TRANSFORMING SELF AFTER THE LOSS OF A MOTHER AS A YOUNG GIRL:
FEMINIST GRIEF GUIDANCE THROUGH ART

A Thesis in
Art Education and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

by

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Abstract

Grief is a misunderstood concept in the United States. Since the advent of modern psychology, popularized grief models have pushed grief from a cultural or religious practice into a medicalized realm that characterizes certain expressions of loss as inappropriate. The designation, of what is the right and wrong way to grieve, is rooted in a hegemonic patriarchal tradition that, throughout history, has characterized women’s expressions of grief as ‘unhealthy’ and in need of medical intervention. Process-based grief models, based on a medicalized understanding, permeate popular culture and present unrealistic expectations of ‘returning to normal’ after loss. This mischaracterization of grief, as a process one goes through and then recovers from, sets people up to feel as if they have failed by not overcoming their grief. The cultural understanding of grief is particularly problematic for children, specifically girls, who have lost their mother.

This study proposes an alternative to a medicalized conceptualization of grief, in which educators who work with grieving children understand loss to be a fundamentally transformative event in one’s life. The purpose of grief work, as indicated in this study, should not be to eliminate painful feelings, rather it should work to support grieving people as they explore and adjust to their new identity and reality after the loss of a loved one.

In this study, I consider the potential of an emergent student-driven curriculum based in the process of art-making, as an alternative avenue for grief work with girls experiencing parental loss. This work is grounded in a feminist pedagogy, which prioritizes care, mutual learning, and non-authoritative relationships. Art-making has the unique ability to hold space for complex, nuanced, and ever-changing emotions. After loss, introducing art-making has the
potential to provide grieving girls with life-long emotional strategies that morph with their feelings and support them through new and ongoing iterations of their grief.

In this case study, I created art throughout five sessions with a nine-year-old girl whose mother had died. Utilizing a critical action research approach, I reflected on my teaching practice and position as a feminist grief guide, while considering the role art-making played in our discussions of loss and processing of complicated emotion. As a feminist grief guide, I grounded my practice in both feminist pedagogy and epistemology, in which grief is considered an ever-changing reflection of personal experience and positionality. Findings indicate that the structure of this art-making series of workshops created opportunities for the researcher and participant to talk about the role of grief in our lives, use the process of creating art as a vehicle for grief discussion, explore art-materials as a way to create ongoing bonds with our lost mothers, exercise reciprocal learning, and express both vulnerability and agency as a grieving girl and woman.
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PROLOGUE

The following section is a body of work titled Before the House Fell Down. This collection of writing and collage came into being on the 20th anniversary of my mother’s death. Faced with complex and overwhelming emotion, I turned to writing and art-making as a way to process, make sense of, and find joy in painful emotions and memories. This inclination, to focus my feelings into art-making, is the source of my inspiration for this study and an ongoing part of my practice as an artist and educator. These vignettes and collages are an example of my emergent methodology in action and a physical manifestation of responsive grief work.

The process of creating this writing and artwork was emergent. I began writing with no clear outcome in mind. I followed strands of my emotions back to my childhood home. There, I spent time observing my childhood self. I revisited a version of myself, which was transformed with the passing of my mother. In reflecting on this writing and collage artwork, I have gleaned new insight into my relationship with grief as an adult woman. The pain of losing my mother will never go away. Rather, it shifts and morphs with the passing of time and my own aging. This collection of writing and collage is a product of my art-making as an emotional strategy, which works with the ever-changing reality of grief through creative expression and self-reflection.

Readers are encouraged to listen to the following songs while reading:\footnote{Link to Spotify playlist: \url{https://open.spotify.com/user/1220867341/playlist/3E4utfJ6Y6p0eRKXriznoJ?si=ewuGyfDWRaytAJF7BpRIVg}}

\begin{itemize}
\item Obvious Child, Paul Simon
\item You’re Still the One, Shania Twain
\item Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da, The Beatles
\item Walking in Memphis, Marc Cohen
\end{itemize}
All I Really Want, Alanis Morissette
The River of Dreams, Billy Joel
Figure 1. *Obvious Child*, paper collage, copyright 2019 by Chelsea Borgman
I am six and bouncing off the walls. It’s 6:00 pm and *Obvious Child* by Paul Simon is playing on the speakers in the living room. Janie and Gordon are coming over for dinner and I know this because *Rhythm of the Saints* is the soundtrack to an evening with friends. Mom turns the music up loud after she sees Dad slip upstairs to shave. Later he’ll come down smelling like a date night with Mom, but for now I’m alone in the living room dancing on the couch. My string-bean legs bounce with the beating of the drums and I feel the excitement of the pace rising in my chest. The song is vibrating my muscles and turning me into jello. I spring from the couch to a nearby chair singing the lyrics I have made up to fill in the gaps of the words I do not understand.

The air is heavy with the smells of dinner. Mom is singing along in the kitchen, unaware of how recklessly gymnastic I am being in the next room. I am jumping, tumbling, throwing myself in the air as Paul eggs me on with the building tempo. It’s already dark out, I keep my eye on the window so I can watch Janie and Gordon’s headlights peak over the crest of our driveway. When I think I see a glimmer of light I run breathlessly to the windowpane, catching myself dramatically before spinning back into the center of the floor. Our house is filled with my Mom’s sandy treasures from Santa Fe. I make my voice boom in the big clay pot she keeps by the fireplace and mimic the flute playing Kokopelli carved into its side. Whipping back, I attempt a cartwheel and end up on the floor face up kicking my feet against the sliding glass doors that lead to the porch. The icy glass shocks my toes and I use the momentum to tip toe them all the way up until I’m almost in a head stand. I can see the naked branches of the trees outside against the darkening gray sky. Our house is perched up on stilts and surrounded by a dense midwestern forest. I don’t know why I’m so excited. This is an evening of grown up talk and jokes. Still, I’m
as lively as the trumpets. I am as light as drumsticks on taut leather. My moves are as smooth as Paul’s crooning.

Why deny the obvious child? Why deny the obvious child? From the floor I hear the crumbling sound of asphalt under tires and I scramble to put feet to ground, legs to knees and hips to torso. I am a lanky bundle of bones with a ponytail. My leggings catch on an exposed nail in the hardwood and I fumble with the tear as I skip to the kitchen to meet our guests. I am bouncing with anticipation. This song always makes me feel this way.
Figure 2. You’re still the one, paper collage, copyright 2019 by Chelsea Borgman
It is Wednesday night and I am in the basement with Dad. He’s folding the laundry and I’m watching my feet dangle off the table’s edge where he’s perched me. A small pile of white cloths are collecting beside me. He’s peeling them away from the clingy towels in the dryer. Dad carries a neatly folded handkerchief every day. As long as I can remember a handkerchief has appeared at the site of bike crashes, monkey bar falls, and hurt feelings. I know it’s my job to fold the squares into a pile. I like this job. I like being down in the basement with him, my toes miles away from the carpet. Bugs are always getting in the basement. We live in the woods after all. I’m wary of the pill bugs and millipedes I know are down there. It’s the evening and Mom is in her studio. My teenage brother, Dylan, has long ago barricaded himself in his bedroom. I can hear him laughing all the way upstairs at a show he’s watching, a sound which echoes through our house each evening. Dad and I are working away. We like each other’s quiet company. We’ve always been cut from the same cloth.

Upstairs Mom’s speakers announce themselves and we hear a muffled melody. The music gets louder when Mom opens the door to her studio and Shania Twain’s voice comes into clarity and wafts down the stairs. Breathlessly she whispers:

“When I first saw you, I saw love
and the first time you touched me, I felt love
and after all this time, you’re still the one I love.”
In comes the piano as Mom slinks slowly down the stairs in woolen socks and an oversized sweater. Like a lounge singer in pajamas, she’s working her audience of one. Dad stops what he is doing. She meets his eyes as she sings along with, *You’re Still the One.* She is at the bottom of the stairs now and playing up the cheesy romance of the song with her animated rendition. Like a movie they meet in the middle of the room. I am no longer there. Swaying back and forth, not quite dancing, she sings along the whole way through. She pushes past the limits of the comic bit she started. Her eyes are locked on his. They giggle. It’s silly. Tears stream down Dad’s face. I’m kicking my feet in the air. I know what love looks like.
Figure 3. *Ob-la-di, ob-la-da*, paper collage, copyright 2019 by Chelsea Borgman
I’m riding in Dad’s teal bean of a Mitsubishi. He is driving me home from second grade. Like always he turns on The Beatles. *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da* comes on. I think this sounds like a kid song. I watch him sing along from my car seat. It is cute he still likes kid songs.
Figure 4. Walking in Memphis, paper collage, copyright 2019 by Chelsea Borgman
I am staring up at the ceiling of Mom’s studio. Her sacred space is unlike anywhere else I have been. The shelved walls of what was once a library are now filled with fabric — floor to ceiling, wall to wall fabric. Mom is crazy for fabric.

I am her partner in crime at the fabric store. I’m five and not in school full time yet. We go to Saint Theresa’s Textile Trove during the day after Dad leaves for work and Dylan has been dropped off at school. Mom spends the morning climbing high onto the sliding ladders of the old shop, pulling down bolt after bolt of hand dyed African fabric. Mom is crazy for African fabric. The ladies who work there swoon over me. They bring me colorful beads they think I will like. I bring home a unicorn pendant Mom says I can make into a necklace.

Mom is sick and it makes her tired all the time. She’s been sick for a long time and all I know is that it makes her grumpy. I’m told not to bother her when she falls asleep in front of the TV, but I climb into her chair with her anyways. I want to press my cheek against her cool skin.

This evening she is having a spurt of energy. Sometimes when this happens, she stays up all night planning and sewing. Her bulletin boards are covered in sketches, quotes and quilt patterns. The floor is lined with half-finished projects. From my perspective on the ground I can see where her knees meet the carpet as she lays out fabric. Her shiny silver scissors are next to her. I can hear the crisp quick sound of the scissors slicing. She’s talking to herself. My eye wanders to the swaths of color on the walls. She has built shrines in-between the stacks of fabric. Little cabinets hold precious trinkets. She has sand from Santa Fe, a figure of an old women quilting, a raven feather, and a picture of me standing at the edge of the ocean. She keeps her special treasures there. I spend hours daydreaming and carefully holding them in the palm of my hand.
Put on my blue suede shoes, and I boarded the plane. Mom’s favorite song just started. She’s tapping her feet and singing along. The lyrics are foreign to me. I know nothing about Memphis. ‘Touched down in the land of the Delta Blues, in the middle of the pouring rain.’ I’ve lost her now to Graceland. Her eyes are closed, and she is singing. ‘Saw the ghost of Elvis, on Union Avenue’... “I followed him UP, to the gates of Graceland” she belts. She shifts on to her toes with the crescendo of the ‘up’. “And I watched him walk right through” she bends over and whispers close to my giggling face. For four minutes and eighteen seconds Mom is bursting. She is dancing and acting. She is unburdened by her body. The chorus comes in and the room is full of voices and fabric and color. Her energy engulfs us both and we end up lying on the floor together laughing, limbs a mess around us.

I fall asleep on the soft white carpet listening to Mom, she is talking to herself while she works.
Figure 5. *All I really want*, paper collage, copyright 2019 by Chelsea Borgman
Do I stress you out?

My sweater is on backwards and inside out

And you say, how appropriate

I don’t like to dissect everything today

I don’t mean to pick you apart you see

But I can’t help it

I am eight years old and fed up with your bullshit. Mom gave me my own copy of Jagged Little Pill by Alanis Morissette so I’ll stop taking hers. I am blaring All I Really Want on the boom box in my room. The door is closed on purpose because I’m old enough to need privacy and I want that to be known. I don’t know most of the words. Any that I do know, I don’t understand. Mom knows this. She gives me the CD despite the edgy content because she likes Alanis’ unapologetic attitude. She wants me to follow the voices of strong women. I have recently spent an entire week wearing Mom’s old chenille sweater and leggings — the only two black items of clothing I can find to fit into. The sweater hangs on me like a dress and the ends of my long scraggly hair are lost in its texture. I’m angry and I don’t remember why.

It’s a weekend afternoon and Dad is outside working in the yard. Mom is resting in her studio. Dylan is off with friends. I often find myself alone on days like this, which is fine with me. ‘Do I wear you out?, You must wonder why I’m relentless and all strung out, I’m consumed by the chill of solitary’. The lyrics slam against the baby blue walls of my bedroom. ‘I’m like Estella, I like to reel it in and then spit it out, I’m frustrated by your apathy’. My mountain of stuffed animals watch me from the corner of my room, unsure of what to think. I feel a voice in
Alanis that feels like mine. I’m finding ownership of my emotions. My feelings are becoming less like waves engulfing me. I feel powerful.
Figure 6. *The river of dreams*, paper collage, copyright 2019 by Chelsea Borgman
Dylan is laying across the floor of the living room. A sun ray is streaming across his legs which stretch on for days. I’m a kid and suddenly Dylan is not. His finger is poised over the record button on the downstairs tape player. He is making a mix tape for his best friend Thomas. He’s twenty seconds into The River of Dreams by Billy Joel. I love this song. I hear Dylan play it in his bedroom in the evenings. Dylan is old enough to have his own boom box in his bedroom. I’m laying upside down on the couch. My eyes are closed and I’m imagining walking through a jungle under a black sky of stars. I can see the glowing eyes of wild cats peering at me through the leaves. Dylan is eleven years old and seven whole years older than me. He knows all kinds of cool music like this. I cross my fingers and squish my eyes closed tight. I wish for him to make me a tape like this for my birthday.
It is February 3rd. I am 29 years old. I have just woken up because my cell phone is buzzing. Up until the moment I see Baba’s message on the screen, I have forgotten its today. It has been 20 years since Mom died. It snuck up on me this time.

My heart sinks when I realize I have planned to spend the day writing. I take my time getting up. My transition from sleep to reality feels particularly harsh this morning. I know I’m procrastinating when I find myself putting on lipstick for no one. I’m contemplating how I will get through the day knowing where my mind will take me. I don’t want to pour my heart out for class. But, I know there is a special lens I look through today. I cannot help but refract her memory around me. Even though I’m sad, her image casts rainbows around my room.

I don’t want to spend this day hollowed out and swollen. So, I go to a place that existed before the house fell down. I tuck myself into the corners of my childhood home and watch. I watch our moments pass. I see us experience our memories before they were weighed down with the knowledge of what happened next.

I spend the day listening to the sounds of my place. On the way to town I quicken my pace to match Paul Simon’s drum beat in my ear. In the library I swoon over Shania and daydream about my far away love. Alanis greets me like an old friend. Jagged Little Pill is still my favorite album if I’m being honest with myself. Walking in Memphis punches me in the gut and I am heaving on the bathroom floor. That one still sends me running out of convenience stores on weekday afternoons.

Through the heartache, moments of clarity peak through the lyrics. I can see myself dancing. I am light, quick, and small. My joy is unadulterated by the complexity of loss. I’m back to the place I lived before I grew up all at once. Back there, music was just music.
Reflection

When we were given the assignment in a graduate course to write “place narrative,” the house on Susan Lane was the first and only place I considered. My colorful childhood home from age six months to 12 years was a special place filled with art, music, and play. Perched up on a hill overlooking a dense midwestern forest, my memories of home are magical in their simplicity. Looking out from our living room porch, down on a hill side of trees, we were a world away from city lights and traffic sounds. I spent much of my early years daydreaming, staring out the windows or sewing small projects in my mother’s studio. When we left that house to move to my stepmother’s suburban home, I felt violently ripped away from not just a vibrant house but from the culture my family cultivated there.

We lived there for three years without her. My dad and I, after my brother left for college, shuffled around that empty house. Evenings were spent in La-Z-Boy chairs watching Super Market Sweep and Friends. Dad and I would read books to each other before bed. We did what we could to hold each other together. I have no memory of what we did with Mom’s studio or her belongings. I cannot recall if they were cleared out or remained untouched until we moved. I know most of her fabric waits for me in plastic containers. Most of my memories from that time are foggy. What I do remember is lying on the kitchen floor watching my reflection in the dishwasher door, a puddle of tears. I remember the moment I realized my father’s upcoming marriage meant saying goodbye to the house, the place, that cradled my childhood.

Reading over the writing that emerged February 3rd, 2019, I am struck by how that house has nestled in my heart and come to represent a feeling of safety and security. I am struck by how it is a symbol of the place that existed before loss, less a physical place than a place in time and of being. I remember in the years after her death when we still lived there, coming to my
Dad in the middle of the night tears streaking my face, “I just want to go home.” He would hold me and desperately repeat, “you are home.”

I have often found myself making art in the years since then, that sought to reconstruct my lost home. My undergraduate thesis exhibition was a room-sized nest, viewers could enter, painstakingly woven together with deep purple thorn branches. Later, I played with womb imagery and became fascinated by elaborate insect nests which are engineered to support their life cycles. Throughout my adolescence and young adult life I have willingly revisited my grief. I have unconsciously put myself in positions to examine, support, and pick it apart. As a master’s student, I have wandered yet again into my grief as a source for creative and scholarly inspiration.

I attribute much of this inclination to my father and the women who gathered around my family in our time of need. Dad never hesitated to grieve openly. I have always admired him for his willingness to cry. He has never been afraid to feel his feelings—a greater gift to a grieving child, I cannot imagine. From him I learned the value of grief. The “can’t go over it, can’t go under it, gotta go through it” kind of grief that begins to move time forward when it suddenly comes to a grinding stop. I can remember my friends in the playground in the weeks and months after she died. In passing, they would mention their mom and an expression of panic would streak across their face. “I don’t want to make you cry,” as if the mere mention of a mother would be my breaking point. I look back at those kids now as a grown-up and tell them to let that little girl cry. Those tears have a purpose.

My mother’s closest friends, many of whom were my teachers, formed a group they called the “God Mothers.” They gave me the support she no longer could. They encouraged me to write, draw, and paint about my loss. They provided space for me within my day to grieve,
laugh, and make art. With their help, early on, I learned to turn to art-making and writing when faced with emotion too big to wrap my arms around.

As I have grown with my grief, I have learned to co-exist with it. It provides me with an ever-present perspective that reflects the world back at me with more vibrancy, gratitude, and sadness than before. Through art-making I have learned to find beauty in that pain. A willingness to sit with the sadness has given me a kind of super-power. I can cry and heave and sob and come out the other side with more insight and clarity. For all its pain, grief has taught me I will make it through anything that comes my way.

With deep gratitude to those women and my father, I look at my thesis work as an opportunity to share this strength with others. I want to develop an approach to grief work which introduces art-making and writing as an emotional strategy (see Appendix A) for children who have lost a parent. Pivotal in my research is the understanding that grief is fundamentally transformative. Counter to messages from popular culture, grief is not a process or series of steps, it is something that changes the self. Grief makes explicit the profound nature of our connections with others.

I see this writing as a deployment of the very strategies I hope to share with others through this study. Faced with the task of writing on a significant day, I translated my grief into a creative process. The inclination to turn to a generative outlet when faced with a new iteration of my grief, has been a consistent source of comfort and clarity since my mother’s death. The realization of the unique power of art-making has prompted me to focus my research on how art-making may support others through their life-long journey with loss.

This writing poured out of me, like a facet being turned on. I see clearly my desire to return to the place before the transformation of grief. I accessed a place of my childhood rarely
visited. It is a place that exists before I understood the world through what could be lost. It is easy to talk about the hard stuff, the heart wrenching soul punching stuff. I can sit down and write an essay that would pull me apart and illicit sympathy. It is much harder to talk about the good times, the times we took for granted, the times we will never have again. Each of the memories I describe are bittersweet, they are a representation of what is gone. However, in attempting to write from the place before loss, I tried to see them as we experienced them. I lead the reader through the memories, as I had them, before I knew what happened. Then, as the piece ends, the reader too reflects on those memories with a new sense of preciousness. Each vignette transforms from a moment in time, to a memento of something that is no longer. The analysis of this action research mirrors my storytelling style and utilizes Narrative Inquiry as a methodological approach to illustrate and understand the data.

In response to this writing, I have created a series of six collages that correspond to each vignette. Using an abstracted narrative approach, I have attempted to capture the essence of our house and the way I felt inside it during these moments. When making the pieces, I turned on each song, loud, and tried to pull on the strands of emotion I can remember from those moments. From there, I intuitively and quickly, sketched out thumbnail versions of the collage. Within minutes I would have the composition fully formed. Dancing around my table with a stack of colored paper I would throw color compositions together. Using an embodied and sensory approach, I pulled out the colors of each scene. I worked as intuitively as I could so, like my writing, I could convey a raw and authentic look at the emotional landscape of my grief and gratitude. Then, as I conducted this research, I repeated the process, creating similar collages based on the vignettes discussed in the analysis chapter.
This body of work represents a special moment in my process as an artist, educator, and grieving woman. Something special happened on February 3rd, 2019, which has prompted me to investigate more deeply the potential of creatively charged grief work. This writing is an encapsulation of a moment of grief, which opened up part of me that had been closed for a long time. It is both the beginning of something new as well as the continuation of something I had been working on for a long time. In the following pages, I present the result of this focused period of inquiry in which I explore contemporary theories as well as my personal expressions of grief, so I may better support girls as they navigate their own relationship with maternal loss.
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION:

GIRLS AND LOSS

Grief has a life-long impact on children who lose a parent. Children, specifically girls, are in need of open-ended grief strategies that morph as they discover new iterations of their grief. This study considers the potential of art-making as a grief method which resists prescriptive process based grief models that dominate popular culture.

In this chapter, I will introduce some of the key factors which impact girls’ grief in the United States. I also propose a new avenue for grief work that utilizes feminist teaching methods and epistemology to inform creatively charged grief work. Through the investigation of feminist theory and art-making, I have developed an action research study that utilizes this theoretical frame through an art-making workshop with a grieving 9-year-old girl.

Purpose of the Study

The loss of a parent is a life-shaking event. Time stands still in the wake of significant loss. The grief which follows can feel all-encompassing and never-ending. Loss is a complex human experience, which exposes deep and profound bonds shared between people (Butler, 2004). For children, the loss of a parent not only means the loss of a loved one but also a loss of stability and is a significant disruption of their developing identity (Pearce, 2011). Parental loss presents many challenges for children who are in the process of establishing their independence, which typically occurs in relation to their parents (Erikson, 1969; Balk & Vesta, 1998). Children’s burgeoning sense of self is uniquely vulnerable to the destabilizing effects of intense grief (Tyson-Rawson, 1996). The effects of grief are especially evident for girls who have lost
their mothers at a young age and do not have a female role model to learn from (Edelman, 1994; Palladino-Schiltheiss & Bluestein, 1994).

This study explores the potential of a feminist grief guide and an emergent student-driven curriculum to support pubescent girls’ grief work as they navigate the social and political systems which impact women’s lives. Employing a critical action research approach, I have reflected on my practice while creating art with a grieving nine-year-old girl, Alexa (pseudonym), over five sessions. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic toward the beginning of data collection, all but one meeting took place remotely via webcam. We used readily available art materials such as paper, markers, and tape. Later sessions included watercolors, watercolor paper, and paintbrushes, which were shipped to Alexa to continue my study and to keep to the commitment I had made with Alexa. Throughout the workshops, we facilitated opportunities to explore our experiences of grief through art materials and the process of art-making, express vulnerability with one another by discussing the role of grief in our lives, and worked towards developing a sense of identity and agency through reciprocal learning in the wake of loss.2 Throughout five sessions with Alexa, I participated in art-making and observed and documented our art-making process and discussions. I recorded (in handwritten form in a journal) my observations and reflections about my teaching approach, strategies of support, our conversations, and the artwork and writing created during the workshop.

**Role of a Feminist Grief Guide**

The death of a mother is particularly difficult for girls who are navigating a patriarchal society during critical years of personal growth. The patriarchal structure of the United States

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2 See Appendix A for definitions of terms such as identity, agency, and reciprocal learning as used in this study.
subjects girls to a culture that prioritizes idealized standards of beauty, the sexualization of youth, and “traditional” gender roles (Wolf, 2002). The death of a mother during formative years means not only the loss of a loved one but the loss of a role model who can provide guidance. Adolescents develop their identity in relation to their parents/caregivers (Balk & Vesta, 1998). Girls, in particular, are socialized to develop their identity through intimate connections with others. Social norms encourage girls to maintain strong bonds and emotional attachments with their mothers throughout their teen years (Gilligan, 1982). For many girls, their relationship with their mother serves as an ongoing resource and model for navigating moral and social issues (Josselson, 1987). Without a mother figure, daughters struggle to know themselves (Tracey, 2008). Even for those whose mothers were not present in a positive way, their mother serves as an important touchstone for teens who are formulating their identity in continuity or contrast to their surroundings (Balk & Vesta, 1998; Tyson-Rawson, 1996). Parents are an important source of continuity in the life of a child. The loss of such stability can have lasting negative impacts for children, into adulthood, if they do not receive sufficient social support from their community (Dowrick, Ellis, Lloyd-Williams, 2013).

Up until the late 20th century, grief was rarely openly discussed in the United States. Due to social expectations and stigmas, grieving over the loss of a loved one has been hidden behind the closed doors of bereavement groups and the home. Despite efforts by some bereavement specialists to bring grief into the open, grieving can still be considered gauche to discuss and counter-productive to indulge (Chapple, Hawton, & Ziebland, 2015). However, for most of human history, cultural grief rituals and religious traditions have characterized the way people understand and express grief (Rosenblatt, 2017). Further, cultural context has a profound impact on the way people grieve. Across cultures people report experiencing many different emotions.
when going through loss, some of which would be considered unusual by the standards in the United States. We do not have words in the English language for some of these emotions. People may grieve much more intensely or for much longer than what would be considered ‘normal’ in the United States. They may focus more on specific feelings, such as anger, which people from the United States typically do not highlight when discussing grief (Rosenblatt, 2017).

The rise of psychology at the beginning of the 20th century changed the social conception of grief. Since then, grief has largely become relegated to the field of medicine and psychoanalysis (Bennett-Smith, 1995; Chapple, Hawton, & Ziebland, 2015). Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) laid the groundwork for future discussions of grief as a psychological disruption to overcome so the grieving person may return to ‘normalcy.’ Psychologists working within outdated grief models often approach emotions associated with grief as issues requiring treatment. For years, psychologists thought of grief as a syndrome to be ‘fixed.’ The publication of *On Death and Dying* by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969 solidified the notion that grief was a process that one moves through so a grieving person may return to an emotional state that existed before the loss. Kübler-Ross’s wildly popular book continues to permeate culture and has established the *Five Stages of Grief* as the ‘natural’ and ‘healthy’ progression of emotion after a loss. Process-based approaches to grief presents numerous problems for most people whose grief does not fit neatly into a set of steps.

Looking back through time, visual artists have demonstrated through their work that loss and the processing of grief are not a contained event but a life-long relationship. Artists like Louise Bourgeois and Eve Hesse revisited grief throughout their lives (Dreifuss-Kattan, 2016). Their relationship with loss can be tracked throughout their careers, bringing new and nuanced understandings of grief to their work decades after the initial loss. Artists throughout history
have known that art has the ability to express emotions too complicated or painful to put into words (Dreifuss-Kattan, 2016). Neuroscience has now caught up and verified that trauma is experienced in parts of the brain, often inaccessible through talk therapy and cognitive intervention alone (van der Kolk, 2014). Art-making offers a unique and powerful medium for externalizing complex and overwhelming feelings, which are beyond the scope of language (Bennett, 2005). The potential of art-making as an emotional skill is demonstrated by artists. Their work reflects how art can be revisited during the life-long practice of grief.

Through a qualitative critical action research study, I intended to harness the potential of art-making after loss. By studying my effectiveness as an art-making guide through grief, I worked toward developing a teaching approach, with the goal to provide young women with emotional resources to navigate their ongoing relationship with loss. I hoped to create a space during a time of emotional and often physical upheaval, in which girls could re-imagine the self through art-making. The analysis of this study considers my ability to facilitate a space for grief informed art-making and begins to reveal the potential of art creation as a dynamic form of grief work.

Due to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide stay-at-home orders, my research was reduced in scale from a group of girls (ages 9-14) to a girl in a one-on-one online workshop. This workshop employed an emergent student-directed curriculum, which sought to aid in reestablishing agency and identity through a creative process (Macpherson, Hart, & Heaver, 2012). Using a critical action research approach, I was able to reflect on my teaching process and gauge if my practice provided the intended support (Klein, 2012). Considering the already heightened stress of COVID-19, I allowed Alexa to guide the emotional intensity of our

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3 See Appendix A for definitions of terms such as critical action research as used in this study.
sessions and intuitively utilize art-making. By creating emotional and physical space for creative expression, I introduced Alexa to the healing potential of art-making, created opportunities to connect with her mother through art materials, and engaged with art-making as both a student and teacher. The nature of grief changes with age and context. This workshop intended to provide Alexa with emotional strategies that can adapt, so she can revisit them throughout her life.

As a visual artist who lost her mother at the age of nine, I understand the ongoing nature of grief intimately. After my mother’s death, I was encouraged by her close friends to express my feelings through writing and art-making. Now, 20 years later, I look back and see how I have utilized art-making to process my ever-changing relationship with grief. Like a good friend, I have looked to art in times of need for comfort and clarity. I see the women who provided me with journals, markers and paints so long ago as understanding something I could not possibly have known as a child. My life would never be the same without my mom. They knew that returning to a sense of ‘normal’ was not only impossible, but beside the point. They understood that loss would be something I would not only carry with me but would define me in many ways. They knew, if the adults in my life turned away from painful feelings, they would deny me the opportunity to understand the gravity of this loss.

So, now as an artist, educator, and researcher, I want my work to create space for grieving girls to sit with their feelings, explore their identity and look forward at the future knowing it will be difficult but that they have the strategies within themselves to navigate the emotional landscape before them. I hope that this research will contribute to our larger understanding of grief and help illuminate how art can positively impact girls after maternal loss.
Art-making was a gift given to me in a time of unexplainable loss. This research is the beginning of my exploration to find how I can best facilitate a space for others.
CHAPTER 2 THE TRANFORMATIVE POWER OF GRIEF:
A FEMINIST GUIDE TO RECONSTITUTING THE SELF THROUGH EMERGENT ART-MAKING

Cultural conceptions of grief dominate our collective understanding of what are ‘normal’ or ‘appropriate’ responses to the loss of a loved one. Medicalized grief models have contributed to a pervasive sense that grief is a series of steps one moves through so they may move past difficult and uncomfortable feelings. A mischaracterization of grief sets people up for failure as they may believe they are at a disadvantage when new and complex emotions do not go away over time.

Contemporary grief theories question the traditional medicalized characterization of grief and suggest that grief is on-going and ever-changing. These theories contribute to this study’s theoretical frame and assert the importance of maintaining bonds with the lost loved one. Rather than considering grief a temporary emotional state, this research understands loss as a transformative event in which a person is fundamentally changed by grief. A transformation is even more evident for children who have lost a parent that they rely on for support. The loss of a mother uniquely impacts girls. Relationships with one’s mother imprints on a girl’s identity and sense of self.

This research looks to female artists of the past who have used art-making as a way to express and make sense of feelings associated with loss. By looking to these artists and learning from their example, I explored the unique potential of art-making to support grieving women and girls as they adjust to their new reality. Art is capable of holding space for complex emotion and nuanced manifestations of grief without imposing judgment or expectation. These qualities,
combined with its open-ended structure, position art-making as a powerful yet largely unexplored avenue for grief within the study of art education.

**Background of the Problem: The United States and Grief Culture**

The United States has an unhealthy relationship with death. Culturally, discussing death publicly is considered gauche, often even within families. They ‘passed away’ ‘went to a better place,’ or ‘are no longer with us.’ Rarely is it stated that someone is simply dead. Openly displaying the emotional turmoil of grief is even more taboo in a culture that ignores death until it is unavoidable. Thus, many people are ill-equipped to process the inevitability of loss.

Bereavement centers and therapists can provide vital resources for those in mourning. Contemporary resources typically understand grief to be complicated and non-linear. However, outside of specialized spaces, grief is often reduced to its simplest form. The Kübler-Ross model, otherwise known as the *Five Stages of Grief*, is the most pervasive conceptualization of grief in the United States. Since the publication of *On Death and Dying* in 1969, the general public has widely accepted denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance as the ‘normal’ progression of grief (O'Rourke, 2010). Media depictions apply the Kübler-Ross model uniformly to all people, adopting these terms and presenting them as fact. From TV shows to movies, books, and magazines, *The Five Stages* is continually reinforced in the United States’ conceptualization of grief (O'Rourke, 2010).

Historically, cultural and religious traditions dictated one’s relationship to loss (Rosenblatt, 2017). Individual societies developed different responses to death and thus their own understandings of loss and mourning. Since the advent of contemporary psychoanalysis in the United States, grief as a subject of study has been continually pushed into the realm of
psychology. As a result, grief has been flattened and characterized by blanket generalizations which do not acknowledge the complexity of grief responses. The Victorian era marks a distinct transition from social grief practices to medical and psychological interventions into mourning. By the 1920s, clinical treatments of grief have replaced mourning rituals; grief became closely associated with mental disorders (Bennett Smith, 1995). Sigmund Freud’s work, *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), contributed to a shift toward treating grief from a psychological perspective. Freud emphasized a need for detachment from the lost loved one. By severing ties, he believed one would be led past their feelings of loss and back to their previous emotional state (Bennett Smith, 1995). World War I produced a generation of grieving and traumatized men whose stoicism and bravery were rewarded in the face of unthinkable loss. Women’s grief, in particular, became pathologized through a clinical lens. Emotional outbursts as a result of grief became associated with feminine qualities and further understood to be a disordered response to death (Bennett-Smith, 1995). Women were “tragically” affected by their grief and were thought to easily slip into madness if indulged (Bennett Smith, 1995).

Subsequent research into grief (Abraham, 1924; Deutsch, 1937; Klein, 1940; Lindemann, 1944) produced prescriptive models such as the *Five Stages of Grief*, which characterizes grief as a contained process which begins and ends (Kübler-Ross, 1969). These models typically consider intense grief which occurs more than six months after loss as ‘complicated grief which requires medical intervention (Rosenblatt, 2017). By thinking about grief through a medicalized patriarchal perspective, grief models lack a feminist sensibility that acknowledges how individual background and experience affect responses to loss. In fact, experiences of grief by Black Americans are almost entirely ignored in mainstream grief research. Few researchers have considered how systemic racism impacts the processing of loss. Paul Rosenblatt (2017) found
that of the grieving Black Americans he interviewed, nearly half considered racism a factor in their loved one’s death and a major influence on their grieving process. Clearly, dominant grief approaches are failing to consider how grief manifests differently across individuals and communities. These models are not acknowledging how grief may be a natural and even a beneficial collection of emotions that help grieving people integrate loss into their new sense of self. Until recently, clinical bereavement models have resisted the messiness of grief by attempting to create a one-size-fits-all model which champions and ‘end’ to grief.

A mischaracterization of grief sets mourning people up for failure. If one is unable to move through the steps linearly or continues to feel sadness, they may feel as though they have ‘failed’ in their grieving or that they are emotionally flawed. The pervasiveness of prescriptive grief models does a disservice to the bereaved. More recently, contemporary grief work has moved away from process-based models to a specialized and nuanced understanding of grief. Newer approaches take experience, cultural background, and social positioning into consideration.

The Continuing Bonds Theory (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996) and the Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) have more recently emerged as dominant theories in the field of psychology. The Continuing Bonds Theory has dramatically changed the way researchers understand bereavement. This approach points to the importance of maintaining a relationship with the deceased after death. Maintaining an ongoing relationship is thought to help integrate the loss into one’s sense of self and personal biography. By integrating the loss into one’s identity, the bereaved can proceed with life having a new but ongoing tie with the lost loved one (Hogan & DeSaintis, 1992; Klass & Walter, 2001; Marwit & Klass, 1995; Shapiro, 1994; Tyson-Rawson, 1996).
The Dual Process Model also suggests an approach that does not emphasize a return to the emotional state before loss. Through the Dual Process lens, grief is a continuing process of oscillation between avoiding and confronting emotions associated with loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). This model places value on facing difficult emotions head-on while also taking time for distraction or avoidance. Authors Stroebe and Schut (1999) argue that an approach which balances varied and cyclical emotion is more inclusive than previous theories. It steps outside of a medical model and encourages taking breaks from taxing emotional coping mechanisms. Both models represent a recent shift towards open-ended grief theories that do not suggest an end to grieving, rather an ever-evolving relationship with the loss. These approaches demonstrate a significant movement towards theories that understand grief as a painful experience, especially for children and teens, rather than a mental disorder that requires treatment (Kuban, 2015).

Despite the advent of these evolving theories, the Kübler-Ross model continues to dominate social and cultural understandings of grief. The cultural stronghold on The Five Stages of Grief has been challenging to disrupt as it permeates popular culture and media.

The United States’ unhealthy relationship with mourning disproportionally affects the lives of grieving children and teens. Because grief often exists behind closed doors, children do not always have examples of healthy grieving habits or access to resources that utilize contemporary grief theory. Teens, in particular, learn how to grieve from the social cues of those around them. Positive and negative responses to their grief can dictate how they internalize and express their emotions (Smith & Sparkes, 2011). The suppression of grief by those around them may lead teens to conceal their grief to fit in (Raphael, 1983). Research shows that adolescents experience grief similarly to adults but with higher intensity of emotion. Intense grief can carry
into young adulthood (Meshot & Leitner, 1993) and have enduring effects resulting in otherwise avoidable obstacles in their development (Balk, 1991).

Until recently, there has been a lack of research into the unique experiences of childhood and adolescent grief. Even today, little research focuses on how grief may affect girls differently than boys. Despite a lack of academic study on the subject, children and teens are grieving, and in great numbers. One in fifteen children in the United States will experience the death of a parent or sibling by the age of eighteen (National Alliance for Grieving Children, 2018). Children are grieving in almost every classroom across the country. The typical school day in the United States provides few opportunities for children and youth to explore their emotions and create positive coping mechanisms for themselves. For many children, the art classroom is the only time devoted to creative expression and emotional release in their day. Thus, art classrooms can become an important resource for children experiencing complex and challenging emotions. However, many art teachers grapple with how to create space for emotional work which will benefit their students.

Addressing the needs of grieving teens and preteens is vital to their future growth. Teens who lose a parent during adolescence experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, and cognitive behavioral disturbances (Gray, 1987; Harris, 1991; Servaty & Hayslip, 2001; Thompson et al., 1998). Loss and the reality of death accompany bereaved teens and preteens into adulthood and continue to impact their mental and emotional state across their lifespan (Harris, 1995).

The formation of personal identity is the central task of development during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). During this process, young people formulate a coherent identity in relation to their surroundings. Parents provide an essential touchstone for identity growth as a role model in
contrast or similarity (Tyson-Rawson, 1996). The sudden death of a parent disrupts the process and can leave teens searching for ways to reestablish their identity after a loss. The result of such a disturbance can be especially dramatic for girls who are socialized to develop through relationships with others, especially attachment figures like their mother. For girls, a sense of connectedness is critical to identity formation (Gilligan, 1982). It plays a significantly more important role in their identity formation than boys (Palladino-Schultheiss & Bluestein, 1994). In the years after the death of a mother, girls may crave and seek out relationships with female mentors. These relationships are important to maintain and can provide helpful resources and modeling for grieving girls (Davidman, 2000; Edelman 1994; Schultz, 2007; Tracy 2008). Beyond the loss of their caregiver and loved one, girls may also find themselves struggling to adjust to the social ramifications of loss. Many teen girls seek acceptance within peer groups. Dealing with the complex emotions of loss without peers who have had similar experiences can be isolating. Studies show that girls who have experienced parental death sometimes experience interpersonal difficulties due to feelings of inferiority and discomfort (Davies, 1991; LaGrand, 1986; Servaty & Hayslip, 2001). Loss of a parent, especially a mother, presents girls with a rocky terrain to navigate during a moment of critical self-transformation.

When factors combine, preteen and teen girls are left with inadequate strategies to cope with the emotional labor of grief. Girls need emotionally supportive outlets for their grief which can adapt to their needs. Without access to contemporary grief practices, resources to aid identity development, and peers who can validate their experience, girls lack the basic resources to develop an integrated relationship with loss and maintain bonds with their deceased parent.
Context of the Problem: Loss and Transformation

The death of a parent is a traumatizing experience at any age. For young women, who are deeply involved in the process of self-discovery, loss can become a pivotal moment in their life (Edelman, 1994). Early loss is profoundly transformative for girls. The loss of a mother and its impact are woven into their emerging personalities and often becomes a defining characteristic of their identity (Edelman, 1994). Loss of a closed loved one has a life-long effect that will change in nature but does not end (Harris, 1995). The time in the aftermath of loss is pivotal in helping girls develop emotional strategies for working through feelings associated with loss. Girls who experience trauma as a result of loss at a young age must be provided with appropriate resources to integrate grief into their personal narrative in a beneficial way.

Hope Edelman (1994) wrote in her book, *Motherless Daughters*, that women who lost their mother in childhood and adolescence exhibit a cyclical relationship with grief. Her study interviewed 154 women who had lost their mother between infancy and 30 years of age. Many of the women considered the loss of their mother an integral part of who they are regardless if they had a positive or negative relationship with their mother. Women reported revisiting their relationship with their mother at critical moments such as birthdays, holidays, and as they approached the age their mother was when she died. New and complex emotions characterized each return to grief as the grieving women transitioned into different stages of life (Edelman, 1994). Women’s testimonies confirm what many mourning people know: grief does not end, but changes in nature over time. A significant loss, like that of a parent, is a transformational experience that fundamentally changes the bereaved person's life.

Judith Butler (2004) points out in her book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, that grief makes visible the relationships we have with one another. “One mourns
when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes, one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation” (Butler, 2004, p. 21). In the loss of a relationship, it is not only the person who has died who is grieved but also the version of the self which existed before loss. Butler explains this conceptualization of grief in a passage from *Precarious Life*:

> It is not as if an ‘I’ exists independently over here and then simply loses a ‘you’ over there… If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who ‘am’ I, without you? On one level, I think I have lost ‘you’ only to discover that ‘I’ have gone missing as well. (p. 22)

What Butler points out here is vital to understanding the unique needs of girls working through loss, especially of a mother. Not only are they in the process of establishing their sense of self as a young person, but they also face the additional burden of constituting the self in relation to the loss of their mother. It is crucial that loss is understood to be a transformative experience and that the goal of grief work should not be a return to a former self but the actualization of a new self in the aftermath of loss.

Understanding that one’s life will forever be changed is an essential step in integrating loss into one’s sense of self. In line with the Continuing Bonds Theory, many scholars agree that maintaining a relationship with the deceased is vital to moving forward with one’s grief (Klass, 2006). Continuing the relationship can take many forms; however, narrative has emerged as a powerful way to integrate loss into one’s biography and developing identity after a significant death. Researchers have identified a qualitative narrative approach to grief as better equipped to explore the complexities of grief, particularly in the death of a parent, than other methods (Davidman, 2000; Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Schultz, 2007; Tracey, 2008). This strength may be
the result of the way grief changes relationships. After death, bonds with the lost loved one change in meaning (Neimayer, Baldwin & Gillies, 2006). Exploring loss through narrative creates opportunities to reimagine bonds through memory and story. Making sense of loss through story is a long-held human response. Individuals and families often collectively develop a biography of the loved one in which particular stories are repeated and come to represent the lost person (Walter, 1996). Girls, especially those who have lost their mother, tend to create mythical narratives around them, characterizing her as more than human (Davidman, 2000). Larger-than-life caricatures help women weave loss into their personal biography and sense of self (Edelman, 1994). Adolescents who have come to a place of acceptance in their grief describe the integration of the loss into their life history as pivotal to their personal growth (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996).

Girls would benefit from emotional strategies that change with their grief. Mourning girls will never return to an emotional state which existed before the trauma of loss. Attempting to do so is futile and fails to acknowledge how grief can lead to personal growth and deep reflection. The pain of loss, especially for young people, can feel so overwhelming and complicated that it evades language-based forms of expression. An approach that utilizes art-making as a form of inquiry presents itself as a potentially transformational means to integrate loss and maintain bonds with the deceased parent.

**Significance of the Study: Creating Space for Art-Making and Grief**
Art-making has a rich history of providing an emotional outlet for survivors of trauma and loss. From professional artists to clinical art therapy practices, art-making has a well-documented history of providing a form of expression that does not solely rely on language. Art has remained one of few arenas in which people can openly express grief and traumatic experiences outside the field of psychology. Art-making’s unique ability to communicate the complexity of trauma presents enormous potential for girls who are responding to the death of their parent.

Art therapists such as Kristen Juul (Juul & Schuler, 1983), Margaret Naumburg (1950, 1965), and Edith Kramer (1958, 1971) contributed significantly to the study and development of art-making techniques for therapeutic and expressive needs. Similarly, Victor Lowenfeld, esteemed art education scholar, used art to establish a rapport and empathy with traumatized children. He found that children could art enable an emotional release of deep feelings which words could not express alone (Kuban, 2015). Psychologists and specialist use art for both assessment and therapy for emotionally distressed children and teens. These techniques include spontaneous art, structured art evaluations, and standardized instruments using art (Steppney, 2010). Some traumatized children who were previously unable to speak about their experience have broken their silence through art-making (Malchiodi, 1997).

Artists throughout history have turned to their medium to process trauma and loss. French sculptor Louise Bourgeois famously created *Maman* in 1999, a 30-foot tall bronze spider that grapples with her relationship with her mother (Dailey, n.d.). Bourgeois lost her mother at age 21. Her death was deeply traumatic and led Bourgeois to attempt suicide. The loss prompted a dramatic shift when Bourgeois changed directions from a career in mathematics to the arts. Many of her works deal with maternal imagery. Spiders became a central theme throughout her
career. *Maman*, created 62 years after her mother’s death, continues to wrestle with loss and grief. The enormous looming sculpture, which protects 32 marble eggs, is both imposing and caregiving. Bourgeois characterizes her mother as a spider herself — fierce, useful, and clever in a 1995 interview:

> my best friend was my mother, and she was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat, and useful as a spider. She could also defend herself, and me. (p. 62)

In this work, Bourgeois makes sense of her loss through symbolism. The scale, material, and physical presence of the work expresses her complicated relationship. The spider protectively nurtures its young while remaining a large and imposing force to the viewer. Through the creation of artwork over time, Bourgeois constructs a larger than life version of her mother, who can encompass and represent her deep and complex emotions. In many ways, Bourgeois career represents the building of a personal narrative around grief. Her continued revisiting of spider imagery serves to reinforce an internalized connection between her mother and the symbolic lore created around her memory. By conceptualizing her mother as a spider, she creates a metaphor she can revisit and rework as her grief changes with time.

Art-making serves as a form of inquiry because it creates connections between disparate ideas, makes powerful symbolic comparisons, and provides a form of storytelling that does not require words. Studies about art-making and trauma support the assertion that art-making has a unique ability to access emotions which are too complex or difficult to be articulated by language alone (Dreifuss-Kattan, 2016). People do not experience the emotional sensations imprinted during trauma the same way as typical memories. These can take the form of disruptive physical sensations or overwhelming emotions (van der Kolk, 2014). Studies confirm
that art activities engage the body’s relaxation response, which reduces hyper-arousal, allowing traumatized and grieving children a way to manage overwhelming sensations (Steele & Kuban, 2013). A sense of mastery and control can help adolescents develop their identity and autonomy (Macpherson, Hart, & Heaver, 2012).

Similarly, we can apply writing and art-making, as a form of storytelling, to grief work. The investigation of complex memories, feelings, and relationships is aided by writing and personal reflection. Art-making creates opportunities for new ways of knowing and working through embodied experiences. Group workshops focused on storytelling through art-making can access different ways of thinking, reimagining, and reassembling memories and personal biography (Davies, Bronwyn, Browne, Gannon, Honan, & Somerville, 2006). Art-making in a group setting also shows significant potential for creating connections across different life experiences. Personal artistic investigation in a group setting creates entanglements between participants in which, through comparison and contrast, new meanings are created (Gonick, 2013). “These spaces can be subtle, shifting, and momentary. Some of these are created in-between the art-maker and her process, the storyteller and her content, the stories and the art work, one art-maker/storyteller and others” (Gonick, 2013, p. 66). In-between spaces create opportunities to disrupt the familiar and explore new ways of knowing (Springgay, 2008).

Marinina Gonick explores the potential of group art-making, specifically with women in her work Entanglements: Art-making, Becoming Girl, and Collective Biography (2013). During a collective art-making workshop, Gonick describes the unique ways each participant responded to the task of visual storytelling:

For some participants, inspiration surfaced as they sifted through the rich details of the stories while walking on the beach or cooking dinner, while for others they emerged
through wandering amongst and handling the various art-making materials in and out around the house. Inspiration did not emanate from a single point of origin. Like other art-making practices it emerges through an often chaotic un-knowingness… Both the stories and arts projects informed each other, and, in the process, meanings surfaced, shifted, and were undone. (p. 66)

Gonick’s observations speak to the open-ended nature of art-making, which may present itself to each participant in different ways. Inspiration and insight could be found at many starting points, allowing for many different styles of learning and thinking. The space created by art-making, outside of normal thinking patterns is a “place in the in-between where language hesitates and falters, where uncertainty cannot be represented and where knowing remains unspoken” (Springgay, 2008, p. 39).

Group art-making for children and teens also offers the opportunity for belonging in social settings. Because teens often feel isolated by their loss (Servaty & Hayslip, 2001), art-making with others can stimulate a sense of belonging (Parr, 2006; Skudrzyk et al., 2009), and create opportunities for social interactions (Askin & Pain, 2011). Group settings can also present its own form of social isolation, so awareness of individual needs is vital to providing a safe and supportive environment (Macpherson, Hart, & Heaver, 2015). If a group art-making workshop can facilitate an unthreatening environment, art-making with others can help young people understand themselves better and cope with painful feelings (Chambala, 2008; Jessup, Cornell, & Bundy, 2010; Raghuraman, 2000).

Taking these considerations into account, it seems young women need a comprehensive model which can morph to meet their needs as they process loss and reconstitute the self. Female artists, throughout time, have used art to process traumatic loss. They represent not only the life-
long reality of grief but also the potential of art-making to transform grief into a creative act. Art-making as an emotional skill provides an open-ended, life-long resource that adapts to the changing nature of grief. Within the open-ended space of art-making, children make important choices and can be empowered by how they depict themselves, their environment, and their emotions. Art-making allows them to decide how they want to see their world and themselves within it. At a moment of upheaval, both at home and within themselves, a space for art-making can provide stability, comfort, and a venue to reestablish agency at a moment of chaos. By providing girls and young women with the space to explore art-making early in their grief, they can learn how to express emotions that are otherwise too complex to approach.
CHAPTER 3 EXPLORING GRIEF THROUGH ART-MAKING:
ARTS-BASED NARRATIVE INQUiry THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

As an artist who experienced the loss of my mother at a young age, my understanding of grief is intuitive. I understand, on a personal level, the impact art-making can have on a young woman seeking meaning after loss. It is ingrained in me to respond to emotions of grief through writing, drawing, collage, and installation art. Through this research, I have reflected on my intuition as an artist, educator, and grieving woman to legitimize what I believe to be a powerful and transformative resource. Through a critical action research approach, I have considered my teaching practices to assess and improve upon my method of supporting grieving girls through the process of art-making.

I intentionally conducted the study from the standpoint of an art educator. By situating my work within the field of art education, I, as a researcher, resist the inclination to ‘solve’ grief by eliminating difficult emotions. Rather, I approach grief through exploration and create opportunities to sit with and make sense of loss with no expectation of happiness as the ultimate goal. Utilizing a critical action research approach, I reflect on my role as a feminist grief guide and art educator and consider how I may best support grieving girls. I use narrative inquiry to further my investigation, as I analyze five art-making workshops and their emergent student-driven curriculum, with nine-year-old Alexa, a grieving girl who lost her mother and is navigating life as a young woman in the wake of loss.
Study Design

There is still much to be explored within the field of art education regarding the potential of art-making in the wake of loss. Art therapists and grief specialists have worked extensively in psychotherapy and have developed ways of understanding grief through the art of children. Art therapy has made a valuable contribution to understandings of grief and its psychological effects on children. The clinical approaches of art therapists provide analytical tools for treating damaging symptoms of grief (Beaumont, 2013). However, not all grieving children have access to specialized methods. Many factors may keep a child from entering an art therapist’s office, be it financial, cultural, or because of location. Further, many grieving children require support without the need for medicalized intervention. The relegation of grief work into the field of psychology is problematic as it has historically categorized grief as a syndrome that requires treatment.

By stepping outside psychology and introducing the importance of grief work into art education, the positive impacts of art-making strategies can reach more children across the United States. Art education offers a lens to look at grief, which is expansive and considers grief as a normal and reasonable emotion. Without the intention to “fix” someone’s grief, I was able to first and foremost provide a physical and mental space to create art without any specific learning objectives, discussion topics, or artistic outcomes planned in advance of each workshop. This allowed for Alexa’s exploration of self through art-making, which took many and varied forms. Taking a similar theoretical stance to those used by art education and disability scholars, grief, like disability, can be a jumping-off point for creativity (Keifer-Boyd, 2018). In thinking of grief as unique and valuable lens, the dialogue around grief can expand to include its potential for transformational growth and expression. The loss of a parent is profoundly impactful and
painful; however, through art-making, it can also become a starting point for self-discovery, artistic expression, and emotional growth. In fact, loss in the life of a young person can be a catalyst for growth. Bereaved teens who have positive outlets for grief can develop a rich sense of meaning, deeper relationships and experience personal transformation (Angell, Dennis & Deumain, 1998; Balk, 1999; Davies, 1991; Klass, Silverman, & Nichman, 1996; St. Clair & Day 1979; Tyson-Rawson, 1996).

By acknowledging the multi-dimensionality of grief and seeing its potential for personal agency, we can no longer understand grief as a syndrome, but rather a reality of life and a pivotal experience of identity transformation. Seeing grief as a normal and even valuable part of the human experience, speaks to a feminist conceptualization of grief work. Feminist grief work allows for the messiness of complex emotion and acknowledges how varying backgrounds and identity inform experience. Looking at grief through a feminist art education lens subverts a medicalized conception of grief and embraces it for all its layered, contradicting, and unidentifiable emotion. A medical way of thinking about mental wellbeing places happiness at the center of health. As feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2010) suggests in her piece *Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness*, happiness, or the unquestioned pursuit of happiness has its own political and social motivations that impact the lives of girls and women. Cultures which have adopted a medical model of grief have forced difficult and painful feelings to the outskirts of the emotional spectrum. Similar to the United States’ unwillingness to face grief head-on, dominant culture also chooses to focus on what comes after sadness rather than the qualities of the emotion itself. To create space to sit-with pain and sadness is in itself a feminist act of resistance (Ahmed, 2010). To accept that sadness and loss is a part of life, which deserves time and attention, challenges the veil of happiness imposed by a patriarchal society (Ahmed, 2010).
Creating a space for complexity and undefined emotion, in which girls may explore all of their messy and difficult feelings, is a vital task of a feminist grief guide.

Feminist Grief Guide

I designed a study that drew on methods and theories developed within the fields of art education and feminist pedagogy\(^4\) and applied them to grief work. This took the form of a critical action research methodology that utilized an emergent student-driven curriculum. This study took place throughout five art-making sessions and included one participant. It was reviewed and approved by Penn State University’s Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B) to ensure the participant’s safety and privacy. The first session was held in-person in a classroom on Penn State University’s campus, while the subsequent four sessions were held virtually via webcam from our respective homes. Our first session was two hours long. The following sessions varied in length from one to two hours. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, four weeks passed between our first and second meetings; however, the last four meetings occurred throughout a three-week period of time. The participant, Alexa (pseudonym), is a nine-year-old girl whose mother died five years before the study. Alexa was recruited for the study via an open call for participants. Both Alexa and her father consented to the research before our first art-making session.

My written reflections, which I recorded after each session, served as the primary data for analysis. These reflections describe activities, conversations, and observations from each workshop, as well as my reflections on my teaching method. I specifically considered my ability to create an art-making space that encouraged grief work, fostered a continued connection to her mother, and supported our relationship as both peers in loss; and as student and teacher. I used

\(^4\) See Appendix A for definitions of terms such as feminist pedagogy and grief work.
layered analyses (Keifer-Boyd, 2014), that focused on the potential of an emergent student-driven curriculum to support pubescent girls’ grief work. Four central concepts emerged from the research inquiry, which guided my initial level of coding: (a) the potential of an emergent student-driven curriculum to support grief work, (b) moments in which grief was explicitly discussed or implied through action, (c) instances in which opportunities were created to explore experiences with grief and identity, and (d) my discoveries, concerns, and reflections on my teaching practice. I then reviewed the data, color coding moments in which these concepts became evident during our sessions. With the new coded reflections, I looked for patterns and links between these emergences. Reoccurring themes began to emerge, which reflected broader trends. The themes included:

1. The process of art-making to facilitate conversation and grief work,
2. A willingness to mutually share vulnerability through the creation of space for messy, unpredictable, and unfiltered emotions, and
3. The development of personal agency through emergent and reciprocal learning.

I then reviewed the data further, looking for particular narratives within my reflections in which these themes were engaged. I selected three central narratives that I felt could encapsulate the essence of the concepts and provide opportunities for more in-depth investigation. These narratives are presented in the following chapter as I remember them and as my written reflections documented. Utilizing a narrative inquiry approach, I identified key stories as the framework of my analysis through which I examined the themes of the process of art-making, vulnerability, and agency from a theoretical lens of a feminist grief guide. The theoretical lens for this study is specifically concerned with recognizing grief as a transformative event, that a return to happiness and ‘normalcy’ is not only impossible but actively negates beneficial grief
work, and that art-making has a unique potential to hold space\(^5\) for complex emotion and foster an ongoing relationship with the lost parent.

I also based this study on feminist principles. A strong feminist pedagogy informs the design of this open-ended curriculum and my role as a guide. Feminist pedagogy champions non-hierarchical learning environments that prioritize personal experience as a valid form of knowing (Shrewsbury, 1997). It also relies on a strong ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982), which invests in students as not only learners but whole people with unique backgrounds and needs. A dedication to feminist teaching is particularly crucial in this study as we engage with difficult and complicated topics related to loss. By employing a feminist approach, I acknowledge my participant’s unique experience, while being committed to providing care no matter how it affects my research. In doing so, I also challenge hegemonic teaching practices and approaches to grief work, which characterizes teachers and medical professionals as unbiased. In acknowledging my deep care for Alexa, I combat assumptions which posit that meaningful grief research comes from a detached and ‘objective’ researcher. Instead, I argue that my experience positions me to engage as a feminist grief guide.

The choice to employ an emergent student-driven curriculum, which focuses on art-making, is supported by research in girlhood studies, art education, curriculum and instruction, and women’s, gender, and sexuality studies. Curriculum scholars have long been rethinking what constitutes curriculum. Work by Dewey (1938), Pinar (2004), Aoki (1993), and Jones and Nimmo (1994) has expanded the definition of curriculum beyond a set plan of study. An emergent (Jones & Nimmo, 1994) reflective (Powell & Lajevic, 2011), and engaged (hooks, 1994) teaching practice considers the life experiences of students as a vital contribution to

\(^5\) See Appendix A for definitions of holding space.
learning and part of a lived curriculum (Pinar, 2004). Within an emergent student-driven approach, curriculum subverts predetermined lessons and becomes organic and ever-changing, responding to the students’ needs and interests (Powell & Lajevic, 2011). Students’ lives become central to an expanded definition of curriculum. Because every classroom is composed of students with different backgrounds and interests, every curriculum should vary accordingly and should not be predetermined (Powell & Lajevic, 2011). Teachers become partners in learning by being responsive and open to contributions by students. An emergent framework understands teaching as a reciprocal relationship in which teachers have as much to learn as students. A feminist pedagogy aligns closely with an emergent student-driven approach, emphasizing how relationships between students and teacher facilitates learning (hooks, 1994).

The adoption of what I refer to as an emergent student-driven curriculum⁶ is critical to this study. Particularly due to the personal nature of the subject matter, it is vital that Alexa’s experiences informed the direction of our art-making. Students should feel like they have valuable insight to contribute and that their individual needs are heard and met. Because grief is such a sensitive subject, I, as a grief guide, must be able to respond in real-time to the emotional needs of the students in how I guide the art-making experience. Being locked into a predetermined curriculum would have limited my ability to respond to the participant’s discoveries, inspirations, and emotional responses. An emergent student-driven curriculum was especially critical as our workshop took place during a difficult and unprecedented moment of global fear and trauma. I was able to adapt to the participant’s daily needs, which nurtured space for focused work and much-needed distraction. Additionally, an emergent curriculum gave

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⁶ See Appendix A for definitions of emergent student-driven curriculum
Alexa agency in the workshops to steer her learning towards personal interests. It was vital that the workshops center the voice of its participant so she could feel in control of her expression.

My role as guide also blurs the lines between teacher, participant, researcher, facilitator, and caregiver. My goal as guide has been to provide a safe and supportive space for self-exploration and transformation. In doing so, I serve multiple roles that may challenge conventional conceptions of what a teacher is. In line with feminist research methodologies, I did not place myself as an authority in the classroom, but rather as an older grieving person on the same journey. Because grieving girls often seek out female mentors after the loss of a mother, I am aware that Alexa may perceive me as a role model. Through the workshop’s reciprocal structure, I attempted to break down the hierarchy of our knowing, which I discuss in the next chapter through narrative inquiry analysis.

The study employed critical action research as a guiding research methodology that utilizes narrative inquiry to interpret data. I used a variety of means to collect this data. After each session, I reflected on my process through journaling. Writing allowed me to track my personal development as an educator and respond to the participant’s changing needs. Journal entries also included the student’s observations and my interpretations of the support I was offering through art-making approaches. By utilizing my reflections as well as those of the participant, I investigate through narrative. I based my approach on principles similar to a feminist methodology (Huber, Caine, Huber, Steeves, 2013), which understands life, experience, and learning as inextricable from one another (Dewey, 1934). By using my own experiences and observations, I engage in “participatory knowledge-making through thinking, feeling, seeing, and acting that [philosopher] John Dewey claims illuminate understandings and fosters internalization” (Latta, Schneller, Ondrik, & Sasges, 2018, p. 6).
Narrative inquiry, a common method used within feminist and action research, also disrupts the dualistic idea of the researcher and the researched. When researchers, who use narrative inquiry, interpret information, their experience and that of the participant are considered equally important. By using stories and experiences as data, narrative inquiry resists “smoothing over diverse voices and perspectives” by giving each individual equal value in (Latta, Schnellert, Ondrik, & Sasges, 2018, p. 9). In a narrative inquiry approach, students are positioned as advocates for themselves and contributors to the study by being authorities on their own lives. Sharing our stories also builds community across differences and allows space for the messy, uncertain, and non-linear reality of complex emotions such as grief (Latta, Schnellert, Ondrik, & Sasges, 2018). Use of narrative inquiry as a research method and teaching pedagogy is supported by grief research which highlights narrative as a beneficial way to investigate loss (Davidman, 2000; Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Schultz 2007; Tracey, 2008) and integrate it into one’s biography and self-image (Walter, 1996).

By employing a critical action research methodology, the study primarily focuses on my role as an educator and guide. Critical action research is a deliberate inquiry by teachers designed to bring about practical improvements to teaching practices (Conchran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Action research is multidimensional, flexible, and by nature, collaborative (Klein, 2012). Student experiences are vital to the development of new methods. It “links theory and practice into one whole idea-in-action” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998, p. 93). An action research approach aligns closely with the principles of an emergent student-driven curriculum. Critical action research, an approach to action research, is inherently reflexive, student-centered, and composed of multiple narratives. It cannot be reduced to simple data but instead contains all the complexity and nuance of a classroom itself. Critical action research lends itself to arts-based data because images,
artwork, poetry, journal entries, among other artforms, can be used as data. By combining elements of critical action research with feminist methodologies and principles, I work within, what I call, a feminist action research methodology. A feminist action research design allows for the messiness of grief work and the expansiveness of art-making practices.

Art education has a responsibility to consider the impact of grief on student’s lives. Since many children and youth will encounter grief, art educators must consider how art-making can support student self-transformation in the wake of loss. By conducting this research, I have only begun to explore the potential of open-ended, emergent student-driven art-making curriculum as a way to create space for emotional processing and to provide life-long strategies for living with loss. The insight gained through this research will contribute to the larger body of knowledge within art education regarding trauma and, hopefully, inspire further inquiry into the subject. In the future, art educators may glean from this research a lens through which to consider grief and its relationship to art-making, so they may support their students through loss. By working specifically with young women, my research also contributes to our understanding of girlhood and the unique impact of loss at a critical moment of identity formation. Grief work cannot continue to exist solely in the offices of therapists. Grief is ubiquitous, and thus resources for all students are invaluable.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Several factors impacted the design of the study, which altered my research plan. Notably, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 significantly changed the format and timeframe for the research. Due to the university’s halt on in-person research and the state-wide stay-at-home order, most of the work took place remotely and over the Internet. As a
result, several participants declined to take part in the study, reducing the sample size from three to one. Further, remote learning limited both of our access to art materials and significantly shifted the types of art-making prompts that we could engage with together. Due to a lengthy period of uncertainty regarding the timeframe of these sanctions, the number of weeks Alexa and I had to work together dwindled. Thus, the overall time Alexa and I spent together was shortened. Lastly, remote learning presented additional difficulties. Alexa was often arriving to our meetings after up to 5 hours of online classes. As a result, she was understandably tired and, at times, lacked focus. It is impossible to fully articulate the impact of COVID-19 on this research. The unprecedented global event has disrupted everyone’s lives, unlike any instance in the past. The additional stress of a life-altering world-wide pandemic inevitably impacted not only Alexa but myself as well. Despite the continued uncertainty resulting from COVID-19, Alexa and I remained committed to the study. I am eternally grateful to her and her father for prioritizing research during a moment of personal and international unrest.

COVID-19 reduced the study to one participant, thus it is limited in its scope. My analysis of data speaks to Alexa and my unique experience and I cannot extrapolate my findings on to a large population. The participant’s positionality as a white, middle-class child in a suburban area reflects a privileged experience of grief. Intersecting oppressed identities have not further complicated her relationship with loss. Further, Alexa and I share many commonalities that informed the way the research unfolded and my interpretation of our interactions. Both of our mothers were artists, and several of our foundational memories together involved the creation of art. Of course, our experiences do not reflect the realities of most grieving girl’s lives, who may or may not associate their deceased mother with art-making. Alexa’s relationship to art,
as the daughter of an art teacher, may have especially primed her to engage her grief through creative avenues.

Additionally, the use of my reflections as a source of data challenges hegemonic conceptions of research, which have historically considered the acknowledgment of a personal lens as disqualifying bias. Thus, some may find this work too specialized and interpretive to contribute meaningfully to a broader understanding of girls and grief. However, feminist standpoint epistemology would argue that it is within the particularities of our experience and interpretation that meaningful research is created. Unlike hegemonic research practices, methods like narrative inquiry, which are informed by a feminist epistemological lens, understand all research as filtered through the researcher’s perspective. Thus, instead of masking an innate bias, feminist researchers acknowledge their unique standpoint as an enriching factor of their work (Harding, 1991). In doing so, they reveal a more accurate reflection of reality than standardized methods based on colonizing patriarchal values (Hartsock, 1983).

This study, if conducted with another participant, and by another researcher, would yield differing results. Variation is expected. As the researcher, I do not claim that my findings apply to all girls who are experiencing the loss of their mother. I understand grief to be complex, nuanced, and deeply informed by the unique circumstances of each griever. This research focuses on the role of a feminist grief guide, rather than generalizing about girls’ experiences of loss. Research methods that seek to standardize the experience of grief have led to the medicalized models which leave grieving girls without realistic examples of how their grief may manifest throughout their lives. By defining the role of a feminist grief guide and reflecting on how I can best embody it, I can understand grief more deeply in all of its painful, beautiful, and ever-morphing iterations.
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF A FEMINIST FIELD GUIDE’S
EMERGENT ART CURRICULUM

Alexa and I began our art-making together on the first warm sunny day of the year in State College, Pennsylvania. I waited for her with anticipation in the parking lot of the Arts Cottage at Penn State University. As a child of loss myself, I felt confident in my personal relationship with grief. Still, I was nervous about working with a grieving child from the positionality of the researcher and feminist grief guide. When Alexa’s gray minivan pulled up, my heart was beating out of my chest. Would she like me? Is she happy to be here? Would she trust me enough to open up? After her father had parked, Alexa sheepishly exited the car—eyes darting between the ground, her dad, and me. Alexa was a local nine-year-old girl, whose mom had died five years earlier.

On the walk from the car to the classroom, I put on my most exuberant and welcoming demeanor. I reassured Alexa that our workshop would be an experience dedicated to exploration and creativity, not doom and gloom. Once inside and after some ice breakers, I learned that Alexa was a bright, inventive, and energetic girl who loves singing, making art, and being the class clown. She offered details about her mom freely and was eager to learn about my own experience with loss. She shared with me that her mom had been an artist and art teacher and that making art together had been an important part of their relationship.

Knowing that we would need to build trust, I prepared some basic prompts, including making name signs, developing ground rules for the workshop, creating button badges, and decorating a sketchbook. Our time doing projects offered opportunities to talk, get to know one another, and of course, listen to Kids Bop while singing along. Later we went outside to climb
trees and take in the beautiful weather. Alexa told me jokes from the highest branch she could climb and performed in the grass a hip hop dance routine from a recent recital. By the end of our two-hour meeting, I felt exhilarated and relieved. Alexa and I had become fast friends and our time together, although brief had already yielded some valuable connections between us, both through our shared experiences of loss and our dynamic as young artist and teacher. When Alexa left that day, neither of us knew that it would be the last time we meet in person. The following week would bring news of an unprecedented pandemic that would separate us physically for the foreseeable future. Our subsequent four meetings took place virtually via webcam, during a time of tremendous uncertainty while we both adjusted to a new ‘normal’ during the outbreak of COVID-19.

Despite the precariousness of our new reality, Alexa and I carved out time to make art together, explore new media, teach one another, and discuss our mothers’ ongoing role in our lives. From the art table in her basement in State College, Pennsylvania to my desk in Cincinnati, Ohio, we forged an important and ongoing friendship around shared experiences, a love of art, and our desire to feel connected to our moms and one another. I feel so fortunate to have worked with Alexa, a truly vibrant and caring person, who offered so much of her heart. Her relationship with art, as a vehicle through which she can remember and connect to her mom, mirrors my experience in more ways than one. I spent countless hours learning from my mom, who was a writer and quilt artist. Many of my most vibrant memories of her came from our time spent together making. Throughout the study, I felt a responsibility to not only model ways to channel and make sense of grief, but also provide avenues for her to connect to her mom through art mediums, just as the women in my life did 20 years ago. Despite striking similarities, Alexa’s experience is entirely her own. Just as any person who has experienced tremendous loss, I cannot
compare her grief to mine or anyone else’s. However, unexpected parallels set the stage for a rich study through which I witnessed art-making’s potential to foster ongoing ties with our vibrant, creative, and artistic mothers.

The following sections highlight three narratives from our five art-making sessions. I then analyze these narratives through themes that emerged during a layered analysis of my written reflections: the process of art-making as a means to facilitate grief work, mutual sharing of vulnerability, and harnessing personal agency as a grieving girl. I read these moments through my theoretical lens for this study, which characterizes grief as transformative. I also consider how these instances support the notion that grief is ever-changing and ongoing and should not be “fixed” but instead explored. Lastly, I consider how these moments support a continued relationship with Alexa’s mother through the use of art materials. I have created a collage to accompany each narrative and reflect my visual memory of our time together (see Figure 7). Through this investigation, I reflect on my practice as an educator and feminist grief guide and consider how an emergent student-driven curriculum contributed to the richness of our time together.
Figure 7. The sketchbook, paper collage, copyright 2020 by Chelsea Borgman
Exploring Creative Avenues for Grief Through Art-Making: The Sketchbook

Alexa squirmed in her chair as she watched me rustle through my bag. We were sitting across from each other at a long wooden table in the middle of the classroom. The once neatly organized space had exploded with color in the last 45 minutes. The table was littered with markers, colorful paper, pencils, and freshly pressed button badges. Although it was our first time to meet, Alexa and I quickly bonded over our love of teal, pop music, and our shared interest in art.

“Here it is!” I said as I pulled the small leather-bound book from my bag. Alexa glanced up, mildly interested as she tugged at the loose threads on her t-shirt hem. It was late afternoon, and the sun streamed in through the windows onto the table. We had been working for a while, and Alexa was getting tired and antsy to move. “Ok, Alexa, I want to show you something very special to me.” I fumbled through the sea of construction paper until I located my tattered sketchbook from under the loose scraps. “This is my sketchbook—I bring this book with me everywhere I go.” I held up the notebook like a precious artifact. Scraps of paper and loose notes tumbled out as I pointed to the thick pages and bulging spine. “I use the book for everything. I take my notes for class in here, I keep my calendar, I draw, I make collages, but most importantly, I write in this book when my feelings get too big to manage.” Alexa’s eyes darted around the room as they avoided mine. “Sometimes, I get overwhelmed with my feelings because I don’t understand them, or they are hard to share with other people who may not get it. I don’t write in it often, but I always know it’s there if I need it. I want to give you your own sketchbook to use.” Alexa continued to shift in her seat as she said, “I don’t really like to write, can I draw in it instead?” “Of course!” I responded, “This is yours to use, however you want.
You can take it home with you or leave it here with me for next time.” “Ok, thank you! I think you can hold on to it … Can we go outside?”

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It was the first weekend of Spring Break, and the campus was deserted. Alexa and I found we had the grassy field next to the Arts Cottage all to ourselves. It was one of the first beautiful days of the year; my skin had not felt sunshine in weeks. I sat in the damp grass as Alexa performed for me dance routines while singing her latest original song. She showed me how she could do a cartwheel. I managed a bridge pose while Alexa watched and giggled, bending over backward with ease. Nearby we discovered the perfect climbing tree, and I spotted her as she scurried like a monkey up the branches. We had about half an hour until her dad would arrive, so I gathered the paint markers and brought them outside. From her branch, five feet off the ground, Alexa decorated the cover of the plain black notebook, while I assisted by holding the basket of markers. She began with a big rainbow in the center, later adding a single white daisy growing from green grass at the bottom. In the top right corner, she wrote her name, and on the opposite side drew a big radiating sun surrounded by blue sky and clouds. As she was finishing up, her dad’s gray minivan appeared in the nearby drive. We scurried to gather the materials. Alexa jumped down from the tree branch and stood, staring at her notebook. Admiring her work, she said, “Actually, can I take the notebook home with me?” “You bet,” I replied, smiling.

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Several weeks passed before our next meeting. We were both still adjusting to our new reality as faces on either side of a computer screen. Alexa had already had several hours of online classes that day, while I had spent the morning struggling to stay focused on my studies
during a pandemic. I checked in with Alexa, creating time for us to discuss our many feelings and worries. Our conversation swerved back and forth between silly jokes and serious concerns. Alexa, a deeply caring girl, shared her fears for her family and even voiced concern for me, offering to send me food if I needed it.

Considering the upheaval created by COVID-19, I had prepared an origami lesson using regular paper I knew she would have at home. I showed Alexa the steps one by one as she carefully followed along. Folding the paper offered gaps in instruction, so we chatted about our likes and dislikes while singing along to the playlist she put on in the background. During a moment of silence, she chimed in, “I used the notebook…”. “Really!? That’s great, Alexa. What did you do in the notebook?” I said. “Well, I drew a comic about a pizza and a mushroom! …and I wrote some stuff. The comic is really funny! I will show it to you next time.” she replied. “That’s great, Alexa, I would love to see it.” A moment of silence passed. “Did you write for fun in the notebook, or were you having some big feelings? It’s ok if you don’t want to tell me,” I said. “I was having some feelings. It was my dad’s birthday last week, and I was thinking about how my mom won’t be here for his 43rd birthday,” her eyes avoided mine. “Oh, Alexa, I understand. I have felt that way too, especially with my dad. We both are lucky to have great dads, and they deserve to feel loved. It’s really hard to know she won’t be there, but I know that you and your sister made it very special for him.” “Yeah, I guess so,” she replied. “I’m really proud of you for turning to your notebook when you needed to get those feelings out,” I said with a full heart. She smiled and shrugged. Suddenly, Alexa leaped up on to her chair. All I could see from my position on the table was her string bean legs. She began to sing a song, which had popped into her head and — just like that, we were on to the next thing.
Feminist Grief Guide Analysis: The Sketchbook

This anecdote highlights three central themes that repeatedly emerged throughout the study. First and foremost, Alexa and I demonstrated how the process of art-making could be a means to build trust, create opportunities to share experience, and provide avenues through which one can explore complex feelings that evade a clear definition. Unsolvable feelings\(^7\), which continue to present themselves long after the initial loss, are often unexpected, overwhelming, and cannot be ‘fixed’ in any conventional sense. In this case, the writing process provided a creative outlet, free from judgment, which could hold a complexity of emotion without any expectation of resolution. Second, the series of events highlight the importance of vulnerability in a reciprocal relationship based on shared grief. Alexa and I both offered parts of ourselves to one another, in an act of trust and recognition of shared loss. By creating space for our vulnerability, we championed the value and validity of difficult emotion and resisted prescriptive grief models, which urge us to ‘return to normal.’ Lastly, Alexa’s use of the sketchbook in a time of emotional upheaval demonstrates her agency as a grieving girl. The notebook provided an avenue for her to take charge of her unique feelings by creating her own strategies to navigate ongoing feelings associated with loss. Through our emergent student-driven curriculum, Alexa dictated the direction of our work and chose to trust me and take advantage of a new resource. Although the story recounts brief and passing moments, it reflects a depth of complexity. Girls like Alexa need opportunities to discover creative avenues for their grief in which they control their narrative, and grief guides honor the vast and ongoing complexity of their loss.

\(^7\) See Appendix A for definition of unsolvable feeling.
The Process of Art-Making to Facilitate Grief Work

Throughout our sessions, the process of creating art became the central means through which we facilitated discussions of grief. Surprisingly, the product or the art itself rarely represented the content of our grief work. Rather, the process of learning from one another, spending time together while creating, and trying new mediums grounded our practice and created opportunities for exploring grief. During our first session, as described above, simple art-making prompts such as button badge making facilitated moments for us to find shared interests and connect. For instance, during our introductory activity of name sign decorating, I shared that my mom died when I was nine years old. Alexa, without hesitation, responded, “That’s the same age as me!” Then said, “My mom died when I was four.” With sadness, we both reflected on the significant difference in our experience and agreed it was hard not to have had as much time, and thus memories with her mom. Similar to Marnina Gonick’s (2013) assertions about making art with others, by working together, we create entanglements between ourselves, in which, through comparison and contrast, new meanings are created. Although difficult at times, our sessions together making art allowed us to compare our experiences by making meaning from our similarities; and sitting with our differences.

Vulnerability in a Reciprocal Relationship Based on Shared Grief

Facilitated through my teaching style and demeanor, I was able to create an open and relaxed atmosphere that encouraged experimentation, unbridled use of materials, and silliness. I employed a strong ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982), which was informed by a feminist pedagogy and centered her comfort. I was upfront with my desire to support her and was careful to remind her that she controlled her level of engagement with difficult topics. My respect for her
boundaries was communicated through explicit statements and the creation of our “ground rules,” which allowed her to voice her boundaries and concerns. These ground rules included: Don’t judge people, don’t share private things outside the workshop, respect others, and don’t make people do things they don’t want to do. By establishing our time together as a safe and supportive space, I believe Alexa was able to exercise her agency and guide our emergent curriculum. The process of art-making created the glue which held our time together and created channels for our discussions.

Central to the story is Alexa’s use of the notebook during a moment of emotional upheaval. Although initially hesitant to engage with the sketchbook, Alexa proved to be open to creative avenues and turned to her book in a moment of need. The process of writing lends itself to grief work because it can hold the complex and often contradicting emotions that emerge during one’s life-long relationship with loss. The notebook is a place to externalize feelings, which can become overwhelming if not expressed. Further, the notebook serves as a blank canvas for all feelings without judgment or expectation.

During our month-long hiatus in which Alexa began to feel sadness and worry about her dad’s upcoming birthday, she experienced what I refer to as an ‘unsolvable feeling.’ Often, grief work focuses on the most immediate and obvious manifestations of loss. Stage-based models, such as the Five Stages of Grief, relies on the assumption that grief stems solely from the loss of a loved one. It ignores the many layers of grief that present themselves over time and are dependent on context. Such models fail to acknowledge that loss is much more than sadness but rather a fundamental restructuring of one’s life, especially in the case of children.

For Alexa, who has lived five years without her mother, her father’s upcoming birthday brought new emotions that she had not yet needed to process. The eldest daughter of two, Alexa
felt a responsibility to make her dad’s birthday special because she knew her mom would not be able to do so. The state-wide quarantine exacerbated this and made it impossible for relatives and friends to visit. This presented Alexa with a new manifestation of her grief, one in which the absence of her mother was made painfully evident. Alexa’s feelings of grief were not solely about her mother’s death, feelings of responsibility, isolation, and helplessness further complicated them. No one could predict this unsolvable feeling, as it resulted from unique circumstances. I believe unsolvable feelings are common if not ubiquitous among grieving children. As Judith Butler (2004) points out, grief is about agreeing to go through a transformation in which one reconstitutes the self. Not only is Alexa’s mother gone, but her role in her family, and thus her self-perception, must continue to shift as well.

Grief models that ignore unsolvable feelings fail to guide grievers through context-specific emotions, which inevitably sneak up on grieving daughters throughout the rest of their lives. Edelman’s (1994) claims, in *Motherless Daughters*, support a characterization of grief which is reoccurring and ever-changing. She reports women experiencing new and complex emotions as they transition into different stages of life, as well as cyclically aligned with significant holidays and milestones. The absence of a mother is as deeply felt as her presence; thus, unsolvable feelings cannot be willed out of existence. Based on my experience, I know these feelings are overwhelming, physically embodied, and difficult to understand. An instance like an upcoming birthday can bring up many levels of emotion, which, especially for children, can be very difficult to comprehend. Unsolvable feelings result from the transformative reality of loss, which fundamentally changes the structure of one’s life. Unsolvable feelings are born from the recognition of a new reality and must be sat with, explored, and adjusted to one’s current state. There is nothing I, or anyone else, can do to change Alexa’s reality as a daughter of loss. I
cannot step in and orchestrate her father’s birthday party. That would be a temporary fix to a lifelong circumstance. Rather, as a feminist grief guide, my role is to provide Alexa with strategies to express her thoughts in a way that adds insight and gives her an opportunity to honor her loss. The notebook provided an avenue for her to write out those complex feelings and reflect on them. We must acknowledge that, although grief fundamentally challenges our cultural fixation on happiness and “normalcy,” it is ever-present. Grieving girls will never leave their grief in the past; rather, it will morph and change over time. The potential of the sketchbook represents grief work, which understands the multidimensionality of loss.

This story is underscored by our shared willingness to express vulnerability. Early on in our meetings, I was open about my grief and did not hesitate to mention my own painful emotions. Alexa was also open about her experience with loss and did not shy away from talking about her mother or answering questions. I attribute her comfort with difficult topics to her very supportive father, who encouraged me to dive right into conversations about loss. I got the sense that he has actively facilitated a safe environment where she can process her feelings. Thanks to her position in a supportive family and their involvement with a local bereavement group, Alexa was primed for our grief work. Although Alexa was initially apprehensive about engaging with the sketchbook, she absorbed the concept and held on to it for future use. By showing her my sketchbook and explaining how I have used it as an emotional strategy, I shared my own vulnerability and acknowledged that my grief is ongoing. My actions not only model a more realistic characterization of grief than mainstream depictions, but it also resists the common inclination to project happiness and credit the end of one’s grief as the ultimate ‘success.’ Here, I presented myself as a well-adjusted, friendly, and functioning daughter of loss who acknowledges the painful reality of grief as an active part of my life. Alexa reflected
vulnerability back to me by offering her story and acknowledging that she too needed an outlet for her feelings.

**Agency and Identity in the Wake of Loss**

Lastly, the story highlights Alexa’s agency and resiliency as a grieving girl. By employing an emergent curriculum, Alexa dictated the structure of our meetings. Although I always prepared some kind of activity, our conversations directly informed our project. During our first meeting, Alexa was warm and friendly but understandably wary about opening up fully. When I presented my sketchbook and offered her a sketchbook of her own, Alexa was not yet ready to show me the complexity of her feelings. Our open structure allowed her to steer our learning in a different direction, taking us outside the classroom and providing her with resources to teach me through her dances and songs. Later she tested me further as I guided her up the tree and supported her if she faltered. Our rapport continued to build as we spent time together. I intentionally allowed her to engage with the book as she wanted to and did not push her to use it. Ultimately, she chose to trust me and try the book when faced with difficult feelings. In doing so, she took her grief into her own hands and showed herself that she had the resources to express her feelings. Prescriptive stage-based grief models deny children agency to determine what they need and when. By stepping back and allowing Alexa to find the resource when she needed it, she demonstrated to herself that she has the capacity to get through whatever feelings come her way.

During our next meeting, when Alexa choose to share her story with me, she indicated a level of trust in knowing I could understand and honor her experience. She controlled how much she told me and ultimately kept much of her writing to herself. The process of writing, like other
creative avenues such as art-making, presents the possibility for grieving girls to establish themselves through loss and find agency in their grief. After loss, so much of life can feel out of control. Circumstance demonstrate how little authority we have over our lives and the ones we love. Within uncertainty, the ability to grieve how one wants to live is vital. Although I would have loved to hear Alexa’s writing, it is hers to share. The ability to choose avenues for grief and dictate how much one wishes to share is important for children who may already feel powerless in an unpredictable world. An emergent curriculum paired with a pedagogy heavily influenced by feminist teaching creates space for children to get on top of their grief by harnessing it creatively, rather than being prescribed rigid, unforgiving models.

To some, this story about Alexa’s notebook may seem like a brief and passing series of events. As a grief guide and daughter of loss, I see a complicated and familiar scenario that evades simple classification. Thankfully, Alexa and I have loving, supportive fathers who have created space in our lives for loss. Like Alexa, I had many people in my life who wanted me to grieve openly and tried to provide me with the tools to do so. However, meaningful work can only happen when the griever is ready. By focusing on the process of art-making, Alexa and I forged a trusting friendship in which she controlled our discussions of loss. I provided my vulnerabilities as well as the strategies I have developed and offered them to her as a symbol of my care for her. She tested the boundaries of her trust through our continued interactions and ultimately chose to share her vulnerabilities with me. I do not know if Alexa will continue to use her notebook. I cannot, nor do I want to dictate her relationship with loss. What I do know is that I provided Alexa with a resource that will never go away and that she can return to throughout the rest of her life. If in 20 years, Alexa finds herself overcome with a new feeling of loss and turns to a blank notebook for support, I will have succeeded in providing her with an emotional
strategy. Grief work should not be about ‘solving’ grief but rather creating opportunities to explore grief, supporting girls as they harness their agency as grieveres and forge their own relationship to loss.

The next section considers Alexa and my use of specific art materials, such as watercolors, to creating lasting and creative bonds with our mothers while also exploring personal identity as a grieving girl and woman (see Figure 8).
Figure 8. The watercolors, paper collage, copyright 2020 by Chelsea Borgman
Forming Identity through Experiences of Grief: The Watercolors

“It looks like your dad is here,” I said. Alexa leaned back on her tree branch and craned her neck to watch as her dad’s van pull into the parking lot behind us. “I see him!” she said, leaping from the branch onto the soil below. It was late in the afternoon, and Alexa and I had just spent two hours getting to know one another. The sun hung low in the sky and cast an amber glow that streamed through the tree branches making shadows on the ground. Alexa sprinted across the grass and onto the concrete sidewalk, her hair blowing behind her. As she was running, she suddenly stopped short and dramatically changed directions. “THE APRON!” she yelped, looking back at me. “The apron!” I responded. Alexa and I hurried to meet in the middle and quickly headed back towards the Arts Cottage. “Phew— I am really glad you remembered!” I said. “Me too,” Alexa replied with a sigh. “I would NOT want to leave that behind.” We quickened our pace as we headed up the stairs to retrieve the precious item.

Earlier that day, when Alexa arrived for our first art-making workshop, she brought with her very few personal items. In the parking lot where we met, I noticed she held a red apple in one hand while clasping a crumpled piece of fabric in the other. We made our way to the large classroom on the second floor of the arts building. Once settled, Alexa and I made ourselves comfortable in the space. I spread my art-making materials out across the table while Alexa spun in circles on a rolling office chair. We became fast friends and spent the first hour, mostly talking. Halfway through decorating name signs, Alexa leaned back to retrieve her apple from the couch behind her. As she grabbed the fruit, her fingers caught the loose edge of the crumpled fabric stuffed in-between the couch cushions.

“What’s that?” I asked. She held the fabric up so I could see, “It’s an apron. It was my mom’s painting apron,” she said. As she presented it to me, I saw the sunshine through the loose-
knit of the worn cotton. It looked like a homemade apron. Its patterned fabric was printed with delicate flowers and made into ruffles. It reminded me of the vintage seed bag fabric my mom collected when I was a child. “I brought it in case we were painting today,” she said. “Alexa, that’s wonderful! We aren’t painting today, but would you like to do that next time?” “Yes!” she exclaimed. “What kind of painting did your mom like to do?” I asked. “She liked to do watercolor painting. She taught me how to do some special techniques.” Instantly, I felt the gravity of her disclosure. I responded, “I have a lot of my mom’s art materials too. I have her sewing machine and lots and lots of her fabric. Those items are really special to me. When I used them, I feel closer to her. Do you ever do any watercolors on your own?” “No, I don’t have any at home,” she said. “Ok, next time, let’s try some watercolors together—would that be fun?” Alexa nodded enthusiastically.

As the news of COVID-19 began to unravel and disseminate across the country, it became clear that Alexa and I would not be able to meet again in person. I struggled to adapt to this new situation and let go of my preconceived hopes for what the workshop would look like. Alexa’s dad and I worked together and arranged to have a set of watercolors, brushes, and watercolor paper shipped to her house so we could continue working. I ordered identical supplies so we could paint in the same way, as if we were physically together. By our third meeting, Alexa and I both had all the art materials we needed to get started painting.

When Alexa’s face popped onto my computer screen, I had never seen her so giddy. Laid out in front of her were her brand new art supplies, which she showed me one by one with tremendous pride. Alexa unwrapped the white plastic container of watercolors and carefully opened the lid, closely inspecting each pigmented cube. Then I showed her the water brush,
which was included in the set. Once she understood how the tool worked, she frantically rushed to the sink to fill its chamber with water. We unwrapped the brushes, examining each one closely while speculating how she might use it. Last, she revealed the two packs of watercolor paper I had found online. Her eyes widened. “I have SO much paper!” she said, almost incredulously. I responded, “I wanted us to have plenty to work with, so we didn’t have to worry if we messed up or wanted to experiment.”

Alexa’s eyes were still wide as she flipped through the pages, presumably imagining what she would do with them. Suddenly her attention shifted, “I have to show you something!” she said as if she had just remembered. Alexa stood up from her art table and disappeared behind the camera. After listening to her rummage around, Alexa reappeared proudly holding a rusted tin with the words ‘watercolor paints’ printed across the front in yellow and green letters. “My dad helped me find the watercolors my mom used!” she said with delight. “Wow! Alexa, that’s amazing. Those must be so special! How wonderful that you have something like that of your mom’s.” Alexa beamed with pride. I continued, “I know we just got new paints, but we can use those instead if you want.” Alexa’s eyes darted away from the camera, “That’s ok; these won’t work anyway.” “They won’t? Why not?” I asked. “They aren’t watercolors,” she said as she examined the box. Alexa held up the tin again, this time slyly covering the word “water” with her fingers. “See, they are just regular paints,” she said. I smiled and said, “Ok, no problem. We don’t have to use them.” I watched her shoulders relax. Alexa seemed relieved that she had fooled me, and I didn’t press further. Later that day, as we worked on our paintings, she explained that she did not want to use them because they belonged to her mom, and she wanted to preserve them as they were when she used them. I told Alexa I understood and pivoted my screen to show her my mom’s sewing machine next to my work table. “I feel the same way about
many of my mom’s belongings. I would be very upset if anything happened to her sewing machine. You get to decide how you use her things. That’s up to you.”

**Identity Transformation after Loss Analysis: The Watercolors**

The use of watercolors guided Alexa and my practice through the duration of the study. From the first meeting, Alexa demonstrated an interest in using the material specifically because of her association with her mother. By following her lead and allowing for our curriculum to emerge, we created opportunities for Alexa to forge new avenues through which she could continue her relationship with her mother. Unlike outdated stage-based grief models, which suggest a severing of ties from the lost loved one, an emergent feminist grief approach acknowledges the importance of maintaining connections with her mother. Alexa’s relationship to art, as the daughter of an art teacher and artist, primed her for creative grief work and presented unique opportunities for her to feel closer to her mom through art-making. By identifying the importance of these objects, as artifacts of her mother’s life, Alexa and I acknowledged the severity of her absence and honored how her life has fundamentally changed. Instead of the objects remaining stagnant symbols of loss, we activated the materials, transforming them into conduits for her to explore her mother’s identity as well as her own. Alexa demonstrated her willingness let me into her grief through symbolic gestures such as bringing the apron. Although hesitant at times, Alexa showed an interest and need for avenues to make sense of these objects in the wake of loss. Ultimately it became clear that Alexa had the ideas and drive to explore watercolors independently, however, my time and attention seemed to give her a platform to do so in a safe and emotionally supportive space. By harnessing the materials, as a way she can feel closer to her mother and explore her grief, Alexa takes charge of
her relationship to loss. I hope that by presenting art materials as a vehicle through which she can connect to her mother, Alexa feels some agency over her grief and is empowered to engage with emotions through the ever-adapting, open-ended, and layered process of art-making.

Guiding Creative Expression Through Emergent Student-Driven Curriculum

By employing an emergent student-driven curriculum, Alexa and I were able to follow her instincts, towards watercolors as our central medium. Regardless of whether it was intentional or intuitive, Alexa geared our art-making towards a medium she associated with her mother. She shared with me memories of painting together and explained to me techniques her mom had taught her like using salt to create texture. Alexa took pride in sharing processes and often suggested projects which would allow her to revisit them. It became clear that watercolors reminded her of her mother and presented themselves as a way she could feel close to her. When we decided to pursue watercolors, I was surprised to hear she did not have any of her own. Although her father seems very attentive and in tune with his daughters, her lack of access to paints highlighted to me a gap in her life. Alexa’s mom appears to have been the driving creative force in her family. Although her family supports art-making at home, Alexa needed an artistically minded person who could guide her to new ways of creative expression. Her undeniable glee upon seeing her new materials reflected that I was helping her meet an important need, the opportunity to explore items with someone who immediately recognized their importance.

The simple act of bringing her mother’s apron to our first meeting conveyed an already present understanding of the object’s power as a symbol of her mother. Much like my own experience with my mother’s fabric and sewing machine, Alexa intuitively gravitated towards
her mom’s belongings when she knew she would be engaging with grief during our workshop. Thanks to the open-ended structure of our work, Alexa and I pulled at this thread to reveal a potential avenue for her emotional processing of loss and transformation. When Alexa brought her apron, it may have symbolized an absence in her life. She may have seen the empty apron as a reminder of who is not there to wear it. When she showed me her mom’s watercolors, they may have been a painful reminder of times they once spent together. These objects may illicit unsolvable feelings in which the gravity of her loss highlights other painful realities that result from such a transformation. Instead of allowing the items to remain stagnant artifacts of her mother’s life, we used them as a starting point for creative intervention. We worked together to transform the apron and watercolors into activated materials that honor the significance of her mother’s legacy.

Conceptualizing art materials, as a means to maintain a relationship with her mother, speaks to contemporary grief theories which acknowledge the need for ongoing, albeit different relationship with the lost loved one. The Continuing Bonds Theory supports the idea that one should create ways to remain connected to the people they have lost as a means of integrating that loss into their sense of self and personal biography (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). By introducing watercolors to Alexa in our workshop, I introduced the materials’ potential to remind her of times together, build a feeling of closeness by mimicking activities she knows she enjoyed, and explore her own identity as a creative girl who has been significantly impacted by loss. Alexa helped to support this conceptualization by continuing to gravitate towards the materials her mother used. At one point during a workshop, I told Alexa we would be using salt to create texture on our watercolor paintings. Alexa immediately insisted that she find the salt her mother used for watercolors. Although she already had table salt prepared for the lesson and
sitting next to her, she was adamant that her dad help her find the exact salt her mom had used. There was something important about touching and interacting with the item, which she remembered her mom using.

My experience with my mother’s art materials informs my interpretation of this narrative. For me, using her sewing machine and fabric reminds me of the things which made her unique. Her fabric collection reflects her artistic sensibility and determination. When I go through her tools and workspace, I see clues into her mind. I laugh at the similarities I notice between us and study her particularities. I am comforted to know I am touching the same items she touched and giving them a new life. The feelings which come up are not linear or one dimensional. I may feel sadness, gratitude, and joy all at once when coming across a box of loose pins. I may find myself laughing through my tears as I find notes she wrote to herself or the remnants of a never-completed project. For me, engaging with her materials brings up everything at once. Her loss was so thoroughly life-changing that her image reflects every element of who I have become. It may be hard to appreciate the emotional complexity of such seemingly simple items for someone who has not experienced a loss so great. For Alexa, I can only guess what working with watercolors means to her. From what she has told me, I believe it offers windows into her past, which may be both joyful and difficult to revisit. I believe such materials have the ability to bring them together over time and space as she engages with the objects, knowing their role in her mother’s life. The watercolors carry with them her mother’s artistic spirit; and tapping into the emotions they carry is a powerful and multidimensional exercise in grief work.

Art-making, as discussed in chapter 2, has a rich history of supporting artists through complicated emotions. Unlike staged-based grief models, art-making provides a blank canvas, so to speak, without any projected expectation. Because the experience of maternal loss is so
thoroughly life-changing and complex, art creates a space for exploration without societal expectations of ‘returning to normal’ or compulsively seeking happiness as the ultimate goal. Alexa and I are particularly well suited for creative grief work because both of our mothers were artists. As a result, art-making offers even more potential for us to engage with our mothers, our feelings, and ourselves because the mediums are interwoven with our experience. By choosing to work with the same materials, our mothers used, we make the decision to turn symbols of loss into creative potential. Unsolvable feelings become fodder for personal exploration. That is not to suggest complicated feelings go away, however, art-making becomes a means to understand these feelings, sit with them, express them, and integrate them into our new reality after loss.

**Sharing Vulnerabilities Through Experiences of Grief**

The success of the emergent approach, to produce meaningful grief work, was only possible through Alexa’s willingness to be vulnerable. Alexa gave me clues that indicated a desire to develop strategies to make sense of these objects and her emotions. Although she was often hesitant to initiate conversation, Alexa was forthcoming about the need through her actions. By bringing the apron and offering information about it, she opened the door for further discussion. In reflecting on my practice, I notice my eagerness to return vulnerability by sharing my own similar experience. I believe by being open about my relationship with my mom’s materials, I indicated to Alexa my inherent understanding of her experience. Of course, Alexa and my experience are not the same, and I cannot claim to understand how she feels, however, I presented myself as someone to whom she did not need to explain her grief. By validating her experience with the similarities of my own, I believe Alexa felt safe to share without the fear of being misunderstood. As a grief guide, it became evident that my role was not to teach Alexa
about her grief. Alexa made it clear early on she had the agency and interest to explore her grief. My role was to create that space in her life and validate the avenues she had already begun to identify, which brought her closer to her mother.

**Creating Boundaries and Asserting Agency**

Lastly, the story reflects Alexa’s agency as a grieving girl. Alexa regularly set the boundaries of our work through her actions. Her willingness to bring the apron and show me the watercolors indicated one level of trust. However, when faced with a form of engagement, using her mom’s actual set of watercolors, Alexa drew a line in the sand and exercised her autonomy as a grieving girl. As a feminist grief guide, it was my role to respect her boundaries and leave space for Alexa to decide when or if she would share more information. It was important to me that Alexa felt in control of the emotional element of our art-making. Although I wish Alexa had felt more immediately comfortable explaining why she did not want to use her mother’s paints, I respect her need to keep that to herself until ready. I am heartened that Alexa felt safe to resist my suggestion and voice her need even if she did not want to fully articulate why.

Developing a strong sense of agency over one’s grief reoccurred throughout my data as an element of engaging with emergent art-making after loss. Alexa has been a strong, independent girl long before I ever met her. It was clear during our first meeting that Alexa is a smart, headstrong, and extremely inventive child. Our continued interaction only confirmed her strong personality. Almost every zoom meeting would begin with a show and tell about the latest song, poem, or American Girl Doll accessory she had created since we last spoke. It is no surprise then that Alexa seemed to have already developed some of her own tools for coping with grief.
During our first meeting, Alexa shared with me several mottos or mantras her mother had taught her. Often during our lessons, she would repeat the phrase “there are no mistakes in art,” when she was struggling with a project. Alexa told me sometimes in art class at school, she feels sad and cries, especially when she gets frustrated because it reminds her of her mom. In this instance, her frustration brings up memories of her mom and highlights how she is no longer there to coach and support her. The unsolvable feeling brings together frustration, sadness, and perhaps feelings of abandonment, which may translate to overwhelming and tangled emotion. Alexa told me that sometimes during those moments in class, she hears her mom’s voice in her head, reminding her there are no mistakes in art. Like the watercolors, words of encouragement act as a link to her mother, working to keep their relationship active and developing through Alexa.

Alexa demonstrated her own grief strategies through the creation of her own mantras. During our workshops, Alexa would often burst out in song or announce a new motivational phrase she had just come up with. “If you can’t find a nice person in the world — be one” and “All the colors are inside me” are just a few of the many pontifications she shared with me. On several occasions, our meetings would begin with Alexa eagerly asking to share a new song. She would sing fully formed songs to me from heart and in full earnestness. Her songs also shared a positive and affirming message, which often made use of catchy and motivational phrases. I began to see positive affirmations as a form of grief work Alexa had been engaging with long before we met. Her inclination to engage with such messages supports the idea that grieving girls have the tools within themselves to develop grief strategies, which are self-soothing and encourage emotional processing. Girls are not victims of their loss. However, they need an environment in which difficult grief work is encouraged and honored as a valid form of self-
exploration. I get the sense that Alexa’s father has fostered grief in an affirming and positive way in their household. It makes sense that Alexa would have begun her journey of self-discovery, through the use of phrases she associates with the comfort and care of her mom. I loved hearing Alexa’s songs and the maturity and complexity of her lyrics struck me. Clearly, Alexa has a rich inner life in which she is doing creative work to process various elements of her life, including her new reality after the loss of her mother.

Alexa’s already independent, and creative attitude certainly contributed to her ability to quickly find and build agency as a grieving girl through art-making. By following her instinct to engage with materials her mother used, I believe I introduced Alexa to a strategy she can return to throughout her life on her terms. By focusing grief work through the process of art-making, the artist can have full control of how they represent their world and themselves. Creating art can be a very empowering exercise for a grieving person who may feel out of control due to the unpredictability of loss. There are endless avenues for Alexa to explore, which connect to and build off her mother’s practice. Objects she used can become conduits for an ongoing relationship that Alexa can turn to in times of need. An emergent feminist approach puts Alexa in the driver’s seat and allows her to control the terms of her grieving. Grief work can be private or shared; what is important is that grieving girls feel they have the strategies within themselves to process and adjust to the new realities of life after loss.

Next, I will explore the role of reciprocal learning in feminist grief guidance and discuss how learning together impacted Alexa and my art-making experiences (see Figure 9).
Figure 9. Learning together, paper collage, copyright 2020 by Chelsea Borgman
Building Relationships through Emergent Curriculum: Learning Together

“Alright, Alexa, let me show you what I have planned for us today. I have a couple of new watercolor techniques we can try.” I said. Alexa excitedly shifted in her seat as she propped herself up by sitting on her legs and leaning in close to the camera. It was our third session working together and our second meeting over zoom. “I want to make a beach scene,” she said, “I even got sand from the park.” A small blue bowl overflowing with sand appeared from outside the screen and into the frame. “Since I saw you last, I’ve been thinking about how I could make it look real. Let me show you how I can do it,” she said, already squeezing glue out onto her paper. I set my watercolor examples to the side. “Go, girl, show me what’s up,” I said, as I watched her confidently pour sand across the page.

Take-charge learning was common with Alexa. Although we had only spent a short time together, I had already started altering my lessons to anticipate the divergences she would take us. She was always bursting with ideas and eager to show me how she could do the work by herself. This became evident during our previous workshop when I had led her through the process of making a paper crane.

“I know how to do origami,” she said, at the beginning of our session. “I’ve done that in art class.” “That’s great! Have you made a crane before?” I asked. “Like a bulldozer?!” she said with confusion. “Oh, no like a bird,” I said through my laughter, showing her my already folded example. “That looks hard! I know how to make a heart and a monster,” she replied. “Wow, I don’t know how to make either of those!” I said. “I can show you. Hey, if we have extra time at the end, can I teach you?” she said, with growing excitement. “Uh, yeah, definitely. I would love that,” I replied.
Alexa and I got to work folding our paper cranes. The project proved more difficult over the computer than in person, since I was less able to show her the steps physically. At times our distance was particularly difficult, and Alexa got frustrated and discouraged. After some deep breaths and reassuring mantras such as “there are no mistakes in art,” we pushed past the bad feelings, and Alexa excelled at making her crane. I had taught this lesson to many children over my years of teaching and was genuinely impressed with her natural ability. “I can tell you come from an artist,” I said, as we finished the last step of the crane. “You are really good using your hands, and you learned how to do that so quickly. I’m impressed,” I said earnestly. Alexa looked proud as she carefully examined her creation. “Wait! Are we out of time!?” Alexa said with a sudden sense of urgency. “Well, we have been meeting for a little over an hour, but I have more time. Do you want to keep going?” I replied. “Can we? I want to teach you how to make a heart,” she said. “Yes, please! Show me how to do it,” I said.

Alexa took me through the steps with excitement. I was an eager learner and made sure to listen carefully as she taught me how to fold the paper. Although she had to remind herself how to make the heart as she folded, she always stayed confident and maintained her role as the teacher. After our hearts were folded and decorated, we moved on to monsters. At some point, Alexa’s four-year-old sister made her way into the basement. Slowly inching towards our worktable with a plush animal stuffed under her arm, Alexa’s sister soon became a shy, yet eager learner in her origami tutorial. Together, the three of us folded and decorated our monsters, adding sharp teeth and big eyes with markers. As our session wrapped up, I thanked Alexa for the lesson and told her how impressed I was with her teaching and art-making abilities.

Alexa was energized and excited as we started to say our goodbyes. “Since we are quarantined at home, we can meet more than once a week. Would you like that?” I said. “Yes!
Yes! Can we meet two times this week?” she responded as she bounced in front of the computer and across the room. “Yes! Of course, I’ll set it up with your dad. It makes me so happy you want to keep spending time together.” At this point, Alexa had bounced her way to her American Girl doll and had become instantly engrossed with changing her outfit. “Ok, see you next time,” I said, knowing I had lost her attention.

Alexa continued to show an interest in spending time together, especially when it involved teaching me techniques she already knew. This was the most evident when we began working with watercolors. Alexa’s mom had taught her several methods, such as sprinkling salt to create texture on the paper and using tape to preserve white space. Several of my prepared lessons intersected with these techniques. Alexa would run with such opportunities. Her mind was quick, and often I would find that before I finished explaining the prompt, she had a fully formed conception of her future art project.

“So, today, I want to show you some really cool things we can do with watercolors,” I said as I held up several prepared examples. “How did you do that?!” she said as I showed her a rainbow painted page with white hearts and stars. “I used some tape, like this, to stick to the page, and then I painted over it,” I said as I held up my tape cut-outs. “Oh, yeah. I think I saw that before,” she said. Before I could say another word, Alexa was on the other side of the room searching for tape. “Ok, great, it looks like you like this idea, huh?” I said. Alexa returned with her tape and, without a moment of hesitation, began pulling long strips off the roll and confidently sticking them to the page. For a moment, I attempted to explain how I would go about doing the project, but it quickly became clear Alexa had already planned an entire composition in her mind. In response, I pulled out a new sheet of paper and began making my
own version of the project. This was often how our sessions would unravel. Art-making was the backdrop to our discussions, providing a focus while we talked about many elements of our lives.

Quickly it became apparent Alexa was writing something with her tape. The letters A, R, and T began to emerge. I complimented her ability to create the curve at the top of the “R” with straight pieces of tape. “How did you know how to do that?” I said. “I dunno, I just figured it out, I guess,” she replied, shrugging her shoulders. “Alexa, I want you to know, not everybody would be able to figure that out so quickly. You are really good at this. I can tell you have art in your genes.” Alexa kept focused on her project as she made big teal brush strokes over the letters. I had barely begun my painting as Alexa started peeling off her tape to reveal her final product.

It was getting close to the end of our session, and I wanted to touch base with Alexa about our next meeting. “So, today is our fourth session working together. For my research project, I have one more session scheduled for us,” I said. Alexa slumped in her chair as if the wind had been knocked out of her sails. “We can keep seeing each other, though. I’m having so much fun with you. Would you like to keep making art together? It won’t be included in my research.” Alexa eyes shot to the screen. “Can we!” she said with excitement. My heart sang with those words. “Of course, always,” I replied, smiling ear to ear. Alexa and I spend the rest of our time brainstorming ideas and dreaming about what we could make together next.

**Feminist Grief Guidance Through Reciprocal and Emergent Curriculum Analysis:**

**Learning Together**

Reciprocal learning was an important part of my time with Alexa. Early on, she demonstrated an independent learning style and created opportunities for her to share her
expertise by teaching me. I followed Alexa’s lead and incorporated time into our sessions so she could inhabit the role of teacher. Our role reversal revealed not only Alexa’s talent as a teacher but also her interest in establishing an equal relationship in which she had agency. I reinforced her position through my feminist pedagogy, which worked towards developing a reciprocal, non-hierarchical dynamic informed by mutual care and support (Shrewsbury, 1997). Within a feminist teaching approach, educators are partners in learning (hooks, 1994). Since Alexa’s mother was an art teacher, our time together created opportunities for her to engage with her grief. By acting as both teacher and student, Alexa may have identified a new potential for feeling close to her mom, by negotiating a familiar dynamic. This may be similar to the use of her mother’s art materials as an avenue to connect with who she was and maintain an ongoing bond. I believe reciprocal learning strengthened our relationship and contributed to Alexa’s continued interest in spending time together, even beyond the study’s confines. On several occasions, I asked Alexa if she would like to continue to make art together. Her enthusiastic responses indicated to me that my focused attention, facilitated through art-making, was not only enjoyable but filled a gap in Alexa’s life. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated the gap, which contributed to new unsolvable feelings, highlighting her unique experience as a child of loss during a time of individual and collective uncertainty.

**Challenging the Role of the Teacher: Student-Directed Art-Making**

The use of an emergent curriculum created an atmosphere in which Alexa was able to assert herself as an artist in her own right, with valid experiences and insight to share. When we created origami during our second session, Alexa was eager to show me her skills and teach me something I did not know how to do. A reciprocal dynamic continued throughout the rest of our
lessons in which Alexa always found a way to introduce a new technique or interpret my prompt. I saw her inclination as partially indicative of Alexa’s outgoing and curious nature, as well as a reflection of her rearing by a mother who was also an art teacher. Similar to Alexa’s use of watercolors as a way to draw connections between her mother’s life and her own, her proclivity towards teaching may reflect a deeply ingrained dynamic, which could add insight to her experiences of loss. By playing with the role of teacher, Alexa may come to feel as though she knows her mother better or can imagine more clearly how she may have experienced the world. I cannot know for sure how Alexa’s relationship with teaching will manifest over time, however, I present her inclination to do so a manifestation of her internal instinct to gravitate towards materials and experiences which remind her of their time together. Perhaps, like the art materials, teaching could become a conduit through which she acknowledges the painful loss of her mother while moving forward with creative ways to continue their connection. I think it is worth noting that within our open-ended curriculum, Alexa choose to drive our learning towards a reciprocal relationship in which she could safely and freely “play” with the idea of teaching others.

Further, in reflecting on my practice, I note an instinct on my part to tell Alexa when I saw connections between her and her mother. An unconscious effort at the time, I repeatedly point out moments in which Alexa showcases innate artistic talent and creativity. My inclination to do so is likely a result of my own experience, in which I have found great comfort in being told I am like my mother. Alexa did not respond directly to the comments, so I do not know if they were a meaningful to her. However, highlighting those similarities, I attempted to show Alexa how I see her mother within her. In doing so, I hopefully inspire Alexa to identify those similarities in the future independent of my suggestion.
Regardless, whether teaching becomes a fruitful outlet for Alexa’s life-long grief work, it became clear that our time together was meaningful. Art-making became a vehicle for our conversations and time together. Alexa was energized when our online sessions began. She was always bursting with updates from the past days to share with me. Each session I was introduced to a recently created American Girl Doll accessory, a new song or poem, or an update on remote learning during quarantine. Alexa seemed excited to have someone to share her feelings with and, of course, a willing audience for her performances. I was always careful to remain fully present during our work time, so she felt seen and appreciated.

I came to understand that my focused attention was providing something important to Alexa. She articulated this to me during a session when we had free time left over at the end. We had both nearly finished painting, so I asked Alexa if she would like to keep working or leave early. She sighed and said, “Can we just keep talking?” We both continued to absent-mindedly paint as we talked about our lives and feelings. At that moment, I felt as though Alexa had articulated a need for a supportive and attentive woman to listen to her thoughts and feelings.

The work of Mary Edelson supports my assumption, she noted in her book *Motherless Daughters*, that many young women gravitate towards female role models after maternal loss (1994). She and other scholars assert that relationships with female role models are important to maintain and can provide helpful resources and modeling for grieving girls (Davidman, 2000; Edelman 1994; Schultz, 2007; Tracy 2008).

I would never presume that I could, or should, try to fill the role of Alexa’s mother. However, the presence of a strong, creative, female mentor, especially one who shares a similar experience, could be a comforting and grounding influence. As a feminist grief guide, my role contains multitudes. If, in particular instances, I can fill a void of female attention, I believe such
focus can be beneficial to a childlike Alexa. Her actions and continued interest in meeting, especially as art-making fell into the background of our time together, indicate to me the importance of adult attention in a young griever’s life. This was made even more important during remote learning due to COVID-19, in which Alexa told me she was receiving no art instruction through school. Within an already traumatic time, it seems even more important that Alexa has time devoted to creative expression with an encouraging and attentive teacher.

Creating Space for Unsolvable Feelings

The process of learning together facilitated a space for Alexa to engage with her emotions in an authentic way, meaning, she was not pressured to adhere to social expectations or compare her feelings to happiness. I attempted to create a space that could contain all the messiness and unpredictability of emotion by carving out time in Alexa’s day in which grief was a welcome but not a required subject. By employing a grief informed feminist pedagogy, I demonstrated, by sharing my own experience, the many-layered and nuanced emotions which come with loss. I worked hard to show Alexa that I would not judge her feelings by sharing my own. Alexa responded with her own experiences, even though they sometimes brought up painful feelings.

For instance, during our last session, Alexa and I were discussing what we could create in the future after my research had concluded. Alexa suggested we make pillows for her American Girl dolls. I told her that it was a great idea and that I could send her all the supplies we would need to make them. Her suggestion sparked a memory for me, and I decided to share it. “When I was little, I had two pink security blankets, my pink blankies. My mom helped me make mini pink blankies for a bunch of my dolls and stuffed animals, so they all had their own.” Alexa did not respond. After a moment, I realized a weight had come over her. “Are you ok?” I asked. “I
wish my mom could do that for me.” she replied. My heart sank. “Alexa, I’m so sorry. It’s unfair she isn’t here to do that with you.” I immediately questioned if I should have shared the story. Was it helpful to share memories, or did it just serve to highlight a painful difference?

“It won’t be the same, but we can make stuff like that together. I will send you some of my mom’s fabric, and we can make all different sized pillows,” I said. Alexa nodded and perked up a bit, but I could tell she was still sitting with the feeling. I was concerned with how much of my experience I should share with Alexa throughout my reflections. I often worried about sharing too much and prompting painful feelings. Looking back at the data as a whole, I believe mutual sharing created an important foundation for our relationship. Although I would never push Alexa towards negative emotion, the presence of difficult feelings in a workshop such as this is important in combating the assumption that neglecting those thoughts can lead to a ‘return to normal.’ Unfortunately, in my experience, unsolvable feelings such as the ones brought up by my blanket story, are an ongoing part of grief. Learning to work with them by acknowledging their presence as a factor in your life is important for incorporating the transformation brought on by loss into your sense of self. This is supported by the Continuing Bonds Theory (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996), which emphasizes the need to incorporate the new reality of loss into one’s sense of self. Through listening to your own experience and learning from those feelings, grievers accept and find clarity in their unsolvable feelings.

**Transforming Self: Identity, Agency, and Art-making**

Lastly, Alexa and my dynamic during our workshops emphasized Alexa’s agency and independence as a grieving girl. Alexa did not shy away from taking charge and asserting her knowledge as valid and worth sharing. I believe my feminist based emergent approach supported
her already present inclination to show me what she was capable of by leading our time together. By exercising agency in a safe and supportive space that values her multitude of abilities, experiences, and insights, she can also explore her identity and her grief. I hope by fostering a space that welcomes both joy and sadness, she feels empowered to lead with both her strength and vulnerability—as equally important testaments to her tenacity as a grieving girl. By harnessing her agency with me in a supportive space, she may be more prepared to access her internal strength in less controlled environments.

Alexa also engaged with her agency as a grieving girl by demonstrating to both herself and me the lasting and ongoing impact her mother has on her life. Alexa’s interest in teaching me may speak to the still very present influence of her mom. By creating a space for her to showcase the many things her mother taught her, Alexa reinforces their continued bond and exercises control over the narrative of her loss. Rather than being consumed by her grief, Alexa displayed agency with grieving by engaging with elements of her mother on her terms and without preconceived expectations of returning to ‘normalcy.’ By holding space for all of the emotions brought up through our conversations and art-making, Alexa and I acknowledged the ongoing nature of our loss. As a grief guide, I resisted the urge to jump in and ‘make everything better.’ Although I wanted to erase Alexa’s pain at times, I knew it was an obsolete act with only short-term effects. Rather, by acknowledging the reality of loss, sitting with emotion, and then thinking creatively about how we could together transform difficult feelings into something with creative potential, we honored our grief while also acknowledging the choices we make about how we engage with our grief. When I told Alexa about the blankets my mother made for me, I made Alexa aware of a new incarnation of her loss. Unfortunately, I cannot take away that pain. However, by acknowledging the impact loss has on her life, while creating opportunities to
engage with that feeling in a generative way by learning to make doll accessories herself, we transform a stagnant feeling into something with ongoing creative potential. Perhaps making doll accessories will bring up more difficult feelings for Alexa, however, the process of art-making creates space to engage with those emotions from a place of personal agency. What is art, if not an opportunity to hold space for raw, authentic emotion and all its messiness? Instead of allowing unsolvable feelings to engulf a girl in an unexpected moment of grief, art-making presents an avenue to embrace and harness that emotion and transform it into something which illuminates, deepens, and adds nuance to the complexity of loss.

Alexa and my multifaceted dynamic as student and teacher, peers in grief, and grief-guide and griever, created opportunities for her to explore her identity as a grieving girl. By taking the reins of our learning and teaching me, she may have connected to a familiar dynamic by acting in a way her mom once did with her. Perhaps in the future, teaching will present itself as another avenue through which she can better understand her mother and feel close to her. Further, a supportive and non-judgmental space encouraged Alexa to be her unfiltered self and welcomed the many messy, and unpredictable emotions loss creates in the lives of a grieving girl. By acknowledging the transformation she has gone through and sitting with unsolvable feelings, Alexa and I challenged mainstream conventions that urge grievers to ‘process’ their grief and move on to a more advanced stage. By introducing art-making, an avenue through which to examine these feelings, we created opportunities to transform what may at the time feel like a deficiency into creative potential for a deeper understanding of the transforming self.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential of an emergent student-driven curriculum to support pubescent girls’ grief work. Employing a critical action research approach, I have reflected on my practice while creating art with a grieving nine-year-old girl, Alexa, over the course of several weeks. Through the analysis of my data, I have considered my role as a feminist grief guide and tracked my experience through narrative inquiry to identify if my approach provided the intended support for a girl dealing with the loss of her mother. Using a layered analysis, I tracked themes that emerged through my reflections and examined them through my theoretical lens.

My theoretical lens understands parental loss to be a transformative event in which a return to ‘normal’ is not possible, as the griever is forever changed. By considering grief as an ongoing series of emotional adjustments to the new reality after loss, I challenge medicalized grief models, which suggest that continued feelings of grief are disordered. Grief models have historically prioritized emotional responses associated with stereotypes of masculine qualities, often posing women and girl’s forms of grieving as inappropriate or in need of medical intervention.

Agency in the Wake of Loss: Exploration of Art-making Materials and Techniques

Through this study’s theoretical lens, I propose art-making as a powerful avenue for young women to explore their grief. The open-ended process of making art holds space for the often unexpected, messy, and life-long relationship with loss. Through art-making, girls can
harness their agency, forging creative pathways to maintain bonds to their lost mother, and develop emotional strategies they can return to throughout the rest of their lives.

By working with Alexa throughout five sessions, I reflected on this lens and allowed it to inform my interpretation of our time together. Several key moments stood out throughout the study and formed the structure of my analysis. Through a narrative inquiry, I examine instances as they felt to me when I experienced them. The process of art-making, sharing of vulnerability, and the harnessing of agency emerged as reoccurring themes throughout the data and undergirded my analysis in chapter 4. In examining my practice as an educator and grief guide, I also focus on the use of an emergent student-driven curriculum as a constant element of our grief work. As our curriculum unfolded, Alexa led us to various manifestations of both her grief and her developing emotional strategies that work to maintain relationships with her mom. Alexa expressed these strategies through her willingness to engage with the sketchbook I provided her with, her gravitation towards materials she associated with her mother, and Alexa and my ever-shifting relationship within the workshop. By examining the instances, I identify both the potential of emergent art-making and a desperate need for strategies that can stretch and morph to meet a child wherever they are in their grief.

**Role and Experiences of Grief in One’s Life: Identity and Vulnerability**

I believe the concept of “unsolvable feelings” offers much still to be explored. This term emerged for me through the analysis of the data. In writing about Alexa’s descriptions of her loss, I identified a shared experience, which I believe is common, if not ubiquitous, among children who experience grief. I hope that future study can add legitimacy to my claim by examining the less obvious ways grief manifests in a child’s life, and the rippling impact grief
has long after the initial loss. I believe by examining unsolvable feelings further, I will contribute to the development of art-related grief methods, which take into account unsolvable feelings and actively works to support grievers as they experience them.

I see art-making as a fruitful outlet to explore unsolvable feelings and express vulnerability through a non-judgmental and supportive medium. Art-making is able to adapt to the ever-changing iterations of grief, highlighted by unsolvable feelings. Through the process of art-making, vulnerability and the messiness of emotion are transformed into a creative act which adds insight and clarity to complex feelings. Forms of art-making can morph and change to meet the needs of grieving girls where they are and throughout the rest of their lives. Through art-making, the grieving person takes control of their feelings and expresses them through their own artistic sensibilities. This can help build agency for a grieving girl who may feel out of control after a life shaking loss.

Art-making also provides opportunities to reconceptualize the self in the wake of loss. Girls can depict themselves however they choose through their art and play with their self-perception. They can exercise different parts of their personality and explore the various modes of expression. This act can help girls integrate loss into their personal biography while also creating space to reflect on their experience and developing identity. Art-making is a uniquely layered act which can serve many purposes simultaneously. Not every grieving girl will have the same relationship to art-making. Different girls may use art-making in a variety of ways, to meet an array of needs. It is this unique ability of art-making, to shape shift to meet the needs of individuals, that positions art-making as a powerful and effective avenue for meaningful grief work.
Feminist Grief Guide

Based on the data collected through my time with Alexa, emergent art-making with a feminist grief guide can introduce creatively charged emotional strategies for girls who have lost a parent. Alexa displayed both her vulnerability and agency in grief, made possible by using an emergent curriculum which allowed Alexa to dictate the terms and content of our meetings. I hope that as Alexa and I continue our relationship, we can further influence each other by sharing our personal strategies for navigating unsolvable feelings. Due to the study’s scope, I will not know if the strategies have the effect of offering life-long support. However, based on the analysis outline in chapter 4, Alexa has already begun building off of these ideas and making them her own by adding her perspective as a grieving girl.

After conducting the study, I characterize a feminist grief guide as a person who creates space for creative expression in the life of a grieving person without expectation of ‘solving’ grief or ‘returning to normal’. A feminist grief guide honors the complexity of loss and its many and life-long manifestations and encourages grieving people to build creative and ongoing connections with their lost loved one. Feminist grief guides meet grieving children where they are in their emotion and value all forms of grief processing as valid. They do not push grief work, but rather allow it to unfold, acknowledging that sometimes distraction and lightness is as important as sitting with difficult feelings. Feminist grief guides appreciate the ongoing reality of unsolvable feelings and honor how grief can feel fresh and jarring when grieving people are faced with an unpredictable set of circumstances. Feminist grief guides see grief as a normal and beneficial response to loss. They understand grief as a starting point for creativity and loss as an experience which, if supported and honored, can produce strong, multidimensional, and
emotional resilient girls. These girls may be forever changed by their grief, however, when supported by a feminist grief guide, they are never limited by their grief.

As I continue this work with future cycles of action research, I will work more closely with participants over a longer period of time. The circumstances of the period in which this research took place, created physical barriers between myself and Alexa, which I believe impacted our ability to connect and build trust. As a teacher, I felt limited in my ability to emotionally connect as well as demonstrate art-making techniques and share materials. Additionally, I believe feminist grief guidance would thrive in a group setting with several grieving girls. By working in a group, girls would be able to share experiences with their peers, creating opportunities for entanglements and new meanings to form. I think this will help me develop as feminist grief guide, as I will learn from the girls’ interactions, gaining a better sense of how I can facilitate a supportive space for all.

In the next cycle of action research, I feel I would be more confident in my intuition as a feminist grief guide. Although there is still much to be learned and explored, this research has solidified to me the need for creative space after grief, with no specific learning objectives. Moving forward with this information encourages me to fully follow the lead of participants without fear that we are diverging away from grief work. Grief manifests in nearly every element of a grieving child’s life. As such, any time devoted to creative expression, which is supportive and unjudgmental, contributes to grief work and creates opportunities for important processing of loss. Grieving girls need models of emergent and open-ended grief work. They need time carved out in their lives for creative expression. Feminist grief guidance presents itself as a powerful way to provide this space and support girls as they develop their identity after loss.
Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

The study contributes to the larger body of research, which examines the unique experiences of grief. By sharing Alexa and my story, we add to a growing tapestry of narratives that express the many and varied experiences which result from the transformation brought on by loss. You could consider this research a pilot study, informing my future inquiries as a doctoral student. As I continue to explore grief through art, I will consider how this research can improve my strategies of support as a teacher and grief guide. By revisiting the analysis, I can learn to facilitate a space for unfiltered and messy emotion through art-making. The data created during our time working together offers insight into my understanding of loss as much as Alexa’s. I hope to utilize this information about myself to strengthen my ability as a feminist grief guide.

I hope in the future to expand an emergent practice to a larger group of girls as I had initially intended for the study. Further, I see the potential for the research to contribute to the development of larger-scale grief programming, which could function as an additional form of emotional support in schools. The current state of the world has produced many instances of grief on individual and community levels. Mass shootings, acts of racially charged hate, climate-change-related disaster, and disease have contributed to the already large numbers of grieving children. Unfortunately, the spread of COVID-19 has also brought increased death and, thus, even more need for grief strategies that can adapt and exist outside a therapist’s office. Often art teachers are looked to, to provide auxiliary emotional support for their community when faced with unthinkable loss. I hope that my future work can help prepare teachers for this role by introducing them to grief models that acknowledge the complexity of loss and its lasting impact. In doing so, teachers may be better able to create space for their students to experience grief without damaging expectations of returning to ‘normal.’
By continuing this research outside of the realm of art therapy and medicalized grief models, I maintain the potential for art education to contribute in its own way to grief research. Little work has been done within art education, addressing its unique potential to engage with grief outside of medicalized settings. I believe it is important to pursue the threads created through my research to understand better how art education theories can improve our cultural conception of grief. Additionally, we must pay attention to the ways that women and girls experience grief through a lens that does not compare their experience to those of men. Thus, the intersection of art education and women’s, gender, and sexuality studies presents an exciting avenue through which I can illuminate the stories of grieving girls from many backgrounds and contexts. In doing so, I work toward a more inclusive, open-ended approach to grief work, which can hold all of the complexity of loss and its many manifestations in the lives of all girls.
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Appendix A: Definitions

**Agency:** The capacity, condition, or state of taking action or exerting personal power and control over a situation or emotion.

**Building Relationships:** Developing personal connections which facilitate sharing of personal experiences and create a context for working collaboratively together.

**Creating Space:** Facilitating a dedicated time for focus on a specific topic. This may take the form of scheduling defined meeting periods, minimizing outside distractions, and establishing a private and safe dynamic between participants in the space.

**Critical Action Research:** A research approach which focuses on improving the practice and techniques of the teacher. This methodology combines Action Research with Critical Theory and requires the researcher/teacher to reflect on their teaching practice and how it may impact individual students and their social and academic needs.

**Emotional Strategy:** An activity or mental exercise which can be utilized in moments of emotional distress. This activity does not seek to eradicate negative emotion, but provide an outlet for its expression and helpful way to work through/with the feeling.

**Feminist Pedagogy:** An approach to teaching which prioritizes personal experience as a form of knowledge construction, employs a strong Ethics of Care, and avoids positioning the instructor as the authority in the classroom.
**Holding Space:** Facilitating an emotional environment in which a subject’s feelings, or concepts, that otherwise may go acknowledged, can be engaged. By holding space, one makes a deliberate effort to honor and respect the topic being discussed while protecting this dedicated time, to the best of their ability, from outside factors (such as distractions, societal expectations, or judgment) which may hinder authentic sharing or engagement.

**Grief:** Emotions experienced in reaction to loss. These emotions may take many forms and express themselves in a range of ways. Grief may reappear throughout life over long or short periods of time.

**Grief work:** Focused attention and/or activities and actions which engage with emotions associated with grief. Grief work can be expansive and may take many forms.

**Medicalization:** A process in which human conditions are socially and institutionally constructed as problems which require medical treatment. Medical constructs become so engrained that a condition or emotional reaction can be diagnosed and treated as an illness.

**Process of Art-Making:** Any activity that results in the creation of art. The process of art-making can be both intentional and unintentional and does not require any specific materials or environment.
Emergent Student-Driven Curriculum: An approach to curriculum development which creates the opportunity for students to dictate the direction of the course throughout the time frame of the curriculum. This approach responds to student interest and need and seeks to connect with the lived experiences of the students.

Support: Responding to the needs of participants, acting as a source of stability, and facilitating a sense of camaraderie and care in the workspace.

Unsolvable Feeling: An entanglement of emotions which arise as a result of grief. Emotions are evoked when new experiences and circumstances highlight the absence of a lost loved one, bringing up a new iteration of grief. Unsolvable feelings result from acknowledging the transformation one’s life has gone through as a result of loss. They encompass the many layered emotions, beyond sadness, which come with adjusting to one’s life after loss.

Vulnerability: The capability and willingness to express difficult topics and emotional wounds with others.
Appendix B: Institutional Review Board Letter of Approval

**Date:** January 6, 2020  
**From:** Philip Frum, IRB Analyst  
**To:** Chelsea Borgman

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<th>Type of Submission:</th>
<th>Initial Study</th>
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| Documents Approved:| • Borgman Minor Assent (2), Category: Consent Form  
                          • Borgman Parental Consent (3), Category: Consent Form  
                          • Borgman Protocol for Human Research (4), Category: IRB Protocol  
                          • Borgman Recruitment Email (1), Category: Recruitment Materials  
                          • Borgman Recruitment Flyer (1), Category: Recruitment Materials  
                          • Borgman Recruitment with Tabs (1), Category: Recruitment Materials  
                          • Borgman Screening Questions (1), Category: Other  
                          • Borgman Workshop Prompts (1), Category: Other  
                          • Borgman_Data_Collection.pdf (1), Category: Other |
| Review Level:       | Expedited |

On 1/6/2020, the IRB approved the above-referenced Initial Study. This approval is effective for one year from date of approval. You will be required to submit an annual administrative review form through CATS IRB. You will receive reminders prior to the administrative review form due date. If an administrative review form is not submitted within one year of approval, the study will be closed administratively.

We would like to know how the IRB Program can better serve you.  
Please fill out our survey; it should take about a minute: [https://www.research.psu.edu/irb/feedback](https://www.research.psu.edu/irb/feedback).