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GRIEF AS RADICALLY SOCIAL

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Grief—the complex and entangling intra- and interpersonal emotions, sensations, and memories that unfold in the wake of a significant death, loss, transition, or severing of a meaningful attachment—is not the possession of an individual. It is not a feeling one *has*. It is not something one does in isolation, even when the griever in question is "alone" in a room. The reason one grieves is because one loves, one is attached—to a person, to a beloved animal, to a place, to a vocation, etc. With the attachment severed, grief rushes in. A longing. A reshaping of binary paradigms such that "absent" and "present" no longer function oppositionally but, rather, mix and swirl to create new combinations like "absent-presence" and "present-absence." We cannot even think grief, then, without acknowledging the degree to which "I" is socially constructed, dependent on others, given to those with whom an attachment of considerable strength promises not only the joys of intimacy but the pain of irrevocable loss. Grief is radically social. This is our argument.

But we face opposition straight away. Consider that since 2022, with the publication of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision*, aka *DSM-5 TR*, psychologists, psychiatrists, and mental health counselors have the power to diagnose Prolonged Grief Disorder. This is a pathological form of grief. Grief gone awry. Marked by symptoms such as "Intense yearning/longing for the deceased person" and "Preoccupation with thoughts or memories of the deceased person" that exceed 12 months in duration (following a death), Prolonged Grief Disorder understands grief not only as a malady to remedy but also as a distressing situation that may require medication: "naltrexone, a drug used to help treat addiction, is currently in clinical trials as a form of grief therapy" (Barry 2022). An individual grieves

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excessively, as defined through medical discourse, and licensed professionals can return that individual to a "normal" state of functioning by altering their brain's chemistry.

Christine Valentine (2006) helps us understand how Prolonged Grief Disorder entered clinical discourse. The dominance of positivist paradigms throughout the 20th Century led academics and medical professionals to overvalue quantitative studies and undervalue subjective experiences of bereavement. In turn, "the experiences and responses of the bereaved are viewed in isolation from their social world and in the light of psychological measures of what constitutes normal and healthy grieving" (2006, 57–58).

Valentine illustrates how three dominant academic discourses took part in the shaping of prevailing contemporary Anglo-U.S. and European understandings of grief. The first was psychology and its "culture of prescription, by means of which grief has been medicalized and pathologized" (58). In hand with the formation of the construct of psychological grief we find counseling strategies to treat this grief, but, as Valentine notes, "such services may also marginalize and separate bereavement from ordinary life, giving rise to a 'cult of the expert' that runs the risk of disempowering people" (59). "Grief Work" in this light becomes synonymous with the "severing of ties" between the living and the deceased in order for the living person to be able to reinvest in new attachments.

Somewhat an equal and opposite reaction to the medicalization and individualization of grief promoted through psychological discourse, the discourse of anthropology led to a re-socialization of grief linked primarily to the desire for forming continuing bonds with the dead. "Such studies have highlighted the social construction of bereavement and demonstrated the diversity of ritual behaviour around the world" (62). On the one hand, anthropological discourse redefined and repositioned grief as a social product, one only thinkable through the practices and epistemologies that reveal the myriads of ways in which living members of society connect with the dead. On the other hand, the sources of anthropological discourse tended to exoticize "pre-industrial deathways" (59), which, in turn, Othered the grief of "those people" whose spiritual beliefs permit such connections between the living and the dead. Additionally, the findings of anthropological discourse rarely made their way into the practice of mental health counseling, and, as a result, treatment for "abnormal" or "distressing" (Western) grief rarely took note of global social bereavement.

The third discourse shaping the contemporary, dominant discourse on grief in the West comes from sociology. Starting in the 1950s, sociologists began to critique the individualization of grief. By the 1990s, following in the wake of the public grieving of those who died from AIDS, sociologists began to focus on personal agency and interpersonal connection through the act of grieving, which, in turn, led to preferences for the stories of grief experience. Ultimately, "The use of discursive approaches has facilitated the deconstruction of taken for granted categories and boundaries: between life and death, grief and mourning, and self and other" (74). Again, however, this discourse, though certainly at least in part responsible for the rise of postmodern articulations of mental health counseling such as narrative therapy, rarely gained access to the counseling

techniques that professionals relied upon to treat (and ultimately *resolve*) "complicated" and then prolonged grief.

Thus, in terms of the professions who assess, diagnose, and treat grief, we arrive at the understanding of grief as something one *has* but would like *not* to have. Grief becomes something to get through. We grieve and then we "return." Outside of this medicalized grief territory, however, many thinkers, artists, community activists, and healers of various stripes have drawn attention to the ways in which grief, far from constituting an undesirable state of torturous longing, frequently leads to transformation and growth, both on individual and collective levels.

Here we find inspiration from, among others, Cindy Milstein, Michelle Cassandra Johnson, Camille Sapara Barton, and Jane Harris and Jimmy Edmonds. Milstein, editor of the essays *Rebellious Mourning: The Collective Work of Grief* (2017), describes the work of the text as asking

> its contributors and readers to journey without answers, with curiosity, by walking directly into our grief. It [the book project] sees the work of grief, and spaces for it, as something that, similar to water and libraries, should be freely, healthily, and publicly available to all. In this way, precisely because we can more openly experiment with sharing the fullness of life, we can begin to rehumanize the world and ourselves. (4–5)

In this configuration—one that we deeply value—it is impossible to sever grief from "normal" (meaning "non-grieving") daily life, as proponents of Prolonged Grief Disorder may wish us to do. And, collectively, the individual narratives that comprise this book directly confront the "12 month" parameters of Prolonged Grief Disorder diagnosis in vital ways. When grief has existed around us from before we are born until, likely, after we die, how is it possible to think outside of grief's perpetual shaping of life?

As in *Rebellious Mourning*, Johnson's *Finding Refuge: Heart Work for Healing Collective Grief* (2021) and Barton's *Tending Grief Embodied Rituals for Holding Our Sorrow and Growing Cultures of Care in Community* (2024) weave poignant personal accounts of life, death, and grief together with compelling reflections on the social dimensions that shape individual lives. Each text joins the collective voices of *Rebellious Mourning* in suggesting that there is an ethics to grieving. Grieving is generative; it provides insight, clarity, and (re)connection. Barton writes, "By feeling into what is happening, by connecting to our grief and our love, we can reorient ourselves to the moment and adapt as needed to make emergent choices that serve life and are aligned with our intentions" (2024, 65). With a never-ending list of personal losses and sources of social grievances—e.g., the disintegration of social institutions, the violent persistence of white supremacy, the degradation of the more-than-human world, to name a few—we argue that the longer we live, the more important it is to choose how we move through our physical and socio-cultural terrains.

Both Johnson and Barton provide for their readers various embodied activities to call forth, hold, move with, and integrate grief in powerful ways. These include yoga practices, journal writing prompts, invitations to connect with the natural world, the use of candlelight vigils, and herbal

medicine. Arguably, each text advocates for intuitive and thus creative thinking and space-making when it comes to grieving and mourning on one's own and in relationship with others.

With an explicit need to explore the multifaceted dimensions of their grief, Jane Harris and Jimmy Edmonds began processing their son Joshua's death through various creative acts. They write, "Our own understanding of grief is that almost by definition it is a creative process–one of doing and creating new things that fill the void left by a loved one's absence, things that would and could not have existed before and unless they had died" (2022, 98). As they grieved for Joshua, Harris and Edmonds began facilitating hands-on workshops for grieving parents and siblings, inviting them to explore their impulses to process and memorialize their loved ones' lives and deaths. Harris and Edmonds's book *When Words Are Not Enough: Creative Responses to Grief* (2022) showcases some of their creative grief work alongside the artful and heartfelt work done by 13 fellow grievers. Through photography, painting, running, swimming, singing, *Ikebana* (Zen flower arranging), social media, woodworking, drawing, and more, these grievers make visible the life-making that can be done by exploring grief with curiosity, compassion, and, in some cases, a dose of humor.

We thus situate ourselves—as grievers, grief workers, researchers, and writers—within this group and with many others who understand and navigate the currents of grief as a long-term practice. As we have been uprooted by trauma, loss, and grief (experiences we understand as distinct yet related), we have followed intuitive signals to reevaluate our social connections and how we wish to show up in a world full of pain and love, division and unity, destruction and repair. Joanne Cacciatore writes, "In doing with grief, grief is not gone, or forgotten, or recovered from. Grief remains our partner, our companion – the source of our compassionate action in the world. When we do with grief, grief is being lived openly, honestly, ennoblingly" (2016, 169). Significantly, we have learned through our own journeys, from those who have written of their own journeys, and from those with whom we have worked in our grief classes and workshops; we have learned that practicing grief helps us participate in the most meaningful aspects of life.

Our experiences have taught us that grief is radically social. Just as every individual human relies upon others (humans and more-than-humans) from the instant of conception, so too does grief emerge from the relationship between beings. Thus, we ask: How can we better understand this notion of radically social grief? What growth is possible once we embrace this social nature? How might we learn with and from the complex social-natural worlds in which we live? We explore these questions through a series of activist-art projects that foreground the transformational qualities of objects from death to life, individuality to community.

Grief as Social Alchemy[1]

Consider the following progression of artistic projects that begin with a trio of works by Mexican artist Pedro Reyes.[2] The first is *Palas por pistolas* (*Shovels for/through guns*) from 2007–2008. In Culiácan, Mexico, Reyes found himself surrounded by guns, gun violence, and gun death. To process the grief of this situation, the artist devised a method for transforming the problem through a kind of social alchemy that drew from the resources of his community. These resources

came from business and philanthropic partners working at the Botanical Garden of Culiacán and the owners of the firearms. Through Reyes's artistic vision, the resources transformed the guns into shovels, and while this act of magical transformation might at first seem banal, a closer look shows true alchemy in action.

Gun owners encountered television commercials inviting them to exchange their firearms for vouchers that could purchase electronics, appliances, and other commodities. The local police department also advertised the project. At the end of the exchange period, the military was enlisted to help handle the weapons. Though rendered in the plainest of language, Reyes's own description of the transformation that followed reveals the power of alchemy at work:

> 1527 weapons were collected. 40% of them were high power automatic weapons of exclusive military use. These weapons were taken to a military zone where they were crushed by a steamroller in a public act.
>
> The pieces were then taken to a foundry and melted. The metal was sent to a major hardware factory to produce the same number of 1527 shovels. The tools were made under specifications such as a handle with a legend telling the story.
>
> These shovels have been distributed to a number of art institutions and public schools where adults and children engage in the action of planting 1527 trees.
>
> This ritual has a pedagogical purpose of showing how an agent of death can become an agent of life. (Reyes 2008)

The word "ritual" feels appropriate here. An artistic idea sparked a participatory project—equal parts political and aesthetic—that culminated in the physical transformation of firearms into tools for connection and growth. By enlisting children and adults in the action of planting trees, Reyes highlights the temporal duration of this ritual's effects. The human lifespan, from adolescence to adulthood, receives extension from the lifespans of the trees, which will likely surpass that of the humans who handled the saplings. It is possible that future children of these children will benefit from the shade of these same trees. Perhaps they will even share the stories of the ritual inscribed on the shovels to their children from the balm of that shade.

Where is grief in all of this? At first, the grief appears as the condition or motivating factor of the project. Guns caused fear, injury, trauma, and death. Grief appears alongside each singular event. Over the course of the project, however, this perception of grief changes. Grief turns into a goad that stimulates social action. No longer simply equated with loss, pain, and heartache, grief becomes a means of creation.

This creative force, at first operative at the level of artistic concept, takes material form in the physical transformation of guns to shovels. When children's hands take up the shovels to plant trees, grief transforms again into a hybrid form of physical and emotional labor. Grief *works* to plant trees. Throughout the project, we learn that grief's identity draws from all these various states: fear, death, motivational force, means of creation, social-emotional labor, a point of connection. In other words, as Priya Jay writes, grief shows itself to be a "shape-shifter," a playfully

mischievous energy that animates time, space, and matter (2021). Like the hyphae and mycelia of fungi that spreads out and through the terrestrial landscape, grief infuses every facet of the social landscape. The shovels may be the fruiting bodies, but the network of grief is palpable within the vast social landscape activated by Reyes's initial idea.

The gun violence motivated *Palas por pistolas*, and the grief brought together a community to create life.[3] This collective grief energy transformed through a second project, *Imagine* (2012). This time, Ciudad Juarez undertook a public destruction of weapons. The government contacted Reyes and asked him if he wanted the leftover metal, which, if not collected, would otherwise be buried underground. Reyes said yes and acquired the leftover parts of 6700 weapons gathered from citizens of Juarez. He decided not to transform the remnants of the weapons into shovels this time. Instead, the metal metamorphosed into tools of musical labor. Through guidance by curator Jessica Berlanga, six musicians transformed the metal into 50 playable instruments. Reyes underscores the magical element of the transformation:

> The task was challenging but they succeeded in extracting sounds, from percussion to wind and string. It's difficult to explain but the transformation was more than physical. It's important to consider that many lives were taken with these weapons; as if a sort of exorcism was taking place the music expelled the demons they held, as well as being a requiem for lives lost. (Reyes 2012)[4]

The alchemical transformation of guns to shovels continues through *Imagine* as firearms become a source material for making music. Linked with *Palas por pistolas*, *Imagine* shows us how grief fuses with musical vibration. The breath that utters a cry of anguish for the dead or for a pained community can become a musical requiem. Grief is both the cry and the song of praise, as Martìn Prechtel asserts, the pain and the prayer, the emptiness and the aspiration (2015).

Whereas the radically social dimension of grief in *Palas por pistolas* finds physical expression in the upturned soil that provides a new home for young saplings planted by the guns-turned-shovels, the social dimension of *Imagine* coalesces in the collaboration between metalworkers, musicians, and auditors. The musicians play with and through grief as the audience, dwelling with their own grief, receives and interprets the notes. Though each person carries their/her/his own individual grief into this encounter, *Imagine* amplifies the collective experience. As these musicians play in Mexico City (Mexico), Guangju (South Korea), Istanbul (Turkey), and London (England), the instruments transpose and transport the grief of Juarez to global audiences and the griefscapes in which these audiences live.

The sonic grief emitted from the collective music-making of the *Imagine* instruments transformed in 2013 when *Disarm* was born.[5] This time, artists and technicians created a group of eight instruments from more firearms collected and destroyed by Mexican military forces. Unlike the music of *Imagine*, which required and drew strength from the work of human musicians, *Disarm* channeled grief into computer software. Designed as musical machines, the instruments made from these weapons resembled less a classical concert orchestra and more a contemporary electronic event. Reyes explains, "These machines are mechanical musical instruments; they can

be programmed and operated via computers, making them capable of performing music concerts with compositions prepared beforehand" (Neri 2013). The decision to fabricate musical instruments that resemble machines aligns with the artist's desire to retain a sense of the weapons' power. The music made of these machines is not always pretty:

> The various parts of these automatons are recognizable as shotguns, pistols and rifles; while they no longer pose the threat of physical harm, they keep the sheer might of their most recent purpose. Now, these former arms strum, ring, crash, hum, and vibrate at different volumes and intensities to express elaborate compositions with a wide range of sonic nuances. (Neri 2013)

Surprisingly, to explain the conceptual work of this project on his website, Reyes turns to Japanese poetry. Specifically, he summons the master of haiku, Bashō (1644–1694), who, as Reyes tells it, offered instruction to his students while walking through a field one day. The walking poets observed nature and composed the following:

> Red dragonflies
> Remove their wings
> And they are pepper pods

Bashō, however, explained that the syllables didn't yet assemble themselves into a true haiku. The master made a subtle adjustment (visible but harder to specify in the English translation):

> Red pepper pods
> Add wings
> And they are dragonflies

Reyes explains his citation of Bashō in this way: "For Bashō, what constitutes a haiku is not only its technical construction, but also a moment of insight; when an object or image is seen in a new light or when something is added or revealed in a meaningful way" (Reyes 2013). In other words, the technical transformation of guns into musical instruments is only part of the total event at work through the trio of projects, from *Palas por pistolas* to *Imagine* to *Disarm*. The perception of the transformation—the ability to see the material of the gun transmuted to the sound of music, for example—is equally important. It takes an audience to make the artwork complete. For Bashō and his students, the magic of the dragonfly inheres within its likeness to the pepper pod. A dragonfly is a pepper pod infused with a different form of life. The magic of the haiku, in turn, comes about through the artful arrangement of words. Bashō also emphasizes not the stripping away of a dragonfly's wings but rather the addition of wings to a pepper pod, thereby highlighting the power of flight for the poem's auditors.

Bashō's entrance into the story brings us around again to the social dimension of this work. Japanese *Renga*, or "linked verse," was a collaborative poetic undertaking that unfolded when multiple poets got together. Group authorship through sonic exploration presided over these poems. Multiple individuals with knowledge of poetic phraseology adapted mundane reflections

on the happenstances of the moment. A walk through a field becomes a poem on the similitude of dragonflies and pepper pods. Bashō and his companions provide exemplary forms of these Renga poems.

When Reyes cites Bashō, (another) something magical happens. Reyes fuses 21st-Century Mexico and 17th-Century Japan. He turns his fellow citizens and collaborators into poets whose materials are metal instead of words. And grief is ever-present. Japanese Renga poetry flourished at the same time as Zen Buddhism and thus the poetry often contains reflections of the fleeting nature of life, the juxtaposition of life and death, and the suffering that meditative minds attempt to absorb and accept. While no longer in the register of Zen or verbal language, Reyes's poetic operations continue to help grief find expression through material form. In particular, Reyes shows how grief lives in guns and lives, albeit differently, in shovels and musical instruments. Bashō and his students found inspiration in nature, and Reyes and his companions found inspiration in the social landscape, one in which guns could become collaborative artistic offerings when sonic wings were added through artistic alchemy.

Remarkably, the transformation continues. Working as a copy editor on a retrospective of Reyes's work, brontë velez experienced the power of the Mexican artist's social praxis. Driven by a desire to share this "medicine" (as they call it on their website) with inhabitants of the United States, velez teamed up with Kyle Lemle to form Bakiné (fka Lead to Life), an organization dedicated to "a people's alchemy for regeneration."[6] Self-identifying as "a trans-local collective led by black-diasporic and queer artists, healers & ecologists," Bakiné undertakes applied alchemy to conjure healing justice.

The group's website hosts an archive of two specific alchemical ritual events, one in Atlanta (2018) and one in Oakland (2019). The events clearly build on Reyes's work, in fact velez had worked with Reyes (Wing 2008). Individuals in the community were invited to surrender firearms to be melted down and converted into shovels. The shovels became the tools for planting trees and installing food forests in urban centers. velez even transmuted some personal pain into the alchemy of the Atlanta project by planting a Redbud tree at the site where a friend lost their life to gun violence in 2013. velez surrounded the tree with the friend's ashes and soil "gathered from the site of an early 20th-century lynching along the Chattahoochee River" (Ibid.). Viewed from a distance, the social fabric made visible through this ritual action appears vast and rich in nutrients. Community members acknowledge the toll of gun violence, come together to transform the instruments of destruction into tools of cultivation, and then these tools engage with land that holds centuries of pain and resilience. Land stolen from Indigenous People provides the canvas on which Black communities, themselves forcibly relocated through enslavement and terror, can express their strength and aspirations.

Grief Makes Space

The spatial dimension of grief takes center stage in Reyes's work and its evolution through the social alchemy of the Bakiné collective. Institutions and individuals alike tend to present grief as

something that closes, confines, takes hold of, and stultifies. Here, however, grief thrives on openness, collective gesture (e.g., ritual), and interconnectedness. Bakiné helps us understand how this is so when they say,

> We are committed to restoring rituals and practices that give room for black folks to grieve and connect with the land so that we can receive co-respite, widen our collective imaginations, prophesy & orient towards a black eco-feminist politic of liberation in the midst of climate collapse. (Bakiné n.d.)

This statement seems to arise from the frustrating, awful, and sadly too true fact that *space* to grieve is not available to all in equal measures. Imagine, for example, many black and brown bodies gathered together and demonstrating against gun violence outside of a capitol building somewhere in the United States. Recent history suggests that police perceive these demonstrating bodies as threatening, as if prone to spill over an imagined border separating peaceful protest and violent riot. At no time do police—or, for that matter, government or public media outlets—consider the space of the demonstration as something constructed by and through grief.[7] Furthermore, if grief was permitted to enter the picture, the kind of grief on display would almost certainly not be understood as something productive, sustaining, and necessary to the wellbeing of the lives gathered together. And this is precisely what Bakiné seeks to rectify. Their transformative rituals permit the construction of sacred grief spaces in which bodies can gather together in love, strength, and hope.

Bakiné emphasizes the fact that respite comes from connecting grief with the land, likely for at least two reasons. First, the land of our shared planet Earth is big enough to hold and process all human emotions. Humans are not separate from Nature, yet we often re-produce a distinction between the two in order to highlight the benefits of human knowledge and power. In grief, reconnection with the land is akin to plugging ourselves back into the source. While our individual lives may wither beneath the weight of devastating life events, reconnecting with the land reminds us that we, as humans, are interdependent and, therefore, more expansive than we typically imagine or feel ourselves to be. Second, White colonizers and enslavers attempted to completely sever this connection between Black people and Nature while building the American nation-state. Of course, colonizers were unable to achieve their goals and enslaved people held and shared knowledge of, for example, plant medicine and agriculture. To reconnect with Nature through Bakiné gatherings, then, manifests the ongoing resistance to colonization (of the past and present) through the collective remembering that the Earth holds us all.

If we could add a footnote to Bakiné's statement, it would emphasize that rituals produce *"room to grieve."* Somewhat magically, a ritual enlivens a given physical environment and all the history that it contains, history that includes individual and community grief events. Once activated in the present, the history of this site collaborates with the ritualists to nurture new connections between individuals (the dead and the living) as a social group and between this newly fashioned collective and the ground itself. Part of the magic displayed by Bakiné, and by Reyes before them, arises from this ability of grief to spark meaningful action and generate a highly grief-literate community. Like a volcano whose lava joins with the ocean to produce new land, grief nurtured and sustained

through ritual practices creates a generative environment in which collective imagination can thrive. For Bakiné, this collective imagination helps develop an image of the future in which the alchemy of the gun-to-shovel transformation continues to grow in power and construct a society in which such alchemy is no longer necessary precisely because gun violence has been eradicated by love and a redistribution of power and resources.

Each of these community-oriented artistic projects, and the tendrils that connect them to one another, helps us better understand the notion of radically social grief. Without being overly prescriptive, perhaps we can clarify this grief by naming some of its essential features. First, radically social grief is not a thing but, rather, a transformative force. Nobody contains this force within themself. Instead, the force exists *between* bodies. Second, this transformative force produces space. Think of how the charged atmosphere produced by the embrace of lovers scintillates, or how a cubic meter of ocean teems with microscopic and visible life. Similarly, we would say that the space produced through grief *potentiates*, that is, it creates a matrix of possibility through which any number of actions and productions are possible. Against the tendency to see these potential actions as dangerous or volatile or fueled by aimless rage, we see the vast potential made through grief space to be, at heart, positively transformative. Third, radically social grief works in tandem with Nature. Indeed, the two commingle and inform each other. Radically social grief has the power to undo the constructed binary between "the social" and "the natural" and reveal some other kind of hybrid materiality in which human labor and natural forces speak of the same Oneness.

Two more elements of radically social grief space reveal themselves to us. One shows itself through Reyes's artwork and deserves to be called aesthetic. This kind of aesthetic is not superficial. It doesn't relate to surface appearance, and it cannot be reduced to something less potent than, say, politics or philosophy. The aesthetics of radically social grief are like the fruiting bodies we know as mushrooms. Mushrooms are the reproductive organs of vast mycelial networks, the health of which are vital for the thriving of all life on Earth. Similarly, the aesthetics of social grief are the fruits of active grief networks. They sprout when the grief network is healthy. The shovels made through Bakiné's alchemy and the musical instruments made through Reyes's art are examples of these aesthetic blooms. Once they bloom, they continue to work. As fungal spores travel on the wind seeking fertile places to land, word of creative grief projects spread to those receptive to their collective poetry and wisdom. Grief aesthetics fuel the social body like nutrients fuel the biological body.

Finally, and this is why we emphasize the social nature of grief, radically social grief *is* grief. There is no grief that is not radically social. Yet, this social nature of grief is often ignored or simply unseen, and the consequences of *not* seeing it are immense. When ignored, the discourse of individuality swallows grief, and people become separated from each other rather than connected. Perceived as an individual attribute, grief then succumbs to pathologization at which point medicalized recovery methods start to seem logical and even necessary to "return" individuals to "normal" functioning. If, however, we honor the radically social nature of grief, then we can

champion togetherness, collective transformation, and an intersubjective identity that views individuals and society as mutually constitutive.

The intimacy of interconnectedness

Grief and intimacy do not usually appear together in conversations about loss, but Reyes's and Bakiné's work show us how these two entities partner with each other. The harm wrought by gun violence conjures images of fracture and fragmentation, devastation and social imbalance. Those images certainly reveal the painful truth about guns, which, given the proliferation of guns and related violence throughout the so-called United States of America, discloses an equally painful truth about our country. At the same time, woven into that story is a social interconnectedness constructed through the togetherness of people who may not ever meet each other. We know this invisible connection intimately from the deep impact that many authors and artists (whom we have not known personally and many of whom were already dead when we came upon their work) have had on us during our own grief journeys.

Reyes's collaborative project, for example, unites those in Culiácan and Juarez whose lives were taken by guns with Reyes himself, the benefactors at the Arboretum, the volunteers who participated in the destruction of the guns, and the community members who used the guns-turned-shovels to plant trees. These connections are then multiplied exponentially by the organisms who will live on, in, under, or around these trees. The humans' lives are intertwined with the saplings, too, the metal of the guns, and the lives that will spring from the augmentation to the local landscape. This web of interconnectedness grows even wider when we recognize the artisans who made the musical instruments for *Imagine* and *Disarm*, the auditors who heard the music at various venues, and even *you* who are reading this essay right now. Northward from Mexico to Atlanta and Oakland, the reach of the web grows wider still. If we sat down and mapped out every connection, we may find a web that touches inhabitants of many different places on our shared planet.

How precisely does this interconnectedness forged through grief in the wake of gun violence appear as intimacy? Just as Reyes surprised us with his turn to Bashō, we will surprise you with a turn toward the playwright Naomi Wallace who helps us with that transformation. In "On Writing as Transgression," Wallace harnesses the tone of the manifesto to address those who teach young playwrights. Her goal is to turn these young playwrights into "dangerous citizens," which means citizens whose art can confront, lay bare, challenge, and transform the devastating reality of our world (2007).

To do this, she argues, writers need to make a distinction between intimacy, on the one hand, and sexiness, on the other. According to mainstream marketing discourse, sex sells. Because of that, many young playwrights think they have to make theatre sexy in order to catch a break. But sexiness often stops at the surface and bars our vision from seeing the intimacy of interconnectedness that thrives at the molecular level of our social world. Wallace asks, "What could be more intimate and personal than the history of our bodies and their relationship to the

world?" And where do we find that trove of intimate stories? History. "What else is history and politics but the struggle of people to define who they are and what they can and cannot do?" Look no further than Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (originally published in 1980) and Robin D.G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002) to find millions of scintillating details that could give rise to decades of compelling performance projects.

What she says next, however, is what brings Wallace into the orbit of radically social grief and the work of Reyes:

> That thousands have died and many thousands more have been maimed in the Middle East by U.S. bullets and shrapnel is again certainly not sexy, but surely very intimate, as is the fact that the bullets that enter the bodies of Palestinian children, fired by Israeli soldiers, are paid for by American taxes earned by American workers who dream of fishing, baseball and sex. What could be more personal than the names that are given to the bombs used to tear our fellow humans in Iraq and Afghanistan into as many pieces as possible—Fishbeds, Floggers, Fulcrums. Adams, Beehives and Bouncing Betties. There is even a weapon called Sad Eyes. What could be more intimate or personal than the fact that we get up in the morning, kiss our loved ones, go to work, come home, pay our taxes—and those taxes from our daily labor are used to kill you and you and you, and I never saw your face nor knew your name. (Wallace 2007)

Through this train of thought, intimacy transpires as a touch that is also *not yet* touch. Workers on an ammunition assembly line touch bullets. Soldiers touch these same bullets as they load them into their guns. These bullets, carrying the fingerprints of the worker and the soldier, touch the body of the target or the errant bystander thereby making a physical connection across individuals located in distinct times and places. Who has a hand in the death of the target or the victim? Who spawned the grief wave that emerges from their death? Not only the worker but also the taxpayer who funds the labor, which is to say all taxpayers. The issue isn't one of direct responsibility but of connection. How are we connected to the deaths of those who die by bullets made on American assembly lines and paid for by U.S. taxpayers? We are connected physically as well as poetically. Wallace advocates for a kind of theatrical writing that makes visible that physical connection through poetic language and artful staging.

The lesson for those of us contemplating radically social grief is clear: tune in to the intimate connection. Grief is a shared experience. One person grieves, we all grieve. Is this why so many people try to run away from grief? When grief rushes in, we sense the interconnectedness of the world, and the feeling is overwhelming. To shut out the hugeness of it all, we may attempt to isolate or anesthetize ourselves or look for sufficient distraction. But none of those techniques are sustainable because the social world informs every fiber of our being.

What if, instead of trying to shut it out, which is basically like closing our eyes to make something in front of us disappear, we dwell in the intensity of the radically social nature of grief? This isn't easy. To do so, we have to build structures that can function like crafts to help us journey safely into the web of interconnectedness. Once we create these structures—through community

gatherings, performance events, writing projects, participatory workshops, et al.—we can offer one another various architectures capable of communicating with our physical and social worlds in intimate and, hopefully, meaningful ways. As Yolande Clark-Jackson (2024) writes, "For the sake of personal and collective well-being and empowerment, individuals and society must choose to acknowledge and process grief. The power of public grieving is its ability to connect us and drive healing and change."

What if this grieving together is actually what love is? Could radically social grief engaged and expressed through collaborative projects lead to a greater awareness of our interdependence and a deeper sense of compassion for ourselves and for one another? If so, perhaps, the violence that has shaped the artful practices of Reyes, the Bakiné cohort, Wallace, and others will ultimately yield to more generative ways of being together on this planet. At the very least, reflecting on the social dimensions of grief may inspire us to challenge pathological assertions of grief as an individual's responsibility to "cure" and, instead as an opportunity to make visible and tangible a shared response to the contours of life and death.

Notes

[1] We thank Priya Jay for bringing this notion of "social alchemy" to our attention. We are honored to have Priya as a collaborator in our griefwork.

[2] For a different engagement, see Humbert (2019).

[3] The shovels were part of a museum exhibition in Santa Fe, NM, in 2023. For more information on that, see Caoba (2023).

[4] You can hear the result in Reyes (2012b): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgMW2VuGItM.

[5] To see images of an exhibit of *Disarm* at the Lisson Gallery, visit https://www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/pedro-reyes-disarm.

[6] Since beginning to work on this essay in 2023, Lead to Life has changed its name to Bakiné. The statements cited here no longer exist on the website, which is still https://www.leadtolife.org/. See also Jones (2008).

[7] For more on grief and social justice movements, see Devich-Cyril (2021).

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Biography

Will Daddario and Joanne Zerdy work together as a married couple to run Inviting Abundance, a business dedicated to improving grief literacy in the United States. They combine their doctoral level research in theatre historiography with radical pedagogical practices aimed at broadening the range of what counts as grief and making visible those whose grief practices have been silenced and made invisible by Western, patriarchal, and medicalized discourses. Zerdy also infuses her griefwork with herbal medicine and permaculture design thinking, all of which helps shape her wee apothecary, Finlay's Garden, named for their dead son. Daddario is a clinical mental health counselor and clinical addictions specialist at Nova Transformations (Matthews, North Carolina) dedicated to bringing performance philosophy into the domain of addictions recovery and mental health care. They finalized this article during the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Helene, which demolished their hometown of Asheville, NC.