

# Anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy for pandemic times

Jennifer M. Poole, Erin K. Willer, and Samantha Zerafa

## Abstract

*COVID-19 has saturated many spaces in loss and grief. Higher education has been saturated too, despite ongoing institutional demands that educators mitigate and manage the grief away. Such demands expose the colonial and carceral logics that operate in much of so-called higher education, logics that may often create what we call ‘transcarceral grief’. Inspired by abolitionist activist scholarship, we understand transcarceral grief as an involuntary response to the surveillance, compliance, discipline, and punishment practices (or carceral logics) that have made education a site of restriction and confinement. Such a lens demonstrates how dangerous many of the ‘must-do’s’ of grief and pedagogy can be and changes how we understand our own pandemic pedagogy. Thus, in this piece, we draw on scholarship, activism, theory, and narrated experiences to identify and work against transcarcerality while teaching/learning with grief in our Canadian and American institutions. Rather than mitigating, managing or recovering from grief, we offer a grief-facing praxis that has the potential to disrupt and re-form how we metabolize grief in higher education. Further, we posit that our anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy has the potential to move us closer to the life-affirming space that we crave more than ever both in and out of the classroom.*

*Keywords: abolition; carcerality; grief; pedagogy; transcarceral*

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*Received 21 June 2021; revised version received 1 November 2021; accepted 29 November 2021. Corresponding author: Jennifer M. Poole, X University<sup>1</sup> (jpoole@ryerson.ca).*

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## Introduction

These have been ‘grief-saturated’ (Perreault, 2011) times on Turtle Island<sup>2</sup>, the place from which we write these lines in the settler states of Canada and the United

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<sup>1</sup> We use this designation in solidarity with the many Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, staff and students who have long advocated for a name-change for Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Egerton Ryerson was the architect of residential schools in Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Turtle Island is the first and original name given to the place settlers now call North America. This name is used by many Indigenous peoples to reference this land. We three authors are all uninvited white settlers to Turtle Island.

States. Despite increased vaccination rates and the lifting of some safety mandates, at the time of this writing (June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021), approximately 25,791 Canadians and 592,932 Americans had died of COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2021). About 19% of Americans had reported losing a close friend or family member to COVID-19 (AP NORC, 2021), with 3,485,133 Canadians grieving the loss of a loved one due to the pandemic (Canadian Grief Alliance, 2021).

As a result of such extensive loss, many teaching and learning spaces have been saturated in grief. News of a death arrives in an email from a colleague or a learner (student), and grief arrives as blank stares, faceless names on Zoom, absences, silences, extended timelines, assignment negotiations, cancelled classes, and leaves or sudden departures. So many on ‘campus’ have lost health, homes, incomes, spaces of safety or community, and relationships. People have been dying all around. People have been ill all around, and not just physically. The water, land, and atmosphere are dying too. The air feels heavy with endings and grievings, thick with pain, and the kind of grief that makes bones hurt, thoughts spin or stop making sense. However, not many seem to be talking about any of this on our (presently mostly virtual) campuses. Some are talking about ‘quick pivots,’ ‘pandemic fatigue,’ ‘return to work,’ and ‘innovative or agile’ platform pedagogies. They are talking about maintaining ‘productivity’ and increased spending and deficits. We are not hearing much talk about how grief is showing up with respect to teaching and learning.

The three of us authors want to talk about grief on campus and the prevalent attempts to either avoid it or manage and lock it away. We want to talk about how grief seeps into and floods over the precarious scaffold of a class, office hour, or best laid plan. Here, there, and everywhere, we want to talk about teaching/learning work as potentially grief facing not grief fearing.

From the experiences and literature we share in this piece, we have learned that grief is experienced mentally, emotionally, spiritually, physically, and politically. It may be individual, collective, or both. We have also learned that it is often disenfranchised and relegated to specific, ‘appropriate’ contexts. Grief may have its own time-way and may not be resolved within a standard three-day bereavement leave (if one is even a possibility). Rather than timing and neatly packaging up our grief, we understand that it must be ‘metabolized’ in its own way (for more, see the folx<sup>3</sup> at Being Here, Human, 2020). We also understand that being allowed to grieve is highly dependent on the subjectivities and privileges of the griever(s) and their access to (emotional, physical, financial, social) resources for mourning.

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<sup>3</sup> Folx is a term that intentionally includes trans, nonbinary and gender diverse people (see Grant & Arrow, 2021).

In authoring this piece, we recognize that to write these lines exposes our own grief privilege. We, as white educators, learners, researchers, and people, are allowed to grieve in ways that our non-white colleagues, students, and friends may not. Elsewhere we have detailed how white privilege and more specifically white supremacy culture (Jones & Okun, 2001) often operate in grief and mourning practices, research, and scholarship (see Poole & Galvan, 2021). Such structures limit what can be said and felt about grief and by whom, exalting controlled, productive, ‘professionalized,’ time-limited, and distinctly white approaches to and expressions of grief. This also limits who can speak about grief and, as we realize here, even write about grief in pedagogy. Grounded in critical approaches, we have begun to call this practice grief supremacy and outlined how it seeks to manage grief out of the classroom, the workplace, and indeed all forms of racial capitalism in order to protect productivity (Poole & Galvan, 2021).

Given the compounding of COVID-19 grief and grief supremacy, our teaching praxis has been changing, bringing with it many ‘must-be’s’ (such as classes going on-line) that keep productivity going. It has also offered up important spaces of ‘maybe-ing,’ and ‘by this, we mean sustaining spaces of possibility; of pushing at the boundaries not only of what IS, but also of what is thinkable, knowable, and doable; of imagining how things can be otherwise’ (Mahon et al., 2020, p. 1). As we detail in this piece and as we attempt to be grief-facing (Poole & Galvan, 2021; Poole & Ward, 2013; Willer, 2019; Willer et al., 2021), examining and re-imagining how we teach *with grief now* is particularly pressing.

Even before COVID-19 times, we began working toward a grief-facing approach to teaching/learning called *critical grief pedagogy*, which was/is grounded in four tenets (Willer, in press; Willer et al., 2021). The first calls for the demedicalization of grief in the classroom, recognizing that mourning cannot always be tidied up quickly and quietly. Such an approach views grief in its multiple forms not as a deviant act, but rather an understandable response to suffering. Second, critical grief pedagogy acknowledges that grief’s unruliness is not a bio-deterministic issue internal to a griever, but rather a result of systems of power such as white supremacy, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberalism, for example, that affect and reflect rules for grieving. Third and fourth, critical grief pedagogy calls instructors and learners to respond to these injustices by making space for embodied witnessing of grief in the classroom and practicing compassion in response (Willer, in press; Willer et al., 2021).

In these pages, we seek to deepen this critical grief pedagogy for these pandemic times by bringing the framework of transcarcerality into the discussion. Specifically, we outline and argue for an *anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy*. In order to do so, we first ‘pan out’ and share some of what is already known about teaching/learning with grief ‘at school’. Second, we focus in, outlining how we

have been with grief as learners and educators. Then, we attempt to go deeper, building on critical grief pedagogy with a specific focus on transcarcerality. Such a focus traces carceral logics such as surveillance, compliance, discipline, and punishment that, we argue, affect so much of higher education and its ‘musts’ but also that affect so much about grief and its management. Such a lens offers us a way to take up and push back against the *compounding carceralities* of teaching through grief in, and sometimes created by, higher education. It might be that this approach creates some opportunities for ‘maybe-ing’ and possible pathways through all the grief folx are carrying. It might also be that this maybe-ing also creates community, something outside the carcerality of grief discourses that seeks to manage, mitigate, and surveil. We need that community now. We crave it more than ever.

### **Panning out and into the literature on grief in education**

From the medicalization of grief to embodied approaches to pedagogy, the literature surrounding grief and education is vast. As a result, our review here is not a wholesome account of that which has been said, written, or felt about grief. Rather, this is a brief accounting of grief and grieving in educational spaces that is meant to stoke the conversations that have often been relegated to closed office doors, the provision of proof or evidence of death (i.e., death certificate, obituary), and even outside of classrooms altogether. With this aim in mind, as we turned to the literature to understand what has been written about teaching/learning with or through grief in education, there were two key dichotomous threads. The first thread fell within dominant understandings of grief and how it is processed, including discussions of grief management, literacy, and training. The second thread broke out of these dominant understandings and positioned grief ‘as involuntary, and as something to be metabolized’ (Being Here, Human, 2020, as cited in Poole & Galvan, 2021, p. 64), and therefore necessitated learning and teaching *through* and *with* grief, rather than *around* or *in spite* of it. We feel it is important, if not imperative, to address how we host grief in the classroom in authentic and intentional ways in the context of COVID-19. The pandemic has generated grief and loss in exponentially high numbers that ‘radically [confront] humans with death and the fear of death’ (Fuchs, 2020, p. 375), while also giving rise to complicated and extended grief (Anderson, 2020; Piper, 2021). Below, we review these two threads in order to provide further scaffolding for anti-transcerceral grief pedagogy in the face of COVID-19.

*Management of grief in education and the classroom*

Most of the literature on grief in education and the classroom is focused on grief management, literacy, and training—all focused on addressing, coping with, moving beyond, and recovering from grief. In many studies, the focus is on how educators can support students as they cope with grief and loss in their lives or prepare them to face grief in the workplace (Hannon et al., 2019; Mitchell, 2005; Perreault, 2011; Rogers et al., 2019). Other scholars debated the role of teachers in supporting students experiencing a loss and its resultant grief. Dyregrov and colleagues (2013), in a mixed methods study including teachers and other staff, noted that some teachers in their study felt that ‘it is not the teacher’s job to care for grieving children but rather the responsibility of “professionals”’ (p. 128). One teacher asserted that ‘we are not, and should not be, psychologists’ (Dyregrov et al., 2013, p. 130). Case and colleagues (2020) found teachers seemed to defer to guidance counselors or other external supports, especially when students had greater needs. Much of the literature consulted here positions educators as a monolithic and objective starting point to support students who are grieving, which will then be passed on to the ‘appropriate professionals’ that will help students ‘recover’ from their loss.

*Boundaries and other pressures*

What many of these articles fail to take up, however, is how educators can process, understand, and share their grief with their students in a classroom setting. In a school where three students died within a period of six months, Hannon and colleagues (2019) found that teachers who were also grieving the loss of students were open with their grieving only to a certain degree, stopping themselves before showing any outward emotion. Teachers and school staff expressed that they ‘didn’t know if it was appropriate or not’ and felt that they had to ‘put [their] own stuff aside’ (Hannon et al., 2019, p. 49). Indeed, much of the literature that discusses grief in the classroom comes back to boundaries, ethics, and appropriateness.

Case and colleagues (2020) recommended that schools must support teachers and school staff ‘while defining appropriate classroom boundaries and establishing clear expectations for teacher behaviour’ (p. 404). Teachers are expected to be in control of their emotions and reactions within any given situation, especially when it comes to more ‘disruptive’ emotions like frustration and sadness (Husbye et al., 2019; Rowling, 1995). Moore (2016), a U.S. college professor who experienced the loss of a loved one in the midst of their academic year, mentioned feeling the pressure to maintain the professional distance between them and their students. Husbye and colleagues (2019) found that teachers in their study articulated the same pressure to discuss grief in their classrooms in the ‘right way’

which would support students without crossing boundaries set by the school and their students' parents. Not only are students expected to grieve in a certain way, but teachers too are expected to respond to that grief (as well as sit with their own) in particular ways that are bound in discourses of professionalism, ethical conduct, and appropriate distance.

### *Grief training and management*

Bolstering these expectations is the reliance on increased grief training and education for teachers in much of the literature. Some research recommends an understanding of traditional models that promote objective, systematic responses to grief processing (Doughty Horn et al., 2013; Dyregrov et al., 2013). Mitchell (2005), in their work with student midwives, advocates for a focus on 'best practices' and 'evidence-based interventions' around grief management that evoke universal, objective approaches to grief and loss. Teachers and school staff indicated the need for better training, ongoing professional development opportunities related to grief, and more discussions of death, dying, and bereavement in educators' training (Case et al., 2020; Dyregrov et al., 2013; Hannon et al., 2019).

The literature that fits into the category of grief management in the classroom is marked by some key gaps. Virtually none of these studies identifies a particular theoretical framework or intentional approach that guides their understandings of grief and loss, nor one that attends to the context within which their work is situated. Moreover, much of the work here references medical understandings and pathology, rather than a view of grief as a human process. All of the literature from this perspective is presented as universally applicable, save a few mentions of diversity that only rise to the extent of demarcating difference and/or deviance under 'cultural considerations' (Doughty Horn et al., 2013; Poole & Galvan, 2021, p. 69). Further, there is no critical engagement with the concept of grief; rather, it is treated as a monolith that refers to a specific, measurable, and tangible loss that, even when it affects a collective, is largely managed individually. As such, grief that is collective, messy, ongoing, and complex is disenfranchised and sanitized in favor of research that fits grief into a neat, 'recovered' box. This invalidation, however, is especially concerning given the current context of a global pandemic, which has induced grief that is 'collective, constant, palpable, ambiguous, and complicated' (Anderson, 2020, p. 6). All this being said, then, where do we go from here?

*Grief-facing education: Alternatives, or at least, something more human?*

The literature that we engaged with thus far largely promotes dominant cultural scripts of grieving as individualized, medicalized, and something to simply ‘get over’ in order to return to normative conditions and carry on. When looking at educational spaces, grief remains largely unacknowledged beyond the few restricted pathways described above. What remains unsaid, however, are the intimate connections between grief and white supremacy. As we detail elsewhere (Poole & Galvan, 2021), white supremacy establishes whiteness as inherently superior in ways of doing, thinking, and being, which then legitimizes itself through processes of racialization that systematically deny the humanity and capacity of those considered ‘racial others’ (Saad, 2020; Sharpe, 2016; Tuhiwai Smith, 2007). Supporting the epistemic dominance of whiteness are principles of objectivity, neutrality, perfectionism, individualism, the concentration of power, professionalism, refusal of conflict, and competition (Jones & Okun, 2001; Kohli & Burbules, 2012). All these principles serve to legitimize white supremacy and can be found in normative ideas, discourse, and approaches to practice.

Understanding grief in the classroom cannot truly happen without a deep engagement with the ways that white supremacy is woven into the fabric of education at its core, particularly around teacher conduct and appropriate rules. As we note earlier, connected to white supremacy is the concept of ‘grief supremacy,’ which sets the criteria for appropriate conditions for grief, including who can be grieved, who can speak of grief, and how (Poole & Galvan, 2021). These criteria emerge from the bounds of whiteness, privileging the response to the loss of white life as well as white grief, while systematically disenfranchising the loss and grief of Black, Indigenous, and racialized people (see Poole & Galvan, 2021 for a more detailed engagement).

These concerns have come into stronger focus during the global pandemic, which has exacerbated existing inequities, particularly around race (Statistics Canada, 2021; Tuyisenge & Goldenberg, 2021; Wallis, 2020). For example, Piper (2021) notes that Canada’s long history of healthcare cuts that serve white, upper-class interests remain legitimized through individualizing and responsabilizing discourses during this pandemic that disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, and racialized people.

Though some scholars begin to fill the gaps created by the dominant practices in education, they largely fail to pull the cloak of grief supremacy apart at its seams and thereby leave white understandings of grief, loss, and life unchallenged and normative. On the contrary, however, more and more scholars illustrate that teaching through and with grief, as well as supporting students as they learn through and with grief, has the potential to fundamentally challenge white, colonial, managerial, and neoliberal understandings in education. Although

there is not yet a prescribed way to do this (and we argue that, in fact, there *cannot* be), the literature points to some key practices that are needed for a more human approach.

First, we assert there is a fundamental need to challenge white and grief supremacy in education that allows for the disenfranchisement of grief in the classroom. These mechanisms force educators to teach while grieving without ever being able to acknowledge what they are living with, especially when it results in outward emotion (Moore, 2016). They are what force educators to compartmentalize their grief into sanitized and easily digestible sentiments of grief with a focus on returning to normalcy (Granek, 2013). They are what regulates grief responses, duration, and appropriateness, marking that which falls outside of established (white) norms around grief as pathological (Granek, 2008; Poole & Galvan, 2021; Willer et al., 2021). We agree with Moore (2016) who notes that the effects of this epistemological silencing are also damaging to students, who are not able to benefit from transformative, teachable moments that arise out of authentic (and sometimes messy) engagement with grief in the classroom.

Willer and colleagues (2021) note that calls for increased grief literacy, education, and training are vested in what they call the ‘Right Things to say,’ or prescribed—as well as safe, appropriate, and distanced—responses and reactions to someone sharing their grief (p. 34). Anderson (2020) agrees, offering the concept of *grief managerialism*, which refers to the ways that experiencing or expressing grief are discussed in terms of mastery or pathology. Both Anderson (2020) and Piper (2021) speak to the prominence of this managerialism in responses to COVID-19 grief. This demonstrates how one ‘must’ navigate, master, and overcome. Much of the existing literature follows this trend, speaking to the ‘must-be’s’ and ‘must-do’s’ (Mahon et al., 2020): the things we must say and do, or the ways we must perform and express ourselves for our grief to be perceived as appropriate and ‘normal’. However, what the next section will move towards, as well as what we advocate for in this paper, is a shift to ‘maybe-ing arenas,’ which speak to what could and can be (Mahon et al., 2020, p. 1).

### **Focusing in: Our experiences of grieving while learning and teaching**

By way of an illustration of these two threads in the literature and our attempt at something more human and relational, in this section we share two narratives about how we (Erin and Jennifer) have tried to be ‘grief-facing’ in the classroom. These narratives take us/you into the ‘before’ prior to COVID-19 as well as into the now of this pandemic. We use the term grief-facing to acknowledge the different ways that grief has *companioned* us in the classroom as both learners and teachers. Erin



leads that storytelling by going back to her experiences of ‘grieving while learning’ and Jennifer follows with how she experienced ‘teaching while grieving’. We include these narratives because our approach to anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy acknowledges that we cannot separate our own grieving and teaching from one another, and because we too believe ‘when we try (that is if we try) to transform our conditions, we as academics, students [...] are actually part of the conditions we are trying to change. This means that our sense making is mediated by those same conditions...’ (Mahon et al., 2020, p. 6). It also means that we are well aware that we can speak to these experiences and conditions because of our positionalities and less precarious pedagogical positions as white settlers who benefit from white and grief supremacy. We can write the below words because of this entirely unearned privilege. This privilege thus makes disrupting transcarceral grief in education more of our responsibility, perhaps making such disruption more possible for others too.

*Erin grieves while learning*

Though some my personal and professional work has focused on how my experiences with infertility, miscarriage, and the death of my son have shaped the ways that I have faced grief as a professor (Willer, 2019; Willer et al., 2021), more recently I cannot help but recognize that I was a grieving learner long before I was a grieving teacher. Below I tell one of the stories of how I faced grief as a middle schooler in the United States. I tell this story because I believe that it lives in my bones and if it lives in my bones, I cannot place it in the Zoom waiting room to talk amongst itself while my students and I get down to business. I tell you this story because I believe that anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy, in COVID-19 or any other times, cannot exist without acknowledging that learners are—at any given time, and more than likely, at most times—grieving. And therefore, the way that we teach them and ‘care’ for them/us matters.

*A green hallway pass enters my seventh-grade social studies classroom and my heart stops red with fear. In hyperbolic slow motion, the student office assistant hands the slip of paper to Mr. Miller. As he glances at the pass, I beg in my head, ‘no, no, no, no, not me, not today, please don’t make me go!’ But Mr. Miller lifts his eyes and announces in slow-mo guttural fashion: ‘Eeerrriinnn iiiitttt’sss ffffooorrr yyyooouuu.’ Yielding so as not to make a scene, I quickly gather my textbooks and Mead notebooks and head toward the door. I ignore my inquisitive classmates who chirp, ‘Where you goin’?’ and ‘Can I come?!’ I look down at the green hall pass with my name at the top and my third period destiny scrawled in cursive letters across it: ‘F.A.C.E.S.’ Although the acronym stands for ‘Friends*

*Always Caring Ever Sharing,' what it really should be called is 'Support Group Hell for Teenagers With Dead Parents.'*

*I silently slink into the classroom where the group is meeting, careful not to look any of the other students in the eye, an unspoken politeness rule designed to protect one another from the embarrassment of having to be here. The counselor welcomes us and says that she'd like to go around and have us 'talk about how ya been doin' since losin' your mom or dad.' What? No! I recognize a boy from gym class. He seems as terrified as I am but shares, in just above a whisper, that his mother died recently of a heart attack. Who knew that from under the armor of our scarlet-colored gym clothes both of us are grieving the temporariness of our parents? As others awkwardly share and my turn draws near, my chest heaves. I hold my breath to control it, but I cannot contain the tears as they begin to trickle and then downright gush out of my eyes. My nose is a geyser now too and although there are tissues, I cannot wipe this mess from my face. I don't want to be a 'friend ever caring ever sharing,' I want to be a friend who flips the desk in front of me over in rage and yells, 'You can't make us do this!'*

*I look for a way out, but everyone stares at me; it's my turn. I am like a little sobbing child now. You know the ones who cry so hard they cannot even talk between the gasps for air? After what feels like minutes I muster, 'My...my...my dad...died last year...when I was in sixth grade.' I am frozen. I don't know what else to say. I don't have the words to describe 'how I've been doin'' now that he is dead. Despite their eyes begging for more information, I am too ashamed to tell them that my dad struggled with alcohol addiction and drank so much over his lifetime that his organs began shutting down. And that as a result he went into the hospital the night we were to celebrate my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday and was dead two weeks later. I don't have the words to say that I am somewhat relieved that he died. Afterall, life with him was so incredibly hard. 'I...I...I...don't know...what to say.'*

*Saved by the bell, I pack up my things and make a beeline to the bathroom before having to go to the cafeteria for lunch. I look in the mirror. Not only have my tears washed away my thick brown eyeliner that I am still getting used to applying, but my eyes are so swollen they are now tiny slits. My nose and face are covered with red blotches. In the cafeteria, I try to sit down inconspicuously at my usual lunch table so as not to draw attention to myself. But as soon as I do, Matt, a boy I have a crush on, calls out, 'JEEZ, what HAPPENED to YOU?' All heads turn and all brace faces close, waiting for me to answer. The heart palpitations return and my face turns even redder than it already is. Again I 'I...I...I' and I manage to awkwardly defend, 'I was at a stupid support group meeting. And I had to talk about my dad. He died.' Not knowing what to say, they return to their square pizzas and chocolate milks.*

From an early age, school was a place where my grief was surveilled, managed, and subverted through silences and a lack of space for it to be unearthed and cared for. As a result, I learned to keep it hidden under a painful guise of good grades, athleticism, and over-functioning. Today I also think about the student from my gym class who was in the group, and I cannot help but wonder how the group's grounding in white and grief supremacy (Poole & Galvan, 2021) affected him as a Black student. The group was designed for white students like me, not Black (male) students like him whose grief is not often allowed to openly leak, whose grievings are typically many, and who cannot usually trust the good intentions of white support. Thankfully, the *F.A.C.E.S.* group eventually just faded away, perhaps a result of the challenges inherent in expecting 12- to 14-year-olds to 'share,' manage, and keep their grief hidden and in tucked away spaces that furthered their otherness. This story calls me to teach grieving learners, especially in COVID-19's wake, differently.

*Jennifer teaches while grieving*

Two weeks after I started my tenure track academic position, my beloved died suddenly. Elsewhere, I have written of some of the *mad grief* that happened at that time (Poole & Ward, 2013), and some of my responses. I have written of the white supremacy that affords this white, ciswoman settler the white grief privilege to even acknowledge this loss here and access mourning (Poole & Galvan, 2021). I have not yet written of the police response, the long years of legalities and my subsequent distrust of colonial legal, health, and governing systems. I have learned a great deal about death and justice since that time, but it is only very recently that I have wanted to write about what it was and has been like to teach through grief. Thinking about the possibilities of 'metabolizing' grief through pedagogy, I share the following narrative as an illustration.

*For me, grieving while teaching all those years ago or trying to work at the teaching, preparing, standing up in front of people with clean clothes on, answering questions and emails, writing and reviewing, was like running in deep, foul-smelling mud. I wrote at the time, 'Everything is slow, everything is hard, and everything hurts. I have no skin to protect me from the wind, no armour to protect me from the outside world, and so I do not want to be in that outside world. I want to be home where I can protect myself and the memories and places that my beloved might return to magically as Joan Didion says. Just getting to campus is a monumental and anxiety-inducing tightrope walk. Like the after effects of a concussion, I have no memory either, no clear thoughts and am not sure what is dream and reality. My hair is falling out, my skin peeling off, my teeth rotting, and my eyes are so hollowed. I do not recognize who I am anymore.'*

*But, that grieving self had a grief-facing departmental chair/director at that time. Two weeks after the death, I told her what happened, I fell to pieces in her office, and she held me with such deep anti-managerial kindness. She offered me a leave, time away. And then, she also said something like, 'Sure, we can cancel everything this term AND I have a feeling that when you are with your learners, something might happen and you may, just for those hours connect through the pain.' And so, I tried it, just for a few hours a week, and I told those learners what had happened, and that I was not sure how I was going to be from week to week, but I wanted to try. They told me things too, and we tried together, and it was, as she had said, the only time/place every week where I was in my body and heart and could lift out of the mud and fly with those learners. We called it the 'flow,' and we knew when it showed up in our space, creating collectivity, humanity, and energy for us. So, it was not just a course, it was a grief-facing and embracing experience.*

Yet, despite this glimpse into grief-facing pedagogical possibilities, the reality of grieving on campus is often something entirely different. As faculty members, if we choose to risk telling anyone at all, the possible responses to an 'accepted and legitimate' loss (i.e., close family member such as a child or spouse) may include a leave of absence or referral to human resources/employee assistance programs for counselling. The managerial goal is to get 'through' the grief in a productive and timely way so one can return to work ready, restored, and robotic. One is supposed to recover oneself (Poole, 2011) so one can continue to uphold racial capitalism (Gilmore, 2017) and its offspring, academic capitalism (Shahjahan, 2015). Faculty members, educators, teachers, and staff are also expected to grieve quietly and privately. For the most part, grief is not to be metabolized in a faculty or staff meeting, it is not to show up in a classroom, it is not to interrupt a grant proposal, manuscript submission, or the hours of committee work, and service required as part of the academic capital contract. If grief time cannot happen on work time, and as academic work time is all the time, then grief time must not happen at all.

### **Disenfranchised/managed grief and carcerality**

When grief must not happen at all, it is disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1999). Doka (1999) explains how this may be rooted in the disenfranchising of the griever, the relationship between the griever and who/what has been lost, in the type or expression of grief, or in the type of death. In our experience, this disenfranchisement feels tight, confining, and wrong. It also pulls on existing threads of white supremacy that are woven into the 'normal' ways of doing things.

The dominance of the discourses on managing and mitigating grief in education (rather than creating the conditions to metabolize it) means there are distinct consequences for noncompliance as well as discipline and punishment for those who break the rules and grieve or mourn out loud, for too long, or in ways not sanctioned by white social norms. In fact, to us, the management and disenfranchisement of grief in higher education feels distinctly carceral.

Carcerality is a lens central to the prison abolition movement, a movement that has evolved over decades of activism and scholarship (see work by Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, or Miriam Kaba for example). This movement has widened to include a deep critique of policing, child welfare, the so-called justice system, and many other *transcarceral* spaces (Palacios, 2016) that white supremacy and racial capitalism work to exalt and protect white bodies, property, and capital. As Palacios (2016, p. 144) explains,

The transcarceral continuum manifests itself primarily in the guise of localized mental health agencies, welfare and child protective services, and professionalized social services, as well as in individualizing, pathologizing, and self-responsibilizing educational and therapeutic projects. This continuum blurs the boundary between the prison's "outside" and "inside," extending its control through stigmatization and the embodied markers of imprisonment...

Those who do not serve or comply with this transcarceral system are punished in a myriad of ways such as criminalization, psychiatrization, and surveillance.

As Palacios (2016) notes, this transcarcerality can also be traced through education, for 'schools' can often be sites of transcarcerality, imprisonment, and abuse. In Canada, one example of this is the 150 plus years of the residential school system. During this period and mandated by law, hundreds of thousands of very young Indigenous children (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) were forcibly removed from their families and imprisoned (until/if they became 'adults') without adequate food, heat, or healthcare in white settler Christian 'schools' (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 2015). So many were subject to violence, cruel experiments (Mosby, 2013), and severely punished for speaking their languages (among other so-called transgressions). Thousands died (TRC, 2015) and thousands more 'disappeared' and remain missing to this day.

While we were writing this manuscript, the remains of 215 children, some as young as *three years old*, had just been located at one such residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia. At the time of revising this manuscript, the remains of over 7,000 children at multiple 'schools' had been located. Although the last such 'school' closed in 1996, the transcarceral 'scoop' of Indigenous children has

continued through child ‘protection’ and ‘welfare,’ as have the attempts by the Canadian government to silence and deny this history and presence (Blackstock & Palmater, 2021).

Thinking through this and other horrifying examples of transcarceral violence, we came across the work of Dr. A. Sewell (2018) on what they call ‘carceral grief’. As we understand it, carceral grief is the grief felt by those who have lost someone temporarily or forever to the prison industrial complex. Those experiencing carceral grief are in the millions, even in the ‘before’ of COVID-19. With the ‘organized abandonment’ (Ruth Wilson Gilmore, as cited in Democracy Now, 2020) of many prisoners during COVID-19, those experiencing carceral grief has grown exponentially.

Engaging with this work on carceral grief alongside Palacios’ (2016) analysis, led us to wonder if *transcarceral grief* could be a way to describe the involuntary grief that comes with the experience of transcarcerality and loss outside the physical walls of a prison, such as those that happen at or because of higher (colonial) education. The carceral logics of surveillance, compliance, discipline, punishment, or abandonment are all operating when grief at or because of education is denied or pathologized, as well as when folx are made afraid to express that grief openly and collectively. As we have learned from our students and colleagues this year, these logics are making an already transcarceral and confining space, that of the colonial and managerial classroom, even more so.

As settler educators in such classrooms, we are ever mindful that what we do can compound the colonial and transcarceral for learners. As a social work educator, for example, Jennifer understands ‘carceral social work as a form of social work that relies on logics of social control and white supremacy and that uses coercive and punitive practices to manage BIPOC and poor communities’ (Jacobs et al., 2021, p. 39). Inspired by Jacobs and colleagues’ (2021) call for anti-carceral social work, we are arguing for an approach to grief ‘that is life-affirming and supports the health, self-determination, and sustainability of all communities, particularly Black, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC), and others most oppressed and impacted by state violence’ (p. 38). To us, life-affirming must be grief affirming too. We see what transcarceral systems are doing. We see the subsequent transcarceral grief and mourning, and an approach that honours that grief demands that pedagogical responses must not be punitive or coercive but sustaining and supporting.

#### *Opportunities for maybe-ing: Toward an anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy*

Building on and working through a transcarceral lens, we now offer a deepened understanding for anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy. Inspired by Jacobs and colleagues (2021), we use the language of anti-carcerality in this section, but we

also wish for our approach to recognize the theoretical confluence (Joseph, 2015) that joins the anti-carceral to the anti-racist and anti-colonial in our attempts to imagine something more for higher education. We share this understanding with Radical Death Studies, which seeks to decolonize existing understandings of death and grief, while radicalizing our approach and galvanizing our action (The Collective of Radical Death Studies, 2021). Important to note is that we do not wish to offer readers ‘must dos’, ‘solutions,’ ‘tips and tricks,’ or ‘best practices’ for ‘dealing with’ teachers’ and their learners’ COVID-19-related grief. Grief is not a virus that can be immunized against; it will continue to flow through us long after face masks have come down and our social distance has decreased.

We also wish to acknowledge that we are not advocating for forced discussions of grief in or outside of the classroom, as such a requirement would be carceral in itself. After all, such spaces are not always safe for everyone, particularly BIPOC whose grief and its expression are disciplined by and through white supremacy (Poole & Galvan., 2021; Willer et al., 2021). In these ways, we wish to recognize that anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy is not interested in fixing or fighting COVID-19-related or other grief; it is not interested in forcing public expressions of loss. Anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy is, however, interested in freeing and feeling grief; it is interested in simply and profoundly acknowledging grief’s presence in students’ and teachers’ lives. It seeks to ‘cross the borders’ imposed by white supremacy and its tight management of grief in education; to push into the liminal space, the ‘in-between,’ within which we can re-imagine, re-story, and re-form (Anzaldúa, 1990; Razack, 2002). As such, rather than offering ‘must-dos’ as is common and requested, we look to open space for ‘maybe-ing,’ or possibilities for resisting these boundaries towards a shift in what we know, think, and do in the classroom in the face of grief (Mahon et al., 2020).

#### *Abolishing the current colonial educational system*

In April of 2020, I (Erin) sat at my computer at 4:00 a.m. (again), desperate to get a couple of hours of ‘must-doing’ work in before my kids would wake. I frantically labored to get my portion of committee work done, edited a manuscript, researched how to engage my learners more actively during online learning, and Pinterest science experiments that would possibly prevent my kids and me from screaming at each other during homeschooling that day. Exhausted, I took my hands off my keyboard and sobbed. I cried partly because I was tired, but mostly I cried because I realized and felt ashamed that my students—both those at my university and the ones asleep in their beds in the next room—and I were over-functioning in the name of the neoliberal surveillance systems in which we work and live. Rather than resting, taking a break, or caring for our grief, we increased our workloads under the weight of time and audit pressures in order to regulate and discipline ourselves

as self-responsibilized workers (Davies & Bansel, 2010; Saunders, 2010). After all, I rationalized, I will have no job to come back to if I do not contribute to providing my university students a so-called high-quality, online education that gets them to enroll in the fall of 2020. My kids won't get into college and will not find a job if they don't continue their pre-k and second-grade lessons in math and reading. Right?

In the face of logics like these, an anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy calls us to reconsider the answer to this question and the purpose of education in the face and aftermath of COVID-19. In so doing, we resist an educational system whose primary goal is to teach students to develop and acquire the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in an ever-changing labor market (Servage, 2009). Rather than positioning students as compliant consumers and 'entrepreneurs of the self' who 'demand 'value for money' from their institutions (Fannin & Perrier, 2019, p. 136; Servage, 2009), our praxis prefers to see them/us as humans who are also being crushed under the weight of loss of human life and those otherwise associated with COVID-19. A grief pedagogy that seeks to disrupt transcarcerality recognizes that our work as educators who teach during COVID-19 is not to train students for work, but to shape life-long learners for social justice, human emancipation, and the creation of a meaningful life (Saunders, 2010; Servage, 2009). Moreover, we reject the model of education that positions students as customers for whom we provide an educational product that reduces the relationship between us to a transactional exchange free from the duties of deeper connection (Fannin & Perrier, 2019; Servage, 2009).

In light of such resistance, an anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy calls for an abolishment of a system that does not forefront the grief and overall well-being of its students, faculty, and staff. We recognize that the lack of care some students have received in the face of COVID-19 is a function of education's colonial roots and systemic challenges. Our call for abolition is grounded in and recognizes the foundational work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Angela Davis, and so many others. We agree with Gilmore's (in press) assertion that we must 'change everything,' but as Kaba (2021) notes, abolition is often viewed as a 'negative project' associated with destruction. Rather, abolition is focused on creating and building anew in life-affirming ways (Gilmore, in press; Kaba, 2021). Thus, we position our anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy as only one tiny shift (Gilmore, in press) that works towards an abolitionist future. As Gilmore notes:

Abolition seeks to undo the way of thinking and doing things that sees prison and punishment as solutions for all kinds of social, economic, political, behavioral and interpersonal problems. Abolition, though, is not simply decarceration, put everybody out on the street. It is reorganizing



how we live our lives together in the world [...] It is not a pie in-the-sky dream. It is actually something that is practical and achievable in the city of New York, in Texas, in South Africa, around the world. (Democracy Now, 2020, 47:49)

With these words in mind, we recognize that the opportunities for ‘maybe-ing’ that we offer below are not avenues toward the immediate and complete dismantling of the current system of higher education. They are, however, part of the means to begin resisting the confines of this system so that we as teachers and learners might make steps toward abolition and begin to free and feel our grief.

### *Freeing and feeling COVID-19 grief in the classroom*

Such an anti-carceral and abolitionist grief pedagogy calls for a resistance of biomedical models that pathologize grief, as well as transcarcerality which confines us to a normative mould, towards making space for both teachers and students to grieve openly if they so choose in the classroom (Palacios, 2016; Willer et al., 2021). In looking for alternatives to carceral, colonial, and confining grief practices, there are some recurring practices in the literature, as well as what we have seen work in our own experience, that offer both a counter-story and counter-practice. Here we highlight these and other avenues toward abolition that resist dominant models of education and open up space for COVID-19 grief.

**Storytelling and witnessing:** Multiple scholars have pointed to the benefits associated with teacher vulnerability and the exhibition of emotion in the classroom in ways that challenge the expectations of teachers as all-knowing, expert, objective, and perfect (Granek, 2009; Johnston Hurst, 2009; Moore, 2016; Willer et al., 2021). Further, hooks (1994) notes that embodied pedagogy, in which teachers bring their whole selves into the classroom and their teaching, has the potential to facilitate possibilities to share, engage, and connect. In highlighting this important practice, we pull from decolonial and critical race approaches, which aim to chip away at dominant narratives, beliefs, and practices. Important decolonial work completed by Indigenous scholars has placed an emphasis on breaking down the dichotomous distance in teacher-student dynamics toward a focus on relationships, as well as the sharing of knowledge and power (Matilpi, 2012; Moore, 2016; Sumida Huaman, 2020; Sumida Huaman & Abeita, 2018).

Numerous others have expressed the potential possibilities inherent in and power of openly sharing grief through telling and witnessing stories. Critical race theorists have long utilized counter-stories and their retellings as a tool to allow for voices that have been silenced and erased to be heard, thereby challenging dominant narratives and making space for a shift (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Our anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy, as well as the research on grief-facing practice

in education, requires resistance to the dominance of white and grief supremacy and its carceral outcomes. In practice, making space for these counter-narratives does just that. For example, Husbye and colleagues (2019) used stories involving grief to start conversations with children in their classrooms. Brown (2020), in conversation with an Indigenous student leader, articulated the power of storytelling to support the metabolizing of grief. Others speak to the transformative power of witnessing and testimony, in which discussions of grief are not only allowed, but encouraged: in doing so, they facilitate important connection-building and mutual understanding that normalize both talking about grief and simply grieving (Dutro, 2013; Willer et al., 2021).

Providing opportunities for storytelling and witnessing has been especially meaningful in our classrooms over the last year. For example, after Jennifer incorporated a focus on grief in an online class this past year, members of that class began to openly share how grief was showing up for them through weekly check-ins and written work. During an ‘open’ class where the group decided on the focus, one learner requested to tell the story of their sibling’s death, of not being able to be there physically, and the deep grief only ‘this class could really understand.’ One of my (Erin’s) most powerful experiences of the year occurred when a student in my class shared with the group that a family member was struggling with substance use. As a witness to the story and in an effort to decrease the power imbalance between us, I shared my dad’s struggles with alcohol and his death. Here, the student and I became co-witnesses to one another’s stories, which not only impacted the bond between the two of us, but also the other students who witnessed our vulnerabilities. Certainly, not all teachers and students will reveal such grievings. We argue, however, that creating space to do so opens possibilities for classroom members to inhabit their true selves rather than disciplining parts of themselves away.

**Creativity and creating:** An anti-transcarceral critical grief pedagogy further resists a focus on grief management and productivity by instead creating and engaging creativity in the face of COVID-19-related grief. For me (Jennifer), being creatively resistant to productivity in these pandemic times has meant defying both ‘due dates’ and the discourse of ‘white time’ that creates/enforces ‘deadlines’ for assignments (Grant & Arrow, in press; Shahjahan, 2015). In one of my two semester courses, all ‘due dates’ became moveable and all assignments had multiple options for completion. In addition, members were encouraged to take the creative time they needed to submit what they considered ‘good’ work as opposed to ‘timely’ work.

Practicing art alongside storytelling is also an embodied avenue that furthers opportunities for grieving, witnessing, and community-building in the classroom (Willer, in press). For example, on the first day of class in the Spring of

2020, I (Erin) showed students Julie M. Elman's (2021) 'Fear, Illustrated' project that includes her whimsical and colorful depictions of fears that people have submitted to the project over the years. I then invited the students to write, illustrate, and share their own COVID-19-related fears as a means of understanding and discussing how we could best support one another over the course of the quarter. A few months later, I also shared with my students a comic (see Figure 1) that I drew that depicted the multiple layers of challenge I was experiencing teaching online (such as students' cameras off, lack of student engagement, constantly asking 'can you see my screen?', and my 'misbehaving' children in the background). This sharing made space for us to name our struggles and grief related to online learning. In so doing, we made one tiny step toward abolishing an educational system that prefers our losses to taunt us through closed windows from the school yard.

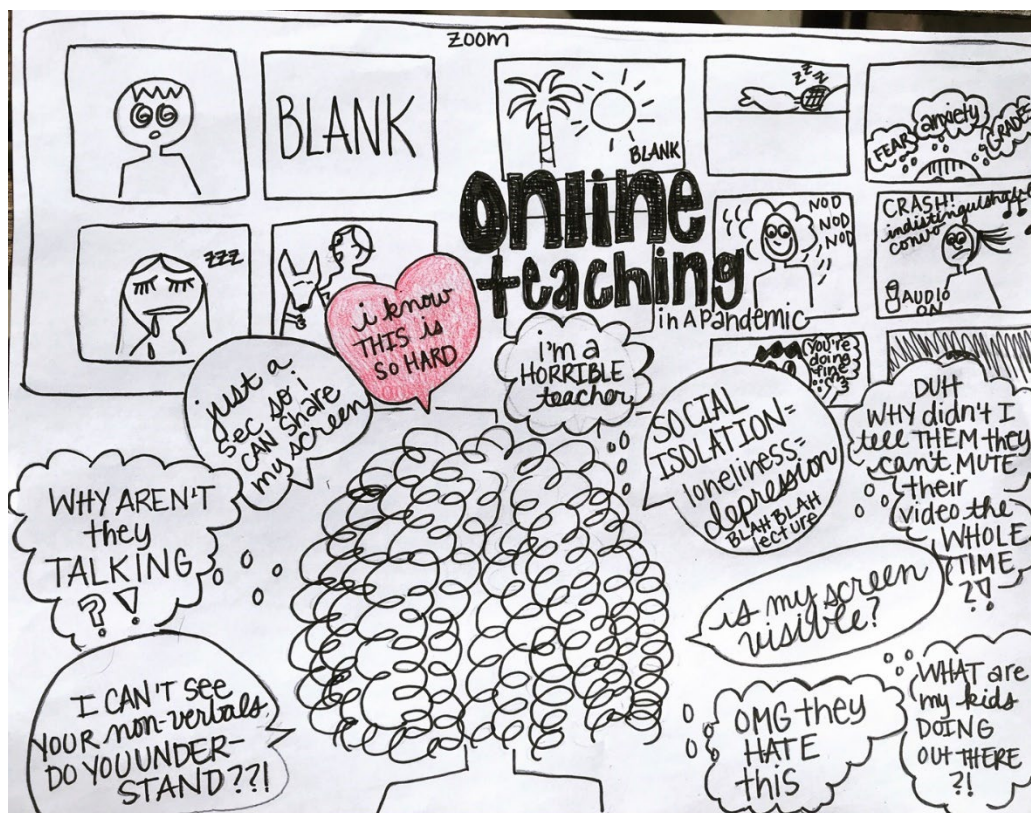


Figure 1. *I know this is so hard.*

**Planning and unplanning:** These opportunities for storytelling, witnessing, creating, and connection can manifest in multiple planned and unplanned ways in the classroom. An example of a planned opportunity includes my (Erin's) Fall 2020 online Communicating Empathy and Compassion course,

wherein I held ‘Circle of Support’ meetings with my students once a week. The circles included five to six students each who came together with me for 30 minutes (of class time!) to not only further process and discuss course content and assignments, but also to check in about how each of us was doing in relation to the pandemic. These brief meetings not only opened opportunities to connect and make space for grieving, but also for the students to practice embodying empathy and compassion.

In addition to planned opportunities for engaging grief in the classroom, we encourage teachers to resist colonial and neoliberal frameworks that often call us to ‘stick to the lesson’ out of fear of not covering all the planned material, appearing unprepared, or being perceived as unprofessional (Moore, 2016). We encourage our colleagues to weigh the consequences of not covering one more course concept versus subverting their own and their students’ grief and pain. For example, on the first day of one of my (Jennifer’s) courses prior to COVID-19, a learner unexpectedly shared that her daughter had recently died. Rather than continuing to cover the material I had planned for the day, I stopped everything, opened the opportunity for the learner to ‘tell us about your daughter,’ asked ‘what would help you be here,’ and for the class to collectively be present with these tellings. Among other things, the telling resulted in coffee being bought for the griever before class, a seemingly simple, yet powerful act of support and sustenance in the face of the silencing of grief and grievers that typically takes place in the classroom. Upon completion of her degree this year, that learner said those acts of sustenance had been pivotal to her success both before and during this pandemic.

**Beyond the classroom:** In the Fall of 2020, I (Erin) submitted more referrals to my university’s student outreach support center than I can remember. Students were clearly suffering as a result of their grief surrounding COVID-19, which was understandably manifesting in so-called poor attendance and grades, anxiety, depression, and self-harming behavior. I could not help but feel the weight that the outreach support providers likely were experiencing as the referrals from me and many others across the university were likely overwhelming their inboxes. Though we participate in systems such as these because we believe in connecting students with relevant supports, we cannot help but want to abolish such frameworks in the name of a more anti-transcarceral and critical approach. As such, we are called to imagine other possibilities. In these imaginings, we have asked ourselves what a collective approach to learning and caring for students might look like. Could faculty, residential life assistants, and counselors, for example, collaborate regularly to ensure students are coping with the repercussions of the pandemic? We also wonder what an education for *life* as opposed to or in addition to an education for *work* could look like for students. Could they take required courses in or could university-wide learning outcomes focus on navigating grief,

mental health, and wellness? Or is this still too transcarceral, too narrow of a definition of care in learning?

In one of my (Jennifer's) classes for example, folx worked together in grief with the goal of radical collective care. Once again inspired by Angela Davis and her work on radical self-care, collective care refers to 'seeing members' well-being, particularly their emotional health, as a shared responsibility of the group rather than the lone task of an individual' (Mehreen & Gray-Donald, 2018, para. 5). Originating from Queer, Black feminist organizing, and disability perspectives, radical collective care is encapsulated in the phrase, 'Be careful with each other, so we can be dangerous together' (Mehreen & Gray-Donald, 2018, para. 5). We also looked to the organizing abolitionist work of Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan, whose workbook, *Fumbling Towards Repair* (2019) offers a myriad of ways to co-create, co-restore, and build community outside the transcarceral.

We acknowledge that anti-transcarceral grief pedagogy can feel uncomfortable and difficult, especially in light of the white colonial and carceral script written for grieving and grievability (Granek, 2013; Willer et al., 2021). Such challenges necessitate a commitment to 'embrace and learn from ... discomfort' (Wong, 2004, para. 13). As Arao and Clemens (2013) note, students often conflate a need for 'safety' with 'comfortability' when discussing social justice issues. The authors argue that instead of working toward safety or comfortability in the face of discussions of racial injustice for example, students are better served through the creation of 'brave' spaces where classroom community members recognize that conversations about issues such as white supremacy require us to be vulnerable and exposed (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Boostrom, 1998). We argue that making space for grief in the classroom requires a similar bravery. In addition, our approach recognizes that careful attention must be paid to systems of power such as heteropatriarchy and white supremacy that subvert grieving particularly for Black, Indigenous, racialized, and many other folx (Willer et al., 2021). Therefore, we wish to note that we cannot simply open our classrooms to grief without acknowledgement of and attention to such systems. The above examples illustrate ways that we can begin to chisel away at and abolish the current educational system and the transcarceral grief that it can create or make worse. We do, however, have to be willing to be uncomfortable and ready for loss, educate ourselves on systemic injustice, and take and make precious class time to do so.

## **Conclusion**

There is no foreseeable conclusion to this anti-transcarceral grief project. It continues to shift and grow, to ask more of us, and to manifest so very differently

each day, as does the grief it seeks to make space for. Just when we thought we had the words for this piece, more experiences of loss would present themselves. Indeed, we will never really know the extent of the loss and grief being felt now and in the aftermath of this pandemic. That deep loss has compounded what was already created by colonial, carceral, and white supremacist systems on campus and beyond. It is and has always been so very heavy, so unbearable for so many. Indigenous, Black, and racialized scholars and activists have always known this and have always resisted. They have always known that everything needs to be changed if it is not going to cause more grief and suffering. As white settler educators, our task now is to keep up the pressure on colonial sites of higher education, making spaces for the grief it both creates and seeks to disenfranchise. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us, such abolitionist work is about presence not absence, about building life-affirming institutions (as cited by *Abolition Journal*, 2020). As we ‘fumble towards repair’ of our own (Kaba & Hassan, 2019), maybe, one day, things will be otherwise.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to acknowledge all the learners, educators and other workers who have shared their grief experience and knowledge with us. They would also like to acknowledge the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with and on behalf of residential school survivors and victims in Canada.

## **Author biographies**

*Jennifer M. Poole* is a white settler learner/educator residing in Toronto, Canada. She is an Associate Professor of Social Work interested in pedagogy, madness, sanism, death and grief. She is happiest outside or, when that is not possible, eating chocolate.

*Erin K. Willer* is an artist/researcher/teacher/mother who lives in Denver, Colorado. As an Associate Professor of Communication Studies, her work seeks to answer the question: how can we engage storytelling, art, and embodied practices to cultivate creativity, compassion, and community in the face of illness, death, and loss?

*Samantha Zerafa* is a recent graduate localized in Toronto who is just beginning to find her place in social work education, practice, and research. She is interested in the discursive operations of whiteness, the manifestation of fatphobia and the field of fat studies, and colonialism in pedagogy and research.

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