Arts-based research offers us the ability to understand the unnamable aches and allusive psychic pains that afflict us without symbolic form–afflictions so defiant of language that we often doubt their existence and ignore our embodied ways of making sense, until they metastasize into a more aggressive pathology.

Good Mourning: Existing with Loss While Living in the Anxious Now

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Abstract: Absence and loss are part of what it means to be alive. While common, grief is a difficult and complex aspect of the human psyche, often producing affects that mask themselves in different forms such as anxiety, anger, despair, and isolation. Able to bring into form the unnamable affects of our psychic lives (Irwin & Springgay, 2008), arts-based research methods can be viable means to transform the grief into something generative. In this paper, each author describes a project that uses a different arts-based research approach to explore a personal experience with grief. Drawing from wordless narrative research (Horwat, 2018) diffractive ethnography (Gullion, 2018) and walking currere (Irwin, 2006), these projects seek to make sense of ubiquitous expressions of grief, such as complicated grief, political grief, and ecological grief, to show how they not only can generate new understandings but make empathic connections with others suffering from similar allusive psychic afflictions. The paper highlights the implicit generosity that arts-based research engenders in its ability to make tangible the distressing and ambiguous psychic conditions we experience.

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Every Mourning is a New Arrival

While every generation since recorded history has believed they lived in an age of anxiety, this moment seems particularly catastrophic. Statistically, as one of the deadliest events in American history, the Covid 19 pandemic destroyed families, communities, livelihoods, and economies and exacerbated a wide range of preexisting social, economic, and political crises–producing a perfect storm of death and destruction (Branswell, 2021; Žižek, 2020). Additionally, we are experiencing an ecological crisis that has contributed to the loss of landscapes and species (Consulo & Ellis, 2018). As our planet and society experience existential losses, the ethical challenge for survivors is to persist beyond overwhelming doubt, push forward despite systemic opposition, and fight harder than ever while grieving the loss of the world we once knew. How do we endure while living with and through the grief we continue to accrue with each passing day?

We posit that how we move through and with grief during these times of despair requires creative acts that allow mourning to be recognized as generative. Philips (2000) writes that "Mourning is the necessary suffering that makes life possible. Good mourning keeps people moving on, keeps them in time, bad mourning becomes something akin to an ascetic personal religion" (p.28). In this article, we reflect on the intertwined roles of artists, researchers, and teachers as a viable way to not only process different forms of grief but learn from it–using the loss to forge new connections. We propose that arts-based research can transform grief into something generative—broad understandings that have the capacity to cross contexts and instill some form of wisdom for others. In this view, art practice is a self-reflective crucial process of naming the unnameable.

…And a Good Mourning to you Too…

Our understanding of grief (a term sometimes used interchangeably with mourning), has evolved since intellectuals and psychoanalysts like Burton (1651/1938), Freud (1917/1963), Shand, (1914/1920), and others wrote about this seemingly impenetrable emotion. First understood as an ambiguous form of melancholy or intense sadness, grief was believed to be a psychic state that "usually begins with a definitive event when the death or life disruption occurred; [with] its ending or perhaps resolution [being] often much less clear and may never occur" (Charmaz & Milligan, 2006, p. 520). The amorphous duration of grief and the mysterious process of grieving is one of the more debatable and unique aspects as it both suggests our continued lack of understanding as well as a significant divide in how to manage it–viewing grief as a complex, natural process (Goldie, 2011), or as a pathology requiring medicalized treatment (Granek, 2010).

Grief is understood as an intense and persistent form of psychic pain caused by the loss or absence of someone or something of significance (Charmaz & Milligan, 2006; Granek, 2010). Often associated with the loss of a family member, friend, or beloved pet, grief can be experienced by the loss of cherished objects, or the loss of one's home. However, grief extends to losses beyond the material, for we can grieve the loss of our identities, the loss of our culture, the loss of our sense of place, or the loss of a personal dream or ambition (Charmaz & Milligan, 2006).

The traditional use of the word grief refers specifically to relational grief, which describes the grief of losing a loved one (Charmaz & Milligan, 2006; Kumar, 2021). Literature describes other common forms of grief, such as delayed grief, where the mourner appears in denial of the loss and processes, such as the loss after the initial separation, and anticipatory grief, where mourners grieve an imminent loss such as family member slowing dying from a terminal illness, and collective grief where a shared or communal experience loss is felt within a community or nation-state (Charmaz &

Milligan, 2006; Goldie, 2011; Granek, 2010; Kumar, 2021). There are also uncommon forms of grief, emotional responses that may speak to some of the more ubiquitous experiences of loss like complicated grief, political grief, and ecological grief. Complicated grief is understood as "[resulting] from multiple stressors and is characterized by excessive rumination, alienation, hopelessness, and intrusive thought for the dead " (Kumar, 2021, p. 104). Political grief or ideological grief was conceptualized as an increasing polarization of political movements across the different nation-states where contrasting ideologies suggest immense losses for the supporters of political parties out of power, relating directly to "losses that are experienced by individuals as a result of political policies, ideologies, and oppression enacted and/or empowered at the sociopolitical levels" (Harris, 2021, p. 579). With climate change comes ecological grief, experienced as a result of loss of ecosystems and landscapes that are closely tied to social, cultural, and economic well-being (;Consulo & Ellis, 2018; Crossley, 2020). These less discernible experiences of grief are challenging in both their infrequent use in common lexicons of grief and mourning and their ambiguous contours, which are often misrepresented with inaccurate emotions.

A common thread throughout the different forms of grief is the inability to comprehend the absence of something significant. Like the separation of atomic particles, the ripping apart of something personally fundamental produces an existential form of psychic distress where "the person not only feels the void of loss but also the lack of its reality" (Charmaz & Milligan, 2006, p. 520). With grief having the capacity to profoundly impact our lives, we return to the question of how best to live with and through the pervasive anxieties, losses, and expressions of grief. In this article, we respond to different forms of grief we are experiencing today as a society through their arts-based practices–projects.

Mourning is what You make of It

As artists, researchers, and teachers, how do we live with these overwhelming feelings of loss and despair? What is the role of art in a world that seems like it's on fire? Creative expressive acts have the potential to help us transform loss into something generative, productive, and new. Ruti (2009) suggests that "through creativity, we are able to signify our suffering and in, in doing, to gradually translate an unnamable ache into a namable recollection; we are able to replace the void of nonmeaning by meaning" (p. 118). To work through grief is to transform the effects of sadness, loss, and grief into something that not only engenders healing but opens new possibilities for personal growth. In this regard, grief is understood as an opportunity to live through the loss to engage in meaning production.

Thus, creative acts are a means to mourn well—a way to channel loss into something generative and productive, breathing life and meaning into absence. Furthermore, creative acts promote growth for the practitioners that produce them and serve as catalysts for helping others transform their own grief into something rejuvenating. They do this by creating conditions for community and collective healing through forming empathic connections with others and solidarity with others' struggles and suffering. In experiences of personal and collective trauma, artistic expressions are lights in the darkness that suggest the seemingly endless tragedies we experience do not need to define our life experiences. We believe that to live well in the anxious now requires us to mourn well. As suggested above, creative acts are instrumental in processing loss and grief, transforming the plethora of unnamable aches and seemingly meaningless psychic pains into something restorative and significant.

We call attention to the intertwining of artmaking/researching/teaching as a living inquiry,

making visible the creative and generative possibilities only experienced through grief and loss. Moving beyond traditional and binary concepts of artist, researcher, and teacher, we instead propose unfolding courses of action, "Loss, shift, and rupture create presence through absence, they become tactile, felt, and seen" (Springgay, et al., 2005, p. 898). Drawing from different arts-based autoethnographic methodologies such as wordless narrative research (Horwat, 2018), diffractive ethnography (Gullion, 2018), and a self-care pedagogy as walking currere (Irwin, 2006), the following vignettes use different creative scholarly approaches to generate new meanings and understandings through intertwining visual and text - grief and loss. Jeff Horwat explores the ambiguities and isolating self-doubt of complicated grief with a wordless allegory based on his experiences in Chicago during civil unrest following the murder of George Floyd during the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Vicky Grube laments the losses experienced through encroaching neoliberalism in education which transformed the nobility of teaching and learning into a soulless commodity. Through the spirit of diffractive methodology, Vicky wonders if we can practice *thinking with* instead of *thinking about* (Gullion,2018). Gigi Yu highlights the natural world as a space for healing and transformation while grappling with the existential impact of the pandemic, climate change, and the heaviness of ecological grief. Each author speaks to the importance of experiencing loss through creativity in relation to care, healing, and renewal.

The World is a (not) Cold Dead Place (Jeff Horwat)

Storytelling is a profoundly human way to make sense of a seemingly chaotic world (Leavy, 2015; Lewis, 2011). It is during periods of intense uncertainty that "stories have the potential to make us feel connected, open our eyes to new perspectives, [and] stimulate the development of empathy, self-awareness or social reflection" (Leavy, 2015, p. 39). By organizing and (re)constructing fragmented experiences, memories, and traumas into a linear chronology, new meanings and insights can be understood (Kim, 2016). Thus, while we draw from our life experiences to create stories, the stories we tell often create new perspectives. Lewis (2011) suggests that this relationship is uniquely symbiotic in that, "we use the story form and the story forms us" (p. 22).

As a compelling form of storytelling, visual narratives–imagery that decenters text as the primary modality of communication– have a unique position in their ability to transcend linguistic barriers and address an affective domain that language is often unable to access. As a method of doing creative scholarship, "wordless narrative research can be useful for exploring a range of social phenomena, [and] particularly valuable for exploring preverbal constructions of lived experiences, including trauma, repressed memories, and other forms of emotional knowledge often times only made accessible through affective or embodied modalities" (Horwat, 2018, p. 176). Drawing inspiration from wordless novels, an obscure genre, first made popular by early twentieth century pioneers Frans Masereel (1918/2019) and Lynd Ward (1932/2008) and developed by contemporary practitioners like Eric Drooker (2007, 2002), Shawn Tan (2007), and Marnie Galloway (2016), wordless narrative research operationalizes the silence of particular human experiences to call attention to the marginalized, overlooked, or depreciated (Horwat, 2022). Furthermore, this exploration of silence is extended to addressing the unnamable aches and psychic pains that often elude language and prohibit growth and healing–such as those affects that relate to complicated grief.

The following silent allegory speaks to the silent and seemingly unnamable feeling my family and I experienced in June of 2020 while living in Chicago. During this tumultuous period, we watched the

vibrancy and energy of the city quickly transform into a desolate and seemingly apocalyptic landscape–the city that we loved becoming seemingly unidentifiable overnight. Consumed by anxiety and concerned about our safety, we focused on adapting to the new world unfolding before us, while silently struggling with a mysterious affect we struggled privately to understand. Percolating under the surface of our daily lives, the unspoken psychic ache manifested itself as a seething anxiety, occasional outbursts of anger, and dull sense dread that was at times paralyzing. Unbeknownst to me, I was struggling with complicated grief which is described as "a persistent disturbing sense of disbelief regarding the death or loss–with feelings of anger, bitterness, and resistance to acceptance of the painful reality" (Shear & Shair, 2005, p. 253). Confused, frustrated, and isolated, complicated grief's fluidity makes it challenging to describe and address as it both denies but responds to the losses.

Unable to discern the contours of complicated grief, I made art. As an artist and researcher, I used my art practice to understand the unnamable affects by drawing through these indecipherable feelings and transforming them into new visual metaphors, thus "creating new associations and habits of clustering emotion around new images" (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p.87). While initially therapeutic, these drawings become a catalyst to transform and (re)present the unnamable affect to promote personal understanding. Rather than recreating my experiences and memories through representational imagery, I use a playful and surreal visual language that utilizes humanoid toy forms as the subjects and a barren landscape as a stage for these subjects to play out different scenes. Somehow, exploring the existential through innocent subject matter disempowers the anxiety–making it more palatable–and provides an entry point for self-introspection and understanding. By focusing on conceptual connections over the representational, the intent is for the narrative to explore the unnamable affect.

In the following visual essay, a female protagonist is seen scavenging a barren surreal wasteland for rocks and stones that she brings back to a male figure who uses the collected building materials to construct a stone bunker. After completing their rock structure, the couple is seen huddled around a burning candle. Seemingly safe but insecure, they watch the candle until it slowly burns out. With the candle extinguished, they are confronted by the horrors awaiting them in the darkness of their safe space and quickly vacate. As the new day rises, the protagonists observe other characters dissembling their stone bunkers and repurposing the stones to produce a sculptural form. The wordless narrative concludes with the protagonists joining the others to produce a melancholic monument–an anthropomorphic grieving monolith.

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

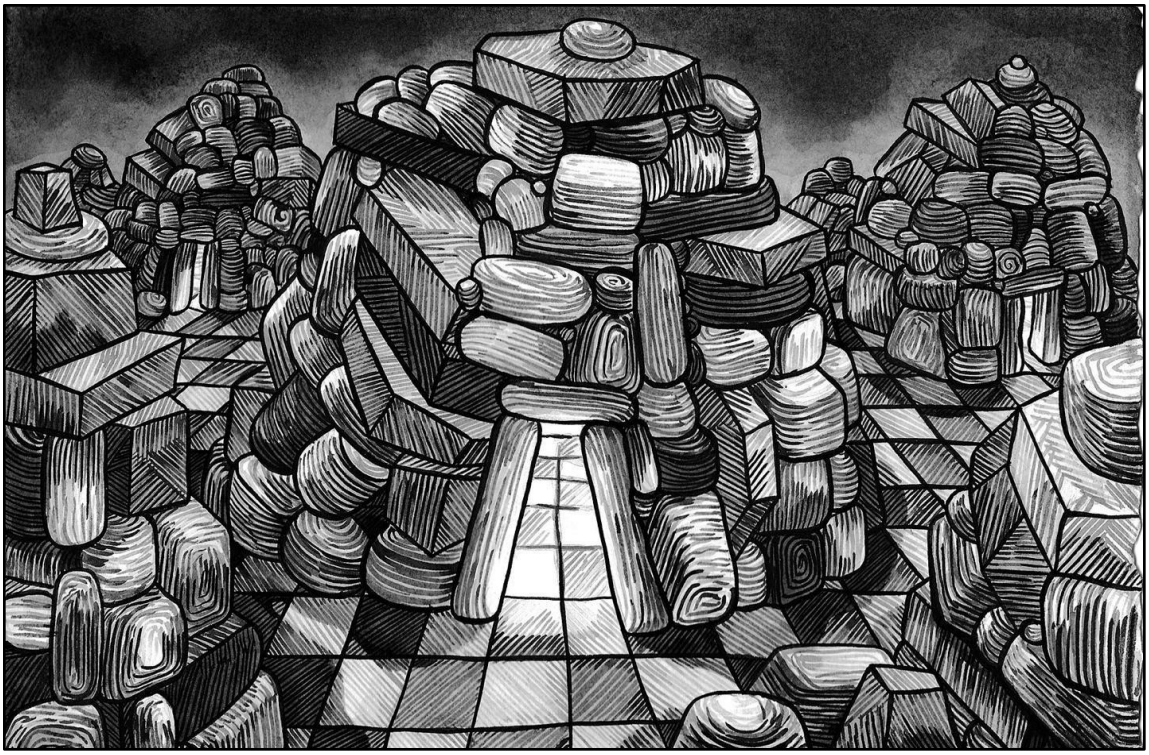


Figure 5.

Figure 6.

Figure 7

Figure 8

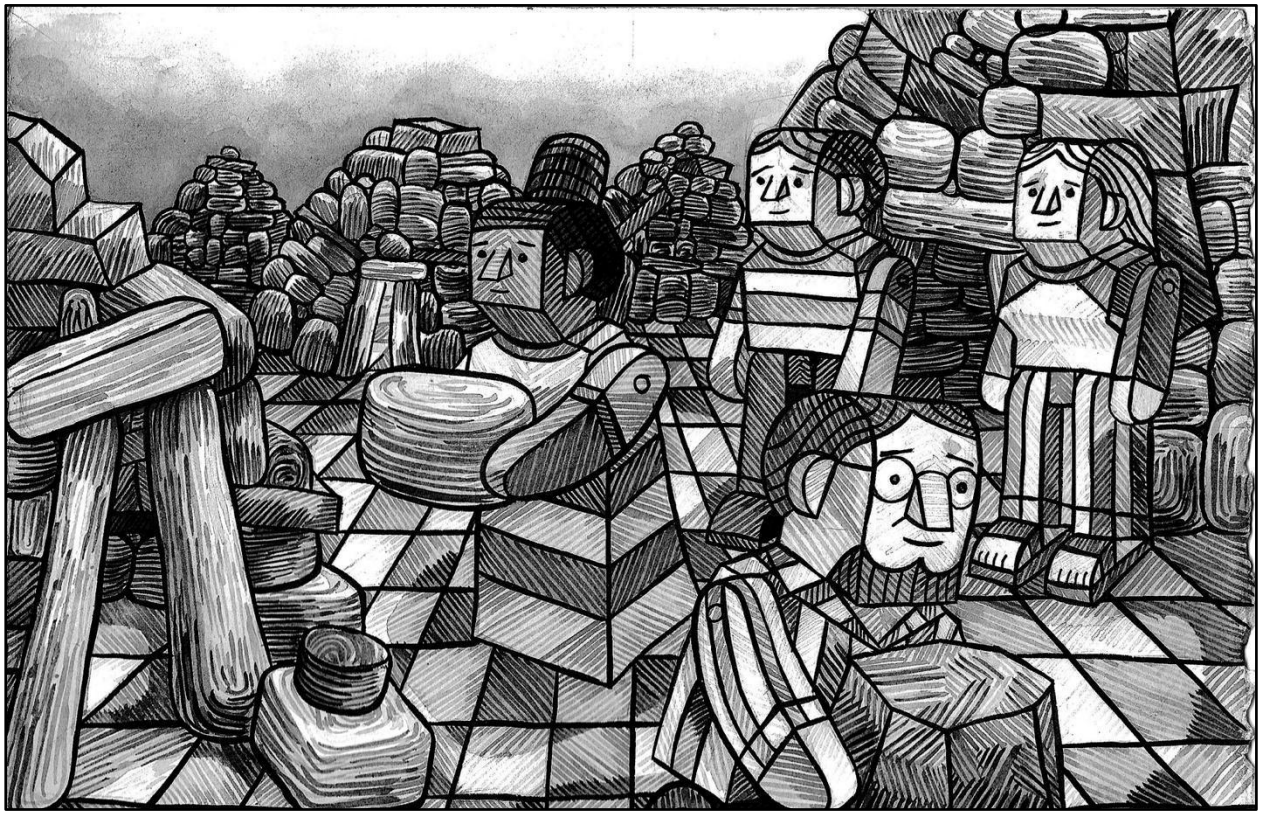


Figure 9.

Figure 10.

Figure 11

Figure 12

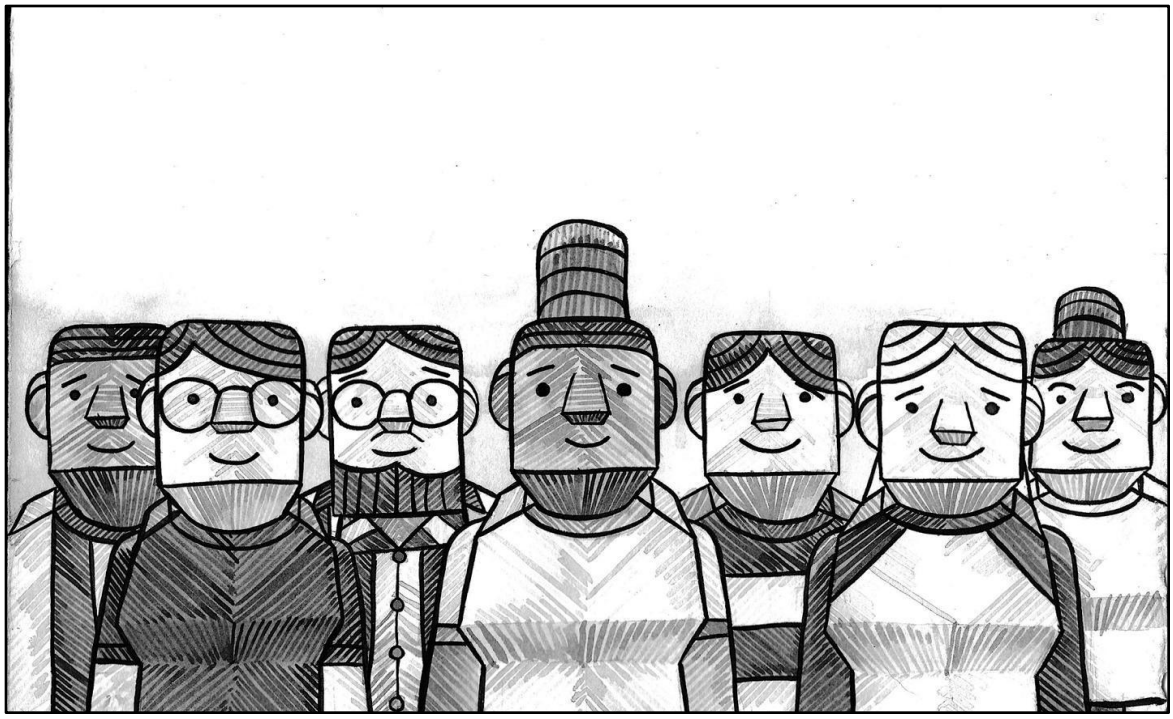


Figure 13

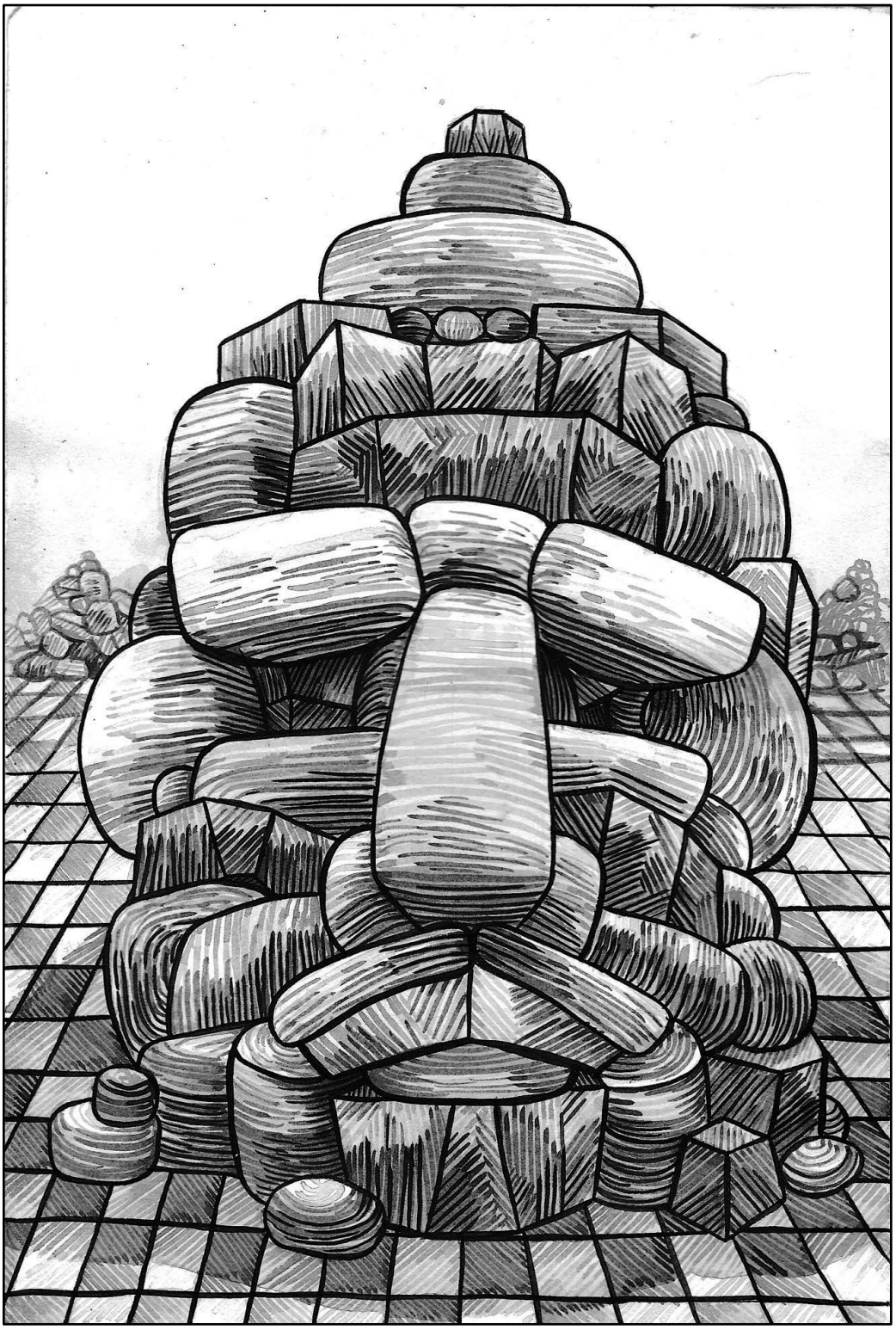


Figure 14

A God Damn Circus (Vicky Grube)

I struggle with depression and anxiety. I awake every morning at 4:30 am, eat the same breakfast, read while having my second cup of coffee, and then begin pacing. I pace through my little house and pace back around half listening to NPR. My hands are behind my back, and I pace for twenty or thirty minutes. I know about my depression from a life experience of worry and isolation: knowing how and knowing when. I am on the ground level. I see this existence as an assemblage. The pacing, for example, has the lights illuminating the rooms from the blue-black of the early morning, the worn floor that I feel as I pace without slippers, my plants, the voice from the radio, the chairs: I am in the doing of being anxious. I am pacing.

Figure 15

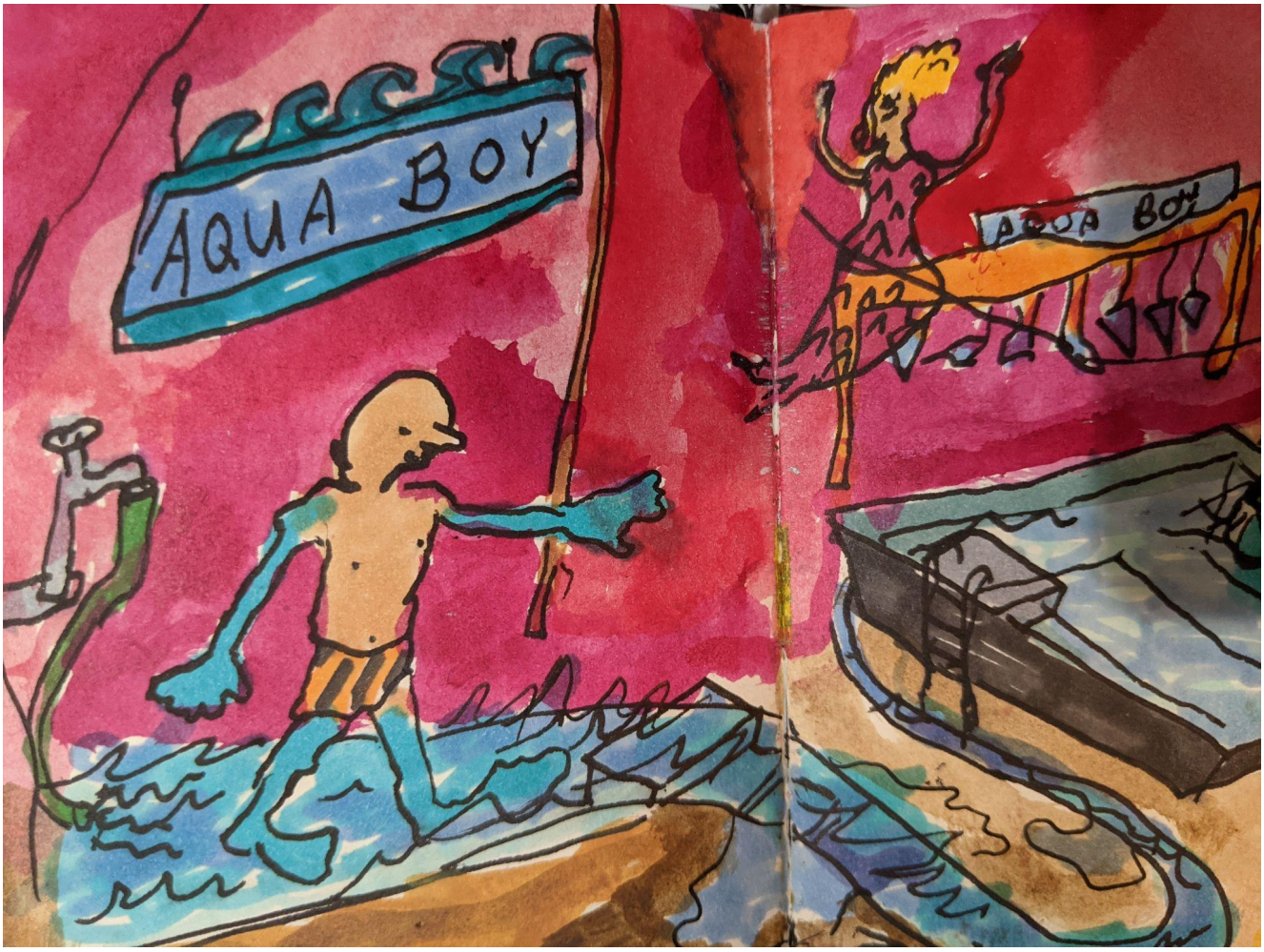


Figure 16

At times I find myself in the liminal – folded into the familiar until the familiar becomes unfamiliar. What does this steady pacing do for me? I know this walking back and forth is a human experience that emerges as matter around me changes, reforming in unexpected ways as I do. The plants look peaked, so I stop and water them and begin the pacing again. I find small objects out of place, and in my passing back and through the house, I reposition them. It is cold in the house, so I turn up the thermostat.

I understand this pacing as the tip of the iceberg. I suffer from depression not as a tragedy but as a possibility or a complex experience not, as a throbbing wound with roots in trauma. Cathy Carruth (2014) teaches me about Judith Herman's work "an affliction of the powerless" (p.33). I cannot stop this walking from one corner to another. I live alone and delight in isolation but know I cannot be without others. Still, I am reticent of others. I feel capsized. My memory, a link to difficult experiences, is not purely a mental moment but bodily as well. So, there you have it. This complex experience that I lived is the memory of the senses. The story of my past is connected to my deep memory and haunts me every day. I pace to ease my body.

When I wake, there is a range of upsetting dreams. I worry about my university art education students. Are they given enough freedom to experiment – to realize their own lives are immersed in matter and meaning? Is their knowledge of art as a humming assemblage of the organic and the non-organic affecting one another? Will my

students have their feet on the floor when they perform the edTPA lite in a school of testing, surveillance, accountability, and corporations calling the shots (Guillion,2018, p.31)? These neoliberal ideals scare the students who were not taught to teach to universal standards. There is a hegemonic politics of evidence (Guillion, 2018).

I sit down to draw, and imagine these students' struggles and wish schools could offer nepantla (Anzaldúa, 2015, p.15) or liminal places, where the familiar becomes the unfamiliar and transformation takes place, where time allows experimentation. I would love to see the school day slow down and pace vary as unpredictable entanglements impact infinite emerging assemblages. I draw images of the circus as a fluid site that behaves as an in between place, a marginalized community.

Figure 17

Figure 18

Walking with: A Pedagogy of Self-care (Gigi Yu)

Vicky Grube's pacing within a small space, and the concern about students' struggles, bring up my own memories and experiences heightened during the pandemic. Being attuned to oneself and the interactions between people, materials, and the environment are essential aspects that contribute to becoming an engaged art educator, which often becomes quickly dismissed when teaching and learning are viewed through linear and prescribed teaching approaches. How do we create for students "liminal moments and spaces in between elements of a formal learning organization and use those occasions to nurture an aesthetic and spiritual currere" (Irwin, 2006, p. 75), where unexpectedness leads to opportunities for transformation? The following is an autoethnographic, an aesthetic walking currere, that allows for a "slowing down" to become "more fully engaged with the aesthetics of place, experience and movement," a self-care pedagogy (Cutcher & Irwin, 2017, p. 117).

During the Covid 19 quarantine, my home life blurred with my academic life. With my three children and husband working and learning from home, I constantly cared for their needs, helping with homework, cooking meals, and listening to their struggles with isolation. This was compounded by the numerous hours of online teaching and meetings. Like many other educators, I recall the small frames of students' faces confined within the boundaries of the Zoom frames. It was nearly impossible to read their faces and gestures. Students were also facing challenges of isolation, illnesses, and the burden of caring for others. I started to spiral into feelings of anxiety and depression. I met with a therapist online to help deal with my anxiety. Sometimes we meditated together over Zoom. She guided me through closing my eyes and envisioning a place where I felt a sense of peace. In these moments, tears formed and rolled down my cheeks. I tried to sort through the roots of my feelings of emptiness and loss, and the disconnect from my body. Irwin (2006) refers to the focus on the care we often give to others as educators and the neglected pedagogy of self, which was prevalent for many women during the pandemic. Seeking out ways to care for myself became essential for caring for others.

I am privileged to live in an area of the United States surrounded by natural beauty. While many people in large cities worldwide were confined to small apartments, I was fortunate to seek refuge in an open natural space near my home known as the bosque. Bosque is a Spanish word that translates as gallery forest, a habitat along the riverbanks, which runs like a long thread down the center of Albuquerque, traveling to Mexico. Tall cottonwood trees spread throughout the forest. The bosque is located within the unceded lands of the Tewa/Tiwa people, and I am grateful for their ongoing stewardship and contributions as creative caretakers of this land. Because of their knowledge and care of the land, I am able to walk here and care for myself. Walking within the bosque during the pandemic became an act of self-care, a time when I could slow down and notice the subtle processes of transformation in the natural world when all things otherwise appeared stagnant.

Figure 19. Cottonwood tree during shedding season

Figure 20. Cottonwood tree rings

Figure 21. A rainstorm approaching the bosque

Each visit was an encounter with the place as the material, breathing new life into my practice as an artist, researcher, and teacher. Walking was, for me, both a metaphor and an embodiment of a liminal space between self-care and art practice (Irwin, 2006). I created an intra-active art pedagogy through heightened observations, awakening the senses while engaging with the wind, water, dirt, and wildlife (Lenz-Taguchi, 2010). An "aesthetic currere," a pedagogy of self (Irwin, 2006, p. 80), with my mind, heart, and hands. Observing and documenting through photographing and drawing with the flows and rhythms of natural pigments became opportunities to re-see myself and the world (Yu, 2021).

Figure 22. Drawing with the flow of natural pigments

Upon returning to in-person teaching at the university, I recognized that art education students were also responding to various stress and uncertainty and seeking care experiences. Introducing students to walking, noticing, and artmaking as possibilities for experiencing slow research and teaching was an intentional introduction to radical necessities of care (Cutcher & Irwin, 2017; Mountz et al., 2015). In this practice, my intention was to hold space for myself and students to grieve as well as heal due to the collective trauma experienced during the pandemic. We headed to the woods by the river with our drawing materials on a particularly windy spring day. I was eager to walk with them in the bosque for healing, finding relief, and creating. Would the students be overwhelmed by the natural elements? Would they see the wonder that inspired my transformation?

Irwin describes a walking currere as, "inherently transformative and offers opportunities for self-creation" (p. 78). By guiding the students through walking explorations, experimentations, and creations with found materials, the environment, and drawing exercises, the students used their imaginations to see the extraordinary happening all around us. I guided them in becoming attuned to the environment through their senses, slowing down, and being within the place (Cutcher & Irwin, 2017). "Listen closely," I told them, "to the wind blowing through the trees and to feel the movement of the leaves and branches surrounding us". Through this slowed-down process, drawing was a form of searching, noticing, documenting, and creating, contributing to a deeper relationship with the transformations around us. One student's reflection, "Beauty in nature is right at our fingertips," and another remembered, "There was a lot of commemoratory, conversation, input, and excitement about the results. Artmaking within nature could be replicated with my future students." These testaments reflect an entanglement of place, togetherness, and materials in the process of becoming art teachers.

Figure 23. Students listen and draw.

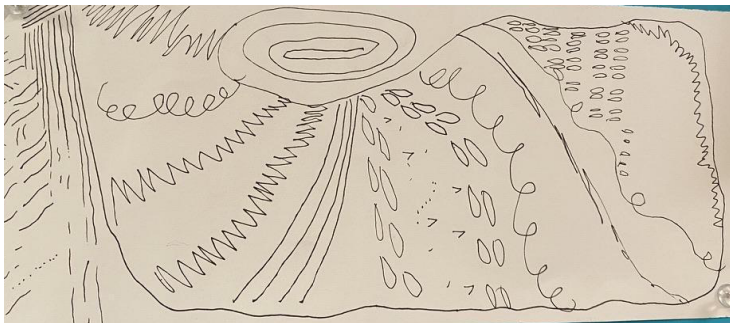
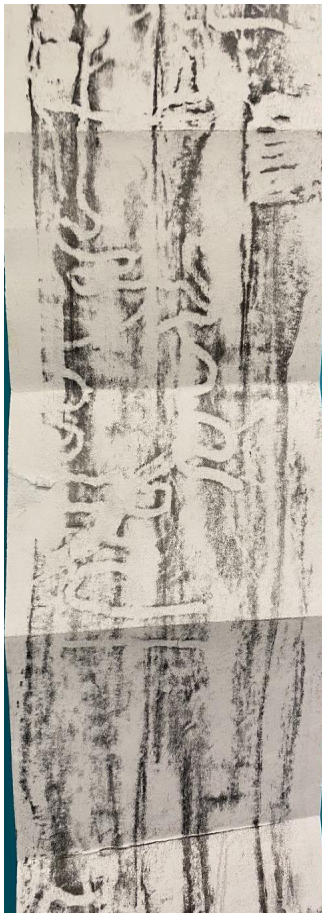


Figure 24. Student drawing sounds.



Figures 25 and 26. Student's rubbing of insect trail of movement through log

Figure 27. Student drawing of movement.

"The most memorable part of our time studying the bosque for me was the movement. Everything moved. Birds, and lizards, of course, but so did the trees, the light, the shadows, the water, and even the dirt when the wind picked up." Student reflection, April 2022

The story could end here. I felt somewhat accomplished at the end of the semester. I reveled in the discoveries students and I made through walking and creating within the natural world. However, tragedy and loss struck again. In the late spring of 2022, New Mexico was ravaged by fires, destroying several sacred natural spaces throughout the state. Shortly after our visit to the bosque, a forest fire consumed the space, literally jumping from one side of the Rio Grande to the other. The smell of smoke filled the air for miles, signifying the loss of trees and other wildlife and a devastating reminder of humans' destructive impact on the natural environment.

Figure 28. Dynamic Burnt trees

Figure 29. Drawing with charcoal from trees

It took several weeks before I could revisit the bosque, due to restrictions placed on visitors. My anxiety about not knowing the damage and loss equated to "an ecological grief" experienced due to the potential loss of a meaningful relationship with the landscape of the bosque acquired over time (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018, p. 275). However, during my first walking excursion, I was amazed at the forest's own process of creation and transformation (Figure 9 and 10). The burnt tree branches contrasted against the bright green sprouts of new growth were visual testaments to the restorative nature and transformations that can only be experienced

through loss (Figure 29, 30, 31). The natural transformations taking place within the bosque remind us that we are constantly in a cycle of loss and mourning and discovery and renewal; we are never in a fixed state of being.

Figure 30. New growth.

Figure 32. Inside burnt tree stump

Figure 31. Inside burnt tree

The Overlooked Generosity of Arts-Based Research

We experience some degree of grief and mourning anytime there is loss or absence. Our visual narratives suggest, oftentimes, the expressions of grief that we experience are so subtle and ubiquitous that it is difficult to understand the allusive affect and the related absence that triggers it. The expressions of grief illustrated in our narratives–complicated political, and ecological–pale compared to the depth of loss experienced through the absence of a loved one. They do, however, speak to the isolation experienced particularly by those in Western societies where individualism permeates through cultural ideologies when confronted by absence and loss (Charmaz & Milligan, 2006; Granek, 2010).

Furthermore, the generosity of arts-based research allowed us to appreciate what is often overlooked in loss and mourning. Arts-based research offers us the ability to understand the unnameable aches and allusive psychic pains that afflict us without symbolic form–afflictions so defiant of language that we often doubt their existence and ignore our embodied ways of making sense, until they metastasize into a more aggressive pathology. Understood through the context of grief, arts-based research is an act of solidarity with other mourners and survivors–a gesture of love to others suffering from similar unnamable aches and psychic pains. By describing the form of these emotional specters, arts-based research helps to understand and validate these experiences–constituting as a provocation for introspection and action.

In the rhizomatic assemblage of the artist/researcher/teacher artmaking becomes a process of ethical reflection and response that is relatable to others outside of self (Irwin & Springgay, 2008). Wordless narrative research invites readers to insert the particularities of their lives into the silence of the visual stories. In diffractive ethnography humans are entangled with the world but are not the loudest voice. This is not post-human, rather, the human is recentered. We must turn away from hierarchical categories and the familiar and look at our data

with an inventive mind, perhaps as Delanda Guillion suggests, "… but as literally composed of intensities (of color, sound, aroma, flavor, texture (2018, p. 69). Enacting a walking pedagogy for a self-care pedagogy allows for sharing in healing and well-being. All these arts-based research methodologies have the capacity to create relationships with others by transforming hidden psychic phenomena into something material, visualizing the unnameable.

Our art practice has the possibility to renovate and renew, cultivating a generosity of spirit and an interconnectedness (assemblages and entanglements) rather than a disparity and fracturedness in the world. Through creative acts, loss and despair are transformed into new ways of seeing, being, and relating with the world. How does making art, a social activity, challenge this individualized relationship with grief? Is there an implicit generosity in arts-based research that also contributes to the generative, restorative, and collective healing? The process of artmaking presents a process that can work through loss and grief is a generous act, a good mourning.

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