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Between the Borderlands of Life and Death: A Spiritual and Intellectual Journey Towards Developing Conocimiento

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Between the Borderlands of Life and Death: A Spiritual and Intellectual Journey Towards Developing Conocimiento

by

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Dedication

In memory of my beautiful mother, Maria Buítron Dominguez. As you always told your daughters every chance you had, “I love you to the moon and back.” Even though words can never do justice to the depths of my love and respect for you, I humbly honor you through my writing.
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Abstract

Between the Borderlands of Life and Death: A Spiritual and Intellectual Journey Towards Developing Conocimiento

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The personal is political, the political is personal. This mantra has inspired feminist thought for decades because of its emphasis on disclosing the personal in the name of consciousness raising, an important form of feminist activism focused on making what is invisible visible in the spirit of bringing about radical change. Feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa’s inspirational writings epitomize the transformative power of incorporating the personal in academic theorizing. Her work has encouraged us to not only reimagine what counts as knowledge, but to “risk the personal” in our own writing.

My thesis contributes to the burgeoning field of Anzaldúan studies by asserting the value of “risking the personal” in academic writing. I open up, immerse in, and expose my wound as I contend with the greatest rupture in my life yet. On January 23, 2011, merely two years ago, a single phone call broke my heart and soul. My 48 year-old mother was dead. My thesis is an autohistoria-teoría that aims to examine the suffering consciousness that arises when we experience traumatic ruptures that shatter our worlds.
Specifically, I use Anzaldúa’s theory of conocimiento as an epistemological framework to map my movements in consciousness as I write about my mother’s unexpected death. I offer my personal account of grief to shatter the silence around death, revealing the complexity that surrounds and defines loss by giving voice to the marginalized experience of losing a mother as a young woman. I then write about the role of writing in the face of ruptures, arguing that writing is a powerful tool in developing conocimiento.

After descending into my wound, I begin my spiritual activism by examining the power of opening ourselves to alternative ways of knowing. I immerse myself in Tibetan Buddhism, embracing its perspectives and contemplating impermanence. All of this in the service of developing conocimiento, a revolutionary mindset dedicated to constant transformation. This transformation is a process of personal and collective healing that acknowledges our interconnectedness. We all experience similar journeys of rupture, pain, and growth. Let us use this connection to improve ourselves, our communities, and our world.
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Introduction

I AM NO STRANGER TO LOSS…

I have been acquainted with death and loss for most of my life. As a 24 year-old person, I suspect this statement might strike many as odd given that I am relatively young to be claiming to have had a lot of experience with death and loss. If there is anything I have discovered in the modest amount of time that I have been in existence, it is that death is indiscriminate and unpredictable. Death can strike in the blink of an eye, regardless of age. I do not think you can ever be ready for it, but what I do know is that once you face death, you are no longer who you used to be. The experience changes you, leaving a permanent scar on your heart about the impermanence that characterizes our existence as humans.

I will never forget my first encounter with death at age four. As I watched my mother dig a small hole to lay my green parakeet to rest, I began to realize that life was far more complicated than I had ever imagined. Once my parakeet, Sam, was lowered into the ground and devoured by the earth, I remember wondering how long he had to stay there. A few hours later, I decided that he had been underground quite long enough. I unburied him, expecting to see him alive and ready to return to his cage. Horrified and frightened by his unmoving, dirty body, I dropped my parakeet back into the ground and ran inside where I cried in my mother’s arms. I did not understand how something could be so alive, flying around, eating food, and then suddenly no longer part of this world.
The loss of my parakeet introduced to my young mind the concepts of death and impermanence, concepts I have continued to contemplate to this day.

Nearly five years after my parakeet’s death, I experienced a different dimension of loss. My family and I lost our home to a rare, 100-year flood that devastated Central Texas in October of 1998. I woke up that chilly October morning to the sound of my mother’s panicked voice echoing throughout the house. Her tone startled me, indicating to me that we were in a dangerous situation. I jumped out of bed, ran to the window, and stared at the murky flood water that was beginning to engulf our home. I scanned the landscape with amazement, awestruck by the incredible amount of water surrounding our home. I felt like I was floating in the middle of the ocean in the dead of night. My amazement was put on halt when I realized the implications of our precarious situation. We were trapped, surrounded by an unrelenting sea of water that was now beginning to infiltrate our home. As I stared at the brown water bubbling in through the vents and cracks in the tiles of our home, I slowly began to realize precisely what being trapped meant for us—there was no escape, nowhere to run even if we wanted to.

To distract myself from our perilous situation, my mind wandered to the stuffed animal I had since infancy, a brown bear named “Beary.” Shocked that I had forgotten to grab him off my bed before fleeing, I returned to my room determined to save him and take him with me. My heroic rescue mission was quickly averted once I realized that I stood no chance against the continuous stream of water that was consuming my room. I watched the flood waters permeate my room, catching a final glimpse of Beary before he drowned along with everything else in my bedroom.
My room was not the only casualty. I could not believe how quickly the water was rising. It continued to creep in the house, knocking over anything and everything in its path. I was terrified. Even though I was extremely scared, my fear quickly transformed to sorrow when I remembered that our family dog, Buddy, was still outside. I dashed to the window, clinging to the possibility that he had escaped from the murky water. He did not make it. His house was underwater, taken captive by the brown sea of water that refused to subside. It kept rising and rising, letting its fury out on everything in its path. We were all at its mercy.

Once staying inside the house was no longer a viable or safe option, my parents decided to move us to higher ground. My dad hoisted all three of us (my sisters and I) up to the roof of our home to protect us from the chilly water. What he did not count on was that more rain was approaching. My sisters and I sat on the roof as rain poured down on us, freezing our already wet and cold bodies. We held hands and scrunched together for warmth, knowing that it was much safer on the roof than down below where our parents were.

Two hours later, we were all rescued by a safety raft. As we glided across the swollen creek that had destroyed our world, I watched clumps of ants dangling from treetops trying to escape the flood waters. Squirrels, snakes, and cats were all also clinging to the treetops. It is amazing how creatures form temporary alliances when death beckons. I felt sorry for them knowing that no one was coming to rescue them. It hardly seemed fair. Like us, they were just trying to survive.
I will never forget the intense relief I felt when we all finally made it safely to shore. Against all odds, we had survived. We were spared, but our house and everything in it was not quite so lucky. We were not able to return home until two weeks later. When we returned, we discovered that the flood had destroyed everything. We lost our home, all of our material possessions, and Buddy. We found his swollen body some fifty yards from where he normally rested. It was right next to our upside down playhouse. I will never forget the brown, murky color of his eyes when we found him. Upon seeing his inanimate body, I quickly threw myself on his body and began to cry. I hated that the flood waters crept up on all of us, making it impossible for us to prevent him from drowning. I hated that he was dead. I hated it all. Fearful that I might become sick from lying on his dirty corpse, my dad picked me up and took me off his bloated body. We immediately buried him.¹

Illustration 1: Disheveled Playhouse

¹ Illustration 1: This is an image of my childhood playhouse found nearly 50 yards away from where it normally rested. The strong flood waters moved it and Buddy to this location. None of us can remember who took this photo.
We were homeless for a few weeks before we moved in with my grandparents. As you can imagine, the next several months were chaotic and humbling for my family. It was hard to comprehend what had happened to us. As a 10 year-old, I did not understand why it all happened. I wondered if we had inadvertently made God angry, compelling him/her to take everything away from us. None of it made sense, but what the flood made me realize was that the world is highly unpredictable. Life can change quickly, in a blink of an eye.² This knowledge about the world frightened me, making me feel extremely unsafe and vulnerable. The flood traumatized me by making me afraid of the weather given how quickly the water consumed our home. I could never sleep through a thunderstorm again after the flood because I was afraid of what the rain might bring. To this day, I still cannot readily sleep through a late night thunderstorm.

Illustration 2:  Flood

² Illustration 2: This picture was taken by my grandmother later in the day after we were rescued. You can see the raging flood water covering the road and flowing violently over a bridge. My grandpa, Uncle Rick, dad, mother, my sisters (Delilah and Daniella), and I are seen looking at the devastation.
We were fortunate enough to not endure loss again for a few years. Of course, death and loss never stay away for too long. In December of 2001, my paternal grandfather was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Stunned by his diagnosis, my grandfather seemingly lost the will to live. He died merely three weeks after his diagnosis. His sudden death impacted me in a profound way because he was the first human being I ever witnessed dying. It was a violent, scary process that I had difficulty understanding. Not to mention, he was the first person I truly loved who had died. I will never forget running into his arms soaked from the cold water after we were rescued. Words cannot accurately express how much his presence meant to me in that moment.

My grandfather’s death tested my family. Family has always been my greatest source of strength. Even in the darkest of times, we knew we would make it because we had each other. We were “Team Mingo” as my dad affectionately called us. The open communication I shared with my parents and sisters helped me make sense of these devastating losses. We were always there for each other, trying to understand the mad world that we were all part of. The intense and unwavering love that we all shared was and still is invaluable. I did not know it then, but family would prove to be crucial as time progressed. We would experience our greatest tragedy yet nearly a decade later.

In January of 2011, I received a phone call that has forever changed my life. At 5:45 that morning, I learned that my 48 year-old mother had collapsed in her room. After being rushed to the hospital, she was pronounced dead shortly after arrival. When asked for an explanation for her untimely death, the only answer that I received was one of uncertainty. Though I desperately longed for answers and an explanation for her sudden
death, I would not find out how she died until two days later after an autopsy revealed that she died from a massive heart attack. I was stunned.

Four months later, still deeply devastated from the loss of my mother, I watched as my paternal grandmother’s body slowly deteriorated from a long battle with lung cancer. She had undergone months of intense radiation treatment hoping that it would improve her chances of survival and possibly get rid of her cancer. Her effort to defeat her cancer, though resilient, proved to be unsuccessful when her doctor revealed that the radiation treatment failed to get rid of her cancer. What the radiation treatment ultimately accomplished was destroying her lungs, making it impossible for her to ever live a normal life. Disheartened with the results, she opted out of going through another round of chemotherapy and radiation treatment. She maintained a positive, inspiring outlook as the disease began to ravage her body. She spent the last month of her life bedridden and unable to control the erratic movements of her failing body. She died in June after the cancer metastasized to her brain.

Death proved to define 2011 for my family. In its wake, we were left wondering how to begin the process of piecing together our broken lives after such complete and utter devastation. I quickly discovered that the process of moving forward is often easier said than done. Because of my experiences with death, I felt alienated from the world. I felt like I was marked as “the prohibited and forbidden” because of my association with it (Borderlands 28). I felt like no one wanted to interact with me because I was tainted by death, and thus marked and treated as a symbol for it because of my tragic experiences. It was far easier for people to be silent, to change the subject, to avoid contact, or pretend
that nothing happened rather than to actually talk to me about the suffering I felt from my experiences with death.

This was my first exposure to the reality that few are receptive to interacting with the bereaved. This phenomenon is not exclusive to my experience. In fact, many scholars have discovered that people in the United States have an overwhelming tendency to avoid contemplating death. There seems to be an intense phobia around engaging in critical conversations around the inevitability of death. Robert Neimeyer, a grief researcher, asserts that “it has become common place observation in thanatological scholarship that we live in a death-denying society” (100). Indeed, the United States is a death-denying society that often uses euphemisms to discuss death, choosing to use phrases such as “passed away” or “expired” instead of directly stating that someone has died.

Some writers have noted that this is not a phenomenon exclusive to the United States, arguing that being death-denying may be a human tendency. In R.K. Narayan’s version of The Mahabharata, one of the main characters, Yudhistira, reflects on what is the greatest wonder of the world. He observes, “Day after day and hour after hour, people die and corpses are carried along, yet the onlookers never realize that they are also to die one day, but think they will live forever. This is the greatest wonder of the world” (Narayan 93). Yudhistira’s reflection draws attention to the human tendency to avoid critically contemplating mortality and the inevitability of death.

My paper addresses specifically the death-denying tendencies of contemporary U.S. society. This fear of death facilitates an unwillingness to engage with human suffering. As Andrea Nye, feminist philosopher, describes about Simone Weil’s
perspective on human suffering, there are many ways that “people make themselves oblivious to human suffering: geographical and educational segregation, public forums that intimidate rather than encourage communication, preoccupation with personal problems and concerns…” (Nye 110). Even though Simone Weil is talking specifically about the suffering of the poor, I believe that the same can be said about those who are grieving and suffering from loss. I can merely speculate about why there is a tendency to avoid the bereaved, but I feel that it is rooted in a larger societal fear about dealing with death. We lack an effective cultural script that would allow us to have a meaningful, productive conversation about the fleeting nature of our existence. Because many lack the tools to contemplate the absurdity of existence, silence is the safe alternative.

**DEATH OF A PARENT**

Breaking the silence around death is a task that many scholars and activists are actively working to achieve. In sociologist Debra Umberson’s *Death of a Parent: Transition to a New Adult Identity*, she explores the impact of parental loss by conducting interviews with the bereaved about their experience. Based on in-depth analysis of the bereavement experiences and stories of seventy-three adults, she concludes that the death of a parent is “an event that initiates a period of substantial change and redirection in the way we view ourselves, our relationships to others, and our place in the world” (Umberson 6).

When Umberson initially started this ethnographic research project, she expected to be tirelessly searching for participants interested in sharing their bereavement stories given how difficult it can be for people to discuss something as sensitive as death.
Umberson was pleasantly surprised when she received nearly 200 names of individuals who were willing to be interviewed. The sheer number of people who were willing to share their bereavement story suggests that the death of a loved one does indeed have a significant impact on one’s life.

Further, it sheds light on the fact that there are many people who long to be heard, who long to share their pain, who actively want to share their bereavement story. As Umberson observes, “When I interviewed each bereaved adult, a personal life story unfolded, a story that began with a young child and his or her relationship to a parent, a story that moved through a life course, with all of its up and downs, a story that ended with the loss of a significant person” (13). Umberson is highlighting the importance of recognizing that when we lose a significant person in our life, our life story shifts, undermining our hopes and dreams for how we wanted the story to end.

Moreover, what makes Umberson’s book so important is that it gives voice to the unique experience of bereavement in relation to parental loss by highlighting the myriad feelings and coping strategies enacted by the bereaved in the face of loss. In her introduction, Umberson includes who she imagines her primary audience to be. She writes, “First, this book is for individuals who are coping with the loss of their own parent…It may also serve as a guide to help individuals channel their distress and personal stress in desired ways” (Umberson 14). As a grieving body coping with the death of my mother, Umberson’s book offered validation about the complex feelings I was experiencing. I felt less alone in discovering that so many others knew what it was like to feel broken, lost, and paralyzed. In a strange way, I was deeply comforted by the
notion “that a parent’s death is a life altering event for most adults,” an event that permanently transforms how a person moves in the world (Umberson 9).

Even though her research provided me with a form of solace, I still found myself struggling to understand and come to terms with my experience. In December of 2012, in the midst of writing my thesis, I decided to take a break from my writing to get a haircut. As I watched my hair gently fall to the ground at a beauty salon in Austin, the woman cutting my hair, Dotty, initiated a conversation with me about the approaching holiday season. She asked if I planned to travel out of state to visit family, or if I was planning on staying around the area. I explained to her that I was going to spend the holiday season at home with my dad and family in Bastrop, a town not too far away from Austin. She paused for a moment before asking, “You said you were going to spend the holiday with your dad. Are your parents divorced?” Taken off guard by her frank question, I quietly replied, “My mom died in 2011.” Shocked by my response, she was taken aback and stopped cutting my hair. She then tenderly remarked, “You are too young to be motherless. How old was your mom?”

“She was 48,” I replied. Dotty paused before gently touching my shoulder, which I took to be her way of expressing her sorrow for my loss without having to verbalize it. She then continued to cut my hair, making sure to not ask any more personal questions. I fell into a trance and continued to watch my hair fall to the ground as she cut away at it.

I offer this experience not to criticize Dotty for inadvertently bringing up a difficult subject, but to draw attention to the fact that when you live in a heteronormative and death-denying society, it does not make sense for a mother to not exist. It is not
“right” for a young woman to be motherless by age twenty-two. Every time that people discover that my mother died, it comes as a great shock because in the cultural imaginary of the United States, it is not the way that things are supposed to be. People are supposed to grow old and live long lives, not die young and unexpectedly.

According to research from the Center for Demography at the University of Wisconsin, 5 percent of the U.S. population grieves the loss of a parent every year (Cited in Umberson 15). Of that 5 percent, there are significant disparities between the ages of individuals who are experiencing this particular type of loss. Umberson offers more illuminating statistics from the Center for Demography at the University of Wisconsin. She observes, “Only one in ten adults has lost a parent by age twenty-five, but by fifty-four, 50 percent of adults have lost both parents, and by age sixty-two, 75 percent have lost both parents” (Umberson 15). I was twenty-two when my mother died, which makes me one of the “one in ten adults” that she describes. This knowledge made me feel even more marginalized in my experience. I only knew three other people around my age that had lost a parent relatively young. Three out of four of us had lost our mother, making it an experience that we could all relate to on some level. Even though the contexts and circumstances around the death of our lost parent were all quite different, I know I found refuge in their company despite the important differences around our unique losses.

LOSING A MOTHER AS A YOUNG ADULT WOMAN

I lost my mother as a young adult woman, a 22 year-old who still longed to continue developing a relationship with a person that meant the world to me. She was merely 48 years-old at the time of her death, an age that many would consider as far too
young to be dead. I have experienced a very specific type of loss, which was the sudden, unexpected death of my mother, a person who I had the privilege of having a loving relationship with. I am writing about how the death of a mother broke a daughter, a young adult still emerging in the world who valued and respected the special relationship she shared with her mother. I must establish that I am not trying to universalize the grief experience of losing a mother. Context matters. It is important to not assume that bereavement stories will be exactly alike. There are unique differences that must be respected and acknowledged when trying to understand what grief does to a person. With that said, I now want to write about the circumstances surrounding my grief experience by examining the impact of losing a mother as a 22 year-old woman.

According to Hope Edelman, writer of *Motherless Daughters*, the “most overlooked and misunderstood daughter of all is the early adult daughter” (61). She explains that part of the reason that this happens is because young adult women are perceived to be grown up, and therefore no longer in need of a parental figure. As such, their grief is often overlooked because “a mother’s importance somehow diminishes to zero the moment her daughter emerges from adolescence” (Edelman 61). However, it is important not to discount the struggles that arise when a daughter loses a mother at this stage in life, especially if a daughter had a strong and loving relationship with her mother. It can be a devastating event, disrupting the hopes and dreams that the daughter once had for her life.

For example, Edelman suggests that “the twenties are the years most women pinpoint as the time they first realized their mother had qualities—empathy, wisdom,
experience—they would value in a friend” (63). I remember having conversations with my mother before I left to begin my undergraduate degree about her hopes for our relationship. She once told me that she looked forward to the day when we could sit at the table together and discuss life not merely as mother and daughter, but as two friends who could talk about anything. When she died, I immediately remembered this conversation and felt cheated that I would never be able to have a friendship relationship with my mother as an adult woman. Even as I write this now, I still feel robbed of this opportunity. I doubt it will ever get easier to accept even though people assure me that it will in time.

Edelman also believes that there is something particularly special about the bond between a mother and daughter. According to research from the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, the loss of a mother is often more difficult than losing a father. Edelman explains that this is the case because of men’s shorter life expectancy, which means that “the relationship a daughter has with her mother is likely to be one of the longest-lasting relationships of her life” (68).3 She also establishes that there is a primal bond between a mother and daughter, a bond that “may become warped, twisted, and violated, [but] it can never be severed” (Edelman 69). In essence, Edelman is claiming that the bond between a mother and daughter is timeless and incapable of being severed even when the relationship is defined by struggle.

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3 This reflection shared by Dr. Mary Celeste Kearney, my second reader of this thesis is relevant. She commented, “I find it interesting that Edelman finds that daughters have a harder time losing mothers than fathers. U.S. popular culture would not suggest this, given that mothers are often dead/absent in girls’ stories while fathers are always present in and significant to girls’ stories.”
Even though I appreciate the work Edelman has done in disrupting the silence around death for daughters grieving the loss of their mothers, I take issue with the rigid and normative ways in which she defines the family. As a feminist scholar, I am skeptical of universalizing the category of woman and making claims about what all women experience because of their seemingly shared status as women. More specifically, in relation to Edelman’s work, I keep thinking about all of the bodies excluded when she makes claims like “our mothers are our most direct connection to our history and our gender” (69). What happens to those individuals, like my nephew, who have two mothers? What about the people in this world who never had a mother? What about those individuals in the world who have two fathers? In other words, I am uncomfortable by Edelman’s romanticization of the bond between a mother and daughter because it fails to acknowledge alternative family structures.

I must stress that I do not readily dismiss what Edelman says. In fact, I believe that her work resonates with many women who are grieving the loss of their mother, myself included. I had the privilege of having a healthy, wonderful relationship with my mother and can relate to much of what is written in her book. Specifically, I am drawn to her observation that the loss of a mother is not something that one ever fully gets over. She writes, “A motherless woman continues to renegotiate her relationship with her mother throughout her life, changing her perceptions and trying to find a place for each new image as it develops” (Edelman 69). This perspective that you have to continuously redefine the terms of your relationship with your deceased loved one resonates powerfully with me.
What perhaps spoke to me the most about her work can be found in her introduction to *Motherless Daughters*. She explains that she decided to write it because she longed to make sense of her experience of losing her mother to breast cancer at the tender age of seventeen. Frustrated by the silence around death as a grieving young person, she sought out books that would help alleviate her suffering. She states, “I needed information. I wanted to know how you were supposed to feel at seventeen when your mother had just died. I wanted clues for how to think about it. How to talk about it. What to say. I wanted to know if anything, ever, would make me feel happy again” (Edelman xx). Like Edelman, I also struggled to find a language to communicate my loss. The deafening silence inspired me to forge my own language in order understand it.

**MY PROJECT**

Finding a language to communicate one’s losses can be a daunting task, especially when you live in a society that is critical of the expression of emotions. As I mentioned earlier, the experience from losing my mom revealed to me how uncomfortable people are with engaging with death and the complicated feelings that follow it. I never knew that people were so ill equipped to talk about it until I was left to contemplate the experience alone. I was expected to go to class and continue my everyday routines even though things were radically different. Contemporary U.S. society marginalizes and devalues feelings, which makes the experience of grief lonely and overwhelming. As such, beginning the task of sharing one’s grief story becomes a particularly challenging endeavor because one has to contend with dominant patriarchal assumptions that dismiss the expression of emotion and advocate detachment as a
strategy for attending to suffering. This perspective of maintaining composure, remaining silent, and dismissing the myriad feelings that accompany grief is ineffective and inhumane. A frank and honest account of loss and pain is much needed.

My thesis offers such an account by revealing the complex human emotions that accompany grief in order to challenge the patriarchal assumption that feelings should not be communicated. By forging a language from my wound and reflecting on my experience with death and grief, I am putting into practice the feminist principle of consciousness-raising. Feminist scholar Robyn Wiegman explains that consciousness-raising “enabled women to share their experiences, define and analyze the social and political mechanisms by which women are oppressed, and develop strategies for social change” (385). By drawing attention to the problematic ways in which death is addressed in the United States through sharing my experience with grief, I hope to highlight the importance of developing a more compassionate approach to engaging with death. We need to change the way that death is not only talked about, but how we attend to dead bodies in the United States.

A feminist approach to grief and loss works against dominant patriarchal epistemologies that privilege reason and detachment by encouraging writing from the wound. The emerging field of Anzaldúan studies, a field dedicated to advancing Gloria Anzaldúa’s theories and writings, draws attention to the transformative power of writing from the wound by disclosing our personal struggles in the name of transforming how we relate and connect to others. Longing to connect with others in a more meaningful way about our shared inevitable fate, my thesis is an invitation to engage with feelings that
arise from grief and loss, emotional states that far from inhibiting us have the potential to heal and transform us individually and collectively.

My frustration by the silence that surrounded death partnered with my own marginalized status from losing my mother at age twenty-two, I developed a heightened obsession with answering the following questions: How do we live and move in the world after experiencing the death of a loved one? How do we make sense of death when many are uncomfortable facing it? I naturally turned to philosophy in hopes that it would help me begin the arduous task of answering these important questions. One thinker in particular, Friedrich Nietzsche, fueled my existential angst by describing life as a struggle to make meaning of existence. He writes, “To live is to suffer; to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.” Captivated by his perspective on the relationship between existence and suffering, I began to wonder how I was going to survive and live in the world without my mom and make meaning from the experience. My mother’s death was an event that shattered my heart and soul. As such, I identify it as a rupture, an event that calls into question the most basic assumptions that shape and organize one’s experience of the world.

Gloria Anzaldúa, a revolutionary feminist thinker and writer, describes ruptures as events that trigger “an awakening that causes you to question who you are [and] what the world is about” (“now let us shift” 547). In essence, ruptures disrupt the flow of our everyday lives, revealing the unpredictable character of the world around us. Once ruptures make us aware of the chaotic nature that defines our existence, we are taken away from the familiar and left feeling “exposed, naked, disoriented, wounded, uncertain,
confused and conflicted” (“now let us shift” 546). We are then left to sift through the rubble, pick up the salvageable pieces of our destroyed and fragmented worlds, and begin the difficult project of reimagining and redefining the new terms of our existence.

My thesis is an attempt to rebuild my destroyed world and to make meaning from the painful experience of losing my mother. The way that death is engaged with now is ineffective and inhumane. The loneliness and marginalization of grief inspired me to imagine alternative ways of talking about death. My thesis is the product of this imagining. I examine the suffering consciousness that arises when we experience ruptures that shatter our world perspectives. I offer a feminist philosophical perspective on how the grieving body might confront ruptures. Specifically, I use Anzaldúa’s theory of conocimiento as an epistemological framework to map my movements in consciousness as I write about my mother’s unexpected death. I offer my wound, my story, my movements in consciousness as I try to repair my shattered world after losing a person that meant the world to me.

By mapping my experience with death using Anzaldúa’s theory of conocimiento, I am disrupting the silence that often surrounds death and giving voice to the marginalized experience of losing a mother as a young adult through my writing. Further, the practice of writing illustrates one way that we can confront ruptures, highlighting the role of narrative in rebuilding our destroyed world views after they have been shattered and violated. There are risks in telling my story, risks that are not always easy to take in academia.
**Risking the Personal**

The personal is political, the political is personal. A simple phrase with so much meaning has sustained and energized feminism by inspiring alternative approaches to bringing about social change. This perspective advocates full self-disclosure in the name of consciousness-raising, an important form of political action meant to give voice to experiences that have been historically silenced. Though this mantra has undoubtedly influenced and shaped feminist perspectives, it seems that is often easier said than done to offer full self-disclosure in the spirit of bringing about radical change.

Anzaldúan theorist, AnaLouise Keating, explores the potential of writing in transforming the world and inspiring radical change. “Risking the Personal” is the title of her introduction to *Interviews/Entrevistas*, which explores her ambivalent feelings about including the personal in her academic writing. She explains, “My academic training, coupled with my love of privacy, make me fear self-disclosure. If I incorporate the personal into my words, perhaps I won’t be respected as a scholar” (Keating 1). Like Keating, I had similar concerns when I decided to write about my own grief. I feared that such raw self-disclosure would not be appropriate for a master’s thesis from a young academic. I feared that my self-disclosure would be met with harsh skepticism and labeled as narcissistic and self-indulgent because of the belief that the personal should not be included in academic research. I feared that what I had to say would not be taken seriously and read as “not academic enough” because my writing is too personal. I feared

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being so shamelessly honest about what encountering death did to me, but I have found that what I fear most is not sharing my experience of grief from losing my mom.

Rather than allowing fear to continue to silence and paralyze me, I decided to take Keating’s call to heart by “risking the personal” in the name of transforming the way in which we talk about death and interact with grieving bodies. “Risking the personal” requires that a person either has no fear or a limited amount that is manageable and does not inhibit one from disclosing the personal. I am inspired by Anzaldúa’s work because it “models a process of self-disclosure that invites (and sometimes compels) us to take news risks as we reflect on our own experiences, penetrate the privacy of our own lives” (Keating 2). Anzaldúa’s bravery and generosity in exposing her wound has inspired me to do the same. In the spirit of “risking the personal,” I expose my wound and my experience with grief as I cope with the devastating loss of my mother.

“Risking the personal” also requires embracing intellectual vulnerability within academia. It is easy to forget that even academics are vulnerable bodies, bodies that encounter and face innumerable challenges in their writing, research, and lives. As such, I think it is important to share the challenges I faced as I embarked on this difficult project. Specifically, I found myself experiencing a strong tension between “risking the personal” while also trying to write academically about my grief. I quickly began to realize that operating exclusively within the realm of theory could not offer the complexity that “risking the personal” could, which caused me to feel torn between two seemingly opposed ways of knowing and writing.
THE MIND/BODY SPLIT IN ACADEMIA

The emerging field of affect studies has played an influential role in responding to the mind/body split in academia by drawing attention to the value of acknowledging emotions and feelings as pivotal sources of knowledge about the world. Keating observes that “because [theory] seems to hide private feelings, desires, and deeply held beliefs behind rational, objective discourse and abstract thought, theory can be more persuasive for some readers” (Interviews/Entrevistas 3). Indeed, theory and empirical research is often perceived as more convincing than research supported through personal experience. The privileging of theory oriented research needs to be reconsidered, especially when it comes to exploring topics that are defined by ambiguity. Theory can only take you so far when it comes to addressing issues concerning human mortality. It has its limits, forcing us to create alternate ways of making sense of the world. We have to bridge this gap between the personal and theoretical, recognizing the transformative potential of theorizing from the body and our wounds.

The historic dualism in academia between the mind and the body inhibits our ability to create more nuanced perspectives about what counts as knowledge. The problem with this dualism is its gendered character that couples masculinity with rationality and the mind, while pairing femininity with emotion and the body. As feminist scholars Gail McGuire and Jo Reger explain, “in academia, this dualism reinforces the idea that feminine qualities (in men and women), such as the expression of emotion, caring for others, and attention to relationships, impede scholarly activity” (55). As a result, this dualism defines “the ideal intellectual as someone who is objective,
passionless, unemotional, and ultimately male” (McGuire and Reger 55). Like McGuire, Reger, and many other feminist scholars, it is important to challenge the notion that emotions hinder scholarly endeavors. Instead, emotions and feelings are valuable because they enhance and complicate the way that we theorize about the world.

Like affect studies, trauma studies scholars have also researched the importance of attending to the feelings that arise in the wake of violence. This field is significant because it draws attention to the body and how it is impacted by traumatic ruptures, gesturing towards the importance of developing theories and methodologies that account for emotional and physical trauma. Feminist sociologist Gloria González-López believes that emotions and feelings are important to consider when conducting academic research, especially when one is researching sensitive topics that are defined by trauma. Specifically, she explores the methodological challenges she encountered while interviewing women and men with histories of sexual violence. González-López explains that descending into the wounds of survivors of sexual violence has enabled her to develop “a tender and unpredictable standpoint” to conduct academic research (“epistemologies of the wound” 20). She writes, “this intellectual journey has become an emotionally challenging process that has invited me to place myself in a state of consciousness that is multidimensional, always in transition and stressful, always stimulating and gratifying, but always unsafe” (“epistemologies of the wound” 20). Challenging perspectives that readily dismiss emotions and feelings, González-López suggests that attending to feelings that arise while conducting researching on difficult subjects is part of the intellectual process. She offers the concept of the “epistemologies
of the wound” to describes this process, arguing that all facets of the human condition are necessary in producing knowledge, including the emotional and spiritual dimensions. In short, González-López conceptualizes our wounds as potentially powerful sites for growth and transformation.

Like González-López, I believe that developing a mode of consciousness that embraces ambiguity is crucial in examining sensitive topics, especially topics that have historically been ignored and silenced such as sexual violence and death. What I want to gesture towards in my thesis is the limitations of operating exclusively in the realm of theory when it comes to writing about death, dying, and grief. Instead, I want to draw attention to the power of narrative in engaging with grief. Stories that arise from grief, just as much as theoretical accounts of grief, are valuable and important in shaping perspectives on grief.

THE FREEDOM OF WOMEN’S AND GENDER STUDIES

Moreover, “risking the personal” and engaging with feelings in one’s academic writing is one way in transforming what counts as knowledge in the academy. In Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom, bell hooks, a prominent feminist scholar, advocates the creation of an alternative approach to learning in the academy by calling into question what counts as knowledge in the classroom. She offers the following critique of how conventional teaching methodologies restricted her ability to learn about the world in a critical way. bell hooks writes,

[focusing] on a holistic approach to learning and spiritual practice enabled me to overcome years of socialization that had taught me to believe that a classroom was diminished if students and teachers regarded one another as
“whole” human beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world. (14-15)

bell hooks then identifies the importance of women’s studies departments in fostering a more nuanced perspective on what kinds of learning can happen in the classroom. She suggests that students enroll in feminist studies classrooms “because they continue to believe that there, more than any other class in the academy, they will have an opportunity to experience education as the practice of freedom” (hooks 15). By identifying feminist oriented spaces as potential sites in which freedom can be explored and exercised, hooks offers a radical perspective about the role of feminism in reimagining what counts as knowledge within the academy.

bell hooks is not alone in her perspective that feminism has much to offer the academy. In “Contending with Disciplinarity,” Kathleen Blee, a sociologist, explores the tensions that arise because of women’s studies interdisciplinary status. Blee highlights the challenges of inhabiting an interdisciplinary space by drawing attention to the unique challenges posed when individuals are asked to teach a class in feminist theory. She observes, “The wide range of intellectual roots within and against which feminist theory is constructed—and the impossibility of understanding each—can be an excuse to skim the surface of disciplinary knowledges” (Blee 181). In other words, Blee is concerned that because of women’s studies interdisciplinary status, it fails to offer a comprehensive account of the myriad conversations happening within the academy regarding feminist thought. As a result, students of women’s studies are ill equipped to engage in a productive conversation about feminist theory across disciplines because they are left
with “a mix and match of conceptual frameworks from vastly different fields of inquiry” (Blee 181).

Even though there are indeed challenges in inhabiting an interdisciplinary space like women’s studies, Blee suggests that it is important to teach classes in feminist theory because it creates “a space for challenging one’s own disciplinary way of being, and one’s own (often unexamined) assumptions about epistemology, methodology, and approach” (181). In other words, Blee is suggesting that in teaching a course in feminist theory, individuals are afforded the opportunity to question how one’s disciplining has shaped their perspectives and perhaps how their training has even limited their ability to imagine alternative approaches to understanding the world. She concludes by urging students and professors of women’s studies to embrace its interdisciplinary status because “it can generate a sense of the excitement of thinking and engaging in dialogue outside of a disciplinary box” (Blee 181).

I offer Blee’s account of interdisciplinarity to highlight that this is enabling for women’s and gender studies because it invites scholars to invent new ways to engage in academic scholarship, shifting away from paradigms that value exclusively theoretical musings and abstract thoughts. As a student in women’s and gender studies, I am energized by the potential of writing from the interdisciplinary space of women’s and gender studies because I do not have to rely on conventional methodologies. Instead, I can construct my own radical methodology. I imagine my thesis as a feminist project that is inspired by the exciting possibilities granted to women’s studies because of its interdisciplinary status. Harnessing the creativity and energy of so many feminist thinkers
before me, I identify storytelling as the heart of my thesis, moving away from traditional academic writing in order to complicate how we understand the world. As communication scholar Carolyn Ellis explains, “stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds, and they should be a subject and method of academic research” (Ellis 32). Ellis is suggesting that stories sustain us by providing us with meaningful ways to grapple with existence; therefore it is important to not only examine stories, but to make storytelling a legitimate method of academic research.

**AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA AS METHOD**

Ellis is not alone in identifying and privileging stories as valid forms of scholarly inquiry. Anzaldúa also identifies stories as important to her writing because it is impossible to separate one’s writing from one’s life. She writes, “I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one” (*Borderlands* 95). The emphasis she placed on integrating the personal into her writing inspired her to invent her own unique style of writing called autohistoria-teoría, which is a “genre of writing about one’s personal and collective history using fictive elements, or a sort of fictionalized autobiography or memoir; an autohistoria-teoría is a personal essay that theorizes” (“now let us shift” 578).

This form of writing privileges the personal by locating it at the heart of the writing process, allowing for the emergence of stories in academic writing. As such, writing an autohistoria-teoría is not just about mere inward introspection. It is an approach that is “informed by reflective self-awareness employed in the service of social-justice work” (*EntreMundos* 6). In other words, it is necessary to be critical and self-reflective before larger social change can be imagined.
Writing an autohistoria-teoría enables one to move inner change outward, transforming one’s wound into a tool to connect with others and change the world. By exposing my wound in writing my own version of an autohistoria-teoría, I am trying to bridge the gap between the personal and the theoretical by showing that “risking the personal” should be considered a respected academic endeavor.

This approach is also ideal because it facilitates healing by acknowledging that it is a process defined by struggle because of the impermanent and shifting nature of writing and existence. Anzaldúa explains further, “tu autohistoria is not carved in stone but drawn on sand and subject to shifting winds. Forced to rework your story, you invent new notions of yourself and reality—increasingly multidimensional versions where body, mind, and spirit interpenetrate in more complex ways” (‘now let us shift” 562).

This perspective on writing allows for more nuanced ways of engaging with the world by acknowledging that healing is a process. We will always actively struggle with our pains. They are part of who we are and inevitably shape who we will become. What we have to decide is how to harness our pain in order to mold and rewrite it. We must commit ourselves to perpetual revision not just in our writing, but in our lives.

Anzaldúa believes that we always have to struggle to rewrite our lives. Keating once described Anzaldúa as a “modern day Coyolxauhqui, a writer-warrior who employs language to ‘put us back together again’” (Interviews/Entrevistas 12). This description of Anzaldúa’s use of language speaks to the challenges encountered when seeking wholeness. Anzaldúa understands that the ground we stand on is ephemeral, never safe, always shifting. Her writing is an attempt to grapple with chaos, an attempt to transform
fragmentation into an appropriate way of being in the world. With all of this in mind, her theory of conocimiento is an ideal framework to understand the grief experience because of its emphasis on fragmentation and brokenness as an inevitable characteristic of coping, being human, and transforming.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Writings by women of color have played an influential role in shaping and expanding the scope of feminism by serving as a catalyst for what has been described as U.S. feminism’s third wave. One salient example of the power of writing by women of color can be seen in the popularity of the feminist anthology, This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color. Edited by Cherríe Moraga and Anzaldúa, this influential collection of writings includes poetry, personal narrative, visual art, and other creative forms of writing to raise awareness about the importance of recognizing difference and understanding how multiple subjectivities complicate the notion of “sisterhood.” By employing different, nonconventional approaches to writing about life on the margins, this collection of voices epitomizes the multiplicity of voices included within feminism. Further, these voices work to reimagine what feminist writing looks like by redefining what forms of writing can count as knowledge.

When Anzaldúa and Moraga sent out the initial call for papers, they included their hopes for the anthology as well as their desire to redefine what it means to be a feminist. They wrote,

We want to express to all women-especially to white middle-class women—the experiences which divide us as feminists. We want to examine incidents of intolerance, prejudice and denial of difference within the
feminist movement. We intend to explore the causes and sources of, and solutions to these divisions. We want to create a definition that explains what feminist means to us. (Quoted in Dicker 109)

Clearly, this lack of concern and erasure of the experiences of women of color inspired Moraga and Anzaldúa to create this anthology. In some sense, This Bridge Called My Back is written with the blood and tears created from the emotional wounds that women of color sustained from being excluded from mainstream feminism. Their writing became their intervention, their insistence that the idea of a universal category of “woman” is fraught with contradiction and ambiguity.

To complement and complicate the work she started with Moraga in This Bridge Called My Back, Anzaldúa’s seminal work Borderlands: La Frontera examines the birth of an “alien” consciousness, “a consciousness of the Borderlands” (99). She explains that the mestiza consciousness is born from “mental nepantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways” (Borderlands 100). Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness describes the mindset of those who inhabit the margins, revealing the messiness that defines the existence of bodies that fail to conform readily to one social category. She explains that this mode of thinking enables survival “by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguities” (Borderlands 101). By promoting an acceptance of contradiction and ambiguity, Anzaldúa destabilizes the primacy of Western thinking by advocating “movement away from set patterns and goals” and developing a “continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (Borderlands 102). In other words, Anzaldúa recognizes that rigid identity categories fail to accurately account for the varied experiences that accompany being a marginalized
subject. As such, she describes the mestiza consciousness as a way of knowing developed from the interstices, suggesting that it is a more faithful representation of the conscious experience of those who have been marginalized.

Her later work expanded on the mestiza consciousness in order to broaden the scope of her original understanding of consciousness. In her earlier work, Anzaldúa was primarily concerned with consciousness and its relationship to marginalized bodies, but as time went by, she developed a theory of consciousness that she hoped would connect all human beings, encouraging us to find ways to connect even despite our many differences.

In “now let us shift,” her essay from an anthology she co-edited with Keating called *This Bridge We Call Home*, Anzaldúa develops an epistemology that privileges the senses, is skeptical of rationality, and encourages questioning our deepest held assumptions. She uses the term conocimiento to describe this revolutionary mindset, which promotes constant transformation in the name of improving the world. Described as a form of spiritual inquiry, conocimiento “comes from opening all your senses, consciously inhabiting your body and decoding its symptoms” (“now let us shift” 542). Based on this description of conocimiento, the body is identified as the primary source of knowledge.

Specifically, in her theory of conocimiento, Anzaldúa identifies seven stages that consciousness moves through as it attempts to process profound change. She identifies the seven stages as the following: the rupture, nepantla, the Coatlicue state, the call…el compromiso…the crossing and conversion, putting Coyolxauhqui together…new
personal and collective stories, the blow-up…a clash of realities, and shifting realities…acting out the vision of spiritual activism. For the purposes of my thesis, I will write about my personal struggles as I grieve my mother’s untimely death by framing my experiences using conocimiento as the foundation for my narrative. Rather than suggesting that we move through these stages of consciousness in an organized way, Anzaldúa insists that consciousness moves through these stages imperfectly and resists linearity. This is an important point because it highlights the importance of understanding how fluid movements in consciousness are by identifying them as cyclical rather than linear. For example, the second stage of conocimiento is nepantla, but that does not mean that it is necessarily experienced second or that it happens only once as consciousness attempts to make sense of violent changes. Nepantla, like all of the other seven stages, is a moment that consciousness experiences over and over again as it attempts to process profound change. It is an on-going process that is defined by struggle.

It is easy to see why framing the “stages” as cyclical and marked by struggle is pivotal when discussing and writing about events marked by suffering. There is not a nice, orderly template we can follow to heal because significant life events irrevocably change us. As such, we must learn to recognize that consciousness undergoes complex, erratic movements as it tries to rebuild the world around it. To begin this difficult project, Anzaldúa chronicles consciousness’s journey towards transformation in her theory of conocimiento.

The first stage of conocimiento is the rupture, an event that is the catalyst for transformation. Anzaldúa establishes that ruptures are often violent and terrifying events
because they challenge our firmly held perspectives on the world. To illustrate precisely how disorienting ruptures often are, she offers her memories from being violently attacked by an assailant. She writes, “Gasping for breath, your scream eeks out as a mewing sound. You kick and scratch him as he drags you across the Waller Creek Bridge” (“now let us shift” 546). The violence of this moment is clearly depicted in her writing, giving the reader a sense of the horror she experienced from the attack. Ruptures are events that are out of the ordinary, events that force us to confront life and death.

Nepantla is the place where consciousness struggles to make sense of the world after the rupture has violated its prior world view. Ruptures remind us of the fleeting nature of our existence by revealing that the world can be chaotic, unpredictable, and unfair. With this newfound knowledge that the world is not a benevolent place, we long to return to a world in which everything seemed stable. In other words, nepantla epitomizes existential angst because the epistemological violence that is inflicted upon consciousness from ruptures makes consciousness desperately desire stability. As a result, living in this precarious, in-between state eventually becomes too overwhelming, which then causes consciousness to descend into the Coatlicue state.

The Coatlicue state takes over when you become paralyzed by living in the emotionally unstable zone of nepantla. Inhabiting nepantla inspires you to long for stability and safety, but you are ultimately offered no solace from your pain because you are consumed by the violence and chaos. You feel yourself being pulled out to sea, watching as you move further and further away from the shore. Disenchanted when no one is able to ease the pain caused by the rupture, “you dream of your own darkness” and
allow yourself to drift into the unknown (“now let us shift” 550). Not only do you allow yourself to close off from and lose touch with the world, you begin to realize that you do not care if you ever come back to it. You want to sink. You let the ocean take over you, hoping that it will drown away your sorrows.

After sinking into deep depression, you eventually “break free from your habitual coping strategies of escaping from realities you are reluctant to face, reconnect with spirit, and undergo a conversion” (“now let us shift” 545). This break disrupts the trance that depression has placed upon your soul, freeing your soul so that in can start the process of imagining a life that is not defined by sorrow and paralyzed by loss. Anzaldúa describes this stage as “the call…el compromise…the crossing and conversion” because it inspires you to try to rise up, and to start the difficult process of moving forward.

The fifth stage, “putting Coyolxauhqui together…new personal and collective stories,” focuses on sifting through the rubble to see if anything is salvageable. You then begin the process of searching for new ways of understanding the world through intense self-reflection and contemplation. As Anzaldúa writes, you search “for bits of lore you can patch together to create a new narrative articulating your personal reality” (545). After exploring alternative modes of being, you begin to reconstruct your world and redefine the terms of your existence.

In the sixth stage, “the blow up…a clash of realities,” you take your new story out into the world and test it. You quickly discover that reconstructing a new world perspective is not easy because “your edifice collapses like a house of cards, casting you into a war between realities” (“now let us shift” 545). Just as you start to ground and
orient yourself to your new reality, the ground beneath you inevitably starts to shake and eventually collapses. You are without a narrative to make sense of the world yet again, making you feel vulnerable and broken once again.

The final stage of conocimiento is concerned with transformation and is called “shifting realities...acting out the vision of spiritual activism.” Once you realize the unpredictable, absurd character of existence, you begin to realize that grounding yourself in one perspective of the world is useless. Developing a philosophy or a strategy that enables you to move in the world without fully grounding one’s self is crucial in moving forward. You must learn how to “negotiate conflict and difference within self and between others” if you hope to transform (“now let us shift” 545).

By writing about my personal experience with grief in these stages, I hope to convey precisely how complicated the movements of the suffering consciousness often are, and to depict how life changing death can be when you lose someone that you deeply love. Even though I frame my memories in a seemingly linear and organized way, I must stress once again that my movements in consciousness were certainly not this rigid. It is impossible to neatly diagram experiences of suffering, especially given the violence that accompanies loss. Violence defies and resists organization, transcending language and forcing us to contend with chaos. Though violence is messy and chaotic, it is important to try to grapple with it, to descend into our wounds, and to critically reflect on our mortality.
Chapter 1: “How do we theorize about death?”

INTRODUCTION

What makes the death of a loved one so jarring is that it violates our most basic ideas about the nature of existence, forcing us to reconsider our perceptions about the tenuous relationship between life and death. Before my mother died, I had lived most of my life aware that sad things happen, but I had never thought that those sad things would happen to me. Even after the flood and losing my grandpa, I convinced myself that I was immune from further devastation because I had “gotten my fill,” so to speak. In an early exploratory study, psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman discovers that this is not an unusual perspective on life for young adults. Her research “found that college students consistently underestimated the likelihood that negative events—including mugging, cancer, car accident, senility, and natural disaster—would happen to them” (Janoff-Bulman 19). Even though Janoff-Bulman’s research highlights the degree by which college students underestimate their vulnerability, I believe that the same can be said for even most adults. As Janoff-Bulman explains, “We believe in our ‘goodness’ and ‘behavioral wisdom,’ and thus if bad things happen, they won’t happen to us” (19).

I do not feel immune anymore. Since her death, I realized that I had lived my life based on some pretty flawed assumptions about the world. I took the idea that she would live to an old age for granted and assumed I would have more time with her. Ruptures have a way of turning our world upside down, forcing us to realize that we can and should never take for granted the people in our lives. Life is fragile.
**LOSS OF AN ASSUMPTIVE WORLD**

When we experience ruptures, our perception of reality becomes jumbled and the world as we knew it becomes forever altered. Collin Murray Parkes, a scholar in thanatology, first used the term “assumptive world” to refer to people’s perspective of reality prior to experiencing the death of a loved one. According to Parkes, an assumptive world is “the only world we know and it includes everything we know or think we know. It includes our interpretation of the past and our expectations of the future, our plans our prejudices. Any or all of these may need to change as a result of changes in the life space” (Parkes 64). Based on his definition, it is clear that people rarely realize the taken for granted assumptions that shape their world views. It is only when one experiences a shift in one’s life space, a rupture that one is able to see how much our lived is defined by assumptions. As such, his work is deeply invested in examining how change is psychologically processed.

Janoff-Bulman expands on the notion of an “assumptive world” by pointing out how much individuals rely on assumptions about the world in order to live with a semblance of control. She suggests that these assumptions are merely fictions that individuals impose in order to make sense of the world. Janoff-Bulman asserts that we rely on three core assumptions that shape our worldview:

1. The world is benevolent.
2. The world is meaningful.
3. The self is worthy.

The notion that the world is benevolent means that the world is a good place, a place populated by only well-intentioned people and positivity. The world being
meaningful means that the world makes sense, that there is a correlation between our actions and the events that unfold in our lives. The belief that the self is worthy means that we believe that we are moral people who are motivated by what is considered good. As Janoff-Bulman observes, “these three positive assumptions co-exist at the core of our assumptive world,” and each one is “emotionally potent” because they heavily support our ability to live in the world (12).

However, when death comes knocking, each of these assumptions is called into question, leading to either substantial cracks in our “assumptive world” or the complete destruction of it. The damage can be catastrophic. Jeffrey Kauffman, a researcher on grief and trauma, states that “the terror that shatters the assumptive world is a violent deprivation of safety…what is lost in the traumatic loss of the assumptive world? All is lost. Hope is lost” (206). Clearly, there are very serious consequences to relying on these fictions, these flawed assumptions about the world. The world becomes no longer recognizable, no longer safe.

With this knowledge that our world perspectives are shaped and based upon flawed assumptions, how do we rebuild our world perspectives after we have lost hope through their violation? In order begin answering this difficult question, it is crucial to first examine how grief has been talked about in academic research. I offer a brief historical overview of grief, examining the ways in which different scholars have conceptualized and grappled with it.
EARLY GRIEF MODEL

Sigmund Freud, a well-known psychoanalytic figure, was one of the first thinkers to write about the experience of grief. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” he explores the complicated relationship between grief and depression by arguing that both are rooted in our longing to revive something or someone who has been lost. As such, Freud identifies suffering as a defining characteristic of grief and depression, coining the term the “work of mourning” to describe the process of coping in the face of suffering.

According to Freud, the “work of mourning” consists of severing ties with the deceased person/object. He writes, “all libido should be withdrawn from its attachment to that object” (Freud 243). On the surface, the “work of mourning” seems easy enough, but what exactly does Freud mean by all of this? George Bonanno, described as a pioneer in the field of bereavement and trauma, offers a useful analysis of what Freud means by the work of mourning. Bonnano explains, “[Freud] thought that when we form a psychological bond with another person, we do so with a kind of primitive emotional glue, what he referred to as the libido” (Bonnano 15). In other words, when we lose someone or something that we love, we have to begin the work of reclaiming our libido, the intense psychological energy we invested in the deceased person or object.

The task of mourning then requires the severing of the emotional bond that was once shared with the deceased person/object. If we refuse to reclaim the psychological energy that we cultivated, “a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory wishful psychosis” will ensue (Freud 243). Melancholia is the term that Freud uses to describe this state of mind, a mindset that
causes one to remain stuck and paralyzed by grief. In essence, Freud is suggesting that continuing bonds with the deceased will ultimately lead to an unhealthy denial of reality, a melancholic perspective that makes it impossible to move on and accept the loss.

The question then arises, how do we sever the emotional bond with the deceased person/object? To begin the difficult process of severing our deeply anchored libidinal attachments to the deceased, Freud proposes that we sift through every memory that keeps us bound up with the lost object. He writes, “when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (Freud 244). It is only when we have relinquished our bonds from the deceased that we can move forward.

Even though Freud was influential in advancing our early understanding of grief, it is important to be critical of the implications of his work. Bonanno offers a particularly sharp critique of Freud’s notion of the “work of mourning,” which is worth quoting at length:

It would be nice to be able to regain the psychological energy that we have invested in someone simply by going through all the memories and thoughts associated with that person, as if people were like drawers of old papers: Clean them out, file them away, and be done with it. The only problem is that our mental life is almost limitless; there would be a lot of cleaning out to do. (17)

Indeed, life would be easy if all we needed to do was sort through all of our memories in order to heal. Of course, it is impossible to navigate easily through all of the emotional human complexities that grief invokes. In short, Freud’s perspective on how to heal in the face of loss encourages that we sift through our memories, compartmentalize
them, and move forward. Our only hope of healing and moving forward is by completely letting go of those we lose along the way.

Freud’s belief in the importance of relinquishing bonds with the deceased deeply influenced the work of many grief theorists. For example, to expand on Freud’s psychoanalytic approach to death, psychologist John Bowlby explores the concept of attachment, describing it as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (Bowlby 194). Bowlby identifies the longing for attachment as an innate, biological drive that humans possess. Specifically, within Bowlby’s attachment framework, the mother is identified as the primary source of emotional stability for the child, the object in which the child invests his/her libidinal energy and attachment. Bowlby then suggests that the loss of a mother has the potential to be one of the most wounding experiences one will experience. He insists that once the emotional connection becomes permanently severed through death, there are often dire consequences for the individual left behind to grieve the loss. Unlike Freud, Bowlby does not find it beneficial or realistic to destroy our emotional connections with the deceased. Instead, he proposes the creation of a model of grief that allows for a reframing of that connection.

By suggesting that grief has a biological element, Freud and Bowlby paved the way for the creation of models of grief that frame it as a predictable, passive experience that is easy to categorize and grapple with. In other words, because grief was thought to have a biological origin, it became something that could be cured and addressed in an orderly, rational way. Though I agree with Freud’s notion of “the work of mourning,” I take issue with his perspective on how to approach the project of healing. I do not believe
that we can fully relinquish the bonds we created with other human beings so readily. Instead, we carry those losses with us not just in our memories, but in our heart as we move forward in our lives. Death does not terminate a relationship; relationships are reinvented in the hearts of those who survive, those who are left behind. I now turn to the most popular stage model to date, exploring the ways in which it conceptualizes grief.

**Stage Model**

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, one of the most recognized names in thanatology, revolutionized the study of grief when she published her seminal work *On Death and Dying*. In her book, she identifies five stages that dying individuals experience as they try to come to terms with their approaching demise. Kübler-Ross believes that these stages are natural and necessary for dying patients to move through in order to process their fate, which then allows them to leave the world having found acceptance and peace. Her work is frequently used and cited and is often a source that the bereaved are recommended to read in order to grapple with death even though her work is focused on the experiences of the dying rather than those grieving a loss of a loved one. Given the popularity of her stage model and its influence in contemporary grief theory, it is worth examining her theory in detail.

Kübler-Ross suggests that the first stage an individual goes through once they learn they are dying is denial. She writes, “denial functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, allows the patient to collect herself and, with time, mobilize other, less radical defenses” (Kübler-Ross 52). In AMC’s *Breaking Bad*, the main character, Walter White, learns in the pilot episode that he is dying from lung cancer. The oncologist tells
him that his prognosis is dire, and that even with the best treatment available, he would only be prolonging the inevitable. Shocked by the news of his imminent death, Walter immediately sinks into denial, fixating on a tiny mustard stain on his doctor’s shirt as a way to process the devastating news. When asked if he understood what was happening, Walter simply states, “There is a mustard stain on your shirt.” Clearly, denial can be a powerful defense mechanism because it can provide individuals with time to absorb and process the devastating knowledge of their imminent fate.

According to Kübler-Ross, after denial begins to fade away, the dying become consumed with the pressing question—why me? When this question proves to have no satisfactory answer, anger becomes the natural response. Though anger is often perceived as a counterproductive emotion, it can be cathartic for the dying because it allows them to begin the difficult process of contemplating existential questions and shaping their perspectives on the afterlife. In short, anger, like denial, helps the dying cope with the knowledge that they are officially on borrowed time.

The third stage in the Kübler-Ross model is bargaining. Because the dying are aware that they are living on borrowed time, they begin to wonder exactly how much they have left. Once the idea of the possibility of having more time creeps to mind, it is then that the dying begin imagining the prospect of defying death. This stage is comprised of attempts to change the unfortunate circumstances, to stay alive in the face of certain death. As Kübler-Ross observes, “most bargains are made with God and are usually kept a secret…” (Kübler-Ross 95). Clearly, bargaining is rooted in a human desire to connect spiritually with a higher power in hopes of making meaning of
existence. Given that believing in God, spirits, and the afterlife can be met with skepticism because believing in such things defies rationality, the third stage is magical because it enables wishful, imaginative thinking, allowing people to escape from reality and imagine a different world, a world in which people can imagine immortality and an escape from death.

The fourth stage is depression. When wishful thinking can no longer be maintained, individuals turn to darkness. Overwhelmed by death and loss, people have the tendency to become hopeless because they realize that they have no control over their inevitable fate. Everything has fallen apart, and nothing can fix what is broken. Sadness consumes every ounce of one’s being.

Finally, the last stage is acceptance. There reaches a point when “[one] is neither depressed nor angry about [one’s] fate,” realizing that life must go on despite the loss (Kübler-Ross 123). Kübler-Ross stresses that this stage is not marked necessarily by happiness, but rather, a degree of numbness about the inevitability of death.

It is interesting to highlight once more that the Kübler-Ross model is inspired by work she did with terminally ill patients rather than actual research with the bereaved. This is fascinating given how influential her writing has been in defining and alleviating the suffering experienced by the bereaved. In other words, her work has been appropriated as a model for bereavement rather than dying. Paradoxically, even though her model is meant to assist the bereaved, Kübler-Ross may unintentionally remove complex aspects of the humanity of those who are grieving by promoting a rigid paradigm. When I lost my mother, well-meaning friends and acquaintances urged me to
read her work so that I could better understand what I was going through. Though I am grateful for the important work Kübler-Ross did in creating a discussion around death, her model fails to capture the complexity of grief. I felt disappointed after reading her work because it sets grief up as something that is curable, as something that one gets over so long as one moves through each stage. The five stages do not resonate with me because some of us experience these emotions concurrently. I didn’t feel angry one month, denial the next, and so on. Instead, I experienced every emotion all at once and it often became difficult to discern precisely how I was feeling. They seemed to bleed together as one. The trouble with the Kübler-Ross model is that it offers a model of grief that is rigid and formulaic, making the bereaved feel as if they are supposed to passively moving through these stages in order to heal. Further, it seems to suggest that grief is understandable and we have the capacity to identify our feelings in a coherent way.

If there is anything I have learned from my experience grieving, it is that grieving means something different for everybody. It is an incredibly subjective process that encompasses so many diverse feelings that it is impossible to create a universal model of grief that does justice to the experience. The Kübler-Ross model attempts to universalize the grief experience by identifying a linear order to the feelings that arise in the face of death. This is problematic because not everyone feels all of these emotions in order as they are grieving. In fact, some people might not even experience some of the feelings at all that Kübler-Ross suggests are foundational to grieving. Even though there are significant flaws in attempting to universalize the grief experience, the Kübler-Ross
model offers a promising framework to begin the project of reimagining how to talk about death.

**Task Model**

Critics of stage theories argue that the problem is “their relative rigidity and the assumption of a sequential time trajectory” (Worden and Winokuer 58). In other words, what makes these models of grief difficult to support is that they make mourning seem curable, predictable, and manageable. Rather than highlighting that the bereaved must actively contend with grief for the remainder of their lives, these models offer a formulaic approach to understanding grief by suggesting that it is curable so long as the bereaved go through every stage. The logic goes that once one has moved through each stage, one is done grieving and has healed from the experience. This passive perspective on bereavement obscures the impact death has on one’s life because it fails to acknowledge the possibility that individuals may carry their losses with them for the rest of their lives.

In the early 1980s, William Worden, an established grief theorist, proposed that a task based model offered a better conceptual framework to understand grief than early stage theories. In a recent essay he co-wrote with Howard Winokuer, a scholar on grief and bereavement, they expand and reflect on Worden’s original theory. They argue that a “task theory presents a more fluid understanding of the mourning process” because “tasks can be addressed with no special ordering, and they can be revisited and reworked over time” (Worden and Winokuer 58). In essence, Worden and Winokuer are gesturing towards the importance of recognizing the complexity that defines bereavement by drawing attention to the fact that one’s grief requires lifelong attention. They then revisit
the four common tasks that Worden identifies that the bereaved must struggle with as they try to make sense of their losses: 1. To acknowledge the reality of the loss, 2. To process the pain of grief, 3. To adjust to the world without the deceased, 4. To find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life.

The first task focuses on the importance of fully understanding that a person has died. Worden and Winokuer insist that “you need to first believe the death has happened before you can deal with the emotional impact of the loss” (58). It seems obvious that the first task would be to recognize and believe that someone has really died, but it is often easier said than done to truly admit that a loved one has died. As Worden and Winokuer explain, “You can know on one level that a person is dead but still want to phone her, keep her room or closet intact, hear her driving into the driveway, reach on the other side of the bed to see if she is there, and the like” (58). Clearly, the death of a loved one creates a strange disconnect between what was and what now is.

Both Worden and Winokuer understand how powerful and disorienting this disconnect is for the bereaved because death is extremely difficult to process. In fact, I would argue that this disconnect exists throughout one’s life after losing a loved one. It has been two years since my mom died, and I still wake up in the middle of the night and say to myself, “I cannot believe that she is dead.” I share this to highlight that it is not unusual for the bereaved to not believe that a loved one has died even several years later. However, it is critical to acknowledge both cognitively and emotionally that death is very real, otherwise it will prevent one from attending to one’s grief in a meaningful way.
The second task focuses on the importance of processing the pain of grief, which is a tough undertaking given the multitude of factors that shape and influence the degree by which individuals experience the pain of grief. According to Worden and Winokuer, the depths of one’s pain of grief is contingent upon “the various mediators of mourning,” which includes “who died, the nature of the attachment, the type of death, the way the loss impacts the person’s sense of self, previous experiences with loss, how well these losses were handled, levels of social support, and secondary losses caused by the death, to name but a few” (60). In other words, there are innumerable factors to consider when assessing how one should approach processing the pain of grief. As such, it is important to recognize that grief is an extremely subjective, personal experience that cannot be reduced to a universal theory that explains how one should be grieving. However, as Worden and Winokuer highlight, it is critical that one embraces the myriad feelings that accompany bereavement in order to fully process the pain of grief.

The third task is concerned with adjustment to loss, focusing on the significant changes in one’s life that follow the death of a loved one. To differentiate between the diverse forms of adjustments that must be made in the wake of death, Worden and Winokuer divide adjustment into three subcategories: external adjustments, internal adjustments, and spiritual adjustments.

External adjustments are described as “those activities of daily living and/or family roles that have changed significantly after the death of a loved one” (Worden and Winokuer 62). Because we are deeply anchored in our assumptive worlds, it is difficult to understand precisely how radically different our lives will become after the death of a
loved one. Worden and Winokuer explain further, “one reason that grief takes time is because it takes time to realize all that one has lost when one has lost a spouse—friend, confidant, bed warmer, bill payer, social director, and more” (62). This rang true for me after losing my mother. I took for granted our daily conversations, failing to recognize how significant those thirty minute phone calls were in establishing my mother as a treasured confidante. When she died, I began to realize that I had lost more than just my mother—I lost a best friend who I could tell anything to. It took time for me to realize the severity of that enormous void.

Internal adjustments are concerned with how death facilitates profound questioning of one’s self and of one’s new role in the world after loss. I have uttered the phrase “I am a motherless daughter” several times since her death. I struggle with it because no matter how many times I say it, I still am not sure what that means for me. I do not know how to be a motherless daughter. I do not know how to reconcile that she is permanently gone. I do not know how to interpret my life history knowing that she seems to exist only in the past and cannot be part of my future in the way that I imagined. You always think you will have more time, but death has a way of forcing you to re-evaluate and shift your internal perspectives on reality.

Finally, spiritual adjustments focus on “the way that death has shaken the foundations of one’s assumptive world, including one’s belief in the predictability of the universe and God’s place in the universe and in one’s life” (Worden and Winokuer 62). Of all three adjustments, this particular adjustment seems to be the most intense in that it calls into question the very existence of god. This description of the spiritual adjustments
the bereaved face highlights that embedded in Worden and Winokuer’s model is the assumption that everyone believes in the existence of god and that death inevitably shakes the foundations of our faith in god.

I found it frustrating as I was grieving to discover that most people assume that everyone believes in god. For me, the notion of spiritual adjustments should more broadly speak to how death forces us to struggle with questions around the very nature of being and existence, questions that have no definitive answer. In other words, not everyone is left contemplating the idea of “god” when death arrives. Instead, individuals may be more concerned with primarily philosophical and spiritual questions around the meaning and nature of existence. For example, “Where is she now?” is a question that continues to haunt me as I cope with my mother’s death because I know that I can never know with certainty where she is. I can only speculate about where she might be, which often serves as a source of anxiety for me because it is difficult to digest that there are some questions that are impossible to answer since they go beyond our realm of understanding. This is especially frustrating because the answers to those questions are of the utmost importance to us as we try to move forward and make sense of death. The death of a loved one provokes existential thoughts and concerns that can be hard to work through. In short, this knowledge can be paralyzing, inhibiting our ability to find meaning in the world after experiencing the death of a loved one.

The final task that Worden and Winokuer identify focuses on the importance of finding a connection with the deceased even though they are no longer with us. They writes, “it is important to find a way to keep the dead loved one in one’s life and
memorialize that person, but in a way that does not keep the mourner from moving on with his or her life” (Worden and Winokuer 65). This perspective calls into question Freud’s model of grief that advocates the severing of the emotional bonds with the deceased so that one can move forward and establish new connections. Instead, as Klass, Silverman, and Nickelman suggest, it is beneficial to establish “continuing bonds” with the deceased. The concept of “continuing bonds” challenges the notion that the bereaved must fully “let go” when they lose someone they deeply love.

Of all the approaches to death so far, Worden and Winokuer’s perspective offers the most active model of grief because it acknowledges that mourning is a process defined by struggle. We do not passively move through stages or phases and suddenly forget and heal from death. Instead, we must constantly work to understand ourselves in the wake of grief. They shed light on the importance of creating models of grief that embody the complexity that defines bereavement.

**Relearning the world**

Thomas Attig, an applied philosopher, suggests that we must get beyond the idea that stage models of grief offer the most truthful account of the nature of bereavement. He writes, “neither the idea that grieving is something that unfolds in stages or phases, nor the idea that it is like recovering or healing from an illness or wound provides what mourners or those who care about them seek”(Attig 44). He continues by explaining the importance of reimagining what counts as truth, arguing that we must get beyond the notion that “only scientific findings, news, reports, biographies, or documentaries convey truth” when it comes to grieving (xxv). He believes that narratives about grief, though
they may have a seemingly mythic character, are important because they reveal far more about the complexity of grief by exposing the intimate emotions that accompany it. In short, Attig has “an abiding conviction that personal stories are the heart of the matter, both in responding to the bereaved and developing thinking about grieving” (xxv).

Attig’s conviction that personal stories are the heart of the matter is rooted in his understanding about the devastation that death can bring. He observes, “loss unravels our daily life pattern: It can never be just as it was before the death” (Attig xlvii). This unraveling that Attig speaks of is far more extensive than most would imagine. When a loved one dies, “many of the feelings, desires, motivations, dispositions, habits, and expectations that shaped daily life when he or she lived remain within us but no longer cohere with reality” (Attig xlvii). In other words, as Attig so eloquently points out, “loss disrupts our life story…the next chapters cannot unfold just as we expected, hoped, or dreamed they would. Our life story, its coherence and meaning are threatened” (xlvii). Indeed, death changes everything, including the way in which we perceive and understand the world and our life story.

Attig proposes that individuals tell their stories about grief to begin reshaping their life stories. I agree with Attig that stories are the heart of the matter and are central in helping people repair and rebuild their destroyed assumptive worlds. As a grieving body, I quickly became aware of precisely how incompatible my experience of grief was with rigid stage models that offered a formulaic approach to grief. I longed for an understanding of grief that permitted me to tell my story. After all, they are the heart of the matter.
THE GRIEF RECOVERY HANDBOOK

In John W. James and Russell Friedman’s *The Grief Recovery Handbook: The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Losses including Health, Career, and Faith*, they encourage the bereaved to create a loss history graph, which “is designed to help you discover what losses have occurred in your life and which of them are most restricting your day-to-day living” (85). Though it may seem strange to create a timeline depicting your losses, it is helpful because it enables us to critically engage with our losses so that we can better understand how those very losses have shaped our lives.

James and Friedman then model what building a loss history graph looks like. They both construct a timeline identifying the major losses in their lives, and then they start reflecting on each event through their writing. What I find compelling about this practice is that James and Friedman are offering full self-disclosure by sharing their loss stories, some of which are very personal and emotional. They do this in order to shed light on the importance of critically reflecting on one’s loss history because in revisiting one’s most painful experiences, one can better understand how to grapple with other significant losses in the future.

To continue the project of recovering from grief, James and Friedman encourage the bereaved to create a relationship graph after they have constructed their loss history graph. They assert that “the essence of recovery is contained in the premise of being totally honest about ourselves in relation to others” (118). In other words, James and Friedman believe that we must be able to be honest about our relationships with others, even the negative aspects that inevitably accompany human connections. There is a
tendency when we experience loss to idealize our relationship with those we lose. Rather than clinging to false idealizations, James and Friedman encourage us “to take an in-depth look at a relationship with an eye to discovering what we wish had ended different, better, or more, as well as the unrealized hopes, dreams, and expectations about the future” (119). Like they modeled with the loss history graph, James and Friedman then write about their struggles with loss by offering their most private and honest feelings about their relationships with other human beings.

I offer all of this information because it is important to consider the role of stories in grief recovery. The idea behind creating the loss history graph and the relationship graph is that we must be honest about our feelings in relation to loss, otherwise recovery can never fully be realized. If we can find the strength to tell our stories, we allow ourselves to heal in a more meaningful way because of our honesty. To be frank, it is difficult to be honest. It is difficult to tell our stories when you live in a society that refuses to engage with suffering or hear about it.

Influenced by Attig, James, and Friedman’s perspectives on the importance of stories and writing in healing, I began imagining my own intervention strategy to begin the arduous task of disclosing my grief story. Writing my own autohistoria-teoría using Anzaldúa’s theory of conocimiento as a framework is an ideal method to begin this task. Her theory of conocimiento acknowledges that consciousness will always struggle to make meaning of existence. It is never an easy process, even if we wish it would be. As I descend into my wound, I understand that this will be a challenging spiritual and intellectual journey for me. I am afraid to remember much of my story, but I know that I
must confront it and be honest with myself about what grief did to me if I want to heal and make meaning of my losses.

I must stress that the story that follows is not going to read like most traditional academic work. For instance, mainstream academic language traditionally follows the protocol of no contractions and presents information in a linear way, but to write in this way as I share my story in the 7 stages of conocimiento would be unfaithful to the project of “risking the personal.” The writing you are about to read in the 7 stages of conocimiento is the language of the heart. As such, I use contractions throughout my writing. The narrative structure also demonstrates the cyclical and interwoven layers of time, resisting linearity by remaking time and space. This is my story. Let us descend into my wound.
Chapter 2: “Descending into the Wound”

RUPTURE

“Every arrebato—a violent attack, rift with a loved one, illness, death in the family, betrayal, systematic racism and marginalization—rips you from your familiar home, casting you out of your personal Eden, showing that something is lacking in your queendom. Cada arrebatada (snatching) turns your world upside down and cracks the walls of your reality, resulting in a great sense of loss, grief, and emptiness leaving behind dreams, hopes, and goals. You are no longer who you used to be.”

Illustration 3: Maria B. Dominguez

January 23, 2011. If someone had told me that the world as I knew it would never be the same once I picked up my phone that morning, I wouldn’t have believed them nor would I have answered the phone. If someone had told me that I was never going to be able to see or speak to my mom again, I would have thought someone was playing a cruel joke on me. Few of us live our lives thinking about how quickly our lives can change. Until my mother died, I had lived most of my life overlooking the ephemeral nature of existence, refusing to acknowledge the unpredictable character of life. Little did I know

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4 Illustration 3: This is a picture of my mother, Maria Dominguez. It was taken during the Summer of 2010 by my sister, Delilah Dylan Dominguez. This was her last summer alive.
that one phone call would forever transform how I understood the world around me. Life is fragile and very often unfair.

“Hello?” I mumbled into my phone as I tried to wake up and figure out why someone could possibly be calling me at 5 am on a Sunday. Despite being completely disoriented, I immediately recognized the voice on the other line as soon as I heard it.

“Victoria, there is no good way for me to tell you what I am about to tell you, so I am just going to say it. Mom is dead. Our mom is dead and you need to get home as soon as you can,” my sister, Delilah, calmly stated. I am silent. “Victoria. Did you hear me? I am so incredibly sorry that I had to tell you this on the phone, but there was no other way.” For a moment, I wondered if I was just imagining that I was having a phone conversation with her. I needed it to be a possibility; I needed hope that it was all a terrible mistake.

“What? Do you mean grandma is dead?” I calmly asked as I sat up in bed. My grandma had just recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer, so in my mind, it made more sense that she could possibly be dead. Not our mom though. That was just absurd. I talked to her a few hours before bed. She was playing cards with dad.

“No, Victoria. Our mom is dead. Dad called me. He just left the hospital. I told him I would call you.” My heart feels heavy and starts beating quickly. I wasn’t dreaming. “Victoria?”

“But…I just talked to her…are you…what did she…how did she die?” I stammered while trying to maintain a calm tone.
“I don’t know. Dad doesn’t know. You have to get home though. Don’t drive. Have Fletcher drive you home, ok?”

“Ok. I have to pack. Bye,” I hang up and pause for a moment. I then turn towards my partner, Fletcher, who was sitting up staring at me wondering what was going on. I looked into his eyes and repeated calmly the news, “My mom is dead. I have to go home.” I then immediately started to gather my things. I rushed around the room collecting my clothes, shoes, and books not once crying or letting my emotions take over. For some reason, I couldn’t process the information that I had just heard. It didn’t make sense. My heart and mind refused to believe it. I wouldn’t believe it until I arrived home after an hour and a half car drive to Bastrop. I hardly remember the car ride home. I was in shock.

I still remember walking into the front door of our home that cold January morning. As I walked in, I kept telling myself that she couldn’t possibly be gone. It had to be a mistake. My dad was sitting at the kitchen table with his hands covering his face as my Aunt Lisa and Uncle Rick stood by his side, stroking his arms as they cried silent tears for their lost friend. My dad immediately stood up when he heard the door close and walked towards me. I stared at his tear stained face for only a second before I ran into his arms, realizing that there hadn’t been a mistake. She was gone. As I slept, she left the world. Overwhelmed with pain, I sobbed in his arms for what seemed like an eternity. We held each other tightly, wishing that we were in a bad nightmare that we would eventually wake up from. We would continue to wake up, but with the knowledge
that she would no longer be part of our lives. It was our new reality, our new life whether we accepted it or not.

**NEPANTLA**

“Nepantla is the zone between changes where you struggle to find equilibrium between the outer expression of change and your inner relationship to it. Even as you listen to old consciousness’s death rattle, you continue defending its mythology of who you were and what your world looked like.”

Illustration 4: My Mom and I

My mom died quickly that Sunday morning. She woke up in the middle of the night with an excruciating pain her stomach, a pain that jolted her out of her sleep and caused her to begin throwing up profusely. Dad said she spoke of experiencing a cold sweat and that she was feeling extremely nausea, symptoms that they both interpreted as signs of food poisoning. She asked dad to make her tea to alleviate the intense pain she was feeling in her stomach. What they didn’t know in that short exchange was that it would be their last conversation. She would never get the tea she asked for. Dad says everything happened so fast. He caught a glimpse of mom struggling to make it to the

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5 Illustration 4: This is a picture of my mom and I from April 2010. My dad, Mark Dominguez, took this photo on a Sunday afternoon. This would be our last Easter together.
bed as he tried to boil water on the stove. She looked weak. She sat on the edge of bed before collapsing, falling for the last time. Dad rushed to her side, seeing the lifelessness that filled her eyes as they stared towards the ceiling. He said he knew she was dead in that moment because of the look in her eyes. He immediately grabbed the phone and called 911, hoping that they could save her and bring her back to him. Upon arrival, they cut off her clothes and spent thirty minutes trying to revive her. When their efforts prove to be unsuccessful, they decide to rush her to the hospital where she was pronounced dead around 4:45 in the morning.

The hardest part for me in learning about her death was not immediately knowing what she died from. I couldn’t accept that she was dead because without a specific cause, I allowed myself to believe in the possibility that her death was a misunderstanding. I reassured myself that she would walk through the front door at any minute. I must emphasize that after listening to my dad’s heartbreaking account of the events of that dreadful morning, I knew she was gone. I knew she was dead the moment I saw my dad sitting at the kitchen table. The story about the events of that morning just confirmed what I already knew, but for whatever reason, I wasn’t able to fully comprehend it all. There was a disconnect between what I knew and what my heart felt. Without seeing her dead body, my mind allowed itself to believe that it was all a terrible mistake.

Her absence slowly became more apparent once we started going through the countless list of things that must be done when someone dies. We set the date of her funeral and then arranged the details for her service. We felt that it was important to give her co-workers and friends a space to mourn her loss, so we arranged a public service that
would follow immediately after our private family service. In addition to planning her funeral, Delilah and I were given the difficult task of writing her obituary. It took us hours to even write a single word down. We both agreed about the impossibility of capturing our mother’s life in a single page. We both scribbled furiously away with our blue pens fragments of information about our mother as we sat at the local CVS scanning hundreds of pictures from different moments in her life to a DVD that would be played at her service. As I stared at the images of my mother, the absurdity of her death kept hitting me. How could she be gone? She was just here. Unable to comprehend or accept her death, my mind couldn’t help but go back in time.

*October 2010.* Home has always been my safe haven. When I started my undergraduate degree in 2007, I found that I was homesick often and longed to return home. Coming from a Mexican-American family with a working class background, I was only the second in my family behind my sister, Delilah, to go to college. I didn’t feel like I belonged in the Academy, so in the moments when I felt extremely overwhelmed and out of place, I would close my eyes and imagine the back porch of my home, the wonderful conversations I would have with my family, and the pure beauty that surrounded it.

I traveled home that October afternoon because I desperately needed to escape academia. After sitting on the porch for several hours catching up with my parents, I stood up from the table, walked towards the edge of the porch, and looked towards the night sky. I remember being thankful that our home was located on the outskirts of town because it prevented the city lights from obscuring the glimmering stars that illuminated
the night sky. I admired the stars for several minutes before my mom moved beside me, placed her arm around my shoulder, and looked up at the stars with me. We stood there for a moment before we saw a beautiful falling star streak across the sky. We both looked at each other with amazement after seeing the brilliant cosmic display. Then, to express my admiration, I broke the silence. “You know, Mom, every time I see a falling star you are around.” She smiled, “Well, you know that isn’t a coincidence, right? If you ever feel homesick or lonely, just remember this moment and look to the sky. I promise I will always send you a falling star when you need one.”

My mind returns to CVS. The DVD is complete. In that moment, I felt such regret. I hated that I never told her how significant that moment was for me. She never knew that our exchange on the porch gave me the strength to navigate through academia. As we walked out of CVS, I convinced myself that she would come home, walk through the front door, and tell us it was all a mistake. My heart needed to believe this, so I let it.

When she didn’t come home that afternoon, I remember feeling utterly disappointed. The possibility that she was indeed truly dead began to frighten me, forcing me to accept the fact that I was in complete denial. Then I remembered, she promised to send me a falling star if I ever needed one. I ran outside and decided to wait until she sent me one. In my grief stricken mind, if she were alive, she would be able to send me a star. When a star never came, her death being real began to set in. I sat outside trembling, afraid to fully consider what that meant.

RING! RING!
“Hello, this is Mark,” my dad answered as he held his cell phone to his ear. My sisters and I stared at him, wondering when and if the endless stream of phone calls would ever come to an end. She just died a few days ago. Since her death, we received so many phone calls from family, friends, and co-workers who, like us, were trying to make sense of her unexpected passing. My dad’s demeanor was serious and reflective as he listened to the voice on the other line. “Ok. Then we can see her in 30 minutes? Ok. Thanks.” My dad looked nervous. “Your mom is ready. Does anyone want to come with me?” I am silent.

**THE COATLICUE STATE**

“You can no longer deny your mortality, no longer escape into your head...catapulting you into the Coatlicue state, the hellish third phase of your journey. You listen to the wind howling like la Llorona on a moonless night. Mourning the loss, you sink like a stone into a deep depression, brooding darkly in the lunar landscape of your inner world.”

Illustration 5: Altar for MBD

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6Illustration 5: A few days after my mom died, my sister, Velma, set-up our living room like this. It all felt so surreal to me. I remember taking this picture as I sat on the couch, wishing it was all a mistake. I took it on January 30, 2011.
Ruptures can disorient us, leaving us silent. Words become inadequate. As I stood outside the room where her body now rested, I found myself paralyzed and unable to move or speak. My hand, though it clutched the door knob, refused to open it. I felt overwhelmed, my heart pounding in my chest like a drum. My hand began to shake. I was afraid to see her. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and clutched my dad’s hand tightly as we entered the room.

The room was dimly lit and the air was cool and sterile. A single Kleenex box sat on a table next to the coffin, making me wonder how many others had been in that very same room crying over the loss of a loved one. I remember knowing that this was a moment that I would carry with me for the rest of my life. There are moments in life that are unforgettable because they put a mark on your soul. As I inched towards my mother’s lifeless body, I knew this would be one such moment, a moment that would permanently transform how I understood the world.

Nothing prepared me for what I was about to see. She looked pale. Her long black hair was combed neatly and it flowed gently down her sides. Her signature black mole on the side of her nose was covered with a faint powder. Her eyes and mouth looked tense, as if they were sewn shut. I stared at her unmoving body and my eyes wandered down to her hands, which were neatly folded across each other as they rested on her stomach. Since I was a little girl, I have always been in awe of my mother’s hand. They were beautiful, angel hands. As a child, I always hoped that I would one day be lucky enough to have hands that resembled hers. The hands that now rested in front of me were no
longer recognizably her hands. They were alien hands, ghostly, unnatural, and skeletal. I was devastated. Death had destroyed her beautiful hands.

Tears began to swell in my eyes as I leaned over to stare at her stiff hands. Unable to control myself, I shook my head in disbelief as tears ran down my face, falling onto her destroyed hands. I began kissing them, hoping that it would transform them back to the angel hands they once were. I wanted to bring her back to life. I needed to believe in magic, in the possibility that my kisses could bring her back to me. As I kissed her hands, the smell of formaldehyde filled my nose and the coldness of her skin stung my lips. She felt like an icicle. It was her, but it wasn’t. Without her vibrant spirit animating her movements, she ceased to be my mother.

Seeing her that day broke not just my heart, but my entire spirit. I was angry at death for ruining her perfect hands. I felt betrayed by life itself for allowing her to die. An uncontrollable anger consumed my entire being as I stared at her dead body. I kept thinking, how could this be happening? Why did she have to die? Unable to accept her fate, my mind once again slipped back in time.

January 14, 2011. It is funny how ordinary the day was. Of course, what I didn’t know then was that this seemingly mundane encounter with my mom would be the last time I would ever see her alive. As soon as she died, I knew that I needed to remember this day. A few days after her death, I sat down to write about our last time together. I didn’t want to forget it, so I wrote down every detail I could remember. To this day, that Friday afternoon remains vivid in my memory and heart.
It was a cold, rainy day. I had decided to stop by and visit her at work before driving back to Georgetown. When I walked into her office, I was greeted by one of her signature grins. My mom had a remarkable smile that could light up an entire room. She gave me a big hug, explaining to me how happy she was that I had decided to surprise her with a visit. After showing me off to her co-workers (she liked to do that), we sat down and started to chat about our weekend plans. I told her that my weekend would be spent working and writing papers. Being the rebel that she was, she tried to encourage me to “take it easy” and to stay home for the weekend. She tempted me to stay by offering to cook me my favorite meal, roast tacos with guacamole. Though I wanted to stay with her, I felt pressured to return to Georgetown to complete my school work. If I had known then what I know now, I would have stayed home—no amount of school work is more important than spending time with those you love.

Before I began my journey back to Georgetown, my mom offered me a mint chocolate from her candy container. I joked, “Mint and chocolate are a terrible combination, Mom. I have never understood it!” She smiled, “I thought you might say that.” She opened her drawer and pulled out an almond milk chocolate bar. “I know it is your favorite. Take it for the road.” She knew me too well. I stood up, gave her hug, and like I always did every time I left her, I let her know that I loved her. She always let me know the same. She insisted that I call her as soon as I made it home since it was so rainy outside. She wanted to know that I was safe. I left her that day never imagining that it would be our last exchange in person. If I had known, I would have never left her.
Remembering her alive, talking, laughing, smiling made her death seem impossible and unreal. Her inanimate body and her destroyed hands forced me to accept that she was gone. I would never be able to visit her in her office again. I would never be able to text her to tell her I was home safe. I would never be able to see, talk to, or touch her again. I looked at her dead body once more. I felt dizzy. None of it made sense. I collapsed into my father’s arms. I was broken. This marked the darkest moment of my life.

Her funeral service was held a few days later on a Friday afternoon. We first had a small, family-oriented, private service where her body could be seen one last time. The larger public service would follow immediately after. I remember struggling to decide if I wanted to see her body again. Something in my heart told me I needed to see her one more time even if it was painful. I couldn’t believe that this was my last chance to ever see her. I sat patiently, trying to compose myself as I listened to my grandmother’s cries, “Ay, Mija! Mi bebé!” I will never forget how crushed I felt as I watched my abuelita rest her head on my mother’s heart, crying for her lost child and begging God to bring her back. I can still hear her cries.

As I wiped away tears and waited for my chance to say goodbye to her body one last time, I noticed Delilah walk into the viewing room from the corner of my eye. Earlier in the week, she expressed that she was not going to see our mother’s body. She insisted that she didn’t want to see her like that. She wanted to remember mom alive, not her embalmed dead corpse. Shocked to see her in the viewing room after our conversation, I couldn’t help but stare as she walked towards our mother’s inanimate body. All I wanted
to do was get up, stop her, and protect her from what she was about to see, but I knew that I couldn’t. She needed to say goodbye.

Delilah’s eyes rested on the motionless body that lay before her. She hunched over and began caressing my mother’s face. Her hand began to quiver as it touched over my mother’s cool skin. A slow stream of tears was visibly pouring down her face. Her body began to tremble. She slowly rose, breaking the dead silence that filled the room. She screamed, “God damn it!” as she looked up towards the sky. The echo from her scream reverberated through the entire building. Overwhelmed and in shock from seeing our now dead mother, she quickly ran out of the room, disappearing out of sight. My dad looked at me with a look of concern. With a knowing look, I nodded my head and went after Delilah. She was outside leaning against the wall of the funeral home trying to compose herself. As I walked up to her, she was rummaging in her pocket intently for something. She pulled a miniature bottle of Jack Daniels out of her pocket and chugged it down. To alleviate the silence, I observed, “Well, that was quite the exit.” She looked up and smiled at me. Through her tears she said, “Glades, this is so fucked up. I can’t believe mom is dead.”

“I know. None of this is right…none of it.” I echoed. We stood in silence for a few minutes before I told her that I needed to go inside and see Mom’s body before they closed the casket. I joked, “You and your friend Jack need to take it easy while I am inside, ok?” She smiled and nodded as I walked back inside.

Seeing my mom’s body for the last time was excruciatingly painful. I kissed her all over her face, thanking her for being in my life and assuring her I would never forget
her. I asked her to stay with me. I remember feeling like my heart was being crushed by a hammer as they began to close her casket. I kept touching my chest, hoping that it would help calm my erratic breathing. No words can accurately express my sorrow as I caught the last glimpse of my mother as the casket permanently closed. I was now officially a motherless child.

Two days after her funeral, we were over at my Aunt Lisa’s house having dinner. Mom had been dead for an entire week now. My dad was particularly broken up about this. He was grief stricken and unable to control his tears. No one could alleviate his pain. All evening I hadn’t said much. I felt numb. Delilah could tell that I was damming in my emotions and tears, so she pulled me aside and asked me if I was OK.

“I’m fine,” I said, forcing a smile while pretending to be strong.

“No you’re not, Victoria. Let’s go for a walk.” We walked out to the golf course near my Aunt Lisa’s house and saw the sunset, blazing brilliant colors into the sky. For a moment it even seemed unearthly. We felt such ugliness and sadness as we stared at the divine landscape.7

Illustration 6: Sunset

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7 Illustration 6: This is an image of the sunset taken on January 30, 2011 by Victoria Dominguez. I took it after my emotional breakdown with Delilah. It was a beautiful sunset. We associate it with the powerful existential moment I describe.
As I stared at the sunset, I couldn’t hold my feelings in any longer. “How can the world continue to be beautiful when she isn’t in it? How can the world go on? Look at that sunset. It is so beautiful. It continues to shine like nothing is wrong. It’s not right. IT’S NOT FAIR!” I screamed hysterically, collapsing to the ground. The scent of freshly cut grass filled my nose as I lay on the earth, begging it for mercy and solace from my pain. Delilah gently touched me as I lay broken before her, maintaining her composure even as my tears drenched her shoulder once I gathered the strength to reach up and hold on to her. I held her so tightly.

“She is in this sunset. We just can't see how. All the answers are there. We just can’t see them. You know? Mom's not destroyed. Her energy has just taken another form,” she calmly whispered as she held me. She didn’t know it then, but in that moment, she alleviated my pain more than anyone could at that point. We tried to feel our energies after talking. We held our palms a few inches apart in front of us. And then something incredible happened. Despite our immense sorrow, we felt connected to each other and everything in that moment. Whether we imagined it all or it really happened—it does not matter. What counts is that sense of being with another, with nature, with this absurd universe. We then both cried. I felt closer to Delilah than I ever had.

When we returned home that night, my feeling of despair continued to consume me. I was afraid to go into her bedroom. In my heart, I knew she had died there. My imagination took over, causing me to visualize and reconstruct her death. I could see her dead body on the floor next to her bed with paramedics cutting her shirt off as they struggled to bring her back to life. My sister, Velma, kept the destroyed shirt that had
been shredded off her body. She also cleaned up the blood stains on the floor from the paramedics failed attempts to insert an IV into my mom’s arm.

This vivid image of the scene of her death haunted me, making me unwilling to go anywhere near it. My dad, too, refused to be alone in his bedroom. It was the site of the trauma, the site where our beloved MBD forever left the world. We avoided it together. We stayed in the living room, trying to process everything that had happened in the last week. We didn’t sleep. We couldn’t. He cried all night long, asking why this had to happen. I could offer no good answer. As far as I could tell, there wasn’t a good answer for it. I was angry, numb, and broken. This marked the beginning of my insomnia, the beginning of my departure from reality, the beginning of my depression.

**THE CALL...EL COMPROMISO...THE CROSSING AND CONVERSION**

“The life you thought inevitable, unalterable, and fixed in some foundation reality is smoke, a mental construction, fabrication. So, you reason, if it’s all made up, you can compose it anew and differently.”

Illustration 7: This is a picture of a sunflower from one of the flower arrangements I was given after my mother’s death. I took this picture on February 1, 2011.
Two weeks after my mother’s death, I returned to Southwestern to start school again. I did not want to go back. Since her death, I began to feel that life was meaningless, unfair, and absurd. We are born to die and despite this knowledge about our inevitable fate, we grow attached to others, we love, and we build our lives with one another without fully thinking about the consequences or the risk we are taking when we decide to love. My mother taught me to love so fully, so completely. Perhaps this explains why losing her felt so painful. I felt as if the world itself should be ending. When you love someone with all of your being, a part of you can’t help but die, too, with their death. The problem was that I felt like all of me had died with her.

This feeling of being dead inside consumed me. As I walked towards my apartment on campus, I remember noticing that everything looked the same, making me wonder why the world continued to be “normal” even when I knew it would never be the same again. The scent of fresh flowers filled my nose as I walked into my apartment, which was covered with dozens of fancy flower arrangements with attached sympathy cards. Even though I was deeply moved by the support offered by the Southwestern community and my friends, I found that the sight of all of the flowers ignited an uncontrollable anger within me. It made her death more real, more permanent. I needed to get away from them.

It was a beautiful day, so I decided to take a walk around campus to escape my apartment. After an hour of walking and reflecting on my new life, I found myself standing in front of a cemetery located near campus. I couldn’t help but think of my mom as I stared at the still cemetery. My family had decided to not bury my mom for various
reasons. We had decided to cremate her body. I felt comforted by the idea of having her ashes at home with us rather than alone in the ground.

Because of the rawness of my wound from losing my mom, it took me a few minutes to gain the strength to explore the cemetery. I am thankful that I found the strength to. It was a peaceful, quiet place with a striking number of dated gravestones. I remember being amazed by the sheer number of graves. In my amazement, I stumbled upon a grave of a 2 year-old, a little girl who had died in the early 1900’s. As I stared at the tiny gravestone, I felt such profound sorrow. A life cut too short—far too short. I sat next to the tiny gravestone and began to cry, imagining how awful it had been on her family to lose her. Even though I cried for the young life that never had the time to experience the world, I found that most of my sorrow was for the family left behind, the family who had the difficult task of picking up the broken pieces of their hearts and lives.

In that moment, I knew that a flower arrangement belonged there. I returned to my apartment so that I could grab an arrangement to take to the gravesite. Once I arrived back at my apartment, I began to realize that I needed to get rid of all of the flower arrangements in my apartment because even though they were well-meaning, their presence served as a painful reminder that my mother was dead just like all of the people buried in the cemetery. I spent the rest of my afternoon delivering flowers to that cemetery. This activity proved to be highly therapeutic and was exactly what I needed to do. It provided me with a much needed release. It also reminded me that I wasn’t alone. Death follows us all.
I let death consume me. The knowledge of the permanence of death haunted me like a phantom, a phantom that refused to give me peace. I couldn’t sleep. Even when I did fall asleep, my dreams offered me no solace. There was no escape from my hellish nightmare. For the next several months, I was always awake in the dead of the night. I was, quite literally, the walking dead. As I lay in my bed, I watched night turn to day, wondering where she was or if she even existed at all. As the rest of the world around me slept, I was awake unable to control my dark thoughts, all of which insisted on haunting me. My thoughts were consumed with death, the image of my mother’s dead body, and her destroyed hands. Bitter at the universe for the new version of reality it forced upon me, I rejected the world, my body, and the people around me. I allowed myself to sink into what felt like an interminable depression.

My classmates stared at me like I was an alien, my professors looked at me with concern, and my friends had no idea what to say to me. By the end of my first week back, I realized that the numbness that had sustained me was beginning to diminish. As I walked out of my last philosophy class, I could not control the flood of tears that filled my eyes. My mentor, the chair of the philosophy department, was waiting for me to get out of class so that he could check on me and see how I was doing. Once he saw me, he immediately opened his door and signaled for me to come in. My tears erupted before I even made it in his office. “I can’t do this,” I whispered to him as I struggled to compose my emotions. I had no idea how I was going to make it through the semester, let alone the rest of my life without her. I wished to go back in time and change everything, to prevent her death, and to bring her back to me. I longed for magic.
When it comes to dealing with death, believing in the impossible can sustain you. Even though no amount of bargaining or pleading can change the unfortunate circumstances and bring that person back to life, magical thinking shapes experiences of grief and makes life bearable in the face of loss. I would talk out loud to my mother every night after she died. I would challenge her to show herself, to reveal to me that she was still part of our earthly realm. When she didn’t respond, I allowed myself to believe that the time just wasn’t right yet. She would come when the timing was right. I just had to keep trying, to keep asking, and most importantly, to keep believing that she would appear.

There were many nights when I stayed up all night, begging her to show herself and to reveal the secrets of the universe to me. When begging didn’t work, I resorted to singing. I sang out loud our song, “You’ve Got a Friend” by Carole King. I played it on repeat, secretly hoping that it would summon her spirit to me.

When you're down and troubled and you need a helping hand and nothing, whoa nothing is going right. 
Close your eyes and think of me and soon I will be there to brighten up even your darkest nights.

You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am I'll come running, oh yeah baby to see you again. 
Winter, spring, summer, or fall, all you have to do is call and I'll be there, yeah, yeah, yeah. 
You've got a friend.

If the sky above you should turn dark and full of clouds and that old north wind should begin to blow
Keep your head together and call my name out loud
and soon I will be knocking upon your door.

You just call out my name and you know wherever I am
I'll come running to see you again.
Winter, spring, summer or fall
all you got to do is call
and I'll be there, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Hey, ain't it good to know that you've got a friend?
People can be so cold.
They'll hurt you and desert you.
Well they'll take your soul if you let them.
Oh yeah, but don't you let them.

The sound of Carole King’s voice filled my ears, encouraging me to reach out, to call out her name, to await her certain arrival. In an ecstatic frenzy, I paced back and forth in my room eagerly anticipating our approaching reunion. Surely, she would come to me. I imagined the scenario over and over, rehearsing the details to make sure that I was prepared for her imminent arrival. I let myself believe that she would knock on my door, tell me that it was all a terrible mistake, and that her disappearance was merely an enigmatic occurrence. Her return would prove that the world wasn’t the dismal place it had become since her death. Her arrival would prove that life is worth living. She would redeem the world. She would save me.

She would never make it to my room, but she did end up making an appearance in one of my dreams. I was swinging in the backyard of a house I had never seen before, swaying back and forth in the wind as I moved through the air. Suddenly, seemingly appearing out of thin air, my mother sat in the swing right next to me, smiling and gliding effortlessly through the air with me. I remember knowing that it was special that she was there. I didn’t want to ask her where she came from. It didn’t matter. I wanted her to stay...
with me, so I embraced her presence as we laughed together as we floated in the sky. I felt so free. Everything seemed perfect until she fell from her swing, crashing onto the ground below. I immediately stopped swinging and ran to her side, afraid that she was hurt. Instead of crying from her fall, she kept laughing and said, “This is so much fun, Victoria.” I was confused.

“Mom, you have to be careful.” I pleaded as I tried to help her up.

“Why? Everything is fine,” she playfully replied as I urged her to get up. I wanted her to get up because I started to sense that there was a presence inside the house. I knew it was death, preparing to swoop in and take her away from me yet again. I begged her to get up and run away with me, but she didn’t seem to want to. She kept saying that everything was fine, but I knew better. I woke up as I begged her to come with me. When I realized that it was all a dream, I felt so empty. She was really gone. I wished I could go back to sleep and bring her back. That is the nice thing about dreams. They have the ability to take you away from reality, allowing you to imagine a world in which your loved ones still exist, but then they inevitably vanish.

I was alone again. To keep my disappointment at bay, I kept singing, talking to her, and believing in magic anyway. I couldn’t, however, believe in the magical nature of time to heal wounds. I was beginning to realize that contrary to the popular opinion, time does not heal all wounds. The pain consumed my entire being for months. It didn’t just take its toll on just my body and spirit, but it influenced my relationships with the people I care about most in my life. My partner of eight years, Fletcher, was deeply impacted by my grief and the wide array of emotions that accompanied it. Angry that no one
understood my pain and sorrow, I often lashed out at him, asking him unfair questions and demanding too much from him.

“Why don’t you feel as bad as I do? Didn’t you love her? I know she wasn’t your mom, but why don’t you care?” I asked as my voice cracked. He grabbed my hand, holding it tightly.

“Of course, I loved her, Victoria. She was remarkable. I just hate seeing you like this. I know there is nothing that I can say to make this better,” he assured me as he stared into my watery eyes. I clutched his hand, realizing how unfair it was to ask such a loaded question to someone that I loved. I began to fear what grief was doing to me. It was making me irrationally angry at everything, including the people who meant the most to me. What was happening to me?

As we sat on the porch staring at the stars, I hesitated about whether or not it was appropriate to ask him the question that had been burning in my mind since her funeral. During her service, I noticed that he whispered something in my mom’s ear before they closed her casket. Though I knew it was an extremely personal question, I wanted to know what he said to her.

“Fletch, at the funeral, I saw you lean over and whisper something to her before they closed the casket. Can I ask what you said to her?” I asked as I stared at his green eyes. He paused for a moment before answering.

“Yeah. I promised her that I would take care of you for her. I thanked her for having you. I just wanted to let her know how much I respected her.” Moved by his kind
last words to my mother, I didn’t know what to say to him. I held his hand and stared at the stars, wondering what my Mom thought of his words.

It was a Wednesday afternoon when I received my first acceptance letter from a graduate program. I had just gotten out of class for the day when I walked into my apartment and checked my email, receiving the letter below:

Dear Victoria:

We are pleased to let you know that you have been admitted to the MA Program with the Center for Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

You were among a very competitive applicant pool this year, and the committee was impressed with your qualifications. We think you will make a strong contribution to our entering class. Congratulations!

Before we send our official admissions correspondence via email and letter head I wanted to confirm the following:

1. Your most convenient mailing address and when you expect it to change (in case you are moving, etc.)
2. Your permanent (non-undergraduate school related) email address.

Please send your replies to ajsalcedo@mail.utexas.edu

Our Graduate Coordinator will take the lead in sending official correspondence regarding the admission offer, and we will also send information in the next couple of weeks about available funding.

Congratulations again on your admission to our program. We hope to see you in the fall.

Sincerely,

Dr. Susan Sage Heinzelman

Director, Center for Women's & Gender Studies

As I stared at the acceptance letter I had just received from the University of Texas at Austin, I wasn’t quite sure how I was feeling. After reading over it one more time to make sure that I hadn’t lost my mind and made up my acceptance, I realized that I
needed to share this exciting news with someone. Naturally, the first person that came to my mind was her. I picked up my phone and searched through my contact list. It had been about two months since her death, and I still hadn’t found the strength to delete her number from my phone. I stared at her smiling face and couldn’t help but remember one of our last phone conversations. My mind went back in time yet again.

_January 19, 2011._ The week before she died, I confided in my mom that I was nervous about hearing back from graduate programs, fearing that I would receive no acceptances. As we talked on the phone, I explained to her that I hated not knowing where I would be in a few months. I told her that I was afraid of rejection because philosophy majors weren’t exactly in high demand, and I had no clue what I would do if I didn’t continue down the academic path. Her response was, “Honey, you are so talented. _If they can’t see that, it is their loss_!” She always knew how to lift my spirits. She often believed in me more than I believed in myself. To this day, I still find it extremely unfair that she didn’t live long enough to see that her faith in me hadn’t been misguided. Her constant support and love made me believe in the impossible. She made me believe that I could be more than I ever thought I could be.

Shortly after receiving my acceptance letter, I had an epiphany, a moment that temporarily jolted me out of my depression. Longing for fresh air, I walked around campus enjoying the nature around me. As I stared at the blazing sunset, it occurred to me that there was still so much beauty in the world even though I felt so broken. In my heart, I knew that I couldn’t keep living like this. At some point, I had to be happy and continue to imagine a future for myself. Whether I felt like it or not, I was still alive even
if she wasn’t. I couldn’t keep living like I was dead. Life moves on. If I didn’t pick myself up, I knew I would be left behind. I had to move forward so I picked up the phone and called my family to share the good news. My dad was beaming, “I am incredibly proud of you, Coots. I know your mom is too.”

**PUTTING COYOLXAUHQUI TOGETHER…NEW PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE STORIES**

“You shed your former bodymind and its outworn story like a snake its skin. Releasing traumas of the past free ups energy, allowing you to be receptive to the soul’s voice and guidance. Taking a deep breath, you close your eyes and call back tu alma—from people, ideas, perceptions, and events you’ve surrendered to it. You sense parts of your soul return to your body.”

Illustration 8: My First Award

The hardest part of putting your life back together is reimagining a new life for yourself. When you start to reimagine a new world, you realize that you have to give up some of your old world, even aspects you don’t want to let go of. I turned to books as a source of knowledge and guidance as I tried to make sense of her death. I found comfort in the voices of those who came before me, those voices assuring me that the dust would

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9 Illustration 8: The image above was taken by my father in March 1998. I won my first medal that day for winning an event in storytelling. My mom was incredibly proud.
eventually settle from the trauma, and that life would go on even though it seemed impossible.

I was afraid to move on, to “let go.” My ambivalence about picking up the pieces of my broken heart and moving forward was rooted in my fear of having to fully “let go” of her in order to move on with my life. According to feminist scholar Judith Butler, to mourn doesn’t mean that you must let go of and forget one’s losses. Butler writes,

I think that one mourns when one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one that changes you, changes you possibly forever, and that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full result of which you cannot know in advance. So there is a losing, and there is a transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned. (18)

I was afraid of the transformative effect of loss that Butler spoke of because I feared the unpredictability around how my mother’s death would impact my life. I wondered, “What would her death do to me? Will I ever be happy again?” I slowly began to realize that I needed to find a way to be at peace with impermanence. I needed to struggle with life’s most difficult questions because that is the first step towards healing. Of course, this is far easier said than done. Before I could get to the point where I started to patch myself together, I turned to texts that embraced and acknowledged that existence is often defined by absurdity and suffering. As a student disciplined in philosophy, I revisited the work of one of my favorite existential thinkers, Albert Camus. I turned to existential philosophy because I longed to have someone or something accept my feelings of anger and my sense of hopelessness surrounding existence. Camus offered such validation.
In Albert Camus’s Nobel Prize winning work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he endeavors to explore the meaning of life in the face of absurdity. Camus posits suicide as an impulse that one succumbs to when one has judged that life is not worth living. He explains that suicide is:

an act prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art. The man himself is ignorant of it. One evening he pulls the trigger or jumps. Of an apartment-building manager who had killed himself I was told that he had lost his daughter five years before, that he had changed greatly since, and that that experience had undermined him. A more exact wording cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined. (4)

By viewing suicide as a response to the acknowledgment of the absurdity of existence, Camus invites us to ponder what it is then that makes life worth living. If “like great works, deep feelings always mean more than they are conscious of saying,” how do we begin the process of understanding our deepest feelings when life has undermined us? (Camus 10).

I felt undermined by life because of her death. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I felt wounded, overwhelmed, and lost. How was I to move on and live in the world with these intense feelings? Camus’s beautiful writing made me realize that our wounds, if they go unaddressed, can follow us for the rest of our lives, eating away at our souls. I needed to re-examine my deeply hidden feelings about death. I needed to consider what made life worth living even when it undermined you. I slipped back in time nearly a decade earlier.

*December 2001*. My grandfather died suddenly of cancer two days after Christmas. I will never forget the day that we learned he had cancer. My family and I
were shopping at a mall in Austin, searching for Christmas presents for family members, and trying to distract ourselves from the troubling fact that grandpa was so ill that he was being tested at a hospital nearby as we shopped. Once we received that devastating phone call, everything began to fall apart quickly. My dad went over to my grandpa’s house a few days after his diagnosis to take him to the doctor for a check-up, and ended up finding grandpa on the floor struggling to get to his feet. His body was declining so quickly that he could no longer carry himself with ease. My dad scooped him up and carried his fragile body to the car, rushing him to the doctor where he would learn that grandpa would be lucky if he survived to the end of the week. When he finally made it home, my dad announced the shocking news to my entire family and then quickly went off to bed. My mom, my sisters, and I could not sleep. We were heartbroken and stayed up talking about how unfair it was that grandpa was suddenly dying. We also were deeply concerned about my dad because he didn’t seem to want to talk about it.

Before we could talk more about my father’s silence, he showed up in the living room and appeared distraught. He announced that he couldn’t sleep either, and then something powerful happened, something that I still can see in my mind as if it just happened yesterday. My dad walked towards my mother, got on his knees, and placed his head in her lap as he began to cry hysterically. My mother stared at us with tears in her eyes as she stroked my father’s hair as he wept in her lap. We all stared back with a knowing look, a look that recognized that grandpa’s death was an event that would change all of our lives. This moment marked the first time I ever saw my father cry. It was heartbreaking.
The next day, we went over to my grandparent’s house to spend time with my grandpa. As it turned out, everybody else had the same idea. When a person is dying, it is incredible how many people show up to say goodbye. I don’t think anybody realized how limited my grandpa’s time was, so I am grateful that many people came immediately to say their goodbyes to him. He moved in and out of consciousness for most of the day, but he was mostly not responsive to anyone. He seemed to be in a world of his own, a reality that seemed to clash with the world of the living. I remember watching him stare at a fixture hanging on the wall in the living room. He would stare at it, reach towards it, and then make intense gasping noises as if he was seeing something that amazed him and was escaping him. I remember wondering what he was seeing. I wanted to see it too, but I knew that I couldn’t. I always imagined that he was getting a glimpse at a different realm, a place occupied by other worldly beings.

He didn’t have to suffer for much longer. I remember trying to relax and take a nap that day. I did not want to sleep because I feared that he would die as I slept, but my parents insisted that I try to sleep despite my concerns. It took time, but I eventually drifted off, falling asleep in the recliner next to my grandfather’s deathbed. I didn’t sleep long. I woke up to the sound of my mother’s panicked voice screaming, “He needs help!” I jumped up quickly, struggling to comprehend what was happening. My grandfather coughed violently, throwing up bile all over his shirt. Then, as if nothing happened, he suddenly stopped moving and became limp. He fell backwards, motionless. He was dead.

Everyone began to cry immediately after they realized that he was gone. For some reason, I couldn’t cry even though I felt like I wanted to. I remember staring at his dead
body intently. It looked like he was still breathing to me. Concerned by my captivation with his dead body, my Tía Maggie affectionately grabbed me and placed me on her lap, hugging me and assuring me that everything was going to be ok. She kept comforting me by insisting that he was fine and that I had nothing to be afraid of. He was “in a better place” and we didn’t need to worry about him. We buried him a few days later.

Remembering my grandfather’s tragic death reminded me what makes life worth living for me: my people, my family. Even though I had difficulty understanding his death, I had the support of people that I loved to help me begin making sense of it. I could not have survived without my family. Even when life undermines you, throws you on the ground, and crushes you, there are still people at the end of the day who can pick you up. Of course, I am not so naïve as to think that everyone has a family that they can turn to for support. But, there is still something promising and uplifting about the knowledge that people and other human beings can sustain us in the face of our most devastating experiences.

As we prepared for my graduation from Southwestern, my family and I realized how painful moving on really was. My graduation marked the first big event that she would be absent from, the first event of many that lie ahead of us. My dad insisted that we should view the occasion as a joyous one because that is precisely what mom would have wanted. Though I knew he was right, it was hard to feel happy about graduation knowing that she would not be there. It just wasn’t fair.

The night before my graduation, I was feeling extremely melancholy thinking about her absence from the ceremony. As I prepared to move out of my on campus
apartment, I stumbled upon a box full of cards that I had received over the years. One in particular struck me. It was a letter written by my mom exactly a year before. She wrote a letter to me because I was leaving to study abroad in Jamaica for the summer. Worried that something might happen to me, my mom wrote me a letter letting me know how much I meant to her—

I felt such comfort as I imagined her sitting down and writing this beautiful message on the card that I now held in my hand. I felt overwhelmed by the deep love she had for me, making me realize that just because she was gone didn’t mean that our love was gone. Finding this card was her speaking to me, telling me that no matter what, even in death, I would always be her “sweet things.” This simple notion gave me such strength because it made me realize something I had failed to consider since her death. Her death didn’t mean she was permanently etched out of my life. Our shared love for one another still existed. I just had to reimagine what our new relationship would be.
With this new understanding of our shared love as timeless, I found the strength to walk across the stage wearing her favorite pearl necklace as a tribute to her. I felt such a profound sense of gratitude for her influence, her presence, and her love as I held my diploma proudly towards my family. I remember the cheers of support coming from my family and the tears that streamed down my dad’s face as I walked off the stage as a new college graduate. I felt strong for the first time in months.

THE BLOW-UP…A CLASH OF REALITIES

“You lose yourself in the maelstrom, no longer able to find the calm place within as everything collapses…”

Illustration 9: Grandma and Grandpa

Mother’s Day fell on a Sunday, which happened to be the day after my graduation from Southwestern. In preparation for our celebration, I was asked to pick up my grandmother who lived a few minutes away from us. As I drove to pick her up, I started to think about everything my grandma had been through in the last six months.11

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11 Illustration 9: The picture you see on the bottom of page 89 was taken in December of 2001. This image is significant because you wouldn’t know it by the image, but my grandfather only had two days left to live.
Several months before my mom died, my grandmother had been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Because chemotherapy left her feeling emotionally and physically drained, she lived with my parents so that they could take care of her. Her body was in extreme pain from her treatments, leaving her confined to the couch all day in a constant state of nausea and discomfort. Chemo ravaged her body, making her feel as if she was the living dead. Though her body was suffering, the greatest attack came on her spirit when she learned that her son, my Uncle Perry, died just a few weeks into her treatment. The circumstances around his death were suspect given his long battle with drug addiction. His rotting body was found in his friend’s apartment, which was only detected because the neighbors smelled a foul odor and reported it to the management of the apartment complex. Needless to say, he died a horrifying death in which there were very few answers for. His death devastated my grandmother, leaving her wishing that she could have done something to help him overcome his addiction.

As a mother, she was deeply concerned with how her other children were dealing with his shocking death. She worried that they were too concerned with her to think about their own suffering. I, too, was worried about my dad when I learned about Perry’s death. I will never forget the note my dad wrote to my sisters and I shortly after Perry died. He wrote, “Perry's loss hurts in a strange way. I would not call it humbling as much as just sad. Sad that he could not find happiness in life. Guess his life was like a 51 year Grey Hound bus ride. He kept missing his stop.” His words indicated to me that my dad was saddened by his brother’s death even though most of his childhood memories were comprised of abusive encounters with Perry, one of which left him with a permanent scar.
on his forehead. Like Gran, Dad wished Perry would find peace in his life. He never did. He died alone, unable to conquer his demons.

No more than a month after burying Perry, Gran was forced to say goodbye to her daughter-in-law, the very person who had been taking care of her as she struggled through chemotherapy. My mom took care of Gran, trying to alleviate the pain from her chemotherapy in any way she could. Like everyone else, my grandmother struggled to make sense of my mother’s unexpected death. Her death was stunning, senseless. I will never forget how hard Gran cried for my mom as she stared at her lifeless body as it rested in the casket. She cried, “It should be me, not you,” as she touched my mother’s cold face. Seeing my mom that day broke Gran’s heart.

In addition to the emotional trauma from losing her son and daughter-in-law so suddenly, my grandmother learned disappointing news about her radiation treatment. It had failed to contain her cancer. Further, the intensity of the radiation damaged her lungs, making it impossible for her to breathe without feeling excruciating pain. Devastated by the results, she decided to give up on treatment. She accepted that cancer would claim her life.

As we rode in the car together, I felt sad thinking about how cruel life had been to her. She didn’t deserve this. In my heart, I knew that this would likely be the last time I celebrated Mother’s day with her. Her death, even though I didn’t know it at the time, was right around the corner. Our car ride home would mark the beginning of her drastic decline.
“What is your mom making for lunch?” my grandmother asked earnestly as we left her driveway to head to my house. Perplexed by my grandmother’s question, I didn’t know what to say.

“What do you mean, Gran?” I asked while trying to conceal my look of confusion.

“Is she making enchiladas? I sure love her enchiladas,” she declared as she stared out the window. I am silent. She continued, “Why are we driving this way? Home is the other direction, honey,” she stated as she pointed the opposite direction out her window. Confused by her comments, I glanced over to read her face, wondering if she realized what she was saying.

“Gran, we haven’t lived there since the flood.”

“Flood?! What flood?” she exclaimed as she looked at my face, hoping for a detailed explanation for an event she didn’t seem to remember. If I had known then what I know now, I wouldn’t have revealed to her what she had missed in the last ten years. Baffled by her sudden memory loss, I didn’t think about the possibility that her cancer had moved to her brain. I didn’t think about the possibility that the cancer was impacting her memory and ability to remember the painful events that unfolded in the last year. I didn’t know better, so I broke the silence and revealed the truth.

“Gran, you don’t remember? We lost our house ten years ago in a flood. And mom, well, she died a few months ago.”

She looked uncomfortable, “That can’t be. Don’t tell me that. I need to call Perry, Lisa, and your Dad.” She began fumbling through her purse for her phone.
“Gran, please, don’t call anyone. We will be home soon. Lisa and Dad are there. I am so sorry.” I wasn’t sure what I was apologizing for, but I knew I was sorry. Something just wasn’t right. I just didn’t know what.

“What about Perry? Where is he?” She asked while trying to hold back tears. I couldn’t tell her the truth. I fell silent. I couldn’t say it.

I didn’t have to. My face said everything. She could no longer hold back the tears. She began to cry uncontrollably, learning for the second time everything we had lost. Though I didn’t understand what was happening at the time, I can now look back and realize that she was crying not just because she lost her daughter-in-law and son, but because she lost her ability to remember important aspects her life and who was now alive to be part of it. Overnight, her cancer erased her short-term memory. Life is fragile and very often unfair.

When we finally made it home, I still remember feeling unsure about what I should tell my dad. As I said, I had no idea what was happening to her at the time. I did the only thing that I could do—I told him that she couldn’t remember important events like the flood or the deaths of mom and Perry. Not really sure what to make of what I was telling him, my dad walked up to my Grandma and asked her how she was feeling. Distracted by our “new” home, she said, “This is a really nice home you have, Mark.” The look in my dad’s eye told me that he knew that things were about to get bad. I will never forget the look in his eye, that knowing look that another rupture was fast approaching.
Gran went to the hospital the next day. That is when we learned that her cancer had moved to her brain, disrupting the part of the brain that controls memory. The next several weeks were difficult and frustrating. Frustrating because we learned precisely how corrupt insurance agencies are and how often the elderly are exploited. Gran was shuffled in and out of different nursing homes and hospice facilities because of insurance policies that required her to be on the brink of death in order for them to keep paying for her stay. At the end of May, she was moved out of a hospice facility that provided her with extraordinary care and transferred to a rough nursing home where she didn’t receive the care she needed. All of this because her doctors deemed that “she wasn’t sick enough” and was “doing much better.”

Grandma’s body declined slowly, forcing us to witness the gradual loss of her ability to do anything for herself. This was extremely difficult to watch given that grandma had to be attended to regularly by a nurse who would change her clothes, feed her, and bathe her. I vividly remember staying in the room as the nurse bathed my grandmother, exposing the most private parts of her body even though she was trying to keep her body covered. My grandmother had lost the ability to control her bodily movements, so even with the nurse’s best attempts at maintaining her privacy, Gran’s body refused to be covered by anything. Delilah said something that still sticks with me as we reflected on the experience of witnessing the decline of our grandmother’s body. She observed, “Before you lies a body that has lived through so much. It has a history to it. It contains that history in its blood, in its scars, in its simple existence. And though you may gaze upon it and see everything, there remains a hidden history that is only visible to
the person privy to its innermost world.” I felt fortunate to have Delilah by my side as we contemplated end-of-life issues and death. She offered such beautiful perspectives on the world, perspectives that are sensitive and attuned to the beauty that can accompany aging.

Grandma did not have to struggle long. She died in June with her son and daughter by her side telling her how much they loved her and how much she meant to them. For the third time in six months, we lost another family member. We struggled to accept and make sense of the heartbreaking events of 2011. I had thought that I was doing better with everything, but my grandmother’s death reminded me that death is inescapable and inevitable. No matter how much I wanted to change the events of 2011, I couldn’t. No matter how much I wanted to repair my shattered world, I couldn’t. I would never see my mom or grandmother again. How do I move on and accept that? Life is fragile and very often unfair.

SHifting realities…acting out the vision of spiritual activism

“Power comes from being in touch with your body, soul, and spirit, and letting their wisdom lead you”

Illustration 10: My Mom and I, 2

Illustration 10: This is a picture of my mother and I on her birthday in 2000. My father, Mark Dominguez, took this photo.
I miss believing that the world is safe. Two years ago, if someone had asked me where I would be right now, I would have never guessed that I would be motherless. It has been two years and I already feel the image of her slowly fading in my memory. As I was reading from Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*, I was struck by a poignant line about how memories of loved ones inevitably fade over time. After losing his entire family in a ship wreck, the main character, Pi, reflects back on his experience several years later after being the sole survivor of the unexpected disaster. He realizes that even though he deeply loves his mother, it is difficult to keep her alive in his memory. Pi writes,

I can hardly remember what my mother looks like anymore. I can see her in my mind, but it is fleeting. As soon as I try to have a good look at her, she fades. It’s the same with her voice. If I saw her on the street, it would all come back to me. But that’s not likely to happen. It’s very sad to not remember what your mother looks like. (87)

Indeed, it is incredibly sad to be unable to recall the face of someone who you love so much, someone who made your life worth living. It is devastating to acknowledge that memory can only sustain and hold on to an image for so long. The idea of forgetting my mother frightens and hurts me, making me long to find ways to keep her with me. Perhaps that is why I have spent the last two years writing about her. I don’t want to forget her. I can’t forget her.

Developing a mindset that allows for magical thinking and growth can save a person, inspiring a desire to imagine more nuanced ways of seeing the world. For example, in Joan Didion’s memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, she explores the magical thinking that went on as she dealt with her husband’s unexpected death from a heart attack. Specifically, she writes about her experiences during the first year of her
husband’s death, describing the strange thoughts that went through her mind as she tried to process his untimely death. Didion offers an example of such thinking when she shares her early attempts to get rid of his belongings. She explains,

I was not yet prepared to address the suits and shirts and jackets but I thought I could handle his shoes. I stopped at the door to the room. I could not give away the rest of his shoes. I stood there for a moment, then realized why: he would need shoes if he was to return. (37)

Rather than viewing Didion’s reasoning for keeping his shoes as a disturbing form of denial, I identify it as an imaginative coping mechanism in the face of death. When you experience traumatic ruptures, like death, it is difficult to immediately process everything that has happened to you. Consciousness itself does not know what to make of immediate changes, so it must find creative ways to engage with the world in order to process ruptures. I experienced many moments like this, moments where I convinced myself that the devastating circumstance could be reversed. I do not regret these moments. All of the moments in which I allowed myself to believe that my mom would return, send me a star, or defy death played a pivotal role in helping my mind process the violence her death caused to my consciousness. This mode of thinking didn’t just save me as I coped with her death, but it has fundamentally transformed the way that I see and understand the world around me.

As I keep emphasizing, I am afraid by the idea of forgetting my mom. This is a normal fear when you lose someone that you love. Joan Didion also worried about forgetting her husband as she moved through her grief. She writes, “I know why we try to
keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us” (Didion 123). I desperately want to keep her with me.

For the first three months after her death, I would wake up and my first thought was, “Mom is dead. This is my life now.” This thought would set the tone for the day by making me feel disillusioned and helpless. Even though this thought depressed me, I also found it to be strangely comforting that it was my first thought. I will never forget the day when I woke up and her death wasn’t the first thought that popped in my mind. When I realized this later in the day, I felt so guilty and disappointed because it felt like I was, in some sense, forgetting her and moving on.

It was and still is impossible to forget her because her absence has so profoundly impacted everyone in my family. Part of my transformation as I move forward in the face of this rupture is realizing the impossibility of forgetting her. Not forgetting does not mean that you live in the past and let their absence consume you, but rather, not forgetting her requires taking the lessons I learned as a result of her death, and raising awareness about the importance of improving the way in which death is engaged within the United States. Death has changed me, allowing me to see how strangely we attend to dead bodies.

This revelation hit me after my sister, Delilah, began searching through my mother’s autopsy report during the summer of 2011. Delilah was the only one who wanted to access my mother’s autopsy report, which she explained was prompted by her longing for closure after the traumatic loss. However, what she ended up discovering from her investigation offered anything but closure. She was horrified and angered after
reading it, motivating her to write a detailed journal entry analyzing the autopsy report and sharing her feelings about its findings. She shared her powerful entry with me, asking me to consider reading it even though she knew that I didn’t want to see the autopsy report. She warned, “It will infuriate and hurt you, Victoria.” Given everything we had been through together, I knew I needed to descend into Delilah’s wound and read her analysis of the autopsy report. This is her story.

**DELILAH’S STORY**

Today I decided to access Mom’s autopsy report. Midday I called the Justice of the Peace and requested a copy of it. A secretary told me she’d call me back, but after three hours of waiting and hearing no response, I drove to the courthouse to make further inquiry.

I climbed a flight of stairs down into a basement office where a lady behind a glass booth asked how she might help me. I told her I’d called about my Mom’s autopsy earlier, and she asked me to have a seat while the Justice of the Peace finished with a few clients who were in her office.

As I sat, I felt dizzy and light-headed. I never thought I’d be waiting for this information in my life. It was surreal.

It took about five minutes before the Justice of the Peace greeted me from behind the glass. I repeated why I’d come to the courthouse, and she asked me to write my request on a yellow legal pad she slid to me. I wrote something like:

**June 22, 2011**

I, Delilah Dylan Dominguez, hereby formally request the autopsy report associated with my mother, Maria Dominguez, in accordance with the public access law (Or something to that effect, I forget what they told me to write…)

A few minutes after returning the pad to the J.P., she came back from her office with 6 sheets of paper. She looked at them and then up at me.

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13 I received permission from my sister, Delilah Dominguez, to include this piece of writing from her personal journal into my thesis.
“It’s been a tough year for you having lost both of your parents. You just lost your dad recently, didn’t you?”

“No ma’am. I lost my grandmother on June 9, but Dad’s still alive,” I responded. Even if Dad sometimes seems a little dead, he’s certainly not dead yet.

“Oh, really? She asked, wrinkling her forehead and raising her brows. “Hm. Well, are you sure you want this? She glances down at the papers. “I’m not really sure you really want to see these papers.”

“I think I do, ma’am. I need some sort of closure.”

“Ok…well, here you go.”

My hands shook as she gave me the papers. I tried to act calm and not look too eager to devour them.

“I was with your mother at the hospital.”

“You’re the one who pronounced her dead, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Just so you know, I said a prayer for her. She looked peaceful.”

“That’s what I’ve heard. Thank you. It means a lot that you did that for her.”

I turned to leave, but the J.P. stopped me.

“Did your father pay for an ambulance that day? Did they bill him?”

“Yes, ma’am. They did.”

“If I were you, I’d ask for my money back. Look here,” she said. “Your mother was dead before she got in that ambulance. They didn’t need to take her to the hospital.”

“What? I asked. My heart beat faster. “You mean she was dead when they got there?”

“Yes. Look at the EMS report. See the notes? It says right here, ‘Pt. complained of nausea and vomiting, Pt. husband checked on Pt. 30 minutes later and she was unresponsive, Pt. found on bed with no bystander. CPR. No change in Pt. rhythm during call. Asystole with no pulses on arrival of EMS.’ Your mother was dead. You can see that she didn’t have a pulse when they arrived. There was no need to take her. And look at this,” she said, pointing to the chart displaying Mom’s vital signs. “Nothing. All zeros.”
“You mean to tell me that she was dead, and they took her dead body to the hospital to just take it there?

The J.P. raised her eyebrows. “I’ve seen EMS take a decapitated body to the hospital for the money. Decapitated. There’s no chance a person’s going to survive a decapitation. Yet they took the body. You see, if your mother died at home, EMS would have had to have waited at the house for me to arrive. I live about 9 minutes from you guys. But no. Your mother was dead, and they took her to the hospital. As long as they take a body to the hospital, they get paid. If I were you, I’d call them and ask them to see proof that your mother needed to be taken to the hospital. Ask to see the Rhythm Sheet and make them prove to you that ride was necessary.”

Fury rises within me. “You mean to tell me that Mom was dead, that there was no hope, yet they put Dad through all of that? They didn’t even let him ride in the ambulance with her. They had him stay so that he could answer any questions the police had. You mean to tell me they put him through that for nothing?”

“Yes. I think so. The EMS here has done a number of questionable things. It makes me furious. But if they hadn’t taken your mother to the hospital, you and your sisters would have been able to see her. As it was, nothing could be removed. All the tubes they used couldn’t be removed. Everything had to say as it was. If they had left your mother at your house, I could’ve kept her there until you all got to say your goodbyes. It sounds like they just didn’t want to wait, so they took her to the hospital.”

I left the J.P.’s office feeling slightly weak. I called Dad on the way out and told him what he had already known, that Mom had indeed died at the house, undoubtedly. He said he knew, that he’d seen the deadness in her eyes that morning.

TRANSFORMING PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH THROUGH SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

A gifted thinker and writer, Delilah exposes how disturbingly bodies are treated, viewed, and written about once they have died. The rest of Delilah’s journal entry offers an in-depth analysis of my mother’s autopsy report, highlighting the degree by which people become objects of scientific investigation once they have died. She observes that the writing found in the autopsy report reads like a detached, science report that treats people as merely bodies, vehicles up for inspection. She states, “I wonder who writes such a detached document, who can train himself or herself to look at human beings as
subjects to be written about like this. I suppose such a person just sees the deceased as a
body” (Delilah, Journal Entry). Like Delilah, I didn’t know what to make of the way that
bodies are written about. It bothered me deeply and made me wonder why this is what
writing about dead bodies had to look like. The medical discourse that permeates my
mother’s autopsy report establishes a tone of detachment that encourages readers to focus
on the science rather than the inconvenient fact that the body that is being studied and
deconstructed was once living only a few hours or days before.

Moreover, what disturbed me about thinking about my mother’s autopsy is
realizing how highly invasive autopsies are because every part of the human body is
exposed, dissected, and analyzed in the name of discovering a precise cause of death.
Most people don’t realize how intense and elaborate autopsy procedures are. It wasn’t
until I read my mother’s autopsy report that I discovered the violent and intrusive nature
of such procedures.

When a person dies unexpectedly at a hospital, their body is expected to remain
in the precise condition it was at the moment of death. This means that all medical
equipment, including EKG pads, defibrillation pads, catheters, combitubes, needles, and
hospital identification bands must all be left on the body. In my mother’s case, even
though she was clearly dead long before she arrived at the hospital, because her body was
taken to the hospital and officially pronounced dead there, her body had to be left with all
of the equipment they used in trying to revive her. As the J.P. pointed out, because the
EMS workers didn’t want to wait around for her arrival, they decided it was best to take
my mother on an ambulance ride to the hospital, which was a decision that prevented me
from being able to see my mother. If she was left at home, I would have been able to see her immediately and her body wouldn’t have been covered with medical equipment. I wouldn’t have had to wait three days to see her embalmed body, an image that I still struggle to process to this day.

But once at the hospital, my mother became merely a body, a body whose life story didn’t seem to matter. Her body was pumped full of chemicals and other substances even though there was never any hope. It all seemed like a grand performance to me, revealing medical practitioners’ inability to admit defeat and pronounce a person dead. When I think of my mother’s dead body in a morgue for three days in that condition, covered by tubes and EKG pads, my heart still hurts.

The imagined image of her body in a morgue was enough to haunt me, but the vivid image that the autopsy report provides about her body deeply disturbed me. Before an autopsy is conducted, photographs are taken and detailed descriptions of the physical condition of the body are noted. The body is exposed and vulnerable. Every internal organ is removed so that it can be weighed, examined, and assessed, including the human brain, the heart, the lungs, the liver, all of it. It is emptied in the name of science. The skin that covers the face and the chest are peeled like a banana in order to access and study the internal organs and fluids. The examiner opens the stomach, weighing its contents and then draining the fluids and materials. They dissect the body for four hours on average, not leaving a spot untouched during the examination.

Given the invasive nature of autopsies and the extremely personal nature of its contents, I have opted to not include the official autopsy report in my thesis. When
discussing this with my supervisor, I began to realize the ethical dilemma I faced if I decided to disclose the medical examiner’s report about my mother. My supervisor asked, “How do you think your mom would feel if you decided to include it?” I am glad that she asked this important question because knowing my mother, she wouldn’t have wanted such intimate details about herself included. My mother was a very modest woman who would have wanted her body treated with respect. She would have been uncomfortable with me disclosing the specific details about her body from the autopsy report. Because I know this about my mother, I feel even more disturbed by her autopsy. She would have never wanted that to happen to her body, but she was left without a choice.

I want to try my best to give my mother a choice here. She deserves respect in the afterlife, respect that she wasn’t granted as she was dying. The primary reason that I considered including excerpts from her report into my thesis was because I was angered by the language that permeates the autopsy report. I felt that it was important to draw attention to an autopsy report because it is a document that most people don’t look at or see in their lifetime. It was painful for me to read her report because it was written in such an objectifying way that it made my mom seem like a mere body instead of a person that was alive only a few days before becoming a subject of a detached science report.

All of this to say that we need to find better ways to not only treat dead bodies, but on how to talk about death in a more meaningful and productive way. I had the pleasure of enrolling in a graduate seminar on Grief Counseling during my last year of graduate study. In this course, I was introduced to George Bonanno’s The Other Side of Sadness, which calls attention to an often overlooked aspect of grief—resiliency.
Bonanno suggests that resilience is the norm rather than intense depression in the aftermath of loss. He also observes that resilient people offer stories that “give flesh to some of the myriad experiences of grieving, and they show that even when we cope effectively with loss, we have diverse reactions and find different ways to get past it” (Bonnano 47). As I reflect on my experience as a grieving body, I realize that resiliency was necessary for me to even begin the task of writing about my grief experience.

When I began writing my thesis, I had so many hopes for what it would potentially become, but of all of those hopes, I discovered that what I wanted most was to write an honest story about what grief does to a person, a story that assures others that it is ok to be broken when death strikes. I also wanted to provide an account of what it looks like to live between the borderlands of life and death, and what it is like to be in a perpetual state of nepantla.

Nepantla is a Náhuatl term that refers to liminal zones, spaces that serve as transitions between worlds. As Anzaldúa establishes, inhabiting this in-between, precarious space results in “seeing double…you glimpse the sea in which you’ve been immersed to which you were oblivious, no longer seeing the world the way you were taught to see it” (“now let us shift” 549). In other words, nepantla allows us to see and experience the world in ways that we never have before. My experience with grief has enabled me to inhabit nepantla regularly, allowing me to inhabit the seemingly disparate worlds of life and death. This experience has permanently altered the way that I understand not only the world, but the people who I share it with.
Even though nepantla is a space defined by ambiguity and confusion, Anzaldúa identifies this as a potentially powerful site for growth. She suggests that nepantla can facilitate the desire to repair, restore, or rebuild our destroyed assumptive worlds. She writes, “Let’s use art and imagination to discover how we feel and think and help us respond to the world. It is in nepantla that we write and make art, bearing witness to the attempt to achieve resolution and balance where there may be none in real life” (“let us be the healing of the wound” (313). My writing is a testament to the fact that nepantla is a site that produces a desire from within to contend with some of life’s most difficult questions. My time in nepantla has been a catalyst for my own writing because it allowed me to work through my own feelings in order to make meaning. This is essential because once we create our own meanings from reflecting on our wounds, we can then turn to others and share that newfound knowledge.

Spiritual activism is the term that Anzaldúa coins to describe this process of collectively sharing our wounds and our most painful experiences in the name of bringing about social change. In Anzaldúa’s final essay published in her lifetime, “Let us be the healing of the wound,” she reflects on the events of 9/11 and shares her feelings about the tragedy. She writes, “bodies on fire, bodies falling through the sky, bodies pummeled and crushed by stone and steel, los cuerpos trapped and suffocating became our bodies” (“let us be the healing of the wound” 303). The violence that defined 9/11 haunted Anzaldúa and many people around the globe. People sensed that this event would change the world, but no one knew exactly how it would. Some even claimed that the world ended and stopped that day. Anzaldúa, though deeply disturbed by the violence, explains that “the
‘world’ doesn’t so much stop as it cracks” (“let us be the healing of the wound 310). 9/11 changed the world because it “cracked our perception of the world, how we relate to it, how we engage with it” (310). She urges all of us to reflect on the crack and to begin the difficult project of rebuilding our broken world in the wake of terrifying violence.

Part of this daunting process is realizing that healing is a constant struggle that requires work and energy. The Coyolxauhqui imperative is Anzaldúa’s term to describe the process of healing. She explains, “The Coyolxauhqui imperative is an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing” (“let us be the healing of the wound” 312). The Coyolxauhqui imperative is important because it establishes that healing does not have an end. Instead, it suggests that to heal means to devote one’s self to constant transformation. The notion that we must always work to transform our lives, our selves, and our worlds sheds light on the pivotal role of stories in making and unmaking the world, gesturing towards the transformative potential of consciousness-raising as a tool towards healing.

My hope for my writing and my thesis is that it will speak to the importance of identifying stories and consciousness-raising as important tools not just in healing, but also in academic writing. I have always been drawn to writing that speaks to one’s soul, writing that makes you feel something. Affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich observes in her latest book Depression: A Public Feeling, that “[she] maintained an attachment to the culture of consciousness-raising and an investment in how the expression of emotion can have collective and public impact” (76). Like Cvetkovich, I believe that consciousness-raising is not an outdated form of activism. In fact, it seems that storytelling through
autohistoria-teoría, memoir, or other nonconventional academic methods embody what it looks like to heal. As Cvetkovich smartly points out, memoir

“depicts transformation as a slow and painstaking process, open-ended and marked by struggle, not by magic bullet solutions or happy endings, even the happy endings of social justice that many political critiques of therapeutic culture recommend. It suggests that when asking big questions about what gives meaning to our lives, or how art or politics can promote social justice or save the planet, ordinary routines can be a resource. The revolution and utopia are made there, not in giant transformations or rescues.” (80)
Chapter 3: Spirituality

In the fall of 2011, I was walking to my car after a long afternoon of studying on campus. I was feeling positive about life because my thesis topic was developing and I had finally found a supervisor to help support my research. I was feeling optimistic about life for the first time since graduation. As I walked towards the parking lot, I caught sight of a marvelous falling star. I was so amazed that I could hardly control my excitement—my mom had finally sent me a falling star! In my heart, I knew it was from her because it is extremely difficult to see a falling star in general, let alone in the middle of downtown Austin. I stopped and smiled at the sky, knowing that it was a sign from her, a message of support that she was with me even though I could not see her. I felt her presence strongly that night. She still was with me. She wanted to wish me a happy early birthday.

I bring up this experience to begin a conversation about the role of spirituality in making sense of death. After my mother died, many people at the funeral made comments to me about how my mother was “in a better place” or that I should be relieved because “God had called her home.” Even though these comments were well-meaning and coming from a good place, I felt deeply frustrated by these types of claims. I wondered, how do you know that with certainty? How do you know where she is? And most importantly, how do you know that God even exists?

This is not to say that I do not believe in the possibility of God. As a thinker disciplined in philosophy, I subscribe to the belief that there is so much about this world that we cannot ever know with certainty. Most people, however, tend to approach the world with the perspective that they know things with certainty. For example, In Plato’s
*Five Dialogues,* the character of Euthyphro believes that he has the faculty to decide what is and is not pious with certainty. Euthyphro is so certain that he has identified the look of piety that he decides to prosecute his father for murder, a murder that he may or may not be responsible for. Socrates remarks that only one “who his far advanced in wisdom” is able to make such certain judgments (Plato 4). Socrates is highlighting the dangers of not questioning our deeply held perspectives of the world, perspectives that he feels always deserve constant reflection. In other words, Socrates does not identify issues as having a right or wrong answer because he understands the world as far more complex. As such, Socrates is simultaneously intrigued and skeptical by Euthyphro’s certainty and resolve to prosecute his own father.

Socrates, curious and captivated by Euthyphro’s certainty, challenges Euthyphro to give him a singular, accurate account of the nature of piety, but he is unable to offer an account that holds. Euthyphro observes, “But Socrates, I have no way of telling you what I have in mind, for whatever proposition we put forward goes around and refuses to stay put where we establish it” (Plato 14). Euthyphro’s observation calls our attention to the impossibility of accepting one account of the world with certainty. World perspectives never stay put. As soon as Euthyphro accepts one account, Socrates quickly points out the flaws in it, forcing Euthyphro to create and imagine a new perspective. Clearly, as Plato demonstrates in this dialogue, it is difficult to maintain our world perspectives because they are always subject to change.

As such, it is imperative that we open ourselves up to change and impermanence. The trouble is that most people do not want to engage with this truth. It is often scary and
overwhelming to accept that our world perspectives are inevitably going to collapse. As Sogyal Rinpoche, a well-respected Tibetan Buddhist monk, observes, “We are terrified of letting go, terrified, in fact, of living at all, since learning to live is learning to let go” (33). Our fear of letting go makes people cling to fixed perspectives of the world, perspectives that are all based on an illusion of permanence. However, as Plato illuminated, the world is anything but permanent. After all, “There is only one law in the universe that never changes—that all things change, and that all things are impermanent” (Sogyal Rinpoche 29).

The idea of impermanence fascinates me because I know that the world is always changing, but the idea of “letting go” through embracing impermanence seems extremely difficult to do. In January of 2013, I witnessed the creation of a mandala at the Blanton Museum on the University of Texas campus. For this special exhibition, the Blanton invited 10 monks from the Drepung Loseling Monastery in Atlanta to construct a 5-foot sand mandala in the museum. The monks worked on the sand mandala for five days by carefully filling an elaborate artistic design placed on a table.

Illustration 11: This is a photograph at the Blanton museum of the monks working on the sand mandala. I took it on January 12, 2013.

After working hard to create the remarkable display, the monks end the ceremony by destroying the mandala, wiping away the sand.

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14 Illustration 11: This is a photograph at the Blanton museum of the monks working on the sand mandala. I took it on January 12, 2013.
that they spent days meticulously putting in place. The mandala serves as a physical manifestation of the idea of impermanence. Like humans, the mandala represents the hard work and intense energy that goes into living. We build our lives and often put an incredible amount of energy into the creation of our worlds. However, like the mandala, we are also impermanent and can easily be wiped away. Inevitably, our lives end.

Illustration 12: Sand and Supplies

When you live in a world that seems so real and stable, it is easy to understand why it is so difficult to acknowledge the ephemeral nature of it. It is hard to grasp the idea that all of it is going to end. My mom’s death allowed me to see this truth in ways that I never have before, inspiring me to start considering what it really means to exist in a world in which everything is constantly changing. I have now started to realize that embracing impermanence means “letting go” of our obsession with the material reality. In some sense, “letting go” means finding acceptance in knowing that the world is shifting and never stable. “Letting go” invites us to think about social reality in a more nuanced way.

Illustration 12: This is an image of the colored sand and other materials used to construct the mandala. I took this photograph at the Blanton museum on January 12, 2013.
Not only do things constantly change, but it is critical that we reflect on the nature of suffering. Robert Thurman, an expert in Tibetan Buddhism, offers a thorough account of the Four Noble Truths, which is “the basic formula the Buddha used to teach his breakthrough insight into the nature of suffering and the way to freedom of it” (258).

According to Thurman, the Four Noble Truths are:

1. That all delusion-driven life is suffering.
2. The causes of suffering are misknowledge and evolution.
3. There is freedom from such suffering.
4. The path to that freedom consists of a spiritual education in morality, meditation, and scientific wisdom.

The 4 Noble Truths highlight the importance of understanding that even though there is suffering in the world, there are ways that we can learn how to develop a mindset that leads us to freedom from suffering. In other words, the Four Nobel Truths reveal to us the power of the mind and the importance of reflecting critically on the nature of the world around us. If we allow ourselves to see that we all suffer, we all inevitably experience pain, then we enable consciousness to expand and see the world in a more compassionate way, leading us one step closer towards developing conocimiento.

Tibetan Buddhism has offered a paradigm shift for me as I have continued grieving while working on this thesis. Developing an understanding and heartfelt conviction of phenomena as impermanent may help us experience less pain and devastation in the heart when encountering a wide array of situations that remind us of the nature that exists at the core of the human experience: the inevitability of change and suffering. This new paradigm has invited me consider how to use this knowledge to connect with others. I can’t help but wonder what the world would be like if people truly
understood the impermanence of it all. What potential would we have to improve the world? Sogyal Rinpoche writes,

So many veils and illusions separate us from the stark knowledge that we are dying; when we finally know we are dying, and all other sentient beings are dying with us, we start to have a burning, almost heartbreaking sense of the fragility and preciousness of each moment and each being, and from this can grow a deep, clear, limitless compassion for all beings. (191)

Sogyal Rinpoche’s belief that a close encounter with death can bring a real awakening, a transformation within our hearts resonates with me. What would the world be like if when we looked at another person, we saw ourselves and realized that we shared the same inevitable fate? People walk by each other often in life and seldom give a second glance at one another. When I was sitting on the bus heading to campus one afternoon, I was struck by how strangely absorbed people are in their own worlds. People are deeply engaged with technology, clinging to their iPods and phones, plugging their ears with headphones so as to drown away the sounds of traffic and people with music. You can sit next to a person for an hour and never find out their name. I often wonder about the people I sit next to on the bus. I wonder what their lives are like, what events they are struggling with, and if they feel alone or happy in this world. I suspect my curiosity about the lives of others is a result of my experiences with death and loss. As it turns out, this isn’t uncommon. Sogyal Rinpoche observes that,

Researchers have noted a startling range of aftereffects and changes [after death has struck]: a reduced fear and deeper acceptance of death, an increased concern for helping others; and enhanced vision of the importance of love; less interest in materialistic pursuits; a growing belief in spiritual dimension and the spiritual meaning of life; and of course, a greater openness to belief in the afterlife. (29)
The death of my mother has made me more compassionate, longing to connect with other human beings in order to improve the world. Moreover, my mother’s death has opened my heart to the spiritual meaning of life again. After years of being in school and being trained to value rationality, I allowed a part of myself to die when I became educated. I now want to return to embracing the spirit, acknowledging that the world may not be as straightforward as the human eye suggests.

I grew up believing in the existence of spirits. My mom introduced my sisters and I to the idea that we weren’t the only occupants of the world. She insisted that there was another realm, a realm where spirits walked the earth longing to return to the world of the living. I had many encounters as a child with what I would consider other worldly beings, beings that were unable to fully integrate into the world of the dead. Even as I write this now, I understand how absurd it all seems to suggest that phantoms exist. I suspect that part of the reason my words are approached with skepticism is because in the United States, we have conditioned ourselves to believe a very specific narrative about how the world works. The existence of spirits or entities that we cannot explain rationally are pushed aside and labeled as figments of our imaginations. I am not sure how or why this has been able to happen, but I know that it has because even as I write I feel embarrassed to say such things because I have internalized the idea that it is seen as ridiculous. I have buried my past and the other worldly activities that once were part of my everyday life because I was told for so long of the impossibility of the existence of spirits.
I bring this up not to create an argument for the existence of spirits, but to gesture towards the importance of opening ourselves up to the possibility that there are other realities that we do not perceive with the human eye. In other words, how do we make sense of what we cannot see?

**WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR BODIES POSTMORTEM?**

We do not like to entertain the existence of realities that we cannot readily see. We have a tendency to objectify and rationalize all facets of the world and make claims of knowledge based on those practices. Our bodies are not immune from this. In fact, in contemporary U.S. society, once dead, the human body is used in shocking ways. In Mary Roach’s *Stiff: The Curious Life of Human Cadavers,* she writes about the myriad ways in which bodies are treated postmortem by exposing the secret lives of human cadavers. Roach, an established journalist, asserts that “cadavers, once you get used to them—and you do that quite fast—are surprisingly easy to be around” (98).

She then describes how bodies donated to science are used once they have been obtained for designated research purposes. Specifically, in her chapter titled “Dead Man Driving,” Roach examines the use of human cadavers in car crash experiments. She writes, “bioengineers and automobile manufacturers (GM, notably) began ushering cadavers into the driver’s seats of crash simulator, front halves of cars on machine-accelerated sleds that are stopped abruptly to mimic the forces of a head-on collision” (91). Essentially, the human body morphs into a test subject so that scientists can better understand and assess the impact that car crashes have on the human body. The idea is that if we study the results from these simulated crashes with human cadavers, public
safety will be improved and lives will be saved. To justify this as an important and acceptable practice, Roach states the following:

A human leg has no face, no eyes, no hands that once held babies or stroked a lover’s cheek. It’s difficult to associate it with the living person from which it came. The anonymity of body parts facilitates the necessary dissociations of cadaveric research: This is not a person. This is just tissue. It has no feelings, and no one has feelings for it. It’s okay to do things to it which, were it a sentient being, would constitute torture. (105)

Undoubtedly, human cadavers have saved an incredible number of lives. However, it seems important to consider the implications of conceptualizing human cadavers as merely lifeless lumps of flesh. At what point does our reliance on objectification become a problem? How does viewing bodies in this way inhibit our ability to imagine the human spirit? Bodies donated to science to be used for the purposes of research are labeled as anything but living, which is supposed to justify the brutal and inhumane treatment of what was once a recognizably human body. I do not mean to condemn the use of human cadavers, but I want to complicate discussions about how to view and understand the postmortem body. In other words, what if, despite the sciences insistence, the human body and the soul are inextricably linked?

This question is important to consider because not everyone subscribes to the belief that the body is merely an object to be desecrated after death. When we readily accept the idea that the body simply transforms into an object in death, we risk privileging an epistemology that values and privileges rationality in making decisions about how bodies ought to be treated in death. This way of knowing fails to recognize the differing cultural perspectives that assert the sacredness of the human body. After
reflecting on what happened to my mom’s body, it became apparent to me the depths of U.S. society’s insensitivity and lack of cultural competence about perspectives on death, dying, and the human body.

To return to the work of Sogyal Rinpoche from *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, he explains some of the central tenets of Tibetan Buddhism around death. He then describes his disappointment with how Western society engages with death by calling into question the dismissal of spirituality. He argues that “the moment of death is an exceptionally powerful opportunity” for an individual to leave the world in a meaningful way (Sogyal Rinpoche 227). As such, the manner in which we die becomes of utmost importance because it shapes and impacts how consciousness will continue its journey onward.

For example, it is the Tibetan Buddhist belief that the body should be immersed in a calm and harmonious environment as it is dying. Sogyal Rinpoche reflects on how spirituality is often lacking and ignored in the West not only as one is dying, but also once a person is officially pronounced dead. To remedy this neglect of spirituality in relation to death, he suggests that “people should die at home, because it is at home that the majority of people are likely to feel most comfortable” (Sogyal Rinpoche 189). The idea behind dying at home is that facilitates the peaceful death that the Buddhist masters advise, which is easier to achieve in settings in which the dying associate with comfort.

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16 A reflection by Dr. Mary Celeste Kearney, my second reader is relevant here. She writes, “In several places you state that Western societies refuse to engage with suffering and death. Is this true of all Western societies, or mostly the US?” Death and grieving are certainly dealt with differently in every country in the West. Mexico, for instance, is in the West but is not as death-denying as the US. For example, it is customary to celebrate El Día de los Muertos in Mexico, which is a day in which the dead are celebrated and honored.
This is not to say that those who die in a hospital necessarily do not leave this world in a peaceful state, but Sogyal Rinpoche cautions against medical interventions as one is dying because it may interfere with the spirits ability to leave the body. He suggests that this is the case because there is no privacy in a hospital as one is dying. People are “hooked up to monitors, and attempts to resuscitate a person will be made when they stop breathing or their heart fails” (189). In other words, these medical interventions distract consciousness as it tries to permanently leave the body to continue its journey to the next realm.

After learning all of this, I began to reflect on how my mother’s body was treated after she died. I found myself struggling to make sense of my feelings around the treatment of her body. It disturbed me to think about the lack of choice she had about how her body was treated. When I saw my mother’s body for the first time after she died, it was a jarring experience because she was embalmed and she never even had a choice in the matter. It is upsetting to think about the trauma and sorrow that followed her death. She should have been left at home because that is where she died. All of the shuffling around that her body experienced was unnecessary and it may have prevented her spirit from leaving this world peacefully. I keep thinking about if she had been a practicing Tibetan Buddhist, her body would not have been respected in relation to her spiritual views.

I bring all of this up to not condemn the use of human cadavers or make a specific claim about how bodies should be treated postmortem, but to reveal the depths of our society’s cultural insensitivity concerning death. For some people, the human body is
sacred and should be treated with respect once death has summoned the spirit. If a person wants to donate their body to science and become a human cadaver after they have died, I think that is perfectly fine. The problem is that the objectification of bodies has become the norm in U.S. society. The way in which my mother's body was treated is a testament to the fact that when we die, we often do not have any choice about how our bodies are treated. This is an upsetting truth that we must work to remedy together.
Conclusion

**WHY THIS PROJECT IS IMPORTANT FOR WOMEN’S AND GENDER STUDIES**

The recent publication of AnaLouise Keating and Gloria González-López’s book, *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa’s Life and Work Transformed Our Own*, highlights how influential Anzaldúa’s writing has been in inspiring new approaches to knowledge through “risking the personal.” In González-López’s contribution to this important anthology, “Conocimiento and Healing: Academic Wounds, Survival and Tenure,” she writes about her experiences on her path towards earning tenure, reflecting on this difficult journey using conocimiento as a framework so that she can share her story with others. She writes, “My own experience has enabled me to realize how crucial Anzaldúan theorizing is for looking closely at scars and healed wounds and especially for exploring potential ways to share these experiences with others” (92).

My thesis contributes to the growing body of feminist scholarship that puts into practice the principle of “risking the personal.” In an interview with Keating, Anzaldúa reflects on her theory of conocimiento and offers valuable insights about its transformative potential. Anzaldúa explains that “conocimiento is a theory of composition, of how a work of art gets composed, of how a field (like anthropology or literature or physics) is put together and maintained, of how reality is constructed, and of how identity is constructed” (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 177).

My thesis models what it means to contemplate and struggle with the ephemeral nature of reality. Even though my writing in the seven stages of conocimiento is
fragmented and deeply personal, it produces a different kind of knowledge that is resistant to Eurocentric epistemologies that are privileged within academia. According to Dolores Bernal and Octavio Villalpando, professors in the field of education, “Higher education in the United States is founded on a Eurocentric epistemological perspective based on white privilege and ‘American democratic’ ideals of meritocracy, objectivity, and individuality” (171). The trouble with this Eurocentric epistemology is that it “presumes that there is only one way of knowing and understanding the world, and it is the natural way of interpreting truth, knowledge, and reality” (Bernal and Villalpando 171). Bernal and Villalpando are gesturing towards the importance of acknowledging that an “apartheid of knowledge” is sustained in the academy by privileging a specific, rigid form of knowledge. As a result of hailing Eurocentric epistemologies as what counts as legitimate knowledge, the academy is severely restricting the development of alternate epistemologies that could complicate our understanding of the world.

My work strives to destabilize the primacy placed on dominant Eurocentric epistemologies that produce an “apartheid of knowledge.” I harness the creative energy that Women’s and Gender Studies has to offer because of its interdisciplinary status to model a radical methodology that embraces “risking the personal” in order to create new knowledges. Writing from the heart is much needed in academia, and Women’s and Gender Studies enables this kind of thinking and writing. I value scholarship that illuminates a problem and wrestles fully with the complexity that it has to offer even if there are no grand conclusions or solutions made at the end. In other words, there are certain subjects that cannot be definitively answered no matter how much empirical
research that one does. When researching and writing about grief, for instance, it does not make sense to merely theorize about it. If we are all going to die one day, how can we not include our personal perspectives on this truth?

Conocimiento requires that we embrace other ways of knowing and “risk the personal.” Anzaldúa writes, “I see conocimiento as a consciousness-raising tool, one that promotes self-awareness and self-reflexivity. It encourages folks to empathize and sympathize with others, to walk in the other’s shoes, whether the other is a member of the same group or belongs to a different culture” (Interviews/Entrevistas 178). Writing from my wound using conocimiento as a framework is my feminist intervention that encourages others to risk the personal in their academic writing. My hope for the future of the academy is that risking the personal becomes no longer a risk, but a respected method of writing that is pivotal in producing new knowledges, new conocimientos.

**WRITING GRIEF**

Trying to produce new knowledge from our wounds is an emotionally draining process. My thesis raises awareness and breaks the silence around a marginalized experience, which has been a feminist practice for decades and has been instrumental in bringing about social change. It also serves as a physical manifestation of my grief because it includes my most personal and vulnerable feelings. I identify my thesis as a form of spiritual activism because it attempts to bridge the gap between the personal and the theoretical by gesturing towards the limitations of writing using an established method. My autohistoria-teoría is an alternative method inspired by feminist ideals. In short, writing grief in this way would not be possible without feminism and its history of
risking the personal in the name of consciousness-raising. It has been an incredibly challenging project to risk the personal about my experiences as a grieving body. The following quote about writing by Anzaldúa captures what the process of writing from the wound feels like:

Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I do write. I can’t stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen. But, in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make “sense” of them, and once they have “meaning” they have changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me. (92)

Writing can be a process defined by struggle. Anzaldúa recognizes how difficult engaging with our most painful experiences can be by revealing the emotional labor that is required in reconstructing our traumas. As Anzaldúa’s quote so eloquently illustrates, living in a state of unrest created by ruptures is what motivates and inspires us to write. She explains further, “It is like a cactus needle embedded in the flesh. It worries itself deeper and deeper, and I keep aggravating it by poking at it…That’s what writing is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning from the experience, whatever it may be” (Borderlands 95). This description captures precisely how writing has functioned for me as I wrote about my mother’s death. The knowledge of her absence, like a cactus needle stuck in the flesh, permeated my soul and motivated me to write. As I poked and prodded at my wound, I realized that reconstructing trauma is simultaneously cathartic and painful.

Writing about my experience with grief has been painful because I had to relive so many difficult moments by summoning details that I had been pushing away for so
long. This arduous process forced me to step back and allow my body the time to reabsorb and reprocess my own feelings. I could never write for more than an hour about my grief. My body and soul could not handle it.

The depths of my grief became apparent as I wrote the third stage of conocimiento, “The Coatlicue State.” It was particularly painful for me to write this stage because I had to revisit the tragic moment of seeing my mother’s body for the first and last time. Though the image of her dead body is permanently and vividly sketched in my memory, it is one thing to have a mental image of something, but it is something entirely different to have to describe and explain such a visceral, raw image. Even now, as I re-read that section, I cannot help but relive the sorrow of that tragic moment. It marked the first time in my life I have ever felt truly helpless and alone in the world.

It is also difficult to be vulnerable. I found myself feeling uneasy and insecure about my vulnerability, fearing that I would not be able to do complete this project given my compromised emotional state. I wondered, “How can I discuss grief and death if I have not come to terms with all of it myself?” I now realize that when it comes to writing about grief and suffering, it is ok to embrace and accept all of our vulnerable feelings that arise. The fact that I was crying and feeling so intensely revealed to me that what I was writing about mattered. Our emotional responses to the writing process are valuable even when they are shamelessly raw. Life, after all, is complicated and messy. Why should the writing process not also be marked by ambiguity?

Even though writing can be painful as I have highlighted, it can also be highly therapeutic. Writing about the special moment that I shared with my mom when we saw a
falling star together allowed me to go back in time and remember how wonderful that moment really was. It reminded me of her beauty, her sensitivity, her love for her children, and her mystical sensibility. Though I will always wish to have had more time with her, I know how lucky I am to have had the privilege to know such a remarkable human being. I experienced true, genuine love by another human being. What more can you hope for in this world?

Perhaps most importantly, writing about my experience with death has revealed to me that many of the perspectives I once held can no longer be maintained no matter how much I want them to. I have to stop planning a future around the idea that my mother will be there to create new memories with me. My life has changed, but by descending into my wound and writing about it, I see and feel more deeply than I ever have. Life is beautiful even when it is terrifying and devastating.

Friedrich Nietzsche suggests that a certain kind of writing affirms the beauty and value of life. He writes, “of all that is written I love only what [one] has written with [one’s] blood. Write with blood, and you will experience the blood that is spirit” (Nietzsche 40). I have often wondered what it means to write with blood. After writing about the death of my mother, I began to realize what writing with blood might look like. Writing with blood strikes at the very essence of our humanity, revealing the ambiguity and messiness that defines our existence. When you write with blood, you are able to appeal to and connect with others in ways that you never thought possible. Writing with blood challenges the ephemeral nature of our existence. Descending into our wounds is necessary in this intense confrontation. Writing about my experience with death by
immersing myself in my wound has forced me to contend with my own mortality in ways that I never have before. I realize my own vulnerability as a human being and as a scholar, allowing me to insert that very rawness and vulnerability into my own writing. Because of my descent into my wound and the rawness that emerges, my writing is drenched by my tears and blood. It has also occurred to me that the only way for me to write about her death is with my blood. The tension I feel as I write my thesis is realizing that traditional academic writing does not lend itself to be written with blood. At this point in my life, writing with blood is the only way I know how.

Despite all of the pain and suffering that I have experienced, I still believe that my family and I will continue to find a way to survive and maintain resilience in the face of this rupture. Writing will continue to be part of this journey of survival for me. My writing has helped me as I try to come to terms with loss by preserving my memories of her. Fyodor Dostoevsky, acclaimed Russian writer, observes in The Brothers Karamazov that memories “emerge throughout one’s life as specks of light against the darkness, as a corner torn from a huge picture, which has all faded and disappeared except for that little corner” (18). Our memories, though incomplete and fleeting, carve off a piece of our lived experience. They have the ability to keep alive, in some sense, those we love and lose along the way.

I want to inspire others to use writing as a tool to make sense of death, to preserve their memories, and to face their fears. I also long to spread Anzaldúa’s message that “our most painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us towards becoming more of who we are” (Borderlands 68). I plan to continue writing
about what pains me because I must in order to produce new knowledge, to move forward, and most importantly, to continue transforming and healing myself, our communities, and our world.
References


Vita

Victoria Dominguez was born and raised in Texas. She attended Southwestern University where she received her BA in Philosophy with a concentration in feminist studies. Victoria then went on earn her MA in Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

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