

University of Nevada, Reno

# Experiencing Grief through Nonhuman Lenses

## **To Grieve Quickly and Quietly: A Grief-Centered Approach to Inside Out**

### **Experiencing Grief in Midnight Mass**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

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## Abstract

*My thesis project addresses instances of human grief and finds particular value in how nonhuman lenses offer humans the opportunity to experience grief. Through depictions of the human/nonhuman binary of both physical and mental transformation, and internal and external dialogue, I will write two publishable articles focusing on the force and function of depictions of grief in visual media. One paper, *Capitalist Grief in Inside Out*, will analyze the animated film *Inside Out* focusing on how and to what effect capitalism disrupts, alters, and shapes human experiences of grief.*

*The second article, *Experiencing Grief in Midnight Mass*, presents nonhuman grief such as loss of land, loss of resources, and transformational loss. In using a nonhuman lens I contend that a post-humanist approach in stories of grief can produce alternative ways of experiencing grief. Both articles aim to push against, challenge, and alter perceptions of experiencing grief in hopes to provide nonhuman insights that may begin alternative conversations towards experiencing, understanding, and representing grief.*

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## Introduction

Grief can be a complex emotional response towards a loss, however that loss usually only applies to humans who are loved and usually only represented as experienced by humans. The dominant grief narrative, which restricts human understanding and the experience of grief, also seems to be meant for certain people and restrictive towards others, while experienced in certain spheres. These narratives suggest that excessive displays of emotion are unproductive and that grieving should not interfere with daily routines or social expectations. These narratives often ignore the complex and ongoing nature of grief and can leave individuals feeling isolated and unsupported. These narratives can perpetuate the idea that certain emotions are taboo and discourage people from seeking help or support when they need it (Barney and Yoshimura 80).

As someone who lost their dad at 14 and then their mother at 21, I've heard and experienced many restrictive and oftentimes toxic language and behavior around how I was meant to navigate in the world while grieving as a child and a young woman. I was expected to return to school the following week after my father's death. Family members and teachers would often tell me that being in school would provide for a good distraction from the grief. After returning home from my mother's death years later, I returned to friends and coworkers who either never asked how I was feeling nor wanted to hear about the grief as it made them uncomfortable. Growing up as a grieving child and then a grieving adult, my experience and emotions had always felt like something I needed to experience internally and do so quietly. Grief is sporadic and erratic, no matter the public, academic, or private sphere in which it happens, and yet, the field of rhetoric has yet to engage with these topics.

This thesis seeks to explore how nonhuman grief might be used to resist dominant grief narratives and suggest that grief is neither just meant for humans, but also not just represented by human experiences. Giraffes and elephants, for example, can both recognize the bones of dead herd members and will starve themselves for days to protect the body of a dead herd member (Brown). Even nonhuman and inanimate objects can be grieved such as the OK summit glacier Okjökull in Iceland which was grieved by villagers when it had officially melted and become too small to be recognized as a glacier any longer (Johnson). Despite this, the experience of grief attends to the loss of nonhuman beings as well even though it has been largely overlooked in academic literature.

My research will begin to establish what I call grief rhetorics, an area of study that connects grief and rhetoric as a means to challenge and resist dominant grief narratives. I define grief beyond the overtly popularized 5 stages of grief definition established by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross which has inadvertently limited and restricted the human experience of grief through five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Instead I utilize wildness theory to un-restrict the experience of human grief and normalize the abnormal feelings of grief. In their introduction to Wildness theory in the 2018 *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o establish not only the importance of uninterrupted wildness, but how it might be applied to concepts such as grief. Wildness as described by Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o "is to be beside one- self, to be internally incoherent, to be driven by forces seen and unseen, to hear in voices, and to speak in tongues," which can be true for those experiencing grief (Halberstam and Nyong'o 137). Don't we become insoluble, uncontrollable, and uncontainable with loss? Upon the death of Jose Munoz, Halberstam and Nyong'o established that wildness

theory can be used in discussions around grief, as they state, “The untimely death of one you did not expect to lose so soon can propel you to spin wildly, sink quickly, sigh deeply, become inert, stop loving, drive fast, sleep too long or too little, cry in airplanes, take stock, lose hope, exhaust friends, fear nothing, risk all” (Halberstam and Nyong’o 137).

Through intersecting grief and rhetoric, which as far as I have seen has not been completely done in one body of work, I hope to dismantle and establish alternative rhetorical grief narratives that push against these predominant ways humans have learned to grieve and navigate grief in a grieving world. Grief has been explored through limited lenses such as emotion writing (Johnson T.R. et al. 2004), therapeutic and healing writing (Batzer Benjamin 2016 and DeSalvo Louize 1999), and well-being writing (Jill 2016). The efforts done through these writing theories have continued to perpetuate a limited understanding of grief and none of them have tackled grief and grief rhetorics directly. This lack of representation around grief rhetoric perpetuates cycles of dominant narratives that suggest grief rhetoric be bound to theories that involve “emotion” and “well-being” writing, when grief and grief rhetoric encompass much more. This work explores how the nonhuman disrupts dominant grief narratives and provides alternative ways of expressing, experiencing, and navigating grief in a grieving world. Grief and grief rhetoric, in my broad understanding, may be defined as any intersection between the loss of both human and nonhuman as it is experienced, represented, and (re)produced.

My thesis project addresses instances of human grief and finds particular value in how nonhuman lenses offer humans the opportunity to experience grief. Through depictions of the human/nonhuman binary of both physical and mental transformation, and internal and external dialogue, I have written two articles focusing on the force and function of depictions of grief in

visual media. One paper, *To Grieve Quickly and Quietly: A Grief-Centered Approach to Inside Out*, will analyze the animated film *Inside Out* focusing on how and to what effect capitalism disrupts, alters, and shapes human experiences of grief.

The second article, *Experiencing Grief in Midnight Mass*, presents nonhuman grief such as loss of land, loss of resources, and transformational loss. In using a nonhuman lens I contend that a post-humanist approach in stories of grief can produce alternative ways of experiencing grief. Both articles aim to push against, challenge, and alter perceptions of experiencing grief in hopes to provide nonhuman insights that may begin alternative conversations towards experiencing, understanding, and representing grief.

I plan on submitting both of these works to scholarly journal articles such as, the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Omega Journals*, *Sage Journal*, the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, and *Duke University Press*. I hope that this project will lead to future works that explore grief and grief rhetoric in a multifaceted and multifunctional format. If I were to continue my work on grief rhetoric I might extend its definition and exploration beyond film and tv and begin looking at how scale and value play into dominant grief narratives. And if I continued to teach at the college level I might extend grief narratives into the classroom in hopes to adjust student perspectives on grief in the world. I am curious about exploring questions such as, how does scale play into our definitions and narratives on grief, how do other cultures experience and define grief, what other modalities perpetuate dominant grief narratives and how might they be adjusted to include alternative perspectives?

I hope that by defining grief through rhetoric, that scholars will see the importance of dismantling dominant grief narratives and begin to understand that it plays a large role in our



understanding of many different forms of rhetoric and that we as scholars play a role in either perpetuating these dominant grief narratives or rewriting the script ourselves. Let's get to work.

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## To Grieve Quickly and Quietly: A Grief-Centered Approach to Inside Out

*The culmination of love is grief. And yet we love despite the inevitable, we open our hearts to it. When the pyre is spent and you've gathered my ashes, spread them from the highest peak in all the realms. You will do this for me. To grieve deeply... is to have loved fully. Open your heart to the world as you have opened it to me, and you will find every reason to keep living in it. - Faye, "God of War Ragnarok"*

### Introduction

When my dad passed away I used to tell people that experiencing grief felt like not seeing the world in color anymore. I remember friends and family members, school counselors and teachers sharing their condolences and telling me phrases like "time heals all wounds" and "They're in a better place." I used to get angry at them, but then when it all happened again after my mom passed away I realized that they just didn't know what to say and that perhaps the script and representation of what to say to someone grieving may have altered perceptions of how to navigate in a grieving world. Grief is sporadic in nature, in coming to understand how to approach those who are grieving, we must first strip back the layers of dominant grief narratives which confine grief and those grieving. These narratives are reproduced in television and movies as well.

My first experience of loss was through a movie. I watched the 1988 Steven Spielberg film *The Land Before Time* as a child and always cried when LittleFoot lost his mother. The film follows the Long neck dinosaurs as they migrate to the Valley, a place with plentiful food for their species to survive. LittleFoot's mother dies early on in the voyage and LittleFoot is meant to continue the journey to the Valley alone, that is until he slowly meets new friends along the way who are all lost and alone as well. It wasn't until years later, after losing both parents, that I realized certain dominant narratives were at play throughout my childhood films such as this one. I define dominant grief narratives as the socially constructed stories and frameworks that people use to understand and make sense of grief and loss. These narratives are influenced by various factors, including culture, religion, history, and social norms, and they often shape the way people experience and express grief.

When LittleFoot is represented by grieving quickly after losing his mother, I categorize the underlying lesson that to meet friends and continue life, one needs to grieve quickly, and independently. Scholars such as Tony Walter argue that Western societies perpetuate dominant grief narratives such as LittleFoot's experience as emphasizing individualism and self-reliance while coping with grief (Walter 6). A nondominant or non-Western narrative might be allowing and representing the passage of time for LittleFoot to grieve longer. As film is a constrained modality, I understand the limitations in allowing for longer periods of time dwelt on things that do not seem important, but that is exactly my point, what is being allowed more screen time and more attention?

Dominant grief narratives, such as these, alter and shape understandings of death, dying, and experiencing grief and loss. It plays into who gets to grieve, for how long, and what we

should say to those grieving or even how to experience grief ourselves. These narratives limit the scope of what grieving is and how it is (re)defined and represented. In their article “Death-Related Grief and Disenfranchised Identity: A Communication Approach” Kendyl Barney and Stephen Yoshimura discuss the common tropes of grief in several films. They say, “In many cultures, this narrative typically involves a process of detaching from the deceased, working through the grief in a certain amount of time, and abiding by social norms around the expression of the experience” (80). Barney and Yoshimura categorize disenfranchised grief as instances when an individual experiences a loss that is not recognized or supported by society (80). In discussing grief through a disenfranchised lens, Barney and Yoshimura highlight that the communication challenges faced by individuals who experience disenfranchised grief, such as lack of social validation, difficulty expressing their grief, and feelings of isolation, all play a major role in how film and television contribute to dominant grief narratives. In this essay I will be addressing dominant grief narratives such as the need to be happy, to grieve quickly, and to grieve quietly as they are represented in the 2015 Disney and Pixar film *Inside Out*.

From this definition and description of dominant narratives I will then utilize John Berger’s BBC News TV show “Ways of Seeing” and Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” to show how images and film (re)manufacture these dominant narratives of grief in hopes to perpetuate a capitalist cycle that overtly romanticizes and limits the experience of grief. When one has to grieve quickly because of a limited bereavement period through work or grieve quietly because social norms suggest our neighbors, friends, coworkers, and classmates may feel uncomfortable listening to our grief, we become part of a systemic culture that (re)presents grief capitalistically instead of altruistically.

According to Berger, we see before we even speak, seeing comes before words. Our ways of seeing are shaped by our social and cultural forces that influence how we interpret and understand images. If this is the case, then images and film are powerful tools that help audience members see, interpret, and interact with others and the world around them. And if it is also true that “the relation between what we see and what we know [can] never be settled” then the relationship between those seeing and the image before them is always struggling to find a balance (Berger). If this is the case, then films such as *Inside Out* play a larger role, especially towards their younger audience members to produce images and videos that reflect real life experiences. This article will address misconceptions of grief as represented by Riley in the film which result in romanticized ideals that guide children down an altered path of understanding grief, sadness, and loss.

This article intends to provide several supporting examples in popular children's films to emphasize the dominant grief narratives that perpetuate and (re)create misconceptions of both experiencing grief and being with those experiencing grief. This article pushes against these dominant narratives to begin new conversations and intersectionalities in hopes to bring nondominant grief narratives to light, such as dismantling the common narrative that people only grieve living beings, and instead broaden this understanding to suggest people grieve much more, such as childhoods, bodily changes, environments, plants, and seasons to name a few. In dismantling these dominant narratives as enfranchised by popular movies such as *Inside Out*, I hope to begin a deeper theoretical framework in which grief can be alternatively represented and discussed across different modalities and through different public spheres. This work will look at establishing a new theoretical framework I call grief rhetoric, in hopes to shatter stereotypes and

perceptions of grief as it is represented and discussed through films and the academic community. Grief rhetoric moves through and beyond the dominant narratives that have categorized it, in hopes to challenge and disrupt these common misconceptions and create a new space, a free space for grief rhetoric to exist.

This article is dedicated towards the future goal of seeing grief rhetoric established in the academic community and giving back to anyone who needs to experience their grief freely. From being in a place of losing my father and mother at relatively young ages, I wish to represent the experience of grief felt by the younger me that had to navigate in a world where dominant grief narratives were the only narratives. This article is for her and anyone else that feels lost and alone in a world that tells us to grieve quickly and quietly.

## Defining Grief and Grief Rhetoric

“The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.” J.R.R. Tolkien, Lord of the Rings (One Volume, page 246)

Grief is often described as a deep distress caused by or as if by bereavement or the loss of something or someone. In her article “Grief and Bereavement Theories” Edith Buglass defines grief as “a natural human response to separation, bereavement or loss ... describ[ing] an individual’s personal response to loss and [having] emotional, physical, behavioral, cognitive, social and spiritual dimensions” (44). Buglass provides an overview of different theoretical



approaches to understanding grief in hopes to highlight the diversity of perspectives within the field and emphasize the importance of considering individual differences when experiencing grief and cultural contexts when understanding grief. In utilizing this definition and following Buglass's theoretical framework on the importance of individual differences and cultural contexts around understanding and experiencing grief, I explore what it means to go beyond the grief or loss of a human being and open up the term to express the loss of anything and everything. We can grieve people, childhoods, jobs, homes, and land (to name a few examples). In experiencing grief, as it can be a multifaceted emotional journey, I pull from Judith Butler's "*Precarious Life*" in which they question what happens when we are (un)done by the grief we experience. Butler argues that precarity is the shared condition of vulnerability that affects all human beings when discussing contemporary global politics such as the events of 911. They suggest that through the importance of empathy, solidarity, and a collective action in addressing the challenges of our world we inhabit, we might be able to adjust our thinking and experiences caused by grief. In this questioning they confront what grief is, how to face it, and how to respond to it both for oneself and others. One overall concept that Butler intertwines through the book is their understanding of grievability. Here they discuss which lives are considered worth being mourned based on cultural and political norms (Butler 20). Butler categorizes the lives that are more "grievable" based on factors such as race, gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status. They argue that placing factors such as these on grievable lives also excludes or erases others who fall outside of these categories. Overall, Butler pushes for a more compassionate and just society that acknowledges and welcomes anyone, whether they fall inside a socially constructed category or not.

In defining and using Butler's ideals towards opening and expanding the definition of grief and who gets to be grieved, I follow their questioning early on, "If "I" am (un)done without "you" then is that grief? Is that the scientific 'ping' felt in one's chest without "you"?" (Butler 22). I will apply their connection to being (un)done as the beginning definition for how I categorize grief. For Butler, being (un)done means experiencing a profound disruption in one's sense of self and identity because of trauma, loss, or other forms of violence. This sense of being (un)done can manifest itself in different ways, such as social anxiety and feeling mentally disoriented. I will be emphasizing Butler's idea on being (un)done as a transformative experience that can challenge one's assumptions and force one's values and priorities to shift. Being (un)done can then be used as a catalyst for social and political change and open new possibilities for alternative futures and ways of being with the grief in a grieving world. This type of being (un)done will look at how experiences of loss, both physical and mental, of both human and nonhuman entities can affect and even transform those experiencing grief.

In using a multifaceted perspective of grief, I will be identifying the problem, lack of and representation of grief within rhetoric studies to suggest possible alternatives that may present representations of human grief and begin new conversations and intersectionalities that push and pull at traditional grief narratives. This project hopes to provide alternative responses of experiencing grief to suggest that grief can exist and coexist in our world and through different bodies, species, and modalities.

### Understanding Inside Out

The grief narratives represented in *Inside Out* present a limited understanding of grief and perpetuate tropes that children must be happy to be accepted in society and be comfortable being controlled by their emotions. As this is a film for children, I argue that dominant grief narratives are perpetuated and targeted for young audiences in hopes to continue socially constructed grief narrative roles and boundaries within society.

*Inside Out* is an animated adventure comedy-drama from Pixar and was released in 2015 and directed by Pete Docter. It follows a young girl named Riley as she navigates her way through the emotional complexities of growing up, which is represented by five personified emotions living inside her head. Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust, and Sadness all interact to shape her memories and experiences, as they try to keep her happy and safe. With Riley's family recently moving across the country, her emotions struggle to adapt to the changes and maintain balance. As Riley's emotions battle it out for who is in control, they come to understand that they need to work together to make sure Riley is happy and healthy.

In an interview on the making of *Inside Out*, director Pete Docter discussed how he came up with the concept from watching his own child grow up. He stated:

The first one was trying to find out what we were saying. That presented itself pretty early, and it was, "We want to be happy in life. As parents, we want our kids to be happy in life. But that's not the reality of life, so how are we going to deal with it? We can try to push it away and triumph over it, but that's pointless in the end. So we have to embrace it." We had that as a general concept (Dissolve).

Throughout its development, *Inside Out* was always meant to represent and show young audience members how to experience their emotions. For the most part, this is understood and

felt throughout the film, in its depictions of connecting the importance of giving sadness room to be experienced above always being happy. As it must be extremely difficult to center a children's movie around fictitious characters living in one's head that help to navigate emotional turmoils that can and do happen to children at young ages, I believe the Pixar team that made this film their best to present a concept as difficult as this to a younger audience group and still have it be both entertaining and educational. The dominant narratives I present in this article are systemic tropes that exist in many other children's films, not just this one, these dominant grief narratives continue to create and foster a capitalist agenda that represents altered perceptions of experiencing loss onto the next generation. This agenda urges those who are experiencing grief to do so quickly so that they may return to the workforce and do so quietly so as not to disrupt workflow.

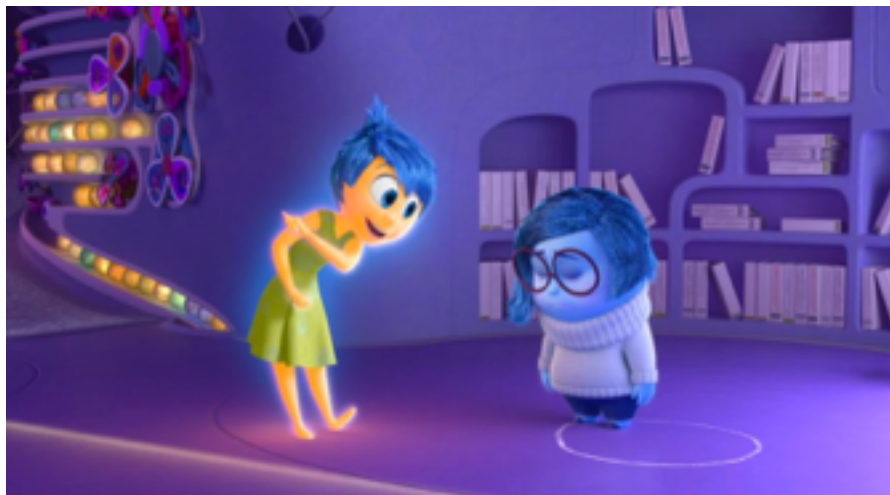
Each section of this article will outline a different dominant narrative that alters the grief narrative. I present each dominant narrative in reference to *Inside Out*, along with alternative films and other sources that also perpetuate these tropes. Each section will define a dominant narrative: the happiness narrative, the control narrative, and the personality narrative. Then, I offer a way to push against, engage, or resist these tropes. The Happiness Narrative will look at how children's films such as *Inside Out* encourage the idea that happy children will be accepted and given attention over unhappy children. Happiness also suggests that there is no room for one to be sad and grieve for long periods of time, this can be seen throughout the film as Sadness is only given limited spotlight to help Riley navigate complex emotions. The Control Narrative will look at how the film represents Riley as not being in control of her emotions and in fact they control her. Throughout the film there is a large control panel in which the emotions inside of

Riley use it to give her different reactions towards situations and with people. Even when trying to represent how one could navigate their emotions, Inside Out perpetuates the idea that you can not control your emotions, they control you. The last narrative on Personality will look at how Joy and Sadness, when not in Riley's control room, leave a hole in Riley's personality. She does erratic and irrational actions while Sadness and Joy are outside of the control room, suggesting that without all emotions present, one can not function as a 'normal' human in society.

Each of the above three dominant narratives contribute towards the main thesis this article argues over, that grief narratives in which those experiencing grief must do so quickly and quietly. To grieve quickly and quietly, those experiencing grief must adapt to being happy, must be in control of their emotions, and will only be accepted fully when they have happy and positive personalities.

By beginning conversations around grief, grief narratives, and grief rhetoric I hope to show that a lack of representation and an altered perception for those experiencing grief has created boundaries and tropes that limit the grief experience and create false expectations and realities for those experiencing grief or associated with those experiencing grief.

### The Happiness Narrative



(Dissolve)

One of the first dominant narratives introduced at the beginning of the film suggests that Riley can not engage and navigate in the world around her unless she behaves positively and happily. In one of the first interactions with Joy and Sadness, Joy can be seen trying to keep Sadness busy so that she doesn't touch any of Riley's memories, in turn experiencing those memories through a sadder lens. In an early interaction between both characters, Joy can be heard trying to cheer Sadness up when she says, "There's always a way to turn things around, to find the fun" (13:53). Later instances with Riley's parents suggest a similar pattern and Riley learns quickly that she receives attention and love when staying positive and happy. When discussing the dominant narratives that disrupt and alter perceptions of experiencing loss and sadness, this quote plays a key factor. Scholar Sarah Ahmed discusses these ideas of navigating and understanding happiness within her theoretical text *The Promise of Happiness*. For Ahmed, happiness has become a cultural obsession and is being used as a form of social control. In her introduction she describes happiness as, "the object of human desire, as being what we aim for, as being what gives purpose, meaning and order to human life" (Ahmed 1). If happiness is what we aim for, better yet—what we are *conditioned* to aim for, then how is it both manufactured and

presented? Who is it (not) for and what are the boundaries by which we are to achieve happiness?

Within the realm of *Inside Out*, happiness is shown through Riley's core memories. These are memories within the movie that make up her personality and fuel her Personality Islands: Hockey, Goofball, Friendship, Honesty, and Family island. According to Joy, "the Islands of Personality are what make Riley...Riley" suggesting early on that her personality is made up of only joyful/happy memories (5:51). Citing author Richard Layard, who wrote his book "Happiness: Lessons from a New Science," in which he dissects the economic impact and psychological connections to human happiness, he lays out a description of happiness as "happiness is feeling good, and misery is feeling bad" (Layard 6). Ahmed furthers this measurability in stating "we can measure happiness because we can measure how good people feel" (Ahmed 5). If this is true then what is being measured within Riley that both sustains her happiness and takes it away? How does power play into one's happiness? Who has the power and for what gain?

As Riley's core memories, which make up her entire personality, are all joy-filled memories, it can be assumed that Riley is an all-around happy child. This can be seen by Joy taking control of Riley's console. This console is meant to push Riley into feeling different emotions, when Joy is in control, Riley feels joy, etc. Now, according to Ahmed, the measurability of feeling good versus feeling miserable happens "within" oneself, happiness is about *feeling* something, feeling is assumed to happen within a person, internally (Ahmed 6). It makes sense to assume that in order for Pixar to translate a complex context such as the feelings inside of a person, these would need to be represented as some sort of entity with human

qualities. The first two dominant narratives that perpetuate a systemic cycle of misconception and capitalist intent stem from the very concept of Riley's emotions, their actions, and what takes place within Riley's mind as events unfold.

The first two dominant narratives suggest the following:

1. The Control Narrative- Someone or something has to be in control of one's emotions for one to be functional.
2. The Personality Narrative- Without joy/happiness, one has no personality.

Both narratives resist a grief-centered approach towards navigating in a grieving world. When one experiences a grief that unravels their very being, stops them in their tracks, and pulls them away from the systemic responsibilities of everyday life, this kind of unravelling pushes against the ability for one to be in control of their emotions and actions. For the control narrative, one who doesn't feel like they are in control because of the loss they are experiencing, makes them a liability, one that does not follow the status quo and can not be easily manipulated through controllable means. In a similar fashion, when one is not positioning a positive personality, they will not be socially accepted in society. We must put on 'brave' faces—fake faces to navigate in the world even though many of us are experiencing immense pain and loss while still feeling socially bound to push down those feelings and emotions to navigate through a Walmart check out counter.

### The Control Narrative





(Yahoo)

When considering control as a dominant narrative, I pull from both John Berger's "Ways of Seeing" and Walter Benjamin's manifesto "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" to suggest that the emotions within Riley are meant to mirror the kind of things and people that control our actions and thinking everyday. When considering childhood movies as a modality for this level of control, Berger argues images and film create illusions of happiness and success which are meant to encourage and manipulate people to buy products and behave in certain ways. Films like *Inside Out*, according to Berger, can also be used to reinforce social hierarchies and power structures, such as dominant grief narratives like control and that we are not actually in control of our emotions, but being manipulated by them. Through the manipulation and exploitation of human experiences represented in film, we can take Benjamin's words at face value when he states, "The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one" (Benjamin 19). When considering the perspective of the moving camera, its altered

perceptions and meanings, along with understanding Benjamin's absent-minded public examiner, it can be understood that those children watching *Inside Out* receive an altered perception of how to navigate in a world when someone or something else is in control of one's emotions and actions.

Berger questions even deeper when he argues, "The art of the past no longer exists as it once did. Its authority is lost. In its place there is a language of images. What matters now is who uses that language for what purpose" arguing that the images and films that shape and make our desires and motives are in themselves controlled and for specific purposes (Berger). Within *Inside Out*, what happens when a child wanting to relate to Riley truly believes someone or something else is in control of their emotions, making them act and think in specific ways? How does that alter one's perception of control and submission? Who gets to be in control and how far is one willing to submit for it?

In the world of Riley's mind, it is seen that she isn't in control of herself or her emotions, she can not go against the actions of her own emotions and inevitably is bound to them. In the same way, the dominant narrative that pushes capitalism over altruism tells those of us grieving that we must do it quickly and quietly. In the moments when no one can control Riley, when her emotions have reached a head and Joy and Sadness are thrown out of the control room unexpectedly, Riley becomes like a robot, expressionless and complacent. This representation of a lack of personality suggests that without joy/sadness/anger/fear/disgust that children will behave like they have no emotion. To have a personality means that one must be controlled by these emotions and the capitalist systems manipulate and manufacture how they emotions are supposed to be shown towards oneself and others.

## Personality Narrative



(Prettypmuchgeeks)

The second dominant narrative on personality urges us to think about the social constructions built around social interactions that suggest without a healthy and positive personality, one will not be accepted. Within the film, Joy and Sadness are sucked out of the control room and Riley begins to descend socially, she becomes docile in class, angry around her parents, and eventually decides to hop on a bus and leave town. And as these actions are happening outwardly, inwardly Riley's personality begins to crumble. This can be seen as all the Personality Islands slip away, leaving Riley with what appears to be no personality without Joy in the control room. The first moment we see her crying over the move to San Francisco and then as Joy and Sadness are thrown from the control room, Riley's facial features become stoic and socially she looks and acts like a robot.

Without Joy, Riley becomes lost or so it is meant to be represented. Anger, Disgust, and Fear fight over control of Riley and it becomes clear that without Joy, Riley will not be Riley.

Visually, this represents what could happen to a child if they are not happy. Without Joy, negative things happen to Riley, for a child watching the movie they may interpret that the same way, if they are not presenting a happy and joyful personality then bad things will happen to them. And then when Joy and Sadness return back to the control room, the only thing that fixes Riley's personality is the combination of Joy and Sadness touching the console and creating a new core memory that is filled with both joy and sadness. This suggests that core memories may always need to be tied with joy and that one's personality must always have a bit of joy in it for it to flourish. This also perpetuates that the movie can not end until a joyful and happy ending comes about, however this is not the case for those experiencing grief. As a child experiencing grief, I can attest that most days I faked it because I knew people would feel uncomfortable with my emotions. I learned that through films such as this, through other social interactions, and from family members.

### To Grieve Quickly Narrative

To grieve quickly translates to grieve so that you can return back to the workforce and be a "productive" member of our society. This narrative resists the grief process within our economic system as federally, we don't even have a bereavement policy in the workforce. As the global pandemic of COVID 19 swept through our country almost 4 years ago, we are still reeling from its impact on our lives. With over 1.1 million US citizens being reported to have died from COVID since its outbreak in 2019, the ramifications of which have left more than 72% of Americans saying they know someone who has died or been hospitalized because of COVID, what has this done to the "bereavement burden" that has been sweeping the workforce ever

since. Statistically, most companies offer at maximum, a week off for employees to grieve (Broughton). This suggests that even when people want to and need to grieve, most of the time they can not because they have to make an income. This is what the capitalist agenda looks like to me, its taking priority on work/income over priority towards mental health/mourning. Oftentimes, this priority exists out of a need of survivability, we need food/shelter/clothes/mortgage/rent. However, to live happier, fuller, and oftentimes more successful lives, we also need to take care of ourselves and our mental health, but to do that one usually needs an income and to be able to sustain an income to pay for the resources towards one's mental health.

The grief narrative suggests that time to grieve should be allotted to each individual and not limited to the grief of a human being. Authors such as Yaolli Rodriugez, whose work focuses on grieving geographies, environmental racism, ecological grief, and anti/de-colonial feminism in Latin America, focus their efforts on not only expanding what we grieve and who gets to grieve, but also how to resist the capital and economic systems that argue we should grieve quickly. In an interview done through "For the Wild", Rodriguez states on the grief of losing her mother during a year long research trip that, "Grief gave me a moment and it obligated me to slow down. So I feel that grief is basically another ontological form of time" which suggests that when we are grieving we can not think about the capitalist systems we normally operate around (Rodriguez). In this ontological form of time we don't think about getting groceries, going to our jobs, playing into the capitalist systems around us, instead we are left with feeling our grief in a space and time different for each person. As Rodriguez continues, "When you are grieving, you are living in another form of time, you don't care about these very linear timelines" I believe this

to be true, when I lost my mother I remember finding my body in random places within her apartment not knowing how long I had been occupying that space for, staring at nothing and not doing anything. Rodriguez suggests that this time of grieving is more fluid in which we, “disconnect from this other modern capitalist notion of time, and it is a time for slowing down because basically all the energy that is happening in your body is used for survival but also to think about your life”. I think that when you're in grief, it is a more fluid, cyclical form of time, where you disconnect from this other modern capitalist notion of time and to think what are you going to do next (Rodriguez).

Scholar E.P. Thomson discusses how capitalism plays into time in his article “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” from the historical perspective of industrial capitalism and its impact on time. Thompson argues that before the rise of industrial capitalism time was perceived differently. Before the rise of capitalism, time was more flexible and shaped around community concepts. Currently, time is commodified and productivity is more important than down time. When discussing grief as time, those experiencing grief can not function in the capitalist boundaries of productivity and industrialization. Thompson discusses these capitalist boundaries as the strict schedules and routines by which our economic systems function. When we are grieving, we can not continue to function inside these boundaries and I believe that to be an important separation from the capitalist agenda.

In this way, the grief narrative resists the status quo to bereave quickly and instead suggests that when we grieve and grieve deeply, we no longer think about time linearly. This is how it felt when I lost my mom. When we returned from the hospital to her empty apartment, I slumped in a spot on the floor in the living room and stared at a piece of carpet for several hours.

I didn't return to work, nor could I fathom doing mundane tasks such as grocery shopping or laundry. The tasks and events that had made up my routine, the capitalist agendas I had followed before this moment, never entered my mind to accomplish, and for a time I didn't think about time or money or groceries. This grief narrative doesn't think about going into work the next day, instead this narrative nurtures and understands the everyday struggle of just being with the grief without adjusting it based on time.

Within *Inside Out*, this dominant narrative of grieving quickly can be seen at the culmination of the movie when Sadness takes control and allows Riley to feel sad about moving away from her hometown. There is a moment of embrace and then immediate joy is felt, blending both joy and sadness into one of Riley's new core memories. *Inside Out* isn't the only childhood film that does this, *Bambi* follows a similar structure, being allowed to see his mother die, then needing to run away and eventually meet new friends that help him cope. In the *Lion King*, we see Mufasa, Simba's father die and then a quick montage of Simba walking until he eventually meets his new friends Timon and Pumba who teach him the Hakuna Matata phrase which means "no worries". The *Lion King* even had a phrase to suggest to its younger audience group to not worry about the loss and simply move on, time heals all wounds, and Hakuna Matata for the rest of your days. Friendship is used often in children's films to suggest that forging new connections through experiences of grief will put one on a path to happiness once again. However, the grief narrative can't be forgotten, we can't choose to not worry, our grief hits us in the face everyday for the rest of our days, whether we are in our office cubicle or not.

## To Grieve Quietly Narrative

When I lost my mom and returned home to my three roommates, I remember them asking me what I needed from them. Having lost my dad years earlier, I responded by saying, “It isn’t what I need now, it’s what I’ll need six months from now because I will still be here, in these feelings, but all of you won’t want to hear about it anymore.” And six months after that statement my roommates had moved on from asking me how I felt that day, moved on from wanting to listen to stories about her, however I was left with the same immense amount of grief and expected to return to the working world where it was understood that my grief needed to be felt internally and quietly.

But grief isn’t only experienced internally, grief can also be the loss of a social relationship with a person, place, or thing that requires interaction, social skills, and communication. When you lose something that was an external connection, why would you be expected to experience the loss of that connection internally? Grief can serve as a number of social functions and help with emotion regulation for the purpose of increasing the effect of social functions (Archer 2008). From this connection with social functions, the negative reactions to losing or separating from the attachment in question can be considered a normal response (Barney and Yoshimura 81).

Experiencing grief within Inside Out promotes that not only can you process intense emotions internally, but that you should be processing these emotions internally. It takes Riley lashing out or trying to leave town for her parents to take an interest and a communicative



approach towards understanding what might be going on inside Riley's head. Does the movie then promote that when we grieve, when we have intense emotions, we only get a communicative response if we lash out or do questionable actions?

The dominant narrative of grieving quietly forgets that part of who we are is (re)made from the social connections that we lose. We are (re)created and transformed by not only the experience of the loss, but by the dominant grief narratives that we are meant to follow in a grieving world. Certain bonds are formed, identities solidified from these social relationships and when they are no longer tied together, what happens?

As Butler questions, "But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us" and in this questioning we are left grieving even pieces of our own identity that can no longer exist (Butler 22). Within the realm of Riley's mind this takes place when each part of Personality Island crumbles away and gets replaced with new memories, new connections and bonds formed. I don't believe we are meant to grieve these social connections internally, instead they should be (re)shaped into new memories, new bonds and connections, expressed and reciprocated externally.

## Grief Rhetoric

It has been my hope that new connections towards old dominant narratives have been formed throughout this article. In understanding that dominant grief narratives exist, I hope to present intersectionalities that point at alternative lenses towards understanding and experiencing grief and the grief narrative. To ask those grieving to do so quickly and quietly is impossible and

to try and fit the wildness of grief inside these dominant narratives is unreasonable. Grief, as Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o describe on the death of Jose Munoz, "...can propel you to spin wildly, sink quickly, sigh deeply, become inert, stop loving, drive fast, sleep too long or too little, cry in airplanes, take stock, lose hope, exhaust friends, fear nothing, risk all" (Halberstam and Nyong'o 137). Maybe a proper dominant narrative for grief is one in which we feel nothing and everything, some days more and some days less. Maybe grief changes who we are, alters our identities, asks us who we are without them. Maybe a Pixar film like *Inside Out* was trying its very best to articulate abstract emotions and thought and maybe a film that represents all aspects of grief will never exist.

I do know that 14 year old me was constructed on the dominant narrative that told her to grieve alone, in her room. No one had told her or showed her that she could yell uncontrollably, risk everything, lose hope, exhaust friends, and fear nothing. Instead she followed the dominant grief narrative, she wrote about her pain and for years thought she could only grieve quickly and quietly. This article is for her eyes and heart and if it could reach out into that infinite void and let her know we were here, writing this article, and doing the work to see these dominant grief narratives dismantled, then maybe she wouldn't feel so alone. Dear reader, if you connect with her, as I do now, then I hope you know someone is out there trying to chisel away at the dominant narratives that have defined us for so long. And maybe, future me and future you will intersect years later and be proud of the grief work we are doing.

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## Experiencing Grief in Midnight Mass

*Mourning is about dwelling with a loss and so coming to appreciate what it means, how the world has changed, and how we must ourselves change and renew our relationships if we are to move forward from here.*

- Donna Haraway, “Staying with the Trouble”

Let’s talk about grief— and not just human to human grief, we should talk about grief in its multifaceted form that reaches beyond time, beyond species, and certainly beyond human to human loss. The grief I want to delve into isn’t limited by the Merriam Webster dictionary definition that suggests grief is simply the loss or bereavement of another, grief in the real world is complicated, racist, wild, capitalist, and most of the time just plain ugly. Grief is experienced everyday, whether you or I think about it or not, grief can be experienced through the micro organisms dying every second on human skin, eyelashes, and hair, grief can be felt through the loss of childhood memories, grief can even be experienced through the glaciers melting because of global warming, but most importantly I want to talk about how grief isn’t limited to one race (I’m thinking about how giraffes have been known to stay with their kin days after death), it isn’t limited to ontological time, or even to the present time you are reading this article (Brown).

Dominant narratives have defined, limited, and altered experiences of grief. Dominant narratives imply there are guidelines and social boundaries in which we function and navigate certain social events and structures. These narratives suggest that there is a “normal” response towards grief (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis 2014). The dominant narrative of grief, especially

how it is represented in film, suggests we as humans only grieve other living beings, that we must grieve quickly so that we can return to the workforce, and we need to grieve quietly because we are conditioned to believe no one wants to hear about our grief (Barney and Yoshimura 80). In many instances, grief is treated as a step-by-step process in which those grieving must “get over” the grief after completing the steps, which include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Buglass, 2010; Granek, 2010; Kofod, 2017). Instead of perpetuating the same dominant grief narratives through human to human relational structures, I argue that broadening our understandings of grief and the related experiences needs to take a turn— a turn towards the nonhuman.

The nonhuman can be seen through the bass swimming in the river, the fallen leaf of an oak tree, the gentle push of the wind against a window. The nonhuman can and does contribute to society, as Indigenous author Vanessa Watts describes intimately in her article “Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!)”. Nonhuman beings are “active members of society...[which] influence how humans organize themselves into that society” and in turn have agency and identity as beings which can grieve and be grieved over (Watts 23). If we are to push against the dominant narratives and (re)define what grief can be, how it can be experienced, and who can experience it, then adjusting our perspective on including nonhuman beings is essential. In defining the nonhuman, I pull from Richard Gursin’s book “The Nonhuman Turn” in which he compiles the interdisciplinary conversations around the nonhuman binary in hopes to categorize the critical, theoretical, and philosophical approaches the humanities have taken towards understanding the nonhuman binary (Gursin 3). Gursin defines the nonhuman as the insistence that we have



actually never been human, but that “human has always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman” (Gursin x). If the nonhuman is a coalition of duality, then the nonhumans which make up our world and upon which humans depend, must be treated with dualism in mind (Murdoch 1). In many Indigenous origin stories, the story of Sky Woman, which encompasses the creation of all beings, humans are the last species to be brought to the earth (Watt 25). This suggests that humans “arrived in a state of dependence on an already-functioning society with particular values, ethics, etc” (Benton-Benai 2010). Nonhuman beings then, have as much agency and right to grieve and be grieved as humans do.

In weaving together the human and nonhuman beings when discussing grief, I argue that humans are part of an ecology of grief that is not separated by cultural social norms, although humans experience grief through such a lens. We as humans may learn something from grieving *with* other species, lands, formations, materials, micro organisms, weather patterns, sciences, elements, and the like. In “Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene,” Donna Haraway argues that we must be with the trouble, be with climate change, and the grieving ecologies all around us. Haraway states, “...genuine mourning should open us into an awareness of our dependence on and relationships with those countless others being driven over the edge of extinction” (Haraway 39). For her, grief does not only apply to humans grieving humans. In fact, as she suggests, grieving nonhuman others provides recognition of the value and connectedness of humans in relationship to various entities in ecological systems. In other words, as I extend here, opening up our capacity to grieve also invites a deeper capacity to connect and participate in the world.

In this article, by resisting the dominant grief narrative and providing a brief look at how the human and nonhuman beings may give alternative ways to navigate and discuss grief, I will be cataloging the nonhuman and human relationship of grief through the 2019 Netflix miniseries *Midnight Mass*. Discussing and depicting instances of nonhuman grief through the show, I use examples, events, and grief narratives existing in the everyday world that resist dominant grief narratives by “staying with the trouble”. This work hopes to unsettle dominant grief narratives while introducing a potential alternative grief narrative that uses the force and function of the human and nonhuman relationships as depicted in TV shows.

### Nonhuman Grief through *Midnight Mass*

*Midnight Mass* is an American supernatural horror miniseries that follows the citizens of a small, isolated fishing village called Crockett Island. This community experiences supernatural events after the arrival of a mysterious priest that is later to be understood as the revived younger version of former Monsignor Pruitt who left the island two years prior at an old age. During the first four episodes we follow the return of Riley Flynn, an alcoholic who was released from prison after killing a young woman in a car accident.

As events unfold, it becomes clear that with the emergence of what will later be coined as the Angel, a mysterious creature Monsignor Pruitt brings back from a sabbatical to Jerusalem, mysterious miracles begin taking place on the island. The older citizens begin looking younger, dead stray cats wash up on shore, and those previously paralyzed begin walking once again. With the added influence of christianity, those of the church begin using the Angel’s blood to create followers that eventually outnumber everyone else on the island. The final episode, hilariously

titled “Revelations” encompasses a midnight mass where everyone is either given the choice to drink the Angel’s blood and be transformed, forcibly fed the blood, or brutally murdered by the newly changed citizens. As it turns out, when the transformation is complete, it takes a large amount of human blood to sustain hunger going forward. Along with that vampiric theme, it is understood that sunlight can kill newly transformed citizens and by the end of the show the remainder of those who are still fully human help to burn down every building (with the help of some who were turned) and almost every character perishes by daylight.

Midnight Mass plays with the existential crisis we all face: what happens when we die? In episode four this is a conversation between two protagonists, Erin Greene and Riley Flynn who are contemplating this question on a couch after Erin finds out she had an unusual miscarriage (due to the Angel’s presence on the island). In this conversation Erin asks Riley “What happens when we die?” (Book IV: Lamentations” 42:27). It is this question and more like it within the world of Midnight Mass that I want to discuss in this article. In asking questions like this, I hope to present different forms and through different modalities in which we all question what happens when we die and how we grieve and can grieve both human and nonhuman entities.

### Definition of Grief and Grief Rhetoric

Grief is often described as a deep distress caused by or as if by bereavement or the loss of someone. In re-defining this term, I extend the definition of grief. Grief is *any* experience of loss, including the loss of a loved one. We grieve people, plants, resources, childhood memories,

homes, jobs, and pets, to name a few. Within the academic sphere grief has extended very little from the field studies of emotion writing (Johnson T.R. et al 2000), therapeutic and healing writing (Benjamin and Louise 2016), and well-being writing (Belli Jill 2016). In extending the definition of grief and grief rhetoric, which looks beyond perpetuating grief as limiting to both emotion and reflective writing, I argue that grief can not and should not be limiting, especially in the academic sphere. In re-defining and situating a much larger understanding of loss and grief, I utilize Judith Butler's questioning on the term in their book "Precarious Life". Butler is responding to the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression that followed from (the events of 911) (Butler XII). Butler begins by suggesting alternative responses towards grief and mourning that don't begin with war and violence. In this questioning, they confront what grief is, how to face it, and how to respond to it— both for oneself and others. Butler explores the intersection of subjectivity and grief by suggesting that grief is not only a personal or individual experience, but also a social and political one that can reveal the ways in which power operates in society (Butler 22). In Butler's exploration of grief they question, "If "I" am (un)done without "you" then is that grief?" and extends this question further by arguing that something about who we are is revealed, transformed, and changed forever because of and through the experience of grief (Butler 22). In their extension of grief, Butler contends that grief is not only about mourning the loss of a person or thing, but also about acknowledging the vulnerability and

interdependence of all human beings. In this way Butler focuses on the idea of grief as universal and argues that it is a cultural and social construct (Butler 31). In understanding the multifaceted nature of grief and experiencing grief, Butler suggests that the process of grieving can lead to the formation of new forms of subjectivity that challenge dominant narratives and power structures.

Overall, this work posits that grief encourages a more compassionate and inclusive approach to mourning, one that recognizes the diversity of experiences and perspectives. My research and understanding of grief extends Butler's questioning on grief, mourning, and subjectivity while addressing Butler's overall argument that individuals can come to recognize their shared humanity and the ethical obligations they have to one another. This type of grief will look at how one experiences the loss, both physical and mental of both human and nonhuman entities and then how to begin to look at how that loss affects and even transforms those experiencing grief.

Butler argues that the boundaries between human and nonhuman life can and do play a factor in experiencing grief. In recognizing the very real possibility of nonhuman forms of mourning, Butler extends that humans can have deeper understandings of the interconnectedness of all forms of life, which help to foster a more ethical and sustainable way of living. In conversation around the multifaceted and multidisciplinary perspective that the boundaries between human and nonhuman beings, I identify the problem (limited forms and representations

of grief that look at the human and nonhuman connection), to suggest possible alternatives that may present representations of human grief and begin new conversations and intersectionalities between the human and nonhuman. I lean into Jack Halberstam's work on understanding posthuman and human bodies in relation to grief. Halberstam suggests that posthuman and nonhuman bodies "emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect" (Halberstam and Livingston 2). Halberstam and Livingston argue that bodies (i.e. physical bodies, bodies of discourse (i.e. cultural or linguistic constructs related to bodies), and discourse of bodies (i.e. the social and cultural norms and practices related to bodies) are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. They suggest that new forms of knowledge and experience can emerge when these different nodes intersect and influence one another. In understanding and delving into the intersectionality between the human and nonhuman experience of grief, Halberstam and Livingston believe that the human and nonhuman experience is not isolated, but rather is shaped by a complex web of interconnected factors. I believe this complex web of interconnected factors can be one entry into understanding grief through a different lens.

Halberstam argues that nonhuman bodies are often overlooked or ignored in discussions of mourning and loss. While human deaths are often the focus of grief rituals and mourning practices, the deaths of nonhuman bodies are rarely acknowledged or recognized. This can lead to a sense of isolation and disconnection for those who are grieving the loss of a nonhuman body,

as well as perpetuate harmful ideas about what bodies “deserve” to be mourned. Halberstam suggests that recognizing the grief and mourning of nonhuman bodies is an important step towards a more inclusive and just society. By acknowledging the value and importance of all bodies, regardless of their perceived status or identity, we can begin to create more compassionate and equitable systems that respect the diversity of life on this planet (Halberstam). It is this intersection between the discourses of bodies represented that leaves me continuing to ask the following questions: How long can we grieve, what can we grieve, who gets to grieve, and why?

These intersectionalities matter, as Haraway states, “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties” (Haraway 12). I believe that to understand grief in its multifaceted forms, we must connect with and delve deeper into the complex connections made and ignored through experiences of human and nonhuman grief.

I hope to provide several alternative ways to understand, experience, and respond to grief. In finding how we are “undone”, in what happens to me “when I lose you”, I encourage messy and sometimes disastrous solutions that look at matter, science, cosmology, and ecosystems both big and small, to try and piece together a world filled with what Jose Munoz would call, “so much senselessness” (Munoz 658). We may not be able to have the answers to what happens when we die, however we can learn to navigate grief in a grieving world through both human and nonhuman experiences. In meeting those of you who are lost in the senselessness, I aim to show an alternative understanding of making sense out of the senselessness through Midnight

Mass, to provide and detail some level of comfort for those who feel alone in their grief. This work wants to stay with the grief and remind any of you that you aren't alone.

### Grieving with the Anthropocene

Midnight Mass follows the concepts of world-ending apocalyptic standards which breed messy and disastrous grief narratives. Timothy Morton, in his work "Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World," suggests that hyperobjects describe entities that are distributed across time and space beyond human perception, and that are so massive in scale and complexity that they challenge traditional ways of thinking about objects. Morton argues that hyperobjects are a product of the Anthropocene, a new geological era defined by human activity and its impact on the environment. He suggests that hyperobjects represent a new way of thinking about the world, one that emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things. Hyperobjects, much like understanding grief from a nonhuman perspective, require new forms of knowledge making and new ways of thinking about causality, time, and space. As he states:

World is more or less a container in which objectified things float or stand. It doesn't matter very much whether the movie within the context of world is an old-fashioned Aristotelian movie of substances decorated with accidents; or whether the movie is a more avant-garde Deleuzian one of flows and intensities. World as the background of events is an objectification of a hyperobject: the biosphere, climate, evolution, capitalism (yes, perhaps economic relations compose hyper-objects) (3).



Hyperobjects, like the Anthropocene and world, represent a new reality that requires us to rethink our relationship to the environment and to each other. By recognizing the interconnectedness of all things, and by acknowledging the impact of human activity on the planet, we can begin to develop more sustainable and ethical ways of living in the world.

In understanding the Anthropocene and its interconnectedness as a hyperobject, consider the constructs of Crockett Island within *Midnight Mass* as this world is slowly ending. This is signified by the oil spill in the ocean three years prior, by the Uppard island slowly returning back to the ocean, and it is accomplished in the last episode when the entire town goes up in flames. All of these events mirror an era many scholars and scientists alike have discussed in the last decade, the Anthropocene. The word Anthropocene is derived from the Greek words *anthropo*, for “man,” and *cene* for “new,” and covers the geological time period from which the human species began contributing a significant impact on the earth’s climate and ecosystems (National Geographic). In the Anthropocene, humans are the primary problem, but, as Richard Gursin notes, that isn’t quite right. In his book “The Nonhuman Turn,” Gursin says, “naming the human as the dominant influence on climate since industrialism... humans must now be understood as climatological and geological forces on the planet that operate just as nonhumans would, independent of human will, belief, or desires” (3). Humans, as a result, have a similar grieving mentality as those of nonhuman descent.

Considering that we are living in the Anthropocene, then the animals, species, and ecosystems are all living and grieving with it as well. Scholars have been discussing the navigation of grieving in a grieving world through the lens of several nonhuman species. Donna Haraway describes this grieving world as “times of multispecies, including human, urgency: of

great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters” in which we are “refusing to know and to cultivate the capacity of response-ability” (Haraway 35). While “Flight Ways” author Thom van Dooren considers the extended edge of extinction from the perspective of bird species which experience grief slowly and in conversation together, both Haraway and Dooren express this time as a great unraveling of tissues and species in a grieving world (Haraway 38). If this unraveling is true, then we are living in a grieving world, an extended grievable world that knows its time is not only limited, but precious. In learning how to grieve with the Anthropocene, we must understand that we are not separate from the nonhumans around us. Grief should be used as a tool that connects us. As Haraway urges, “Grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living, and dying; human beings must grieve *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing” (Haraway 39). Within *Midnight Mass* we see this grieving with mentality in understanding, accepting, and embracing death.

The concept of what happens when one dies is a through line throughout the entire show and carries with it the opportunity to embrace and experience grief through a nonhuman lens. As the show ends, we get the opportunity to listen to one of the protagonists, Erin Greene, experience her final thoughts on her own death after the Angel has ripped into her neck. She considers that “the problem with the whole thing” is “Myself”. She then goes into the science of her body stopping, one cell at a time, realizing–remembering that every atom of her body was forged from a star. She connects with the energy all around her stating that there is no point where any of that ends and she begins. We see Erin looking up at the night sky, as the clouds dissipate and above her are thousands of stars. In this moment, we see her breathe deeply several times and curl her fingers around blades of grass and gently push up dirt under her nails as she

recounts her final moments before dying. For her, death is like returning back to the land and the cosmos that she had always been a part of, it isn't so much the grief of leaving, but the comfort of returning at play here. If we are to understand the entangled shared living and dying that Haraway describes, then this kind of being with grief is necessary to understand and embrace. Erin echoes this entanglement when she says "all things....a part. All of us.... A part. You, me....every plant, every animal, every atom, every star, every galaxy, all of it" ("Book VII: Revelation" 14:32). We are not the only species that experiences grief and we are certainly not the only species that embraces it. In accepting and understanding the interconnectedness that created you and me, we need to grieve with the ecologies all around us. In understanding this interconnectedness, this returning, we may even find joy through the grief.

### Grieving with the Land

For Erin, returning back to the land was a source of peace and in connecting to the land, grief can be seen, felt, and experienced through it as well. Understanding the world that is ending and its connection to hyperobjects is important in its relationship with grief and grieving with the land. In *Midnight mass*, shots of Crockett island appear dismal at best. In the first scene of the island it becomes apparent that with a population of 127 people, not much is left of the land. An aerial shot of the island shows a small green patch of land surrounded by the ocean while sounds of seagulls can be heard in the distance. Homes are boarded up with cardboard around the windows and the only road around the island is dirt. There is trash along the shorelines piled up in between pieces of log and boats can be seen sitting on trailers or overturned in the sand. As Annie Flynn (Riley's mother) remarks of the real estate market upon his return home from

prison, “The Millers went last year. They didn’t even list. I don’t think anyone’s trying to sell anymore. They just left” (“Book I: Genesis” 39:57). In this ghost town, piles of rotten wood are strewn around, houses are scratched with peeled paint from years of salt, and boats are pushed up on jagged rocks from years of neglect. It feels as if the ocean is ready to just swallow the town up, erase the existence of it and the people altogether. *Midnight Mass* alludes back to this dreary landscape as a way to express that those who stay on Crockett Island are much like the land around them. They too are dilapidated, broken, and beyond repair.

Crockett Island is inhospitable and inherently wild. The only inhabitants are stray cats, The Upwards, that eat the meat off of the bodies buried on the island from the 1920’s. As young teen Ooker tells Warren Flynn, Riley’s young brother, “when people actually lived up here, they’d just bury their dead in their yards...sometimes there’s a storm, and it floods, and those bodies just pop up right out the ground. Cat food” (“Book I: Genesis” 48:01). The Upwards represent an unruly wild that eventually encompasses the entire island. It is in this space where chaos can roam free, as teenagers are seen smoking pot and it is later learned that this is the first place the Angel goes to feed on the stray cats.

In the first twenty minutes of the first episode, the viewer understands that there was an oil spill that caused problems for the watermen three years prior. A hint at settler colonial power structures signifies the end of a resource on the island and in its loss the people pack up and move on to other resources on land. Nature was destroyed in oil and later on the unnatural (Angel) destroys the remaining people on the island. It is here in the first episode that we learn of the true nature of the people and their relationship with the land. Annie Flynn describes this transformation by stating, “ This isn’t a community anymore, honey. It’s a ghost” (“Book I:

Genesis” 38:00). Loss and grief are visible: in the empty homes, the stray cats. Grief is felt in the desperation of Annie Flynn’s words and Crockett Island exemplifies the end of the world and grief is slowly sinking in. As Morton says, “World is a fragile aesthetic effect around whose corners we are beginning to see. True planetary awareness is the creeping realization not that “We Are the World,” but that we aren’t” (Morton 1). Maybe, subconsciously, the people on Crockett island are grieving the loss of *their* land. This grief sets about a transformative nature in each character of the show.

For Crockett island, these ties were found in the livelihood of fishing, in the religious community, and are slowly being detached. In this place those who are left, are ghosts themselves. As Butler states, “When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do” (22). Much like the stray cats on the Uppards, the remaining 127 people on Crockett island are just that: strays. This sense of belonging (or not) can cause its own type of grief, one that grieves things/people they never had.

Within *Midnight Mass*, the land represents more than its physical parts. It represents a community, a home, a way of being; in it, a human ecosystem once thrived. Don’t we as human beings create this cycle over and over again, unearthing what we need and leaving destruction behind in our wake? In this wake, lies an unspoken feeling, an undoing, of what was. Here we see that certain species were given the choice of depleting the land while others were not: the fish that can never repopulate in the ocean near Crockett island, the cats that are left to eat themselves because they can not swim, the remaining people of Crockett. In these undoing spaces, a deeper level of grief can be unearthed.

Midnight Mass shows how ecological grief— or the grief of land and ecosystems— is equally as devastating as the loss of a loved one. These forms of grief represent how the loss of a mother is a similar loss to that of land and/or resources. It is a kind of slow death that hints at the destructive power of climate change in the past and in the future. Within such destruction, loss is ever present, and as I argue, it is increasingly important to develop new narratives and associated tools to learn not only how to cope with, but also, grieve such forms of destruction. Midnight Mass offers viewers an opportunity to see nonhuman representations of grief and begin to understand that these nonhuman forms of grief are vital in understanding that grief is not and can not be limiting.

In a real world example of grieving with the nonhuman, a small community in Iceland held a service for a glacier that had melted due to climate change. In her article “How to Mourn a Glacier”, Lacy Johnson covers the story of this community through its grief of these glaciers. The 4 glaciers had been a part of this community for over 300 years and the very last one, Okjökull, officially melted so much in 2014 that it could no longer be classified as a glacier.

For Sigurðsson, a glaciologist in the region, Okjökull’s death was a major loss. As he states, “Children learn the name of Okjökull in their earliest geography lessons; they see its name printed on nearly every Icelandic map. A good friend has left us” (Johnson). We as humans grieve the slow death—extinction of glaciers that have been a part of history books for generations just as much as we grieve our ancestors. as shown through Okjökull’s death. If we are to learn anything from stories such as these, it’s that we are a part of the loss, a part of the slow death, and maybe that should change how we spend and contribute to the time we have here.

## Grieving with the Transformations

The internal and external bodily transformations that any person can experience, such as weight gain, age, miscarriages, gender affirming care, and puberty are important to grieve as land and people are. These sites of transformation tend to be overlooked and not seen as grievable, however grief allows those transforming to let go, accept, and oftentimes learn how to celebrate in the midst of difficult transitions. In *Midnight Mass* examples of those who grieve the transformation and those who do not or are not allowed to are representative. In this way, I hope to show who gets to grieve through the transformation, who is not allowed to grieve transformations, and how that representation affects those within the supernatural environment of *Midnight Mass*.

Riley, the main protagonist who returns to Crockett Island after settling a court case in which he had been drinking and driving one evening and caused a horrific car accident that killed the young female driver he had hit, struggles with continuing his life. Upon returning home his demeanor is depressive and he keeps to himself except when it comes to Erin Greene, a childhood crush he had had years prior. During episode 4 when Riley gets bit, he becomes the second person on the island to become transformed by the Angels bite, the first being Monsignor Pruitt who had brought the Angel to the island in the first place. When Riley gets bit by the angel, we as the viewers witness the rapid transformation in which he becomes non/human. Several physical features change, his eyesight is intensified, his hearing increases, his bite marks heal rapidly, sunlight hurts his eyes and skin, and he has an insatiable hunger for human blood. These physical transformations did not exist before the Angel gave him his blood and can not be

reverted. Monsignor Pruitt describes this change as a “gift” from God and allows Riley to experience the outside world (“Book V: Gospel” 38:54).

Riley’s physical transformation is subtle, and in front of others, it can be as if he didn’t experience a metamorphosis at all. Even though the transformation is unseen to those in the show, we as the viewer get to experience his changes along with him. For Riley, he must grieve several things as he learns of his new powers and transformation. We can see quickly that sunlight burns his skin (must grieve experiencing the sunlight), he craves blood (must grieve normal human eating patterns and food), and his eyes become newly enhanced being able to see and sense things that were not present before the transformation (must grieve human-like reflexes and abilities). Many transformations like this are subtle and we grieve the changes internally, especially when choice plays a part in the changes.

Along with Riley himself experiencing grief of his body and lack of choice, his parents must grieve the ambiguous loss of their son. According to Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss* which is described as “a theory used to understand experiences of grief by families of missing persons or family members with Alzheimer’s disease, is described as a “situation of unclear loss that remains unverified and thus without resolution” suggests that we grieve unclear losses that do not have resolutions (Boss 270). Riley’s parents receive a letter from him, however they do not find out about the loss of their son for several episodes and are left in an unclear place that leaves their grief suspended. I find this to be an interesting crossroads in which, when considering all intersectionalities of what it means to grieve with the nonhuman, we find societal and cultural barriers that mean to push us away from a freedom to grieve. In these cases, the need to grieve is essential for parents, children, friend-family, and other forms of kin, however cultural and



societal norms tell us we can not do so together or even outwardly. We are expected to grieve these choices and changes internally because otherwise, the outside world may not understand the reason for the loss or the reason for the grief. And in that place we are meant to navigate in a world where the loss can not be tethered to something physical. Choice and lack of choice play a large role in the grieving process, of who gets to grieve and for how long. Within *Midnight Mass* we see that choice can play a major role in the grieving process, especially for those who are transformed or lose someone because of the Angel.

Consider the story of Isabel Selinger, a writer for the *New York Times*, who wrote the article “Celebrate Your Kid’s Transition. Don’t Grieve It”. In the article, Selinger argues that the grief felt by her father after her transition affected the transformation negatively. For her, she felt a duty to be there for her father’s grief, however she argues that “a trans person is expected to provide emotional support through the grieving process” which creates a lack of acceptance of her transformation (Selinger).

In questioning who gets to grieve, such as Selinger’s father, who had been supportive in his son’s transformation and defended him in front of several family members, and Riley’s parents who only get an ambiguous letter of his disappearance, I’m left wondering, when choice is taken from us are we still allowed to grieve? In considering Selinger’s claims about her father’s lack of acceptance to her transformation, such as her stating, “The first step toward just consideration of trans people is for our loved one to deal with their negative feelings about our transition as far away from us as possible” suggesting that her father must grieve the loss of his son alone (Selinger). However, Selinger who made the choice to change her body, argues that her

father must grieve alone, away from her when the social and physical transformation of her body and future are what he is grieving in itself.

### Grieving With—

In discussing grief through loss of land, resources, nonhuman forms, and transformations, this article argued to broaden understandings and definitions of grief. By expanding upon the very definition of grief and, through deeper connections made between grieving with the nonhuman, I posit that human to human grief is not only limiting, but also suffocating when bordered by social and cultural boundaries. Grieving *with* the melting glaciers, with the transformations, and with the Anthropocene are several ways to view and experience grief differently. Haraway discusses her theory on sympoiesis, or the idea that all living beings are interconnected and that our fates are intertwined, in order to expand the scope of mourning to include more than just human loss (Haraway Chapter 3). Haraway honors the complexity and diversity of our connections with others, especially in times of mourning and loss. In this piece, I furthered this call by bringing to attention the messiness, ugliness, racist, capitalist, and all too real parts of grief in a grieving world through an analysis of Midnight Mass.

This work has looked at a very small portion of understanding grief through nonhuman perspectives. I hope to continue this work in seeing dominant grief narratives put to rest and illuminate the path of grieving with/in a grieving world. Haraway discusses this navigation and need to grieve with as an urgency, that if we don't start to grieve with the nonhuman, then all we do is contribute towards dominant grief narratives, as she states:

The decisions and transformations so urgent in our times of learning again, or for

the first time, how to become less deadly, more response-able, more attuned, more capable of surprise, more able to practice the arts of living and dying well in multispecies symbiosis, sympoiesis, and symanimogenesis on a damaged planet, must be made without guarantees or the expectation of harmony with those who are not oneself—and not safely other, either. Neither One nor Other, that is who we all are and always have been. All of us must become more ontologically inventive and sensible within the bumptious holobiome that earth turns out to be, whether called Gaia or a Thousand Other Names (Haraway 98).

In understanding that we all are grieving in a grieving world, the idea of becoming more aware, more responsible, more attuned towards those who grieve around us maybe we can begin to slow down. In slowing down, maybe we can see humanities contribution, exclusion, and monopoly on grief through different lenses. In this way, I see a deeper understanding of grief through nonhuman perspectives as a way to reach, be a part of, and accept our role in and through a grieving world.

Grief is not an exclusively human-human experience. In contemporary western society, however, the grief of losing a non/human companion or an ecosystem is often trivialized or dismissed. Acknowledging and addressing grief associated with nonhuman loss is important for promoting a more holistic approach to ecological conservation and animal welfare. *Midnight Mass* offers a model of grief that resists dominant tropes by showing the intrinsic value of nonhuman life, acknowledging deep emotional connections that make us responsible in a grieving world, and shows that we can all work towards creating a more compassionate and interconnected world.

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