknowledge the hazards of casually participating in what Apple (2013) aptly names the “Freire industry”:

[E]ach new generation of critical educators must rediscover Freire’s work anew to connect itself to the long history of educational struggles against exploitation and domination. Yet…I have many worries about this “Freire industry.” Too many people have employed Freire as both writer and person as part of mobility strategies…in which members of an upwardly mobile fraction of the new middle class substitute
linguistic activity – radical sounding words and supposed friendship and closeness to radical actors – for lived political action of a more substantive kind (p. 26).

Barndt (2011) offers a similar challenge vis-à-vis critical pedagogy and popular education: “In the adoption of popular education in the North, there has always been a danger that it is reduced to participatory techniques and depoliticized, while its origins and intent have been intensely political” (p. 12). Meanwhile, Allman and Wallis (1997) say that because Freire’s work consists of an “indivisible totality based on assumptions and principles which are interrelated and coherent” and, therefore, that “we cannot take hints from Freire or use bits of Freire; we must embrace the philosophy as an integral whole and attempt to apply it accordingly” (p. 113). So there is the challenge of adopting Freirean tools in a facile (or selfish) way, there is the challenge of enfeebling what was meant to be a deeply political process of learning, and there is the challenge of diminishing Freire by picking and choosing only certain aspects of this work. While I welcome the aforementioned critiques, I disagree with Kane’s (2001) assertion that “[g]iven the variety of interpretations accorded to Freire’s work…it has become almost meaningless to talk, in the abstract, of a “[Freirean]” approach to education” (p. 53). On the contrary, a thoughtful examination of the diversity of Freire-identified projects should confirm the legitimacy and generativity of a Freirean approach. I also disagree with Allman and Wallis to the extent that embracing Freire as a whole is different than engaging Freire as a whole; the latter is our proper task. Admittedly, Kane is right to say that adherents of a Freirean tradition should be pressed to specify their radical, liberal, or conservative interpretation of Freire: “unless content to ignore or fudge the issue, practitioners of a ‘[Freirean] approach’ need to make their own political understanding of Freire explicit” (ibid.). As already indicated, my understanding of Freire in particular as well as the field of critical pedagogy more generally is that education should be framed by a commitment to social justice and community development for all.

The work of Freire (along with those who have expanded on his work) becomes one of the deepest foundations for my research because, as has been widely acknowledged, a thoroughly Freirean approach to education constitutes much more than a how-to instructional method or a rationale for educational or socio-political reform. Darder (2015) summarizes well how Freire’s pedagogy “was not pedagogy solely for the classroom, but rather a living pedagogy that has to be infused into all aspects of our lives, including our personal politics”
Similarly, West (1993) locates Freire’s genius in being able to explicate the dynamics of “how ordinary people can and do make history in how they think, feel, act and love” (p.xiii). These are but two glimpses into the fact that Freire offers not just a teaching method, but rather a thoroughgoing socio-political theory, a comprehensive approach to knowledge, a revolutionary praxis, and a dynamic project of love walked-and-talked. This is why Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) becomes known not merely as a critique of banking education or as a one-dimensional manifesto for anti-capitalism, but as a uniquely propagative force behind many subsequent critical pedagogies (and social movements). Thus, when Freire outlines the two-stage pedagogy in which, firstly, “the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation” and, secondly, “this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all [people] in the process of permanent liberation” (p.40), this two-fold process of freedom gets taken up in many other arenas of human struggle. For example, hooks (1994) asserts, “I felt myself included in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one of the first Freire books I read, in a way that I never felt myself – in my experience as a rural black person – included in the first feminist books I read” (p.51). The point of this is to identify a sort of deep grammar or “deep momentum” within Freire that resonates with a variety of critical educational approaches that take full account of race, class, gender, and other socio-political realities as being inherent in and determinative of the dynamics of education and, moreover, of knowledge itself. Giroux (1985) names this resonance as Freire’s “metalanguage” or as a series of “theoretical signposts” (pp. xviii-xix) that require critical mediation and decoding within specific contexts. A key aspect of my theoretical framework, then, is to clarify these Freirean “theoretical signposts” as being able to orient us within the human experience of mortality as much as within the human experiences of race, gender, class, and so on. Yet, it is important to clarify the decidedly political nature of this orientation; that is, Freire is a good foundational choice precisely because his work is committed to economic justice and political liberation and, accordingly, my exploration of cemetery-based pedagogy will proceed with a clear commitment to social justice.

As we begin probing how Freire’s work can situate the cemetery classroom, three key terms arise: humanizing praxis, critical consciousness, and dialogue. In reference to praxis, Freire explains that for the oppressed, pedagogy “is an instrument for their critical discovery
that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization” (1970, p.33) and that breaking free from this dehumanization can be done only via praxis – namely, “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p.36). Furthermore, breaking free from dehumanization requires a specific kind of subjectivity: “[t]he oppressed, who have been shaped by the death-affirming climate of oppression, must find through their struggle the way to life-affirming humanization” and “[i]n order to regain their humanity they must cease to be things and fight as [people]. This is a radical requirement. They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become [people]” (1970, p.55).

Interestingly, in light of my proposed research, this latter quote contains a “Freirean slip” in referring to the “death-affirming climate of oppression”. Undoubtedly, Freire means to indict the oppressors for celebrating violent, oppressive, and humiliating death, but as I hope to demonstrate, Freire’s praxis itself can be affirming of human mortality as an integral component of the process of humanization. Indeed, Freire recognizes that “[i]t is as conscious beings that [people] are not only in the world but with the world, together with other [people]” (1985; p.68), that it is through a process of change, “of transforming the material world from which we emerged [where] creation of the cultural and historical world takes place” (1993; pp.107-108), and that – perhaps most baldly – “[k]nowledge has historicity” (1997; p.31). Thus, praxis becomes a humanizing and historical process, and although Freire himself did not elaborate on the materiality of this process vis-à-vis the mortality of human beings, his construction of humanizing praxis certainly lends itself to such elaboration. Humanizing praxis also becomes a key methodological pillar for my proposed action research approach whereby the pursuit of knowledge is inseparable from the process of “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it”.

The second and third terms that will play a key role in my research – critical consciousness and dialogue – are closely aligned. Freire defines critical consciousness in conjunction with his distinction between “banking education” (education that anesthetizes and inhibits creative power) and “problem-posing education” (education involving a constant unveiling of reality). He clarifies how “[t]he former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (1970; p.68). The process of fostering critical consciousness, a multi-stage process Freire refers to as conscientization, becomes “the process in which [people], not as recipients,
but as knowing subjects achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality” (1985; p.93). Moreover, critical consciousness is intimately related to material reality and, thereby, adverse to neutrality in the face of material, socio-political issues of injustice:

It is sufficient to know that conscientization does not take place in abstract beings in the air but in real men and women and in social structures, to understand that it cannot remain on the level of the individual. It would not be superfluous to repeat that conscientization, which can only be manifested in the concrete praxis (which can never be limited to the mere activity of the consciousness) is never neutral; in the same way, education can never be neutral (1974; p.132).

Here we catch a glimpse of the integral importance of dialogue – of “not remaining on the level of the individual” – within the process of conscientization. In speaking of dialogue, however, Freire refers to much more than the act of conversation; rather, dialogue becomes inextricably bound up within the process of humanization and, therefore, “dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task” (Freire and Macedo, 1995; p.379). Engaging in dialogue proceeds from the recognition that the process of knowing is social and, therefore, the process of learning is social as well. Regarding dialogue as “an existential necessity” (1970; p.77), Freire articulates his well-known definition of education:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is [herself/himself] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow….The students – no longer docile learners – are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher (pp.67-68).

So we are looking at a dynamic process in which reflection and action, students and teachers, sociocultural reality and prospective transformations of that reality all interact in creative fashion. This relates to a sidebar point pertaining to a debate about the extent to which Freire’s work depends on Marxism and/or the traditions of dialectical thinking. Although I do not have the space to engage this debate in a substantive way, it seems to me that Au (2017) is right in naming Freire’s work as being firmly rooted in dialectical
materialism. In trying to make sense of the relationship between conscious, human subjects and their world, Freire explicated this relationship in a particular way, in line with Marx: “this relationship between consciousness and our material environments must…be thought of dialectically – as an interconnected interchange between humans and their social, cultural, and material environments, a relationship characterized by interaction, relational unity, and dynamic fluidity” and, therefore, “[t]his dialectical materialist conception provides the foundation for Freire’s own formulation of consciousness” (pp. 175-176). The reason why it is important to identify the dialectical approach within Freire – seeing “things” as processes, seeing history as the result of dynamic tension between interrelated yet seemingly opposite forces – is because many of Freire’s assertions about the nature and potential of education carry embedded assumptions about the generative and dialectical relationships between human subjectivity, oppression, liberation, the world-as-is, and the world-as-it-could-be. In turn, these generative and dialectical relationships get caught up in how we articulate the ontological connection between life and death, how we understand the nature of human agency among the living and, as I will explore in later analytical chapters, how we might think about human agency in relation to the dead. Part of what this dimension of Freire encourages is an investigation of the (dialectical) relationship between life-lived-as-such and life-lived-in-light-of-death, and this in turn highlights a certain affinity between Freire’s approach and the approach of death education as Kastenbaum articulates in a pithy way: “the study of life – with death left in” (2004; p.19). Indeed, as was pointed out earlier, Freire’s recognition of the historicity of knowledge (and of literacy) prefigures the specificity of all human-experienced realities from economic justice/injustice to gender- and race-based difference to the finitude of life itself.

So far I have outlined some of the ways in which Freire provides an important foundation for my research, but does the Freirean tradition also present any difficulties for engaging the themes I have identified so far – death, mortality, community development, and hope? Bowers (2005) alleges that although Freire’s pedagogy raises awareness about social or political changes that need to be made, it cannot be the basis of community because community “requires multiple forms of knowledge and relationships that are not always dependent on the critical reflection and the perspective of the individual” (p. 139). Furthermore, Bowers’ argument is that the Freirean tradition holds conceptual biases –
anthropocentrism chief among them – that prevent them from addressing ecological issues, and so the tradition must be challenged if it is to be relevant for today’s environmental crisis: “The social justice issues of class, race, and gender that are now the focus of attention of Freire’s followers, and that received increasing attention during Freire’s last years, should not be treated as separate from the cultural changes that will be required if we are to limit our adverse impact on the environment in ways that allow ecosystems to recover” (p. 143). In actuality, as will become clear later in the literature review and in the design for and analysis of the “cemetery classroom”, critical pedagogy holds tremendous potential for contributing toward the integration of social, economic, political, and ecological learning. Indeed, mortality becomes a fascinating vehicle by which this integration can take place, and Freire’s elaboration of humanizing pedagogy provides an important resource in advancing this integration.

Another difficulty for those following Freire has become clear through feminist critiques of his writings. While Freire speaks vigorously and eloquently about liberation from injustice and oppression, one could argue that he does not understand the deep-rootedness of patriarchy and his social theory cannot adequately make sense of multiple, intersecting oppressions. Indeed, as Weiler notes, “Freire slides over the contradictions and tensions within social settings in which overlapping forms of oppression exist” (Weiler, 1991, p. 453). Oddly, his work can be somewhat decontextualized from specific situations of injustice and, therefore, it lacks substantive analysis in the face of real-life experiences of violence or discrimination; in particular, his treatment of humanization is often universalized and lacking particularity. A different feminist critique shines a light on Freire’s reification of the always-humanizing and always-emancipating teacher, and his apparent blindness to teacherly abuses of power and authority (Jackson, 2007). Even as these and other feminist critiques hold, there continues to be a sense of affinity between feminist pedagogy and the Freirean tradition. hooks (1993) articulates this clearly:

There has never been a moment when reading Freire that I have not remained aware of not only the sexism of the language but the way he…constructs a phallocentric paradigm of liberation – wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same. For me this is always a source of anguish for it represents a blind spot in the vision of men who have profound
insight. And yet, I never wish to see a critique of this blind spot overshadow anyone’s (and feminists in particular) capacity to learn from the insights (p. 147).

Therefore, pointing out gender blindness does not require that we discard Freire. Nonetheless, while feminists rightfully demand a strengthening of Freirean pedagogy through a proper account of patriarchy, my research pursues similar strengthening through a proper account of mortality. Although to be clear, this is not to insinuate that mortality is like patriarchy in the sense of being a problem. Rather, it is to acknowledge a resemblance of approach: A strong feminist critique carries an unequivocal analysis of the human experience of gender even as it harnesses something of the core of Freire’s pedagogy. Likewise, I am advancing a critique that carries an unequivocal analysis of the human experience of mortality. That Freire did not or could not write about humanization through these two lenses does not negate his work, but it highlights the need for others to expand and, as Freire himself indicated, to reinvent his pedagogy in accordance with each new context. How do we learn to do this reinvention, and what kind of contextual knowledge is required?

Co-Creation of Knowledge

That knowledge must be situated in and created by community interaction is a key aspect of critical pedagogy. Freire says that “[e]ven when you individually feel yourself most free, if this feeling is not a social feeling, if you are not able to use your recent freedom to help others to be free by transforming the totality of society, then you are exercising only an individualist attitude towards empowerment or freedom” (in Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 109). On another occasion Freire explains that “the breakthrough of a new form of awareness in understanding the world is not the privilege of one person”; rather, this sort of breakthrough is a collective experience (1998, p. 77). These as well as earlier-noted articulations pertaining to dialogue and the co-creation of knowledge can be seen as amounting to a foundation for community development, although it should be noted that Freire did not actually convey his ideas using the terminology of community development. Nevertheless, many proponents of community development use Freire extensively as an authoritative and inspiring source. This is to say that Freire’s pedagogical work, with its associated socio-political assumptions about how historical change takes place, can be interpreted fairly readily as a robust framework for
understanding the organization, continuance, advancement and/or transformation of community. Ledwith (2011) states that Freire “has made more impact than any other thinker on community development around the world since the 1970s” (p. 53). Ledwith (2016) then articulates community development as the putting-into-practice of critical pedagogy:

It is critical pedagogy that gives community development the potential to bring about change for social justice. The process begins by simply questioning everyday life’s taken-for-grantedness to see the contradictions we live by more starkly. This leads us to seeing the world through a new lens – seeing power in action and co-creating new knowledge, a new story of the world that forms the basis of action for change (p. 7).

Ledwith goes on to make the connection again with Freire: “By critical pedagogy, Freire means empowering education, education that questions everyday life, identifies contradictions, makes critical connections with the structures of society that discriminate and acts to change things for the better. In fact, it is a perfect fit with community development!” (p. 21). Elsewhere in her writing, Ledwith makes the case that our current global troubles demand that community development itself be re-formed in accordance with a justice-minded and liberation-attentive orientation: “We have constructed a western worldview that is unhealthily preoccupied with profit, at the same time as that profit imperative is both undermining human well-being and destroying the planet that is key to our very survival….Never has there been a more important opportunity for community development to redefine its radical agenda and to engage with injustice in the process of progressive social change” (2011, p. 2).

While community development has been defined and elaborated in many different ways, here we are focusing on a kind that takes from Freire not just a general sense of being empowering or a broad-spectrum interest in social justice. More particularly, the aforementioned practice of Freirean dialogue becomes the basis for a specific approach whereby, because community is advanced through dialogue, the fundamental make-up of that community is formed to be inclusive, democratic, and action-oriented. According to Westoby and Dowling (2013), applying dialogue to community development is about “practitioners eliciting a mandate from the people they are engaging with” which requires everyone to do critical analysis together, thereby “pushing the boundaries of how people together interpret the shared world, and then creating ‘other’ spaces of awareness and possible action” (pp. 26-
27). Similarly, Eversole (2015) explains how Freire put forward a community-based approach to education that emphasized knowledge-sharing and starting with local people’s own knowledge about their local contexts: “Freire’s work successfully linked knowledge from educational theory and knowledge from community-based practice to propose a new way of ‘educating’ disadvantaged communities, one that drew on the diverse local knowledges and practices of these communities themselves” (p. 114). Yet another example is Ife’s (2013) vision of community development which identifies Freirean and other critical approaches as essential ingredients for community-building. Just as Freire steers us away from any kind of monolithic knowledge that does not connect with the experiences of real people, Ife states that community development is not about some kind of generic idea of community but, rather, “an ongoing and complex process of dialogue, exchange, consciousness-raising, education, and action aimed at helping the people concerned to construct their own version of community” (p. 117). Finally, in this regard, Newman and Clarke (2016) talk about a Freirean notion of community as being “inflected with notions of a whole civil society” (p. 34) and as involving new pedagogies and new forms of participation. This transformative, Freirean approach to development “has been espoused by many community workers…who view the problems of their communities as rooted in broader patterns of inequality and injustice” (ibid.).

Drawing this connection between Freirean critical pedagogy and community development can affect how we understand the unfolding of history. In his elaboration of community development praxis, Ife (2013) makes the point that understanding historical process helps us see that the existing social, economic and political system is not fixed and that historical change – even major change – can be seen as normal and inevitable: “The obstacles to change seem insurmountable only if one takes an ahistorical view, whereas a historical perspective helps to open up other possibilities and helps one realise that we are living in a period of massive change, and that it is in precisely such periods that new options become real possibilities” (p. 394). This links back to how Freire sees the pedagogy of the oppressed as a way of both raising awareness about the social, political, and economic realities of any historical moment, and empowering people to see themselves as agents of change within history. As noted, I aim to focus on the category of humanizing praxis, and here we find confirmation of the collectivity and historicity of this praxis. Ife’s conclusion is
that “[i]t is an exciting period in which to be alive, and community workers have a real opportunity to help shape a new society” (2013, p. 394). And again we encounter the theme of hope, as Ife explains that community development workers must have a combination of a vision of a better society, and hope that change toward that vision is possible: “Both are essential: vision without hope leads to despair and disillusionment, while hope without vision leads to reactive and pragmatic action with no purpose or goal” (p. 393). Community development workers who have both vision and hope will have the requisite “passion and drive” for being able to bring about genuine community development (ibid.). If this is true – that vision and hope contribute toward people’s collective capacity to recognize historical possibilities and act on them – then this becomes yet another connection between community development and critical pedagogy. Does it follow that at any historical juncture, communities will discover truth in Freire’s aforementioned statement that “[w]ithout a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle”? What actually constitutes hope, and how can its presence become a prerequisite for historical struggle?

The Ontology of Hope

For Freire, hope plays a central though somewhat indeterminate role in the process of education. Freire’s view of hope is ontological, epistemological, and agentive, as evidenced in this extended quote:

I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream. Hope is an ontological need. Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings, and become a distortion of that ontological need….

The idea that hope alone will transform the world, and action undertaken in that kind of naïveté, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. But the attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion. To attempt to do without, which is based on the need for truth as an ethical quality of the struggle, is tantamount to denying that struggle one of its mainstays….As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness. That is why there is no hope in sheer hopefulness. The hoped-for is not attained by dint of raw hoping. Just to hope is to hope in vain.

Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and
turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can become tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope (1994, p. 8).

Yet, as previously noted, with as much vigor as he constructs his view of hope, Freire proclaims that “we must take every care not to experience [hope] in a mistaken form, and thereby allow it to slip toward hopelessness and despair” which are “both the consequence and the cause of inaction and immobilism” (p. 9). So we have a sense of needing to avoid the degeneration of hope, but what exactly is this “hope and dream”?

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire situates hope squarely in the middle of the process of humanization: “Hope is rooted in [people’s] incompletion, from which they move out in constant search – a search which can be carried out only in communion with others….The dehumanization resulting from an unjust order is not a cause for despair but for hope, leading to the incessant pursuit of the humanity denied by injustice” (1970, pp. 91-92). For Freire, the concept of hope relates closely with terms like *untested feasibility* and *limit situations*, although this connection is not explained in any systematic way. Rather, his concept of hope must be inferred within the more general project of education: “The matrix of hope is the same as that of education for human beings – becoming conscious of themselves as unfinished beings. It would be a flagrant contradiction if human beings, while unfinished beings and ones conscious of their unfinished nature, did not insert themselves into a permanent process of hope-filled search. Education is that process” (2004, p. 100).

This idea of the “unfinishedness” of human beings contributes an interesting bridge between ontology and subjectivity in the sense that Freire’s view of our unfinished nature or essence as people, in conjunction with the unfinished dimensions of history itself, becomes a correlative mechanism by which we are (or will be) conscious of the ways in which our actions contribute toward the fulfillment of any given historical possibility. Integral within this mechanism is hope because it is “a natural, possible, and necessary impetus in the context of our unfinishedness” and without hope, “instead of history we would have pure determinism” (1998, p. 69). Saying that hope is a “necessary impetus” is a strong claim, and Freire does not shy away from that which is implied – namely, that “[i]t is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite” (1997, p. 106).

In what specific ways does this “maintaining of hope” relate to, emerge from, or express the dynamics of critical pedagogy? Although McLaren declares that critical
pedagogy “dares to gesture in the direction of hope” (2015, p. 253), such audacity does not actually clarify hope itself. Some propose the more nuanced “critical hope” as an obvious way of following the critical tradition. For example, Boler (2014) identifies critical hope as the knowledge that “there is no assurance of justice, but one is yet willing to fight for justice” (p. 36). Taking a slightly different approach, Horton (2014) defines hope as “a trans-historical and cosmopolitan force, a word, especially when prefaced with ‘critical,’ that becomes thickly connotative with transformative ideas of freedom, expanding knowledge, fullness of feeling and audacity of purpose and action” (p. 153). Making an explicit link with education, Zembylas (2014) states that “[c]reating pedagogical spaces for embracing critical hope in educational settings may therefore be seen as an act of ethical and political responsibility that has the potential to recover a lost sense of connectedness, relationality and solidarity with others” (p. 14).

For educators to have an “ethical and political responsibility” to configure pedagogy in a way that nurtures critical hope is a point that should urge us toward quite detailed work on how to facilitate learning, how to design curricular materials, and how to “come clean” on the routine ways in which our educational institutions encourage and discourage the cultivation of hope. The embodied pedagogy presented later in this chapter is a modest contribution in this regard, but we cannot fully engage such efforts without elaborating the specifics of how “critical hope” interacts with critical pedagogy.

We might clarify the matter by venturing outside the field of education although, evidently, many people have difficulty in trying to define hope. Eagleton (2015) describes hope as “a tremulous, half-fearful expectation, the mere ghost of a robust assurance”; moreover, it can be likened to “a castle in the air, agreeable company but a poor guide, fine sauce but scanty food” (p. 39). Aronson (2017) makes the unusual claim that hope “is vacuous and imprecise, yet whatever it is, it is clearly essential – inspiring people, motivating them, keeping them going in difficult times, even encouraging them to try an experimental treatment or to face brute force” (p. 27). Psychology is another field in which much has been written about hope (e.g. Snyder, 2002; Day et al., 2010), but the urgent matter vis-à-vis critical pedagogy is to clarify the relationship between hope, human agency, and action for justice. Waterworth (2004) offers a philosophical entry point with the twofold assertion that “one can hope without expecting but not without desiring” and, therefore, that “desire is
partially constitutive of hope”. This is to say that hoping does not consist of expecting things will turn out a certain way. However, “hoping must have an element that is expectation-like [but] this expectation-like element is, in fact, anticipation” (p. 9). In my view, anticipation assumes both an imaginative human capacity and a realm of possibility, but it is not clear to what extent we need to integrate uncertainty alongside the possibility. Martin (2014) alleges that “hope is a combination of the desire for an outcome and the belief that the outcome is possible but not certain”; in other words, hope should be seen as “desire in the context of epistemic uncertainty” (p. 11).

Moreover, hope calls forth something deeper than anticipation and heftier than an ability to ascertain possibilities; hope equips us for and presses us into action. Solnit (2016) expresses this idea succinctly: “Hope locates itself in the premises that we don’t know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act” (p. xiv). Not that hope is the only kind of “room to act”, but hope seems to provide a particularly forceful (and imaginative) catalyst for action. When faced with present-day fears brought on by climate change, racism, violence, and injustice, learning hope not only calms the heart but also trains the will for stepping up to the challenges. This is corroborated by various authors. For example, Jacobs (2005) says that “hope can be a collaborative and imaginative process by which we overcome despair and reclaim agency in our pedagogy” (p. 800). A similar approach can be found in Aronson (2017):

The hope I am concerned with is not merely an attitude, or a mood, or a feeling – all of which emphasize its subjective side. It is, rather, a unique combination of the subjective and the objective. Rooted in human needs and longings, it attempts to change the world. In hoping, we are pointing to an objective future that we wish to see happen, and anticipating that a certain state of affairs may come about. We act in the possibility that events may be smiling on us – that is, in circumstances in which our goals may actually be realized. Hope is neither a wholly subjective dimension of life nor a movement of events governed by iron laws. It is potency and possibility (p. 11).

Likewise we see this approach in the way Goodman (2002) defines hope “not as a simplistic emotion but as a complex way of understanding and being, creating and resisting, an active process that both sustains and is sustained by a vision of a desirable future” (p. 196). Stitzlein (2012) claims that hope is “a proclivity toward possibility and change for the betterment of
all” and “a way of being that overcomes the paralyzing or destructive forces of pessimism and anger” (p. 157). And in a somewhat pragmatic description along the same lines, Macy and Johnstone (2012) talk about hope as a practice, as something we do rather than have, and so it is a process with sequential steps: “First, we take a clear view of reality; second, we identify what we hope for in terms of the direction we’d like things to move in or the values we’d like to see expressed; and third, we take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction” (p. 3).

Assuming Freire is right that “hope is an ontological need”, my brief review of additional perspectives on hope demonstrates that the ontology of hope surely intersects with subjectivity and epistemology as well. That which could be is the arena of those who know that their own initiative has something to do with the yet-to-come. In this vein, I propose that we draw a distinction between hope-as-worked-for (i.e. hope that is actively pursued) and hope-as-such (i.e. hope that “just” exists as the perceived object of anticipation). This distinction helps to clarify both the imaginative and the active as two constitutive elements of hope. In keeping with critical pedagogy’s unrelenting drive for liberation, my own provisional definition of hope is as follows: Hope illuminates the threshold of future possibilities for justice, peace, and wellbeing and simultaneously, paradoxically locates that threshold in (but does not necessarily remain limited by) human action in the present. However, Freire’s work highlights something missing from this definition having to do with the ontological dimension – i.e. “hope is an ontological need”.

To be clear: critical pedagogy’s take on hope, in conjunction with other voices surveyed thus far, indicates a connection between hope and human agency, and this connection in turn points toward the place where hope and pedagogy intersect. In a summation of Freire’s view of hope, Webb (2010) puts it this way: “Hope and education thus share the same ontological root, and are inextricably tied. For Freire, the very possibility of education is grounded in his understanding of hope as the constant search born of the human being’s consciousness of its own incompleteness. Not only the possibility of education but also its purpose, for if hope is characterised as a constant search then the purpose of education is to act as its permanent guide” (p. 327). Furthermore, again referencing Freire, Webb points out that the discourse of conscientization is the discourse of hope – “a hope against the evidence that recognises the obstacles before it and yet grows in strength in spite
of these, and a hope experienced by the hoper as ‘the taking of history into their hands’ as they strive for the ‘untested feasibility’ that lies beyond the concrete material data of every limit situation” (2013, p. 410).

However, since we are searching for clarification about humanizing praxis, we should be clear about the way in which hope is constituted within the interplay between action, theory, and reflection. Given critical pedagogy’s approach to critical consciousness and dialogue, and given the community-based co-creation of knowledge, it would appear that Freire’s “education in hope” proposes a unique curriculum featuring lessons in both hoping-in-order-to-become-human and becoming-human-in-order-to-have-capacity-for-hope. Both carry implications for how we understand human subjectivity. Yet, we dare not wander off into a philosophical thicket. Critical pedagogy is about political engagement and social justice, and so our examination of hope must attend to the real-life, everyday matters in which humanization calls for collective action rather than just inventive contemplation. In the following section we will see that, in fact, death is one of these everyday matters in which we must forge our view of humanization and in this matter, too, we will contend with hope. What is not clear yet is how hope and humanization interrelate. From within the field of death education, Fanslow-Brunjes (2008) defines hope as “the feeling that makes it possible to imagine how something good might come of death, the most dramatic change of all” (p. xvi), but my review has already established that hope is much more far-reaching than a feeling. Thus, in order to grapple with what humanizing praxis makes possible while at the same time grappling with human mortality, we must proceed into the heart of death education where “the most dramatic change of all” illuminates yet another aspect of how hope and human change-making interrelate.

**Death Education**

Death education can be defined as “the informal or formal teaching and learning about the many facets of dying, death, and loss” (Noppe, 2009, p. 316). Advocates of death education believe that “death-denying, death-defying, and death-avoiding attitudes and practices…can be transformed” and that “individuals and institutions will be better able to deal with death-related practices as a result of educational efforts” (Wass, 2003, p. 211).
When it comes to educational efforts pertaining to dying and death in Canada, ours is a time of contestation and innovation. In one way, the field is confounded by what some identify as a culture of “death denial” (e.g. Zimmermann, 2012; Cozzolino, Blackie, and Meyers, 2014). Consider the vast sums of money spent on products designed to defy aging and snub mortality, or the countless euphemisms that help us to avoid speaking directly about death. Add to this what Northcott and Wilson (2017) identify as the general historical trend in Canada whereby death’s domain was gradually professionalized, bureaucratized, and medicalized to the point where “[d]ying and death were removed from the context of normal life and placed instead in the context of health care institutions to be managed by professionals” (p. 93). In this context, knowing what to do with a family member’s dead body is no longer necessary because doctors, funeral directors, and other functionaries take care of all the details. The result, according to Northcott and Wilson: “Bureaucratization shifts control over dying and death away from the dying person, the family, and community, and towards officials who are strangers and who operate according to the bureaucratic culture rather than the individual’s relevant subculture” (ibid.). Clearly, denial mixed with professionalization mixed with loss of control leads to a problem for those wanting to advance death education. Kortes-Miller (2018) describes the problem as a vicious cycle in which

we neglect our death education (it’s easy to do when no one ever brings up the topic or offers us a course), so we lack the emotional and practical skills when it comes to facing death. Because we tend to fear what we don’t know, we become increasingly scared of talking openly about the end of life. Complicating this is the fact that most of us already fear the process of dying: we’re scared about pain, loss of control, losing people we love, being ripped from our own lives, uncertainty. That fear can lead to anger as we pretend that dying and death aren’t integral parts of life and living. We feel isolated as we grapple alone, trying to make sense of our emotions around death. Many of us feel ashamed: of our fears, of our lack of knowledge – even of our desire to learn more about the end of life. All these negative emotions can lead to denial; we’d rather not experience them, so we work even harder to avoid learning about death (p. 5).

For those who object to the professionalization, bureaucratization, shame, and negativity, death education then becomes an exciting project of resistance and creativity, and the combination of cultural, medical, and social innovation in everything from end-of-life
care to funeral practice to online memorialization provides unparalleled occasions for learning. Moreover, the 2015 decision of the Supreme Court of Canada to ban the prohibition on medical assistance in dying (MAID) not only obligated parliamentarians to generate legislation, it also stimulated conversations about the meaning of life, the medical definition of death, the intricacies of who should be allowed to make life and death decisions, and the extent to which one can facilitate a “good death”.

Even while professionalization continues to influence the contours of death education, countervailing efforts are expanding the field. For example, in studying death in the age of globalization, McManus (2013) observes that “[t]he experts are no longer in a hierarchical relationship where professional dominion over the body dominates the proceedings”. Professionals are still involved, but their work becomes part of a more complex negotiation: “The professional, the dying, the dead and the bereaved come together to negotiate the symbolic content, the meaning and the terms-of-passage for those who are transitioning from life to death” (p. 105). If this is true, death educators need to develop unique competencies in order to meaningfully engage such symbolic negotiations.

These contextual factors continue to shape the evolution of formal death education in Canada. Universities and colleges now offer courses in thanatology – the study of dying, death, and bereavement – and death-related curricula have made their way into the training of nurses, doctors, social workers, school administrators, and other professionals. Similar to their counterparts in other places around the world, Canadian death educators work along the lines of what Kastenbaum calls “the study of life – with death left in” (2004, p. 19). In general, “[l]eading figures in formal death education emphasize that, at its core, such education emphasizes life and living” and, therefore, that the study of death celebrates “the various dimensions in which human life is expressed and experienced: the physical, the behavioural, the emotional, the cognitive, the interpersonal, and the spiritual” (Balk, 2014, p. 147).

As much as death education proceeds with this kind of uplifting approach, however, educators still face significant obstacles. In reviewing North American death education, Cupit observes that “[p]erhaps the most significant death education lesson learned was that this subject was neither to be acknowledged nor studied” because it was seen as “[t]oo culturally toxic for conversation”; thus, death became something to be feared, and “stress
from dying and death was compounded by cultural ignorance” (Cupit, 2013, p. 348). How can death education overcome such fear, stress, and ignorance? Furthermore, how can death education intersect with the humanizing praxis of critical pedagogy? It turns out that making the decision to study life “with death left in” already contains something of an answer to these questions. Whereas denying death or letting fear take control of the experience of death results in disempowerment and dehumanization, actively engaging death and including death as an integral part of life results in empowerment and humanization. This is why my review of death education will zero-in on what I call death-inclusionary praxis as a defining category.

**Literacy that Fosters Human Agency**

In earlier times, from the fifteenth to the seventeen centuries, death education in the West occurred within what was known as the *ars moriendi* tradition (Latin translation: the art of dying well). This tradition involved the publication of Christian guidebooks containing instructions for how to conduct special rituals at the deathbed. As the dying person was being threatened by Satan, these guidebooks offered advice to the priest whose job was to prepare the soul for the moment of death. If one can strip the particular religious trappings from this tradition, it foreshadows our present-day death education scene by assuming that (a) how a person dies matters, (b) some ways of dying are better than others, and (c) a “good death” includes accompaniment from other people (Kastenbaum, 2012, p. 468). On the other hand, current death education includes at least two prominent features that were hardly present in the *ars moriendi*. First, death education today tries to enrich quality-of-life and quality-of-attitude in the face of death. Second, in spite of everything about death that is beyond our control, death education tries to empower people to become active decision-makers vis-à-vis both the processes of dying and the eventuality of death (Corr and Corr, 2003).

Thus, there is a rough parallel here between the values and purposes of critical pedagogy and death education: active political subjectivity corresponding to active decision-making, and social justice corresponding to quality-of-life (especially in light of the determinants-of-health literature – e.g. Raphael et al., 2001; Brassolotto, Raphael, and Baldeo, 2014; Government of Canada, 2015). Moreover, the pursuit of active decision-
making and quality-of-life correspond to the specific process of humanization as outlined by Freire, which makes it peculiar that there is no body of literature that systematically explores the relationship between human mortality and critical pedagogy (or even between mortality and the broader field of adult education). This gap is all the more strange because the intersection between the fields of thanatology and critical pedagogy provides unique options both for theoretical innovation and for transformative, everyday praxis.

Of course, there is nothing about critical pedagogy or death education that would prevent this sort of innovation; the two fields simply have not interacted much yet. In the Canadian context, a rough approach might be to cross-reference death education with Nesbit’s (2013) boiled-down summary of adult education:

1. A set of unyielding social purposes, informed by passion and outrage and rooted in a concern for the less privileged.
2. A systematic and sustained philosophical and critical analysis that develops the abilities to connect immediate, individual experiences with their underlying structures.
3. A keen attention to the specific sites, locations, and practices where such purposes are made real in the lives of Canadians (p. 7).

On the surface, death educators might urge adult educators to be clear about the extent to which they believe these “unyielding social purposes” can be intelligible without reference to the mortality of Canadians. Indeed, citing adult educators’ tendency to treat both teachers and learners as amortal – that is, not clearly identified in any particular way vis-à-vis mortality – death educators might appropriately ask for the third point to be modified as follows: “A keen attention to the specific sites, locations, and practices where such purposes are made real in the lives and deaths of Canadians”. Likewise, adult educators and advocates of critical pedagogy might urge death educators to be clear about the extent to which they understand “immediate, individual experiences” of death as being connected to underlying social structures.

Granted, this constitutes only a makeshift collaboration between critical pedagogy and death education. Does the literature provide any more specific foundations for this linkage? Stepputat (2014) assesses the relationship between dead bodies and politics, and claims that “the fate of dead bodies and human remains seems to be a very appropriate field
to study in order to trace how claims and performances of sovereignty are developing in the contemporary world” (p. 29). In a similar vein, Laqueur (2015) declares that “[p]ersonhood persists where it manifestly no longer resides; the dead, as represented by their bodies, are somewhere and are something” because “[n]ot only do the dead do work, but by their words and actions the living for a very long time have shown their reliance on the work of the dead” (p. 31). The question is how the “performance” or the “work” of the dead is involved in socio-political matters, either to replicate or transform situations of injustice. This represents yet more uncharted territory given that “[t]he prospects for death practices in advanced modernity are informed by an optimism for possibilities yet to be imagined, cross-cut by the real danger of re-inscribing enduring social inequalities” (McManus, 2013, p. 235).

Assuming we conduct death education as a kind of literacy, we are formulating a way of “reading the world” (to borrow from Freire) in which we actively include the experience of death. Thus, death-inclusionary praxis involves focusing on the potential for an empowering pedagogy, for participants to see themselves as change-makers within their respective worlds of dying and death. If we can see, as Auger (2007) describes, “a vast array of everyday social practices that constitute a death”, and if we see death “not as a given…but rather as a socially constructed and maintained phenomenon” (p. 27), then empowerment can be operationalized through very intentional training, equipping, and educating in order to shape this process of social construction.

A public health approach is another way of situating the experience of death (both personal and social) as an underpinning for education. In broad terms, this approach can be understood as a type of community-based education in which people’s learning about death both relies on and extends their experiences of empowerment, and in which death becomes integrated within existing discourses around the social determinants of health. The work of Kellehear (2015) within the Australian context is instructive for a Canadian public health approach to death education. According to Kellehear, “[o]nly by increasing the education level, and therefore the quality of community engagement about death and loss, are we able to bring a more informed public to the table so that they may willingly and soberly address these important topics and reduce the level of hysteria and public anxiety” (p. 222). He further observes that “[a]lthough it is true that public health professionals have little experience in matters to do with dying and death, it is equally true that palliative care
colleagues have little formal training in health promotion, health education, or community development”; an obvious opportunity exists, then, for complementary training programs and professional exchanges in order to co-construct knowledge about the relationships between death and public health (p. 231). For Kellehear, death education “remains the single most important public health challenge for the future if we dare to hope for informed public discussion and rational policy development in end-of-life care” (p. 232). The kind of interdisciplinary learning as described by Kellehear can be seen as prefigured within existing discursive strategies and policy mechanisms surrounding what are known as the “social determinants of health” – that is, things such as income, employment conditions, social environments, gender relations, culture promotion, coping skills, and other factors that influence the health of given populations (Government of Canada, 2015). Especially in light of the current legal and societal debates around medical assistance in dying, the implicit task is to identify “good death” or “dying with dignity” as being among social determinants that contribute toward a healthy community. The project is comprehensive, then, as we look for “new institutions, cultural forms, and religious symbols that allow and encourage us as individuals to come together to respond to death and mortality” (Heinz, 1999, p. 15).

Whether learning about the prospects for community development and social justice through death education or, alternatively, learning about death through community development and social justice, either way encourages greater literacy and increased human agency. Of course, from the perspective of death education, this pursuit runs up against clear barriers because of specific end-of-life realities. As pointed out by Beresford and Croft (2011), “people facing death and dying are likely to have very limited time and resources, and few opportunities for self-organization, with many competing priorities” and so “[t]hey may not have the realistic chance to develop their own collectivity as an effective basis for emancipatory and empowering user involvement” (p. 59).

Interestingly, at the much deeper place where the fear of death poses an existential barrier, we discover the makings for hope. In a famous investigation of the human proclivity to deny the reality of death, Becker (1973) concludes that “[t]he idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else” and yet death “is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for [people]” (p. ix). This idea then forms part of the genesis of
what becomes known as terror management theory which evaluates how the conscious awareness of death can motivate people to be deliberate and even constructive with their life choices. Although the existential threat of death can also prompt negative behaviours and thoughts, terror management theory examines how the awareness of death

  can motivate people to enhance their physical health and reprioritize intrinsically meaningful goals and values, and nonconscious death awareness can move people to live up to positive standards and beliefs, such as environmental concern or compassion; build positive relationships with friends, family, and loved ones; encourage helpful community involvement; support peaceful intergroup coexistence; and can foster certain self-enriching behaviors, such as creative expression or the exploration of novelty (Vail et al., 2012, p. 320).

To be clear: this approach contributes alongside other death education efforts in terms of nurturing a unique type of literacy about death that increases human agency. Perhaps many people would find it counter-intuitive that death awareness can lead to “helpful community involvement” and “peaceful intergroup coexistence” and, in fairness to terror management theory, human agency should also be explored to the extent that humans exercise the agentive choice to avoid situations that remind them of death (Hayes, Schimel, and Arndt, 2010). Nonetheless, the issue of human agency figures prominently in how we understand the nature of hope vis-à-vis death, and this exploration of hope can add a useful perspective on how pedagogical initiatives can be configured in death-related contexts generally, including in a cemetery.

The Problem of Hope

Earlier we encountered Freire’s recommendation for “a kind of education in hope”. In a way, the field of death education itself continues as a learner in this school because making sense of life and death requires us to learn something about hope, but it turns out that, for all intents and purposes, hope is a problem in the study of mortality.

On the one hand, hope is seen as an enemy to the full appreciation of death. In a pithy version of this view, Jenkinson (2015) entitles one of the chapters of his book Die Wise “The Tyrant Hope”. In other words, hope is tyrannical in blocking true wisdom about and openness to death. Though he does not subscribe to this harsh view of hope, Gawande (2014)
describes it well based on his experience as a physician working alongside dying people and their family members. In many cases, hope becomes equated with resisting death, in spite of evidence, and then hope looks like this:

When there is no way of knowing exactly how long our skeins will run – and when we imagine ourselves to have much more time than we do – our every impulse is to fight, to die with chemo in our veins or a tube in our throats or fresh sutures in our flesh. The fact that we may be shortening or worsening the time we have left hardly seems to register. We imagine that we can wait until the doctors tell us that there is nothing more they can do. But rarely is there nothing more that doctors can do. They can give toxic drugs of unknown efficacy, operate to try to remove part of the tumor, put in a feeding tube if a person can’t eat: there’s always something. We want these choices. But that doesn’t mean we are eager to make the choices ourselves. Instead, most often, we make no choice at all. We fall back on the default, and the default is: Do Something. Fix Something. Is there any way out of this? (pp. 173-174).

Similarly based on experience as a physician, Schneiderman (2008) explores how, in the face of death, hope might actually cause harm. He recounts a study (more than 1,000 patients in several different hospitals) involving critically ill patients who expressed hope (i.e. their own prognostic estimates exceeded those of their physicians). These patients asked for more aggressive and more invasive treatments than did patients with more realistic prognostic estimates. These more aggressive treatments did not increase their survival rate at all; instead, these treatments increased the level of suffering. Schneiderman concludes that “the difficult but essential task for all of us, physicians as well as laypersons, is to discard the conventional, narrow view of hope as a psychological tool to prolong life. That version of hope is useless, if not perilous” (111-112). In a somewhat different take on the enmity between hope and death, Wisman and Heflick (2016) make the claim that hope is directly challenged by death: “Death is a reminder that one’s life will end in biological decay – and also represents the stopping point for, and ultimate obliteration of, all desired outcomes” (p. 870).

On the other hand, hope is valued both in the dying process and after death. In his philosophical exploration of death, Fairfield (2015) maintains that [i]f in the encounter with [the mystery of death] there is neither certainty nor even reasonable belief, there remains the imperative of hope. The voice of hope is the voice of life itself, an absolute affirmation of life in the face of death. It is the obstinate refusal to allow death the final say, a protest of one’s
whole being against annihilation” (p. 128). Returning to the medical context in which Gawande and Schneiderman expressed concern about hope, Nuland (1995) suggests that “of the many kinds of hope a doctor can help [the] patient find at the very end of life, the one that encompasses all the rest is the belief that one final success may yet be achieved whose promise vanquishes the immediacy of suffering and sorrow” (p. 223). Many of those who work in end-of-life care recognize that part of the value of hope lies in its evolution during the dying process. For example, O’Rourke and Dufour (2012) explain how “hope will change often, from something grand to something real and practical; from a hope to be cured, to a hope to keep working; then to a hope to keep eating; a hope to live to see a daughter’s graduation; and finally to a hope for a comfortable death that is free of pain” (p. 76). To value hope, then, does not consign hope to a singularity. In the face of death, hope can be directed toward everything from a miracle cure to the assurance that one’s life will be remembered, from life-after-death immortality to the ability to enjoy the tastes of the next meal. According to Fanslow-Brunjes (2008), “[m]ore than a wish, of deeper origin than a goal, that thing called hope is actually what drives the process of change, whether the transition is into death, or into a different way of living” (p. xvi).

Since we are pursuing the death education theme into a cemetery-based research project, we might consider any specific meanings of hope vis-à-vis cemeteries. For Eggener (2010), cemeteries “speak of hopes of the deceased [and] offer summations of lives lived and speak of community, the connection to place, mortality, afterlife, and eternity” (pp.10-11). In relation to ecologically-minded practices captured within the terms “green burial” or “natural burial”, Davies and Rumble (2012) explain that natural burial “gives material expression to the belief that death is necessary to life in a manner that provides hope and comfort for the bereaved and empowers the place of the dead in modern society” (p. 117). In what ways does the cemetery provide hope? And returning to the issue of human agency, does the cemetery have any particular impact on our capacity to act, to participate, or to otherwise become involved? And what of the dead lying in the cemetery – do they have agency in some sense? Harper (2010) claims that “[b]y acknowledging that the dead body is not a uniform entity but one that can hold a multiplicity of meanings and therefore be different things, we move towards the concept of the dead body as a social agent” (p. 311). Is this inferring that we should augment Kastenbaum’s summation of death education by enrolling in “the study of
life, with dead people left in”? In order to practically and physically situate death-inclusionary praxis, we turn now to the cemetery.

**Regarding the Cemetery Qua Cemetery**

Consider two kinds of experience vis-à-vis the cemetery: On the one hand, people experience the cemetery qua park meaning that they walk through or spend time in the cemetery in a way synonymous with walking through or spending time in a park or green space. In this way of experiencing the cemetery, the presence of headstones or the knowledge of bodies buried underground is incidental to the sights of trees and grass, the sounds of birds, and the smells of blossoms. On the other hand, people experience the cemetery qua cemetery meaning that the headstones, the underground corpses, the signage indicating that this is a cemetery, the knowledge that a burial of a fellow community member may take place in that very spot the next day – all of these physical and symbolic aspects of the space matter in terms of how it is experienced. This distinction becomes particularly significant given the proposed nature of my research involving what could be seen as an additional way of seeing the cemetery qua classroom.

Although this research project never intended to focus on cemetery history per se, existing literature contains several important points relating to this dynamic between cemetery qua park and cemetery qua cemetery, and so the literature helps to clarify the variety of ways in which we conceptualize what exists and what occurs in a cemetery. For example, this kind of clarification can be seen in Woodthorpe (2010) in her claim that “[m]uch more than a static landscape of headstones, benches, and rose gardens, the contemporary cemetery is a dynamic space filled with assumptions, activities, and perspectives, some of which are contradictory” (p. 117). Elsewhere in her writing, she includes a somewhat more agency-specific description of the cemetery as “a political, contested and dynamic space accessed by a wide range of people who carry with them varying expectations and demands” (Woodthorpe, 2011, p. 272). This dynamism then leads to important questions regarding how the cemetery should be used, according to what policies, and based on the input of what sorts of people.
These questions are not unique to the present day. In North America, particularly during the period from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the role of the cemetery was changing dramatically. Whereas cemeteries were to be avoided in earlier times – the fear of sickness or grossness was somewhat well-founded due to shallow burials and the unsanitary care of the dead – the early decades of the nineteenth century saw the opening of new kinds of “rural cemeteries” where people could go for recreational purposes. In his cultural history of these nineteenth-century cemeteries, Eggener (2010) explains how

[i]n a time when few American cities had anything resembling public parks or museums, cemeteries filled these and other roles. Cemeteries were understood as substantial civic improvements, signs of urban prosperity and progress. Not only were they much larger, more hygienic, and more aesthetically pleasing that the older urban graveyards, but they were also intended to be socially and culturally uplifting in ways that the earlier sites were not (pp. 24-25).

A famous example is the Mount Auburn Cemetery which was opened four miles west of Boston, Massachusetts in 1831. In its early years, this cemetery became so popular that people needed tickets to get in, and local horse-and-carriage businesses offered leisurely rides through the graveside pathways. Indeed, it became a sign of success to be seen in the cemetery (Linden-Ward, 1989). But while the high-society included these rural cemeteries as esteemed places to visit, the lowly “potter’s field” continued as a commonplace burial ground for people who were homeless, people living in poverty, and people who were excluded from mainstream society for any number of reasons. In these cemeteries, the “pauper’s grave” was often unmarked, perhaps even the reopening of a mass grave, and the coffin would be so badly-made that you could see the body through the cracks (Rugg, 2000, p. 269). Thus, along with the troubled co-existence of rich and poor among the living, both rich and poor populated the cemeteries of earlier times, although in quite different ways. This reality has persisted throughout time to the present and so, according to Warner, “the cemetery as a collective representation repeats and expresses the social structure of the living as a symbolic replica; a city of the dead, it is a symbolic replica of the living community” (1976, p. 368).

The complexity of the cemetery qua cemetery relates not only to the sociological but also to the personal, and to the relationship between person and society. Warner explains how the cemetery provides “enduring, visible symbols” that engender reflection on the death of
others as well as one’s own eventual death and, therefore, the headstones “anchor each
person’s] projections of [their] innermost fantasies and private fears about the certainty of
[their] own death – and the uncertainty of [their] ultimate future – on an external symbolic
object made safe by tradition and the sanctions of religion” (p. 363). As will become clear
later, cemetery-based pedagogy acknowledges and then elaborates on this “anchoring” as an
integral part of what it means to learn in the context of a cemetery. And, as a kind of
foreshadowing of the subjectivity-related aspects of cemetery-based pedagogy, Warner
further describes the cemetery as follows: “The grave with its marking is a place where the
living can symbolically maintain and express their intimate relations with the dead. There is a
kinship of kind, too; today’s dead are yesterday’s living, and today’s living are tomorrow’s
dead. Each is identified with the other’s fate. No one escapes” (p. 368). Maintaining intimate
relations in light of a shared fate – this certainly connects with the kinds of lessons that
cemetery-based pedagogy aims to facilitate, although considerable expansion is needed in
order to operationalize this in “real life”.

Although highlighting the inescapable “kinship of kind” is certainly one function of
the cemetery qua cemetery, other functions also co-exist, sometimes in seeming
contradiction. Neither scholarly nor non-scholarly literature explores this co-existence in
great depth, although a few sources provide an important foundation for further study. In her
examination of how cemeteries occupy urban space, McClymont asserts that cemeteries can
be interpreted in multiple ways, especially given certain historical changes in burial practice:
“The ongoing tension between cemeteries as a place of public promenade, and private
reflection and bodily interment, coupled with a shift away from burial towards cremation
further complicates their spatial significance both as places themselves and as part of a
cityscape” (2016, p. 384). Making a connection to larger civic matters, she goes on to make
the case that cemeteries are “political and cultural landscapes with multiple and contested
meanings which in turn frame what behaviour may or may not be deemed legitimate therein”
(p. 385). To designate the cemetery a “political landscape” in itself begs for a particular
lesson to be learned, not only about the cemetery itself but about the contours of human
subjectivity within the cemetery, and further shapes our understanding of death-inclusionary
praxis as identified earlier.
McClymont claims that depending on what or who the cemetery represents, or what parts it plays within the context of a city, certain “activities and identities” are legitimized or delegitimized (p. 385). This is a bold assertion, and is accentuated by her additional claim that cemeteries open up issues of civic identity and cultural diversity, although she does not go into detail on this beyond a general recognition that “cemeteries are spatial vessels of civic identity, telling diverse histories of the city and representing intangible notions of the character of a given place” (p. 393). While she helpfully identifies the importance of municipal policy-making that can support the multifunctionality of cemetery space, she does not provide clarity about how people should specifically enter into, relate to, or learn in these “vessels of civic identity”. This is a crucial point. If the cemetery can function variously depending on the expectations of those entering, including for educational purposes, then it needs to be clear how these various functions can co-exist since, as shown by Deering (2010), “[t]he more that cemeteries and churchyards are understood as multiple-user landscapes and managed to that end, the better one can hope to improve the sites for all users and circumvent conflict” (p. 90). At stake here are the multiple ways that cemeteries are designated or excluded vis-à-vis certain uses, and it is only in recent years that land-use planners are advocating for more diverse options in how cemetery lands might be integrated into communities (Bennett and Davies, 2015; Basmajian and Coutts, 2010). So within the cemetery qua cemetery, “[b]urial ground design that explicitly incorporates multiple uses and accommodates divergent burial practices could significantly improve the process of making burial facilities into more central community land uses” (Couttsa, Basmajianb, and Chapina, 2011, p. 260).

Assuming that teachers and learners are among the multiple users of the cemetery as a “more central community land use”, how is the cemetery conceived of as a classroom? More to the point, how is the cemetery conceived of as a site for critical pedagogy or for community education? Clearly, there is virtually no literature exploring either of these questions, especially the latter. Roseboro and Ousley-Exum (2010) investigate the cemetery as a site for one component within a teacher preparation course, although the investigation focuses more on the dynamics of affective learning and less on the dynamics uniquely related to the cemetery context itself. In their case study of New Orleans cemeteries, Miller and Rivera (2006) acknowledge that cemeteries can teach people about the past and about the
sacredness of a local place, but theirs is an example of many sociological and anthropological studies that do not delve into the pedagogical dimensions of the cemetery. They acknowledge that a cemetery is “centrally significant” to a community’s sense of well-being and that a cemetery “is a living place that reflects the conditions and social realities of the surrounding community both past and present” (pp. 348-349). Likewise in the field of community-based arts one can find fascinating examples of cemetery-based initiatives such as, in the North American context, the annual “Night for All Souls” event and the “Art and Meaning in the Modern Cemetery” symposium held at Mountain View Cemetery in Vancouver (BC), the annual Lantern Festival and Sculpture Path sponsored by Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston (MA), or Dia de los Muertos events in various cemeteries across Canada and the USA. However, as much as these represent innovations (or, at least, culturally-mindful initiatives) on the part of cemeteries and arts-based communities of practice, as of yet there is no accompanying scholarly literature examining this arts-based theme in relation to education, let alone pertaining to organized educational initiatives – formal or informal – within the cemetery context.

And yet there is dynamism at the place where critical pedagogy and cemetery-based pedagogy overlap (both practically and theoretically), and this dynamism becomes part of the terrain that will be described in subsequent chapters. For now, Worpole (2003) foretells something of what lies ahead in his comment that “the last landscapes of human culture [i.e. cemeteries] were also among the very first” because “it was when people began to mark the passage and place of death that they discovered their humanity” (p. 199). Although Worpole may not have intended the reference to “humanity” to mean all of what Freire means in his advancement of “humanization”, nevertheless we have yet another example of how critical pedagogy and death education can intersect. Both humanizing praxis (including discovering our humanity) and death-inclusionary praxis (including marking the place of death) are evocative, useful, and potentially mutually-refining tools that can be utilized as we proceed into a cemetery-based research project.
Summary of Theoretical Framework

In this literature review I have placed two fields together that do not normally interact. The venn diagram (Figure 2.2 below) depicts these two fields along with their associated values, vocation, and potential.

![Figure 2.2 – Provisional theoretical framework](image)

In the area of overlap, two primary aspects have been named in the course of reviewing the literature – namely, the vocation of hope and the potential for human agency. Others will be examined in the course of the empirical research and the ensuing analysis.

With critical pedagogy literature, I began with the work of Paulo Freire including his elaboration of the political purposes of education and his linking of critical consciousness and dialogue. Then I considered ways in which critical pedagogy understands knowledge as a collective exercise of co-creation, and I provided examples from the work of those who connect this aspect of critical pedagogy with the close-cousin project of community development. Finally, I sifted through various writings about hope, including several that make a specific connection between hope and the critical tradition. Several times in this section, I revisited the specific category of humanizing praxis as a key vocation or “tool”
within critical pedagogy, and this tool will be re-introduced later on when it comes time to analyze research data.

With death education literature, I began with a general recognition of the state of death education generally and in Canada in particular, and I included examples of scholars whose work describes the ambivalence with which our society views death. A key task within death education has to do with studying life “with death left in”, and this forms the basis for what I call death-inclusionary praxis which takes many forms from increasing literacy vis-à-vis the traditions, meanings, clinical aspects, socio-psychological challenges, and public health mandates surrounding death, to navigating the complexities and sometimes contradictory implications of hope in the face of dying and death. Finally, I spend time with various pieces of literature that talk about the cemetery not only from a historical-cultural perspective, but from a political perspective which, in light of the critical pedagogy literature, further illuminates the matter of subjectivity. Thus, death-inclusionary praxis carries a substantive enrichment of how we understand the ways in which humans – even the dead – can act in the present world including, as noted several times with respect to hope, acting to bring “another world” into the world.

By exploring the space where critical pedagogy and cemetery-based pedagogy overlap or, at least, the space where their respective educational projects get caught in generative tension, we shine a light on something palpable yet unexamined; it is not a “simple” gap in the literature. Given that the two vocations or “tools” of humanizing praxis and death-inclusionary praxis emerge from fields that value participation and community-building but in different ways, and given that both fields grapple with the significance of hope, the overlap between the two demands clarification. As has already been made clear especially with regard to critical pedagogy, such clarification should not be made “simply” as a piece of philosophical wizardry. Based on the literature so far, the clarification needs to come through engagement with real-life human experience, with death left in, and it must somehow contend with the realities of justice and injustice. As was suggested earlier, it is important to avoid misappropriation and de-politicization within the “Freire industry” or within something that might amount to vogue scholarship more than on-the-ground work for socio-political liberation. Again, in the words of Kane (2001), “unless content to ignore or fudge the issue, practitioners of a ‘[Freirean] approach’ need to make their own political
understanding of Freire explicit” (p.53). Indeed, there is nothing gained in weaseling around. Freire advances the pedagogy of socio-economic and human liberation. Death education advances an unflinching pedagogy that meets human mortality face-to-face. By co-harnessing these two pedagogies in the context of a local cemetery, my research aims to promote community development and hope in the real world, including the on-the-ground and in-the-ground world of the cemetery.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Serving Coffee and Dessert in a Cemetery

I began this dissertation by posing two open-ended questions about how death contributes to life and how human mortality makes a difference when we are facing injustice, violence, or ecological crisis. These high-level, generative questions spurred me to include some of my own personal experiences in the introductory chapter and then, in the subsequent chapter, these questions began to recede behind the more focused two-fold review of critical pedagogy literature and death education literature. As I now turn toward specifying the overall methodology, individual methods, and analytical approach for my research, it seems particularly advantageous to comment briefly on how I understand the role of these open-ended questions moving forward, especially vis-à-vis the core research questions.

In their examination of how questions function within social science research, Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017) advise researchers to avoid being too focused or too broad in how they ask questions: “By being too focused, the researcher runs into the hazard of imposing preconceived ideas by creating leading questions. By being too broad, it may prevent the reader from figuring out whether or not the research questions have been answered” (p. 35). To strike this balance is what they call “the art and craft of questioning” (p. 105). In my research I have tried to practice this craft by striking the balance between the high-level, open-ended questions (as began the introduction) and the more sophisticated core research questions:

1. Who gets to participate in the pedagogy of the deceased?
2. How can a cemetery classroom lead to community development and hope?
3. What is the relationship between human mortality and critical consciousness?

I retain the high-level questions as generative, but the bulk of the dissertation has to do with engaging these core research questions as more specifically instructive. In this way my approach is in line with Richards (2009) who describes the researcher as needing “to work like an eagle, soaring over the landscape, locating something small that can be captured,
diving in to take it and then making sure it’s not dropped!” (p. 14). Of course, this metaphor carries an unfortunate allusion with respect to my research on death – that is, in no way do I see my task as swooping down to prey upon anyone or anything. In actuality, the following pages describe me “swooping into” the cemetery in order to serve coffee and cake to research participants. The point is that while my overall methodology now focuses on engaging the core research questions, the generativity of the high-level questions remains and, indeed, I will return to this “soaring” level toward the end of the dissertation.

After briefly describing two exploratory events that preceded the research proper, this chapter sets forth my overall methodological approach including characteristics of the qualitative research and epistemology, then outlines the research design including four specific research methods, and finishes with commentary on the trustworthiness of the research, my analytical approach, and my own identity as a researcher.

**Exploratory Events**

As I geared up for this research, there were more than a few raised eyebrows when I described the idea of studying death and cemeteries, which made me wonder if launching a pedagogy of the deceased without ever having had the experience of being deceased was akin to participating in a pedagogy of emotion without ever having cried, or a pedagogy of humour without ever having laughed. I carried on with the initial stages of design by relying on different metaphors: there is value in teaching about the importance of coagulation without requiring students to scrape their elbow so that they have the opportunity to wait for the bleeding to stop, and there is value in teaching about the joys of friendship without demanding that students make new friends during the course.

More to the point, in the interests of a more systematic gauge of the feasibility of cemetery-based education, I hosted two exploratory events in the spring of 2016. This was several months prior to the launch of my research. I describe these events here because they strongly influenced both my general perspective on cemetery-based education as well as my specific methodological choices for this research project. Both events were held in Mount Hope Cemetery (Waterloo, ON) which is a city-owned cemetery in uptown Waterloo. I
invited friends, neighbours, and acquaintances to attend one of these events, and I invited them to share the invitation with others as they saw fit.

In advance of these two events, I communicated with cemetery staff in order to explain the scope of the project and to propose a location for the two events (according to my sense of where a circle of chairs could be set up on relatively level ground in the middle of the cemetery). Cemetery staff counter-proposed a different location which ended up being better than my originally-proposed location because it situated the two events at the edge of a section known as the indigent cemetery or “free cemetery” (sometimes referred to as a “potter’s field”). This section features many unmarked graves where burials took place for people who had no money, people who had committed suicide, or people who had been regarded as outcasts at the time of burial. Although I assumed that critical pedagogy would include conversations about how social justice connects with unmarked cemetery plots, I did not know the full extent to which this location would provoke group conversations. Participants appeared to be quite impacted by the presence of these unmarked graves, especially in close proximity to other graves where the headstones were large and ornate.

These exploratory events included guided discussions, brainstorming, and a reflective-embodied activity involving lying down in the grass between the headstones. Overall, participants evaluated these events quite positively, even effusively so in some cases, although there was also a general sense of uncertainty about where the events would lead in terms of follow-up and longer-range community impact. As I noted above, these two events provided me with invaluable experience that shaped the current study. My general conclusions based on these experiences were that (1) cemetery-based pedagogy was credible and (2) more in-depth work was in order.

**Methodological Approach**

As previously noted, I devised the three core research questions in order to focus my research concerning the participants, the classroom, and the consciousness involved in the pedagogy of the deceased. I chose to engage these three questions with an overall methodological approach that can be characterized as (1) qualitative research and (2) semi-participatory action research. Furthermore, at a basic level I am striving for a critical
approach in which the seemingly run-of-the-mill cemetery can be examined with fresh eyes. This is in line with Prasad (2018) who characterizes a critical approach as one in which we interrogate “the innocence of social and institutional practices, however innocuous and commonplace they might seem” (p. 172).

After summarizing these two aspects of my methodology, I proceed to outline some of my primary epistemological assumptions, some strengths and weaknesses of my methodological approach, the recruitment process, the four specific methods, and the issues of trustworthiness and researcher identity.

**Qualitative Research**

Most of what I am pursuing in the pedagogy of the deceased has to do with the making of meaning, the exploring of complex perspectives, and the charting of critical and collective consciousness. Therefore, I am utilizing a qualitative research methodology with the assumption that my aim is toward something of meaning, of insight, and of depth (or thickness) of analysis. I utilize qualitative research as a way of understanding mortality and death through interactions and negotiations rather than through statistical or otherwise quantifiable conclusions. I do this as a way of probing individual and collective interactions with and within the unique context of the cemetery, and also as a way of attending to the significance of my own involvement in the research itself. While recognizing that there could be useful options for configuring this research by quantitative means, I am selecting a qualitative methodology because I believe it is suited to engaging my core research questions and, given the participatory dimension of my research design, because it facilitates me being able to grapple with personal perspectives, narrative experiences, and even imaginative contributions from participants. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe this aspect of qualitative research as follows:

Both qualitative and quantitative researchers are concerned with the individual’s point of view. However, qualitative investigators think they can get closer to the actor’s perspective through detailed interviewing and observation. They argue that quantitative researchers are seldom able to capture their subjects’ perspectives because they have to rely on more remote, inferential empirical methods and materials (p. 10).
Key within this statement is that qualitative researchers think they can get closer to others’ perspectives and experiences, the assumptions around which could lead us into the grips of long and intricate debate about what exactly qualitative research brings to light – i.e. truths, facts, experiences, interpretations, validities, non-transferabilities, instances of cause-and-effect, narratives, constructions, evidence, explorations, and so on and so forth. This debate is important but I do not believe my research depends on its resolution.

To be clear: attitudes, events, and human experiences pertaining to death and mortality can be researched in any number of ways, including through a wide variety of quantitative approaches; indeed, in some cases, what makes death education so impactful is when it highlights well-done statistical analyses of the causes of death, when it aggregates data on health-care spending in the area of palliative care, or when it analyzes psychological research on suicide prevention strategies. Nonetheless, my ambition is to delve into the complicated world of pedagogical initiative and human agency, and so the qualitative approach becomes the more fitting choice for researching a complex topic that “goes deep”. Therefore, my qualitative approach is along the lines of Ravitch and Carl (2016) who describe “a mode of inquiry that centralizes the complexity and subjectivity of lived experience and values these aspects of human being and meaning making through methodological means” (p. 5). Within this mode of inquiry, truth is not universal or static but rather situated in multiple perspectives and contexts. This is why the task of interpretation (of experience, of data, of meaning) is inextricable rather than recreational within the research process, which is to say that we must make sense of things. Directly related to this is the role of the researcher who can never be objective or neutral, but rather must be or even gets to be subjective and implicated in interpretive authority rather than impartial authority. All of this affects how qualitative research deals with research participants. Again I take the view of Ravitch and Carl (2016) who assert that “people’s experiences and perspectives are deeply embedded in the contexts that shape their lives, and how people experience aspects of their lives and the world is subjective and can change over time. Qualitative researchers are precisely interested in people’s subjective interpretations of their experiences, events, and other inquiry domains” (p. 9).
It is clear that this is a very different methodological approach than any kind of positivism in which the goal is to collect objective or self-evident facts. Likewise, my approach is unlike others (including other qualitative approaches) that see action as something that might be appropriate afterwards, perhaps best done by others. Rather, I am choosing a qualitative approach that sees action as an inherent ingredient in the research process. I resonate with Denzin (2015) in this regard: “As global citizens, we are no longer called to just interpret the world, which was the mandate of traditional qualitative inquiry. Today, we are called to change the world and to change it in ways that resist injustice while celebrating freedom and full, inclusive, participatory democracy” (p. 32). As much as someone might wonder how I could put a cemetery together with “celebrating freedom and full, inclusive, participatory democracy”, this is indeed the kind of research I am working to achieve, which is why I am further defining my methodology vis-à-vis action research.

**Semi-Participatory Action Research**

Especially in the unmapped terrain where critical pedagogy and death education overlap, my chosen methodology cannot simply detect and describe reality *as such*. To put it another way, I cannot detect and describe reality *simply*, purely, or untouched by human involvement. Instead, methodology becomes a means of representing, embodying, and changing reality. In addition, this methodology cannot treat pedagogical work as disinterested or objective; instead, methodology becomes a means of tracking the processes, decisions, reconsiderations, and reflections of those facilitating the pedagogy. Moreover, this methodology cannot only proceed through the initiative of a single researcher; instead, methodology becomes a means of welcoming or hosting the involvement of community members as co-researchers to some extent, and certainly to a great extent as co-creators of knowledge and co-makers of change. This is one reason why I am specifying my approach as semi-participatory action research.

Another reason has to do with what I believe to be the dynamism of both the cemetery and my particular pedagogical approach. Instead of regarding the cemetery (or the meaning of mortality) as static, I am seeing it as a *lively* place for learning and community development. And instead of regarding the pedagogy of the deceased as any kind of pre-
formed model or curriculum, I am seeing it as emergent and, importantly, in need of the participation of others. Thus, I am adopting action research methodology because the research involves both reflecting on the practice of cemetery-based pedagogy and anticipating a variety of change-making opportunities that arise from/within the pedagogy. In his overview of the field of action research, Stringer (2014) states that the purpose of this kind of research “is to provide the means for people to engage in systematic inquiry and investigation to design an appropriate way of accomplishing a desired goal and to evaluate its effectiveness” (p. 6). Putting it this way carries the assumption that the people affected by the matter under investigation should be participants in the investigation which, in turn, means that action research should be conducted “in ways that are conducive to the formation of a community of inquiry – the ‘common unity’ of all participants – and that strengthen the democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing qualities of social life” (pp. 23-24). As I will clarify later in this chapter, I have designed my research to welcome this sort of “community of inquiry”, acknowledging that the inquiry also features important limitations.

Given the nascent character of the pedagogy of the deceased, my adoption of action research must be qualified, which is to say that we are not dealing with an established pedagogy in which practices can be assessed in light of well-documented experience. In my estimation, this only makes the process more captivating because the change-making ambition is under (friendly) interrogation during the time when it is particularly bright-eyed. Carr and Kemmis (1986) talk about how action research “aims at improvement in three areas: firstly, the improvement of a practice; secondly, the improvement of the understanding of the practice by its practitioners; and thirdly, the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place” (p. 165). Knowing that the pedagogy of the deceased is more-or-less new, the presumption of improvement needs to be adapted (i.e. even the implementation of a new practice might rival the significance of the improvement of an established practice). One might argue that functionally there have always been tacit pedagogies of the deceased, but that these pedagogies have not yet been improved in the ways being explored in this research. When they later re-define action research by adding “emancipatory” as a descriptor, Carr and Kemmis (2009) state that “emancipatory action research is itself embedded in, and conducted in accordance with, the democratic values and deliberative processes of the kind of ‘good society’ it seeks to foster and promote. As such, it is nothing other than an elaboration of the
democratic form of social life of which it would itself be an integral part” (p. 78). To stretch
the point only a little for this context, I am exploring what it means to be embedded in the
values and processes of the kind of “good cemetery” that the research is seeking to explore.
In this way, my action research carries an important prefigurative element that, while
exciting, also raises a concern about the possibility of feeling compelled to stake out more
than is possible. Somekh (2006) makes the point that when action research presumes that
researchers and participants will work together toward systematic intervention,
reconstruction, and transformation of practice, “[t]his presupposes that it is possible to
generate actionable knowledge which is trustworthy in providing the foundation for
improvement” (p. 27). In my research, to stake out too much might be to claim
trustworthiness of knowledge that is still in formation, in need of additional pedagogical
intervention, or even fallible in some way.

As for the “semi-participatory” qualifier, my intent is to make it clear that although
the research features participatory dimensions throughout, and although my research is
inspired by the tradition of participatory action research (PAR), I cannot make any lofty
claims that it is a full-fledged participatory project. This is important because, as explained
by Carr and Kemmis (1986), “[t]hose involved in the practice being considered are to be
involved in the action research process in all its phases of planning, acting, observing and
reflecting” (p. 165). This is made all the more important because of the community
development theme that features prominently in the second core research question. Along
these lines, Ledwith’s (2011) vision is of “dismantling power relations that are associated
with traditional research in favour of a mutual, reciprocal inquiry of equals” (p. 78). For this
mutual inquiry to take place, especially if it aspires to community development, research
projects must become “counter-hegemonic critical spaces where power relationships are
deconstructed according to our analyses of power in order to reconstruct democratic relations
with new possibilities for a world that is fair and just” (ibid.). To be clear: only in a nascent
way did my research amount to a counter-hegemonic critical space. Future iterations could
certainly involve greater boldness of critique in the face of the multitude of vested interests
when it comes to the industries, cultures, and economies of death, although we should not
lose sight of the fact that any democratization in the “zones” of death can be considered a
betrayal of those who would prefer a corporatized and ultra-professionalized (and sanitized) approach to death.

Participants were heavily involved in key phases and modes of inquiry, but so too their initiative was engineered and steered by my initiative, including initiative that, in some cases, I took in their absence. This is why I am calling the research semi-participatory, which does not demote the research into the realm of the pseudo-participatory, but it calls for honesty about my own limitations of time, and of capacity for convening in-depth involvement from others. On a deeper level, this reality underscores something about the limitedness of knowledge in general and the specific epistemological limitations carried within the inescapability of death, which brings me to several basic clarifications about how I am working with knowledge.

**Epistemology**

The epistemology informing my research carries several clustered assumptions about the situatedness of knowledge (especially in community) and the importance of learning through critical reflection on experience. Some have described this situatedness in axiological terms – in other words, knowledge as value-laden, as something inherently effected (not just affected) by power relations and by one’s de facto commitment to either defend or resist systems of injustice. Interestingly, framing my work in terms of action research sets the stage for not only parsing out knowledge in several ways as I will do below, but laying groundwork for the role of hope vis-à-vis the relationship between the world as it is and the world as it could be. In this regard, it is worth quoting Carr and Kemmis (1986) at some length:

Clearly, action research requires a different epistemology from positivist and interpretive approaches, both of which have difficulty relating retrospective explanation or understanding to prospective action. Positivistic research relies on a notion of prediction based on scientific laws established in past situations and expressed as controlled intervention, as its basis for informing future action. Interpretive research relies on a notion of practical judgment based on the understandings of the practitioner derived from the observation of previous situations. Action research involves both controlled intervention and practical judgment, but gives them both a limited place in the notion of the self-reflective spiral of action
research which is arranged as a *programme* of controlled intervention and practical judgment conducted by individuals and groups committed not only to understanding the world but to changing it (p. 186).

To underscore the significance of this point, not only does action research suggest a way of “relating retrospective explanation or understanding to prospective action”, but the cemetery context itself welcomes an added layer in which our knowledge of/through mortality – the “permanently retrospective” – can make it possible to configure bold, unbounded change-making plans *according to* the boundedness of prospective human action.

As I explored in the literature review, the overlapping of critical pedagogy and death education gives rise to unique theoretical and practical options for the cemetery classroom. So too does it constitute a unique epistemological project when we co-locate praxis and embodied learning, the noting of which (below) provides a natural segue to a recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of the research methodology overall.

**The Knowledge of Praxis**

From within the tradition of critical pedagogy, McLaren (2016) states that knowledge is never objective or neutral; rather, it is a social construction rooted in power relations:

> When critical theorists claim that knowledge is socially constructed, they mean that it is the product of agreement or consent between individuals who live out particular social relations (e.g. of class, race, and gender) and who live in particular junctures in time. To claim that knowledge is socially constructed usually means that the world we live in is constructed symbolically by the mind through social interaction with others and is heavily dependent on culture, context, custom, and historical specificity. There is no ideal, autonomous, pristine, or aboriginal world to which our social constructions necessarily correspond; there is always a referential field in which symbols are situated. And this particular referential field (e.g. language, culture, place, time) will influence how symbols generate meaning. There is no pure subjective insight. We do not stand *before* the social world; we live *in the midst of it* (p. 31).

There are several implications of viewing knowledge this way. One is that knowledge must be intimately related to how we are conscious of ourselves and our world, including how/whether we are conscious of ourselves as human subjects and how/whether we know
that our actions can make a difference in the world. Another is that the prospects for new knowledge often relate to our ability to ask questions. According to Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017), “questions represent possibilities and are integral to the process of understanding the worlds of participants’ lives and perspectives. They provide the occasion for the co-construction of knowledge. They offer the telling of stories rather than producing answers” (p. 15). And not that asking questions can be equated with posing problems, but Freire’s classic comparison between banking education and problem-posing education becomes a firm footing for not only pedagogy and learning but epistemological work as well: “Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 68). Especially when the pursuit of critical consciousness takes place in the context of a collective struggle for liberation, for freedom, or, notable in this research, for hope, how we know is inextricable to the subjectivity of the “we”. Furthermore, as I reviewed in the previous chapter, Freire explains that for the oppressed, pedagogy “is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization” (1970, p.33), and that breaking free from this dehumanization can be done only via praxis – namely, “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p.36).

So if we do not stand before the world but live in the midst of it, and if living in the midst of the world carries the possibility or even the necessity for changing the world, then knowledge must be situated in the dynamism of praxis. Otherwise the pedagogy of the deceased would be an intellectual exercise with no discernable real-world significance.

**The Knowledge of the Body**

My methodology includes the body, not just as an interesting sidebar but as part of the backbone (!) of everything from the conceptualizing, to the meeting with participants, to the generation and analysis of data. An embodied approach sees knowledge as being contained in and constructed by our whole body rather than just the rational mind. As well, through an interesting opportunity afforded by the English language, this embodied approach
suggests something of the community (the body) of knowers. We are body-selves who relate to one another, and we come to know things as we relate to each other as embodied people.

Notwithstanding the 21st-century explosion of research methodologies, this embodied approach might be deemed suspect for going well beyond subjectivist, constructivist, and postmodern approaches to an epistemology in which the acquisition of knowledge connects to material realities such as a runny nose, dirt under the fingernails, chronic pain, or the eventual cessation of brain function. In this present moment as I write, my scholarly knowledge production interrelates with my undeniable bodily experiences of being slightly too cold (even with a blanket around my shoulders and a hot drink at my side), enjoying the feel of a soft chair that tilts back just so, feeling a slight pain in my thumb where a band aid hides a recent cut, and having recently eaten supper. These embodied experiences affect/effect how I feel and think, and in one way or another they shape my present capacity for knowing, for explaining what I know, for strategizing in light of what I don’t know, and for learning from others’ knowledge, all of which are key research activities.

If we double-back on the Freirean literature reviewed in Chapter 2, we note that although Freire does not delve into the area of embodied learning, some of his writing provides an open, though complicated, invitation to make sense of the human body vis-à-vis critical pedagogy. He says that “[t]he importance of the body is indisputable; the body moves, acts, rememorizes the struggle for its liberation; the body, in sum, desires, points out, announces, protests, curves itself, rises, designs, and remakes the world” (1993, pp. 86-87). This becomes an epistemological claim insofar as “[i]t is my entire body that socially knows. I cannot, in the name of exactness and rigor, negate my body, my emotions and my feelings” (p. 105). Although none of this leads him into a systematic treatment of embodied learning, Freire makes it a priority to authenticate “a certain sensualism” about the body “even in connection with cognitive ability” and, therefore, “it’s absurd to separate the rigorous acts of knowing the world from the passionate ability to know” (1993; p.87). What kinds of insights might Freire have articulated about embodied learning if he would have done more writing in this vein? He seems insistent about naming the importance of the body in a substantive way: “We must dare,” Freire insists, “to say scientifically, and not as mere blah-blah-blah, that we study, we learn, we teach, we know with our entire body” (1998, p. 3). He states that “[i]t is the human body, young or old, fat or thin, of whatever colour, the conscious body, that looks
at the stars. It is the body that writes. It is the body that speaks. It is the body that fights. It is the body that loves and hates. It is the body that suffers. It is the body that dies. It is the body that lives!” (quoted in Freire and Macedo, 1989, p. 18). In terms of embodiment, Darder makes sense of Freire’s legacy in the following way:

The human body…constitutes a significant political terrain from which all emancipatory knowledge must emerge. Without the materiality of the body, our teaching and learning is reduced to a process of abstraction and fragmentation that attempts to falsely render knowledge a neutral and objective phenomenon, absent of history and ideology. Freire recognized that it is the body that provides us the medium for our existence as subjects of history and as politically empowered agents of change (2015; p.69).

As teachers and students enter into dialogue, their material bodies “become rightful allies in the formation and expression of collective consciousness” (p.66), and so “a political commitment to counter the disembodiment of our humanity is at the heart of Freire’s pedagogy of love” (p.70).

Accordingly, part of my methodological framework involves the need to supplement Freire with relevant insights of those working with embodied learning more broadly (Ollis, 2012; Wilcox, 2009; Wagner and Shahjahan, 2015). These supplementary insights help us to acknowledge the body as a site of knowledge production and, by extension, to account for how the mortality of the body impacts what can be known through the body. It might seem like a strange thing to draw attention to the fact that those involved in education will die someday, but it should be no more peculiar than finding significance in the gender, race, or class of those same people. As has been well-demonstrated by critical educators with a thoughtful sensitivity to feminism or race-based analysis, for example, there are always epistemological and pedagogical implications in social location. Though the implications may be very different, surely the same degree of thoroughness is in order when it comes to acknowledging the significance of mortality (and the awareness of mortality) within any pedagogical project.

Kastenbaum (2004) has pointed out that life can be best understood “with death left in” (p.19). In light of the growing literature in death education (and the limited though significant literature examining cemeteries) my methodological commitment is to foreground
the practical and theoretical implications of mortality, in this case vis-à-vis a pedagogy that is embodied and embodying (that is, community-building). Epistemologically, this is to say that the kinds of learning and teaching that take place in a cemetery do not consider death as incidental – as though dying is a regrettable interruption of what would otherwise have been the proper course of life – but, rather, as one among many defining aspects of human experience that hold significance in terms of what we know and how we can know it. This experience is carried in the body and should be researched in terms of the body. Here I concur with Ellingson (2017) who explains that “[m]apping the body requires keen attention to where researchers situate themselves, what their assumptions are about research practices, participants, and truths, all of which affect and are affected by researchers’ choice to pay explicit attention to issues of embodiment” (p. 36). Furthermore, assuming we proceed with this kind of mapping, we come to an epistemological approach in which we recognize that “[k]nowledge grounded in bodily sensations encompasses uncertainty, ambiguity, and messiness in everyday life; it is inherently and unapologetically subjective, celebrating – rather than glossing over – the complexities of knowledge production” (p. 156). In practical terms for this project that seeks to explore the “messiness in everyday life [with death left in]”, the embodied dimension leads to not only serving coffee and dessert in a cemetery, but also lying down in the grass between the headstones, and more.

**Strengths and Weaknesses**

There are strengths and weaknesses to the methodological approach described thus far. On the strength side, my methodology encourages an exploratory approach both practically and theoretically, and closely related is the relative flexibility and openness to adapt the project on the go, especially in the face of emergent and/or changing dynamics throughout the process. The qualitative approach along with the associated methods described below make for thick, textured, and substantive data; as a matter of fact, I consider it a great honour to be able to sift through an incredibly rich trove of insights, reflections, anecdotes, and creativity as expressed within the various data created by and with research participants. To name the strength in a slightly different way, choosing an action research methodology necessitates the involvement of others, and this is a benefit in itself for how the
experience and wisdom of the group can then naturally contribute to an understanding of community development.

Some of the weaknesses of this methodology are shadow sides of the strengths. For example, an exploratory process is good except for when it leads to indeterminacy or ambiguity, and this is compounded when one is tackling a concept like hope which is already difficult to manage within the social sciences. Likewise, me being a participant on some level also becomes a weakness in the sense that I end up having undue influence over the process and even the learnings from the process. Looking ahead to future prospects for cemetery-based research, a full-fledged community-based methodology would be an exciting way to ensure a different, collective ownership over the entire research process.

With respect to my overall methodology and the specific methods such as interviews and Cemetery Café meetings, those unfamiliar with qualitative research might wonder about the extent to which my research can be generalized. Mostly, this should be of no concern at this juncture because the supposed value of generalization is both methodologically and epistemologically debatable. Indeed, in a postmodern and post-truth era, I agree with Somekh (2006) who contends that “[i]f it is no longer possible to establish truths which are generalizable across contexts, it is no longer a disadvantage to have a methodology which always generates contextualized knowledge” (pp.27-28). In fact, such contextualized knowledge probably means a greater readiness to listen to challenges and to put forward a basis for action that is invitational and curious rather than strident, narrow, and/or domineering.

Nevertheless, although I believe that the lack of generalizability is not a methodological weakness, it feels important to flag generalizability as a foundational issue pertaining to social identity and political power. In the course of my research, mortality itself takes us into contested terrain where seemingly generalizable statements such as “Everybody is the same because everybody dies” seem to clash directly with individually- or culturally-bound statements such as “This is what death means to me” or “This is how the dead are revered in my culture”. Sorting through these issues will be part of my analytical work in light of the various datasets.

One other issue needs to be named here. In the academy, more and more people recognize the importance of Indigenizing knowledge through the proactive inclusion of First
Nations voices and the decolonization of the educational enterprise in general. In reference to the specific geographical context in which I did my research, Warrick (2012) explains how “Aboriginal presence in the Grand River valley spans 13,000 years. Although most of the stories of the ancestors have been lost or forgotten, physical portals to the ancient past lie buried beneath our feet in the form of archaeological sites, artefacts, and other remains. While artefacts do not speak, they do have stories to tell” (p. 170). My understanding of Indigenization would involve not just quoting from a book, but reaching out and learning from Indigenous people for whom the Grand River watershed is traditional territory. The absence of such work represents a shortcoming of my research thus far, which is why I make an analytical choice later in the dissertation to prioritize the theme of Indigenization as one of the concluding Courses of Action.

Research Design

My overall research design involves recruiting a small group of local community members into a series of participatory learning events in a cemetery, the purpose of which is to explore ways in which the cemetery can be a “classroom” for community development and hope. In accordance with the methodological approach described thus far, the research includes the following phases:

1. Recruitment – enrolling approximately 10 to 12 participants
2. One-to-one meetings – orientation and (semi-structured) opening interviews
3. Researcher preparation – preparing the means to collect and store data; devising and revising facilitation outline for the first group meeting
4. Launch of the Cemetery Café – bringing participants together into the cemetery; leading large-group discussions, embodied activities, reflective components, and world café-style brainstorming;
5. Individual homework – assigning optional homework assignments between meetings
6. Adaptation – revising facilitation outline for the next meeting based on unfolding dynamics and issues
7. One-to-one meetings – debriefing and (semi-structured) closing interviews
8. Transcription and dataset compilation – including data from interviews, flipchart data, photographic data, homework submissions, field notes
9. Analysis – in iterative fashion, making sense of datasets
10. Write-up – organizing all the research components and constructing a thesis document

In addition to summarizing these sequential phases of the research, I feel it is important to state that my research was designed to be welcoming in at least three senses: First, it was meant to welcome participants. The serving of coffee and dessert was not unimportant in this regard, but so too was the general posture of openness and respect I tried to exude throughout in my facilitation and in my correspondence with participants. Second, the design was meant to welcome emergent dynamics in the pedagogical process. For example, as I will describe below, various aspects of the cemetery classroom and the homework assignments meant that my plans sometimes needed to change in order to respond to themes emerging from group discussions. Third, the design was meant to welcome mortality, not in the sense of wanting anyone to die but in the sense of opening up awareness, attentiveness, appreciation for what mortality might have to say within the process.

I also followed up on ideas for action that came out of the research process. I suspected that some of this follow-up might involve collaboration with staff people in the Cemetery Services office of the city, and other follow-up might involve the prospect of forming a citizen’s group to advance cemetery-based community development projects. I communicated an invitation for people to become involved in a follow-up walking tour of the Mount Hope Cemetery and a follow-up meeting with cemetery staff. Although several people indicated interest in participating in such meetings, it only worked out for two people to join me for the walking tour, and one person was able to join me for a follow-up meeting with the Manager of Cemetery Services. It was within this meeting that an idea germinated: the initiation of a citizens’ group that could be called “Friends of Waterloo Cemeteries”.

Though it has already been signalled several times, it is important to reiterate that a key aspect of my research design was to take people into a cemetery for the interactive learning experience. In the most general sense, this design assumed that the cemetery is more
than just a cemetery. What is this *more*? In his alluringly-titled *How to Read a Graveyard*, Stanford (2013) frames the cemetery like this:

> However noteworthy we think we are now – to our families, in our careers, in the headlines, even – a graveyard teaches that such esteem is most unlikely to endure. If we went into cemeteries regularly, we’d be forced to pause and digest this basic lesson, a useful corrective to the look-at-me values that underpin so much of modern life and its aspirations. We would also be able to imagine the lichen on our own memorial, growing over the wording that recalls our best qualities, and picture the gravestone eroded at its edges by the weather, or worse tilting at a gravity-defying angle, or collapsed and propped against a wall somewhere at the back of the cemetery. On my daily circuits, I have started to find such sights comforting, the essential democracy of oblivion that levels out life’s triumphs and setbacks once our bodies are laid in the earth (pp. xv-xvi).

So why is the cemetery more than just a cemetery? Stanford speaks of “the essential democracy of oblivion”, and although that might sound gloomy, I think we misread him and, more importantly, we misread the cemetery if we overlook its profound welcome. That this welcome is for social justice as much as for decomposition is a key part of the cemetery being *more*.

Given that the cemetery is such a central aspect of the research design, it is important to clarify that I will be focusing on two particular cemeteries that would be considered to be conventional in the North American context only. Around the world there is a wide variety of cemetery practice, the consideration of which goes well beyond the scope of my research. Less obvious is the almost complete exclusion of cremation practices. Although conventional North American cemeteries often include cremation plots, much of the data here pertains to what is often termed “traditional burial” in which a human body – embalmed or not embalmed – is buried in the ground. Furthermore, I am mindful of the many cultural and religious traditions around the world that continue age-old funerary practices for which there is no need for anything like what we in Canada know as a cemetery. Again, the consideration of these traditions goes beyond the scope of my research except for the important fact that certain of these traditions are also practiced in Canada.
Recruitment

Recruitment for the project began at the end of September 2016 and consisted of several modes of communication: (1) A recruitment message (see Appendix A) was emailed to approximately sixty to eighty individuals in my personal and professional circles, accompanied by a request for people to re-send the message to individuals in their circles who they thought might be interested to participate. This recruitment notice indicated that the purpose of these meetings was to create “an opportunity for innovative learning, brainstorming, interactive activities, and community development, all while gathering with a small group of community members in a local Waterloo cemetery”. The message also included a link to an associated Facebook event page that contained the same information. In addition, I made a number of targeted contacts with individuals or groups who I thought would be particularly interested in the project because of the death/cemetery-related topic – for example, other hospice volunteer trainees I had met in hospice training, those who had been involved in a death-themed art exhibit, and former students from a lifelong learning class I taught on the topic of death and dying. Knowing that my contact list had specific limitations based on my social, cultural, and professional background, I contacted a number of individuals who I thought could distribute the invitation among a greater variety of people within the local community – for example, a representative from a local interfaith coalition, staff people at a local mosque and the local chapter of Muslim Social Services, and the coordinator of a multicultural centre. Finally, I sent the invitation to everyone who participated in the two exploratory cemetery-based events described in the beginning of this chapter.

To those who indicated initial interest in the invitation, I sent a follow-up message accompanied by an information letter (see Appendix B) that explained the project in greater detail, including a description of the proposed time commitment. All participants who confirmed their participation were then given a Consent Form (see Appendix C) that summarized the university ethics approval process and then asked for specific consent for the taking and publishing of photographs, and for the recording and transcribing of interviews. The Consent Form reiterated that the research was entirely voluntary and that consent could be withdrawn at any time.
Unfortunately, some people who were very enthused about the project explained that they could not become involved due to other commitments. In retrospect, this was particularly unfortunate because several of these people (whom I knew) would have contributed greater gender and cultural diversity to the group. Others of these people may or may not have contributed such diversity given that I had never met them and did not know their backgrounds.

During the recruitment phase, I was mindful of a regrettable aspect having to do with the seasonal timing. With autumn came dropping temperatures, leaves changing colour, and an approaching date – I was not sure exactly which date – after which meeting in a cemetery would be fairly impossible unless I planned to outfit each participant with a snowmobile suit. At the end of the day, it was not clear that waiting six months would have yielded a significantly different group of participants, but it certainly would have guaranteed that the meetings could have taken place outdoors in the spring and summer, risk of rain notwithstanding.

Once I met everyone at least once, I must admit feeling nervous about what seemed to be a startlingly homogeneous group – i.e. mostly white, middle-aged women. I wondered what went wrong with the recruitment. Two questions were paramount in my mind: How could we have rich conversations if the group consisted of mostly or all white people? And why on earth were there hardly any men wanting to participate? In fairness, there were several men who expressed interest but could not join due to other circumstances, but general interest seemed to be coming from many more women than men. Although I spent time worrying that my project would lack legitimacy because of the lack of diversity, I assumed that those present would be ready to participate in conversations about how privilege, power, justice, and mortality are connected. Furthermore, while acknowledging the important issues pertaining to the relative homogeneity of the group, I trusted that meaning and relevancy would have to emerge from a small group of people volunteering to “go to class” in a cemetery.

In terms of the demographics of those who chose to join the Cemetery Cafe, the following table (Figure 3.1) shows the self-reported identities of the eleven group members. Participants’ real names have been changed to pseudonyms, and these pseudonyms follow through the remainder of this document, including in the attribution of participant quotes:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Cultural/racial identity</th>
<th>Faith affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Pretty bland</td>
<td>Don’t really have a faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>No affiliation; Anglican by trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>Dabbled; previously United Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>No ties to religion; previously Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasper</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Mennonite-Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leona</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>woman</td>
<td>European</td>
<td>Mennonite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcy</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>woman</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Mennonite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marlys</td>
<td>mid-40s</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>British-Canadian</td>
<td>No faith affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosena</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>White Anglo-Saxon, German</td>
<td>Mennonite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tana</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>British-Irish-Scottish</td>
<td>Agnostic with a spiritual bent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thea</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Canadian-Irish</td>
<td>Collapsed Catholic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3.1 – Self-reported identities of group members.*

In the chapter that follows, various information in this table receives analytical attention especially vis-à-vis gender, age, and cultural/racial identity. (It should be acknowledged that the opening interview guide did not ask participants to identify themselves vis-à-vis additional aspects of social location such as sexual orientation and ability/disability.) For now, I will note that participants themselves felt compelled to “read the bodies” – i.e. to remark on the demographic make-up of the group usually by pointing out that most of the group consisted of white, middle-class, middle-aged women. Participants’ views on this will be further taken up in the analysis. My fieldnotes contain some of my own reading of the situation:

Through all of my years of schooling for example in which men's voices have dominated in the literatures I have studied and in which classroom dynamics have had some achingly male-dominated patterns, I felt honored and thankful that this group would be dominated by women. It was some kind of revolutionary upset of history! And especially thinking of the cemetery as a place where the sexist and patriarchal patterns of society have been literally etched in stone, it felt like an amazing breath of fresh air to think that a group of women would be holding sway and that women would be in the driver seat. On the other hand, I began to struggle with a sense of
embarrassment because how could it possibly be that a recruitment process could be seen as legitimate if all the members are homogeneous? (fieldnotes, November 5, 2016)

It should be noted that in addition to the eleven group members, a staffperson from City of Waterloo Cemetery Services agreed to be interviewed at the start of the project. Quotes from this person appear in the following pages under the name of Jim (also a pseudonym). He identifies himself as being fifty-seven years old, white, and of German-Irish background.

**Methods**

In terms of specific research methods, I chose several methods rather than a singular method because I wanted to welcome participants into several different yet complementary ways of engaging the themes, thereby creating overlapping and mutually-enriching datasets. The following subsections give brief explanations of the four methods: (1) conducting one-to-one interviews, (2) facilitating Cemetery Café meetings, (3) offering individual homework assignments, and (4) tracking my own reflexive work.

**Method 1: Interviews**

After assembling the list of participants and assigning pseudonyms, I invited each participant for an opening interview. I also conducted one key-informant interview with a staff person from the City of Waterloo Cemetery Services, as noted in the previous section. Interviews tended to be between forty and forty-five minutes each, and were semi-structured based on a list of guiding questions that participants received in advance (see Appendix D). Interview questions were intended to stimulate thoughts and reflections on a variety of themes, although the underlying trajectory was focused by the three core research questions as outlined earlier. Some questions were meant to prime participants to view the cemetery as a classroom, and to be prepared for something of the pedagogical work that was to come; likewise, hearing their preliminary answers helped me to clarify the pedagogical approach and to reflect on some of the underlying assumptions they expressed vis-à-vis the cemetery as a learning space.
During each interview I placed a small digital audio recorder on the table in front of the participant in order to record the conversation in entirety. After the last meeting of the Cemetery Cafe, I invited each participant for a closing interview, conducted in the same manner as described for the opening interview. Participants again received the guiding questions in advance (see Appendix F).

I transcribed these recordings using a computer keyboard and standard word processing software, and then I assembled the printed transcripts (166 single-spaced pages) into several three-ring binders. I describe this logistical process because of the notable way in which the data went through successive stages of *embodiment* within the one-to-one interview setting (nonverbal communication, speaking, listening, laughing, some shedding of tears in several instances), to *disembodiment* within the processes of audio-digitization and transcript-digitization (interviews becoming fully housed in solid-state computer disks), to *re-embodiment* within the process of assembling the printed transcripts into a binder that allows for reading and paging-through. I am particularly mindful of a few different moments when a participant began to cry as they spoke. When transcribing, although I chose to note “laughter” in a few cases when the humour seemed germane to that point of the interview, I could not find a satisfying way to retain the embodied experience of crying or tearing up within the black-and-white, straight lines of the interview transcript. While others have worked on this problem (e.g. Hammersley, 2010), it was not something I attempted to problem-solve in my research.

Taken as a whole, the character of both the opening and closing interviews is primarily exploratory and reflective. Even when asked to define certain terms such as community development, participants tended to adopt a probing approach that seemed to involve a presumed need to wonder and to “rummage around” much more than to arrive at a firm conclusion. I do not regard this approach as inherently good or bad, although I fully admit that it is along the lines of my own personality; therefore, my interviewing style may have skewed the data even more so in that direction.

As to the nature of the interview method itself within my particular methodological approach, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of what might seem like a simple conversation. Richards (2009) describes the issue very well: “An interview is both the most ordinary and the most extraordinary of ways you can explore someone else’s experience. It is
as ordinary as conversation, and as intrusive as a spy camera” (pp. 42-43). While working with this ordinary/extraordinary dynamic, my approach was to view the interviews as opportunities for engagement and exploration. I take the view of Holstein and Gubrium (2004) who see interviewing as “a social encounter in which knowledge is actively constructed” and in which “the interview is not so much a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but rather a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge” (p. 141). This is also in line with the knowledge of praxis as outlined earlier in this section, as well as with the co-creation of knowledge as outlined in the literature review. In interpreting and analyzing this data, my task was to “explicate how meanings, their linkages and horizons, are actively constituted within the interview environment” (p. 156), though the complexity of interpretation certainly calls for only very measured claims about the “truth” either of what is interpreted from what is said, or of what is said as such.

**Method 2: Cemetery Café**

The Cemetery Café meetings were somewhat along the lines of a focus group, although they included multiple forms of discussion and interaction. Four such meetings were configured to involve participants in a substantive though semi-participatory way. In advance of each group meeting, I devised and then facilitated the agenda; participants just had to show up, ready to participate in discussions and activities. Nevertheless, throughout the Cemetery Café, participants’ involvement was not trivial or inconsequential. Pedagogically, my approach to the group meetings was to prompt discussions, foster creativity and outside-of-the-box brainstorming, encourage individuals to share their questions and thoughts, and invite people to participate in the embodied activities. At least once or twice each meeting, I would spontaneously shift the agenda according to the interests (or energy levels) in the group, and I introduced the flipchart paper as a commonly-owned record of participant insights and questions that rose to the surface.

I intentionally chose City of Waterloo cemeteries for the Cemetery Café. There are other cemeteries in the Region of Waterloo including churchyard cemeteries and private cemeteries, but the following two principles pointed toward meeting in publicly-owned space: (1) given the prominence I was giving to the community development theme, a public
cemetery seemed to be much more appropriate in terms of expanding and democratizing the possible meanings of community; and (2) given the action research dimension of my research, the breadth of options for community-based initiatives seemed much greater in a public space rather than a private space. On another level, the two city-owned cemeteries carry added personal significance for me because I have ancestors buried in both cemeteries, and the Mount Hope Cemetery is located close to the neighbourhood where I live and therefore, in a sense, it feels like my community’s cemetery. (For the record, the place in Mount Hope Cemetery where the Cemetery Café met was not close to the area where any of my ancestors are buried. This is important to say because my facilitation might have been different if our meetings had taken place on top of or near their graves. Also, the fact that their graves are memorialized with “conventional” headstones speaks to me about my middle-class upbringing as compared to that of the people who were interred in the same cemetery but in unmarked graves.)

With community development in mind, I communicated with City staff in advance in the hopes that they would support and perhaps even participate in the Cemetery Café meetings. They were generally very supportive, although they made sure I understood and agreed to some basic parameters such as that Cemetery Café events could be relocated or postponed if a burial was scheduled for that time, and that the respectful decorum of the cemetery would not be disturbed.

The times and locations for the four Cemetery Café meetings were as follows:

1. Late October – Outside, in the middle of Mount Hope Cemetery (cemetery owned by the City of Waterloo)
2. Late November – Inside the chapel of Parkview Cemetery (cemetery owned by the City of Waterloo)
3. Mid-January – Inside the Button Factory (community arts centre owned by the City of Waterloo)
4. Late April – Inside the Adult Recreation Centre (multi-purpose community centre owned by the City of Waterloo)

While the first two meetings took place in the two city-owned cemeteries, the onset of winter meant that the final two meetings needed to be held in other city-owned facilities and, therefore, I devised creative ways of maintaining a consistent “cemetery mindset” even while
meeting in other spaces. I felt it was important to create consistency in several additional respects. I wanted participants to be able to walk into a uniquely hospitable space.

Partly as a nod to the “death café” movement (Fong, 2017; Miles and Corr, 2017), partly because I enjoy the small, simple rituals of hosting people, and partly because of my assumption that the cemetery space would need an added element of comfort in order to make the meetings successful, I decided that all the meetings would feature café-like table settings, hot beverages, and snacks such as homemade baked goods, fruit, crackers, or squares of dark chocolate. From a utilitarian standpoint, it might not have been necessary to bring along folding tables, cover them with colourful tablecloths, and serve baked goods on ceramic plates rather than paper plates. Before the first meeting, I did not have to ask each participant about their preference for tea or coffee, tuna salad or egg salad sandwiches. Nor was it necessary to provide cloth napkins. However, these hosting efforts felt important as a way of creating a welcoming and cozy atmosphere, as a way of encouraging embodied learning, and as a signal that the Cemetery Café was worthy of some fuss. Yet the issue of comfort was complex. On the one hand, participants very much appreciated the tables, the snacks, the cloth napkins, as well as the extra blankets for keeping warm. On the other hand, more than one participant later remarked about the irony of trying to make the cemetery into a comfortable place. Instead of pretending that the cemetery was a cozy and pleasant place, would it not be better to face the discomfort, the cold ground, the graves, the reality of our mortality?

The Cemetery Café included pedagogical strategies that would be standard fare for many adult educators: the circle of chairs to cultivate a learning community, the flipchart easel for recording the thoughts and input from the group, and the instructor or facilitator making an effort to carry out the work of education while being on the same level as participants – in this case, literally sitting on the same level. In line with another important theme in adult education, the meetings also included several experiential and interactive components including small-group conversations, personal storytelling, brainstorming, problem-posing discussions, and embodied learning activities.

Three aspects of the Cemetery Café must be noted in terms of the associated datasets. First, as much as was practical, various activities were recorded with a digital camera. Participants had been alerted to this as part of the opening interview and in the signing of the
Consent Form. At the first meeting of the Cemetery Café, I asked a friend to take a variety of photos from different angles, and I took some photos during the lying-down activity. For the following three Cemetery Café meetings, I took all the photos. Photos were stored electronically. As I added photos to this dissertation, I made the following alterations: (1) based on a participant’s request, cropping that specific participant’s face out of any photos; (2) based on a request from Cemetery Services staff people, blurring any surnames or other defining features that were visible on headstones; and (3) based on the perceived value of visual clarity, increasing the contrast and brightness of several photos.

The photographs communicate important contextual factors – for example, the Cemetery Café setting being simultaneously comfortable (tea, snacks, tablecloths, etc.) and uncomfortable (cold temperatures requiring participants to wear winter coats and toques). Of course, photography can be done well or poorly, and photographs can be interpreted well or poorly. My general analytical approach to the photographs was interpretive-integrative wherein I tried to understand the data held within or “behind” the photo. Emmison (2004) talks about how photographs have been misunderstood as constituting forms of data in their own right when in fact they should be considered...as means of preserving, storing or representing information. In this sense photographs should be seen as analogous to code-sheets, the responses to interview schedules, ethnographic field notes, tape recordings of verbal interaction or any one of the numerous ways in which the social researchers seek to capture data for subsequent analysis and investigation (p. 251).

Secondly, each of the four meetings had a “world café” component, or variation thereof. By placing large sheets of flipchart paper on the tables and laying out dry-erase markers, participants could create a collaborative record of their conversation including words, paragraphs, doodles, questions, and brainstorming. Since they were physically large enough to feel accessible to three or four people simultaneously, these flipchart papers then became shared spaces in which each person was able to contribute. Topics were provided, and sometimes the table groups stayed the same and sometimes the groups switched around, always with one person staying at the table to explain where the previous conversation had gone. Several times, the Cemetery Café included time for participants to gather around these flipchart papers in order to discuss concepts like hope, respond to ideas about the connections
between mortality and social justice, and brainstorm options for community development. Some areas of the papers are covered with single words or short phrases, other areas include full sentences, and there are also some pictures and diagrams. Given the interactive nature of the conversations and the accumulation of thought written or depicted on the flipchart papers, these papers themselves prompted clarifications, reiterations, and sometimes disagreements about various ideas. The papers took on an added effect because, after each meeting, I scanned and consolidated them into a single PDF document that I sent to all the participants for consideration between meetings. 

Thirdly, each meeting included an embodied learning activity. For example, during the first Cemetery Café meeting, participants lay down on the grass in between the gravestones. The purpose of this activity was to invite participants to experience the cemetery in a full-bodied way that had obvious allusions to the reality of human bodies buried under the ground. In light of embodied learning theory and the prospects for experiential learning, my hope was that the lying-down activity would prompt more personal or more visceral reflections in the ensuing discussions. In another meeting, participants were paired up for a discussion about social justice, but their discussion was intentionally disrupted by an activity that involved one person lying on the floor, as though dead, and then being covered from head to foot with a length of fabric. The purpose was to create an embodied experience that would prompt additional layers of reflection. Yet another embodied activity was a “hand-hope” exercise involved individuals tracing their hand on a sheet of paper and then using this paper as the basis for a reflective activity on the topic of hope. All such activities were repeatedly identified as optional.

**Method 3: Homework**

In between the meetings of the Cemetery Café, participants were given optional homework assignments. The purpose of these assignments was to supplement the group work of the Cemetery Café with individual work that could be completed according to each individual’s preferential pace. Submissions usually came in the form of word-processed documents sent to me via email, all of which were compiled into a single document that was sent to all participants as soon as it was possible to do so. The first homework assignment
asked participants to share their ideas for the installation of a temporary or permanent cemetery sign that would nurture community development and/or hope. The second assignment started with an acknowledgement that the Cemetery Café meetings were based on various ways to “bring the people to the cemetery”. Participants were then asked to share written or visual ideas for what it would look like to go the other way around – to bring the cemetery experience to the people. The third assignment challenged participants to devise either a top-ten list of reasons why the local community benefits from the presence of Mount Hope Cemetery, or a top-ten list of reasons why the local community benefits from the fact that people are mortal. In each case, participants were instructed to not include their real names because they knew that submissions would be scanned and compiled into a document that could be shared with the group as well as included in this thesis. Since participants knew that their homework would be seen by others, at least anonymously, we might wonder how that affected what each person chose to submit.

Method 4: Researcher Reflexivity

Preissle and deMarrais (2015) define reflexivity as “the practice of studying and documenting the researcher within the research: studying ourselves as we study our topics, participants, and settings” (p. 190). In accordance with this reflexive approach, I wrote personal field notes based on my personal-scholarly experience throughout the research project. These personal field notes were meant as a container for a wide variety of things from logistical problem-solving to abstract theorizing, from methodological clarifications to poems, and from emotional venting to journalistic reporting of my relationship with participants. I wrote all of these reflexive field notes using standard word processing software, with the exception of miscellaneous doodling, diagram-drawing, and concept mapping for which I used pens or pencils and a notebook filled with lined paper.

In addition to being a retrospective record of my research process, these field notes also contributed to the action research methodology in terms of reflecting, interrogating, encouraging, and questioning my choices as a researcher and, more importantly for the Cemetery Café, my choices as a facilitator. I elaborate on this aspect of reflexivity in the “Researcher identity” section later in this chapter. Throughout the project, as much I found
this reflexive work to be an important way to interrogate my own process, I am mindful of what this reflexivity could not accomplish. While being a strong proponent of reflexive research practices, Pillow (2010) concedes that “entrenched, hegemonic social categories, such as gender and race, may remain untransformed by reflexivity. We each reach the limits of our own reflexivities, our own reflexive abilities and understandings; we can push these limits by reading, by sharing and talking with others, but reflexivity does not fix the dangers of qualitative research” (p. 279). This kind of recognition generates a unique tension within my project because, on the one hand, I am exploring the theme of human limitation (ironically, even in our human efforts toward freedom) as raised in the cemetery context, while on the other hand I am trying to integrate what I see as a particularly good ruthlessness on the part of critical pedagogy to keep troubling, insisting, questioning, and hoping.

**Quality, Trustworthiness, and Validity of Research**

In a time when everything from TV programming to carpet to political punditry to breaded chicken fingers can earn the right to be called “high-quality” or even “superior quality”, how does social science research go about earning such titles? By way of assessing the quality of qualitative projects, researchers talk about validity, trustworthiness, reliability, credibility, plausibility, adequacy, authenticity, goodness, transferability, and many others. One might be tempted to go the way of Ball (1985) who, when trying to make sense of differing conceptions of quality within the field of higher education, entitled one of his essays, “What the hell is quality?” I prefer to move ahead with a straightforward, constructive approach that leans heavily toward trustworthiness rather than validity. I share the concern expressed by qualitative researchers (e.g. Kvale, 1995; Lewis and Ritchie, 2003; Hays and Singh, 2012) for whom pursuing validity should not amount to straying into the realm of positivism, thereby making it problematic or even impossible to work toward the epistemological goals of interpretive or constructivist paradigms.

Rather than working to ensure “precision” or “correctness” of research results, I agree with qualitative researchers who define validity in terms of the pursuit of trustworthiness, in part because trust involves a relationship, in this case between researcher and reader. Along these lines, Hays and Singh (2012) talk about “the truthfulness of your findings and
conclusions based on maximum opportunity to hear participant voices in a particular context” (p. 192). I also resonate with those who, while still referring to validity, give full recognition to the complexity of the research process especially vis-à-vis research participants – for example, Ravitch and Carl (2016) encourage research that places primacy “not simply on the specific validity concepts or procedures used to attempt to achieve it but also on doing justice to the complexity of research participants’ experiences and thoroughly contextualizing their lives, perspectives, and experiences in ways that help to present the most complex and therefore valid renderings possible” (p. 187). Accordingly, they make a case for “an active and iterative process of achieving research rigor that relies on you, as the researcher, to make reasoned and grounded decisions that faithfully attend to the complexity of participants’ experiences” (p. 211).

My specific research design works toward this kind of trustworthiness in five ways: (1) *Triangulation* – using several methods and generating several kinds of datasets amounts to a kind of triangulation, although this in itself does not guarantee much of anything since even triangulated datasets need to be interpreted and analyzed before they can be regarded as valid or trustworthy. (2) *Member-checking* – my approach to member-checking is another example of the semi-participatory nature of the project in the sense that participants had opportunities to see each other’s homework, to comment on the various learning activities, and to raise questions and ideas based on the progression of material from meeting to meeting in order to test the “goodness of fit”, but they were not involved in the analysis of data I undertook following the last meeting of the Cemetery Café. (3) *Prolonged engagement* – the Cemetery Café portion of the project spanned almost seven months which, although not a longitudinal study by any means, meant that participants were interacting with each other, with the cemeteries, with relevant death-related materials, and/or with me as facilitator for a period of time long enough to build rapport and trust. (4) *Theory development* – especially with respect to innovative theory development in the unexamined overlap between critical pedagogy and death education, I was able to plan, think, and facilitate theoretically (and to share some of this with participants over the course of the project), and to “inch toward” some of the analytical work that is now represented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. (5) *Planning for action* – in accordance with the action research methodology, each of the Cemetery Café meetings featured at least one action-planning component in which participants could
brainstorm and/or evaluate previously-brainstormed ideas for cemetery-based community development projects. Additionally, after the final meeting, participants were given an opportunity to join a follow-up meeting with City of Waterloo staff in order to discuss plans for cemetery engagement activities. The reason for mentioning this in relation to trustworthiness is that the integrity of the action research process was intimately tied to participants’ ability (or readiness) to contribute into a praxis cycle. To varying degrees for each participant, this aspect of the process represents a very modest form of Lather’s concept of “catalytic validity” which represents “the degree to which the research process re-orient, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (1991, p. 68) and, thus, corresponds to a specific reworking of validity that Lather herself ties to the conscientizing tradition of Freire (ibid.).

**Analytical Approach**

I begin this section with a theoretical framework, and then I will describe my analytical approach in somewhat more practical terms. One of Paulo Freire’s most well-known phrases describes the task of *reading the word and reading the world*. “Reading the world always precedes reading the word,” explains Freire (quoted in Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 35), “and reading the word implies continually reading the world.” Although some of his writings express this idea “just” in relation to the process of literacy, Freire makes it clear that this reading is anything but a passive, one-way operation of looking at or studying objective materials that are “out there” available to be read. Rather, “reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work” (ibid.). Elsewhere he points out that we must find the constitutive elements of the word: “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (1970, p. 75).

Utilizing this Freirean insight to situate my analytical approach accomplishes two things: Firstly, in light of how neither the word nor the world can be apprehended in isolation, we gain an appreciation for the inextricable link between the context per se and the
interpretive framework by which we come to know the context. Secondly, in light of the tangled relationship between reading and writing the word/world, we gain an appreciation for the agency of those who put themselves into dynamic and generative relationship with the context. To be clear: Freire makes it abundantly clear not only that the word cannot speak for itself apart from those who read/write the word, but also that the word cannot be discovered or understood apart from a dynamic interaction with (and transformation of) the world in which the word exists.

This carries an important implication for researching the pedagogy of the deceased insofar as the “output” of the various aforementioned methods cannot be simply presented as if to say, “Here is the word as the participants discovered it…” or “Behold the world as it became known to the researcher…”. Not only is the research unable to speak for itself, but also, since those involved are implicated in the research so thoroughly (through agency, voice, interpretation, embodiment, and political commitment stated or unstated), the rendering and interpreting of the research must acknowledge something of the dynamic relationship between the data and the subjective involvement of those who generated the data. In parallel fashion to the reading of the word/world, we need to read the bodies of research participants (who themselves became readers of bodies) while at the same time reading the scattered ashes or buried bodies of those who were memorialized in the cemetery (and their headstones, their lack of headstones, and so on), knowing that the capacity to read any of these bodies is intimately tied to and limited by the common human reality of being a body.

To return briefly to Freire, the point here is about how to understand data within a problem-posing pedagogy. For Freire, the way in which we are conscious of reality is connected to the way in which we divulge or uncover reality: “Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 68). Furthermore, and in consonance with this problem-posing education, a critical approach to this constant unveiling of reality in order to change reality must attend to issues of power, which is why my analytical work will feature what for critical-sociocultural learning theory is a rudimentary insight about how “[p]ower is made visible in the ways
social relations between people enable some forms of agency, and constrain others” (Esmonde, 2017, p. 21). More particularly within my community-based and community-aspirational pedagogy, my analysis will need to attend to contextual examples of how “communities commonly place constraints on who is allowed to participate, and in which ways” (ibid.). Whether or not the pedagogy of the deceased can unveil such constraints remains to be seen, especially given the fact that participation itself is vexed by an apparent indeterminacy between the agency of the living and the agency of the dead.

More practically, following the main sequence of research from opening interviews to Cemetery Café meetings to closing interviews, I compiled all the datasets – interview transcripts, flipchart notes, photographs, homework data, my own field notes – and proceeded into the analysis phase using integrative-interpretative approach, building from the core themes identified within the Freirean, embodied learning and death education literatures. After reviewing and becoming familiar with all the materials, I generated initial codes by handwriting words and phrases on the hard copies. I reviewed these codes several times in order to begin the process of identifying common themes. Some of the themes clearly reflected the themes I had brought up in the opening interviews and in the first group meeting when the project was launched, while others were themes that had been created or modified by the group over the course of the research.

In accordance with the integrative-interpretive approach (exemplified by the work of Ravitch and Carl, 2016), my aspirational task throughout was to analyze in a way “that iteratively integrates within and across design, data collection, data analysis, and theoretical framework building throughout the various stages and activities of [the] research project” (p. 223). Furthermore, this integrative approach requires “engaging a specific kind of criticality” whereby the researcher

1. keeps a focus on the integration of formative data analysis into the research process to ongoingly shape data collection;
2. integrates across the various data sources to see connections, disjunctures, and opportunities for further exploration and inquiry (sometimes referred to as analytic triangulation);
3. engages with related theory in formative and inductive ways that challenge thinking and help conceptualize what is happening in the data;
4. engages in reflexive and collaborative processes that challenge interpretations and analytical procedures;
5. understands that the overall framing of and approach to the data analysis process is intentional and systematic as well as creative and emergent; and
6. uses the ever-emerging conceptual framework as a guide and ballast for data analysis processes and emerging interpretations of the data so that integrative connections can be made between the research questions, the goals of the study, the context(s) that shape the study, the data, relevant formal theory, researcher identity and positionality, and study methodology (223).

These six points amply indicate not only “a specific kind of criticality” but also an exciting thoroughness. Here I acknowledge that, given my semi-participatory approach as outlined earlier, there was only a partial fulfillment of the “ongoingly [shaping of] data collection” as noted in the first point, and only a partial fulfillment of the collaborative process as noted in the fourth point. Nevertheless, insofar as the partial can still point toward the full, my analytical work in these instances will identify options and ideas for future research.

To further clarify this integrative approach, it is worth noting Ravitch and Carl’s five assumptions vis-à-vis data analysis. First, the assumption is that data analysis is iterative and recursive, meaning that analysis begins when the first piece of data is collected, and that subsequent analyses build on and inform those previous. This means that the various phases of analysis become “emergent and responsive to what you are learning in real time” (2016, p. 224). This leads to the second assumption which is that analysis should be both formative and summative – in other words, in addition to making sense of data after they have been collected, analysis should involve “understanding and engaging in multiple analytic processes, including conceptualizing the ways that data analysis should drive the refinement of research questions and data collection instruments” (p. 225). Third, Ravitch and Carl talk about the need for “data and theory triangulation” in which the process of juxtaposing data for tensions, confirmations, and groundings is accompanied by the juxtaposition of multiple theoretical perspectives for tensions, confirmations, and groundings (p. 226). On the data side, rather than analyzing data chronologically, for example, the task is to “consider and organize analysis of the data in ways that help to view it from various analytic angles” (p. 227). Simultaneously, by way of honouring the “back and forth between theory and data”, theoretical triangulation involves “[s]ituating your analysis within theoretical components that you speak into and [that] help to illuminate different aspects of your data”, thereby creating “analytically complex and robust findings” (pp. 228-229). Fourth, in recognition of
how interpreting someone else’s reality and telling their story involves an inherent power asymmetry, the analysis must include recognizing and addressing power differentials. This involves strategies such as being transparent about one’s own interpretations and assumptions, including raw data when possible, including participant validation when possible, and acknowledging limitations throughout (pp. 229-230). Fifth, analysis should involve seeking out alternative perspectives throughout the process: “you should actively seek out people who will challenge you in a variety of ways, including specifically challenging your assumptions, biases, preconceived notions, and how each and all of these shape the ways that you think about the data and the people in your study” (p. 231).

**Researcher Identity**

We don’t see things as they are. We see them as we are.

– Anaïs Nin

In the context of a qualitative action research project, this quote by Anaïs Nin can helpfully provoke several questions about researcher identity. If we cannot see things as they really are, what are we actually able to report vis-à-vis the “things” of the research, and how does the identity of the researcher affect this reporting? Does it make sense for a researcher to say, “We see things as we are” even when that researcher holds significant power over the process of choosing what and how to see things? And in relation to action research in particular, does it make a difference if our efforts to see are interconnected with our efforts to make change and, again, what kind of power does the researcher hold when it comes to prioritizing various change-making options? Recalling Visser’s observation (from Chapter 1) that “there is a tension between transparency and navel-gazing within reflexive accounts of research” (2017, p. 12), I include the following brief thoughts on my researcher identity as an effort toward transparency.

In the introduction I noted the fact that I am a white, male, middle-class mortal, and these various aspects of my identity matter in terms of how I experience the world and how I am experienced by others. I also gave a cursory acknowledgement that in my formative years – a key part of my cultural background – most everything I knew about death revolved around church-based funerals and in-earth burials at a cemetery. I have since learned about
the diversity of cultural traditions around death rituals and, through aligning with feminism and being involved in anti-racism work, I have been changed as a result of noticing my privileges and participating in social justice and peacebuilding work. Nevertheless, as much as I might feel like being “in the know” about cultural diversity and anti-oppressive work will make me open, helpful, and energizing as a teacher and as a leader, in no way have I miraculously transcended my identity, my view of myself, or my view of the world. I bear in mind what McLaren (1997) says about the fact that “[a]n individual cannot say he or she has achieved critical pedagogy if he or she stops struggling to attain it. Only sincere discontent and dissatisfaction with the limited effort we exercise in the name of social justice can assure us that we really have the faith in a dialogical commitment to others and otherness” (p. 13). I take this as yet another good reason for the reflexive work of grabbing myself by the collar, turning on a bright light, and grappling with how my identity influences the choices I make within the research process.

Based on my awareness of diverse cultural traditions around the meaning of death and the practice of memorialization, I knew that my decision to focus on cemeteries would have the effect of both attracting and driving away prospective participants. As well, knowing how some cemeteries make significant efforts to welcome the diversity of cultural traditions, and truly believing that cemeteries can be reinvented, my assumption was that cemeteries could (and should) be seen aspirationally, as places that can encompass much more diversity of tradition, practice, and belief than has often been the case. Both in the opening interviews with participants and in the opening meeting of the Cemetery Café, I clarified that the project would focus almost exclusively on the cemetery context; and there were several occasions throughout the subsequent meetings when we acknowledged that there are many different cultural, religious, and/or philosophical traditions in the world when it comes to death, memorialization, and mourning. I assumed that through the duration of the researching and writing up of the research, we (participants, readers, and I) could carry on with a presumed (i.e. tacit) sidebar acknowledgement along the lines of “...there are contexts other than a cemetery where we could engage these issues and experiences having to do with mortality, of course, but this particular project is focusing on the cemetery....” However, my presumed sidebar acknowledgement probably reflects the essence of Anaïs Nin’s quote in that I was seeing the cemetery as a welcoming and aspirational site (and I was assuming
others would see it similarly) even though for some people it was probably a site marked by specific, off-putting cultural expectations.

All of this became even more pertinent due to my action research methodology and my desire to be a participant/learner at some level within the research, rather than only a facilitator. I struggle with this because as much as there were times when we succeeded in creating dialogue together, thereby making it feel like a truly collective exploration, participants most often looked to me for direction and clarification. I found myself wondering how the whole process would have been different if at the start of the project the facilitator briefly acknowledged her Muslim perspective (instead of me briefly acknowledging my Christian perspective), or if he occasionally described traditional funeral and mourning customs based on his experience as a Vietnamese-Canadian, or if she selected a different meeting location in the cemetery based on what was easiest for her to access with her wheelchair. Of course, this is not to say that I had nothing to share. I, too, have a different perspective based on my experience as a white, male, middle-class mortal, but did I make this perspective explicit within my facilitation or did I effectively treat it as normative or universal and, therefore, not worth mentioning? As I grapple with this question, I think about how choices I made as facilitator (and now as author) had the effect of welcoming or foreclosing precisely the kind of consciousness-raising that I identified in the literature review as being an integral part of the framework for this project. Thus, when it comes to reflecting on my own identity as a researcher, that which Anaïs Nin articulates in a pithy way might be usefully expanded through the following passage about reflexivity as articulated by Mullaly and West (2018):

Reflexive knowledge is knowledge about our location within the social order – that is, the forms and sources of our positions of both domination privilege and oppression – and how we may exercise power in our professional and personal lives to either reproduce or resist social features that limit others’ agency. It is also knowledge about the source and substance of our social beliefs, attitudes, and values. Such understanding may help us to free ourselves from self-imposed constraints derived from the massive legitimating power of the dominant ideology (p. 369).

I will write about this reflexive knowledge several times in the analytical work of Chapters 4, 5, and 6, and I will revisit the matter again in the Conclusion. What makes this issue doubly important is the third core research question which insinuates that something about mortality
itself – and perhaps the cemetery itself – might have some bearing on the fostering of critically-aware, reflexive consciousness.

Conclusion

Freire insisted on “[n]ot a reading of the word alone, nor a reading only of the world, but both together, in dialectical solidarity” (1994, p. 105). In multiple ways throughout this project, participants were invited to “write” or contribute something based on their reading of the cemetery, and my task is now to read their reading and writing. This might seem to flirt unnecessarily with a kind of poetic yet frustrating indeterminacy, but my goal is to engage the data through a Freirean approach as I have understood and adapted it. In his advocacy for a specific process of literacy that carried a simultaneous drive toward human liberation, Freire insisted that this process involves “a ‘reading of the world’ that enables its subject or agent to decipher, more and more critically, the ‘limit situation’ or situations beyond which they find only ‘untested feasibility’” (ibid.). In the analytical chapters that follow, I will offer an interpretive way of deciphering and integrating the various datasets pertaining to the participants, the classroom, and the consciousness associated with the pedagogy of the deceased, with a view to identifying what might lie beyond, untested.

Prompted by each core research question in turn, and with an eye to the integrative task described above, I work through the data using the analytical tools as identified at the end of the literature review: (1) humanizing praxis, (2) death-inclusionary praxis, and (3) the dialectics of liberation-limitation. In several cases, I conclude that additional or different kinds of data are required in order to carry the analysis forward in a satisfying way.

Although I now take it for granted that people agreed to participate in something called a Cemetery Café, I want to acknowledge my fear that people would not actually show up in the cemetery, either because of the unusual nature of the project or because the end of October can feature uninviting weather. The following excerpt from my field notes along with the photograph taken at the first meeting of the Cemetery Café (Figure 3.2 below) become the segue as I turn from designing the research to entering into the research:
It was a cold evening – cold enough that people needed to wear mitts, winter hats and winter coats. I brought along a basket of blankets and they were all used by the end of the evening. People placed the blankets on their laps and huddled with their arms wrapped around themselves. At the same time, it was a beautiful evening. The cold temperature did not seem to sway people from coming nor, at some deeper level, did it sway them from a pretty obvious sense of curiosity and gratitude to be invited into this place. I had set up three tables for the group members plus a table with the food and drinks. I had the flipchart at one side. After tablecloths and candles had been put on all the tables, it really did have the appearance of a cute, if not eccentric, outdoor café. As people arrived, I welcomed them warmly, and I invited them to help themselves to the sandwiches and coffee and tea. Although I am an introvert, I can also be quite gregarious and outgoing in some situations, and so here I found myself being a friendly and service-oriented host, and I became increasingly filled with gratitude at the fact that people actually showed up (fieldnotes, November 5, 2016).

Figure 3.2 – The first meeting of the Cemetery Café, October 2016.
Chapter 4
THE PARTICIPANTS

Learning to Build and to Bury Community

In the previous chapter I summarized how my research methods generated a variety of datasets including those stimulated by one-to-one interviews, group activities in the Cemetery Café meetings, homework assignments between Cemetery Café meetings, and personal fieldnotes. In accordance with an integrative approach to data analysis exemplified by the work of Ravitch and Carl (2016) my aspirational task is to make sense of the data in a way “that iteratively integrates within and across design, data collection, data analysis, and theoretical framework building throughout the various stages and activities of [the] research project” (p. 223). Furthermore, this integrative approach requires “engaging a specific kind of criticality” whereby the researcher, among other things, looks for “connections, disjunctures, and opportunities for further exploration” and “engages in reflexive and collaborative processes that challenge interpretations and analytical procedures” (ibid.).

As noted in the methodology chapter, a fundamental part of my approach is a presumed renovation of both adult education praxis and community development praxis to include not only a theoretical recognition of death and mortality, but a quite tangible integration with respect to death-related practices, customs, and procedures. This approach continues to guide me into the analysis phase, which is why this chapter title points to the actions of learning and community-building along with what might seem like the incongruous action of burying the community. This is meant to reiterate the non-negotiability of death in relation to even such things as community-building, which is to say that we cannot build and build and build community without regularly and literally burying (or burning) members of the community. By this I do not intend to convey anything sinister or irreverent. To the contrary, acknowledging all the added layers of meaning in light of diverse religious and spiritual beliefs about death, the processes of community-building and community-burying are mutually strengthening. Both processes reflect the many exquisite colours of humanity and, in turn, deep within this reflection glints a difficult truth about not just leaving death in, as though by toleration, but learning to identify and even “leverage” the specific ways in which death contributes to life.
The first core research question focuses attention on the participants by inquiring about who gets to be involved in the pedagogy of the deceased. The question also implies an opportunity for those who could become involved in the pedagogy of the deceased. On the very surface, one might think of two perfunctory answers to the question. On the one hand, “It’s obvious – everyone participates.” This approach considers the question to be a non-starter because death is the eventual, common fate for everyone and, moreover, everyone participates in conversations about death or has experiences relating to the death of family members or friends, and these inevitable conversations or experiences already constitute an informal pedagogy of the deceased. On the other hand, “Who gets to participate in being deceased? Who would want to participate in that?” This is an expression of indignation at the inference that death is something good that we are allowed to experience. No, death is something to abhor.

Based on the research, I believe that this core research question is getting at something more thoroughgoing and also more unexamined than “just” the fact that all of us will die. I believe that the question both points us toward a deep reconsideration of who we are as human beings and summons us toward an enriched, politically-relevant sense of what it means to actively participate in the collective passage of life and death. Accordingly, in this chapter I work with several datasets in order to analyze the who of the pedagogy of the deceased. I consider the extent to which this pedagogy, as much as it is fully inclusive, does not encompass generic, unspecified people, but rather people qua mortals – that is, mortalized people. Moreover, I look at how this pedagogy involves a distinctive kind of participation marked by action that is as humanizing and liberating as it is mortalizing.

¡Presente!

Pertaining to the research not being content with generic, unspecified people, it is important to acknowledge the make-up of the research group itself, to shine a bright light on who is present and who is not present, and then to ask how this bears on the first research question about the who of the pedagogy of the deceased. As noted in the methodology chapter, the demographics consisted of an all-white and nearly all-female group; indeed, for three of the meetings, it was fully all-female and all-white. Should we then answer this first
core research question by saying that there was something about the pedagogy of the deceased, as advertised, that seemed particularly appealing to white women? Or that there was something about the recruitment process that actively dissuaded others from joining? Although a number of men expressed interest during the recruitment phase, most told me that they could not join because of other commitments, and my efforts to extend the recruitment invitation into the vast cultural diversity of the city appeared to fail completely. Of course, we could reflect on a different conclusion regarding the homogeneity of the group by naming it a confirmation or verification of some of the culturally-specific norms, beliefs, and practices in relation to North American cemeteries (i.e. the process succeeded in recruiting some of those specific people for whom the cemetery is an important place). However, even with this view, further research could clarify how to optimize the recruitment process in order to appeal to a greater diversity of people for whom, based on their cultural and/or religious traditions, cemeteries are important places.

The participants themselves reacted variously to the homogeneity of the group. In surmising why the group was dominated by women, Tana reflects that “this is probably a serious generality, but I find that men are less comfortable with the subject of discussing death because it is so emotionally loaded” (Tana, closing interview). April sums up the situation by saying “we were too homogeneous…just too many white women with money” (April, closing interview). Rosena adopts a posture of acceptance: “We knew that that’s how it was going to be, so you just go with that” (Rosena, closing interview). Thea acknowledges the limitation of the homogenous group – she assumes homogeneity in terms of gender, race, and class – but then ventures a positive interpretation: “maybe having that homogeneous group makes it easier to have the seed of a community, and from there, once it’s more grounded and you can diversify – you know, put down roots first – then all the diverse branches can come, but you need to have some roots” (Thea, closing interview). While recognizing that Freire’s approach to humanization is not about waiting for some sort of ideal condition (i.e. the “right” set of participants), it is important to grapple with the particularities of identity, power, privilege, and/or lack of privilege within the real-life group, including the particular way in which my own identity as a white, middle-class man influenced the process. In the following chapter I will address the pedagogical significance of my own involvement as facilitator, but here the pertinent point is about how Freirean humanization can thrive
precisely because of the in-history particularities of human experience – including, among other things in this case, how group members try to make sense of who is present and who is not present.

Framing the matter in terms of presence is particularly complex in this research because of the way in which what I am calling “in-history particularities” relate to the who of the pedagogy. This can be explained in reference to a photo that was taken during the second meeting of the Cemetery Café when participants gathered inside the Parkview Cemetery chapel (see Figure 4.1 below). The photo shows the participants engaging in small-group, world café-style conversations, and each table group is using a piece of flipchart paper for their collective notetaking. Written on the flipchart easel behind them are three guiding questions: (1) Who is not here? (2) Who needs hope in our community? And even more pointedly, (3) Can the cemetery cultivate hope? Immediately behind the flipchart easel and relatively close to the floor (difficult to see in the photograph) is a casket-sized platform which can be lowered into the basement where the cremation oven is located. In the background, on memorial shelves around the perimeter of the room, there are dozens of urns containing cremated human remains, many of which are accompanied by photographs of the deceased. The urns and photographs are situated inside box-like niches with glass doors, and approximately one quarter of these niches are currently vacant.
As previously noted, my research is in line with Prasad (2018) who describes a critical approach in which we interrogate “the innocence of social and institutional practices, however innocuous and commonplace they might seem” (p. 172). In the photograph we see an innocent cemetery chapel, inside of which are innocent niches that get populated with cremation urns, and it so happens that people are seated at tables having innocent conversations. When a funeral is to take place in this room, a casket is placed quite innocently on the platform to be lowered into the crematorium. Nevertheless, we have already recognized that the cemetery contains more than just the “innocuous and commonplace”, just as it is the resting place for more than just “generic people”. With this photo taken inside the cemetery chapel, the “who” is not generic. These are specific people whose gender, race, class, and other markers of social location give rise to a certain kind of awareness. In a similar way to how they specifically identified themselves as white women (or females), we could identify them as being mortal in their specificity.

Along the same lines, recall the photo in the introductory chapter showing a circle of chairs in a cemetery, tables bedecked with tablecloths, plates, and empty mugs, and people standing together in the background. Knowing that that photo was taken in a section called
the “indigent cemetery”, we rightfully wonder (as did the participants in the Cemetery Café) about the socio-economic disparities by which some burials go marked while others go unmarked. The “who” of that photo is not generic. In terms of the dead, it has to do with specific people whose wealth or status granted them respectable or even lavish burials and other people – they were seen as Others – whose poverty or social marginalization consigned them to paupers’ graves. In terms of the living, it has to do with people who, especially as provoked by socio-economic differentials evident among the dead, are conscious of their own status. It has to do with choices actively made – to hang out casually on top of these indigent graves with no plan to challenge the social, economic, or political status quo or, as was the actual case with participants in the Cemetery Café, to gather in a spirit of respect and discovery, and to discuss what would need to change in the community so that no one would ever be consigned to a pauper’s grave. For the record, in his role as staffperson for the publicly-owned cemeteries, Jim articulates the city’s mandate to be responsive to community needs in the face of economic disparity: “There are always some inequities within the system but…we try to have a cemetery that is for all. We’re open and welcoming [by making] social assistance available if there is no means available to a family and they had to complete an interment….If there’s a need in the community, we’re trying to address that need” (opening interview with Jim).

As became clear in the literature review, critical pedagogy contributes the tool of humanizing praxis and death education contributes the tool of death-inclusionary praxis, and these powerful tools now help us to make sense not only of this particular photo but of unfolding and associated pedagogical dynamics as participants meet in the cemetery classroom. For example, we might bear in mind Freire’s explanation that for the oppressed, pedagogy “is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization” (1970, p.33) and that breaking free from this dehumanization can be done only via praxis – namely, “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p.36). Accordingly, through the lens of humanizing praxis, Cemetery Café participants are reflecting on such things as why the cemetery is or is not a hopeful place, who is here and who is not here, what would need to change for the cemetery to cultivate hope, and how socio-economic status affects the way in which the deceased are memorialized. These matters are accentuated in light of death-inclusionary praxis because
participants’ awareness of such socio-economic realities is stimulated by “the study of life – with death left in” (Kastenbaum, 2004, p. 19) and, therefore, the naming of inclusions, exclusions, justices, and injustices is attuned (and accentuated) at some level by participants’ consciousness of mortality.

In the photos from the cemetery chapel and the outdoor cemetery classroom, there is an additional, remarkable dynamic by virtue of the presence of the dead in the classroom itself – i.e. in the cremated remains and (figuratively) in the accompanying photographs that sit on the shelves along the walls of the chapel, and in the graves and (figuratively) in the accompanying headstones that are all around in the outdoor setting. As I noted in the literature review, this auxiliary aspect of “the study of life – with dead people left in” begins to augment our understanding of Freirean dialogue insofar as the deep, ontological interactivity among people (for Freire originally, among students and teachers) relates to currently unexplored subtleties if some of the participants “happen” to be alive and some “happen” to be dead.

One way to explore this interactivity is to work with a supplementary, quasi-analytical tool that comes out of a particular memorialization ritual often associated with revolutionary movements in Latin America. This ritual involves someone speaking the name of a person (often a political leader, a movement leader, or an artist) who was killed by a repressive regime, followed by the response of everyone else saying, “¡Presente!” (literally, “present!”) which is to say that this person is not forgotten but, rather, that she or he is present and accounted for in a way that inspires the movement. To say, “¡Presente!” is like saying, “You are here with us! We continue our struggle and our work in your name!” I experienced this at one of the annual School of the Americas (SOA) demonstrations outside Fort Benning, Georgia, where the names of dozens of people killed by Latin American military or paramilitary groups were read over loudspeakers to a crowd of over ten thousand people. After every name was spoken, members of the crowd raised white crosses into the air and announced, “¡Presente!” Given my familiarity with some of those in attendance vis-à-vis their personal relationships with particular individuals whose names were read, I knew that some people certainly experienced a visceral feeling of these deceased people being present though in a mysterious way. Through the lens of humanization, this ritual holds complex meaning because of its apparent suggestion that the dead can be present among the living,
that their presence can be confirmed (or even invoked in a sense) through ritualized
ceremony, and that this presence somehow inspires the human will to struggle for justice. In
a fashion that cannot be captured by anything like a photograph, the dead are present,
unconquerable, and their humanity inspires those who are living.

To be clear: I am not attempting to assemble some sort of pedantic-pedagogical ouija
board, as though participants in the Cemetery Café will begin to hear, literally, the voices of
the dead. In this regard, I take a view similar to that of Mitchell (2007):

To me, reincarnation and an afterlife are not necessary to make things interesting. It is
sufficiently interesting that we attribute feelings, desires, and emotions to the
deceased, that we continue dialogues with them, that the material possessions they
leave behind become imbued with potent meaning, and that we carry on public fights
and pursue causes on their behalf. That the living continue to pay heed to the dead has
many manifestations in our daily lives, and many functions. We might say that the
‘vitality’ of the dead is a very real part of our lives (p. 2).

In the pedagogy of the deceased, for the dead to be a very real part of our lives should
register a key issue around human subjectivity. Freire talks about how “the breakthrough of a
new form of awareness in understanding the world is not the privilege of one person”; rather,
this sort of breakthrough is a collective experience (1998, p. 77) and so, in dialogical fashion,
participants together engage in praxis – “reflection and action upon the world in order to
transform it” (1970, p.36). Through the application of death-inclusionary praxis, we should
feel obliged to answer one or the other of two questions about the “who” of this pedagogy:
what is the nature of the agentive participation of the dead who are “left in”, or how does the
presence of the left-in dead affect the agentive participation of the living? Either of these
questions point us to an expanded understanding of what constitutes being human, becoming
human, and participating in light of being human or, awkwardly-put, humanly participating.
Yet, an additional question is just as relevant around how to weigh the significance of, and to
assess the difference between, people who are present in the cemetery because they want to
participate in the cemetery per se, and people who are present in the cemetery but without
any of the same desire to participate. This brings us to the matter of agentive involvement
and how to understand participation.
Agentive Involvement

Death is nothing at all.
It does not count.
I have only slipped away into the next room.
Nothing has happened.
   – Henry Scott-Holland

Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there. I do not sleep.
...When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there. I did not die.
   – Mary Elizabeth Frye

Which is more striking – that both of these poems consist of the living speaking on behalf of the dead, or that, in one way or another, both poems claim that the deceased person is not really deceased? Judging by the fact that both poems appear when doing an internet search for “famous funeral poems”, people find it inspiring or reassuring to think that the dead are not completely absent and without voice. Still, if pressed on the issue of whether or not the dead can participate in anything among the living, in what ways do people respond?
In the opening interviews, research participants expressed a range of opinions about the meaning of participation within the context of the cemetery, including whether or not dead people can qualify as participants. The following exchange with Beth speaks to this in a light-hearted way, although the humour could be seen as a fairly thin cover for deeper issues of how participation relates to usefulness:

Beth: I would say that the dead aren’t participants, but you have to think of what is a participant – like how are they contributing. Are they?
Matthew: What do you think?
Beth: I don’t know. They’re certainly not doing the dishes! (laughter)
   (Opening interview with Beth)
If the dead people buried in the ground are not doing the dishes, what are they doing, if anything? Jasper describes the activity of the dead by invoking the notion of communion: “I think that somehow there is a lingering beingness or awareness of consciousness of the dead around cemeteries, that there is still some way that they commune with us, or they interact with us, and that we are most able to sense or be open to that communion when we’re in the physical place…where their physical remains are” (Jasper, opening interview). By contrast, Marcy explains that, “I think of participation as very active – someone who is actively choosing to get involved in something – so I have trouble seeing the bodies in the ground as participants….I guess they’re participating in the activity of the cemetery which is to lie there and be buried” (Marcy, opening interview). Interestingly, Jim puts forward the possibility of including those who are dead as participants, but clarifies that they are a different kind of participant – namely, “static participants” rather than active participants (Jim, opening interview). This highlights the complexity of defining participation especially in the context of neoliberalism where both the theory and the practice of participation can be co-opted by various actors whose underlying ambitions can be to disempower rather than to empower.

Nevertheless, we could proceed with something like Ledwith and Springett’s assertion that “[p]articipation implies democracy; a state where everyone has a voice in the decisions that affect their lives, and acts collectively for a common good” (2010, p. 26). This aligns with the deeply-embedded participation inherent in how Freire talks about conscientization as “the process in which [people], not as recipients, but as knowing subjects achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality” (1985; p.93). Agency is connected to participation, and participation is connected to being aware of the capacity to transform reality (and awareness itself is connected to the effort to engage in transformative action). In light of the previous section in which I considered whether/how people remain present in some way even in death, what does this mean in terms of voice and the ability to act? Is Jim putting his finger on an expanded view of human agency, one in which participation continues even while activity has ended?

We might summarize the exchange with Beth (noted above) as pointing toward a notion of agency qua usefulness. Whether or not the dead could ever make themselves useful in the land of the living – taking out the trash, returning overdue library books, reducing
poverty – might be beside the point raised by the first core research question (though it will
be discussed later vis-à-vis how the dead can have agency in political affairs). At issue here
is the matter of human subjectivity with both life and death all in, as it were, and this matter
carries great significance if we are trying to learn something through praxis. What is the
relationship between human subjectivity and human mortality? Do we participate in
mortality only in the sense of sharing in mortality, or is there something more in the sense of
actively contributing to something by way of our mortality? And in the cemetery context,
does participation amount to something substantively different between those who enter the
cemetery with a consciousness of mortality as compared to those who enter the cemetery
with what we might call a naïve, amortal consciousness? My allusion to Freire is intentional
(i.e. his explication of the stages of consciousness from magical to naïve to critical), and I
intend to explore this later in the chapter. For now, suffice to say that if agency can be tested
to some degree by the extent to which a (live or dead) person’s presence contributes a
discernable impact (including based on the character of that presence vis-à-vis socio-
economic or political analysis), then the cemetery becomes a fairly riveting context in which
to discern human agency.

As we look at the photo showing the inside of the cemetery chapel and take stock of
the cremated remains of people sitting in their urns, it’s blatantly obvious that they will not
be washing the dishes any time soon, and yet participants speak about being impacted by
gathering on top of unmarked graves and in a room surrounded by cremation urns. What is
this impact? Is it just the fact that the dead are dead, or is it the presence of the dead –
however perceived – that becomes impactful? And what of specific cultural and/or religious
traditions, not well-represented in the Cemetery Café itself, that take it as more than just a
figurative truth that the dead are present among the living (e.g. see Krmpotich, 2010; Kong,
2012; Ladwig, 2012)? Or what if the presence of the dead is palpable through (what we
identify as) their perception of us, along the lines of what Jasper describes: “when I’m
walking in a cemetery it’s silent, but it’s not the silence of an empty room; it feels like the
silence of someone listening” (Jasper, opening interview). This description resonates with my
own reflections immediately following the cemetery chapel meeting:
The small-group conversations went well enough, although I was a bit distracted by the overall situation in the room which almost felt like a fishbowl discussion. On the inside of the fishbowl were these folks who had agreed to meet in a cemetery in order to talk about community development. On the outside of the fishbowl were dozens of people “looking out” from their photographs and urns. Could they hear us? Were they smiling or frowning at our efforts to grapple with mortality? (Personal fieldnotes, November 23, 2016)

By recalling the fact that some of the memorial shelves were empty, we are reminded again of the socio-economic realities of the community whereby some people have the money to pay for this kind of memorialization and others do not. If we reflect on this scene in light of the active listening practiced by counselors and social workers (drawing out someone’s experiences by encouraging them in most every way except for saying much of anything) then we might consider a distinctive relationship between the living and the dead: those of us who are living speak and act, while those who are dead “actively” draw us out. They listen, they nod (motionlessly) and, although they are sitting in their urns or lying in their graves, they speak to us, “Say more. Do more.” Even if this is only true in a figurative sense, then part of the answer to the first core research question is that the dead somehow get to participate in the pedagogy of the deceased, and their participation can urge us to learn what it is about our community that makes it possible for some to be memorialized with great embellishment and others without such. Whether the dead have any consistent political commitments in this regard (either for or against the separation of people based on class) remains unclear.

As for assessing the participation of living people, based on his previous employment with a municipal recreation department where they referred to participants as “users” of recreational programming, Jim describes his tendency to use the same terminology in his current role with the City’s cemetery services: “anyone who comes through the door or comes through the gates is a participant or a user of the cemetery and they all bring their unique needs” (Jim, opening interview). This spurs us to again consider who (or what) can be included in the list of users for a cemetery, and to contend with research participants’ lack of consensus on this matter. Several research participants frame the issue of cemetery use as being heavily shaped by intentionality such that people coming into the cemetery in order to attend a memorial service or tend the grave of a deceased relative should be seen as
participants in a different way than people who come into the cemetery just to walk the dog or to use the cemetery as the shortest possible route between point A and point B. This issue of intentionality is foregrounded within this exchange with Leona:

Leona: …there needs to be intentionality behind [the participation] in terms of walking through it or visiting it or groundskeeping. The things that are planted there are, you know, they’re participating in the life of the cemetery – what it looks like, what graves get shaded and where moss grows.

Matthew: And just to clarify, does that apply to human intentionality then, or the plants also participate in some way?

Leona: Yeah, I would say the plants also participate in some way.

Matthew: You mentioned “engagement” and that’s another angle on this. How do we engage a cemetery? I’m playing with the word. Do we engage the cemetery or do we engage in the cemetery?

Leona: And is that different than participating?

Matthew: Yeah! That’s what I’m wondering. Is it helping us to see a different kind of activity?

Leona: I guess what I was trying to land on there is intentionality. Is there a word that would describe a relationship with the cemetery that doesn’t require someone’s intention? (Leona, opening interview)

Humanizing praxis would seem to value the more context-aware participation of the intentional cemetery-goer. Yet, those who are using the cemetery as a thoroughfare could still be seen as participants because, according to Carla, “there is a level of participation…they’re getting some messages whether they’re conscious of them or not” (Carla, opening interview). Moreover, Leona raises an interesting corollary to this point whereby people who intentionally avoid the cemetery (for example, because they regard the cemetery as a spooky place) may actually be engaging the cemetery moreso than people who walk through the cemetery without acknowledging the significance of the place they are walking. This is to consider that the cemetery classroom might be holding sway even if people do not enter the classroom, and so those who choose not to participate can unwittingly reaffirm their participation.

At the same time, how do participation and humanization interact if and when community events draw people into the cemetery in order to (a) foreground mortality or (b) do almost anything but acknowledge human mortality? The first Cemetery Café meeting included small-group discussions about community events that could take place (or, in a very
few cases, that do take place) in the cemetery. As part of the stimulus for these discussions, participants were encouraged to identify cemetery-based events that could contribute to community-building and/or could cultivate hope in the community. This flipchart sheet (Figure 4.2 below) was created by a small group of four participants and is representative of the overall tone and productivity of these discussions.

*Figure 4.2 – Flipchart notes, October Cemetery Café*
Ideas include everything from cycling derbies to historical re-enactments, and from book club meetings to community mapping exercises. This sort of brainstorming took place several times over the course of the project, and each time participants considered the extent to which any given event depended on the cemetery to be a cemetery as compared to an outdoor, park-like area. We acknowledged that depending on the circumstances in which people entered the cemetery, certain events could take place in which the presence of headstones or any other indicators of burial, death, or mortality would be more or less incidental, whereas other events would not be intelligible or feasible without being able to interact with the headstones, invoke memories of the dead, refer to the eventual death of all living things, and so on.

With respect to community development praxis, this sort of brainstorming will be further considered in the next chapter. For now, a fairly obvious conclusion is that cemetery-based pedagogy can include many or even all members of a community in the sense that the broad range of possible cemetery events can appeal to a broad range of people in a community. Embedded within this is another conclusion about the need to take action so that more of these kinds of community activities would actually happen in the cemetery and, concomitantly, so that a broader range of people feel welcome in the cemetery. According to Marlys, there is a general way in which a cemetery “raises questions about social inclusion or social integration in a historical context…about how much social inclusion or exclusion there was” (opening interview). Thea puts this in terms of the degree to which the cemetery can be seen as a “safe” space – “if it was looked at as a safe place for everybody to die or to be buried, because everybody is equally mortal” (opening interview). In this view, according to Thea, the cemetery could definitely be seen as a suitable place to talk about social justice “if everybody was welcomed equally into a cemetery” (ibid.). As she looks back at the Cemetery Café meetings themselves, Thea observes that the people who were there were probably fairly liberal-minded…so I’m sure they’d be open, but… I don’t think there were any specifically marginalized groups there. I think everybody was privileged. I mean, we were women and so we could say we had certain degrees of marginalization…I doubt that anybody was poor per se. I think that might have changed… what the outcome would have been if people had been challenged with those kinds of things. I don’t think it was ever really brought up directly – any of those kinds of questions (closing interview with Thea).
From the facilitator standpoint, I struggle to make sense of this comment in light of what I remember as several times in the group meetings when I prompted discussion about “Who is here and who is not here?” in terms of social privilege. Of course, my facilitation simply could have been poor, but more relevant here is how my facilitation was limited by various privileges I have as a result of social location. This is to say that even while the cemetery could be a good place to talk about social justice “if everybody was welcomed equally”, the nitty-gritty realities of the pedagogy and/or the limitations of the pedagogue(s) can turn the grand ideal of welcome into the lesser reality of an in-group.

Marcy brings a similar perspective in her opening interview when she notes that “the cemeteries I’ve been in tend to not be very diverse...economically, racially, socially…and I think that hinders the type of social justice development that [your] question is asking about….it can be a place where you kind of feel like you’re a part of a club” (opening interview with Marcy). And in reference to the specifics of the Cemetery Café project after the fact, she observes that

[s]ome of it felt like we were talking about issues that we may not have had much experience with because the group was not very diverse, which I know gets at that other question about the make-up of the group. I don’t know how many of us have experience with poverty, so to talk about that just felt like we were waxing philosophical maybe, and again we were mostly a Caucasian group, so I’m not sure many of us have experienced discrimination on the basis of our skin colour. We’re all aware of these issues and we’re all wanting to work at them, but that’s different than feeling it on a daily basis. I think having us meet in the cemetery, especially the first meeting when you took us around… and pointed out how different it was for the pauper area to the area where there were grand gravestones for the wealthy people – that was significant and it gave a visual for the inequality…that was a good pedagogical decision to have us meet there (closing interview with Marcy).

So the issue pertains both to the cemetery itself as well as to the human face of the cemetery-based pedagogy. As cemetery-based pedagogy intersects with critical pedagogy, it becomes even more important to clarify the meaning of welcome: Who is welcome and who is not welcome in this space? Is this a space that welcomes the humanity of those living in precarious circumstances, or is its tendency to make such people disappear?
Within the Mortal Shape of the Human Journey

The Cemetery Café was far from being a place of perfect welcome – the problem of group homogeneity and the constraints of my facilitation remain – but our modest efforts became prefigurative of the community-building refurbishment that can take place in the cemetery. Part of this links to the development of consciousness in the sense that the cemetery itself provokes a certain kind of awareness that would be different if any given event happened in another place. April explains this well:

So anything you have at the cemetery is going to have people talking, “This is really strange, you know, to have this at a cemetery. Why did we have this at a cemetery?”… I think it could potentially open up a lot of conversation by having something in a cemetery because when you have an event in a parking lot, nobody cares because it’s a parking lot. They go home and they don’t even think about it, but in a cemetery, believe me there’s going to be a lot of thinking about it afterwards. A lot of conversation about how interesting it was (April, closing interview).

However, even as cemetery-based events have the potential to nurture community participation and a distinctive-though-generalized consciousness, we dare not lose the critical edge. We dare not shy away from politically-literate, power-attentive participation. Heading in this direction, Jasper puts forward an analysis pertaining to the politics of voice:

Jasper: In any group, people who talk the loudest are the ones who get to participate. There are people who are sometimes drowned out or silenced and even though they’re there, they’re not allowed to participate. So I think the number of people participating could be limitless if it was listened for and invited, and if the louder participants – say the living human beings – if they were willing to expand that circle of participation.

Matthew: ...so participation in some ways depends on the consensus of the people who are there to choose to listen or not?

Jasper: Yeah, it depends on the consensus of the loudest people there, the same in any group in any society. The people who speak the loudest are able to participate, and many people are not able to participate (Opening interview with Jasper).

This is putting it rather baldly and, although some might take issue with the loudness factor, we should hear this as a very worthwhile critique of what signifies participation, and on whose terms. In aid of a more community-minded approach, Jasper equates participation
with “the intention of being changed, or the intention of being open to others, the intention of listening” (ibid.). This resonates with Freirean dialogue in which “the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers” (1970, p. 67). Can something of this be extrapolated into the cemetery context? Freire claims that “[t]he teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is [herself/himself] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (ibid.). Is this to imply something specific about how to participate alongside one another in the cemetery?

The matter is unresolved. We need to figure out how humanization relates to (or functions within) the pedagogy of the deceased. To engage this persistent matter, I conclude this section by returning to my personal fieldnotes where I tried repeatedly to devise a pictorial explanation of the process of humanization. Even prior to the Cemetery Café meetings, I had been pondering how to express my idea that we need to “mortalize” the process of humanization, and sometimes I tried to represent this process diagrammatically. As the Cemetery Café meetings got underway, I felt more and more compelled to represent the process in such a way that death was not presumed to be an inherently disruptive phenomenon. For example, the two diagrams at the top of Figure 4.3 (below) attempt to show what I gather to be the implicit assumption in an amortal view of humanization whereby death is seen as an interruption of what is otherwise an endless process of becoming ever more human.
In absence of mortality, humanization can be abstracted into an ethereal and ahistorical progression, inferring an ethereal and ahistorical human being. The bottom diagram tries to integrate mortality by showing the beginning and end of life as integral aspects of the human journey. Humanization then has to do with living within, abiding by, or respecting the specific, natural, mortal shape of the human journey and, it seems to me, this is parallel to respecting the specific ways in which race, gender, and class shape our human experience. Critical pedagogy is about learning both to name our experience – “This is who we are…” or “This is the experience that makes us who we are…” – and to activate ourselves as change-
makers in light of that experience. Here the task is to figure out how mortality shapes our human experience.

Through the lens of death-inclusionary praxis, both the naming of experience and the activation for change are inscribed with/bys not only the existential fact of mortality but also the specificity of experience by which each person encounters the circumstances of others’ deaths and, ultimately, the specificity by which they die their own particular death. These specificities clearly and often involve deep sadness, trauma, and extraordinary grief – or relief in the case of what may be called a “good death”. However, rather than pursuing therapeutic options in the face of the sadness or the relief (which are very important), the Cemetery Café welcomes participation that has more to do with seeing and acting upon the recognition of a mortalized self in relation to a mortalized community. This is why mortalization must apply to communities as well as individuals, and it is why I am suggesting that, at some level, community-building must be accompanied by community-burying.

Then who gets to participate in the pedagogy of the deceased? Through articulating a range of views and sometimes appearing to prefer that the question remain unanswered (or even unanswerable), participants highlight the complexity of what it means to be agentively involved in the cemetery. To add to the complexity, it seems that one of the nuances of participation relates to whether or not the cemetery can be regarded as public space either literally (i.e. a publicly-owned cemetery as compared to a privately-owned cemetery) or functionally in the sense of being a space that is open and accessible to everyone in society. For example, as previously noted, Marcy feels that the cemetery can sometimes feel like a club, but she also says that

[op]n the other hand, I could see the cemetery as a public space, and it feels like public spaces are dwindling in our Western context, and it’s public space that’s not commercial space. That’s very rich and valuable and so in that sense it can be an equalizer. Anybody is welcome to walk through, and I can imagine seeing a wealthy family and a homeless person in the cemetery at the same time and it feeling very natural. So maybe it does bring people together, although I think in very small ways (opening interview with Marcy).

Also invoking the notion of public space, Beth proposes a connection between the presumed aspiration for social equality and that which makes the cemetery public:
So it’s publicly owned, it’s open-access to everyone – I guess you could see that as social equality. But then when you look at the cemetery itself you see so many different inequalities. Like the [paupers’ area] that has no headstones and the reasons behind that….or you see the monstrosity of the headstone for some people that cost tens of thousands of dollars…and then what’s underneath, like a ten thousand dollar coffin or a plywood box. So there’s a lot of inequalities…but at the same time they’ve all ended up in the same spot (opening interview with Beth).

Featured in both Marcy’s and Beth’s quotes is the notion that the cemetery is an “equalizer” and a place where “everyone ends up in the same spot”. In this vein, April states that “everybody ends up there, whether you’re poor or rich” (opening interview with April) and Grace says that “we all are born and we all die – we’re all the same…no matter what our race or gender or economic background is” (opening interview with Grace). This raises an issue that will figure prominently in the next chapter about the extent to which practices and sites marked by mortality have the effect of collapsing humanity into an essential sameness or oneness.

For now, a final participant quote can further problematize the issue of whether or not the cemetery should be seen as public, accessible, and open to everyone. So far, we have looked at several aspects of the indigent section of Mount Hope Cemetery especially in terms of the thoughts and feelings of Cemetery Café participants as they met in space occupied by unmarked graves. Yet, while these unmarked graves are still located within the cemetery proper, Jasper tells the following story about a special cemetery he visited in the USA where convicted murderers were buried because public cemeteries did not welcome their full memorialization:

I think the normal procedure [in a public cemetery] was for them to be buried on the cemetery ground with just a little tag indicating where they were without even a name, but the place I visited was a place where they could be buried with dignity, with their family present, and there would be a headstone or a wooden cross, and that was a way of bringing these people who had made terrible offenses in their lives, bringing them back into the fold of humanity in their death….why are some people not considered worthy of being given a human burial and some are? (opening interview with Jasper).

In the context of this cemetery in the USA, it was noteworthy (because of what Jasper interprets as the unwelcoming atmosphere in public cemeteries) that people who had been convicted of murder could be memorialized with dignity and respect. An implied question
might be, Are there any people in our Canadian society for whom a dignified cemetery burial would be objectionable? Are there any people to whom our society might want to say, “No, we don’t really want you to participate in the cemetery. You don’t get to be buried with the rest of us”? Embedded here, too, are issues around who gets to decide what is fitting and appropriate for memorialization.

As we work through the various data, it seems that one way of specifying who gets to be involved in the pedagogy of the deceased is to specify something about the relationship between having a mortal existence and having agency. Jasper addresses this by describing what for him is a relationship between having actions available, having limitations on action, and having hope:

Jasper: Limits in both time and space, for me, allow me to see more clearly the range of actions which are available to me, and the range of actions which I can accomplish and that’s empowering to me. To see my own limits helps me to see all the range within those limits that are mine to engage with, and for me that is a very hopeful feeling.

Matthew: And is it that you’re more aware of the range of options or is it something about having the motivation to use those options?

Jasper: Not, it’s not the motivation.

Matthew: It’s knowledge?

Jasper: I’m not ever really motivated by knowing that I’m going to die. I mean, for a lot of people that is motivational. For me it’s more that – OK here’s my life, it’s such-and-such a size, it has certain boundaries and limits to it, here are the boundary markers, here is my gravestone I’m looking at in the future, it’s a visual reminder in my present reminding me of my own gravestone in the future. But look how far there is between here and there. There’s this range. I can go through life and get to that gravestone of mine saying, Yeah look at all these things that made this a full life (opening interview with Jasper).

Why does it make sense to say that having limits is hopeful? Does this imply that we should feel hopeful when our participation must be limited? In a mortalized context such as a cemetery, although we are all participants by virtue of being mortal, we need a narrower definition of participation in which the vocation to become more fully human is inextricably tied to the vocation of mortality, and in which human agency is both poised for community-building and justice, and restricted by the eventuality of death. This narrower definition of participation, in turn, raises several weighty questions. Firstly, an epistemological question that could bear on the design of consciousness-raising activities in the cemetery: What
happens to an individual’s knowledge after death, assuming a holistic, non-Cartesian approach in which knowing is not just a rationale enterprise? Is some knowledge still existent in the body after death, or does it leave the body in a similar way that some presume the soul leaves the body after death? On a related matter, what happens to individual human agency after death? Although many might scoff at the idea that agency is anything other than completely absent from someone who is dead, a range of the world’s religious and cultural traditions would beg to differ, as would certain theories that attribute agency to the non-human. The question about human agency, in turn, carries yet another: Are dead human bodies still human beings, or has the dead human body moved from being a subject to being an object? Although these questions seem to derail our answering of the first core research question, I believe they are actually helping us to zero in on a particular dynamic of humanization in which the who of the deceased clarifies the who of the living.

We can probe this dynamic by looking at an excerpt of a proposed cemetery sign submitted as homework by Marcy (her proposal in entirety will appear in the next chapter). Part of the text for this welcome sign includes the following:

You are invited to be fully human in this place. You may run, laugh and play, or sit quietly and reflect, as long as you do so with a sense of reverence and respect for those buried here and their survivors.

The people buried here come from all walks of life. They were men and women, rich and poor, from diverse racial and cultural ethnic backgrounds, of different sexual orientations, of different abilities, of different ages at death, and different in so many other ways. Yet death does not differentiate. Why do we differentiate in life? (Homework submission from Marcy).

Notable in this excerpt is the compact yet multilayered portrayal of the kinds of agency involved in being “fully human”: running, laughing, playing, reflecting, revering, respecting the dead and the living, acknowledging differences, and questioning our acknowledgement of differences. And perhaps we become most puzzled when we return to the first sentence and reflect on what happens to our efforts to be fully human at the moment when we die. As per the earlier question, is death an interruption of our lifelong project to become fully human? Whether through a religious/spiritual viewpoint or through a more philosophical perspective, is there a connection, a continuity, or a consonance between acting/being human as such and acting/being human in light of being mortal?
To further examine this dynamic of humanization, let us recall how several participants clearly identified the cemetery as a sacred place deserving of respect, and added descriptors like “peaceful place”, “holy place” or “sanctuary”. By contrast, we know the visceral feeling of outrage when people speak crudely about death or when people treat dead bodies with a lack of respect, and this outrage can clarify what is at stake in the cemetery. In her exploration of what it means for the dead to be present to/for the living, Glahn (2012) analyzes what happens when we witness one of these situations in which dead bodies are not treated respectfully:

such a handling of corpses is ignoring their humanity; it is human-blind. In situations with dead human bodies, where we feel the diffuse discomfort that we try to name by saying: “This is violating or disrespecting the dead person’s dignity” we acknowledge that someone is recognizing the corpse as human, but is treating him as if she were not a human being and hence is making herself guilty of being human-blind. By treating dead human bodies incorrectly, namely as non-human, we erroneously and unjustifiably exclude them from the community of human beings. And being excluded from the human community is humiliating and therefore violates one’s human dignity (pp. 26-27).

This augments our view of humanizing praxis. While most everyone immediately recognizes the disrespecting of dead human remains when they see it done physically, here we are exploring additional aspects of how we dignify the dead through justice, inclusion, and empowerment. In a positive way, the physical respect of the dead should go together with other kinds of respect through inclusive, dignifying, and empowering funerary practices and interment, and all of these reflect back on the living insofar as we intentionally choose dignifying and justice-oriented ways of interacting with the dead wherein, as noted earlier by Laqueur, “[p]ersonhood persists where it manifestly no longer resides” (2015, p. 31). Moreover, and not at all unrelated, humanizing praxis also connects with ecologically dignified ways of treating dead bodies – for example, Carla says that “it’s not where the body is disposed of, it’s the honouring of it [and] it’s starting to bother me, how we use the space and put them in vaults and don’t really honour nature in our processing of bodies” (opening interview).

The honouring of nature will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 6; the point here is about the interconnectedness between, on the one hand, learning to accord respect to the
dead through what we do with their bodies and their memory and, on the other hand, learning to accord respect to the living. According to Glahn, this interconnectedness involves the necessity of action: “In the presence of a dead human body we cannot omit acting. No matter what we do, crucial is that we have to do something. We cannot do nothing. The material presence of the dead body requires our action” (2012, p. 28). One might retort, “Well, I don’t have to do anything with a dead body if I don’t want to!” Setting aside the fact that ignoring or avoiding a dead body are still actions, Glahn’s substantive claim is about how being in the presence of the dead has some bearing on human agency, and my claim is that this bearing has pedagogical potential. At the surface, this pedagogy can amount to a lesson in how to dispose of a dead body (or how to remember a person who has died) according to one’s respective social, cultural, and/or religious tradition. Much deeper, I am claiming that this pedagogy amounts to a lesson in how to become fully human, within which is an additional, embedded lesson about the agentive “shape” of this process of becoming. Yet, to frame the issue along the lines of the first core research question, who gets to participate in this process of becoming?

Notwithstanding the fact that humanity practices a wide variety of funerary traditions including burial, cremation, and many others, so far we are exploring the notion that those who get to participate in the humanizing “process of becoming” are those who acknowledge the presence of the dead and/or who are open to being called to humanizing action on behalf of or in the face of the dead. Interestingly, this highlights a complex dynamic, so far only lurking at the edges, about how death relates to action. In so many ways, the death of others or the knowledge of our own eventual death facilitates action – perhaps this is best known in popular culture as the phenomenon of the bucket list – but death also takes away the ability to act. Is this a contradiction or a dialectical reality? In terms of community development, death and life can be dialectically related, and mortality can both enable and circumscribe the pursuit of social justice, though it becomes particularly complicated to make sense of some community members experiencing a “good death” alongside others who experience death through tragic or violent circumstances. Cropping up here is what I am calling the dialectics of liberation-limitation, and it is something I will further explore in the next chapter.
Then Who?

So far I have worked through a variety of research data in conjunction with humanizing praxis in order to engage the question of who gets to participate in the pedagogy of the deceased. The complex, unresolved matter of agency notwithstanding, my minimum claim is that everyone gets to participate, but that not everyone participates simply by virtue of coming into the cemetery. My accompanying claim is that the cemetery is a particularly useful and evocative context in which to explore the process of humanization and the meaning of human presence, especially vis-à-vis dehumanizing social and political realities. As a sidebar, it is worth noting an entirely different way that one could try to clarify the nature of participation and agency in a cemetery – namely, by making legal claims based on any number of well-established human rights frameworks. For instance, Baglow (2007) makes the assertion that “the corpse indeed can be said to have limited human rights, ‘passive’ rights, to be sure, but rights nonetheless. The social corpse is imbued with presence and personhood” (p. 224). He provides further elaboration on how the personhood of the dead authenticates their rights:

While the corpse is not included in rights talk, at least at the moment, other older discourses and cultural scripts are called upon to invest the corpse legally with what to all intents and purposes are rights: to proper disposal, to dignity, to bodily integrity. What at first blush appears incongruous – the notion of the rights of the corpse can be seen to flow logically from both the construction of rights and from the voiceless demands of the social corpse for recognition and respect, demands that we continue to honor (p. 236).

From this approach, the relationship between the living and the dead takes on a remarkable exchange of rights demanded and rights honoured, respect called for and respect given. Is the exchange reciprocal in some way? Who gets to determine what counts as a respectful exchange?

This is a fitting place to acknowledge a sneaking concern within the pedagogy of the deceased having to do with spoken and unspoken socio-cultural expectations around what constitutes appropriate human activity in the cemetery – i.e. around what people get to do in the cemetery. Imagine a recently-bereaved family, having buried their loved one within the last week, now entering the cemetery in order to water some flowers by the headstone. As
they walk across the grass, they see a group of people seated in chairs, drinking coffee, and then proceeding to lie down helter-skelter in the grass not far away from their loved one’s grave. Or imagine them entering the cemetery and then encountering a pizza party or a cycling derby. Might their response be, “Hey! You don’t get to do that in the cemetery!” For the living, the concern is about the overlay of pedagogical ambitions and initiatives onto a space where people need to be able to grieve well, without the distraction of flipcharts, bizarre embodied activities, or creative community events. On behalf of the dead, if we can claim to know their needs, the concern is about respect, and whether or not the pedagogy of the deceased presumes certain kinds of activities in the cemetery that violate the respect that should be accorded to the space.

Pertaining to my research, the simple, perhaps unsatisfying response to this concern is that cemetery staff made it clear from the outset that if a memorial service or any other related activity needed to happen in the cemetery, then the activity of the Cemetery Café needed to be postponed without exception, and participants knew about this possibility. On a very practical level, it seems reasonable to say that memorial services should take precedence over “elective” pedagogical initiatives in the cemetery. A more political response to this concern relates to a moment in the opening interview with Marlys in which she reflects on the different experiences of First Nations peoples and white North American settler society, thereby distinguishing another angle on the question of participation in a cemetery – namely, “thinking about whose land are we on here, and where are those past and present Indigenous participants who have had this land?” (Marlys, opening interview). This is a timely and far-reaching matter because it connects cemeteries with current truth-and-reconciliation efforts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. It augments the first core research question by asking, “Who gets to decide where the pedagogy of the deceased takes place? Who gets to decide where the cemeteries actually are?” From a critical-pedagogical perspective, the question about Indigenous participants deserves substantive attention beyond the brief excerpt from Marlys’ interview, which is why I take this up in the first Course of Action within the concluding chapter. To be clear: to ask the question about who gets to participate in the pedagogy of the deceased in the Canadian context is to provoke an embedded question about how our assumptions and practices pertaining to death should be
informed by the greatly unfinished truth-and-reconciliation efforts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples on this land.

In this chapter I have worked with the data in order to make sense of a multidimensional and dialectical reality – bodies and bodies, animate and seemingly inanimate, individual and collective, land of the living and land of the dead – and this reality involves both the appearance and the concealment of human agency. The experiences of the research participants contribute toward our understanding of an enriched, mortalized human presence in the world. In the following chapter I will explore how the pedagogy of the deceased becomes a kind of literacy as we learn to *read the bodies* and *read the bodies* in this way.
The second core research question focuses attention on the cemetery classroom and its unique potential for leading to community development and hope. The question is framed around strategic capacity (“how can a cemetery classroom lead to…”) in recognition of the exploratory and nascent character of the cemetery as a site for learning, although in a limited way my research also offers something of the actual (“how does a cemetery classroom lead to…”). Some might say that the cemetery can only be named as a classroom in relation to cemetery-related topics such as genealogical study or landscape design, although this begs the question of what constitutes a cemetery-related topic. Another approach is to say that the cemetery itself is the topic or the way of learning. Jasper makes this point in a circuitous way:

I think the best part of the cemetery is because it’s not a classroom. It’s a space that’s not one of the defined spaces we’re used to moving in, so we’re not going to be acting in pre-programmed ways. In a classroom I do such-and-such, when I’m in a church I do such-and-such, when I’m in a store, I interact with people in such-and-such a way. I like the idea of the cemetery as a classroom because it opens us to possibilities… the experience can circumvent our expectations, if we’re willing (Jasper, opening interview).

Also along the lines of the cemetery itself being the teacher, Carla supplies a fascinating image that describes a kind of literacy. When asked to describe a “cemetery classroom”, she says that it’s a good reminder of the fact that we will all die. There is no choice. So as a classroom, it would be like the posters the teachers might have on the classroom wall of the alphabet or something like that… Even though the teacher may not be talking about those items on the classroom wall, you’re surrounded by it. So as a classroom I think it’s got its own permanent message…I may choose to pretend it’s not there [but] I’m going to get it by osmosis (Carla opening interview).
If we extrapolate from Carla’s image, we envision the cemetery classroom bedecked with death literacy posters all around – the headstones, religious and cultural rituals, the ecology of flora and fauna, the evidence of sameness and difference, the presumption of bodies in the ground, and bodies walking, running, standing, or lying above the ground. And in the same way that death does not necessarily interrupt the process of humanization, so too death does not necessarily interrupt the process of building community. Figuratively, at least one row of these wordless “posters” teaches the ABCs of how we can participate in a death-left-in community. Literally, the bodies in the ground and the headstones that honour them teach the ABCs of how our community participation must include time spent above and below (or, to again acknowledge more than just the practice of burial, time spent both in the land of the living and in the place or phase of being that follows death). Thus, I am framing my engagement of this classroom-related research question around a kind of literacy work, a kind of learning to read.

Although the Cemetery Café was exploratory and modest in its innovation, the research indicates that the cemetery can, indeed, function as a classroom for community-building efforts. Part of the reason for framing this question around leading to rather than “involving” or “including” is because of my presumption that the cemetery classroom (or death education more generally) is both an in-class experience and an extension program; that is, the classroom includes embodied learning, community development, and hope, but it also leads to embodied learning, community development, and hope that unfold in other places as well. By focusing on several pieces of data, I will consider how the cemetery classroom is both place-based (e.g. in the cemetery) and inherently portable – insistently portable, even – through the way it can engender cascading and transferable lessons. Accordingly, in this chapter I analyze the “how” of the pedagogy of the deceased, and I consider specific experiences of Cemetery Café participants in light of humanizing praxis and death-inclusionary praxis.

A brief note about the connotative significance of this chapter’s subtitle: the word “body” simultaneously refers to (1) a body of a living person or animal, (2) a dead body, and (3) a group of people. Whereas the similarity between “word” and “world” provides a memorable, rhyming emphasis to Freire’s conceptual point about the dialectics within reading/writing the word/world, the single word “body” both collapses together and
multiplies the dialectical character of reality in which a body (i.e. group) of bodies (i.e. living people) read the bodies (i.e. dead people) who, even though they are dead, continue to hold sway in (i.e. to write, in a sense) the land of the living. This is why I believe there is an element of literacy work in all of this.

General Attitudes Toward the Cemetery

Given the relatively unusual nature of meeting in a cemetery for anything other than a funeral, it is worth noting the overall attitude with which participants regard the cemetery as one of the places where human remains are disposed of. Of course, the phrase “where human remains are disposed of” infers some callousness, and Leona picks up on this theme:

I don’t think of a cemetery as a disposal place. A cemetery is more of a memorial place because what you see in a cemetery are the markers, so when I read “where human remains are disposed of” that conjured up images of a hospital, incinerator, gas chamber – like some not-so-pleasant images in terms of disposal, and what do I think about those kinds of places or what do I believe about that would be a little bit different (Leona, opening interview).

Participants express both connection and disconnection to the cemetery. Several participants clearly identify the cemetery as a sacred place, and they add descriptors like “peaceful place”, “holy place” or “sanctuary”. An example is Jasper who describes the sacredness of the cemetery in this way:

It’s always seemed to me that my family and I – or my friends and I – no matter how many ways we’re diverging through life, in a way we’re all going to meet back at this same place later on. So the cemetery has always felt like a very good place to me, a home place for me. It’s quiet, it’s calm, it’s peaceful, it’s sacred. And I do think that the presences of the dead are somehow present in the cemetery – that we are closer to people who have died when we’re near their last physical resting place (Jasper, opening interview).

He continues by explaining that “when I’m walking in a cemetery it’s silent but it’s not a silence of an empty room. It feels like the silence of someone listening” (ibid.). Although this comment is very much open to interpretation, it carries interesting resonance in light of Freirean dialogue and the section in the previous chapter on what it means to be present and
to be aware of others’ presence in the cemetery. In a somewhat similar vein, Thea articulates her belief that the cemetery is “a place for the people left behind. I think it’s a place to remember and visit and touch base with those people, and so you keep connections just for the quiet reflection” (Thea, opening interview). Meanwhile, Marcy reports that the cemetery “feels like a spiritual classroom. Maybe that’s a good way to put it because it feels like a thin place, where the veil between the earth and the other world is very thin” (opening interview).

While all participants readily acknowledge that the cemetery can be a meaningful place for others, several indicate their own sense of disconnection. April says, “I would say that spiritually and religiously it doesn’t really mean anything to me. I feel like it’s kind of a waste of good land” (April, opening interview). Marlys says, “I don’t really have any reactions one way or the other. I haven’t spent much time in cemeteries or visiting people because I don’t think I know anybody who’s buried in a cemetery” (Marlys, opening interview). Rosena explains that “I wouldn’t say it’s a place I go to with a lot of reverence because that just isn’t the way I feel” although, at the same time, she then described how after her mother died, she and other family members go to her mother’s grave with plastic cups and a bottle of Mogen David wine where they toast her mother and her step-father – “that has made me feel more connected [to the cemetery]” (Rosena, opening interview).

Regarding general attitudes toward the cemetery, one final point has to do with humour. While there is no lack of English-language jokes and puns having to do with death and cemeteries, humour sometimes plays a more nuanced role in how participants articulate certain perspectives about the cemetery. For example, in assessing whether or not the cemetery can be a hopeful place, April explains that when I go in the cemetery all I think is, “If I don’t do something with my life soon, I’m going to end up there and that will be it”…So it’s almost more of a desperation….[T]he cemetery itself doesn’t make me hopeful because I’m thinking, “No, I’m going to turn around and run now because I’ve got things to do before I get there!” (laughter) So to me it’s kind of the opposite of hope. Now all of us being in the cemetery together – that could be hopeful, or make me feel some hope. But just walking through it, which I do all the time because I go to the grocery store, it’s more of “I’d rather do something! (laughter) Take care of myself, eat more vegetables or something!” (opening interview with April).
April’s description might contain the makings for a joke, but I interpret her laughter as pointing to something more weighty than funny – something about how the cemetery can remind us to keep our priorities straight. In another interesting example of a humorous perspective, the following exchange comes from the opening interview with Grace when she describes a different sort of cemetery pedagogy:

Grace: As kids we learned how to drive [in the cemetery]. My mom would pull over and let us drive. For me that was always the perfect spot to teach your kids to drive because it’s quiet, and there are roads, you know? So when my oldest daughter started driving we went there. She was nervous but she was getting used to the different roads. And we see this [other car]…and so I said “Pull over to the side, they’ll pass you, don’t worry about it.” So this car wasn’t passing and it wasn’t passing, and it finally occurs to me, because we’re getting a little bit closer, that it’s another mother teaching her daughter to drive in the cemetery. *(laughter)* Yes, it’s like, “OK, so we aren’t the only ones!”

*Matthew: Wow, that’s incredible!*  
Grace: Yeah, we would make jokes, you know, “Well, you aren’t going to kill anybody. It’s the perfect spot” *(Grace, opening interview).*

Again, we might proffer a joke about not killing or injuring people in a cemetery or we might smile at the peculiar location for a driving lesson, but the humour is accompanied by a deeper point. Grace’s anecdote comes at a point of the interview when we are discussing what would need to change for people to feel more welcome in the cemetery and, therefore, to interrogate the humour is to ask why it should be considered funny or strange for people to use the cemetery for driving lessons. Indeed, as we consider the prospects for community development, an intentional partnership between a cemetery and a driving school could be just as reasonable as that between a cemetery and a genealogy association, or between a cemetery and a bird-watching club, or between a cemetery and an undergraduate civil engineering class as they learn how to use surveying instruments. From the literature review, let us recall the notion that “[b]urial ground design that explicitly incorporates multiple uses and accommodates divergent burial practices could significantly improve the process of making burial facilities into more central community land uses” *(Couttsa, Basmajianb, and Chapina, 2011, p. 260).* Whether it is a teenager learning to back up the family car, a group of ecologists learning their flora and fauna, or community activists putting together a
poverty-reduction strategy, perhaps some occasional cemetery humour will assist the process of attaining this multiplicity of use.

A Hospitable Place

As noted in the Methodology chapter, I felt it was important for the Cemetery Café to feature an atmosphere of hospitality. For me, this was closely connected with creating an atmosphere for what Shor (1992) described as “extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary” (p. 122). Rather than “just” gather in a cemetery for cerebral discussions about mortality, community development, and hope, we gathered in an ordinary place where the extraordinary could be experienced through café-style eating and drinking and through learning activities that included explicitly embodied components. All of this started to weave together the pedagogy of the deceased with both the pedagogy of food and embodied learning. The eating, drinking, and participating in embodied activities had a direct impact in terms of (a) fostering an embodied experience for individuals and (b) em-bodying the individuals into a community – i.e. a body of learners. Grace refers to this directly: “You always had coffee and something snacky, and the tables and chairs. You went to a lot of effort and it was appreciated. I think it did enhance the feeling of connections between people”. Marcy echoes this sentiment but also adds to the mortalizing theme:

I think your set-up with the tables and the tablecloths and the food and those little touches were very significant in making it feel like we’re a little community of people, we don’t know each other, but we’re a community, we’re eating food which is a very mortal act, and so that really set a warm and welcoming tone and, I thought, made everyone comfortable and allowed us to share very openly from the beginning (closing interview).

Thus, making the cemetery a hospitable place in these tangible ways primes us to grapple with the tangible process of mortalization. In and of itself, this approach recalls Martin and Te Riele’s (2011) challenge to “move beyond endless critique, deconstruction and deferral toward real world struggles guided by radical love, social justice and hope” (p.37, emphasis my own).
 Meeting in the cemetery as the real-world location of the pedagogy of the deceased, we can further interpret the pedagogical work of the Cemetery Café through a place-inflected approach in conjunction with death-inclusionary praxis. A particularly fitting example of a place-based approach is articulated by Gruenewald (2008) who makes the connection in overtly Freirean terms: “Through reading the world (or the places in the world that one knows) as ‘political texts,’ teachers and students engage in reflection and action – or praxis – in order to understand, and, where necessary, to change the world” (p. 311). In this research, participants are reading the cemetery as a ‘political text’ and the “where necessary” speaks to both the conditional specification (along the lines of “when necessary”) as well as the concrete, place-based reality in which the reading is taking place – i.e. Where is change necessary? In this case, in the cemetery. This approach is noteworthy because, as Gruenewald puts it,

[i]n place of actual experience with the phenomenal world, educators are handed, and largely accept, the mandates of a standardized, “placeless” curriculum and settle for the abstractions and simulations of classroom learning. Though it is true that much significant and beneficial learning can happen here, what is most striking about the classroom as a learning technology is how much it limits, devalues, and distorts local geographical experience. Place-based education challenges all educators to think about how the exploration of places can become part of how curriculum is organized and conceived (p. 317).

An important task of the pedagogy of the deceased is to practice education in one of the specific locations that feature “actual experience with the phenomenal world” of death and mortality. As we have already seen, participants read the “political text” of the cemetery vis-à-vis social, economic, or cultural inclusion/exclusion, but how do participants go from reading the world to changing the world? Moreover, in what way does death-inclusionary praxis affect the way in which this pedagogy is place-based?

Specific elements of the cemetery classroom (see Figure 5.1 below) speak to the significance of the place-based pedagogy as noted by Gruenewald.
Participants have gathered in a place surrounded by headstones and, even more to the point, face-to-face with headstones. Not only is death generally looking us in the face, but the deaths of many specific local citizens as well, and this is where the face-to-face experience becomes a “text” calling for a political reading. In an area just beyond what is visible in the photo, various well-to-do entrepreneurs and local politicians are buried with large headstones and, in some cases, marble “fences” or lines of granite posts that demarcate their generous family plots. These are what some historians might refer to as the “community builders” who personified entrepreneurial vision and courage, and now they are dead. Meanwhile, just behind where the photographer is standing, a fairly sizable area constituting the indigent cemetery exists with hardly any headstones at all. The lack of detailed records makes it virtually impossible to distinguish the location of most of the burials in this section, but it is clear that these are what some historians might refer to as the marginalized, the outcasts, and the paupers. They lived on the margin, they struggled to feel a part of the community, and in some cases they took their own life because of hopelessness. In the middle of all this, literally

*Figure 5.1 – Place-based pedagogy, face-to-face with headstones.*
among the curriculum of the deceased, the Cemetery Café welcomes participants into a learning experience.

In light of death-inclusionary praxis, the “mere” fact that participants are sitting in the cemetery need not prove that mortality is anywhere near the top of the learning agenda. Perhaps these are local birdwatchers learning from a guest ornithologist, or perhaps they are members of a local genealogical society taking part in a local history session. But the agenda is clearly banking on the cemetery qua cemetery rather than the cemetery qua park, and so the learning clearly involves leaving death in. In a similar way, humanizing praxis helps us to understand what is going on here as more than grappling with death per se. The flipchart paper shows the outline of the meeting which includes cultivating community, cultivating hope, and cultivating action. These are ingredients for critical pedagogy. To revisit Gruenewald’s challenge regarding place-based education, “[t]he question is whether we will embrace place at all – What happened here? What will happen here? – as a critical construct in educational theory, research, and practice” (2008, p. 321). In the Cemetery Café, participants ask questions with critical import: Who is buried here and who is not buried here? What is it about our community that resulted in and results in people feeling included or excluded? During our lifetime, what will we do to build our community? Will we end up buried anywhere like this? This last question hints at where we are heading with an analysis that brings together place-based pedagogy and humanizing pedagogy, with death left in. We are heading into a classroom that not only banks on the cemetery qua cemetery, it also banks on participants qua mortals – that is, participants who can learn and interact with each other (and with the classroom itself) in ways that are characteristically human. This brings us to embodied learning.

**Lying Down**

As previously noted, the agenda for each meeting of the Cemetery Café included at least one embodied learning activity. At the first meeting, following a general overview of the history of the cemetery, I facilitated an activity in which participants were invited to lie down on the grass among the headstones (Figure 5.2 below). After the logistics of the
activity had been explained and participants were ready, I began the activity with these spoken words:

- In your own way, try to be fully present in the cemetery.
- You are a body, and you are a member of a body of learners.
- When you lie down in this place you are lying among many other bodies that have been buried. Be mindful of how you are lying near other bodies – both living and dead.
- This lying down is a time of quiet rest before we cultivate action. (Facilitator notes, October 25, 2016)

In a fairly contemplative manner, participants silently lay down on the grass, some immediately adjacent to a headstone and some in the “aisles” between headstones. In light of death-inclusionary praxis as examined earlier, this activity became a specific way of doing adult education “with death left in” or with the embodied simulation of being dead left in. Indeed, the simulation was apparent for both participants and observer. Although I maintained the facilitator’s mindset by watching the timer and looking out for passers-by, I also found myself transfixed with the scene before me. An excerpt from my field notes:

*Figure 5.2 – Participants lie down in the middle of the cemetery*
A little part of me worried that the whole thing would turn into an awkward spectacle, but a bigger part of me felt excited to do this “lesson planning” as part of a creative and embodied pedagogy. It really felt like this portion of the evening would have significance in terms of being present in the cemetery, participating in the cemetery, and provoking discussion about the bounds of human agency. I was so curious what the participants would think of the activity. Bodies on the earth, bodies under the earth. And what did that passer-by think as they rolled past on their bike? “It’s late autumn and just another cool evening in the cemetery, but… wait! A bunch of people lying on the grass between the gravestones? They’re alive, aren’t they? Are they OK? Why are they scattered helter-skelter in the middle of the cemetery? And why is there a guy standing beside them with a clipboard?” (Personal fieldnotes, October 26, 2016)

To the passer-by, the “guy with the clipboard” may or may not have conveyed the fact that this was an educational initiative. Perhaps she assumed it was a fitness class that had decided to meet in the cemetery that evening. Indeed, without any contextual details, one could be forgiven for looking at the photograph above and thinking for at least a moment that it was taken at an outdoor yoga class. For the record, copies of an explanatory leaflet (see Appendix E) were placed beside the roadway, near the lying-down spot, but I am not sure that any passer-by actually took a copy of this leaflet.

As for the participants themselves, they described various experiences of the lying-down activity including everything from really liking it, to finding it comforting and stimulating, to not being affected by it at all. Here is a representative sample of participant reflections:

I really like it….Honestly, if more people could have that experience, it could actually get people thinking differently about their life. Not everybody would have a positive experience from it, but I loved it. I really did (closing interview with Carla).

I think maybe the fact that it was such a short period of time probably didn’t really lend to reflection because if you’re only down there for 5 minutes, and some of us might want to take a nap. That’s what I was thinking: Don’t fall asleep! Don’t fall asleep! (laughter) You know, for some people lying down for 5 minutes, there’s no way they can get themselves settled into any kind of reflective thought pattern because they’re still thinking about that rock that’s underneath their butt…my head was lower than my feet, so the blood was kind of all rushing to my head (closing interview with Tana).
I found it really relaxing and it gave me a good opportunity to just sort of soak in all of the things that you take for granted, like the sounds and the smell… it was comforting to be lying surrounded by these beings that had been, but weren’t any more in the physical sense. So I thought that was a good experience (closing interview with Beth).

I think it might have had an impact on the group – maybe not everybody in the group. It didn’t have a whole lot of impact on me (closing interview with Rosena).

The concept of talking about death and mortality in the context of a cemetery, and after having laid down with your head at a headstone – it brings more gravity, it’s more grave in that, “Yeah, so this is for real!” So it elevates your perspective on the topic….I quite liked it….to lay down on top of someone else… it felt courageous in a kind of way (closing interview with Leona).

It was very peaceful, but it was also sort of grounding, I guess – a little like shavasana. It made me be present or think about the process a little bit more, think about what it could be, or what a cemetery could be…. So that was actually one of my favourite parts, frankly…. it just sort of made you feel part of a community… so maybe that helped us become a group, too (closing interview with Thea).

Seen through the lens of humanizing praxis, this activity appears to contribute toward the strategic capacity of the cemetery classroom vis-à-vis embodied learning (the nature of the activity itself), community development (e.g. Thea’s comment about feeling part of a community), and hope (e.g. Leona’s comments about elevated perspective and courage, and Carla’s comment about thinking differently about one’s life). It is not mechanistic, as if lying down in the cemetery will lead to community development or hope (note Rosena’s observation about the lack of impact), but it seems to be a pedagogical strategy that has the potential to prime participants in a certain way. A direct reference to this is from Carla’s reflection of what it was like to go from the lying-down activity to the brainstorming session that immediately followed: “we went into an exercise of how can we bring the community more into the cemetery…I had never thought about that question before, but having had a positive experience of lying down – I think it helped my thinking of how people could come and have some of that, even if they didn’t lay down” (closing interview with Carla). The brainstorming exercise she references is the one described in the previous chapter in which participants discussed ideas for community events in the cemetery. In that instance, death-inclusionary praxis shines a light on how participants generate knowledge about and
collaborative strategies for building the community with its cemetery left in and, thereby, when they generate community development ideas in a similarly inclusive way.

What about the cemetery classroom in terms of humanizing praxis and the clearly political commitment of critical pedagogy? How does the cemetery become a place for Freirean pedagogy that enables people to unveil and transform oppression – “a pedagogy of all [people] in the process of permanent liberation” (1970, p. 40)? Part of the second Cemetery Café meeting went to the heart of this question by working through a sample of critical pedagogy literature and then engaging in small-group discussions about how the cemetery can cultivate hope and critical consciousness. The literature sample that was provided to the participants was drawn from Margaret Ledwith’s *Community development in action: Putting Freire into practice* (2016) and consisted of a two-page section entitled “An easy introduction to critical pedagogy”. What follows is part of this section:

By critical pedagogy, Freire means empowering education, education that questions everyday life, identifies contradictions, makes critical connections with the structures of society that discriminate and acts to change things for the better….At the heart of the process is an understanding that education is not neutral: it is either strengthening the status quo by deepening the structures of discrimination that create social inequality, or it is questioning, exposing and changing these structures to create a new future based on fairness, justice and sustainability. In summary, critical pedagogy focuses on the politics and power of everyday life through a process of education and learning that emerges in critical consciousness, the foundation of collective action for change (pp. 21-22).

After distributing this sample to participants, I took time to highlight and explain several points made by Ledwith, and I also shared some of my own thoughts about why “questioning everyday life” and “making critical connections with the structures of the society that discriminate” should be connected with a re-mortralized view of ourselves as human beings, and a re-mortralized view of consciousness itself. Immediately following this Freirean-pedagogical effort, participants got into table groups to discuss how the cemetery can cultivate hope and hospitality, and how consciousness-raising relates to mortality. During these discussions they took turns writing notes on flipchart paper, some of which are excerpted below (Figure 5.3).
In general, the flipchart notes convey something of the questioning, problem-posing spirit as participants talked about reasons why the cemetery does and does not instill hope, the ways in which raising consciousness about the indigent section of the cemetery could lead to action, cross-cultural understandings of mortality, and the presence and/or absence of a sense of safety, welcome, and hospitality within the cemetery. This last point figures prominently not only in these small-group conversations but also throughout the rest of the Cemetery Café meetings. As an internal question for the research group itself, “Who is here and who is not
here?” consistently troubles the research participants in terms of why the group was so middle-class, so white, and so female. Pertaining to the cemetery, the question is about whether or not the cemetery is a welcoming place, and for whom. Especially since this research involves two city-owned, public cemeteries, participants are fairly insistent that a lot could be done to make the cemetery welcoming to all members of the community regardless of cultural background, class, gender, and so on. To be clear: participants do not go in the direction of seeing the cemetery as a highly political site, but they readily explore the practical and symbolic ways in which the cemetery can be much clearer about what it often subtly implies about who is welcome and who is not welcome, what kind of memorialization is or is not for purchase (and for how much), whether or not mortality is something that should concern us at any other time other than a funeral, and so on.

**Toward Community Development and Hope**

To further examine the extent to which the cemetery could be seen not only as a viable, but an attractive or necessary location for certain community events, I configured one of the optional homework assignments to elicit proposed texts for permanent or temporary signs that could be installed in the cemetery. Assuming that a cemetery sign (especially a permanent sign) can give voice to our assumptions, hopes, and visions for what can take place in the cemetery (and who can be present in the cemetery) these proposed texts shed further light on the potential for the cemetery as a community gathering place. The following examples are submitted by April, Thea, and Marcy:

Welcome to Mount Hope Cemetery
As you enter this cemetery we encourage you to think about lives lived in years past, as well as your own life and those close to you.
As you walk through this cemetery we invite you to read about the history of Kitchener-Waterloo through the lives of those who are buried here. Look for historical plaques throughout our cemetery.
We also invite you to sit and ponder as you read the inspirational words of philosophers, theologians and writers.
Welcome (Homework submission from April).

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Welcome to Mount Hope Cemetery.
This is a place where you can visit the past, live the present, imagine the future.
Please be at home here! (Homework submission from Thea)

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Welcome to Mount Hope Cemetery.
As you walk through this cemetery, you are encouraged to reflect on your mortality. In this place, we can experience the changing of the seasons and remember that all of life succumbs to death. We may fear, ignore, fight against, accept or even welcome this reality. But it is a reality nonetheless.

Life is a gift and should be lived fully and completely while we tread on this earth. What lies on the other side of death is a mystery and can be approached with reverence and hope that all will be well on the other side of the veil. Do not be afraid! All will be well.

You are invited to be fully human in this place. You may run, laugh and play, or sit quietly and reflect, as long as you do so with a sense of reverence and respect for those buried here and their survivors.

The people buried here come from all walks of life. They were men and women, rich and poor, from diverse racial and cultural ethnic backgrounds, of different sexual orientations, of different abilities, of different ages at death, and different in so many other ways. Yet death does not differentiate. Why do we differentiate in life?

You are invited to bring your friends and meet new people in this place. Build community! It is good for the soul.

May you experience peace, hope, comfort and perhaps even a deep joy as you embrace the mystery of life and death (Homework submission from Marcy).

If we evaluate these sign proposals through the eyes of critical pedagogy, we see a fertile coming-together of individual concern, community concern, and what we might call cosmic concern. April’s submission very efficiently primes us to realize that entering the cemetery means entering a place that pertains to the local community both past and present, and that it is worth putting the physical location together with philosophical or theological insight. Marcy’s sign integrates a joyful invitation to “be fully human in this place” while simultaneously advising a frank confrontation with socio-economic and cultural discrimination. She also urges cemetery-goers to contemplate their own mortality as well as the universality of both life and death in general.

This speaks to a consciousness-related matter that will figure prominently in the next chapter but for now, by corollary, it is important to identify the classroom-related matter. In
contrast to certain learning environments that emphasize sameness (for example, a grade-
school classroom in which the roster and the learning activities get decided based on all the
students being the same age) or difference (for example, a workshop that attracts a diverse
group of participants and finds pedagogical ways to draw constructive attention to the
differences among participants), the cemetery classroom emphasizes relatedness. While it
certainly facilitates critical discussion about similarities and differences in human experience,
the cemetery classroom urges participants to see both similarities and differences as
secondary components within a more fundamental relatedness of life which, in turn,
interconnects with death. Later I will consider how participants become aware of this
relatedness as an aspect of critical consciousness, but here the importance has to do with how
the cemetery classroom can lead to community development and hope. Recalling Wolff’s
assertion that “all life is a single system” (2010, p. 209), we can sharpen the focus on the
cemetery classroom by bringing together the universality articulated in Marcy’s sign and the
implied historicity in April’s sign with a community development approach that pays close
attention to what I am calling the relatedness of life and death. According to Wolff, “[a]n
complex translation of an understanding of interdependence into community work involves
the awareness that any person’s present and future state is determined by a wide range of
factors – often called social determinants – that have an impact on that individual’s life.
(2010, p. 209). The cemetery then becomes a specific place in which we can explore how a
person’s future, final state of being deceased is determined by social, political, economic, and
cultural factors, and, given the interconnectedness of life and death, the cemetery teaches
about these social, political, economic, and cultural factors as constituting a politics of
interconnectedness in which participate both the living and the dead.

Embedded in this politics is a sidebar question with both theoretical and practical
import: How do we carry out intersectional work in the context of relatedness? When it is no
longer “just” the intersection of multiple, conflicting identities of privilege and oppression,
how do we learn to interact with one another when these multiple, conflicting identities are
joined by the certainty of death that both undivides and unconforms human communities? It
seems to me that engaging this question means not only unlearning patterns of binary
thinking, but also tapping into a unique way of re-humanizing the difficult work of building
solidarity in the face of patriarchy, racism, and other pathological manifestations of power.
Learning how to become more fully human then contains (or is contained within) the process of learning how to work with and celebrate human difference in the context of community. Based on her experience as an educator, hooks (2003) explains that

[w]e become more sane as we face reality and drop sentimental notions like “We are all just human, just the same,” and learn both to engage our differences, celebrating them when we can, and also rigorously confronting tensions as they arise. And it will always be vital, necessary for us to know that we are all more than our differences, that it is not just what we organically share that can connect us but what we come to have in common because we have done the work of creating community, the unity within diversity… (pp. 109-110).

In the pedagogy of the deceased, while I believe that we are exploring something that is “more than our differences”, we dare not underestimate the work required to comprehend the unity within diversity, with death left in.

Lest we lose track of the concrete manifestation of this pedagogy, we can return to what participants actually experienced in the cemetery classroom, even without a sign encouraging them to adopt universality or historicity. Tana explains that meeting in the cemetery provokes

a lot of thought around what do poor people do when they die, and who takes care of them? That sort of education makes you think about people who are necessarily on the edge of society in the first place and makes you more aware of them because everybody dies, so what’s the difference between the dude in the house [in the wealthier neighbourhood] and somebody who’s hanging out at the soup kitchen? (Tana, closing interview).

Furthermore, according to Tana, the cemetery itself speaks of the contradictions around social and economic class. The cemetery itself

makes you more aware of things like caste and money and privilege – especially white privilege. It made me more aware of that because of the way that the indigent were sort of put together in a little space with no markers, and nobody even knows which way they’re lying. That was a bit of an eye-opener for me, actually. It’s not something you think about unless you actually go to that place and take part in something like this. There’s no way of knowing that that is the spot where all the indigent were….There’s no sign. Nothing. No indicators at all. But anybody who’s got enough money for a stone – and those things are bloody expensive, too, right?
Five grand a piece – if you’ve got enough money for a nice stone, then everybody knows where you are (Tana, closing interview).

Part of what is at stake here is the implied lesson for community development. While many have called death something along the lines of “the great leveller”, the cemetery classroom appears to teach the opposite – i.e. death as the great *emphasizer* of socio-economic disparity. Even if we say that death and/or the cemetery teach both lessons in dialectical tension, the research pushes for a clearer sense of the implications for community development.

To put the matter succinctly, it seems disingenuous to engage in justice- and inclusion-oriented community-building while simultaneously burying the community in such a way that reassigns and communicates disparity in a permanent exhibit. By applying the tools of death-inclusionary praxis and humanizing praxis, I am contending that the pedagogy of the deceased reframes the cemetery as a place to learn about how the building and the burying of community can be contiguous and co-contributive toward social justice. Secondly, I am contending that this pedagogy carries an ontological claim about how both human sameness and human difference are brought together into a deep relatedness or interconnectedness. Thirdly, I am contending that an appreciation for community development requires that we learn about this relatedness in light of concrete (local) realities of social, political, economic, and cultural significance that are implicated, conjointly, in the processes of community-building and community-burying. In the next chapter I will analyze the role of consciousness in these processes, but before doing so I need to speak pointedly about how hope fits into this pedagogy.

The core research question asks about how a cemetery classroom can lead to hope. Cemetery Café participants view hope quite variously. Marcy reports that “it felt like we were sort of a little community and even though not all of us are going on to take some sort of social action out of this, we were brainstorming ideas for social change together, and that felt hopeful” (closing interview with Marcy). Feeling more baffled, Marlys says “hope is just kind of out there. It’s interesting and provocative, but connecting hope to cemeteries is still a bit weird for me” (closing interview with Marlys) and this is echoed by Rosena: “It’s a bit puzzling or disconnected for me to connect hope to a cemetery. I’m just not quite there” (closing interview with Rosena). Tending toward cynicism, Jasper defines hope as “whatever we look forward to in the future that will get us through the present. The flip side of that is
that often hope is just an excuse to keep doing whatever we’re doing so that in the future maybe there’ll be a different result…it’s looking forward to something different in the future but in practice hope often looks like a reason not to change” (opening interview with Jasper).

By contrast, April articulates dissatisfaction with any concept of hope that does not involve some sort of effort. She states “if I was to hope my kids are going to grow up – well you can’t just hope, you’ve got to do something because if you don’t do something, they’re not going to grow up well” (opening interview with April). Rather than hope as a reason not to change, April talks about hope as a reason to act: “[It makes sense to work on something] and then have faith that it’s going to work, but ‘I hope it’s going to work’ – that doesn’t seem like quite enough to me. I think there needs to be something more than just hoping about it” (ibid.). This is along the lines of the definition of hope I composed in the midst of the literature review (here with a Freirean preface): As an ontological need, hope illuminates the threshold of future possibilities for justice, peace, and wellbeing and simultaneously, paradoxically locates that threshold in (but does not necessarily remain limited by) human action in the present.

Yet, in the context of the cemetery classroom, is this about learning how to hope, or learning specific things to hope for, or learning about other things entirely, with hope as a by-product? Consider two contrasting hope-related statements by research participants.

Referring to the cemetery, Grace declares “I hope that one day…we intermingle, that we don’t have to say this is the Catholic area and this is the Jewish area, you know? It would be more inclusive and people could be, like, this is the people who want to be buried under the oak tree and this is the people who want to be…. Pick your tree!” (closing interview with Grace). Assuming that Grace intends to comment only on the intermingling of those who choose to have their bodies or their ashes buried in a cemetery (indeed, many would probably consider such intermingling to be an erasure of their own distinctive death-related traditions and beliefs that do not pertain to cemeteries), then she is getting at something about liberation for the community of the dead. Jasper puts forward the thought that, in addition to being a reason not to change, hope can be “a reason not to look at facts. For instance, mortality. You can hope all you want that you’re not going to die, but you’re still going to die, so hope is not really helpful when you’re looking at death” (opening interview with Jasper). This is getting at something about acknowledging limitation – in this case, of each of
us as mortals (leaving aside the matter of when it might or might not be appropriate for someone to hope that they will not die a premature death). Again we encounter the dialectics of liberation-limitation and, in light of hope as needing to be accompanied with action (vis-à-vis April’s assertion about hope, my own definition of hope, and the implied agentive make-up of humanization), this dialectics suggests the need for a sharpened, hope-attentive understanding of praxis.

To proceed in the negative: We cannot have action, reflection, theory, action, reflection, theory, over and over and over again until the sun turns to ice, unless we are content either to traffic in disembodied, abstracted human beings rather than real, live people who are limited by mortality, or to satisfy ourselves with praxis itself as an abstraction. As a process that takes place in history, praxis is shaped by all that aspires toward liberation as well as all that is characterized by limitation, including the limitation of death. It should be no surprise that this begins to resemble the earlier point I made about how death should not be seen as an interruption of humanization, except the point here is about the way that hope ensures that humanization contributes to larger historical change. Figure 5.4 below is excerpted from my fieldnotes where I was trying to depict the necessity of forward-moving praxis (the spiralling at the bottom) rather than what I often wonder is the implied “static praxis” of a model in which the action, reflection, and theory components circle insularly and interminably.
What the bottom of this diagram is depicting and what is coming to light in the Cemetery Café is that, acknowledging the presumed dynamism of action, reflection, and theory, hope is what ensures that praxis will be neither linear nor circular. To proceed in the positive: hope ensures a creative, building, maturing process that can only be poorly portrayed as a spiralling or whirling of historical change. Hope ensures that we can see how another world is possible, and hope invites us, even depends on us, to contribute proactively with that “another world” in mind. If mortality was not a factor, not only would all historical change fall on each person’s shoulders, but the Earth would become ever more overcrowded with people, all of whom are beleaguered with the stress of making sure history turns out properly. Fortunately, according to Marcy, mortality brings community together because it forces people to rely on one another, to support each other, and to ask for help. She contends that “[d]eath of some can make way for leadership of others. It keeps things evolving and changing and growing and maybe growth is inhibited if nothing ever dies” (opening interview with Marcy). Thea puts forward a similar thought by saying that mortality gives
rise to “a cycling of new ideas, new people, new things” (opening interview with Thea). In these quotes, let us not miss what some would regard as a radical challenge to the way we think about mortality. Recall the assertion by Wisman and Heflick (2016) that hope is directly challenged by death: “Death signals the potential for all aspects of hope to be completely obliterated” (p. 883). Quite to the contrary, Marcy and Thea are staking out the rather audacious claim that death can actually facilitate the renewing of community and the rising of new possibilities.

Then How?

The second core research question asks how the cemetery classroom can lead to community development and hope. My claim is that the cemetery (among other such places) is a classroom in which we can learn how to take our place in the community-building and community-burying work that continues in pursuit of the “another world” that has come up several times already. How does this happen? Admittedly, there is some imprecision in what it means to “take our place in the community-building and community-burying work”, let alone in how to define the requisite pedagogical tools for learning the taking of our place. Indeed, as much as the four meetings of the Cemetery Café featured some rich conversation and fascinating interaction, they very much constituted an exploratory effort only, and my own fledgling efforts as a Cemetery Café facilitator leave much more to be gained in how to lead this sort of educational process. Building on the insights and experiences of Cemetery Café participants, it is apparent that more needs to be said about how the cemetery classroom can lead to community development and hope, which is why the second Course of Action in the concluding chapter will attempt to pinpoint at least a few more specific ways to configure the cemetery classroom.

In asking how the cemetery classroom can lead to community development and hope, we should not ignore the role of the cemetery pedagogue. In the methodology chapter I wrote about the reflexive work of “grabbing myself by the collar, turning on a bright light, and grappling with how my identity influences the choices I make within the research process”. I also quoted from Preissle and deMarrais (2015) who define reflexivity as “the practice of studying and documenting the researcher within the research”. In this regard, a documentary
note is that I did not ask participants to give me feedback on my facilitation; this in itself is noteworthy, although I should add that each closing interview included questions about what worked well and what did not work well about the Cemetery Café. As far as my own self-assessment, I often find it easy to be a harsh critic. The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes after the last meeting of the Cemetery Café:

People were tired. I was feeling pretty up-beat but when I read fatigue on people’s faces, I started to falter, wondering if I was failing to connect. One person thanked me for leading the meetings, but also described them as having wacky activities that didn’t seem to be connected – but that they were memorable, that she’ll always remember lying in the cemetery. What is this project other than wacky?... I have questions about my ability as a facilitator, and I wonder how much we’re actually doing anything in the realm of critical pedagogy (fieldnotes, April 25, 2017).

As previously noted, some participants gave positive feedback about my efforts toward hospitality, and a few people expressed appreciation for the interesting assortment of activities. The one slightly more extended comment on my facilitation includes reference to the community development and hope themes of this chapter, which is why I include it here:

I think part of this whole project is you and your way of being with us as learners, so I think that really worked well. I think it could go to a place of fear for some people and, if you weren’t who you were, I think it might have a little more maybe. Maybe not. I don’t know. I just found your presence and your way of being and your allowing us to…like, you were really good at getting a sense of what’s really happening and not sticking to your agenda, do you know what I mean? Like, “OK this isn’t going to work…” or “This is going to work…” or being inclusive. So I think that would also be important for both hope and community development. It’s also the approach of what you bring to that (closing interview with Carla).

Through the lens of the second core research question, Carla is expressing the importance of a certain approach, a certain “way of being with” that befits the work of hope and community development. This resonates with the material in the literature review about how critical pedagogy should be seen as an approach, a way of aspiring toward deepened community (Ife, 2013; Ledwith, 2016). However, building on the experience of the Cemetery Café, we can engage the second core research question with additional, strategic proposals for how to configure the cemetery classroom – hence, the second Course of Action in Chapter 7.
I began this section by admitting some imprecision about what it means to learn about community development in the cemetery. From this chapter’s themes of hospitality and embodied learning, the next part of the analytical trajectory moves into critical consciousness which then represents high-risk/high-gain territory, since delving into human consciousness can become many things other than precise. Freire can offer the segue. As I noted in the literature review, Freire does not explicitly elaborate on death and mortality in any of his writings on critical pedagogy, although I have argued that his view on humanization lends itself to such elaboration. When he does grapple with ontological limitations vis-à-vis the pedagogy of the oppressed, he claims that “[i]t is precisely a ‘reading of the world’ that enables its subject or agent to decipher, more and more critically, the ‘limit situation’ or situations beyond which they find only ‘untested feasibility’” (1994, p. 105). The cemetery might be regarded as one of the most striking examples of a finite limit situation, one of the clearest pieces of evidence that freedom’s quest cannot be interminable, and yet – this gives us a glimpse of how little we understand about the relationship between things finite and things infinite – even in the cemetery there seems to be something of untested feasibility. In Pedagogy of the Heart, Freire orients education in relation to the consciousness of finitude: “In order for finiteness, which implies a process, a claim for education, it is necessary that the being involved becomes aware of it” (1997, p. 93). To analyze the cemetery classroom through this lens is to shine a bright light on the dynamism of being-in-finiteness and being-in-process (toward knowledge, freedom, justice, and so on) or, using my terminology, the dialectics of liberation-limitation. But the crux of the matter has to do with learning to develop awareness. Freire continues: “Consciousness of one’s inconclusiveness makes that being educable. Unfinishedness in the absence of consciousness about it engenders domestication and cultivation. Animals are domesticated; plants are cultivated; men and women educate themselves” (pp. 93-94). How do we become conscious of our inconclusiveness, and in what ways does the awareness of mortality connect with a critical approach to “being educable”? My claim is that this connection can be learned in the cemetery and in the work of hope even though, ironically, truthfully, our understanding of hope is finite, too.
Chapter 6
THE CONSCIOUSNESS
Welcoming and Being Welcomed

The third core research question looks into the relationship between human mortality and critical consciousness. There are several ways to explore this question: First, we can probe the inner workings of critical consciousness to see how one’s awareness of mortality affects the kinds of knowledge one can accumulate or create within the purview of critical consciousness (similar to how we might explore the way in which a person’s awareness of how tall they are affects how they walk through a forest with many low branches). Second, we can examine how the condition of mortality itself, the finitude of being human, affects the basic make-up and the limits of critical consciousness (similar to how we might explore the specific ways in which our physical condition of being bipedal affects how we learn about the world, whether we are aware of our bipedalism or not). Third, we could take a Freirean pedagogical approach in which the deeper epistemological dynamics are only relevant insofar as the reflection- and action-oriented strategies (for unveiling reality and becoming critically aware of the oppressive conditions within that reality) are helped or hindered by an encounter with mortality. Ultimately, the Cemetery Café meetings involved aspects of all these approaches. Perhaps it is important to reiterate that the research methodology is not positivist-experimental in the sense of finding a cause-and-effect relationship, although some of the data presented in this section might begin to sound like, “If you lead such-and-such an activity in the cemetery, it will cause participants to have such-and-such an awareness of…”. Rather, the process here is iterative and in line with Freire’s conscientization – “the process in which [people], not as recipients, but as knowing subjects achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality” (1985; p.93). While my research seeks to comprehend this deepening awareness in the particular context of the cemetery, it is important to remind ourselves that the pursuit of this awareness extends well beyond this one context; indeed, there are various socially, culturally, and religiously-defined contexts (and/or discourses) in which mortality and critical consciousness interact.
Several participant quotes provide a good entry point into the relationship between mortality and consciousness in general. Leona says that mortality gives purpose to life because “when something is finite then you value it. If it’s endless then it’s meaningless, it’s always there, it’s always replenished…so to know that something will end makes the value of its existence valuable” (Leona, opening interview). Carla’s reflection is that “I think it heightens my focus. It’s like a lens….When I think about death I become so grateful for what I’m feeling today or what I have today or I think what do I want to do if I only had a year left to live, what would I want to do? And so it brings clarity to what really matters” (Carla, opening interview). In a somewhat humorous reference to how mortality can promote a healthful or protective mindset, Beth wonders if a risk management approach might say that “if you don’t have to worry about dying then everybody would be skydiving and eating Oreos for breakfast” (Beth, opening interview). All of these speak to a general connection between mortality and individual awareness, but what about social awareness?

Since the cemetery itself constitutes an important part of the pedagogy of the deceased, it makes sense that seasonal temperature changes in the cemetery would influence the cultivation of consciousness. April speaks about how meeting in that particular outdoor setting toward the end of autumn contributed to a helpful kind of awareness: “Even in the cold, that’s what I like about it because it’s uncomfortable – it should be uncomfortable if you’re going to be thinking about death and dying and mortality….It’s not comfortable to think about mortality, so I like the idea of being cold and suffering a little bit” (April, closing interview). April also notes that, for these particular events that included hot drinks and snacks, the contextual factors combined to form a unique experience that corresponded to Ledwith’s definition of critical pedagogy that had been distributed to participants:

that Ledwith thing where she talked about critical pedagogy… ‘the contradiction of the structures of society’…so sitting at a table and having tea and cookies in a cemetery kind of makes you think differently. So it changes your reality of, ‘OK we don’t usually sit in the cemetery and have tea or coffee’. So this is a good way to try to change the thinking because everywhere else you sit and have tea and coffee but not there, so I think that was a good way to kind of tweak people’s thinking (ibid.).
Moving back into the previously-specified theme of relatedness, Marcy notes how the cemetery setting created a heightened awareness of mortality, and she explains how this awareness of mortality engendered a sense of interconnectedness:

> It definitely made me much more keenly aware of my own mortality….The embodiment experience was very significant for me and being surrounded by [the boxes with] the urns and the pictures made me wonder what my little box will be like. Connected with being aware of my mortality is also feeling much more aware of being connected to the plants, the animals, the earth, the soil, the rivers, feeling like, ‘Wow, I’m part of this living world and dying world!’ (Marcy, closing interview).

Leona also addresses interconnectedness but through the lens of belonging. She reflects that whereas people in our society often find belonging through joining or cheering for particular sports teams or through buying the latest, coolest clothing or gadget, the cemetery actually offers another kinds of belonging, but one that we resist:

> We don’t want to belong to the earth. That’s hard. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust – to belong to a cemetery – oh my gosh, that’s heavy! That’s no fun!... I mean, everybody belongs to the earth [but] often what’s helpful about belonging is that someone doesn’t belong. That’s how you know who’s in and who’s out, right? That’s your team (closing interview).

Through the lens of critical pedagogy, these quotes do not focus overtly on the awareness of socio-political oppression, but they corroborate the notion that humanization can take place in the cemetery, and the last quote by Leona in particular makes the link between the consciousness of being included by death and the consciousness of including or excluding others. In the literature review I looked at how praxis becomes a humanizing and historical process, and I noted that although Freire himself did not elaborate on the materiality of this process vis-à-vis the mortality of human beings, his construction of humanizing praxis lends itself to such elaboration. I also looked at how Freire’s recognition of the historicity of knowledge prefigures the specificity of all human-experienced realities from economic justice/injustice to gender- and race-based difference to the eventuality of death. In this regard, Leona offers a snapshot of what I earlier called an unexamined overlap between critical pedagogy and death education: “we don’t live our lives thinking that we’re going to die, and so I think by its very nature, [death-based pedagogy] can do nothing but
question everyday life, and it identifies a huge contradiction – life and death, here and not here, acting and not acting, and through that provides an opportunity to nuance other contradictions that exist” (Leona, closing interview). How does this nuancing find its way into identifiable choices within the pedagogy of the deceased? Are there strategies for raising this kind of consciousness, and/or for capitalizing on it when it has been raised otherwise? As I turn to specific pedagogical initiatives in the next section, Freire’s work on conscientization will be close at hand.

**A Way to Raise Consciousness?**

Before looking at pedagogical initiatives that can raise a certain kind of consciousness in or pertaining to the cemetery, it is noteworthy that in the case of one of Waterloo’s publicly-owned cemeteries, city staff have been intentional about encouraging a reciprocal relationship between Parkview Cemetery and the adjacent lands (the cemetery is bordered by a wooded park, a series of sports fields, and a dog park, all owned by the City) thereby nurturing a certain view or attitude vis-à-vis the cemetery:

That was a deliberate design, part of the Master Plan…to create more of an integrated space between cemetery, wooded space, open space, and with our sports usage as well. So…whether it’s a mountain bike group or a soccer group coming through, or someone using the baseball facility or tennis [facility] or dogpark…it’s kind of, we’re all getting along, we’re all appreciating and respecting that other use…so that was certainly a conscious effort to implement an approach and a design to the park and the cemetery. We took down fences so that we could integrate that over time. There’s a relationship there (opening interview with Jim).

Jim’s account is striking in how unpretentiously it expresses a vision of something quite momentous: different people getting along and respecting each other, including users of sports fields, dog parks, and cemeteries. In this particular case, taking down the fences can be seen as a significant contextual detail that can affect how we think about the cemetery and how we might envision a mingling of the consciousness of things mortal (cemetery) with the consciousness of things recreational (park, sportsfields, etc.). Interestingly, in the case of Mount Hope Cemetery, adjacent or nearby properties (not owned by the City, in this case) include such things as a hospital, a high school, a tool and die factory, a grocery store, a midwifery clinic, and many single-family homes, and so we could imagine what sorts of
consciousness-raising would be possible by “taking down the fences” between these various lands and encouraging the various users to appreciate one another.

As we delve into the arena of consciousness-raising, we can look at specific pedagogical initiatives that are designed to provoke, inspire, or encourage a certain kind of awareness vis-à-vis mortality, death, and/or the cemetery. For example, one of the homework assignments involved coming up with an itemized list entitled “Why Our Community Benefits from the Fact that People are Mortal”. I believe it is relevant to clarify that this homework was assigned toward the end of the Cemetery Café project, and so at this point participants could look back on a number of death- and cemetery-related discussions, activities, and experiences. Marcy submitted the following list:

Eleven Reasons Why Our Community Benefits From the Fact that People are Mortal

1. When we die we allow for regeneration of ideas for social change. Youth with fresh energy to tackle problems such as climate change, economic injustice, racial inequality and more can now take on leadership positions.
2. Cadavers fertilize the soil and can provide nutrients for plants, trees, bugs and other parts of the ecosystem.
3. If we were immortal and continued to reproduce, we would quickly over populate the earth and use too many resources.
4. Mortality forces us to rely on each other. If we were immortal we could survive as islands unto ourselves. Because we are mortal, we are vulnerable and need to rely on our families, friends, and communities to love and care for us because our bodies will fail us one day.
5. Mortality forces us to get along. We need peace, love, kindness, generosity, compassion, justice, mercy, and forgiveness to live together as mortal beings and ensure the survival of our species. If we were immortal, we wouldn’t worry about human beings surviving and we could be nasty and brutish towards each other.
6. Mortality is a great equalizer. No matter what our race, gender, class, nationality, sexual orientation, or level of health and ability, we are all mortal beings and will all die.
7. Mortality connects us – it’s something we have in common with other humans, plants, and animals. It should cause us to see ourselves as part of the ecosystem rather than outside of it.
8. Cemeteries are public spaces for community members to gather and spend time in. If we weren’t mortal, we wouldn’t need cemeteries.
9. Mortality enables us to feel things more deeply. If we were immortal, we would not experience devastating loss, or on the flip side, abundant joy.
10. Mortality is linked to our spiritual impulse and our need for connection to the Divine. If we lived forever we would not need God.
11. Mortality provides employment for undertakers, clergy and other religious leaders, coffin-makers, and others involved in the business of death. (homework from Marcy)

Of course, we could spend time assessing to what extent the items in this list should be regarded as observations as compared to proposals or invitations for people to cultivate a certain outlook on the significance of mortality. Either way, the list provides a remarkable foundation for what we might call a “death-positive” consciousness. Through the lens of humanizing praxis, I would go further. Given Marcy’s rather comprehensive itemization of benefits, especially in regards to multiple aspects of both individual and community life, I see her list as a sort of re-framing of human existence itself, and thus we have not simply a series of distinct points but a combined, the-whole-is-bigger-than-the-sum-of-its-parts effort that ends up re-aggregating the features of human existence. And as a pedagogical or curricular piece, this list puts things like justice and community-building alongside things like broad ecological concern and an individual person’s spiritual impulse, and so it encapsulates an inclusive and integrative approach to consciousness-raising. It also makes a fascinating assertion that mortality provides the community with cemeteries, implying an embedded consciousness-raising piece about the value of the cemetery as a potential community space.

As previously noted, one of the homework assignments involved drafting some text for a possible sign to be installed in the cemetery. The previous chapter included several examples of participants’ submissions for this assignment, and an additional example is the following sign text by Jasper:

Welcome to Mount Hope Cemetery
In this earth all earths are united; the various sundry lands from which all our bodies hail are joined in one greenness of smoothing out. Inequities, iniquities, troubles of the flesh, all find their end here, where flesh returns to earth.

As you enter, tread lightly on the memory of those who have gone before, and whose earth is now bequeathed to us and to our descendants. Remember you are among the dead, who are with us still. Remember that you will return from this place to your place among the living.

Look for signs of the living in this place. Look for the places where the two worlds touch, softly, and ask what messages pass between them.

This cemetery is a place for rejoining. What was old will be new. What was whole will be reconciled. Welcome to the living and the dying.

(Homework submission from Jasper)
This text expresses themes of connectedness, remembrance, and mystery, and it issues a direct mandate to “tread lightly”. It also articulates the amazing thought that both inequities and iniquities find their end in this place, and we might wonder whether to be gratified, bewildered, or offended at this assertion. An important question about this submission relates to the extent to which going through the opening interview and/or attending the first Cemetery Café meeting inspired Jasper to write the text this way. Given my research methodology and my integrative-interpretive analytical approach, this question will remain unanswerable in this context, although I can certainly make a reasonable claim that there must have been something about the combination of my facilitation, the group chemistry, and the cemetery itself that steered Jasper’s choice of wording. Furthermore, by conjecture, we can think about how this sign could actually impact passers-by in the cemetery, whether or not it could implant something of the same sort of “consciousness of connectedness”, and whether or not its expression of the rejoicing and reconciliation themes could encourage people to situate their own mortality in a positive light. To be clear: this may not have much to do with the hunt for conspicuous aspects of consciousness; it may have more to do with the cultivation of an overarching “way of looking”.

It should be noted that what I am calling mortalized consciousness can certainly emerge within various sites of learning outside of the kind of pedagogical initiatives under discussion here. Some death educators make the claim that in fact, from one end of the life course to the other, much of our learning about death and mortality actually happens within informal settings where the lessons come through day-to-day interactions, negotiations of family matters, conversations with friends, and the like. We can see an example of this in the following interview excerpt when April is describing an interaction she had with her four year-old granddaughter:

I’m going to tell you the story about my granddaughter, okay? So last week we were going away and she was going away to visit her other grandparents, so she was sitting there and all of a sudden she says, “Omi, where is your grandma and grandpa, and where is your mom and dad?” And I went, “Oh, well they got old, sweetie, and they died.” And she went, “They died? But you’re not going to, right?” And I went, “No, not me, not for a long time.” But what are you going to say to a four year-old? You’re going to freak them out completely. I thought, “O my goodness.” Yeah, that to me is mortality…you know, seeing the end. When I think of dying I think, “It doesn’t matter to me. If I die, I die.” But my kids, they’re getting to the age where they’d
probably be okay, but my grandkids – I see them every day. I can’t leave them! So that’s mortality – that brings it right home for me (April, opening interview).

This is to recognize that the relationship between mortality and critical consciousness – or any consciousness for that matter! – need not depend on intentional pedagogical work. What I am calling mortalization sometimes takes place quite unbidden, yet can still cause long-term changes of consciousness. Working from my own fieldnotes, I believe that mortality is not just the fact of death but also the reckoning with death. It’s something about how death is an event you can record on a certain day, at a certain time, in a certain place, but it’s also something that you come to terms with at a very, very deep level. And so mortality is not like a picture on the wall that you can look at and then turn away from. It’s a reality that enters you on a spiritual and emotional level, and in some ways you can never really turn away from it once you’ve seen it (fieldnotes, October 2016).

**Acting and Reflecting in the Body**

Another approach to the question of how to raise consciousness within the pedagogy of the deceased is to examine the link between consciousness-raising and embodied learning, first by analyzing a photo that was taken at the third Cemetery Café meeting (Figure 6.1 below). This meeting took place in a city-owned community centre because I decided it was inadvisable to meet in the cemetery in the middle of January (in Southwestern Ontario, at least). During this meeting, participants created a list of top-priority social justice issues for the local community and, in pairs, began to discuss action strategies for addressing these issues. After about ten minutes, I suddenly interrupted the discussions. In each pair, Partner A was told to lie on the floor and Partner B was instructed to cover Partner A with a piece of fabric, including their face. Once this pose was set up, everyone took a few moments of silence to observe the situation from their particular vantage point. I did not explain the meaning of the pose; I assumed the death-suggestiveness was obvious (i.e. the cloth over the whole body alluding to a situation in which a dead body gets covered).
After a minute or two of quiet, everyone returned to their seats to continue discussing action strategies for addressing the particular social justice issue they had chosen. In terms of pedagogy, my hope was that this embodied activity would creatively and abruptly invoke an awareness of mortality that would imbue the remaining conversation with some sort of death-attentive consciousness.

Immediately afterwards, several participants made verbal remarks about the activity being interesting, but for at least two participants the activity failed to meet its specific objective: Rosena reports “I was on the floor with the cloth drawn over my body. For me, it didn’t relate significantly to any of the [research] themes. Perhaps a bit to mortality, although I haven’t imagined myself dead and didn’t then” (Rosena, closing interview). Similarly, Marlys says “[w]hile it was a memorable experience in that it was unusual, I can’t say that it
related to the themes of mortality, hope, community, or social justice in any particular way” (Marlys, closing interview). While this activity holds unique potential because of the relatively simple way of evoking an embodied reminder of death for both the person covering and the person being covered, my overall conclusion is that I did not facilitate the activity effectively. I suspect that if participants were given a much more explicit clarification of what the pose is meant to signify, it could infuse a more palpable sense of mortality. I also suspect that if the activity would be followed by guided questions about why an awareness of mortality might be relevant to a discussion about social justice, or if the activity would be accompanied with storytelling about specific members of the community who have died, participants could make more connections between mortality and community.

Before turning to other research data pertaining to the connection between consciousness and embodied learning, it is worth bearing in mind how activities such as lying down in the cemetery or covering up one’s conversation partner with a sheet relate to education and conscientization in the Freirean tradition of critical pedagogy. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire states that problem-posing education “strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (1970; p.68). Integral to this problem-posing approach is the collective process of conscientization “in which [people], not as recipients, but as knowing subjects achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality” (1985; p.93). While this education relies on active participation from everyone – teacher-students and student-teachers – I have not seen any evidence that Freire used embodied simulations to prompt or facilitate conscientization. Perhaps we could examine Freire’s personal influence on Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (a form of social-change education) as well as on the tradition of forum theatre more generally since these theatrical pedagogies incorporate embodied interactions meant to simulate oppression and the throwing off of oppression. However, critical pedagogy itself has not particularly been known for theorization or practical training in the use of embodied learning, although academics’ untiring fascination with epistemology has generated increasing scholarly attention on how the body affects or contains knowledge, including critical-social and activist knowledge. Ollis (2012) explains that “[e]ducators tend to steer away from the perceived danger of the epistemology of the body. Bodies are messy and fleshy things, and educators are uncomfortable with emotionality
and the agency that emotions can give a learner. They can challenge and shift the authority of the educator in the learning process and in their management of the classroom” (p. 177). Here, bodies are messy and fleshy things that die, and even simulated dead bodies can have a pedagogical effect.

To be clear: covering up one’s conversation partner with a sheet seems fairly bizarre, but it can represent an elaboration of or, as Freire himself urged, a reinvention of conscientization. In this case, through the risks and benefits of embodied learning, problem-posing involves posing (striking up a pose associated with) the problem in order to pose the problem. In the case of the previously-described activity, posing as dead bodies was intended to foster an added, felt awareness to the naming of social justice issues and the posing of strategic options. Incidentally, all of this carries a specific challenge to praxis-based learning of any sort if the assumption is that reflection happens in the head or in the intellect as compared to action that happens with the whole body. Rather than separating the mind and the body, can praxis involve integration – an embodiment of action and an embodiment of reflection? Wilcox (2009) argues that “[i]f we take embodied knowledges seriously, it is not enough to simply add new tricks to our teaching, research, or activism oeuvre; we must re-examine our old tricks as well as our institutions” (p. 118), and here we might think of the “tricks” or leading edges of critical pedagogy that might be ready for more than just extracurricular forays into embodied learning. “In other words, our ultimate goal is not to add embodiment and stir; it is to invite conversations concerning embodied knowledges and their radical implications” (ibid.). This is why I believe that an important dimension of the pedagogy of the deceased is to practice ways of doing reflection in an embodied way.

Another embodied learning example comes from an activity that was meant to link hope and mortality, this time without depending on the cemetery as a location. Following a group discussion about critical pedagogy and about how social justice relates to the cemetery, I instructed each participant to trace the shape of their hand on a blank piece of paper and then (a) write the phrase “one day” above the pinky finger, (b) imagine what life could be like one day from now, and then (c) finish the sentence, “I hope that…” or “My hope is for…” After writing down their hope(s) for one day from now, participants then wrote the phrase “one month” above the next finger, imagined what life could be like one month from now, and then indicated their hopes. The same followed for the third finger, fourth finger,
and thumb corresponding to one year, one decade, and one century from now. As became obvious through this process, hope included in-the-moment hopes, mid-range hopes, as well as long-term “reveries” for the world long after the death of each participant. Given the preceding discussion about social justice and the cemetery, I assumed that socio-political hopes would be among those identified.

In the second part of the exercise, participants used the space “inside” the traced hand (i.e. the palm of the hand) to note what they could do to work toward or contribute to the hoped-for world they described above each finger (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3). This is where the hand became more than just a convenient way of organizing the five-fold timeframe; indeed, the palm became the point of interconnection between these different timeframes and provided a clear visualization of human agency vis-à-vis any hoped-for reality.

![Figure 6.2 – Example #1 of hand-hope images, April Cemetery Café](image)
In terms of consciousness, the traced line around all the fingers could represent our awareness of human limitations, including the limitation of one’s own lifespan, that restrict involvement in some way. Though it was not covered in this group discussion, the exercise also opens up some consideration of how the hand both represents the generic hand of anyone (i.e. all that is shared in human experience) and also erases particularities such as how a woman’s hand and a man’s hand are connected to different experiences, or how the history of racism is lived differently between people.

It should be noted that the exercise did not require participants to integrate socio-political issues into their written hopes. The two examples above include brief mentions of healthy community, peace, and ecological concern, but they also (very rightfully) identify quite personal matters about family well-being and vocational aspirations. Through the lens of critical pedagogy, such an exercise could be critiqued for allowing hope to be overly individualized, and for human subjectivity (the portion written in the palm of the hand) to be overly domesticated. Although we might envision a radical version of this exercise in which most of the hand images are emblazoned with revolutionary pledges, the application of
humanizing praxis sheds light on what actually happened in the sense that participants were empowered to reflect on their experience, to name a liberatory world-to-be, and to begin charting a course of action toward that world-to-be in such a way that honoured their agentive *and limited* role in the pursuit of that liberation. If the activity “strayed” into the private rather than the political, that may not be about the activity itself as much as about the hegemony of individualized and introspective approaches within death’s domain, to the detriment of political and community-minded approaches. This is not to absolve my responsibility as the facilitator. If the activity is repeated, humanizing praxis demands an explicit instruction for participants to include socio-political hopes, and death-inclusionary praxis demands an explicit instruction for participants to be clear about how their socio-political efforts will be limited by the eventuality of death.

As part of debriefing the exercise in the meeting, several people observed that the exercise made them think about the specific limitation of human mortality. Weeks later, Marcy offers this observation:

> The very last exercise you had us do with our hands [in which] we had to reflect on “What do we hope for the world tomorrow, in a week, in a month” maybe was supposed to make us feel hopeful, because we were thinking about positive change and how to bring that about. But it made me feel anxious and a little worried that I don’t have long to do much, and I’m not sure that I’m spending my time wisely. Being aware of mortality made me feel very small in the grand scheme of the universe, and then that carried over into impacting change. So maybe that was supposed to make me feel hopeful, but it made me a little panicky (Marcy, closing interview).

I readily acknowledge that the exercise itself and/or my facilitation of the exercise could have been improved, but I also believe that Marcy’s strong expression of anxiety can be heard as a signal of both failure and success. On the one hand, if an exercise that is trying to foreground hope ends up making people feel anxious and worried, then surely it has failed miserably. On the other hand, if the exercise activates a clear sense of “hope for the world” and “positive change” and *simultaneously* causes people to become so keenly aware of their mortality, so conscious of being time-limited, then perhaps the exercise is a wonderful success with the kind of consciousness-raising (and problem-posing) being developed in this project. If the latter can be true, then the exercise certainly needs some optimizing so that participants walk
away with something more along the lines of, “I felt so aware of my limited time, and yet so excited about the possibilities for action!” Something of transformative learning theory may assist with this optimization, although the characterization of a “disorienting event” would need to be changed based on the thrust of this research which is toward mortalized consciousness being an orienting rather than a disorienting experience.

All Our Mortal Faculties

Based on earlier points about how the cemetery can be a classroom for community development, I conclude this chapter by looking at how consciousness and mortality interrelate when the pedagogy of the deceased goes portable, outside of the cemetery. One of the homework assignments involved replicating something of the cemetery classroom in a place other than a cemetery; the rationale was along the lines of “taking the cemetery to the people”. Participants submit ideas such as:

- Videos made available to the general public – e.g. video of a musical event or play that takes place in a cemetery (homework from Thea)

- Pop-up cemetery that can be set up in a large public place, including headstones made of canvas or wood – passers-by could be invited to write their own epitaph, or to post their own thoughts about what is important to do while still living (homework from Carla)

- Intergenerational workshop where different ages are brought together to reflect on death and mortality – this workshop could also raise awareness about different cultural and religious traditions around death (homework from Marcy)

- Combination cemetery/labyrinth set up in a large courtyard in a shopping mall: Around the outside are various informational displays about death and cemeteries – for those who choose to enter the labyrinth, a pathway leads to the centre where they can sit on a bench or spend time beside a small fountain or tree – small cards offer suggested topics for meditation, or space to write the name of a loved one (homework from Leona)

- “Forest school” program in which participants are led through a forest in late fall – the facilitator leads activities focusing on the decay of plants and animals, and the role of decomposition in the natural order of things (homework from Marcy)
- Replicable public presentation on topics such as green cemeteries, cultural differences and deathways, logistics of cemetery care (homework from Rosena)

- Cellphone app that provides information about cemeteries and/or death (homework from Rosena)

Each in their own way, these ideas provide creative entry points for what we could think of as cemetery outreach into the community, thereby enacting programmatic and portable manifestations of the cemetery classroom. Added to these could be popular education workshops, informational displays, or public events that raise awareness about parallels, contrasts, and tensions between mortality, race, class, gender, and other aspects of social location. In accordance with death-inclusionary praxis, any such ideas would need to be implemented in such a way that death does not get commoditized or downgraded into a spectacle; this is particularly important in North American society where, with exceptions like the professional service of a funeral home or the artful depiction of death on a movie screen, many people do not actually want to touch death with a ten-foot pole. In accordance with humanizing praxis, such ideas would need to be implemented with an overt commitment to social, political, ecological, and/or economic justice, the effect of which would clearly distinguish these initiatives from other (vitally important) death-related education pertaining to palliative care, grief counselling, suicide prevention, advance care planning, and so on. Interestingly, to “take the cemetery to the people” in these ways carries the strategic advantage of connecting the realities of death, which touch everyone in multiple ways throughout their lives, with the task of social justice which can often come across as the domain of progressive politics only.

To analyze these sorts of cemetery-outreach events in the broader framework I have been developing thus far, we can return to Freire’s pedagogical approach in which “conscientization does not take place in abstract beings in the air but in real men and women and in social structures” and in which “conscientization, which can only be manifested in the concrete praxis (which can never be limited to the mere activity of the consciousness) is never neutral; in the same way, education can never be neutral” (1974, p. 132). In her exposition of Freire’s notion of conscientization, Darder (2015) looks at the way in which the materiality of the human body governs the epistemological and agentive dynamics:
The human body...constitutes a significant political terrain from which all emancipatory knowledge must emerge. Without the materiality of the body, our teaching and learning is reduced to a process of abstraction and fragmentation that attempts to falsely render knowledge a neutral and objective phenomenon, absent of history and ideology. Freire recognized that it is the body that provides us the medium for our existence as subjects of history and as politically empowered agents of change (p. 69).

This implies a dialectical relationship between the body and consciousness and, therefore, “[f]or Freire, the greatest emancipatory potential that underlies a pedagogy of love is the integral enactment of our human faculties – body, mind, heart, and spirit – in our pedagogical and political struggles to awaken critical consciousness” (p. 79). As conceived within death-inclusionary praxis and as proposed in strategic-programmatic ideas, the pedagogy of the deceased seeks to enact the faculty not of the unspecified body but of the mortal body in a struggle to awaken critical consciousness. Consequently, as an arena for humanization and the cultivation of critical consciousness – socially, collectively, in community – the pedagogy of the deceased aspires to convene learning initiatives in which conscientization is concrete, grounded, and attentive to the ways in which mortality is implicated in social structures. In this sense, critical pedagogy challenges death education to not just “leave death in” as though it could be permitted to stay on a discretionary basis, but rather to learn what it means to proactively negotiate the social, cultural, political implications of death as experienced in unavoidable fashion by “real men and women in social structures”. This would seem to confirm the pedagogy of the deceased as a project in which all of our human faculties would be treasured, in part, by virtue of being shaped by mortality.

With this in mind, a pop-up cemetery exhibition, a culturally-diverse deathways workshop, or a cemetery-themed cellphone app could contribute to socio-political empowerment only if they enable participants to make the three-way link between the materiality-historicity of the human body, the materiality-historicity of social structures, and the materiality-historicity of human subjectivity. To the extent that this link can be made, the relationship between mortality and critical consciousness then appears to involve (a) materializing both in the sense that mortality can cause critical consciousness to emerge and in the sense that, rather than making consciousness abstract, mortality makes consciousness material (i.e. “of the material”), and (b) agentivizing in the sense that mortality activates
agentive human potential. To the second point, what remains unclear is how much mortality activates *collective, socially-conscious* agency as compared to individual agency. In any case, we could test this relational claim by gauging the psycho-somatic experiences of research participants or by doing a longitudinal study on whether/how participants become involved in community development work as a result of being involved in the cemetery classroom. These represent areas for future research.

In exploring the relationship between mortality and critical consciousness, I conclude by turning to a piece of homework submitted by Leona. The following is her rendering of an interactive sculpture that could be installed in a cemetery (Figure 6.3):
The casket would be of rugged design to withstand the wear-and-tear of individuals who choose to lie down and close the lid on top of themselves. The adjacent headstone features a blackboard or whiteboard on which each participant can write their name and epitaph in whatever way they wish. The welcome mat could be the most radical feature because it conveys the audacious image of death as the gracious host, holding open the door for us. This sort of installation could facilitate a truly amazing experience for someone who chooses to lie down in this way. Incidentally, there are already examples of death education initiatives involving a room full of caskets where students are led through a contemplative exercise that culminates with each of them lying down in their individual casket and watching the lid close over top of them (e.g. Sang-Hun, 2016). Any such activity can be seen through critical eyes in order to notice power, privilege, marginalization, and oppression. If people contemplating

Figure 6.4 – Homework submission by Leona
their own death amounts to self-help and personal enrichment only, that probably assumes that these people’s everyday experience is not marked by precarity or discrimination. If the pedagogy of the deceased devolves into an individualized hobby for the middle-class, then it has lost its way. Or if we think of situations marked by systematic, targeted oppression against certain groups of people, the communal version of the spend-a-few-moments-in-a-casket activity is no longer pedagogical; it is genocidal and horrific.

In a previous chapter I made the claim that we should see a connection between the building of community and the burying of community, and I have tried to demonstrate that the pedagogy of the deceased should be seen as an inherently collective enterprise. What would it look like for a community to encounter an interactive installation like the one proposed by Leona, or a participatory exercise that amounted to the same thing? To be clear: the purpose of this question is to get at something of the underlying collective consciousness that the pedagogy of the deceased is trying to engender. What does it mean for a community to be literally welcomed into the cemetery for the purpose of community development, and to be welcomed into mortality for the purpose of cultivating hope? When faced with the reality that mortality inscribes the human experience alongside race, gender, and class, how does a community learn to define what liberation might look like, and how to get there? Questions abound in the pedagogy of the deceased, which is a very good thing for an exploratory effort into the relatively untested, intersectional realm of mortality and critical consciousness. However, if questions are among the good fruits of a problem-posing pedagogy, then the danger of accumulating too many questions can be likened to heaping too many ripe fruits together. In order to prevent rot, it is important to channel at least some of these questions toward practical innovation. Hence, the concluding chapter picks up the consciousness-related question in the context of an ecologically-minded Course of Action.
Then What?

Another world is not only possible, she’s on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.

– Arundhati Roy

The third research question asks about the relationship between mortality and critical consciousness, and by now it should be clear that the pedagogy of the deceased is striving for a consciousness of something along the lines of Freire’s “untested feasibility”. The above quote by Roy, often repeated in the midst of social change activism, might be a succinct expression of this kind of consciousness – almost being able to see and touch the possible in all its beauty, while conceding that it might be a future generation that welcomes that world in its fullness. In this chapter I have worked through a number of pieces of data to explore how we might proactively raise consciousness about this “another world” vis-à-vis death and mortality, how to understand consciousness in relation to embodied learning, and how to situate these ideas alongside Freire’s approach to conscientization. Research participants offer a variety of perspectives on how to understand the mortality-consciousness connection, and they raise themes of interpersonal, community-based, and even planetary bases upon which to cultivate mortalized or death-appreciative awareness.

At the end of the day, what is the relationship between human mortality and critical consciousness? Of the three core research questions, this is the one that is most in need of elaboration and further study. In any case, my provisional claim is twofold: firstly, that the relationship is dialectical and that it is one of attunement (that is, mortality attunes critical consciousness); and secondly, that this relationship can be somewhat revealed through dialogical engagement vis-à-vis the level of awareness only, or greatly revealed through engaging in critical-embodied learning in a cemetery or in a place where cemetery-like experience is readily available. At the same time, this dialectical relationship remains somewhat unclear, and this lack of clarity can be examined through some of the words and phrasings we use to talk about death, funerary traditions, and the significance of the dead vis-à-vis the living.

One example is a kind of collapsing approach in which we speak of mortality in general as that which breaks down all economic, social, and cultural differences, and the
cemetery in particular as a place where all such differences are supplanted by a kind of
infinite, cosmic levelling. Even if this approach is motivated by a great sense of justice, there
is a very real possibility that speaking in this way can end up having the appalling effect of
replicating a culturally-homogenizing consciousness in which an idealized cemetery makes it
even harder to build mutual respect among the many different human approaches to
mortality. At one point in her opening interview, April mounts what seems like a pointed
socio-economic critique:

everybody ends up [in the cemetery], whether you’re poor or rich. So, you know, the
rich people don’t want the poor people in their neighbourhoods. [The cemetery is] a
good place to start a dialogue: “Well, excuse me, but this poor guy is right beside
your rich guy and, you know, that’s just the way it is”… we’re all going to end up
there eventually, so let’s try to make the time between now and then pleasant for
everybody because we’re all living, you know? (opening interview with April)

In fairness, I assume she means to refer to those people for whom cemetery burial is
traditional or expected, but when her push for justice is underscored with “we’re all going to
end up there eventually” then one kind of presumed equality begins to ignore other
dimensions of difference (i.e. pertaining to the wide variety of funerary traditions as
previously mentioned). In my own role as facilitator, I am fairly sure that I used this sort of
collapsing approach on occasion, too, which complicated the effort to nurture critical
consciousness.

Another example is in the word used to describe what we do with the human body
after death. In English we often speak of the “disposal” of human remains, but this word has
connotations of “garbage” or of an unpleasant object needing to be “dealt with”. Rumble,
Troyer, Walter, and Woodthorpe (2014) challenge the use of the word “disposal”, in part,
based on how it affects our death consciousness:

In an era that increasingly acknowledges that nothing is disposed of forever, we thus
invite colleagues in contemporary death studies to question whether ‘disposal’ is still
an adequate umbrella term for all techniques for dealing with human remains. Bodies
are in one sense disposed of, in another sense dispersed into the environment; neither
term embraces the totality of what happens to human remains or how people today
think about them or their own post-death self. We, therefore, invite suggestions for a
more comprehensive term (pp. 257-258).
The point here is that even in the seemingly innocuous terminology we use, we fashion certain ways of thinking about death that may or may not truly accord with our philosophical, religious, or spiritual beliefs. As to the specific invitation for a more comprehensive term than “disposal”, I will pick this up in the third Course of Action in the following chapter where my aim will be to further elaborate the contours of a humanized and death-inclusionary consciousness.
Some years ago when my children were young, I would occasionally take them to a cemetery and, in the hopes of instilling fascination with the place (rather than fear), I would tell them that we were going to visit the “cemetery playground”. Without batting an eye, they followed me into this playground where we walked, ran, looked at trees, and puzzled over the engraved images on headstones. Years later, I find myself beckoning people into the cemetery for a different kind of “play” but with a similar expectation that the cemetery can be a place that engenders fascination.

A Place of Fascination?

In many present-day Canadian contexts, to speak of the cemetery as a place of fascination can sound peculiar, ghoulish, or just plain comical because our mainstream society tends to represent the cemetery as a place to go only if a loved one dies and needs to be buried, or if it contains a decent way of getting from Point A to Point B – the cemetery qua walking route. Leaving aside any educational function whatsoever, it can be difficult to give even pragmatic attention to the cemetery qua cemetery. For example, in their survey of cemetery design practices from within the field of urban planning, Basmajian and Coutts (2010) make the comment that

[al]though there is little scholarly, or even popular, literature focused on the issue of planning for disposal of the dead, the problem is potentially severe. The cultural aversion toward publicly discussing death and burial inhibits conversations about whether cemeteries and burial grounds could be used to serve other important ecological and social functions. Yet, unlike many of the things we plan for, mortality is a certainty and the disposal of the dead is an unavoidable task (p. 307).

And so a great mockery arises in the North American context when the “cultural aversion toward publicly discussing death and burial” exists concurrently with the annual fervour of Halloween. If it is true that our society would rather not discuss death, what should we make of the last day of October when our death aversion culminates in the strange caricature of the
cemetery as the homeland of fake cadavers, sardonic epitaphs, and rubberized pools of blood? As the father of three children, two of whom still went trick-or-treating this past Halloween, I wonder what they and their peers are learning based on the kind of urban landscape captured in the photo below (see Figure 7-1).

![Figure 7-1: Halloween cemetery, complete with protruding arm and bloody leg.](image)

In response to this scene we might say, “All in good fun!” and perhaps we recognize a certain beauty in those who create styrofoam headstones inscribed with horrid puns. Yet it seems to me that these kinds of cemetery images begin to overtake other efforts to talk about death in matter-of-fact terms, or to explore cemeteries as sites of true fascination. In this regard, I am heartened when most people who hear me describe my research express authentic interest at seeing the cemetery as a classroom and, in broader terms, at seeing death as holding some important lessons. It is not radical in any way to regard death as having something to say about life, and to view the cemetery as a place we want to visit by way of edification and community-building. Then more people will take Eggener’s (2010) description as being self-evident:
On one level cemeteries are about the pasts we bury in them. But on another they are inherently future-oriented. Memorials are nothing if not directed at those who will look upon them and be called to remember. They also speak of hopes of the deceased. Because cemeteries are such patently liminal sites – poised between past and future, life and death, material and spiritual, earth and heaven – they more than any other designed landscapes communicate grand social and metaphysical ideas. They offer summations of lives lived and speak of community, the connection to place, mortality, afterlife, and eternity (pp. 10-11).

As I have claimed in the preceding chapters, a certain kind of cemetery-based pedagogy is well-suited to assist our efforts in hearing what cemeteries have to say when they “speak of community”. Likewise, this pedagogy can enable us to discern what we have to say to one another as we enter these “patently liminal sites”. Put crassly, rather than telling us to arrive at the cemetery because someone just died and needs to be buried, this approach beckons us into the cemetery as intrigued, living learners. Schillace (2015) points out that “[w]e cannot wait until death happens to talk about death. It’s a bit like waiting until winter to gather in the grain. Why not meet now, talk now, while the sun is still warm on your back?” (p.230). Likewise, we cannot wait until the cemetery is our permanent home to gather in the cemetery to learn the things that make for a living, breathing community.

I started this dissertation by posing several open-ended questions: As individuals and as communities, how do we learn to recognize that death contributes to life? More particularly, is there something about human mortality that makes a difference when we are facing injustice, violence, or ecological crisis? After recounting a number of personal experiences with death, I put forward three core research questions that were meant to focus my research concerning the participants, the classroom, and the consciousness involved in the pedagogy of the deceased:

1. Who gets to participate in the pedagogy of the deceased?
2. How can a cemetery classroom lead to community development and hope?
3. What is the relationship between human mortality and critical consciousness?

The subsequent chapters chronicled the design, implementation, and analysis of a qualitative research project in which I convened an intermingling of literature from critical
pedagogy and death education, and in which I convened a small group of people to learn in and from the cemetery as a sort of classroom. In this classroom, and in the manner of Shor who advocated for “extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary” (1992, p.122) I have guided us to politically re-experience a place that has often seemed to be apolitical. Through the lenses of humanizing praxis, death-inclusionary praxis, and the dialectics of liberation-limitation, I worked through a variety of materials including interview data, flipchart data, photographic data, homework data, and field notes data in order to come to a better understanding of both the nascent state and the potential elaboration of the pedagogy of the deceased. In places where the Freirean tradition struggles to make sense of the relationship between mortality, humanization, and critical consciousness, I have tried to determine these inner-workings in light of the Cemetery Café experience, and with a particular eye toward community development and hope.

In consideration of the research, I have made three claims: (1) Everyone gets to participate in the pedagogy of the deceased, but that not everyone participates simply by virtue of coming into the cemetery. My accompanying claim is that the cemetery is a particularly useful and evocative context in which to explore the process of humanization and the meaning of human presence, especially vis-à-vis dehumanizing social and political realities. (2) The cemetery (among other such places) is a classroom in which we can learn how to take our place in the community-building and community-burying work that continues in pursuit of the “another world” that is possible. Moreover, the connection between our awareness of mortality and a critical approach to being educable can be learned in the cemetery and in the work of hope even though, ironically, truthfully, our understanding of hope is finite. (3) The relationship between human mortality and critical consciousness is dialectical, and that it can be somewhat revealed through dialogical engagement vis-à-vis the level of awareness only, or greatly revealed through engaging in critical-embodied learning in a cemetery or in a place where cemetery-like experience is readily available. Taken together, these three claims amount to a “proof of subject” not only in the sense of proving the value of educational events in a cemetery, but also in the sense of confirming and fleshing out the humanized and mortalized subject. Through subsequent research and activism, I trust that others will find ways to deepen our understanding of the many different ways that each of us embodies this subjectivity.
This concluding chapter builds on and extends my analysis into four Courses of Action, the first three of which correspond respectively to the three aforementioned claims and the last of which attempts to address the lurking issue of violence. The phrasing “Course of Action” is of double meaning because it points to something you decide to do, while also alluding to a school program (i.e. a course). These Courses of Action are not merely supplementary areas; rather, each stands as a strategic, pedagogical outgrowth of the cemetery classroom. The subtitle to this chapter alludes to an imaginative approach of seeing this fourfold work as fitness work, and seeing the four Courses as stations in a training circuit. In order to build physical strength, we rotate through a variety of exercises; in order to train the body politic, we put ourselves through a variety of social, cultural, and political movements. In the tradition of adult education where theory and practice dance so closely, something of this training approach is articulated by the title of Horton and Freire’s *We Make the Road by Walking* (1990). In this chapter, I am proposing that “we make our politics by living and dying”, and I have formulated four ways, in tandem with the insights from the preceding analysis, in which this living and dying can be done usefully, thoughtfully, and inventively.

**Course of Action #1: Indigenizing the Undiscovered Country**

At the end of Chapter 4, I included an excerpt from the opening interview with Marlys in which she ponders the meaning of participation in the cemetery, and she reflects on the different experiences of First Nations peoples and white North American settler society: “Another angle on [participation] is thinking about whose land are we on here, and where are those past and present Indigenous participants who have had this land?” (Marlys, opening interview). Although Marlys was the only participant to raise this question, I indicated that it deserved more substantive attention. In regards to the “who” of the pedagogy of the deceased, I indicated that we need to engage an embedded question about how our assumptions and practices pertaining to death should be informed by the greatly unfinished truth-and-reconciliation efforts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples on this land.

Accordingly, this first Course of Action examines the prospects for Indigenizing the undiscovered country. This play on words is highly political. The object of the sentence
present as a Shakespearean reference – in Act 3 Scene 1 of *Hamlet*, the protagonist talks about “the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns, puzzles the will and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of?” At the risk of hijacking Shakespeare, Hamlet’s reference to the “undiscovered country” gains additional layers of meaning during the history of colonialism from the 1600s to the present in the sense that the so-called discovery of countries results in the subjugation of entire peoples, the ruin of physical landscapes, and the aggrandizement of a white, Eurocentric worldview. In a way that Shakespeare could not have easily predicted, his invoking of discovery language foretold the truly death-filled “discovery” that First Nations peoples suffered at the hands of European colonizers, and some of this “discovery” pertains to the erasure of Indigenous sites and traditions of death. Especially at this juncture in Canadian history, to enter the cemetery with a critical lens is to interrogate the cemetery through the lens of Indigenous-settler relations, to probe for missing or desecrated burial grounds. Although I briefly mentioned Indigenization as part of the methodology chapter, the pedagogy of the deceased calls for additional work in regards to the decolonizing of cemetery space as well as mortality itself.

In the Cemetery Café project, while reflecting on the meaning of participation in the cemetery, Marlys asks, “How do we come to terms with ourselves as a settler society here? Another angle on this is thinking about whose land are we on here, and where are those past and present Indigenous participants who have had this land?” This is a good way of asking the question, and somewhat akin to the reclamation of historical memory, the recovery of deceased peoples – everything from “simply” honouring forgotten graves to literally relocating human remains that earlier had been pilfered and placed on display in museums – represents an arena in which Indigenous-settler relations figures large. In the wider North American context since the 1990s, the USA seemed to lead the way in terms of the identification and repatriation of human remains and other First Nations artefacts with the passing of NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act). This legislation required all museums and other federally-funded institutions in the USA to return human remains, funerary objects, and other cultural artefacts to their respective native communities. Although there is no comparable federal legislation in Canada, there has been a fair amount of attention to this issue among various levels of government as well as within
museums and universities. Current events underline the urgency of truth-and-reconciliation efforts – for example, the Canada-wide itineration of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and ongoing demands that Canada fully implement the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In a similar vein, Hill (2006) describes a native perspective on human burial: “We believe that the remains, the associated burial objects, and the actual soil in which they rest is sacred…. In the past, our ancestors buried many objects along with the body with the belief that in the afterlife one would need all the things that one needs in life” (p. 15). In his exposition on “making a final resting place final,” Hill sums up an Indigenous view that “the dead have power, and it is dangerous to neglect the spiritual needs of the dead” (ibid.). Pertaining to the territory and traditions of the Wendat people, Hamilton (2010) reports that “after death, bones (atisken or “souls”) retain a sentient presence. Humans possess two souls: one leaves the body after the Feast of the Dead, but the other remains with the physical body forever, unless it is reborn as a child. These souls require care even after death, and the disturbance of their buried remains is dangerous because it angers the dead” (pp.85-86). A final example is Nahrgang’s (2013) Indigenous perspective on the archeology of Ontario:

There are countless unmarked sites – many of the grave and village markers that were of relevance to our people [are] no longer standing, but the areas of concern still remain in the ground. As many as 80 percent of our sites are still undisturbed in this province and have yet to be found. Why not make sure that developers look for archeological sites and plan around them to ensure their protection as we develop more land? Would it be so hard for municipalities to demand that archeological evaluations be done before anyone can disturb the spirits of our ancestors? What lies in the ground cannot be replenished after it is removed; it is a non-renewable treasure. If we allow the destruction of our sites, we are destroying a direct link to our heritage and history and forever leaving a gap in the story of those who came before us (pp. 206-208).

For those of us who convene cemetery-related events from a white settler perspective, it is important to acknowledge which specific traditional territory we are on because the land and its peoples are so intertwined both in life and in death. Depending on the geographical circumstances, it may also be appropriate to augment the land acknowledgement with an acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of all things, along the lines of “We are standing on First Nations land, we are standing on the bodies of First Nations peoples, and in a
figurative way we are standing on the shoulders of First Nations traditions of seeing human bodies as being connected to the land and to the bodies of all living creatures.” This is to consider the possibility that when I (as a non-Indigenous person) advance ideas about interconnectedness or relatedness vis-à-vis life and death, these ideas might hold water, in great part, because of the influence and strength of very ancient Indigenous teachings about the kinship between all generations of those who are dead, we who are living, and those who are yet to come.

This begins to guide us toward Indigenizing the deepest levels of the soul, the place where we make sense of our own mortality. Consequently, for me as a white European settler of Mennonite background, I need to fess up to my people’s history of colonizing land in specific places such as the Grand River watershed, but I also need to find ways to challenge my spiritual-religious views about the meaning of death and the significance of burial grounds and cemeteries. While my peers are engaged in, for example, decolonizing the academy or decolonizing our church’s denominational structures, perhaps my interest in the pedagogy of the deceased directs me to learn about truth-and-reconciliation efforts pertaining to cemeteries and, ultimately, to decolonizing cemeteries.

To this end, in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), we learn about First Nations children who died while attending residential schools, about cases in which student and staff deaths were treated differently (staff members’ graves were marked with headstones featuring biographical information while students’ graves were identified only by plain white crosses), about the routine denial of a family’s request to have their child’s body returned to the home community (pp. 99-100), and about how many residential school cemeteries were undocumented and/or allowed to fall into long-term neglect (pp. 258-262). The Commission concludes that “assisting families to learn the fate of children who died in residential schools; locating unmarked graves; and maintaining, protecting, and commemorating residential school cemeteries are vital to healing and reconciliation” (p. 263).

To train the body politic is to acknowledge the particular history of Indigenous-settler relations and to engage cemetery-based work accordingly. Whether responding to the nationwide mandate articulated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or engaging in Indigenous-settler dialogue in a local area like the Grand River watershed, the pedagogy of
the deceased carries political agenda for all of us. Hope illuminates future possibilities for justice and right relations between First Nations and settler peoples, and I believe that what Freire called “a kind of education in hope” points to (but does not necessarily remain limited by) human action within this protracted reconciliation project.

 COURSE OF ACTION #2: ESTABLISHING TEACHING CEMETERIES

In the literature review I examined a number of sources that helped to draw the distinction between the cemetery qua park (in which the cemetery is experienced as a green space that includes an additional, perhaps incidental feature of human burials) and cemetery qua cemetery (in which human burials and/or memorialization of those burials are integral to the experience of the cemetery space). Through all the meetings of the Cemetery Café, the stated objective was to figure out the potential for experiencing the cemetery qua classroom. However, beyond various brainstorming and aspirational discussions, what remains unexamined are the prospects for operationalizing or normalizing the cemetery qua classroom; in other words, much of what I covered so far might be seen as an interesting educational overlay onto the cemetery, even though the second core research question established a framework for talking about various ideas and options for a cemetery classroom rather than a cemetery that might only be a classroom parenthetically or occasionally. In this Course of Action, I work to authenticate and elaborate the notion of a cemetery classroom by proposing some basic parameters and possible design features of a cemetery that is inherently educational.

In light of the prospects for increased death education, including both formal and non-formal initiatives, one of the fascinating implications of the pedagogy of the deceased is the possibility of establishing what I am calling “teaching cemeteries” that would be roughly analogous to teaching hospitals. In some ways, cemeteries have always been teaching cemeteries without being named as such, although one could argue that they have functioned more so as “disposal cemeteries” to the extent that the disposition of human remains has been their primary or even sole function. Whether through the creation of new cemetery space or
through the re-purposing of existing cemeteries, the establishment of the teaching cemetery offers community-enriching as well as pedagogical benefits.

The core of the teaching cemetery idea has to do with death education and the common good. In the case of teaching hospitals, one might ask in whose interest it is for patients to be subjected to the care of student doctors and student nurses. Does this represent a risk in terms of people being more likely to suffer, or illness being more likely to spread? Most would point out the error of the question – i.e. the students in these hospitals are under the charge of full-fledged medical professionals. It is, in fact, a great public good for such teaching institutions to be in existence, and for patients to be treated by people who are learning to become doctors and nurses, as articulated in this example from a Toronto hospital:

For medical students to become doctors, or for doctors to become specialists, they need practical experience. Likewise, nurses, researchers, pharmacists, social workers and other health care professionals get practical experience at teaching hospitals….Trainees gain education and experience under the supervision of senior clinicians….our clinicians keep up with the most recent developments in medicine. This ensures that we provide our patients with the latest technology and techniques (Princess Margaret Cancer Centre, 2018).

So in the teaching hospital, the provision of top-quality care benefits everyone from patients to students to clinicians to researchers. The same can be true of a teaching cemetery. It is a great public good for some cemeteries to be conceived of as teaching facilities, for one person’s death to contribute to the betterment of those who are learning and teaching the many disciplines that are involved in caring for the dead and in accompanying the families of the dead.

Practically-speaking, what sorts of professions could become involved in a teaching cemetery, and how would the various disciplines be coordinated in terms of pedagogy? On the learning side, the cemetery could host a wide variety of graduate, undergraduate, diploma, and certificate students from both universities and community colleges. In a comprehensive arrangement, elementary and secondary school students could also participate. On the teaching side, the cemetery could host an especially rich assortment of professionals and practitioners:
On the user or participant side, the teaching cemetery could likely offer a wide range of choices in terms of cremation or burial options (including green burial), physical memorialization, as well as what is sometimes referred to as “aftercare” options for emotional and spiritual support. Depending on the preferences of the bereaved family, they might experience nothing different than those who access a conventional cemetery, or their experience might be remarkably enriched by the multifaceted involvement of a community of practice. Last but not least, on the community side, the teaching cemetery could be utilized for a variety of community development projects and events, and this approach would have the effect of integrating the cemetery space into the surrounding social, political, and cultural space, thereby authenticating the cemetery as a community asset. In the coming together of students, teachers, users, and community, the teaching cemetery could also spur research in a variety of disciplines, thereby extending its relevance and its reach as a community asset.

The conceptualization of teaching cemeteries raises ethical issues, at least one of which connects back to the core of the pedagogy of the deceased. In the day-to-day use of a teaching cemetery, users, students, and teachers need to negotiate ethical questions pertaining to consent. For example, how do cemetery users give consent for their use of the cemetery to be subject to the learning and teaching of others? In what sense, if any, would the teaching function of a cemetery depend on prior consent having been given by the deceased? Would one be able to donate one’s body to a teaching cemetery? Another set of ethical issues pertains to how a teaching cemetery can operate vis-à-vis the diversity of death-related practices, ritual traditions, and technologies. If the presumption is for inclusive education, would the teaching cemetery be obligated to educate people about promession and mushroom suit disposition just as much as about traditional burial and cremation, and would there be a
mandated way to cover Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, and other religious beliefs pertaining to death?

More to the core of the pedagogy of the deceased, the teaching cemetery highlights what we might think of as farther-reaching ethical issues around social justice. For example, how can the cemetery be used pedagogically in such a way that it contributes to rather than detracts from inclusiveness and human dignity? This question shines a bright light on specific assumptions, choices, and interpretations of cemetery-based learning – for example, the fact that lying down in the cemetery might be impactful or liberating for some while simultaneously being pointless or even offensive to others, or the fact that being in a cemetery should not cause us to speak about “the dead” in all-inclusive terms, ignoring the many culturally-diverse funerary traditions that have different frames of reference for death and memorialization. Deciding what constitutes the pedagogical scope of the cemetery is one thing, but so too is it important to “trace the dollars” and look at where those involved get their funding. What should happen when companies or for-profit organizations enter the fray, and should there be any particular parameters on the commercialization of the cemetery space?

Returning to the persistent concern that Cemetery Café participants had about the inequity between the graves of paupers and the graves of the wealthy, in what ways, if any, should a teaching cemetery regulate interment and memorialization practices so as to mitigate socio-economic disparities? Finally, how should the pedagogy of the deceased deal with what is sometimes experienced as an urban/rural divide? Gruenewald (2008) makes an insightful observation about the limitations of place-based education and critical pedagogy: “If place-based education emphasizes ecological and rural contexts, critical pedagogy—in a near mirror image—emphasizes social and urban contexts and often neglects the ecological and rural scene entirely” (p. 309). This is to suggest that, even as a concept in infancy, the teaching cemetery might be assumed to be an urban cemetery, but rural cemeteries can actually be particularly compelling places to learn not only about ecology but also about social justice and community development.

In the opening paragraph of this section I noted how, in one sense, cemeteries have always been teaching cemeteries. The implicit lesson has often amounted to something like this: Inequalities can (or should?) be perpetuated through the manner in which we bury
ourselves as a community – for instance, through the asymmetry of differently-sized headstones. How can the teaching cemetery be designed so that the implicit lesson is more about how to memorialize the transformation of inequalities? To the extent that the cemetery can be reconfigured as an organized, even institutionalized site for the cultivation of critical consciousness, then part of its teaching work can be the elaboration of a very unique, place-based approach to humanizing praxis. In practical terms, the result would be biologists, funeral celebrants, and headstone designers being joined in the cemetery by social justice activists and community development facilitators.

In advancing teaching cemeteries as a course of action, I would be remiss without including a corollary point, also based on the public good, about a useful comparison between death education and sex education. This point connects not only with the cemetery but also with how we learn about larger-scale matters of democratic citizenship.

Children can learn about “the birds and the bees” through interactions with peers, from a parent, and/or through the internet, but they must receive some of this education in the school classroom, mandated by provincial legislation. At any given time, some people think the sex education curriculum does not cover enough while other people think it covers too much, but the relevant point is about how such education is deemed to be a public good and a public right: In its *Canadian guidelines for sexual health education*, Public Health Agency of Canada (2008) states that “[s]exual health is a key aspect of personal health and social welfare that influences individuals across their lifespan. It is thus important that health promotion programs focusing on enhancing positive sexual health outcomes and reducing negative sexual health outcomes are available to all Canadians” (p. 2). Furthermore, by way of operationalizing this approach, “[a]ccess to effective sexual health education requires ongoing support in both formal settings, such as schools, community groups, health and social service agencies and in informal settings where sexual health education is provided by parents, caregivers, peers and others” (p. 18).

Similar to how children gain increasing awareness about everything from puberty to birth control to sexually transmitted diseases to the diversity of gender identities, why would we not ensure that they gain increasing awareness about such things as what to expect when someone is dying, how to work with grief, ethical issues about medical assistance in dying, and philosophical/spiritual perspectives on mortality? Teaching in a matter-of-fact way along
the lines of “sex is like this for the birds and the bees, and for humans it’s like this…” can be a template for a matter-of-fact lesson on death: “OK, let’s start with the necrophagous blowflies. They’re the first insects to show up and lay their eggs in a dead body…” There might be a more congenial way to begin, but the point is not to try to gross out the students; the point is to situate human mortality in a larger context, to encourage respect, and to instill human agency. Perhaps the death unit could begin with a question such as, “What is it like to go to a funeral?” but the same kind of open, informative approach can be taken no matter how the topic is broached.

This idea is only starting to receive attention. For example, an episode of CBC Radio’s The Current includes interviews with several people talking about how death education should join sex education in our schools’ curriculum. Kathy Kortes-Miller says that “as educators and as Canadians in general, we have no choice about whether or not we will learn about death but we have some choice about how we learn about it [and] our education system can play an integral part in this” (quoted in CBC Radio, 2017). Similarly, Dr. Jessica Zitter asserts that death is a public health issue and that “for the health of our society every single person needs to be educated about this topic” (ibid.).

Pursuing death education as a public health issue makes sense insofar as what we call a “good death”, like sexual health, is another key aspect of personal health and social welfare. As noted in the literature review, Kellehear (2015) is instructive for how death education can be thus configured vis-à-vis the social determinants of health. Especially in light of the Canadian context where the new reality of medical assistance in dying (MAID) continues to spur ethical, legal, cultural, and societal debate around life-and-death issues, we could identify “good death” or “dying with dignity” as an additional social determinant contributing toward a healthy community, and so public education becomes part of how we learn about, promote, and even regulate such determinants at various local, regional, and national levels. In addition to providing a useful common ground between educators, health workers, legislators, and members of the public, such an approach could also contribute to local economic development.

In this scenario, educators in elementary and secondary schools could work alongside a variety of community partners in order to facilitate and support the purposes of death education. With a thoughtful curriculum in hand, teachers could draw on the expertise of
hospice workers, nurses, faith leaders, palliative care doctors, social workers, and even people living with terminal illness. A death education unit in a Grade 5 class would look different than a unit in a Grade 11 class, but the common goal would be to facilitate open, informed, and compassionate discussion about the realities of death, dying, and bereavement. Additional public education could be coordinated beyond grade school, including awareness-raising about everything from advance care directives to green cemeteries to diverse cultural-religious approaches to funeral practice. The approach would be interdisciplinary, and one could imagine local regions each having their own version of a roundtable meeting where curricular updates and community engagement strategies would be discussed by a group of teachers, public health planners, funeral directors, thanatologists, poets, and counsellors.

Herein lies an exciting area of interchange between adult education and the kinds of school-based and community-based death education as outlined above, given the commonly-held goals of raising critical consciousness and identifying the locus of proactive, change-making agency for all those involved. For example, some of today’s most vigorous death education efforts seek to empower individuals to plan for and facilitate their own home-based end-of-life care, or to intentionally purchase eco-caskets and green burial plots rather than accept whatever a death-related professional might recommend. Moreover, fundamental assumptions about what should constitute death-related professionalism are changing as a direct result of this empowerment factor – for example, some Canadians now request the services of “death midwives” who see their facilitative role within the death process as somewhat parallel to the role of birth midwives within the process of birth (CINDEA, 2015). These are just a few examples within the rapidly growing movement to “reclaim death”, but to be clear, teaching cemeteries or death education in our public schools need not advocate such things as death midwifery in order to cultivate critical consciousness and empowerment any more than sex education needs to be radical in order to promote critical consciousness and empowerment. The point is that a proactive, informative, and empowering approach to death (as is the case with sex) could benefit from planful collaboration between those involved in school-based education and adult educators whose expertise includes the facilitation of education in which participants see themselves as protagonists. Healthy human agency vis-à-vis sexual activity and sexual identity runs a useful parallel with healthy human
agency vis-à-vis death, dying, and bereavement and, therefore, far from engendering morbid or depressing thoughts, such an educational approach can fill learners with hope.

I should note that death education, like sex education, can get highly political. It seems that an organized, evidence-based, constructive approach to teaching children about sex will get bunged up repeatedly as partisan conservatives fight with partisan liberals, and as adherents of certain religious/philosophical traditions fight with one another about what constitutes a proper education. So it will go with death education, but I see this as a tremendous opportunity for even more full-bodied pedagogical work. Whether originating from politicians, parent groups, representatives from the funeral industry, or members of faith communities, school-based death education could arouse both strong objections as well as insistent opinions about what should or should not be included in the curriculum. In this regard, death education can learn a lesson or two from sex educators who demonstrate the depth of their field because they teach about sex, yes, while simultaneously teaching about mental and physical health, how to nurture care and fun in relationships, and deep respect for self and others. So if school-based death education would get mired in debates about how much air time to give to certain funeral practices, whether or not death doulas should be regarded in the same professional category as funeral directors, or when the appropriate time is to introduce children to suicide prevention, my hope is that the curriculum would be evaluated and refined, as well, by the extent to which it is teaching skills like being respectful of others, celebrating cultural differences, nurturing emotional literacy, and taking proactive ownership in their individual lives and in their communities.

To be clear: A teaching cemetery or a school-based death education campaign can get highly political and that can be a very good thing especially if lessons about how to respect others and how to take proactive ownership help people to become more engaged citizens. Along these lines, Killilea (1988) goes so far as to consider the possibility that “the awareness of mortality may serve as a catalyst for a new democratic consciousness” (p. 124). In a time when schools are looking for innovative ways to teach young people how to become global citizens, this represents a stunning option for educators. Killilea continues:

If our society were to develop the customs, symbols, and other cultural reinforcements that supported increasing numbers of people in acknowledging the fragility of their individual existence and the importance and satisfaction of finding
community with their fellow mortals, it may not be presumptuous or naïve to anticipate a vastly changed political consciousness and vastly raised hopes for participatory democracy (pp. 124-125).

How to translate this into a practical curriculum is the question. Although it may or may not be appropriate to have elementary or secondary school students lying down in the grass between the headstones, some sort of embodied approach would be just as helpful (and memorable) for young people as for adults. Making good on my earlier work on embodied epistemology, I am suggesting that the birthing, shaping, and renovating of political consciousness has something to do with our identity as more than just “intellectual or spiritual creatures who only accidentally inhabit our flesh” (Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein, 2010, p. 723). As they are birthing and shaping political identities, even very tenuous ones, young people should be encouraged to thoughtfully inhabit their flesh, and to explore how being embodied and being mortal contributes to being an active citizen.

Even if death education becomes a very small part of the overall curriculum for elementary and secondary students, its overall relevance pertains to the changing Canadian demographics and epidemiology of death and dying. In their study of the history of death and dying in Canada, Northcott and Wilson (2017) note how the experience of death has shifted dramatically – death is happening moreso after chronic illness (as compared to infectious/acute disease), death is happening moreso in advanced age, the care of the dying is happening moreso by professionals (rather than by family members), and the care of the dead is happening moreso in funeral homes (rather than in the family home) – and they conclude that “[d]eath, which had been common and familiar, became unfamiliar, remote, invisible, and expected only in old age” (p. 22). Cemetery-based and school-based death education can foster awareness and involvement with respect to these changing demographic and epidemiological patterns, and the point is not to turn the clock, but rather to equip young people with basic tools to understand these patterns, and to do so thoughtfully and in good pedagogical fashion.

To train the body politic is to organize at least some cemeteries as sites for education toward community-building, empowerment, hope, and active citizenship within a democratic society.
Course of Action #3: Greening the Skill and the Soul of Burial

At the end of Chapter 6, I noted the difficulty of trying to isolate (let alone define) the relationship between mortality and consciousness. I suggested that our use of language is one important thing that helps or hinders our efforts to cultivate critical consciousness. I also offered a provisional, twofold claim (1) that the relationship between human mortality and critical consciousness is dialectical and that it is one of attunement (that is, mortality attunes critical consciousness), and (2) that this relationship can be somewhat revealed through dialogical engagement vis-à-vis the level of awareness only, or greatly revealed through engaging in critical-embodied learning in a cemetery or in a place where cemetery-like experience is readily available. Building on the work of the Cemetery Café, this section seeks to engage the level of consciousness by enlarging what has so far been talked about as humanizing praxis; now I want to situate humanity in the larger context of the planetary community by exploring a kind of ecologizing praxis.

In the literature review I included some of Bowers’ (2005) argument that the Freirean tradition of critical pedagogy holds conceptual biases – anthropocentrism chief among them – that prevent it from addressing ecological issues in an adequate way. Participants of the Cemetery Café identified a connection between ecological awareness and cemeteries on several occasions, although mostly in a parenthetical way. Prior to the Cemetery Café, when Thea is asked what could be learned in the cemetery, she states, “I’d say there’s a little bit of biology that can be learned there. People learn about going back to the earth again. It depends how people are packaged, of course, and how long that takes (laughter)” (opening interview). Given the fact that Thea expresses ecological concern several times, I interpret her laughter as being along the lines of, “Isn’t that silly, how our burial practices slow down the decomposition process?”

No matter the angle of approach, the design and maintenance of a cemetery have ecological implications and, in turn, these connect with social, political, and economic matters relating to death. In a somewhat paradoxical way, mainstream Canadian cemetery practice, which one could argue is designed to package death and grief into a sanitized and manageable experience, nevertheless lays the groundwork for an ecological mindset in the sense that cemetery qua park calls for more and more environmental accountability. Even
with the relatively simple matter of municipal prohibitions on pesticide use, the practical implication for a cemetery is the gradual influx of weeds which then become a small reminder of the wildness and complexity of the natural world. This is an area of deep contestation today. One version of a “tradition burial” is equated with formaldehyde embalming of a body that gets placed in an elaborate casket made out of non-renewable and non-biodegradable materials, which then gets placed in a concrete vault that is covered with monocultural sod that gets mowed every few weeks. Another version of a “traditional burial” is equated with a complete prohibition on anything that does not qualify as environmentally-friendly (embalming fluids, caskets, vaults) and, instead, the practice of “green burials” in which bodies are placed in biodegradable shrouds or wood-only caskets and buried in a naturalized setting, sometimes with GPS coordinates as the only means of locating the grave. Moreover, in the ancillary funeral home industry, the movement toward ecological practices further emphasizes the contested nature of what qualifies as “green” because some of the practices are embraced for the sake of ecological responsibility while others are embraced for the sake of increasing profit. Interestingly, focusing on cemeteries is a choice that further pushes my project into this contestation because of the apparent tension between burial and cremation vis-à-vis which practice should be designated as the most environmentally responsible (aside from cultural-religious traditions that presume one practice or the other).

The title of this section implies something practical going hand-in-hand with something spiritual or figurative. In terms of the practicalities of green cemeteries, I have already alluded to some of these in terms of both negative prohibitions (e.g. against embalming and non-biodegradable caskets) and positive endorsements (e.g. for naturalized cemetery maintenance). Through the lens of humanizing praxis, the teaching of these skills—even the institutionalizing of these skills—represents a small though distinctively protective strategy in our much larger struggle to ensure that Earth will remain hospitable in the coming centuries. Interestingly, in this practical vein, concurrent with the Cemetery Café project was the rolling-out of a new green cemetery section in one of Waterloo’s two public cemeteries (Figure 7.2 below).
Representing approximately ten percent of the overall expansion of Parkview Cemetery, this new green burial section includes both prohibitions (e.g. on embalming and certain types of casket) and encouragements (e.g. for naturalized maintenance and the planting of native species grasses). In the foreground of the photo are the round markers that take the place of headstones, and the forested area in the background indicates the close proximity of parkland. Although it is difficult to visualize what this portion of the cemetery will look like

*Figure 7.2 – Green cemetery section, Parkview Cemetery*
after twenty or thirty years of naturalization, it is worth imagining how a Cemetery Café-type initiative could make the most out of a cemetery section that features an explicitly ecological ambition. As is the case with most other fields of work, environmental innovation can go hand-in-hand with local economic development and so, for example, designing ultra-ecologically-beneficial funerary products can encourage sustainable economic development in other ways.

Yet, in line with Freire’s “ontology of hope” and other more intangible markers of the whole-body approach arising within the pedagogy of the deceased, learning the practical skills of green burial should be accompanied by learning something of the soul as well. In her investigation into green burial practices, Kelly (2015) deepens the conversation to the place where we contend with our fate as embodied beings:

Through the erection of barriers between the corpse and the rest of the living world, decomposition is not only pre-empted and altered, but nature is profoundly polluted – corpse and all. The offenders – embalming, hardwood, sealed and metal caskets, and concrete vaults – all have their own histories, their own reasons of how they came into perfunctory use. What each use shares in common…is that none of them could have come to flourish and to remake a dead body that does not matter to nature without a radical shift in how we think about human decay (p. 30).

This connects back to the survey of death education in which many scholars point out the many ways that humans have tried to distance themselves from the true realities of death (in this case, the fact that our bodies decompose after death). Drawing ourselves back to death, then, must be more than practical; it must be an existential project:

The good news is that our feelings about human decay are not fixed and forever. They’re flexible and change in contexts and over time and, so, we can remain hopeful that our feelings can be swayed once again….We are, en masse, a culture terrified of human rot. And we’ve done our best to shun it….This doesn’t mean that we look to create practices that leave us living with rotting corpses. But it does mean seeing to our physical place in the food chain and rethinking our relationship to the earth in our living as well as our dying. It means respecting the intelligence within nature so we can find our way back to union with the earth (p. 33).

This speaks of the combination of what I am calling the skill and the soul of ecological efforts in relation to the cemetery, and it is a combination that brings us back to death-
inclusionary praxis because it has to do with the protection and resilience of the natural environment, with death left in. Reconnecting to the community-building theme that pops up again and again in this research, promoting green burial also means “eroding the relegation of all visible reminders of the dead to the sequestered environment of the cemetery” so that death, thereby, “becomes a more overt dimension of everyday life” (Clayden, Green, Hockey, and Powell, 2015, p. 200).

What this everyday life looks like, with death left in, has specific ramifications for urban settings such as Waterloo where this research took place. In her study of what makes for a natural city, Stefanovic (2012) broadens the scope for what we consider to be “natural” for twenty-first century Canadian cities:

In the end, a city remains ‘natural’ precisely because it preserves the interplay between the unencompassability of wildness and the very essence of being human. There is no thematic prescription to draw upon, for the mystery of a natural city cannot be reduced to a neatly circumscribed inventory of sustainability principles, nor is it a static accomplishment. Instead, as evolving and historically implaced, a natural city must pay heed to our essential, often taken for granted connection with the earth and with other living beings with whom we share our time (pp. 28-29).

And, if I may be so bold as to build on her last sentence, a natural city must pay heed to our connection with the earth and with other living beings with whom we share our deaths. In practice, heeding this connection results in the enrichment of land both physically, biologically as well as culturally, thereby providing at least a partial retort to those who claim that cemeteries will always just be a waste of space.

To train the body politic is to head in the direction of the body ecozoic: to learn to use the practical tools that facilitate ecologically-responsible burial practices while also learning more about the interiority of death and what that means for how we care for and “dispose of” the dead. On the deeper level, this probably means that we need to acknowledge continuity between humanization and decomposition: to become human involves an eventual time spent as nourishment for the earth, whether in the form of ashes immersed in a river, freeze-dried remains scattered in a woodland, or decomposing flesh and bones buried deep in the soil.

This forges a unique and co-generative connection between the themes of agentive participation and consciousness-raising that have already been explored, although it points to
what we might consider to be a bizarre dialogue between the pedagogy of the deceased and the pedagogy of food. Indeed, the scholarship of food studies may have already paved the way for this dialogue by, for example, calling “for greater attention to be paid to the materiality of food, the body, and the embodied experience of eating” (Abbots, 2017, p. 155). By exploring the economic, political, social, cultural, and ecological aspects of eating, the work of food studies scholars provides much of the framework for additional exploration into what it means for human beings themselves to be eaten literally (after death) or otherwise enveloped by the water, air, or soil of the Earth. It seems to me that engaging this dialogue between the pedagogy of the deceased and the pedagogy of food “can only serve to deepen our understandings of the political dynamics of food and eating [and being eaten], and enhance the theoretical contribution of food studies to emergent cross-disciplinary debates on cultural politics, new materialisms and the body” (p. 155 – the brash editorializing is my own). A particularly interesting foothold into this topic is the work of Cann (2018) whose research also highlights something of the cultural specificity of both food rituals and death rituals:

The act of preparing food, followed by the act of consuming it, is similar…to the way death decays our bodies. We prepare dead bodies for public “consumption,” through washing, purifying, embalming, or cremating them, preparing bodies to participate as corpses (or even as absent bodies) in public and social rituals of bereavement and loss. Similarly, we transform food into meals, preparing and altering food in the kitchen, changing raw materials into a synergetic meal. Cooking and corpses both transform and construct social rituals in which we come together and think about life, death, and life after loss (pp. 1-2).

If it seems too radical to create a curriculum around “human death as food production” then surely, at minimum, this represents a fertile opening for conversation between death educators and representatives of faith traditions that hold diverse and long-standing beliefs about what happens to us after we die. This, too, can stimulate discussion about how we describe what it is that we do with our dead, since “disposing of” or “dispersing” a body does not necessarily reflect the diversity of cultural or religious beliefs about how to go about entrusting, committing, letting go of, carrying, sending, and praying for the person who has died. Incidentally, this also represents yet another link with the Indigenization theme from earlier in this chapter since First Nations peoples have been practicing various kinds of green
burial on this land for thousands of years. In the broadest of terms, the greening of the skill and soul of burial can nurture a certain learning posture vis-à-vis our place on the Earth – a pedagogy of deference rather than a pedagogy of domination – and ultimately this teaches us yet again about what it means to embody power with rather than to exercise power over other people or the Earth.

Course of Action #4: Hoping for an End to Violence

As I made clear at the end of Chapter 1, in the face of violence, war, and brutality, my research was not intended to treat death as always or inherently good. No, death can be overwhelmingly awful. Moreover, knowing the realities of murder, genocide, or catastrophic accidents, I do not intend to regard mortality as being simply pedagogical. No, any useful lessons about mortality can be obliterated in an instant. Of many pertinent examples, the Holocaust can be invoked as a context of mass violence in which the pedagogy of the deceased breaks down on multiple levels. If it is anything other than offensive to speak about the “pedagogy of the gas chambers”, then one of the only lessons of this pedagogy is of the kind that can only be articulated by the likes of Wiesel: “They have no cemetery. They did not even have a cemetery. We are their cemeteries” (1985, p. 168). As we learn about the connections between death and violence, how can we sort through what is good, what is horrific, and what is redemptive?

My aim in this Course of Action is twofold: (1) to acknowledge the difficulty of advocating for a cemetery classroom in light of the actuality or threat of violent death, and (2) to put my finger on an important way in which the pedagogy of the deceased, through the vocation of hope, can contribute to peacebuilding.

For many years I have found my spiritual home in the Christian-Mennonite tradition of faith-based peacemaking, and I have found my academic home in the discipline of peace and conflict studies. I say this because it begins to indicate something about the pacifist conviction I have inherited and cultivated about advocating for peace and trying to put an end to violence (though to be clear, not all students of peace and conflict studies are pacifists!). I feel this conviction deeply, though I acknowledge that my fairly comfortable life as a white, middle-class man in the “peace-loving” country of Canada has meant that my pacifism has
not been tested as it would be if, for example, I was living in Syria at the time of writing these words (in the spring of 2018, the war in Syria is entering its seventh brutal year with no end in sight). How would people in Syria react if they were presented with an opportunity to attend a Cemetery Café?

In any case, the first point I want to make does not actually depend on pacifism, although I would argue that a pacifist outlook sharpens the point considerably. I have already alluded to the vast array of violent deaths that are taking place in today’s world, but the awfulness of the present-day is multiplied by hundreds of years of recent history in which people have butchered each other all around the world. Whether in organized cemeteries, in chaotic mass graves, or otherwise, the bodies of the dead have been disposed of in ways that are not only physically pragmatic. Dead bodies are variously inscribed with added meanings, especially under circumstances of political turmoil. Anstett and Dreyfus (2017) explain how after episodes of war or mass violence come to an end, “the resulting human remains become the subject of numerous and varied forms of investment. They are claimed by families and states and subjected to the attention of international organizations and the media….They are often sacralised and thus used to legitimise political or religious power” (p. 2). Stepputat (2014) makes the point rather bluntly: “The death of a person represents an occasion for the performance of sovereignty” (p. 5). Therefore, given that the process of “laying to rest” can be so thoroughly moulded by this sort of performance (of sovereignty or political ambition), my advancement of a cemetery classroom can very quickly falter without a clear, convincing explanation that such a classroom is not obfuscating the political performances or counter-performances associated with some or all of the dead in any given cemetery context. The pedagogy of the deceased is a difficult proposition in light of violence and war, and also in the context of the cemetery where violence can be seen to be both justified and condemned at the same time.

However, difficulty does not necessarily mean impossibility, especially in light of the historical fact that meanings assigned to the dead are quite variable. As pointed out by Verdery (1999), “among the most important properties of bodies, especially dead ones, is their ambiguity, multivocality, or polysemy. Remains are concrete, yet protean; they do not have a single meaning but are open to many different readings” (p. 28). McManus (2013) echoes this point: “How the passage from life to death is personally experienced, socially
organized, culturally acknowledged and symbolically testified, has always been fluid and contested” (p. 235). These observations provide groundwork for my second point which has to do with a choice between viewing the cemetery as a justification for violence or viewing the cemetery as a summons to build peace. I will illustrate the choice in an unsophisticated way: On the one hand, in Waterloo’s Mount Hope cemetery where the first Cemetery Café took place, there is a permanent war memorial featuring an engraved sign that reads “To Our Glorious Dead. We Shall Remember Them.” A flagpole with a Canadian flag is installed immediately adjacent. I interpret this as an expression of achievement – “This is what they had to do, and they did it!” – and as a kind of veneration of politically-justified violence. On the other hand, Vancouver’s Mountain View Cemetery features a large, permanent sculpture that is meant to draw attention to the Armenian Genocide of 1915. An oversized, metal-engraved fingerprint of a victim of the genocide is accompanied by a plaque explaining that the installation is meant to recognize the genocide, thereby “bringing us all one step closer to eradicating crimes against humanity”. I interpret this as an expression of lament and as a call to prevent mass violence.

I am suggesting that one way to move toward a peacebuilding approach is to be clear about how we construe the cemetery qua achievement and/or the cemetery qua lament. This is indeed an unsophisticated way to proceed, but I strongly believe that the pedagogy of the deceased must be clear about its commitment (or choice) in this regard, in a similar way to how critical pedagogy demands that we be clear about a commitment to social justice. This is along the lines of my earlier point about how the cemetery is not an innocent place; the features of the cemetery represent choices made, here in regards to how we make sense of violence. My belief is in the innate sanctity of life, and so I would advocate for reinvesting human bodies with dignity, seeing the inviolability and sacredness of the human person as irrefutable logic for saying that killing is wrong. But we need not insist on such deontological pacifism. With ever-increasing volumes of data and analysis, historians and political scientists are pointing out the relative ineffectiveness of violence. For example, Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) conclude that “nonviolent resistance campaigns have been more effective in achieving their goals than violent resistance campaigns. This has been true even under conditions in which most people would expect nonviolent resistance to be futile, including situations in which dissent is typically met with harsh regime repression” (p. 220). This is
just one example of how the pedagogy of the deceased may not be teaching the lesson so often assumed; that is, the noiseless cry of both victims and perpetrators might be, “We did not have to do it this way! Find a different way!”

Peace and conflict scholars Barash and Webel (2009) argue that “[h]owever one judges the desirability of peace or the legitimacy of (at least some) wars, it should be clear that peace and war exist on a continuum of violent/nonviolent national behaviours and that they constantly fluctuate. Neither should be taken for granted, and neither is humanity’s ‘natural state’” (p. 40). Putting this together with critical pedagogy’s insistence that education cannot be neutral, in the cemetery we have to be clear about what all these bodies signify about our approach to conflict: “The human condition – whether to wage war or to strive to build an enduring peace – is for us to decide” (ibid.). The same is true of human memory. We have the choice to remember the dead based on the assumption that, regrettably, we must rally the troops and descend into the hell of war again and again (in some settings, that we get to demonstrate our military prowess again and again) or, along the lines of the oft-repeated “Our grief is not a cry for war”, to remember the dead based on the conviction that we must prevent violent death and prioritize nonviolent ways of engaging conflict.

All of this underlines the need for follow-up research about how the pedagogy of the deceased can be elaborated through the lens of peace and conflict studies. Further underscoring the complexity of this research are the complicated ways in which religious and cultural traditions refract our understandings of how death and the dead function vis-à-vis human conflict. The myth of redemptive violence gets inflected variously by religious belief, philosophy, political science, and cultural traditions, and so too political understandings of the power of nonviolence get interpreted alongside faith traditions in which power is experienced as a spiritual force. Complicating this even further is how, in situations of martyrdom, violent death can get re-purposed as a rallying cry for both nonviolence and violence.

While standing in the middle of a cemetery, does it make any sense to hope for an end to violence? While looking at a war memorial, does it make sense to talk about turning swords into ploughshares or to transform a killing field into a place of well-being? In the introduction I mentioned the community of Las Abejas (The Bees) in Chiapas (Mexico) who responded to a violent massacre in their community by redoubling their efforts as nonviolent
peacemakers. They buried their dead, but their vision was of the bloodshed being figuratively turned into honey that they could offer as a message of nonviolence. When our North American delegation was invited for one of the monthly memorial services, we joined with community members as they gathered to mourn, as they set forty-five candles over top of the entombed bodies, and as they poured out their deep lament mingled with a fervour for putting an end to violence (see Figure 7.3 below). They hoped for peace, and their memorialization of the victims focused their hearts and minds as they laboured toward that hoped-for peace.

Figure 7.3 – Candles at a memorial service in Acteal (Chiapas, Mexico)

To train the body politic is to utilize humanizing praxis to see a connection between mortality and the pursuit of peace. When the cemetery classroom is overwhelmed by grief for the victims of violence, I believe that becoming more fully human involves learning (at a regrettably slow pace) how violence is parasitic rather than predetermined, and so while the
very long-term hope is that peace will supplant war, the current hope is about putting an end to the violence that is within our purview at the present time. Peace then encompasses both protecting the sanctity of life and safeguarding the dignity of death, including the dignity of not having one’s dead body commandeered as part of a justification for violence. This is about making peace with death, not in the sense of resigning ourselves to it, but wielding death as a tool for peace and planetary survival.

Areas for Future Research

*History says, “Don’t hope on this side of the grave.” But then, once in a lifetime The longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up, And hope and history rhyme.*
- Seamus Heaney

In the sequencing of this research from the complexities of the critical pedagogy and death education literatures to the interactive meetings of the Cemetery Café to the analytical work contained in Chapters 4 through 6, I have revisited a number of themes over and over again, especially in relation to how mortalizing practices can advance community development and hope. Without apology, I have insisted that we *should* hope on this side of the grave, and that such hope can only be discernable as an integral aspect of working proactively toward that great historical rhyme. Before concluding the dissertation, I feel it is important to name several areas for future research. While these go well beyond the scope of this project, each can expand the work of humanizing praxis and death-inclusionary praxis.

Death and the Digital World

Our 21st century Canadian society features extensive (many would say ubiquitous) use of the internet, social media, and digital technology. How are the realities of death present in an online world? What does a project in critical pedagogy look like if the objective is to engage with and learn from digital memorials such as those housed within Facebook and other similar platforms? What are the prospects for embodied learning in conjunction with the mechanisms and platforms of digital technology that are fairly disembodied? What are
the ways in which online communication creates opportunities and obstacles to re-
mortalizing a sense of human relatedness? How can cellphones be used to facilitate place-
based cemetery education? Those looking into these sorts of questions have started
publishing articles and books within the last 5 years (e.g. Sofka et al., 2012; Mitchell et al.,
2012; Kneese, 2017; Arnold et al., 2018). Future research could include both qualitative and
quantitative studies utilizing a great variety of technologies to explore the digitization of
death and mortality.

**Intersectional Theory**

Matters of social location and intersectionality have become interwoven throughout
this research, and the dissertation will end without a satisfying resolution to how the identity-
based politics of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation relate to mortality. After my use
of such words as relatedness, diversity, undividing, and unconforming, I see great potential
for future research on the ontological and epistemological aspects of mortalized social
location. A possible approach to this particular research could work from the quasi-
geometrical depiction of intersectionality (e.g. intersecting lines, webs of identity, etc.) in
order to consider either the circularity or spirality of death within everyday power relations.
A very different approach would be to analyze in-depth, personal stories from individuals
reflecting on how their death-related experiences connect with various aspects of their social
identity, or with various ways in which they experience oppression and/or privilege.

**Organ Donations and Embodied Learning**

Similar to the limitedness of my cemetery-based research vis-à-vis a presumed bias
toward in-earth burials, another limitation has to do with the presumption that human beings
will be cremated, buried, or otherwise memorialized as whole bodies. In what ways does the
reality (and the increasing expectation) for organ donation affect how we think of ourselves
as embodied people in life, and in what ways does this reality change anything about how we
memorialize people in death? There is increasing fascination with the significance of, for
example, someone who dies but whose heart gets transplanted into another person in order to
give the gift of life. Opportunities and ethical complexities arise in terms of community,
finances, use of technology, and the definition and configuration of legal rights. Future research could shed light on how these complexities can form the basis for pedagogical work.

**Death and Interfaith Dialogue**

As has been acknowledged in cursory ways within this research, around the world there is a wide variety of religious and spiritual traditions when it comes to ritualizing, memorializing, talking about, meditating on, and making sense of death and mortality. At its best, interfaith dialogue is about building bridges of mutual understanding among various groups, as well as building relationships of trust and reciprocity between individuals. What would it look like to mount an action research project that focused on interfaith encounters in the context of funerary rituals – e.g. mixed-faith funerals? Future research in this area could be psychological, sociological-demographic, or theological.

**Hope as Research**

I started the previous section by claiming that we *should* hope on this side of the grave, which is to say that we ought to engage in the great task of hope within the here and now, even when it seems as though the foremost objects of our hope lie so far away that they could just as well be somewhere in that great “undiscovered country” beyond this life. In light of the above-mentioned areas for future research, and acknowledging the significance of how we go about doing research, it seems to me that pursuing any future “classrooms for hope” (whether cemetery or otherwise) will carry wonderful opportunities to test the further claim that hope can go well beyond mere acceptability, well beyond “just” serving as a catalyst for novel pedagogical practices or community development projects; in reality, hope can kindle something deep within research methodology itself.

In an article exploring the prospects for utopian thinking, Giroux (2007) observes that “[t]he impoverishment of intellectuals, with their increasing irrelevance – and at times their growing refusal to address human suffering and social injustice – is now matched by the impoverishment of a social order that cannot conceive of any alternative to itself” (p. 32). This is a terse way of naming humanity’s inability to recognize historical options, and it should prod anyone interested in research to consider the urgency of “what could be” in
addition to the importance of “what is” and “what has been”. Accordingly, part of what lies ahead is the elaboration of hope qua research, or hope-as-research. Returning to Freire’s assertion, “I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope”, we should see something deeply investigative within the human capacity to hope. After all, according to Freire, “it is as necessary to be immersed in existing knowledge as it is to be open and capable of producing something that does not yet exist. And these two moments of the epistemological process are accounted for in teaching, learning, and doing research” (1998, p. 35). Although not stating it outright, Freire seems to be describing hope and research as two co-constitutive moments: “The one moment, in which knowledge that already exists is taught and learned, and the other, in which the production of what is not yet known is the object of research” (ibid.).

Building on Freire’s helpful yet somewhat unexplained notion of untested feasibility, my contention is that, while aligned with the methodological tradition of participatory action research, hope-as-research is uniquely scaffolded with what we might think of as preconceived feasibility or, perhaps more to the point, insisted-upon feasibility. Therefore, hope-as-research becomes a powerful methodology for probing the extent of the possible while also scanning that which currently exists (including all the limitations, barriers, and oppositional forces that seek to uphold the status quo). As an integral component of research (and with the reminder that this component necessarily includes the dimension of action), hope both reveals the limits of oppressive conditions and examines the uncharted territory that stretches past those limits. This examination does not proceed so much in the realm of theory as it does within upsurges of community-based activism, social change movement-building, and prefigurative politics, which is to say that hope-as-research can challenge any methodological assumptions whereby research and action are seen as sequential stages rather than mutually-constitutive elements of a single task. In the words of Shade (2001), “hopes are productive in drawing us beyond present practical limits, showing us new horizons and leading us to discover (or generate) new means of exploring them. Hope thus has two modes of practicality: being grounded in real conditions and being productive of new and better ones” (p. 7). If the research task is to examine the complexities of the status quo alongside the creative options we have for disturbing the status quo, then hope not only proceeds in what Shade describes as two modes of practicality; hope becomes a mode of research itself –
dogged, rigorous, and all the more generative by its unique combination of criticality and productivity.

At the end of the day, we may need to augment the “modes of hope” taxonomy presented by Webb (2013) – patient hope, critical hope, sound hope, resolute hope, transformative hope – and so new realms of practice and theory can result from adding investigative hope to the list. To whatever extent social science methodologists and social activists collaborate within this investigative hope, perhaps their shared aspiration can be summarized by the following words sung by those in attendance at Paulo Freire’s funeral in May 1997. How fitting for those who loved Freire to conclude his funeral by urging themselves into the unfinished project of liberation:

Come let us go,
who hope for the unknown,
Who know what must be done
and don’t wait for it to happen.
- Brazilian activist song (author unknown, quoted in Avadhuta, 2006, p. 297)

Not the End: Another World is Dead Ahead

In my exploration of the pedagogy of the deceased, I have explored some pedagogical options for learning to recognize that death contributes to life, and I have convened a group of research participants in a cemetery to figure out if there is something about human mortality that makes a positive difference when we are facing injustice, violence, or ecological crisis. One of the key issues has been the dialectics of liberation-limitation – knowing that another world is possible, hoping and working for that another world, and yet acknowledging that our efforts are limited. Finishing this dissertation has ended up confirming this dialectical reality. After writing Page 1, Page 2, Page 3, and so on, I have discovered so many ways in which my perspective and my writing is limited. This makes me reflect on how the final page of the document, far from being a rude interruption of a project that could go on forever, represents a good and right ceasing of my effort. Recalling the idea that there is a “mortal shape of the human journey” (Chapter 4), I think about the benefit of creating my document with a mindset of Page 1 of __, Page 2 of __, Page 3 of __, and so on,
and I think about the benefits for individuals and communities to live well within this human existence that includes the contribution of death.

Following these things of such import, it feels oddly satisfying to conclude the dissertation by waxing eloquent about something that appears rather uninteresting – namely, a water spigot. Fittingly, in order to get to the eloquence of the spigot, we need to ride the uninteresting city bus, as follows: In their study of how immigrant women in Los Angeles exercise political agency, Boudreau, Boucher and Liguori (2009) look at how subjectivity does not always depend on the momentousness of democratic elections or extraordinary situations of revolutionary turmoil. In response to what many determined were unjust immigration reforms, the women in their study build the capacity for political involvement through seemingly uninteresting activities such as riding the city buses every day. For these women, riding the bus becomes a specific means of building strategic relationships with one another, sharing information, gaining knowledge about the community, interpreting intercultural dynamics, and figuratively appropriating the streets that would then become the physical site of political demonstrations. The authors conclude that if the women’s capacity for activism came out of “small gestures…the spontaneous and intuitive reactions and adaptations” of everyday life, “it may very well be that political action is generated through continuity with daily routines” (p. 340). In order to understand how people become political actors, then, we need to “reflect on the bridges from the ordinary to the extraordinary and back to the ordinary” (p. 344).

One of these bridges is the ordinary water spigot because it speaks unassumingly of the individual and of the community, both of which carry extraordinary pedagogical implications. The following photo shows one of about twenty water spigots located throughout Mount Hope Cemetery (Figure 7.4 below).
Hanging just below the spigot is a plastic watering can which is available for anyone’s use. Together the spigot and the watering can allude to people’s day-to-day activities of tending the graves of loved ones (including watering flowers), healing from devastating loss, and remembering what life was like before their loved ones died. There are no courses entitled “How to Tend Your Family Member’s Grave 101” and yet, one way or another, people learn to use the spigot and the watering can, and they also learn the more inexplicable tending skills of the heart.

Yet the spigot and the watering can also speak of what the community does. Through the funding and strategic mandate given to municipal staff, the community has enabled the installation of these spigots as an essential aspect of the cemetery infrastructure. Somewhere along the way, city workers dug multiple trenches throughout the cemetery in order to install interconnected pipes that can carry water to multiple locations. Each spigot is installed in a
convenient location, at a convenient height, and is accompanied by a simple watering can. The implicit lesson is that a cemetery needs to provide people with what they need to tend, to heal, and to remember. In a similar fashion, perhaps we can analyze the existence of garbage cans installed throughout the cemetery, the relatively narrow roadways snaking through the cemetery grounds, or the posting of signs encouraging dog owners to use a leash and to “scoop the poop”. All these constitute an informal public pedagogy in terms of what people are encouraged to do and not do in the cemetery.

What else could be installed in a cemetery by way of essential cemetery infrastructure? As is possible within the constraints of topography and the layout of burial plots, could a small open-air pavilion be installed for the purposes of hosting community events? Could concrete pedestals be installed throughout the cemetery that would be used as the bases for sculptures made by community artists? Could a “living wall” be set up as a way of demonstrating the principles of ecological reclamation and the natural filtering of grey water? Could there be a cultural diversity monument that provides information about the funerary traditions of various world religions? Can the cemetery partner with a local community development organization to curate an interactive Hope Display in which people use slips of coloured paper to write down their hopes for an inclusive, just, and peaceable community, and these slips get posted in moderated fashion? What would it take for ideas like these to be seen as just as appropriate, just as worthy of our tax dollars, as the installation of garbage cans and water spigots?

I convened the first meeting of the Cemetery Café in the autumn, my favourite season. The coloured leaves, the cool and crisp air, the proof of many good things having come to fruition, the unmistakability of change – the one season when it feels to me as though everything is perfect. Now I am finishing my dissertation in the first warm days of spring, and so I am thankful that it reflects something of how the majesty of death can be seen, preposterously, in the first new buds of spring.

But the pedagogy of the deceased should not settle with a poetic ending because there is urgent work to be done. There is more that we need to learn about mortality in order to activate ourselves as human subjects. There is more that we need to unlearn about mortality in order to comprehend the connection between the goodness of justice and the goodness of life, with death left in. There are more ways we need to build community in order to supplant
poverty with justice, and there are more ways we need to hasten the development of critical consciousness. In the face of violence and ecological crisis, we need to make it clear that another world is dead ahead, and that hoping for that another world means stepping up – Indigenizing, establishing, greening, hoping, and developing community in many ways.

In exploring the pedagogy of the deceased, my purpose has been to explore how matters pertaining to death and mortality can teach us to connect everyday personal experiences with the experiences of community writ large. How, then, can individuals and communities learn to value a good death, and what can be done about problematic and preventable deaths? When my life comes to an end one day, or when an entire generation comes to an end one day, something much greater than one life or one generation will continue the age-old work of making and remaking. Therein we learn what it means to be related. This is one of the most unforgettable educational encounters, where the mortal and the endless come face to face. And there is still work to be done.
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APPENDIX A
Recruitment message

You are invited to participate in the “Cemetery Café Project”. This is an opportunity for innovative learning, brainstorming, interactive activities, and community development, all while gathering with a small group of community members in a local Waterloo cemetery.

Participation would involve an overall time commitment of 10 hours spread over 4 to 5 months (4 group meetings and 2 one-to-one interviews). Group meetings will include discussion and brainstorming on the themes of community development, hope, and human mortality, as well as an embodied learning activity meant to encourage more individual reflection. Out of respect for the project name, the “Cemetery Café” events will include free coffee, tea, and a small snack (e.g. chocolate). One-to-one interviews will be occasions for articulating general thoughts, questions, and ruminations about your experience of the group meetings.

There are significant benefits to participating in this project – e.g. meeting and learning together with members of your local community, reflecting on questions about mortality in a safe environment, and being part of a creative initiative that builds community and nurtures hope. There are no significant risks to participating in this project.

This project contributes toward a doctoral dissertation in the Adult Education and Community Development program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. The project also stands to make a unique contribution within the field of “death education”.

Registration is required (followed by contact information and link to Facebook page).
Dear (insert participant’s name):

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a research project I am facilitating as part of my PhD studies in Adult Education and Community Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. This letter provides information about the project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

My proposed project consists of qualitative research that utilizes Freirean critical pedagogy in the context of a community-based (i.e. cemetery-based) and hope-filled exploration of human mortality. The overall purpose of my research is to explore cemetery-based pedagogy in order to foster community development and hope.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and the overall time commitment would be approximately ten hours over the course of four or five months. Participation includes two components: (1) Together with ten or eleven other participants, participation in a series of four monthly “Cemetery Café” events that will be designed to encourage learning and dialogue among group participants. Each of these events will be approximately two hours in duration. With the permission of participants, photos will be taken at these events and some of these photos may be used in scholarly presentations and/or in printed form (e.g. my own dissertation, or a chapter in an academic journal), although such use of photos will not be accompanied by any identifying information. (2) Two semi-structured interviews with the researcher – one before and one after the series of “Cemetery Café” events. Each of the two interviews will be approximately one hour in duration, and will take place in a mutually agreed-upon location. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. All information you provide is considered completely confidential, and no value judgments will be made on any of your responses. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study; however, with your permission anonymous quotations may be used.

You may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences by advising the researcher.

This research project is unfunded, and so I am unable to offer full compensation to research participants. However, participants can submit receipts for out-of-pocket expenses associated with their participation (e.g. bus fare to the Cemetery Café, or childcare expenses). Each participant will receive a small honorarium at the conclusion of the project, or at an earlier time if they choose to withdraw from the project.

There are significant benefits to participating in this project – e.g. meeting and learning together with members of your local community, reflecting on questions about mortality in a
safe environment, and being part of a creative initiative that builds community and nurtures hope.

There are no significant risks to participating in this project. (But please inform the principle investigator if you are recently bereaved, if you have experienced death-related trauma, or if a cemetery triggers a significant emotional, spiritual, or physical reaction for you.)

Each participant will be assigned a code and pseudonym. Where basic demographic information is included in the reporting of this research, this information will be generalized (e.g. the use of age range, general description of community residence, etc.) to eliminate specific, personally identifying aspects of the information. The letters of consent, the list of participants, codes and pseudonyms will be stored under lock and key at a location only accessible by the researcher. Likewise, all data including flip-chart materials, fieldnotes as well as interview audio files and transcripts will be stored under a lock and key cabinet accessible only to the researcher, and where applicable in a password protected computer at the researcher’s home. All data will be destroyed five years following the completion of the study. Data will not be shared with anyone other than the thesis supervisor.

This research project has been reviewed by my supervisor – Dr. Peter Sawchuk – and has received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Toronto. However, the final decision about participation is yours. If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics, ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Participants will be notified when the final dissertation is available through the University of Toronto library system. Participants will be notified of any other materials that emerge from the project based on participant involvement – e.g. the design of public education signs for the cemetery, additional articles, etc.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at _____ or by email at _____.

Thank you, and I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Matthew Bailey-Dick
PhD Student
Adult Education and Community Development
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) – University of Toronto

Please keep a copy of this INFORMATION LETTER for your records.
APPENDIX C
Consent Form

Note: By signing this consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a project being conducted by Matthew Bailey-Dick of the Adult Education and Community Development program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto) under the supervision of Dr. Peter Sawchuk. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this project, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted. I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be audio recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses. I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the thesis and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous. I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through a University of Toronto Research Ethics Board. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this project, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics by emailing ethics.review@utoronto.ca or phoning 416-946-3273.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this project.

☐ YES ☐ NO

I agree to have my interviews audio recorded.

☐ YES ☐ NO

I agree to have my photograph taken as part of group discussions and/or activities during the “Cemetery Café” events, and I consent to such photos being included in publications or displayed within public presentations by the researcher.

☐ YES ☐ NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any publication that comes of this research.

☐ YES ☐ NO

I agree to treat the participation of others in the group as confidential.

☐ YES ☐ NO

Participant name: ____________________ Participant signature: ____________________

(please print)

Witness name: ____________________ Witness signature: ____________________

(please print)

Date: ____________________

You will be given a copy of this Consent Form for your records. The signed copy of the Consent Form will be retained by the project investigator.
APPENDIX D
Opening interview guide

Theme: Demographics
1. Please briefly describe yourself in terms of basic demographic information – e.g. gender, age, cultural/racial identity, home community, faith affiliation if applicable.

Theme: Cemetery Café group
2. How do you feel about being part of this Cemetery Café group?
3. How does this Cemetery Café group experience compare to other group experiences you’ve been a part of?
4. From your perspective, in what ways does this group seem to be diverse and/or homogenous?
5. Who is not in this group? What groups of people are not represented here?

Theme: Cemetery context
6. What are some of your personal, cultural and/or religious beliefs about the place where human remains are disposed of? (This might pertain to cemeteries, or it might pertain to other places.)
7. If you think of a cemetery as a kind of classroom, what are some of the lessons that we can learn? Also, who (or what) are the teachers?
8. Aside from cemeteries, what are some other helpful/powerful places for gathering together and thinking about human mortality? Give specific examples and compare them to a cemetery.
9. What does it mean to participate in a cemetery?
   a. Are those who are dead the only participants?
   b. In what ways are living people also participants?
   c. Can “participant” also apply to other living things – e.g. plants and animals?

Theme: Mortality
10. How do you define human mortality?
11. What are the advantages of mortality – for individuals, for communities, and for the planet?
12. How does the cemetery affect the way you understand/experience your own mortality?
13. Educators do a lot of work to figure out how things like gender, race, and economic class impact the classroom and/or the experiences of individual learners. Assume for a moment that the same kind of work can be focused on human mortality. Why might it be helpful for learners to talk together about their experiences of mortality (including both similar and different experiences)?

Theme: Hope
14. How do you define hope?
15. Does being in a cemetery make you feel hopeful? Why or why not?
16. What would need to change for more people to see the cemetery as a place that nurtures hope?
Theme: Community development
17. How do you define community development?
18. Imagine the cemetery as the starting point for an exciting community development project in our local community. What could be the outcomes of such a project?
19. If we understand community development as needing to include things like economic justice, intercultural diversity, and social emancipation, what aspects of the cemetery encourage this kind of community development? What aspects of the cemetery discourage this kind of community development?
20. Does community require mortality/death? Why or why not?

Theme: Pedagogy
21. What helped or hindered you from participating in the embodied activity of lying down in the cemetery?
22. Beyond this particular research project, what are some creative ways for the cemetery to play an educational role in the community?
23. Based on your experience with the cemetery as a kind of classroom, what are some opportunities and challenges for classroom participants – i.e. for learners? for teachers?
24. Based on what you have learned about critical pedagogy, how has the cemetery facilitated learning and action for social change? Ideally, how could it facilitate such learning and action?
Curious about what’s going on here?

We are participants in an event called “Cemetery Café” which is a community learning event that combines small group conversations, quiet reflection, large-group brainstorming, and a unique embodied experience of the cemetery. (Cemetery staff are aware of today’s event.)

One of the questions we are exploring in this Cemetery Café is this: How can the cemetery be a place for community development and hope? What do you think? If you have thoughts about this question or if you want general information about this project, contact Matthew at (email address).
APPENDIX F
Closing interview guide

Theme: General questions
1. What worked well about the Cemetery Café project?
2. What did not work well about the Cemetery Café project?
3. Comment on any thoughts, observations, or questions you had about the make-up of the Cemetery Café group (i.e. who was present, who was not present, etc.).

Theme: Cemetery context
4. Do you feel that the context of the cemetery (or the cemetery chapel) influenced the group discussion in any way? Why or why not?
5. Did the Cemetery Café project have any impact – negative or positive – on your attitudes and/or beliefs about mortality?
6. What are some of the questions (about mortality, cemeteries, community development, or hope) that remain unanswered for you?

Theme: Hope and community development
7. How did the Cemetery Café contribute to or detract from your understanding of hope?
8. How did the Cemetery Café contribute to or detract from your understanding of community development?

Theme: Pedagogy
9. Margaret Ledwith defines critical pedagogy like this: “education that questions everyday life, identifies contradictions, makes critical connections with the structures of society that discriminate and acts to change things for the better” (2016, p. 21). With this in mind, what were some of the successes and/or failures of the cemetery-based pedagogy?

Theme: Beyond the Cemetery Café
10. Beyond this particular research project, what are some creative ways for the cemetery to play an educational role in the community?
11. How can the awareness of mortality facilitate learning and action for social change?