

(Re)tracings of What Was Once Present/Absent

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*we were going to be elders
just because we were still around
and i was going to listen to you on a panel
we didn't feel qualified for and hear you talk about your guilt
for still being alive
when so many of your friends were taken
by suicide
by AIDS
by racist police
and jealous ex-lovers
and poverty
and no access to health care
and how you had a stable job you suffered at until the weekend
how you avoided the drama
and only went to the club at pride
and so here you were with no one to dance with anymore*

—Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Pulse”

For as long as I (Bretton) can remember, I have been fascinated with Gothic and macabre entities and stories around death. Whether it was slipping a purple Skeletor action figure into my backpack before I left for elementary school every morning; staying awake deep into the night and early morning during my teens to watch the HBO television series *Tales from the Crypt*; or traveling to Transylvania, Romania, to visit Dracula’s castle after I graduated from college, narrative contexts imbued with death have indelibly shaped my understanding of and interest in the world. On January 17, 2017, my relationship to death changed with the physical transition of my mother. Even as we write this Introduction to this JFE issue centered on the theme of Death, Loss, and Remembrance Across Cultures: A Role for Folklore in Education, I viscerally recall the bleeps, dings, chirps, and hums of machines inside the room sustaining her final breaths. I remember a nurse turning on an audio device that played ocean waves breaking across an unidentified shoreline, dulling the machinic soundscape reverberating throughout the room. My mother loved the sea and I like to think that—in her mind—she was able to live out her last moments somewhere serene, sandy, and warm near the ocean. I distinctly remember the walls of the hospital room being



A family photo, with Bretton as a youth.

beige, sandy even, and wondering about the intersections of tranquility, death, place, space, and sound. Shortly after the (sound) waves were turned on, I looked outside the hospital window and noticed a thick layer of San Francisco fog hovering in the distance. Perhaps the fog was gently approaching. Perhaps not. Regardless, the loss of my mother, Pamela Varga, has significantly affected how I consider the category of death as generative and vital for educators, students, researchers, and folklorists in that it affords unique opportunities to (re)trace cultural registers and sensibilities by helping us make sense of that which we cannot immediately touch, yet nonetheless continues to touch us.

For as long as I (Mark) can remember, I have had an uneasy relationship with death and loss. My first growing awareness of loss and remembrance was in learning retrospectively

about the life and death of my cousin Chris, who died shortly before my second birthday. In the small rural community where both Chris and I lived, news of death travels at the speed of light, and his death reverberated all through the community and continues to do so whenever I have conversations with people in my hometown who remember my cousin. Chris, a senior in high school, was killed in a drunk driving accident while driving home from his shift at a local restaurant late one evening shortly before Christmas in 1982. A driver in the other lane, impaired by alcohol, crossed the center line and collided into my cousin's car, killing him instantly. I have no memories of Chris as I was not yet two years old at the time of his death. I wish I could tap into some deep recess of my memory to visualize what I would later grow up to learn was his fondness for me as a baby, how he would often stop by my parents' house to hold me and feed me, including the night of the high school's annual winter dance when he and his girlfriend stopped by to take a picture holding me on their way to the dance, a week before his death. Part of the remembrance of Chris takes shape in certain cultural ways we remember and commemorate loss and death. Chris won a staggering number of awards as a high school tennis player in Indiana and throughout the country. In a small town of only 1,000 residents, accolades such as this take on a significant role in the cultural memory of the community. While I grew up hearing my family members often speak mournfully and longingly about my cousin, and his death, the ways in which his death are remembered were never far from me. The high school where Chris attended (and from which I graduated two decades later) named its tennis courts in memory of Chris, with an honorary placard commemorating his life, his prowess as an athlete, and his death, which remains displayed prominently on the entrance to the courts. As mentioned in the accompanying image of his newspaper obituary (itself a genre of folk narrative) the memorial service for Chris was held in the

high school gymnasium. The unease I have had with death in part relates to the unease I felt at wishing I could remember my cousin, and instead only being able to feel his presence in my high school all those years later, walking onto the tennis courts bearing his name and imagining the gymnasium, packed to capacity, for his memorial service, spaces I saw every day while I was a student in the same high school.

Death and education are never far removed. When we (Bretton and Mark) approached the *Journal of Folklore and Education* to ask about submitting a piece on folklore, education, and death, we were both engaged in writing about death as a curricular and pedagogical topic for educators as the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded in its first year. Along with two of our colleagues, we had been creating spaces in journals, books, conferences, and classrooms for educators to contemplate how to approach, relate to, and teach through concepts and feelings of grief and loss. Our hope—then and now—has been for educators to see grief as a way of relating to the world. Grief and loss can help learners consider conditions that contribute to the (re)shaping of how we should feel about losses of life within/outside our cultural worldview, especially when such losses of life animate many lessons/topics in our curricula, from war and genocide to colonialism and imperialism to epidemics and natural disasters. We see loss and grief as an educational practice in “deepening, attending and listening” to one’s self, culture, community, and world, an educational engagement across cultural contexts “rooted in love and compassion” (Weller 2015).

As educators, we have had numerous occasions to teach through and with death and grief with our students. As a college student learning to teach, I (Mark) was observing a social studies teacher teach his high school economics classes on September 11, 2001. Both the teacher and I felt ill-equipped in the minutes, days, and weeks that followed to talk openly with students about the thousands of deaths that transpired that day. A few years later, teaching in my own high school classroom, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina entered my midwestern school and community when students suddenly arrived, displaced from their homes and relocated to Indiana from Louisiana, forced to attend schools with no one they knew while they grieved, often imperceptibly to me and other students in the class, the loss of their homes, their communities, and the life they knew before

Chris Lee Helmsing

CAMBRIDGE CITY — Chris Lee Helmsing, 17, 414 W. Maple St., Cambridge City, died Wednesday in a traffic accident on U.S. 40, west of Centerville.

He was a senior at Lincoln High School, a member of the National Honor Society and vice president of the Key Club.

Playing No. 1 singles, Helmsing led the Lincoln tennis team to its third straight Tri-Eastern Conference championship as well as its first



Chris Helmsing sectional and regional titles. He was the all-conference selection in No. 1 singles and was undefeated in four years of regular-season singles.

He received honorable mention on the all-state team named by the Indiana High School Tennis Coaches Association. This past summer he entered tournaments in Bloomington, Indianapolis, Carmel and Anderson, and won two Richmond city championships. He also played basketball and varsity baseball. He was employed at Dinnie’s Restaurant in Richmond.

Survivors include his parents, Larry and Pat Huntsman. He is also the son of Larry Helmsing of Richmond. Other survivors are his sister, Nancy Kate, at home; maternal grandmother, Frances Ballard of St. Joseph, Ill.; paternal grandmother, Faye Coffey of Richmond; several aunts, uncles and cousins.

Funeral service for Chris Lee Helmsing will be at 2 p.m. Monday in the Lincoln High School gymnasium, with the Rev. Gordon Mehaffey, Cambridge City Christian Church, officiating. Burial will be in Riverside Cemetery.

Friends may call from 1 to 9 p.m.

the storm. In my (Bretton) experience teaching in Florida, hurricanes played a significant role in how students came to understand their relationship to materials of the world and injustices relating to mobility and loss. I will always remember Hurricane Irma and how it not only destroyed sections of the community but also caused trauma for my students as they followed the deathly destructive path of the hurricane on the news. For both of us (Bretton and Mark), helping our students contemplate loss of this magnitude was challenging. One thing September 11 and Hurricane Katrina have in common, along with many examples that appear in this issue, is how such events challenge the ways particular communities, societies, or cultures mourn loss and relate to those who have died and the experience of death, up through and continuing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

While we each hold a distinct relationship to death, importantly, this issue has been assembled against the backdrop of countless unfolding deathscapes that include climate catastrophe, a global pandemic, and continued enactments of unjust death upon marginalized communities. As a portion of Alexis Pauline Gumb's poem "Pulse" at the beginning of this Introduction indicates, in the U.S.—sadly, and all too frequently—death holds hands with injustice¹ and disproportionately affects the lives of those deemed "Other." Essential to our engagements with death, loss, and remembrance in this issue is the need to recognize the violent conditions underpinning life in this country. Extending this perspective to events of 2020, Madaha Kinsey-Lamb (2020) wrote in the *Journal of Folklore and Education*:

I am writing this in The Time of Corona.... We all know people who contracted the virus, were initially turned away from hospitals, died, or survived; or joined their fears and astonishment with ours at the fast pace of upheaval and devastation. In the weeks since the start of this article, however, it has also become The Time of George Floyd—of tears, outrage, tear gas, fires, and marches to quiet feelings of powerlessness. (2020, 9)

Despite these contexts of death and injustice, Gloria Ladson-Billings reminds us that the "hard re-set demanded by the Covid-19 and anti-Black pandemics of 2020 require us to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy that takes into account the conditions of students' lives these occurrences set in motion" (2021, 73). In particular, culturally relevant pedagogy is concerned with three aspects of education: student learning/growth, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billing 1995). Ultimately, Ladson-Billings' framework works to engage students in the variegated ways that different people experience life—and, we would argue, death. We see natural connections between culturally relevant pedagogy and folklore: Both are emergent; involve authentic narratives, experiences, and (re)imaginings of the past and future; and aim to enhance knowledge and equity through a multicultural lens (Morales 2020). Ladson-Billings points out that "all students will be thrust into a diverse, multicultural world where they will need to understand the culture of those different from themselves" (2021, 71). From this perspective, we argue that culturally relevant framings of death, loss, and remembrance contain rich possibilities for substantive educational change and deeper, more complex understandings across social and cultural contexts.

Death in the pandemic made the ritual of mourning more visible. Acts of love and arts of memorialization that happened within a tradition and without special notice became something reinvented—sharing values with past traditions yet looking and feeling different as many reconciled the loss of coming together and the abnegation of community-sanctioned ritual. Our usual ways of relating to death—most often mediated through personal relationships of a family member or friend who has died—become conditioned differently through mass events of death, loss, and remembrance. In all instances of death as an experience, education mediates for us through learning—thus creating opportunities to approach such instances with traditions, rituals, and practices passed along to us. This becomes the space in which folklore and folkloristic aspects of death, loss, and remembrance offer a role for folklore and education. Invoking the urgency to “unlearn” and rethink the politics of knowledge in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the folklorist Charles L. Briggs suggests that because folklore involves “documenting the social lives of stories, objects, and other cultural forms and tracking how they circulate and are transformed as they move through time and place,” folklore enables educators to teach unique ways of knowing, acting, and relating to death, loss, and remembrance as a form of agency—a means of making one’s place in life while being in the midst of loss all around us (Briggs 2021, 320).

Folklore is rich with examples of how to engage with death, loss, and remembrance. To take one instance, the folklorist Solimar Otero describes her godmother Tomasa’s saints and orichas, the presence of which reminded Otero of her deceased family members. Through folk practices of remembrance, this encounter touched Otero’s life “in both ephemeral and tangible ways” (Otero and Martinez-Rivera 2021, 5). Otero’s example of remembrance of the deceased offers an entry point to learning about identities, histories, and communities through traditions, rituals, and culture. As another example, the folklorist Willow Mullins engages with the online interactive film [Welcome to Pine Point](#) to disrupt “some of the most ingrained assumptions of the field—that folklore *should* be preserved; that groups are organic and natural; that folklore itself is about cultural presence” (2019, 136). The film, produced by Michale Simons and Paul Shoebridge in 2011, explores the intersections of memory and materiality by (re)tracing “a productiveness that follows a death, as if to fill in the hole left by the thing that is now gone that simultaneously references and grows out of that absence” (Mullins 2019, 139). To which, we ask, how might educators *further* leverage folklore to attend to the nuanced absences endured by their students to foster productive, compassionate spaces of cultural connectivity and sustainability? And, perhaps paradoxically, what is (or are we) *missing*?

This collection of articles works toward answering these questions by traversing temporal and cultural demarcations relating to how time alternatively affects and frames the sensibilities of people within different communities. To this point, stories and novels, poems and legends, film and television, song and art about death, loss, and remembrance continue to be (re)animated through ghostly figurations blurring delineations of time and space (i.e., pastpresentfuture [Varga 2022]). Such experiences of touching the past and feeling the ephemerality of life help explain death and loss across social imaginations. As scholar and artist Eve Ewing argues, “[g]host stories serve as an important counter-story; a ghost story says *something you thought was gone is still happening here*; a ghost story says *those who are dead will not be forgotten*” (2018, 154). Ewing’s work signals that engagements with in-between-ness are more than just memories of that past, they

hold narrative agency and are committed to disrupting master narratives of history, (in)justice, and community (i.e., counternarratives, see also Cook and Dixson 2013, Solorzano and Yosso 2002).

What if education embraced an orientation suggesting that embedded within the present are traces of the past demanding justice(s) of the future (Derrida 1994)? How might hauntological framings calling “into question the fixed-ness of historical accounts of injustice, thus unlocking *interlocking* and unaccounted for spaces of hopefulness, amelioration, and atonement” (Varga and Monreal 2021, 84) challenge education—specifically (through) folklore—to think differently about how imbrications of artistic representations and cultural practices can work toward the rupture of (educational) injustice(s) (e.g., Varga and Helmsing, in press)? Eroding temporal boundaries allows us (e.g., educators, researchers, folklorists) capacity to contemplate a future enlivened with cultural traces of the pastpresent. As Derrida noted:

No justice...seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead... Without this non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present...without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who are not there, of those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living, what sense would there be to ask the question “where?” “where tomorrow?” “whither?” (1994, xix)

At its core, this issue is about justice *through* the lens of death, loss, and remembrance. This collection of scholarship establishes an alternative register to cultural mutings embedded within educational contexts and narratives; that is, working within liminal spaces to make the absent, present (once more). Each article grapples with temporality—and thus ephemerality—across a broad spectrum of contexts (climate, communal health, disaster, history, mortality, narrative sovereignty, photography, place, religion, ritual, and sound). Articles also foreground how the tools of folklore enable fuller, deeper sources of cultural expressions to emerge and take shape, existing potentially as resources for hope, survivance, and love in the face of loss and grief as authors recount. As guest editors, we see this collection as a means for subverting dominant narratives and demonstrating how powerful culturally relevant approaches are in educational contexts and beyond. We believe that this rich resource offers many perspectives of death and loss that can be generative for educators and artists to engage in discourses around remembrance.

In conclusion, both folklorists and educators can add *life* through educative acts of remembrance, commemoration, tradition, and mourning. The folklorist Betty Belanus describes curation as “adding life” to an object, story, narrative, experience, or place (Belanus 2021). Although it may seem a paradox for an issue focusing on death to exemplify practices of “adding life,” moments of folklorists and educators adding life to the items, objects, and practices surrounding us help make visible the complex in-between-ness of life and death. We hope that this issue of the *Journal of Folklore and Education* will prompt readers to consider their own complex and complicated relationship(s) to death and contemplate how intersections of death, loss, and remembrance influence how people come to understand themselves, each other, and the world(s) around them. It is our sincerest wish that readers find the articles featuring art, stories, knowledge, resources, and experiences beneficial for (re)tracing what was once present/absent. After all, and as Donna

Haraway suggests, “without sustained remembrance, we cannot learn to live with ghosts and so cannot think” (2016, 39).

Endnotes

To acknowledge injustice—specifically white supremacy—in educational research writing and publishing, white (and west) have been left uncanceled. This editorial decision upholds JFE’s long-standing tradition of combating oppression through textual measure. Language (and text) matter. We understand that this stylistic decision does little to change these injustices, but we remain hopeful that acknowledging the pervasiveness of whiteness in education and in academic texts will encourage readers to consider ways to disrupt its presence in contexts of writing, reading, artmaking, and teaching.

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