

Introduction

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The inspiration for this book is rooted in informal conversations we have engaged in over the years with other scholars and activists about the emotional toll of grief experienced by those who engage in social justice–oriented research and advocacy. One of the catalysts for these conversations was a searing experience of grief we shared when we attended a farmed animal auction yard together in June 2012, beginning what we have come to call a “buddy system” approach to research.¹ Although this was not the first (or the last) time we both experienced grief in our research, our shared grieving at the auction and the way our grief ran counter to the dominant affective nature of the auction yard itself made us pause more than once to reflect on the role of grief in fieldwork.

As we have written about elsewhere, auction yards are routine spaces of exchange for animal agriculture and are not typically framed as spaces of human grief.² At the auction yard, we witnessed cows raised for dairy collapse in the auction ring and holding pens; cows and their calves sold separately, bellowing to

each other across the pens; day-old calves with their umbilical cords still dangling from their bellies who were being sold for veal production and were attempting to nuzzle the auctioneer; and cows being beaten and shocked with electric prods. These routine features of animal agriculture (dairy and meat production) are so thoroughly normalized that they are not viewed as violence against the animal.³ Farmed animals' lives and deaths are routinely rendered ungrievable through this normalization of violence against them.⁴ Our own overwhelming grief in confronting the suffering experienced by cows at the auction yard caused us to reflect together on questions of grievability, ethics, and our role as researchers and academics. Questions posed by Judith Butler about the political nature of grief—of grieving the ungrievable—were at the forefront of our conversations: How did grieving the “spent” cow raised for dairy, collapsed from exhaustion in the auction pen, make political her life, commodification, and death?⁵ What did it mean for us to be there, witnessing her, grieving for her, and doing nothing to change the trajectory of her fate? How could we process and make manifest this grief when grieving the lives and deaths of farmed animals is, as James Stanescu explains, “socially unintelligible”?⁶

As we thought about these questions, we were also talking with others about their experiences of grief in the field and found that many of them were struggling with similar questions. It was these experiences that led us to organize a set of sessions at the 2015 annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Chicago, Illinois. There was such an overwhelming response to the call for panelists that the sessions spanned the better part of a day, and, with many others who came to present and listen, we engaged in an intimate, dynamic, and moving conversation on themes of grief, trauma, emotion,

and witnessing in fieldwork. At the end of the sessions, we were asked by a number of people to “do something more” with the conversations that were sparked in the sessions; there was an urgent sense among participants and attendees that these ideas and experiences should be shared beyond the conversations in that room and offered up as a resource for other researchers and advocates. To be sure, feminist scholars and ethnographers have published well-theorized academic works on some of these themes; indeed, this volume follows on a genealogy of intimate looks at trauma, loss, and grief in the field, such as Renato Rosaldo’s *Culture and Truth*, Carmen Diana Deere and Diane Wolf’s edited collection *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, and Ruth Behar’s *The Vulnerable Observer*.⁷ What stood out about these sessions was the raw emotion, solidarity, and ethic of care involved as individuals shared their experiences in a way that did not require them to maintain a facade of rational or distant academic-researcher. Rather, the emotions felt were acknowledged openly as a valid response to the violence witnessed in the field.

For many, this open sharing and acknowledgment prompted an enormous sense of relief just to know that others, even if they did not actively share those same field experiences, could identify with the toll of their own work on their mental and emotional well-being. Woven through these stories were the loneliness and feelings of madness that emerge when trying to push away these emotions or pretend they are not there in order to perform the perfectly disciplined, productive, neoliberal subject (the poised and professional teacher, the prolific writer, the prestigious grants recipient, the well-spoken presenter, the unfazed conservationist). The act of grieving in and after “the field” disrupts this flow of neoliberal productivity, forcing a slowing down or, at times, even a stoppage. A number of participants in these discussions

expressed the difficulty they had experienced getting to the act of writing or even returning to their everyday lives because it meant facing the traumatic nature of their research and working through the grief that was there, just below the surface (which would bubble up, usually at the most inopportune times).

As we moved from these conference sessions into formulating the project in book form, we began with a list of more than forty scholars, practitioners, and activists—most of whom we have met, some of whom were recommended to us by others. As we sought contributors, the initial response was strong, and many replied enthusiastically that they would love to participate. Only a handful declined at the outset, usually out of concern for other pressing engagements. But as the weeks and months went by, the silence from some authors was resoundingly loud. One by one, we received e-mails from, or had conversations at conferences with, authors who admitted that the very act of attempting to write their grief had raised unresolved emotions and traumas. Some laughed nervously, noting that the act of trying to confront and understand their grief forced them to acknowledge their need for counseling. Others teared up or wept openly as they shared their struggles. The pain that the possibility of this dialogue opened up was raw and palpable. But it wasn't pain created by broaching the subject; it was pain that seeped from the deep wounds that were already there.

In the work of bringing together so many grieving authors, it has become clear to us that many people struggle to make the time to take care of themselves, of their own emotional needs. In nursing and social work, this is known as the “self-care deficit”—a take on care ethicists' concerns for the “care deficit,” or the vacuum of care left when a primary caregiver enters the workforce. Through this lens, then, it is plain that many academics, activists,

and practitioners have taken up the insistence on productivity over self-care.⁸ There simply is not time for self-care *now*, given the pressing deadlines and temporal strictures of life in late liberal capitalism and, more pointedly, in the neoliberal academy.

Challenges related to self-care and mental and emotional well-being are not unique to the call for this volume; rather, they are situated within a growing conversation about the mental health crisis in academia. Indeed, a recent study summarized in *Times Higher Education* suggests that academics “face higher mental health risks” than those working in other professions.⁹ And while none in the profession could confess to being surprised, perhaps bell hooks most clearly defines this mind-body-spirit split the academy expects of its faculty, noting that “the self [i]s presumably emptied out the moment the threshold [i]s crossed, leaving in place only an objective mind—free of experiences and biases.”¹⁰ To refuse this framing, to center not just emotion itself but the moments in which emotions have interrupted, swayed, pushed, and stopped our work as researchers, is to center a recognition of the very political nature of emotions in the field. With the exception of some recently published feminist scholarship, emotional responses to research and advocacy have largely been left to informal conversations. Our hope in publishing this collection is that the deep emotional resonances that reverberate across the somatic, intellectual, and affective self might be taken more seriously while also reminding researchers and practitioners that they are not alone.¹¹

GUIDING QUESTIONS

In offering a space for these expressions of grief, we posed a series of interrelated questions, drawing together witnessing,

responsibility, ethics, grief, and self-care. For us, the questions posed were not intended as outlines, nor were they imbued with expectations. They were invitations to ruminate, to think aloud, to feel publicly, to respond from and to the moments (and sometimes extended periods) of grief that emerge in the midst of “doing research”—either in the actual field or in private lives. We have chosen to leave these sets of questions as we posed them to the researchers in order not to theorize each framing in a top-down way, but rather to open up the frame for theory to emerge through the questions and through the very act of storytelling; importantly, “stories are material practices” and are the theory in themselves as living discourse.¹² In turn, we have asked our authors to loosen their grip on theory. This proved to be difficult in some cases. In the end, for some authors, a reliance on theorizing their grief to the elision of their own personal frames took over—we learned through this process the work that turgid theorizing can do within the affective realm; namely, it offers a way to depersonalize and distance the personal or to create a protective shell around one’s emotional core. For other authors, distancing occurred through a reliance on ephemeral expressions of “our grief” as opposed to their own, framing their singular experiences within a broader community of academics, activists, and practitioners. Within an institution that is often hostile to expressions of emotion or vulnerability, it can feel safer and less dangerous to couch one’s own, singular experience in expressions of the “we.” For yet another author, her inability to write about the trauma itself led to a piece about how she attempts to engage in self-care. Together, the framing questions and the chapter responses have turned away from this disciplined reliance on theory for legibility and instead seek to offer further opening.

Researchers are often in the position of bearing witness to suffering or injustice—a position that frequently highlights their privilege and the uneven power relations between researcher and researched, witness and witnessed.¹³ *What is the relationship between the witness and the witnessed? What are researchers' responsibilities to those whose lives they witness? What are the ethics and responsibilities involved in witnessing? How do researchers reconcile the differential acceptance of suffering for different bodies, especially where "acceptable suffering" has varied norms and normalizing functionality across a range of geographies?*

In critical research, researchers often feel that they have a responsibility to be involved in social, economic, and political change—perhaps even engaging as public intellectuals.¹⁴ *What are researchers' responsibilities to intervene when they encounter intimate violence and suffering, and how might they try to shift more structural aspects of violence? In other words, how do researchers see themselves not just as academic scholars but as scholar-activists dedicated to changing the conditions they study? How do scholar-activists research in service to those they study? How do they collaborate with those groups they study to make change in the moment and in broader structural conditions?*

Humans, of course, are not the only species that engages in grief; nonhuman animals, too, grieve deeply from trauma they experience, and, as for humans, grieving for other species and ecosystems is often rendered socially unintelligible.¹⁵ Grieving the ungrievable is intertwined with ethical questions about proximity and responsibility to human and nonhuman others. *What are the ethics of grieving and witnessing? Who has the right to grieve? And for how long (e.g., we are thinking about cross-generational trauma among elephant and other animal populations, among human populations after Hurricane Katrina, in instances of genocide, etc.)? How does one engage in grieving at a distance, whether that distance is temporal,*

cultural, physical, or across sites of perceived difference (race, gender, sexuality, species, etc.)?

The weight of uncovering the depths of structural violence as researchers seek to understand the production of suffering sometimes provokes them to recognize their own embeddedness in these structures of violence and, especially, the fact that even as they try to live their lives as people and scholars in ever more ethical ways, they are also still deeply embedded in practices and processes that do harm.¹⁶ In fact, they often benefit from certain forms of violence and structures of power, operating with various forms of inherited privilege (racial, class, species). *How does one reconcile this privilege and one's embeddedness in violent social relations so that it is possible to move forward but also acknowledge that there is always more to be done? How does one not become hardened by the constant barrage of images of atrocities or by witnessing firsthand the suffering of others? And conversely, how do researchers not become burned out by the work (i.e., by feeling it too much to sustain the work)? What are the tools they engage in (successfully or not) to protect themselves? What is the role of guilt, and how do researchers intentionally make their grief and the grief of others political? Finally—and this is important—how do researchers who study violent social relations have hope?*

WITNESSING, ENTANGLEMENTS, AND CO-OCCURRING EMOTIONS

For scholars who study death and dying, violence and killing, suffering and injustice, and marginalization and dispossession, grief and the act of grieving are often central, politically, to the research process, and yet, this emotional labor and its politics are rarely centered in our work. In this collection, the authors are all

writing about their personal emotional responses that have emerged through their work and as witnesses while in the field or in practice. In this, these are not generalized accounts of personal experiences in academia or in contact zones related to academia, nor are they empirical accounts or analyses of the work they have engaged in. Rather, the authors reflect on their personal emotional reactions with the settings, scenes, people, nonhuman animals, environments, and material that they encounter. As emotional beings who care deeply about the subjects we study, we often grieve the injustices we encounter and the illegibility of this grief when the bodies and lives we grieve are deemed “ungrievable.” Often, our processes and experiences of grief are sidelined or dismissed as personal emotional responses—not relevant to our research, or even antithetical to it. And yet, as Judith Butler and others continue to remind us in a broader landscape of the politics of emotion: grief is a political act with political implications.¹⁷ When we acknowledge grief not merely as a solipsistic reflection on our own emotional state but as an act of recognition, the political nature of both the subject we are grieving and the grieving process itself can emerge.¹⁸

Grief is often regulated through processes of normalization through the “violence of derealization.”¹⁹ Complex emotions and their entanglements within and through research are often elided, erased, or ignored in the service of academic productivity, global conservation, and professional attitudes. Grief is often only legible when it is collective grief—the grief of a nation, a group, and ecologies that have experienced a pointed political economic violence that is knowable to a wider audience that acknowledges that violence *as* violence.²⁰ To experience grief alone, or for those who might be deemed “others,” is seen as an aberration outside the scope of what might be deemed normal.²¹

So, too, grief often comes with silent temporal rules—both real and perceived. Although many of the authors studiously avoided discussions of the temporal throughout their narratives, there is an underlying neoliberal insistence to return to work, to not be pulled too far out of the strict timelines we often face.²² Grief and mourning generate new temporalities that lose their linearity.²³ The past haunts an almost imperceptible present, even as it is girded by an impending future. Indeed, grief is often a response that finds no home in the workplace. To return to the work of working, grief must be sequestered. And yet, as Butler reminds us: “One cannot say, ‘Oh, I’ll go through this loss this way, and that will be the result, and I’ll apply myself to that task, and I’ll endeavor to achieve the resolution of grief that is before me.’ I think one is hit by the waves, and that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and finds oneself foiled. One finds oneself fallen.”²⁴ This metaphor of grief as a series of waves, undulating at its own tempo, is not uncommon.²⁵ Grief is a common reaction to loss, to witnessing others’ losses and the loss of biodiversity. It is affective and embodied—sometimes private and sometimes public, but always personal.²⁶

Within late liberalism and its attendant neoliberal subjectification and domination, public grief of the personal kind is disallowed—and this refusal to allow grief is a mechanism of discipline and violence that prescribes who can grieve, how, and in what spaces.²⁷ Storytelling and narratives of experiences in the field call for foregrounding the power of emotion and the pervasiveness of grief in our research. In privileging the varied embodied emotional responses that take grief as their starting point, we open up the frame to the lived realities of many of our colleagues—not to normalize it but to *denormalize* abjection. In some small ways, this collection is a reminder that grief does not simply slip away, per-

sonalized and forgotten to all but those who have grieved. It is an invitation to acknowledge grief in its many forms. It is an attempt to recenter the very essence of what it means to live inside of affective bodies and experiences.

Grief is also geographic. The spaces, places, and scales in which grief occurs shape the manifestation, processing, and understanding of grief and mourning.²⁸ Grief transforms spaces into places as they become “endowed with *meaning and significance*” through grief—transformations that can be either personal or collective.²⁹ Grief travels geographically, creating a topography of emotion, at once providing a site of connection and distance.³⁰ Grief is also mobile in and through the body and in and through our own emotional geographies. Grief comes and goes, gets buried in a corner of our body-minds and then appears again, sometimes in moments we least expect.

Methodologically, the authors in this collection have spent their careers using qualitative, quantitative, and/or mixed methods; this breadth of methodological approaches shapes not only how they *do* their research and fieldwork but also how they are comfortable talking about it. While certain forms of methodological training may seem to lend themselves more easily to emotionally engaged, narrative reflection (e.g., ethnography or oral history methods underpinned by feminist methodologies), this collection illustrates the unique insights that researchers employing other kinds of methods (e.g., quantitative analysis, ecological surveying) contribute to an exploration of grief and witnessing in the field. Thus, it highlights and honors the different ways in which scholars and practitioners experience grief (and a wide range of other emotions) and write about those experiences; our hope is that these varied contributions speak to a wide audience of scholars, practitioners, and graduate students

who engage in emotionally charged and difficult fieldwork and research.

The widely varying styles reflect not only the different disciplinary training that individual writers have received but also the ways that individuals grappled with their grappling—how they could best manage such an intimate and personal narrative within often-unforgiving professional contexts. For some of the authors in this collection, grief has been intimate and embodied—marking their affective selves with wounds of loss that cut deeply. Grappling with intimate loss in the midst of a career that rests on rigid temporal frames disallows for some kinds of mourning. Time, in some ways, becomes an enemy to the affective body, stringing along the unfinished business of grieving, erupting through the fabric of constancy and professionalism in unexpected ways and at unexpected moments.

For others in this collection, the deepest senses of grief have occurred through the act of witnessing others' pain and trauma. Some scholar-witnesses approach their research with the intent to bear witness; they anticipate and embody a politicized engagement with structural and embodied violence, often with a commitment to generating social change. Others enter their fieldwork without an intent to witness (as a political act), and an encounter or moment of coming into contact with violence and trauma radicalizes and transforms them, sometimes setting them on a different kind of path. Moving on with work and life from these encounters—the intentional or the unintentional witnessing—the scholar-witness might find themselves emotionally undone, irreparably changed; or, as Naisargi Dave writes, “something in the person ceases to exist after the event is over.”³¹

But this way of thinking presumes that the witness is witnessing a finite event with a definitive beginning and end, and

perhaps suggests that we are not already entangled in the structures of violence we study. Indeed, witnessing, as opposed to studying, engaging with, or looking at, requires an awareness of the depths of our multiple entanglements. It is to foreground an acknowledgment beyond subjectivity toward an intentional act of politicized embodied and affective experience. At the same time, to witness is a political act of pushing back against the invisibilization of the acts of violence against lives that are rendered ungrievable. So, too, is witnessing one's own emotional experiences pushing back against expectations of objectivity, detachment, and unemotionality in the academy, in the laboratory, at conferences, in the office. It is to honor, as Karen Barad does, the entanglements, to refuse the individuation of academia broadly and the expectations of scholarship, particularly:

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair, individuals do not preexist their interactions. This is not to say that emergence happens once and for all, as an event or as a process that takes place according to some external measure of space and of time, but rather that time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future.³²

In some ways, then, although witnessing is neither the beginning nor the end of the work, it is the spark toward generative reimaginings of what it means to be a scholar and how to be in relation with the academy, with each other, and with our wounds. In posing the questions as we did, we invited an engagement

with the visceral memories that haunt the edges of so many scholars' work, to come into their emotionality, to bear witness together—of their own bearing witness, for others to witness, to make available the witnessing of and by others.

Many of the responses to our questions about grief in the field have hinged on a politics of emotion—what is or is not allowed or acceptable as a bona fide scientist, as a visitor in the hospital, as witnesses to violence. The politics of emotion, as Sara Ahmed argues, involves “the relation between emotion and (in)justice, as a way of rethinking what it is that emotions do.”³³ For many of the authors in this collection, multiple emotions underlie their work in varying ways—as experiences of personal injustice, in the witnessing of devastation, in the struggle to remain objective within the confines of academic and professional pursuits—because research does not emerge from an empty question.³⁴ The questions themselves arise from both curiosity and a deep investment, a sense of *caring* about and for others—others that encompass the environment, discrete ecosystems, nonhuman animals, and humans, altogether and all at once, sometimes together and sometimes as independent actors in our worldviews. In this way, grief is an embodied signifier—a driving force and an emotion that too often must be tucked away in order for researchers to be taken seriously within their fields. Indeed, the rational, distant, unemotional researcher subjectivities that so many of the authors have been trained to embody are the locus of varied fraught emotional responses.³⁵

Of the many emotions that authors discuss throughout this collection, guilt and shame most commonly surface. What is it that so often manifests guilt and shame as co-occurring with grief? For some, it was the absence of grief in moments when grief would be an expected response that generated feelings of

guilt. For others, it is guilt in feeling grief or shame in sharing their grief, prompting questions of who has the right to grieve and in what ways. There is also the guilt for not “doing more” or not interceding to interrupt or prevent violent encounters. And there is the shame some researchers felt in aligning themselves through inaction in complicity with those who enact violence on others.

So often, expressions of guilt and shame elicit hostility. Shame, Ahmed tells us, is “an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body.”³⁶ This bodily felt-ness of shame is stored in the flesh as memory—reminders of an ideal social relation that, although not quite lived up to, is reaffirmed in its negation. Thus, while some may argue that guilt and shame are unproductive (and, indeed, we heard this sentiment from colleagues), we argue (and the authors insist) that these experiences tell us something important. Like anger, these emotions mark the jagged ruptures of complacency, and in their emergence they signal an intensity of interest—love, even.³⁷ They are not, in and of themselves, the end point but rather the starting points. These emotions and responses let us know that something is wrong; they motivate us, transform us, but they cannot be (and are not, to the authors) the transformation itself.³⁸

Laughter, too, has figured prominently for some of the authors in the book. They reflect a need for laughter: the mirth and joy that laughter brings as a release, the inappropriately timed laughter that often accompanies grief, sorrow, pain, and loss, and the power of laughter to banish and transform, fleetingly, moments of great sorrow. The rawness of some of the writers’ expressions—and their willingness to share these moments—reflects a vulnerability that is so often removed from