What It's like to Lose Papi: A Counterstory on Grief

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Natalie Madruga (she/her) was born in Key West, Florida where she is considered a "freshwater conch." She now lives in Orlando, Florida and works as an Instructor for The University of Central Florida's (UCF) Department of Writing and Rhetoric. She attended UCF as both an undergraduate and graduate student (go Knights!), graduating with an MA in Rhetoric and Composition. While in her graduate program, she was awarded the Conference on College, Composition and Communication's Scholars for the Dream award. Her research interests include public memory and memorialization, critical race theory, cultural rhetorics, and first-year writing pedagogy, specifically for Hispanic serving institutions. When not at work, you can find Natalie creating playlists for her walks and workouts, re-watching her favorite TV shows, or on her couch promptly at 7 PM EST for Jeopardy! She also likes to cook, dance, decorate, and discover all the local businesses in her area. This essay was a labor of love, sometimes written late at night in bed on her phone, through voice memos on her walks, or in between tears and precious memories. She hopes readers and grievers take away from her words that they are not alone.

Abstract

This essay combines both the genre nuances of a personal essay and academic article. It focuses specifically on the experience of navigating graduate school while the feelings of grief and structural social norms exacerbate the process. In the beginning, the essay first introduces the argument of why grief and mourning are different for minoritized communities through scholarship from Critical Race Theory. Then, the author presents specific scenes from their life that showcase these challenges through three narrative vignettes, followed by a final reflection.

Key Words

grief, grieving, critical race theory, counterstory, mourning, public memory, family death

> One time, my Father and I were driving down the busy streets of residential South Miami. Hunched over in his Toyota Tundra, holding a café con leche in his hand and driving with the other, he pointed out all the things that were different since he had grown up. He pointed to an office building, and a Wendy's, and reminisced about how these streets used to be filled with nothing but strawberry fields that he would work at over the summer. He noted, with a hint of nostalgia, how much things have changed, and how time passes by without you ever knowing it.

This is the opening paragraph of my father's eulogy, which I wrote on the day of his service just hours before it. To give some context, my father died by suicide in 2016, a week before Thanksgiving. It was shortly before my 22nd birthday and the semester before the end of my undergraduate career. The service was eight days after this death. While writing his eulogy, I didn't overthink anything, I didn't edit and reedit myself throughout this writing process. I wasn't thinking of the audience, rhetoric, or any writing strategies. I was writing because I had to. I was writing because I was "the writer" of the family. Throughout those eight days, my mom was giving out all these affirmations, specifically to me, telling me, "*Tienes que hacer fuerte. Tienes que seguir pa'lante.*"

I remember feeling angry about these affirmations. Why am I the one who has to be strong? Why are we already talking about moving forward? I had just lost my father! And now, because of my long-standing identity as the writer of the family, I was writing

about my father before I was ready. Before I wanted to. After the eulogy, I resisted and made excuses to avoid all opportunities to write about him and to write about my feelings, and my grief. I could not bring myself to do this willingly until I was in graduate school.

Throughout my masters' program, I was exposed to scholarship that mesmerized me. I read from scholars who combined their narratives and lived experiences with theoretical considerations, such as articles from Aja Y. Martinez and Jacqueline Jones Royster—scholarship that foregrounded life experiences as the content and reasons for producing new knowledge and ways of thinking, scholarship that so delicately and brilliantly handled discussions on why things in academia, especially for women of color, must change. And the work from writing, rhetoric, and literacy scholars that presented this, as well as the work from scholars in adjacent fields, motivated me to continue arguing for this change.

Towards the middle of my graduate program, I started to put this motivation into practice. I was motivated to do so not only by the scholarship I was reading but because early on in graduate school, it became very apparent how much my grief was a part of my learning and life experience. In my first semester I tried to ignore my grief—and that easily, and very quickly, only made it worse. I started to think about how as a woman of color, in academia, this was a part of my life experience that was greatly affecting me, so I wanted to turn to that life experience and write about it rather than let it fester. It began by including small stories and experiences in my projects for graduate school. By the time I was completing my coursework, I had two projects in which my grief, and my experience of suddenly losing a parent, was the focus. This is the work I am presenting here. I am hoping to accomplish two things when writing this piece. First, I want to answer the charge from other scholars in the field, who argue that scholars should be able to have the opportunity to write and work through their grief, make space for those feelings, and incorporate them as valid experiences in their scholarship (Galliah; Hutchinson; Stewart). And in doing so, I want to push back against the typical narratives and norms associated with loss, and with death. Assumed narratives that exist in our everyday lives often come from what scholars note as "majoritarian stories," defined as "master narratives of white privilege" (Martinez 3).

Since they center on the stories of dominant groups, these narratives place expectations not only on everyday behaviors and practices but also on the way minoritized people navigate important life experiences. This is exceptionally true for women of color going through these experiences since majoritarian narratives often make assumptions about the "inherent" strength and resilience of women of color when working through grief. Pushing back, and disproving this narrative, was another inspiration for my work here.

In this essay, I introduce the scholarship that has inspired me to return to this writing space after quite a few years of resistance—the scholarship that presents the complications that come with grief and mourning. I present my argument by taking a problem/solution approach. First, I introduce how grief and mourning are different for minoritized communities because of majoritarian narratives and some of the strategies those communities have used to complicate those narratives. Then, I present specific scenes from my life—where I could feel my emotions tugging at me the most, where my life was disrupted by assumptions of my resiliency. The organization of my project is modeled after Jacqueline Jones Royster's "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own." Royster stacks three individual stories "one against another against another" to "offer a litany of evidence from which a call for transformation . . . might rightfully begin" (30). I am hoping my experiences with grief have the same effect.

INTERPRETING ACADEMIC CONVERSATIONS: WHAT I UNDERSTAND ABOUT WHO'S MOURNABLE, WHO'S NOT, AND WHAT THAT SAYS ABOUT GRIEF

Throughout this essay, I use the terms *grief/grieving* and *mourn/mourning* to refer to two different situations or experiences when talking about death. I use *grief/grieving* to refer to an individual's feelings of loss or suffering from the death of a loved one, and *mourn/mourning* as a collective set of practices or actions society participates in when people die. I make this distinction because I find there is a difference between the individual feelings of grief one person or family experiences and the action of mourning an entire community might practice.

In both the individual feelings of grief and the collective actions of mourning, race affects how people grieve, how people mourn, who is grieved and mourned, and how those narratives of grief and mourning are represented and told. Scholars who study race, particularly in the United States, do so with certain central tenets as a driving force for their critiques and analysis. These central tenets are informed by critical race theory, a theoretical framework and methodology first introduced by Black legal scholars such as Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams. The first tenet focuses on the "permanence of race and racism," the fact that racism is a permanent and normal part of United States society and that the dominant society typically benefits from the effects of racism (Martinez 10). Its permanence creates a hierarchy of how life is valued in the United States, and structural examples of this include housing discrimination, the school-to-prison pipeline, and wealth disparity. Returning to grief and mourning, racism does not suddenly resolve or disappear when a person dies. Racism extends into how life is memorialized or mourned, as well as who can be mourned, or who is worth mourning.

Considering the first tenet of critical race theory, I argue that there is a hierarchy of mourning in the United States, based on how that life was valued while alive, that is informed by dominant ideologies or white, middle-class ideals. The violence this ideology causes

is that it informs who can be mourned in the United States and is guided by racist, classist, ageist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist ideologies. I challenge this ideology by bringing forward its Eurocentric origin and the violent history it has in the United States.

This hierarchy of mourning can be traced back to the Greek origins of memorialization, as well as to the construction of United States national identity. It is present in early Greek rhetorical tradition with the funeral orations of Demosthenes. Demosthenes eulogizes soldiers killed in battle, beginning his speech with the notion that since these soldiers "preferred to die nobly than live and see Greece suffer misfortune" and goes on to say that because of these actions, properly eulogizing them would be an "impossible task" (Worthington 25). Here, Demosthenes lays out a thought process that society will continue to see when thinking about the dead—that the value of a person's life goes beyond words if they choose to die while protecting the interests of those in power. Based on this oration, Demosthenes shows grieving people that if the death of their loved one did not assist in the bettering of their country, the death is unmournable.

Ersula Ore writes a contrasting argument and presents how violent acts of racism are used to construct the United States' national identity through public lynchings. What Ore presents in her book *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric and American Identity* is how not just the death but also the violent acts inflicted against Black people, "target members of the polity not originally conceived as members of the polity" (26). Ore demonstrates how the intentional decision to celebrate anti-Black violence through public lynchings functioned to construct the United States' national identity through the postcards made of lynched victims, the public lynchings held as if they were afternoon picnics, and the lynched effigies made of our first Black president. The United States' past and present public lynchings show grieving people that if their loved one is considered not a member of the polity, their death is not only unmournable, it is also unmemorable. Overall, Demosthenes's orations and Ore's book show two contrasting arguments that, when placed together in conversation, demonstrate a longstanding presence of a hierarchy of life and the need to challenge that hierarchy.

Outside of scholarship, there are nuances in everyday conversation that support and continue to perpetuate whose life does and does not have value in the United States, and, therefore, whose life is and is not mournable or memorable. My first thought brings me to early discussions on social media about the coronavirus that attempted to comfort people by affirming that "only the elderly and immunocompromised die from the virus" and that there is consistent evidence on how minoritized people are even more so affected by the virus—in terms of transmission, testing, and vaccine distribution—yet the government seems to do little to nothing about it. Additionally, I think about popular culture, how folks always joke that no matter the genre of movie or television show, the person of color, the queer person, the disabled and/or neurodivergent person, the trans person, is always the first to die or to have some sort of villainized narrative. Their story is always the shortest, the most contorted, or filled to the brim with the most trauma.

This is all to say that socially, especially in the United States, there are codes in place that tell us who can be mourned. And these codes affect how grieving people work through the unimaginable loss of their loved ones.

But perhaps what affects grieving people the most in their everyday life are the restrictions that tell us how we can grieve and how our grief can only be perceived from outward actions. Pauline Boss's book *Ambiguous Loss* provides great insight on the consequences unresolved grief[1] can have on individuals and families. Her work focuses on families who have missing loved ones, or loved ones dying from terminal illnesses. The grief these family members feel from losing a loved one who is both absent and present is what Boss identifies as "ambiguous loss": for example, a mother with dementia who is physically present but mentally absent or a soldier missing in action who is physically absent but stays present because they aren't officially pronounced dead. Based on years of case studies with families experiencing ambiguous loss, and in turn unresolved grief, Boss argues that ambiguous loss is a long-term feeling that traumatizes and immobilizes (24).

Additionally, she points out that unresolved grief has a multitude of effects on a person's daily life, such as causing additional stress to other factors of their life, like their jobs and their relationships, disrupting their family dynamic, and creating generational feelings of unresolved grief. Throughout her book, Boss notes that ambiguous loss can apply to a multitude of situations and has developed to be more encompassing since she first started publishing on the topic. Other examples she includes within Ambiguous Loss include generational migration, emotionally absent family members, and divorces.

The hierarchies of mourning that surround loss that can then lead to unresolved grief can be even more constricting when it comes to race. In Aja Y. Martinez's book, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, she argues for the necessary and foundational position of counterstory as a methodology in the field of rhetoric and composition by critiquing how counterstory has been delegitimized both in this field and in other fields. Her work builds on the previous practitioners of counterstory, who utilize it as a methodology that challenges what scholars call "'majoritarian' stories, or master narratives of white privilege" (3). Majoritarian stories place the lived experiences of white, able-bodied, cishet men as the natural or normal starting point for reference for lived

1 I use grief instead of mourn here because Boss uses the phrase "unresolved grief" and in her book focuses on how the emotions her patients feel affect their everyday life.

experiences. This centering of majoritarian stories "distorts and silences the experiences of people of color and others distanced from the norms" (23). Centering majoritarian stories affects how white, privileged folks perceive the behavior and experiences of those distanced from the norms and creates social codes that perpetuate how people should act and react to life experiences. I argue that there are majoritarian stories present when it comes to grief and loss, and those stories center on privileged experiences of grief and loss, therefore creating additional work for people of color as they attempt to resolve, or at least live with, their grief.

Felicia R. Stewart's article "The Rhetoric of Shared Grief: An Analysis of Letters to the Family of Michael Brown" provides impactful commentary on how majoritarian assumptions affect the grieving process of people of color, and more specifically, how white notions of Black resilience, specifically related to Black women, can deeply affect the lived experiences of grieving mothers. Stewart analyzes letters written by Wanda Johnson, mother of Oscar Grant III, and Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin, to the family of Michael Brown, utilizing a critical analysis that focuses on eulogistic rhetoric. When framing her analysis, Stewart explicitly points out the ramifications of majoritarian assumptions:

> Important to note is the perception of Black mothers in American society as a whole. Black mothers have long been viewed as strong, independent, and fierce. Viewed as positive attributes, these qualities can pose a burden for Black women (Parks, 2010) as the perception places an expectation that Black women are simply built to withstand tribulation and turmoil and can navigate easily through the hardships of life. (Stewart 356)

Stewart's words here address exactly how perceptions of grieving people can be exacerbated by assumptions rooted in white privilege and white supremacy. Historically, science has promoted and rationalized that Black people can endure more physical and emotional trauma than other communities and therefore do not require adequate support for working through traumatic experiences they face from racist actions. Because we live with this notion that Black women are "simply built to withstand tribulation and turmoil," we must contend with how that notion reflects how much work must be done. To begin authentically listening to the lived experiences of Black women, to begin the social change that will be felt, the majoritarian stories created about Black women must be chipped away, and that dominant ideology must be challenged (Stewart 356).

People of color interrupt the majoritarian stories created by white supremacy by using approaches such as counterstory and testimonio when writing about their experiences with loss. Martinez explains that counterstories are not just "marginalized narratives" but narratives that critique a dominant ideology and focus on social justice (17). Martinez also cites Dolores Delgado Bernal, Rebeca Burciaga, Judith Flores Carmona, who have worked on providing pushback against majoritarian narratives in Latinx critical race theory, or LatCrit. Delgado Bernal et al. discuss testimonio, a methodological strategy "that allows the mind, body, and spirit to be equally valuable sources of knowledge" and focuses on giving a voice to the silenced so they may reclaim the authority to narrate (Martinez 365). Delgado Bernal et al. also specifically note that testimonio can help people "respond to and heal from oppressive experiences" (365).

This is what I hope to accomplish by telling these stories, by revealing the experiences I have had as a Latina woman, as a grad student, and as a person who is grieving a loved one who died in a way that, to some people, would make them ungrievable. I am hoping that by telling these stories, I can provide moments of critique on how majoritarian narratives have affected my grieving process and practices. I hope the stories create a possibility for social change for other women of color who are also experiencing loss, a change that will get people to start listening to the experiences of women of color rather than exploiting them, a change that will get people to think critically about and provide the support women of color need while they grieve, rather than just assume they are too resilient to need it.

SCENE ONE

On the outside, my mom has always looked like she has it all together. I have so many memories of this in my life. I think about how she delicately puts together her appearance, how she pieces together her outfits every day. I think about how she's always pushing her feelings and initial emotions aside—whether it's for a client that's calling her five times in a row while she's trying to get things done, or squinting tears away when an unexpected conversation gets too deep.

I think a lot about that phrase *having it all together*. There are people who have it all together and people who don't. In almost all rhetorical situations. In grief, there are people who "got over it" in an appropriate amount of time and continued with their everyday life. And then there are the ones who didn't.

To the outside world, I guess I'm the former. I always look put together. I get to my classes, both the ones I teach and the ones I take, on time. I do my work on time. I do my dishes, and those of other people, in an appropriate time frame too. There are probably more of these moments I can't think of right now.

But I don't think I have it all together.

There are times when I still feel like I have a hole in my head, even though it's probably in my heart. There are still times when the mildest inconvenience makes me curl up into a ball. There are things I say out loud to my therapist that leave burns in my brain. I know they are thoughts that are common, thoughts I share with a

whole community of people. But they are heavy thoughts. Heavy thoughts that scare me.

I was nine years old the first time I thought about ending my life. I was at a school fair with my mom. That was in 2003. The first time I ever told somebody about that moment, the first time I ever revealed that thought from my head and said it with my voice, was to the first therapist I went to after my father died. That was in 2017. I carried that thought with me and only me for fourteen years.

And I'm still carrying things. Heavy things.

I revealed a detail from the day my father died to a close friend of mine in my graduate program one time. And they were shocked to hear this detail as part of my story. I told them about how on the day my father died, he called 911 so no one would find him dead. It was a detail that I thought everybody knew because when my father's death was fresh, I told anybody who would listen to me the entire story. I couldn't keep it in, I didn't know how. So to me, everybody around me already knew what happened. But since he died, I've moved across the state. Made new friends and colleagues. Introduced people into my life who only know this presentation of me, the presentation I allow them to know.

Reflecting on this moment makes me think of Les Hutchinson's article in which they talk about the loss of their grandmother and best friend. In their conclusion, Hutchison says that writing about their loved ones allowed them to learn about those loved ones' lives "in a different way than I have known them while they were alive." When my father's death was fresh, I think that's what I was trying to do. I was trying to understand the emotions he showed when he took his life. The dark places in his head he never showed to anyone. It was a part of him I didn't know existed until that day. And the only way to make sense of it was to just relive it and rewrite it and retell it to anybody who would listen.

I realize now that what I was doing back then, sharing all of these details with no caution or purpose, wasn't writing about my father's life in any different way. I was writing about his death because, during the first two years after his death, I could not fathom it. I could not convince myself his suicide had actually happened, so I spread those details around to the world as a way to embed the truth in places where I couldn't deny it.

After I shared this detail, there was a dense silence. My friend then said, "Wow . . . that's heavy." It looked like they also wanted to ask me how I did it all, with this luggage wheeling behind me, in front of me, all over me, but then stopped themselves. I said "thank you" to them in my head because honestly? I don't have an answer. And why? Because I don't have ALL of it together, I only have some of it together.

But why, or maybe how, do I even have some of it together, if that's the thing? I thought of my parents when I thought of this question. Because I think, in our three ways, that's how we all are. All were. We all had, or have, some of it together. My parents, in my small town, were community celebrities, award winners, club presidents and governors, and philanthropists. My mom decorates the house for every holiday and always puts things back where they came from once she is done with them. My dad had a folder for each appliance he owned, with its manual, receipt, and warranty information.

So, that's just how I grew up to be. Always look together, always have at least some of it together, no matter the cost.

I think that's why I don't know how to do nothing. I just don't. I tried the other day. I was going to try to do work, but I was just getting over an ear infection. I took the opportunity since I was finally feeling better to try and relax. So I sat on the couch. Watched the news. Patted my cat while he slept next to me, pat pat pat. I was thankful for him at that moment. He reminds me that you can do nothing but sleep for sixteen hours a day and still mean something to somebody. I made strides here. But then, I also did the dishes. Tried to organize the fridge. Booked a hotel for a trip six months in advance.

Check, check, check. Together, together, together.

I can try to "relax," but only for so long is what I've learned. And I think that isn't just a personal burden but also a collective one. What is relaxing? I feel like the main narrative of relaxation is big bubbles in a clawfoot tub, a frozen drink slowly turning into slush by the sand, or a cabin overlooking big trees in the rain. And the minute I paint these pictures, I'm laughing to myself. Who has the time for this as a woman of color, as a grad student? I've been working twice as hard almost all my life—the world isn't going to expect less of me just because my dad is dead. We don't get that time away—we're too "resilient," and the world thinks we just don't need it. There are universal images for relaxing, I feel—but there are also societal undertones that underscore who's allowed to relax and who's not. I argue that those societal undertones are determined by the systems that also mark who and who isn't grievable and mournable. If you're othered in the United States, if you're not a member of the polity, you'll be expected to do triple the amount of work and then go unnoticed when it's all over. And it just makes relaxing more stressful, this idea that I don't even deserve to relax in the first place. If my grief is a wound, all these complications around relaxing infect the wound. While I think everyone deserves to relax how they want to relax, and that it shouldn't be so complicated by capitalism and "girl boss" culture, sometimes all I can muster is laying my head on my cat and feeling his heartbeat. It reminds me that I'm alive.

And while I'm thinking about all this, I also think I work constantly because it makes me feel like I'm at home. That's what both my homes were like. The feeling I get from the vision of my mom sitting on the couch, letting out a sigh, and then getting up to

put something back in a cabinet is a comforting feeling. A feeling distorted by what the world asks of us, but a comforting feeling nonetheless.

So what does this say about my grief? I feel like it says, *I fooled you. You may think you're over it in such an appropriate amount of time. You may think you've picked up the pieces and glued the* bucaro *back together seamlessly, no glue slowly seeping through the cracks. But you're just running your fingers over the broken pieces over and over again because it's all you know, and it's all you have left.*

SCENE TWO

I have been attending HALOS, Healing After a Loved One's Suicide, since April 2017. It's a support group facilitated by our local chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. When I started attending HALOS, the facilitator was Drew. He was the foundation of that group, always providing the intended, necessary silence the group might need, asking questions the group had never thought about and dropping insightful one-liners I hold in my heart, picking them up when I need them most. Drew always used to say that with grief, "If you don't talk it out, you'll act it out." That's why I always go back to HALOS when I'm feeling extremely lost, or weak.

I was attending one of our biweekly meetings close to the holidays because those feelings had started to creep up again. Around this time, Drew was taking a break from facilitating the group. I noticed his absence had been feeding some tension into the room. It felt like the group was feeling lost, a little misguided, without him. I think since Drew's not here, and there are new facilitators with new questions and ways of facilitating, people are dipping into new conversations.

Last night, the focus was Christmas. For obvious reasons. Christmas has this laminated meaning; it's layered with joy and lights and brightness. This one couple in the room talked about how they feel they're in a bubble right now and that everything Christmas is outside of that bubble. They called the outside of the bubble "loud" and "insensitive." And I get it. Christmas is in conjunction with joy. And joy is in opposition to grief.

I struggled with the conversations the group had about the holiday season.

The holiday season, specifically Christmas, has been a coping mechanism for me. I dive head first into the cheer, into the twinkling lights and cooking for my family. During Christmastime, my family celebrates my birthday and my grandmother's birthday. On my grandmother's last birthday with our family, I made *arroz con pollo* for everyone, just like she used to. It's such a soft, delicate memory I hold in my heart.

I did relate to the group's conversation, however, because that's how I feel about Thanksgiving. To me, Thanksgiving is a performative waste. My parents divorced when I was nine, and because of that, I always spent it with my dad. It was his holiday. So if he's not here, why celebrate it in the first place? I'd be happier watching TV until 2 p.m., making lasagna, and drinking a bottle of wine instead of cooking this whole turkey for five people and then throwing it out a week later. Why eat a turkey if it's not his turkey? I guess here, for me, turkey is in opposition to lasagna.

Shortly before this meeting, I found out I had won a Scholar's for the Dream Travel Award to attend the 2020 Conference on College Composition and Communication. When there was a lull in the holiday conversation, I brought up my award. How empty it felt to have something so meaningful happen to me and not have my dad here for it. To have won something so worthy of a celebration and to not have him to celebrate with me, the person who celebrated everything about me. Throughout the conversation about my award, I mainly talked to the couple I mentioned above, who were fighting Christmas from their bubble. They helped me get down to this point: I don't necessarily miss that my dad's not here to know about my award. I miss the conversation we would have had about it. I miss talking back and forth with my dad, I miss our phone calls and our talks while he drove his truck through South Miami. And then Ben, part of the couple, left us with this thought: "When someone dies, the relationship between you and that person doesn't go away. What goes away is the conversations between the two of you."

That night I had a lot of trouble sleeping. My thoughts kept me busy with other thoughts and grades and maybe writing other proposals for future conferences. I ended up in a thinking domino effect. It felt like the top of my brain was trying to distract myself with thoughts about work and school. But the rest of my brain was in so many other places—I was thinking about the conversation from HALOS, thinking about conversations with my dad, with my family, with my dad's friends. I was thinking about my home, thinking about Key West. *Ficha* after *ficha* fell in my head until I was tossing and turning so much my bed felt like it was made of lava.

I thought about how my dad's friends see him in me, how their eyes water when they look at me, and how they can barely stand the sight of my face when I visit home. About how some of my family members refuse to look at his pictures and the things that refusal makes me think about myself. How my body hides from me the feeling of the phrase, "You're just like your father."

Reflecting on that night, I think my body was fighting something—the truth and utter weight of Ben's statement from that one meeting. The main thing that's gone is the conversations with your loved ones. And as a grieving person, you're trying to make up for it yourself. You're talking to yourself in your head to try to reach that person. And whether you believe what you believe, whether there's a ghost of that person somewhere or whatnot, the constant

trying, the looking inward to make outward conversations happen, can be so isolating. It's a lonely process. It makes me feel lonely. As an only child, as a person who grew up with divorced parents, I think a lot about loneliness. For a lot of people, Key West is a temporary place—families come and go, so I did not have a lot of consistent friends when I was younger. I had to teach myself how not to feel lonely when I was alone. At around nine or ten years old, my solution to this was writing fiction. Making up characters based on people I saw while I was out with my mom running errands or trotting behind my dad at Home Depot.

Coming up with storylines and telling them to my English teachers, who would then give me suggestions: "Where's the conflict?" "You've got to have a frozen moment!" To combat this loneliness, I started with stories. I've been doing that for almost fifteen years, and I think I have the hang of it now.

After my father's death, I started to think about loneliness almost in the opposite way—that you don't have to be alone to feel lonely. I feel I do have a solid support system now, but there's always going to be a hole in it because someone is missing.

Conversations are missing. And because of that, I'm not sure if I'll ever feel truly not lonely.

SCENE THREE

On inauguration day in 2021, I was out for an evening walk. I was listening to National Public Radio, and at the time, they were interviewing Micki McElya—a history scholar who focuses on collective and national mourning. The interview focused on the many emotions the world, and more specifically folks in the United States, were feeling due to immense grief from the global pandemic. McElya focused on feelings like trauma, the collective sadness, the emptiness everyone must be dealing with, and how the most effective solution for processing those feelings is to do so together, as a country. On this day, the United States was mourning the approximately 400,000 lives lost to the coronavirus. While on this walk, while listening to this talk, I could feel the wind whipping around me and holding me in gently, like a hug. I'm glad it was there because without it, I don't know how much farther I would have been able to go.

As a researcher interested in public memory and collective mourning, my initial reaction was to be deeply saddened by this interview. I then was curious about McElya's work. I started to do some research on this scholar, looked at some of their books, and found one of their publications. As I was doing this, a thought started to fester. 400,000 lives. That is so many people, that is so many people's loved ones. That is so many families who now have to figure out what to do with the material life of their loved ones. And while on that sidewalk in 2021, I was immediately taken to my hometown in 2017.

My father bought his townhouse in 2009. I think besides his family and maybe his friends, it was one of the things he loved the most. He decorated it with a modern theme, poured in thousands of dollars to fix the foundation, bought the latest and greatest gadgets and appliances, and had paintings and photographs commissioned by his friends that he could use as wall decor. He held birthday parties, Thanksgiving dinners, and pizza-making competitions at his place. He had a map of Key West from the 1800s commissioned, and he hung it above the dining-room table to remind himself of the island he made home. When the house was everything he wanted it to be, he bought a run-down, 1990s Jeep Wrangler he could fix on the weekends as a hobby.

After he died, my mom and I—we couldn't touch any of it. We couldn't bring ourselves to clean his house. Besides me, it was his baby, and it felt so wrong to disrupt the image he made of the place where he was most comfortable. It was as if he was dying all over again.

It took a storm—and this isn't figurative—it took a literal storm to get my mom and I to that point. In 2017, Key West was hit by Hurricane Irma, and my childhood home was left with severe damage. Above the room where I grew up, the roof was down to nothing but plywood. The mold that accumulated while we had evacuated made it unlivable. It would take almost seven months for my mom to get even a fraction of the insurance money to start to fix it. And during that time, we had to find a place to live, so we decided to move into my dad's townhouse.

I remember opening the deadbolt on that day. The Jeep was still in the driveway, with two flat tires. All of the windows were closed and shut. The dust had started to gather in the corners. Tiny spiders had made their homes in the dust. I had half expected him to be sitting on the couch, reading his Kindle and watching *60 Minutes*.

But he wasn't there.

Les Hutchinson, when writing about their grandmother, points to nature. They write,

> Write the map to where you live. Start as close or as far from your home as you wish. The map back home reads like a Joshua Tree. Start from any point, all you see are light green fronds. They pierce your skin if you dare to touch too close. I suggest holding yourself together tight. The fronds will shred into a million little threads if you pull a single one too hard. So don't. Press lightly. Be prepared to move on.

After the first few weeks of tiptoeing around his decorative dreams like mice, we had settled into reality. This would have to be our home now. I think Hutchinson's words emulate what this process was like for my mom and me.

From late 2017 to the summer I left for graduate school in 2018, we sold furniture items and appliances, replaced his paintings with those from my mother's father, held a yard sale, threw away old medicine from cabinets and bathroom sinks, donated some of his tuxedos, sold some of his appliances we didn't know how to use, decorated with paisley rugs and shower curtains, big candles, fluffy throw pillows, and plush blankets. Every step was like following the Joshua Tree—we pressed lightly onto the next frond, as slowly as we could.

Throughout this process, the emotional weight of his stuff started to fade into frustration, and eventually anger. He had so much stuff, and it seemed like every time we had successfully donated something or found another home for it, there was another rack of clothes or a storage bin right behind it. For months, it seemed we were making no progress. It was stressful.

The Jeep was no different. We were literally watching it deteriorate in the driveway—accumulating dust, rain washing off the dust, tires slowly flattening. It was one of those items we never touched on the to-do list because it was simply too big.

One day, one of my dad's friends, whom I worked for at the time, offered to buy it. He even offered to have it towed. Not even a week later, I looked out the window and it was gone. He had had it towed while we were still sleeping. That day, I had four people message me that they noticed the Jeep was gone as they drove past the townhouse.

Edward Casey talks about the four major forms of human memory—individual, social, collective, and public. Individual highlights "the unique rememberer," someone who remembers an event or a tragedy in several particular ways and is also engaged in "remembering how" that tragedy occurred—"remembering how" is understood as having a deep, detailed memory of that event (20). Social memory considers how people with preexisting relationships remember the same details from experiences they share (20-21). Collective and public memories are often connected to a "historical circumstance" that communities remember together, whether they have existing relationships or not (26). Losing my dad brought these nuances forward for me. Losing him is an individual memory I have a hard time sharing with other people. But I was not the only person to lose him, so there are these social memories of his friends and coworkers I carry as well. The Jeep was a stark reminder of that.

McElya's interview brought all of these memories to the surface. And her interview got me thinking, especially in terms of collective and public memory. Oftentimes, I feel those public-memory scholars forget that within collective and public memories, there are also people who are working through individual memories, who are "remembering how" (Casey 20). I thought a lot about those who have lost loved ones to COVID-19. I cannot even fathom what it must be like to lose a loved one to an illness everyone is talking about, whether it's through the Zoom dinner table or in the daily news headline. I cannot fathom what it must be like to lose a loved one to an illness that is a hoax to some people.

Reflecting on the memories of going through my father's house, I thought about the 400,000 communities of loved ones who now had to go through this process, too. Who now had to dismantle and repair the images of their loved ones who are gone, the images of their loved ones that have been made through their material. With all of these emotions coming together, I was lucky to have the wind to hold me at that time.

REFLECTION

Scholars like Hutchinson and Shelly Galliah both argue that when those grieving can share their stories of loss, and work through and reflect on that loss as part of their scholarly experience, a transformation can begin. Hutchinson notes the effect their losses had on their writing, reflecting, "I [Hutchinson] stopped writing entirely for months, feeling my voice had vanished," but "by writing about loss I was able to work again. The act of memorializing allows my voice not to be silenced by overwhelming grief, but to embody that grief, give it a name, honor it, and work with it." Galliah concludes by reflecting, "[R]evisiting my mother's death while drafting, writing, and revising this essay has slowly forced both a recognition and a necessary shift" (30).

What I find most impactful about both of these claims is how both scholars focus on how writing, in particular writing their stories, created a physical change in their lives. When I was able to work through and write through these experiences, I am certain it changed me as a writer. It lifted a weight off of me, even if it was only a little bit.

This transformation through storytelling also has a strong foundation in other scholarly conversations, especially when talking about the experiences of underserved communities in the United States. Scholars like Delgado Bernal et al. and Martinez note the ripple effect counterstories and testimonios can have—that when the lived experiences of people of color are centered, they chip away at the majoritarian stories that are made of us. Martinez highlights the domino effect counterstories can have and how they provide critiques of social oppression informed by an interest in social justice and a possibility of social change (28). Delgado Bernal et al. write about *testimonialistas*—scholarship in which the author is both the researcher and the participant, in which they document their own stories in or out of academia (366). *Testimonialistas* are narrations that challenge dominant and/or majoritarian notions and are written "to theorize oppression, resistance, and subjectivity" (366). Both scholars here bring up such important exigencies for why the telling of counterstories and *testimonialistas* is necessary—it is because when people of color tell their stories, the narrative is

made by us, and we can begin to push back against the narratives that have been made about us by white people.

I choose to integrate these two arguments because I think there is power in people of color sharing their stories about grief. It is a part of our everyday lives in a way that can only be understood from our stories. In the United States, people of color are more affected by diseases, illness, and institutional violence than white people. Additionally, people of color are less often offered mental health resources, putting us at a higher risk for suicide. And most of the time, the narratives of this loss and death are controlled by majoritarian narratives—with this control, there is no room for social change (Martinez 28). That is why I wanted to share my stories—to begin to chip away at notions of resilience surrounding women of color and to show there are Latinx people out here—people like my father and me—who fight our internal battles to live in this country every day. I am hoping that by sharing my stories, I can add to the process of transformation the community before me has already begun.

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