

# Ma(r)king The Unthinkable

## Cultural and Existential Engagements of Extreme Historical Violence

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Culture is a compromise with life that makes life possible. (Becker, 1973, p. 265)

CULTURE IS POSITIONED at the bedrock of social studies education. As evidenced by *Theme 1: Culture* of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2010) standards, studying culture allows for the examination of “socially transmitted beliefs, values, institutions, behaviors, traditions, and way of life of a group of people” (para. 1). While culture has been predominantly defined (anthropologically) as being an aggregate of routines, customs, and presuppositions that a societal group embraces with consideration being given to past experiences (e.g., Benedict, 1934; Dixon, 1928; Linton, 1936; Mead, 1937; Tylor, 1924; Wissler, 1929), it is common for social studies teachers/students to describe culture in ways that relate to everything people eat, drink, wear, and say (Brophy et al., 2016; Giroux, 2018).

Lines of inquiry into culture also present opportunities to engage with the interplay between human and societal development, as well as the role culture plays in the actualization of individuals’ understandings of the world, self, and others (E. Kashima, 2010). While there is a healthy body of research attending to cultural practices relating to the construction of sustained meanings and practices (e.g., Berry et al., 2002; Cole, 1996; Fiske et al., 1998; Y. Kashima, 2000; Markus & Hamedani, 1991; Triandis, 1994), Anglophone research that confronts how cultural perspectives can be leveraged in a way that engages with (historically) existential concerns (i.e., knowledge that we humans will die and how these understandings have been registered and navigated over time) is sparse. And as history and research has shown, when cultural worldviews are challenged, circumstances are cultivated that lead to violent (inter/intra) actions between people with divergent perspectives (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1986, 1990, 2001, 2007; Reiss & Jonas, 2019; Routledge & Vess, 2018; Schimel et al., 2007).

With this in mind, our inquiry entangles elements of existential psychology with what was auditorily produced by enactors of extreme violence when asked to reflect on cultural practices

associated with(in) a framework of extremely unthinkable violent performativity/ies. To do this task, we (re)turned to the work of Hatzfeld (2003) who interviewed Hutu perpetrators from the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and Gross (2004) who investigated the thoughts of local citizens participating in the massacre of Jewish people in the Polish town of Jedwabne in 1941. In an effort to accentuate the (cross/under)currents of murderousness between/across each of these violent epochs, we ask: Why did these ordinary people commit such atrocities? Although the work of Hannah Arendt (1963/2006), Christopher Browning (1993), and Stanley Milgram (1963) have illuminated how ordinary people can do terrible things to others without necessarily intending or desiring to inflict harm, their work does not account for equally ordinary people who kill and maim with a sort of heroic joy, when murderers were determined to take away their victims' dignity before they took their lives such as "order[ing] them to do some ridiculous gymnastics exercises, singing songs that stated 'the war is because of us, the war is for us'" (Gross, 2004, p. 62). Central to our argument is that these accounts of extreme violence offer (re)new(ed) opportunities to consider the relationship(s) between cultural sensibilities (i.e., shared practices and beliefs that are perpetually shapeshifting) and ways that culture is conceptualized in educational contexts.

After expounding upon *terror management theory* (TMT), we situate this research in a body of literature that (re)traces historical conceptualizations of culture (see Duncan, 1980; Kroeber, 1917; Williams, 1961) and contemporary apprehensions of violence (see Butler, 2020). We then take a post-qualitative look at first-hand accounts of genocide from Rwanda and Jedwabne, Poland, through the lens of TMT (Greenberg et al., 1986, 1990, 2001, 2007; Jacobs et al., 2021; Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Routledge & Vess, 2018). By weaving ourselves into the data as well as with our own thinking and feeling(s) in relation to this inquiry, we hope to provide a more complex understanding of the role cultural worldviews played throughout processes of extreme violence and its existential links/implications. Although, of course, this line of inquiry does not absolve willing or coerced perpetrators/witnesses of their responsibility, as authors, we are optimistic that engaging with difficult/violent knowledges will help us imagine/construct a world that hurts less—a world in which people with divergent worldviews and cultural practices can learn to peacefully coexist (Garrett, 2017).

### **Terror Management Theory**

As experimental work based on the work of Ernest Becker (1973), TMT posits that humans, in part, have developed cultural worldviews (i.e., shared conceptualizations of reality and meaning and associated self-esteem) to insulate themselves from the existential terror of mortality (Greenberg et al., 1986, 1990, 2001, 2007; Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Routledge & Vess, 2018). At the heart of Becker's work (and TMT) is the assumption that humans have an evolved mental complexity that has provided survival advantages including anticipating future outcomes, planning, cooperating, and overcoming environmental challenges. This awareness of ourselves in the world around us, however, is a double-edged sword. Because humans are able to project the self forward in time, we can understand that we are subject to the same natural processes as other animals—specifically aging, decay, and ultimately death. Like (most) living organisms, humans generally desire to keep on living, and so any awareness of this inevitable mortality is intensely troubling without an adequate psychological buffer, particularly when put into a state of mortality salience (i.e., when reminded of death). These reminders of death can be direct (e.g., being asked to talk about death), indirect (e.g., seeing a funeral parlor), or even via a subliminal message

(Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Although there is always a psychological need for existential anxiety buffers, there is an increased need for these defenses when in a state of mortality salience.

Existential defenses take a variety of forms, all of which are directly or indirectly related to culture insofar that these psychological structures are informed and built upon shared (cultural) worldviews and performativities. To name a few examples, close personal relationships (Mikulincer et al., 2003), attending to physical health (Courtney et al., 2020), and religious beliefs (Vail et al., 2019) can all have significant effects on anxieties about mortality. Importantly, studies from a TMT perspective have taken place in countries with a variety of cultural belief systems (e.g., Canada, China, Germany, India, Iran, Italy, Israel, Japan, United States, and so on; Pyszczynski et al., 2015), which provides degrees of consistency in terms of existential framing. Yet, the specific forms of anxiety buffering vary based upon the cultural milieu (i.e., what relationships, “good” health practices, and religious beliefs, etc., look like). Accordingly, TMT research to date has deduced that:

1. the stronger the psychological structures that can alleviate our anxieties are, the more effective they are in threatening situations; elevated self-esteem reduces existential anxieties aroused by a reminder of one’s mortality (Greenberg et al., 1990),
2. reminders of death increase the need for close attachments, worldviews, and associated self-esteem (Burke et al., 2010), and
3. a threat to an anxiety buffer increases one’s death-related thoughts (Hayes et al., 2008a).

In relation to education, teachers need to be aware of personal immortality projects such as striving to make a lasting impact on their students (van Kessel & Burke, 2018), but of particular interest to the authors of this paper is how (violent) performativities informed by cultural worldviews function to provide people—in this case evildoers—with a sense of self-esteem and what the consequences of that function may be for (inter/intra)personal and group relations.

### **Cultural Worldviews and the Threat of Difference**

Cultural worldviews are humanly-created, shared, symbolic conceptions of reality that function as a source of immortality. Shared worldviews, whether religious or secular, are potent buffers against existential anxiety and are intimately tied to culture (Greenberg et al., 1990, 1992; Schimel et al., 2007). As Ernest Becker (1973) stated, a cultural worldview “is more than merely an outlook on life: it is an immortality formula” (p. 255). Worldviews provide humans with both literal and symbolic immortality. In a literal sense, worldviews tell us how part of us might live on after the death of our bodies (e.g., afterlife, reincarnation, recycling atoms). Worldviews also help us live on symbolically because of the legacies left to our culture and the world. Our ideologies and symbols will live on long after we are gone: “Societies can be seen as structures of immortality power” (Becker, 1973, p. 63). Our worldviews also teach us what it means to be a “good” person, and, thus, our self-esteem (which is its own buffer for existential anxiety; Greenberg et al., 1986; Tjew-A-Sin & Koole, 2018) is intimately tethered to a particular worldview.

The problem with relying on worldviews to assuage existential concerns is twofold: humans have constructed their varying cultural belief systems, in turn leading people from different belief systems to interact with each other—and each interaction can make us question

(consciously or unconsciously) the validity of our own perspective. A loss of faith in our way of understanding the world and our place in it functions akin to a direct reminder of death (e.g., seeing a corpse or writing about death). Our bodies and minds can respond to a threat to our worldview as we would a threat to our very lives (Schimel et al., 2007): “threats to meaning, certainty, belongingness, self-esteem, and other psychological entities produce fluid compensation effects because they are linked to the problem of death” (Pyszczynski et al., 2006b, p. 332).

This link between worldviews and protection from death anxiety has two (inter/intra)related consequences: a reminder of death makes us more entrenched in our worldview (Rosenblatt et al., 1989), and exposure to divergent worldviews implicitly reminds us of death, therefore, provoking defensive reactions (Schimel et al., 2007; Solomon et al., 2015). When humans are exposed to divergent worldviews in precarious contexts that heighten death anxiety (e.g., dialogues involving death, natural disasters), humans experience a double dose of death apprehension: a direct reminder of death as well as a weakening of our (worldview) defenses that might protect us from that existential anxiety.

Throughout life, people (en)counter reminders and triggers that indicate that their fictionalized assemblage of reality (their cultural worldview) is perhaps arbitrary—including something as simple as the existence of other ways of knowing and being. When this occurs, as theorized by TMT, people retract to their cultural groups in an effort to validate/affirm their worldviews/postures. Further, this repudiation can lead to a sharp decrease in tolerance and empathy for other cultural perspectives/idea(l)s, which can lead to increased proclivities for violence (Greenberg et al., 2001; Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Humans can cling their worldview in ways that e/a-ffect numerous social relations, such as “prejudice, nationalism, social judgments, interpersonal attraction, romantic love, charitable giving, emotional reactions to one’s own creative actions, support for pre-emptive wars and suicide bombing (within different cultures of course), stereotyping ... attributional biases, and other forms of behavior” (Pyszczynski et al., 2006b, p. 329; see also Greenberg et al., 1997, 2007). From a social studies perspective, TMT’s positioning of cultural worldviews and threat of difference offers a way to traverse traditional demarcations of culture and theorize implications of culture on frameworks of unthinkable violence.

### **(Ordinary) Superorganic Cultural Entities/Fallacies**

Modern conceptualizations of culture are steeped in traditional, anthropogenic influences. When considering how, comprehensively/contemporarily, to define culture, one must regard two camps of thought—holistic and individualistic—that attempt to theorize the outcome of cultural manifestations. Kroeber’s (1917) article on “The Superorganic” presents—although opaquely—a statement holistically granting culture as being an entity that holds both an ontological status and causative power (Duncan, 1980). By attempting to reify the notion that culture is beyond man(kind) and that it (re)acts independently of any individual’s actions, Kroeber (1917) posited that culture adheres to its own laws despite the implicit difference between what can be deemed organic—or *vital*—and cultural. From this perspective, channels of culture are “so unmistakably similar to the evolution of plants and animals, that it has been inevitable that there should have been sweeping applications of the principles of organic development to the facts of cultural growth” (p. 164). Despite this (creaturely) ideation of culture reminding us that everyone possesses a predisposed skillset and there are powers/competencies that must be acquired from non-

hereditary agencies, culture, as a concept, is replete with nuances and in many cases is governed by inescapable (non/violent) conditions.

### Complexities of Culture

We acknowledge that culture is not a neutral concept and is not only dependent on context but also subjectivities/collectivities. Put another way, there are many complexities to culture that in turn lead to a myriad of uses/definitions within social education(al research). According to Williams (1961), there are three fundamental angles that any conceptualization of culture must include: (1) *culture as the ideal* (i.e., postulation of consummate beliefs/practices/values); (2) *culture as documentary* (i.e., the recording of anthropocentric thoughts, language, inter/intra-actions, and experiences); and (3) *culture as social* (i.e., socially constructed architectures that govern group behaviors and (re)actions). While each of these components are mutually constitutive, perhaps they can be best thought of as coordinates from which *all* humanity navigates in their own distinct ways. Whereas some groups of people consider culture to embody “the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, [and] the characteristic forms through which members for the society communicate” (Williams, 1961, p. 42), others may not. Regardless, central to Williams’s (1961) conceptualization of culture are the (behavioral) patterns that are formed and that continue to manifest within a group. As these imbrications relating to the fundamentals of culture may be defined as “a selection and configuration of interests and activities, and a particular valuation of them” (Williams, 1961, p. 47), they become operationalized/performed as a way of life.

That said, collective cultural practices then become ordinary, despite subjective analysis from outsiders. Reflecting on the importance of recognizing the normalcy of group cultural practices and (modern) influences within the context of (group) identity formation, Willis (1990) said,

It is the extraordinary in the ordinary, which is extraordinary, which makes both into culture, common culture. We are thinking of the extraordinary symbolic creativity of the multitude of ways in which young people use, humanise, decorate and invest with meanings in their common and immediate life spaces and social practices—personal styles and choice of clothes; selective and active use of music and TV, magazines, decoration of bedrooms, the rituals of romance and sub-cultural styles; the style, banter and drama of friendship groups; music-making and dance. Nor are these pursuits and activities trivial or inconsequential ... they can be crucial to the creation and sustenance of individual and group identities. (p. 2)

In many cases, due to spatial proximity, individuals possess limited decision-making power(s) and are forced to perpetuate (violent) patterns of behavior due to self-preservation. Within these crosscurrents of cultural commonality and non/compliance lies the notion of privilege. Put another way, some—those who have been historically marginalized (e.g., economically disadvantaged or those with racialized backgrounds)—have no choice but to participate in cultural practices that initiate/sustain fields of violence.



## Force(d) Fields of Violence

According to Butler (2020), non/violence is omnipresent and exists at all levels of society. For groups of people who have been historically marginalized, “the consideration of violent action is not a choice, since one is already—and unwillingly—within the force field of violence” (Butler, 2020, p. 7). From this perspective, non/violence is always already embedded into the architecture of cultural practices or ways of be(com)ing with(in) group or spatiality. Although many cultural outsiders may attempt to codify violence as being justifiable, necessary, and understandable under such circumstances, Butler (2020) prompts our thinking about the (lack of) agency some people have with regard to participating in (violent) cultural practices:

Even if violence is circulating all the time and we find ourselves in a force field of violence, do we want to have a say about whether violence continues to circulate? If it circulates all the time, is it therefore inevitable that it circulates? What would it mean to dispute the inevitability of its circulation? (p. 8)

Just as some do not possess the privilege of *not* engaging in cultural practices of violence, violence enacted by/upon humans across cultural intergroups can have rippling emotional effects, further influencing how existentially destructive encounters are processed and reciprocated. According to Bar-Tal (2003), although “group members are deeply and emotionally touched when compatriots are killed and wounded, especially when the loss is sudden,” even when “those killed are not personally known, the personal relevance of the human losses is intensified” (p. 80). When emotional/physical harm is done to humans, those afflicted by violence and those inflicting harm are perceived as compatriots/kin. This effect occurs regardless of the scale of human violence or if the act was done to a single person. In this way, the force(d) fields of violence become culturally interminable, extending beyond the individual act and disseminating (violent) meditations to larger groups. Further, “the physical violence is perceived as a group matter and group members view the losses as group losses, with the victim acquiring a social identity within the group’s perception of the event” (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 81). Thus, mortality salience mushrooms across/within both group settings (enactors and victims) making them “more defensive and less tolerant toward individuals who are not members of their own group” (Reiss & Jonas, 2019, p. 450) and further fostering aggressive acts toward those outside a group’s culture.

## Responding to Cultures of Violence

When groups experience violence, they are forced to confront a threat to their own (individual/collective) mortality and the truth that “life is finite and that one must die someday” (Reiss & Jonas, 2019, p. 451). Moreover, social interactions are impacted as the group contemplates a reaction to the (violent) event. Reiss and Jonas (2019) posited that each group response occurs in phases. As Step 1 considers the group’s perception of tertiary factors relating to future acts of violence, Step 2 unpacks the motivational-affective states of mind that include: (a) behavior inhibition (i.e., becoming aware of violence and ways in which this cognizance mediates (cultural) rigidity); (b) anxiety arousal (i.e., heightened states of potential affect); and (c) attentional vigilance (i.e., increased concern over self-preservation). During Step 3, motivated cognition, group members “can choose whatever cognition provides simple solutions and promises

instant relief” (Reiss & Jonas, 2019, p. 456). Previous research delineates that this step is vulnerable to bias and stereotyping, which unveils the relationship between mortality salience and (cultural) rigidity (Jonas et al., 2003), formation of social constructs (Landau et al., 2004), states of (cultural) generalization for outsiders (Kimhi et al., 2009), and unequivocality of cultural beliefs/practices (Vail et al., 2012).

Each of these play an important role in Reiss and Jonas’s (2019) final step, Step 4: motivated behavior. Undergirded by a plethora of empirical research (e.g., Belmi & Pfeffer, 2016; Kugler & Cooper, 2010; McGregor et al., 1998; McPherson & Joireman, 2009; Pyszczynski et al., 2006a), “when confronted with mortality primes, individuals tend to become more defensive of their own ingroup; thus, perceiving people and groups as potential threats to one’s world-view increases the readiness to exert force against those violators” (Reiss & Jonas, 2019, p. 458). Alternatively, following mortality salience resulting from engagements/exposures of violence, the likelihood of (aggressive) retaliatory measures and the rejection of accepting/understanding divergent perspectives/backgrounds greatly increases. In sum, violence within the context of culture is often avoidable considering the (forced) conditions and the psychological impact that experiencing violence causes. These implications are not limited to those who suffer from violence and extend to groups that have purposefully enacted harm upon others within/outside their own cultural group.

### **Research Method(ology)**

To (re)create unexpected meaning(s) from previously conducted/recorded reports published in 2001/2003, we (the authors) first used thematic analysis to help us examine the various perspectives and unanticipated insights with(in) each of the two locations selected (Nowell et al., 2017). This fluid and nomadic approach provided us with an accessible method for organizing, describing, and reporting on themes (Braun & Clark, 2006) relating specifically to the construction of cultural practices by perpetrators/witnesses in Poland and Rwanda. Specifically, we analyzed each of the two texts (relating to Poland and Rwanda) for framings that connected occurrences during the genocide to our (working) definition of culture (i.e., a constellation of actions, procedures, and practices that are informed by shared worldviews) and existentially-motivated preservation/defenses. Distilling each several-hundred page text in this way allowed us to foreground reflections and actions of violence that were isolated insofar that they became customary for the perpetrators.

After identifying fragments of text, we created a composite from both collections of interviews, framed specifically around the a priori theme of culturally violent praxis. We acknowledge that, while this approach is malleable, it can lead to inconsistencies and a lack of coherence throughout our thematic development (Holloway & Todres, 2003). However, we embrace the uncertainty that accompanies this approach from the assumption that “fluid and multifaceted methodologies can offer new dimensions of research to better articulate, accommodate, and reflect anticipated conditions and preferred spatial dimensions for qualitative research” (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016, p. 81). More specifically, we were intentional about braiding together accounts from both Poland and Rwanda in an attempt to put both violent epochs into conversation with each other. We acknowledge that each event consists of specific people and conditions relating to culture/violence but argue for their confluence in a way that allows us to think through/across/with cultural factors sustaining/perpetuating accounts of extreme violence.

We next implemented a post-qualitative methodology—thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012)—inoculating our own perspectives, questions, and theoretical underpinnings into what was produced by the perpetrators/witnesses (i.e., fragments of text from both contexts—Poland and Rwanda). Through the implementation of this methodology, we engaged with the data from the middle, which allowed us to “produce something new” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 1). According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), “every voyage is intensive, and occurs in relation to thresholds of intensity between which it evolves or that it crosses” (p. 5). As such, we understand post-qualitative methodologies to be a journey into the often-overlooked in-between spaces of meaning providing unexpected opportunities to (re/un)make (re)new(ed) assemblages of understanding. We are guided by Jackson and Mazzei’s (2013) notion that an “assemblage isn’t a thing—it is the process of making and unmaking the thing. It is the process of arranging, organizing, fitting together” (p. 262). From this methodological perspective, we argue that knowledge is not a hidden multiplicity waiting to be (un)found or pinned down, but rather a process of deterritorializing, reterritorializing, and conceptual *becoming* from unconventional points of entry (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Our approach, then, was essentially to “begin with the epistemological and ontological commitments of the analysis”—in our case, primarily through terror management theory—and use the theory “to think about” our topic of concern and then “read and wrestle with texts” (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 10).

Our process occurred in different phases and began with each author reading through the composite and making theoretical dis/connections. After sharing these philosophical engagements, we then returned to what was produced and inserted our own dialogue-thoughts, perspectives, and questions-into the composite before arranging the text into consumable and thematic subsections. We argue that this multifaceted intra-action from within the textual threshold allowed us to de/familiarize ourselves “with nuances, complexities, and less dominant aspects” (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016, p. 67) of (cultural) power and (existential) possibility. To assist us in delineating our intra-actions with(in) the data and perhaps further contributing to the interlaced nature of our analytical w(a/o)nderings—*perpetrators/witnesses’ words are in italics* and [our ongoing questions and comments as researchers are bracketed].

## Theoretical Entanglements of Culture/Violence: Rwanda and Poland

### Bonding Over Culture

Culture is one of these shared constructions and “gives life meaning, order, and a sense of permanence” (Greenberg et al., 2001). That is, people “use the fabrications of culture, in whatever form, as charms with which to transcend reality” (Becker, 1973, p. 236). Constructing, accepting, and maintaining a shared cultural worldview takes constant work in order to manage this existential terror. To enhance a sense of being and belonging, people have created anxiety buffers to shield themselves from their own mortality and maintain mental equanimity. For example, before performing unthinkable acts of violence, *those who wanted to chat, chatted. Those who wanted to dawdle, dawdled—if they could avoid being noticed. Those who wanted to sing, sang. We didn’t choose special songs to raise our spirits, no patriotic airs like the ones on the radio, no mean or mocking words about the Tutsis. We didn’t need encouraging verses, we just naturally turned to traditional songs we liked* [resulting in a cultural fostering of trust and sense of] “identity and sense of power” (Becker, 1973, p. 3). However, even if this trust is superficial and not



emotional, Becker (1973) warned that “still most of us would struggle to survive with all our [cultural] powers” (p. 2). [Accordingly, when cultural practices are created/enacted, differences in the cultural self are eroded, significantly impacting the development of interpersonal and intergroup attitudes (Greenberg, et al., 1990).] Our culture is distinct from their culture—we are different from them. *It meant nothing to us to think we were busy cutting our neighbours down to the last one. ... They had already stopped being good neighbors of long standing. ... They had become people to throw away, so to speak ... those killings were premeditated, they were rough at the edges, but still they went unpunished.* [Considering that “the maintenance of life is perhaps one of the most sacred and universal values in human culture” (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 79), to what extent do mundane cultural practices, such as singing, conceal/subjugate motivated behaviors (i.e., Step 4)? And, how might the relationship between punishment and ethicality be generative in thinking about human behavior?]

Importantly, bonds that are created within (cultural) groups are registered differently within a community. Reflecting on the atrocities committed in Rwanda, a local Hutu woman noted: *That bunch was famous on the hill for their carousing and tomfoolery. Those fellows did not seem so bad ... but when they had been drinking, they took sport in the speaking of misunderstandings and wicked words.* [This calls attention to the nuanced ways that behaviors—shaped by cultural worldviews—are justified within cultural groups. We understand this reflection as an attempt to see the “good” within the group through a playful (e.g., carousing) classification of behavioral patterns, which in turn makes us think about the conditions in play and place that allow someone to rationalize problematic and violent cultural manifestations (i.e., Step 2).]

## Ordinarilizing Evil

To cope with death related stimuli, humans have developed psychological structures: cultural worldviews and self-esteem. To maintain this structure of purpose and order, *we would wake up at six o'clock [and eat] brochettes of grilled meat and nourishing food because of all the running we had to do [before] [w]e sorted ourselves out on a soccer field* [reinforcing Butler’s (2020) notion that violence is multi-faceted and complex, and yet this ordinariness was not due to thoughtlessness, but rather conscientiousness]. *Perhaps man can get used to killing, if he kills on and on* [and is around those who kill over and over again. However, perhaps the socialness of culture and/or the fears of deviating from (new) cultural norms binds humans.]. As Becker (1973) asked, “and what is this fear, but a fear of the reality of creation in relation to our powers and possibilities?” (p. 52). [To what end is this defensive fear “a protection of our self-esteem, of our love and respect for ourselves” (Becker, 1973, p. 52)?] *A number of farmers were not brisk at killing, but they turned out to be conscientious. ... Doing it over and over: repetition smoothed out clumsiness.* [Repetition can help maintain “faith in a cultural worldview because doing so serves the vital psychological function of managing existential terror” (Schimmel et al., 2019, p. 5), and in this case, repetition prevented thoughtfulness about the actions of those with a shared culture.] Notwithstanding the ways these patterns unfold, infold, and refold, violence maintains the capacity to cloud moral/ethical judgements. As one Hutu perpetrator noted: *in a way, I forgot I was killing live people.*

*Before the war broke out [in Poland], 1600 Jews lived in Jedwabne, and only seven survived, saved by a Polish woman, Wyrzykowska, who lived in the vicinity. On Monday evening, June 23, 1941, Germans entered the town, reminding Polish inhabitants of their mortality salience*

and leading to the start of a Polish-led *anti-Jewish pogrom*. It is worth noting that “death reminders need not always lead to ethnocentrism, intergroup conflict, and punishment of moral offenders” (Schimmel et al., 2019, p. 7). As such, if cultural practices are prosocial and innately compassionate, TMT can crystalize people’s perspectives/(re)actions in a positive way. [Perhaps, we should consider the lack of compassionate (cultural) underpinnings/structures that primed groups in both Poland and Rwanda for outbreaks of violence. Further, we argue that this underscores the importance of cultivating empathy across all levels of society, as “reminders of death should increase their motivation to uphold these values” (Schimmel et al., 2019, p. 8).] The pogroms were led by Polish bandits, two of whom *walked from one Jewish dwelling to another together with other bandits playing accordion and flute to drown the screams of Jewish women and children*. When threatened, “individuals [tend] to engage in motivated cognitions to regain a sense of belonging, identity, and agency” (Reiss & Jonas, 2019, p. 469). [Are the most banal of activities, singing and playing music, the most expeditious avenue for (re)claiming a sense of belonging, identity, and agency? How does making music while people are being slaughtered lessen the culpability while simultaneously increasing the consent to participate in such violence?]

### **Fetishizing Evil**

Those who threaten someone’s worldview can be constructed as evils that must be eradicated. That said, “the killers never allow themselves to be overwhelmed by anything” (Hatzfeld, 2003, p. 152). One’s own group is “pure and good” and others “are the real animals, are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and bringing disease and weakness into your vitality” (Becker, 1973, p. 93). *We told ourselves that the Tutsis were in the way [and] for us, kind words for Tutsi were more fatal than evil deeds*. Becker talks about fetishizing fear by localizing all of one’s fear and anxiety into a single, manageable source, which is then labelled as evil, making fears concrete and controllable. *We knew full well what had to be done, and we set to doing it without flinching, because it seemed like the perfect solution* [Hinting at motivated cognition (i.e., Step 3)]. Often these scapegoats are construed (and othered) as “racialized” groups, but any group can be fetishized as the embodiment of evil.

People fetishize evil because it is ultimately a way of dealing with a sense of vulnerability and death. Then, by coming against the evil, lashing out against it (and, in some cases, eradicating it), people can assert their status as heroes who will live on within their worldview group. The heroic quest is to annihilate the evil ones. When those who violate our worldview are killed (by us or by others), our worldview threat is buffered (Hayes et al., 2008b).

*Rumors spread that the Germans would issue an order that all Jews be destroyed. Such an order was issued by the Germans on July 10, 1941. Even though the Germans gave the order, it was Polish hooligans who took it up and carried it out, using the most horrible methods*. [For this to happen, so willingly and at such an accelerated pace (i.e., operationalization of Step 3, motivated cognition), Polish citizens must have felt that acting violently towards their fellow citizens would offer a release from confronting their own mortality salience (Reiss & Jonas, 2019).]

## Triumphing Over Death

According to Ernest Becker (1975), “if culture is a lie about the possibilities of victory over death, then that lie must somehow take its toll on life, no matter how colorful and expansive the celebration of joyful victory may seem” (Becker, 1975, p. 121). *I no longer thought about either life or death. But the blood struck terror into me. It stank and dripped. At night I’d tell myself, after all, I am a man full of blood; all this spurting blood will bring catastrophe, a curse. Death did not alarm me, but that overflow of blood, that—yes, a lot.* TMT is underpinned with the concept that humans cultivate and sustain culture as a buffer from the existential terror of their own mortality, and those perceived as Others (especially culturally) are a threat “that” (not “who”) must be eradicated for the good of the group. For perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide, *rule number one was to kill. There was no rule number two.* If our enemy dies, we do not.

Ultimately, our narrowed perception brands these fetishized evil Others (and not “us”), and our own survival is linked to their demise. Jozef Chrznowski testified regarding Jedwabne: *When I came to the square, they [Sobuta and Wasilewski (two other perpetrators of violence)] told me to give my barn to burn the Jews. But I started pleading to spare my barn, to which they agreed and left my barn in peace, only told me to help them chase the Jews to Bronioslaw Sleszynski’s barn. We chased the Jews under the barn and we ordered them to enter inside and the Jews had to enter inside.* Because one group has fetishized the other as evil, it is not just that the victims are dehumanized, but the perpetrators have also lost their humanity. *During the killings I no longer considered anything in particular to the Tutsi except that the person had to be done away with. I want to make that clear from the first gentleman I killed to the last, I was not sorry about a single one.* Once you have begun the process of eradicating the evils, what we might consider to be normal or taken-for-granted morals evaporate. *Perhaps patience and forgetting will win out; perhaps not.* Regardless, ordinary people willingly do terrible things; they have lost their humanity as they have sought to conquer their own un/conscious anxieties about impermanence:

The thing that makes man [sic] the most devastating animal that ever stuck his neck up into the sky is that he [sic] wants an earth that is not an earth but a heaven, and the price for this kind of fantastic ambition is to make the earth an even more eager graveyard than it naturally is. (Becker, 1973, p. 96)

## Concluding Thoughts

In his poem, “In Tenebris II,” Thomas Hardy (1896/2006) stated, “if a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst” (p. 151). While we understand the two genocidal events presented in this article as being unforgivable/unthinkable atrocities, the goal of this project is to persist with troubling lines of thinking in order to understand the role culture played throughout the construction of a framework of enacted violence. As such, we seek to avoid creating simplistic villains that absolve ordinary people and structures of responsibility, but rather a more textured understanding of the role culture played in shaping their actions and perspectives (van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). Social studies education needs to consider multiple examples that might dismantle the possibilities of further atrocities, or at least remove impediments to taking action when they occur (e.g., Castro & Aguayo, 2013; Totten, 2013). Thinking with Becker and TMT allowed us to engage with what was produced by perpetrators of extreme violence and illuminate behavioral,

cognitive, and motivational (in)differences within a cultural/existential context with the intent of teaching in a way that implicates us all in understanding extreme (historical) violence.

In 1999, Sam Wineburg posed the question, “Why study history at all?” (p. 488). Pushing this question further, we ask, “Why study *violent* history at all?” As we, social studies teacher educators and researchers, continue to grapple with identifying (re)new(ed) ways of making the world hurt less, engaging with accounts of extreme violence presents an opportunity to think through the cultivation of *non-violent* ways and processes of knowing and be(com)ing. Just as Butler (2020) noted, “stabilizing a definition of violence depends less on an enumeration of its instances than on a conceptualization that can take account of its oscillations within conflicting political frameworks” (p. 15), we found that complexifying violence led to our intra-personal interrogation of pre-existing cultural practices in both Poland and Rwanda. Each account reminded us of the importance of healthy, sustainable community practices and the criticality of empathy.

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