(DE)CONSTRUCTING A NARRATIVE OF HOPE:
AN (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO "MISSING PERSON" DISCOURSES

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DIANAH MCGREEHAN
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by

DIANAH MCGREEHAN

APPROVED:

Derek M. Bolen, Ph.D.

John E. Klingemann, Ph.D.

Micheal W. Salisbury, Ph.D.

Julie D. Gates, Ph.D.

August 2016

APPROVED:

Dr. Susan E. Keith
Dean, College of Graduate Studies

DEDICATION

To my sister Roxanne,

I love you, and I miss you.
I can envision you,
my childhood friend,
innocently smiling and imagining what you would grow up to be.
Wishing to be a famous star.
Much like the brightest stars in the sky,
your light was extinguished too soon.
Flashing, fallen into earth.
I still see radiant traces of you.

To those lost and those searching,

I take your hands and walk with you through the fields toward the edge our journey. As we reach the abyss, we scream into the depths of darkness. Our voices amplify and echo against the plateaus and peaks of what is hidden within. Visceral voices reverberate into a communal chorus. We leave the abyss forever transformed by our shared lived experience, shared voices, and shared search for meaning.

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I wish to acknowledge every person who has inspired this inquiry and illuminated me with their presence throughout the process of this journey. Our interwoven stories and shared moments form the pathway to my/our co-constructed meanings of love and loss. For all those who embraced me when I was weak and helped me laugh at life's absurdities, I want to thank you for your magnificent support.

Dr. Derek Bolen, thank you for guiding me through the rabbit hole and showing me the wonderland of autoethnography. Over the last few years, you have been my greatest advocate and ally. As I write this, I think about Sunday afternoons in your dining room and the clicking and clacking of fingers typing against computer keyboards. I recall how I would sit there with you, John Marc Cuellar, and Devin Collins and discuss the most recent articles we discovered. The countless cups of coffee you shared with me/us should have had "drink me" written on the mug. The donuts sugary glaze may have spelled out "eat me" because it was in those moments that my voice—our voices felt stronger, bigger, and wiser. Your amazing passion for teaching elevates and positively transforms your students and countless others in the autoethnographic world. You are my champion, confidant, and most importantly my friend. I am a better person and scholar because of you.

To my thesis committee members, I truly appreciate the time and energy you dedicated to me this summer. Dr. Klingemann, I will always remember the calming words you shared with me before my defense. I will certainly echo your words to future students nervously waiting and overthinking their defense. I'll tell them a story about a professor who reminded me to stay calm because I was now the expert in the room. Dr. Gates, your compliments toward my writing style certainly boost my confidence as a storyteller. Your words reinforced in me the power of autoethnography to emotionally move readers and transform written narrative into a shared experience of reflexivity. Dr. Salisbury, I will always cherish the courage and vulnerability you demonstrated in sharing such intimate details about your own experiences with loss during my thesis defense. I was so moved by your connection with my work and the comments you provided me. I just wish I had the opportunity to thank you in person for being such a wonderful addition to my thesis committee.

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Roselee Wilson, your constant smile and strength made your office a safe haven and oasis in moments of chaos. I am fortunate to have had in you my life and now consider you a dear friend. You were the first person I shared the final draft of my thesis with because I value your empathy and compassion for others. Thank you for joining me on this journey.

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When I decided to leave my corporate world behind to go back to get my master's degree, my friends and family provided an amazing amount of support. Chris, you are one of my best friends, and I just want to thank you for pushing me to live out my dream of getting my master's degree. Your simple suggestion has forever changed my life. I can now forgive you for not buying me that fruit cup in high school.

Dad, thank you for long country drives and deep discussion about life while on the backroads of the Texas Hill Country. I am lucky to have such a wonderful person influence me so deeply with their values and outlook on life. Mama, I don't tell you enough how much I love and care for you. I am amazed by your stories of strength and the value you place on family. Mom, I appreciate you endless love and hope for Roxanne. You were always her unspoken hero.

My stepbrother, you have grown into such an amazing man. I am so proud to call you my brother. Although you two didn't say it enough, I know how much Roxanne loved you and how much you loved her.

To my older brother, you never gave up searching. Because of you, we have come closer to the truth. You are an amazing big brother and always reminded Roxanne how special she was. Beyond being an amazing big brother, you are an amazing father and husband. Thank you for your endless encouragement throughout the process of this inquiry.

To my three sisters and stepdad, you are all my second family. I know you all created a place to call home for Roxanne. I don't underestimate the impact her loss had on all of you. Roxanne was so excited to big your big sister. With the announcement of each of your births, her smile was always the biggest. You helped her shift her identity from the youngest sibling to the big sister. She became someone to look up to.

To my beautiful niece, you are such an amazing and beautiful young woman. Your mother would be so proud the natural grace and kindness for which you exude. You are Roxanne’s greatest accomplishment. I am sorry you never had the opportunity to know her. However, I do hope you know how much she loved you.

Roxanne, I love you. I will remember you most as my closest childhood friend. I miss your smile and sense of humor. The other day, dad and I discussed the concept of death. In his opinion, someone only truly dies when their name no longer escapes the lips of others—when they escape the memory of those who remain. We will always remember you and share your story. I will repeat your name over and over again so it resonates in the memories of others. Your story matters, and I am happy I can share it.

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I address personal and cultural narratives surrounding missing persons and loss. I write relational stories of coping through traumatic loss to further understand how (co)constructed meanings emerge in the liminal space between hope and grief. I inquire into how our perspectives and narratives shift over time as we engage with individuals, communities, and the media. I discuss how individuals can begin to cope with pain and form meaning through shared narrative. I explain how autoethnography provides a space for members of this cultural group to gain an understanding of the ambiguity and complexity experienced in traumatic loss. Through the reflexivity of autoethnography, readers and writers employ experiential engagement to understand the interconnection and commonality of self with others. I remind readers how the communal nature of narratives can serve as a therapeutic intervention to gain resilience toward uncertainty when a loved one is a missing person.

Keywords: missing persons, ambiguous loss, complicated grief, autoethnography, social construction, communication

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

ABSTRACT viii

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION 1

Goals of this Inquiry 9

Summary 16

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE 18

Developing a National Narrative 19

(Co)constructing Meaning 24

Social constructionism 24

Relationalism 27

Ambiguous Loss 30

Frozen grief 31

Finding meaning 33

When hope hinders 35

Traumatic Loss 36

Homicide survivors/co-victims 36

Prolonged and complicated grief 39

Coping with Ambiguous and Traumatic Loss 43

Summary 44

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY 47

Autoethnography 49

  - A history of autoethnography 49
  - Turning to narrative 51
- Criticisms of Autoethnography 52
- Therapeutic Nature of Autoethnography 55
- Core Ideals of Designing Autoethnographic Projects 57
  - Foreground personal experiences within cultural phenomenon 58
  - Illustrate reflexivity throughout the sense-making processes 60
  - Describe/critique cultural norms and practices 61
- Ethical Considerations 62
- Writing Techniques 64
  - Personal narrative and interpretive interactionism 65
  - Messy texts and layered accounts 65
  - Evaluating narrative text 66
- Summary 67

CHAPTER 4 HOPE: THE LIMINALITIES OF LIFE AND LOSS 68

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION 111
- Summary 112
- Reflecting on the Goals of My Thesis 114
  - Understanding the impact of collective hope and collective loss 114
  - Exploring how I processed, communicated, and negotiated the space of hope 116
  - Constructing a space for understanding complicated experiences of loss 117
  - Honoring the memory of Roxanne McGreehan 118
- Contributions of this Autoethnographic Inquiry 119

    Field of communication of studies..119
    Survivors of ambiguous and traumatic loss 120
    Relational construction of my identity...121
  Directions for Potential Inquiries..122
REFERENCES 125

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Two weeks.

It's been two weeks.

And now—now I am supposed to reflect on life and give thanks. The holidays have a way of making you overthink life, your place in it, and what it all means. Sometimes I think Thanksgiving was created to give you a false sense of warmth as the cold, cutting air of fall arrives. But it never changes the weather. The shivers. The longer, darker days. I am drying my damp hair, daydreaming near the small space heater in the corner of my room. As I prepare to dress in something my stepmother will approve of for a Thanksgiving meal, I find myself going back in my mind to the call.

Two weeks ago, my dad received a call from my mom in Colorado. She asked him if he had spoken to my sister Roxanne. In my family, we don't frequently call each other. We might call on occasion to play the role of a good father, a good mother, a good daughter, a good son, a good brother, or a good sister. The calls help us from becoming strangers and allows us to maintain the love, the connection a family is supposed to have.

I imagine the long pauses and awkwardness during the conversation between my mom and dad. Two people who now only know each other through polite inquires during private discussions with their children. They very rarely feel the need to call one another. So when the phone rang and it was my mother on the line I imagine the long pauses.

"Hello, is this Ronald?" my mother mutters. <Pause>

"Yes this is Ronald. Is this Gina?" he responds with surprise. <Pause>

"Yes this Gina," my mother's broken English suddenly is recognized by my dad. She continues, “I no hear from Roxanne. She call you? <Pause>

A confusion rushes over my dad, “What do you mean you haven’t heard from Roxanne? Was she not on the bus?” <Pause>

“What you mean…you no talk to her?” concern echoes in my mom’s voice.

“No I haven’t talked to her,” he quickly assures her. In that moment, it may have taken him a while to think of the last time he actually spoke to my sister. My mom continues the conversation. She is explaining again how Roxanne was recently traveling through San Antonio and Los Angeles before joining the military.

“She supposed to be home yesterday, but she no on bus. Mindy say she no see her or talk to her. I no hear from her. You sure she no call you?”

“No, I haven’t heard from her. Roxanne didn’t even call before to tell me she was going to be coming to San Antonio,” he insists.

My mother responds with surprise, disbelief, and frustration that my dad is unaware how a couple weeks ago his own daughter was in his city. She was minutes away from his house. It’s a new house my sister has never called home. A house she has never walked in.

It’s a house she likely doesn’t know the address to.

He doesn't have the answers to the questions to follow. After he hangs up, he calls me to ask if I have spoken to Roxanne. Scattered thoughts quickly come over me. I certainly haven't spoken to her recently. I have to think of the last time I actually spoke to Roxanne, the last time I connected with her. But I can't think of it with certainty. Short of a proper answer, I blurt out, “I haven't spoken to her. Why?”

“Are you sure she hasn’t tried calling you?” my dad echoes the surprise and disbelief of my mom.

Slightly annoyed, I assure him, “No I haven’t seen any missed calls from Roxanne or had any messages. Why are you asking if Roxanne’s called me?

He replies, “Well your mom called me and told me Roxanne was in San Antonio a couple of weeks ago. Did you know Roxanne was in San Antonio?”

“No. What was she doing in San Antonio?” I quickly question.

“I asked your mom and she didn’t really know exactly why she was here. I am guessing she came to pick up medical records,” he says with uncertainty.

I didn't know my sister, the sibling I was closest with in our youth, was just miles away from me. I don't have the answers to the questions to follow.

◎

I step out from my small corner of warmth to get ready to leave my little, old apartment. Cold air rushes over me as I open the door and step out from my little home, a home I rent. I drive to my parent’s place hoping that they actually decide to turn on their heater. Their house is always so cold. I knock on the door of their new house—a house I never grew up in, never lived in. I wait in the cold. I sense the person on the other side double-checking through the peephole making sure it isn't a stranger.

The door opens as an announcement is made to the rest of the house by my dad, “It’s Dianah.”

He quickly turns back toward the kitchen, mumbling, “Ronald and David are here. Oh, don’t forget to take off your shoes.”

The bodies down the hall don’t get up or shift from their positions to greet me as I am bent over untying my laces. To my excitement, I can take off my coat because the heater is on. The warmth and aroma from the kitchen is inviting and gives me a sense of home. I make my way through the house to the dining room table, which is adjacent to the living room.

My stepmother sits in the living room, enjoying a Filipino game show in Tagalog. Because she is the only one who speaks Tagalog, she sits alone in front of the television. It's a quick, well-deserved break after cooking all morning. My dad, brother, and stepbrother are sitting with me at the table to catch up on life for a bit before we eat the big meal.

"So, Dianah, how are classes going?" Ronald asks.

"They're going good. I am just knocking out some required, transferrable classes before I go to Texas State. I figure it's a lot cheaper that way," I reply. He continues the conversation.

"Do you plan on moving to San Marcos?" Ronald asks with a smile.

Tilting my head with slight disappointment, I explain, "No, I think I plan on staying in San Antonio and just commuting."

"So, Ronald, how is school going for you?" dad interrupts.

"ROTC is good. I should be commissioned by May," Ronald responds with a matter of fact tone.

As an Air Force retiree, Dad provides an affirming, "That's great!" Dad turns to my younger step brother David, "How about you David, how are things at the good ole commissary?"

David smirks, slightly bragging, "It was pretty busy this week because of Thanksgiving. So I made good money."

"I bet it was a pretty busy week for you too dad!" I interrupt calling attention to the obvious demands on postal workers during the holiday season.

Quick to respond, dad proclaims, "You know the old saying… neither rain, nor snow, nor sleet, nor hail shall keep the postman from doing his job. But it has been cold and I have been working a lot of overtime because everyone is taking time off for the holidays."

"Are people starting to sends cards?" David questions.

Dad continues his rant, "I had to cover a route for one of the new guys in an older area of town, where you have to walk up to the houses. There are a lot of older people who just wait on their porch, every day at the same time… waiting for the mail. But a lot of them just wait out there on days they know they are receiving their social security checks."

David mutters sarcastically, "So no cards yet?"

Dad finally answers the question. "Yeah, a few cards have started coming through the mail. I feel bad for this one older lady. She just likes to talk to me. I think I may be one of the few people she talks to on a regular basis. This old lady would talk to me for an hour if she could… but I have to deliver the mail. I can't talk all day. She keeps asking me if I've got a card for her from her son. She waits outside every day to talk to me. Every day she asks me if I've got a card from her son. And I tell her no. Every day. Pretty much people just get junk mail. Half of the mail is just junk mail."

This simple conversation is put to a momentary pause by a quick prayer and blessing by my stepmother, "Thank the lord for gathering 'all' of our family here today to enjoy this holiday meal." I give my stepmother a quick sideways look of disdain because Roxanne isn't here. She never really saw Roxanne as part of this family. It's because Roxanne asked to live with our mom in her early formative teen years. Simple conversation continues through dinner. After dinner, my stepmother goes back to watching her shows and my dad gets to washing dishes. My brothers and I stay at the table that sits near the kitchen. We give each other knowing looks. We know that with all the catching up, we have been avoiding the bigger questions.

My father had told me about his experience at the police station the week before. Although he didn't describe his helplessness when the police told him, "Sorry sometimes girls her age just want to go missing," I could hear his subtle, bitter sarcasm when he repeated the phrase. The officers didn't report her as a missing person that day. They told him there just wasn't much they could do unless the missing person is a child.

But for the authorities to not even care enough to take the time and effort to file his daughter as a missing person is simply frustrating. I mean this is the action a father must take. They must go to the authorities to take action. But when the authorities don't value the concerns you have for your child, it devalues you and your role as a father.

"Dad, have you gone back to the police since last week?" I ask.

"Well they already said there's nothing they can do," dad clarifies.

I protest, "Yeah, but maybe you should talk to someone else. I don't understand why they couldn't just file her as a missing person. Even if she did run away, they should still file her as a missing person."

"Well the officer said they only file runaways who are minors because they aren't legal adults. People over 18 can choose to run away. The police don't search for adults who may not want to be found," dad sighs after the last phrase.

Perplexed, I jump in, "But they don't know if she is a runaway. I mean why would she run away and not take the bags she's traveling with? No offense to Roxanne, but I don't think she is the master mind type to plan a huge disappearance. That kind of stuff takes money. And why wouldn't she run away after seeing Beth. It just doesn't make sense. She was about to join the military. Once she was in the military, she could get away from

Matthew and get custody back of Beth. I don't know it just doesn't make sense. Did you tell them all of this when you went in?"

Dad defends himself, "I just told them the situation and answered his questions. Once I said her age, he said they just wouldn't be able to do very much."

I can tell this discussion is making my stepmother uncomfortable. It was taking away from the expectations of the day, the holiday cheer. She seems more annoyed than concerned that my sister was disrupting our day. So we push the conversation aside and put on smiles to be "happy."

After our Thanksgiving dinner, all but my stepmother get into the family car to go on a typical post-dinner drive. As we drive toward downtown San Antonio, my dad says there is somewhere he wants to take us. Near a quiet highway underpass, I can see this is a space where many homeless people in the area congregate. Roxanne was traveling by Greyhound bus. This small corner of the city for the homeless is near the station.

"What are we doing here?" frustration and confusion are seen on my face and confirmed in my voice.

My expression magnifies as my dad admits, "We're looking for Roxanne."

"Why would we look for her here?" I reiterate my confusion.

"I just thought we have to… we have to try because you never know," he explains.

At first, I thought my father brought us here to teach us some sort of life lesson on being grateful. I realize this was the answer to the question which was silenced at home.

Dad murmurs, "I just thought that maybe your sister has gone crazy."

I can tell from his face he is serious. When he was younger, his mother had been institutionalized for schizophrenia. I remember the story about how she thought she could see and speak to the dead.

Under a cloudy gray sky, in the cold, we search around graffiti filled pillars and throughout the streets. I glance over the faces of these often forgotten souls. I notice how many look to be staring off in deep thought. Some almost seem to be thinking about some unknown future, others a distant past. So we start looking, hoping to see my sister shivering in the cold and lost in her mind. Maybe we're the ones who have lost our minds for a moment. But in this moment it makes sense.

◆ ◆ ◆

Since 2002, I have found myself existing in a liminal space between hope and reality. This is the year that my younger sister, Roxanne McGreehan, vanished at the age of twenty. Since then, I struggle with my failures in my performance as sister to Roxanne throughout her life, disappearance, and death. I struggle to find meaning in it all. I stifle through expressing of all the emotions and feelings which have accumulated these past twelve years. I realize that I may never be able to encapsulate all of my thoughts and experiences.

◆

My first summer semester of graduate school, I received a call from the detective investigating the murder of my sister. After years of hoping for an answer, I finally received one. However, this answer was incomplete and left me with so many more questions. Hope continues to haunt me. I now hope for a new discovery of her physical remains and some form of justice. But just as before, I find myself in a liminal space waiting for answers. That phone call stirred in me my interest to approach the topic of missing person discourses throughout my graduate work.

◆ ◆ ◆

In this thesis, I share stories of life, loss, and grief. I (de)construct the paradoxical ideologies of hope that forms from missing persons discourses. Hope is a self-created contradiction which surfaces to shield suffering individuals from a painful reality (Boss, 2006). Hope in missing person cases is an inescapable narrative that (mis)guides individuals, families, and communities through a shifting labyrinth of beliefs and actions while complicating possibilities in the discovery of "truth." They are such successful ideologies that most members of our society would be skeptical they function under the power of dominant social narratives (Richardson, 1991). I work to illustrate how dominant narratives of hope construct others. To explore this othering, I reflect on my own experiences of loss to illustrate how hope stifles the grieving process. Reflexing on my own experience, I suggest the problem of constructing hope in missing person narratives is that it casts the person processing this tragedy into a personal purgatory. Hope in missing person cases denies the acceptance of loss. I discuss how choosing to accept the ultimate ending of death for the missing person evokes emotions of guilt throughout the grieving process. Overall, I examine how the (de)construction of hope in social discourses of communication impacts missing person narratives.

Goals of this Inquiry

As I consider the goals which guide my inquiry and reflexivity, I hear the voices of members of my thesis committee. I am reminded how I want to discover too much from my inquiry; how I want to answer too many questions. What resonates most as I set my goals from those early conversations is how autoethnography functions to "do" something. "What is this thesis *doing*?" I ponder this question for some time and keep asking myself, "What do I want these personal narratives to do?" I understand that yes, I may want too much from it. I wanted answers to all the questions I have had, questions which are not always meant to have answers. I am reminded how these questions will not be answered by the theories of famous rhetoricians or social scientists. I have come to understand how in the "doing" of autoethnography and sharing of my own narrative I begin to approach my own personal sense-making.

As I reflect on my own struggles of sensemaking through trauma, I theorize these experiences and shared stories through a constructionist lens (Schwandt, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Through constructionism, I adopt an ontology which understands reality as co-constructed through our lived interactions with others. This project allows me to co-construct narratives and discourse with others who have found struggle in their search for meaning in the midst of loss and trauma. Doing autoethnography, my first goal for this research is to understand the impact of collective hope and the collective loss of survivors coping with the loss of a missing person. I aim to maintain an intersubjectivist epistemology which strives toward co-constructing knowledges as presentations of realities of observed cultures.

Poulos (2008) explains how the *accidental dialogue* that erupts from everyday encounters has a transformative power to alter ordinary time and space to moments of meaning which build a co-created narrative from the organic process of co-being—moments of meaning that redefine relational connections and shared realities. Vande Berg and Trujillo (2009) illustrate how many voices can intertwine to form co-narratives during times of crisis. To achieve this goal, I seek to capture the utterances and voices that blur to form the co-narratives which are performed through and onto me. By examining the "us" in the communication process, I endeavor in my thesis to reveal the impact of culturally embedded grand narratives on personal stories involving missing persons. By doing this, I work to understand how these co-constructed narratives have impacted my own expectations and dialogue as a survivor of trauma. It is through shared meanings and understandings I can begin to understand my own personal narrative (Bochner & Riggs, 2014).

My second goal is to explore how I process, communicate, and deny hope during the disappearance and assumed death of my sister. Foss and Domenici (2001) explain how survivors of the trauma of missing person cases are haunted by the liminal space between life and death that their loved ones exist in. Family members of this trauma experience negative attributions which evokes guilt about how they perform their relational roles as family toward the victim. As I approach this second goal, I understand my own frustration in finding meaning through the painful experience of the loss of my sister as rooted in my questioning my performance of sisterhood. My purpose for sharing this evocative, sensitive narrative is to achieve “an interior liberation” (Levi, 1987) while repositioning readers as co-participants in the process of working to understand and cope with their own experiences of loss and trauma.

Scholarly narratives regarding missing persons are currently a limited site of research in the communication field. When considering oppressed voices in our society, I do extend these limitations to victims and survivors of traumatic experiences. The third goal of my inquiry is to construct a space for the members of this underrepresented cultural group to gain a greater understanding of this confusing, complicated experience of loss. After the sudden, shocking death of her brother in a plane crash in 1982, Ellis (1993) recognizes how the term *survivor* extends to all those who live beyond the wreckage of trauma. She demands how there must be a place in research that speaks to those “who have encountered emotionality associated with loss, and to those who would embrace a sociology that attempts to cope with emotional experiences that escape orthodox social science" (Ellis, 1993, p. 724). I am a member of a community that has searched endlessly for those who have been lost and labeled as missing. This label also applies to this group of survivors. Our personal voices and stories have been missing from traditional communication research. Reflecting back onto ourselves, we are lost in search of deeper meaning of our experiences. As I share the intertwined, blurred stories of those who have searched and are searching, I seek to find the missing. I desire to find a greater understanding of myself through this shared narrative.

The final goal of my thesis is to honor the memory and life of my sister Roxanne. My sister's disappearance did not initially cause alarm from police officers. Her disappearance never received news coverage. She never received a funeral. She never received a memorial—even after the confession of her murder. This thesis serves to do these things. I seek to create alarm for all those who are missing, both those who are physically lost and those who are lost seeking answers. I seek to now share the story of her disappearance, to acknowledge her death, and mourn her life. I yearn to be a good sister and to earn forgiveness for not finding my voice sooner in sharing more openly her story, my story, and our stories.

In Chapter 2 of my thesis, I highlight the work of the scholars who have assisted in shaping my inquiry. Understanding social constructionism and relationalism (e.g., Gergen, 1973; Gergen & Gergen 2000; Gergen & Walter, 1998) as it occurs in the co-active process of dialogue, I begin to understand how one's personal narratives form from the canonical narratives that surround missing persons. Shor and Freire (1987) understand dialogue as "a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it" (pp. 98-99). Baxter (2011) explains how, in dialogism theory, transformation of new meanings emerge in moments of tension and uncertainty. When families and individuals try to make meaning from the circumstances of a missing loved one, they are impacted by the multivocality of the living, the dead, and the space of existence between them.

Durham Peters (1999) challenges traditional concepts of dialogue by discussing the desire to reach "beyond" through the spiritual tradition. Communicating with the dead, angels, or the missing creates a private projection of meaning, permitting a confession of desire and reality. An utterance chain (Bakhtin, 1986) of words already spoken in the past, not-yet spoken in the future, and may never be articulated can haunt and influence the dialogue of families. Families of a missing person live in a liminal space of hope formed from the *as if*, which Zelizer (2004) states is established through the subjunctive voice. The subjunctive voice creates a narrative which permits the missing person to remain in a constant present tense. This narrative denies shock and grieving by denying death. When a person is first reported missing, this space of possibility creates an urgency to transcend the chaos of the moment and to develop narratives with positive conclusions.

Jones, Zagacki, and Lewis (2007) describe missing persons as "rhetorically situated in a past simultaneously, prophetically, flowing into an imagined present and an incomplete future" (p. 108). This maintains the missing person in a frozen present. The narrative of hope is transformed from this space and emerges as the dominant ideology in social discourses of missing persons, confusing our linguistic and phenomenal reality. Eagleton (1991) questions the oversimplifying worldview this creates. Hope is a mystification of meaning that suppresses "social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions" (Eagleton, 1991, p. 6). The contradiction or antonym for hope is reality. The most successful ideologies are so tightly fitted into social realities they are essentially reifications of common sense. This brings into question the power structure which frames hope in the hierarchy of its belief system. Although we may rename our demons of guilt, we are continuously haunted by the desire for and denial of an ultimate ending.

The desire for an ultimate ending in missing person cases is more the desire for an ultimate truth of what has happened to loved ones. A man finally confessed to the murder of my sister in 2013. Her murder investigation is labeled as a cold case homicide. Wellman (2014) researched how cold case homicide survivors utilized social comparison of grief. The research results indicated how this group of underrepresented survivors positioned themselves as “worse off” and “different” when comparing themselves to survivors of non-homicidal deaths. I have particularly experienced this same social comparison. Spry (1995) discusses the hegemonic implications of “victim” and “survivor” in women’s narratives of sexual violence. Labels of “victim” and “survivor” also resonate in the naming of *others* after these acts of trauma. Ellis (1993) demonstrates how these words blur together. Survivors will often (re)enact the moment of death. They place themselves in the position of the victim. Their emotions entangled with the assumed fears and thoughts of the victim. Through scholarly inquiry, I seek to illustrate how hope functions both in narratives of missing person cases and in cold case homicides.

In Chapter 3, I describe how my methodological approach of autoethnography functions in my inquiry as a communication process to convey my own personal narratives and to (re)collect shared stories on loss and trauma. I utilize a reflexive messy text (Denzin, 1997; Marcus, 1994) and layered account (Rambo Ronai, 1995) approach to emphasize how personal narratives are entangled and impacted by social discourse. I seek to highlight how voiced personal narratives of missing persons and loss are transformed to co-created findings of self-awareness through relationships with *others*.

Regarding how autoethnography functions as communication, Bochner and Ellis (2006) explain in autoethnography "we see people enacting the process of learning how to live, struggling to make sense of their lives and their losses, healing their wounds, trying to move on from and survive the unnerving blows of fate" (p. 118). To understand the narratives surrounding missing persons, I first recognize the importance of my own personal narrative as a participant and observer of this cultural group and cultural phenomena. Victims and survivors of trauma are silenced by traditional norms of representation in scholarship. Adams (2012) encourages researchers to (re)claim voice and break cultural silencing by engaging in autoethnography that "allows a person to write through pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty; illuminates cultural phenomena in complex ways; and makes the research more accessible" (p. 191). An epistemological and methodological shift from the postpositivist standpoint occurs as researchers intensify their cultural understanding through the sensual experience. Doing autoethnography requires an active participatory speaking, listening, and acting together with a culture.

Through my autoethnographic approach, I seek to construct a space for myself and readers to reflect on shared stories to understand how survivors communicate through the complexities of lived moments of struggle. As I work through this difficult dialogue, these personal narratives will serve to open spaces in the field of communication for more autoethnographic inquiry regarding missing persons.

In Chapter 4, I present my personal narratives and stories, which I have collected throughout the life, disappearance, and death of my sister. I understand I can never truly tell my sister's story, but only my own personal narrative. As the filter and constructor of these stories, I can only share fragments of my personal truths. These truths continue to be (re)constructed through the (re)telling of these stories by both myself and the reader. Bamberg (2008) explains, "narratives could begin to morph slowly from their treatment as texts that re-present the meanings as encoded, preserved, and transmitted in these texts to processes within which these meanings were locally, situationally, and contextually 'under construction'" (pp. 183-184). Regardless how individual interpreters apply this text to their personal lives; it serves to open up dialogue for survivors of trauma. Richardson (1990) says "narrative is the best way to understand the human experience, because it is the way humans understand their own lives" (p. 65). Through my autoethnography, I share lived experiences that echo elements of any reader's understanding of pain, loss, and hope.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I conclude my thesis by reflexing back on my initial goals. I discuss the achievements and limitations of my inquiry as well as suggestions for future scholarly approaches and dialogue about missing persons and cold case murder survivors. I emphasize how my autoethnographic approach allows for a multivocality of meaning making both through my shared narratives and the narratives not yet heard because they are suspended by hope. I reinforce the importance of future projects concerning the ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999) of missing persons and cold case murder victims/survivors.

Summary

Through autoethnographic inquiry, I (de)construct narratives of hope shaped by social discourses surrounding missing persons and cold case murder victims/survivors. I theorize narratives of trauma and loss through social constructionism and relationalism (e.g, Gergen, 1973; Gergen & Gergen 2000; Gergen & Walter, 1998) to understand the transformation of meanings that emerge from complicated grief and ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999). I address how hope creates a liminal space in which grief is stifled and denied. By sharing my own personal stories of traumatic loss and uncertainty, my thesis serves as a contribution to the dialogue which must be continued by communication scholars and social scientists seeking to further understand and support those suffering in the tumultuous space between hope and grief for the missing.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

> I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973. In newspaper photos of missing girls from the seventies, most looked like me: white girls with mousy brown hair. This was before kids of all races and genders started appearing on milk cartons or in the daily mail. It was still back when people believed things like that didn't happen.
>
> Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*

In Sebold's (2002) *The Lovely Bones*, readers are quickly introduced to Susie Salmon describing the day she was murdered by her neighbor. From her heaven, she continues to narrate the story of her family's search for truth and meaning after their traumatic loss. Books, television programs, newspapers, and magazines create an awareness of how narratives surrounding missing persons have constructed our societal discourse. Losing a loved one under any circumstance is a life-altering experience. Families with missing or mysteriously murdered loved ones experience a prolonged hope for physically finding the missing person. They yearn to discover truth and to receive justice. Many of these personal stories of struggle will never be publicly shared or explored by scholars and researchers.

To further understand the complex communication occurs as individuals and communities try to make sense of it all, I first highlight historical cases and moments in the United States that have shaped the development of missing persons discourses. Next, I focus on the theoretical frameworks of social constructionism and relationalism to demonstrate how the interpretive paradigm sustains a co-construction of realities which occurs in the co-active process of dialogue. I then describe how individual and family communication is complicated and stifled by *ambiguous loss* (Boss, 1999). Finally, I address the complex grieving experienced by homicide and cold case survivors working through traumatic loss. By gaining a stronger understanding of the societal discourses which have co-constructed my personal narratives and how communication functions for individuals and families suffering loss, I gain a greater insight into how I have come to interpret and recognize my own struggles of communication through my own hardships of having a missing and murdered sibling.

Developing a National Narrative

Every year, thousands of people are reported missing throughout the nation. According to the 2013 National Crime Information Center on the FBI's website:

> As of December 31, 2013, NCIC contained 84,136 active missing person records. Juveniles under the age of 18 account for 33,849 (40.2 %) of the records and 9,706 (11.5 %) were for juveniles between the ages of 18 and 20. During 2013, 627,911 missing person records were entered into NCIC, a decrease of 5.1% from the 661,593 records entered in 2012. Missing Person records cleared or canceled during the same period totaled 630,990. Reasons for these removals include: a law enforcement agency located the subject, the individual returned home, or the record had to be removed by the entering agency due to a determination that the record is invalid.

Endangered Missing Juvenile is the largest category of missing persons. Individuals within this category are under the age of twenty-one and do not meet the following criteria: (a) have a proven physical or mental disability, (b) are missing under circumstances indicating they may be in physical danger, (c) are missing after a catastrophe, and/or (d) are missing under circumstances indicating their disappearance may not have been voluntary. The last category is for those who are 21 and older and do not meet any of these criteria, but whom there is a reasonable concern for their safety.

Quinet (2007) argues how these numbers displace "the missing missing"—missing persons who were never reported as missing and some of whom may be serial murder victims. According to Quinet (2007),

> Virtually all estimates neglect the types of killers and victims that are always partially discounted: the serial killer who murders victims who have never been reported missing; the serial killer who disposes of bodies in such a way that when discovered the cause of death and victim identity are unknown; and killers who choose marginal victim populations such as illegal aliens, prostitutes, and the homeless. (p. 320)

Relating this to the disappearance and undiscovered remains of my sister, she also exists in this space of "the missing missing." When she first disappeared, police officers neglected to report her as a missing person. She remained unlisted as missing for over a decade. It is only through the confession of the serial killer who targeted her that we are aware of her cause of disappearance and death. His disposal of her body complicates the possible discovery of her remains. Although these unfortunate individuals' untold stories vanish from statistics, some of the stories of the "missing" have been told and retold akin to cautionary children's tales.

Foreboding folk tales and frightening stories of fact still echo in households, communities, and the media. These tales of terror and tragedy have shaped the discourse and actions of a nation. During the Prohibition Era, prominent families became prey to professional kidnapping rings seeking to profit from potential ransom money (Cushman, 2011). Sensational headlines and stories in newspapers stirred emotion and fear in the public. A nation's innocence was snatched when Charles Lindbergh, Jr. was kidnapped in 1932. This famous abduction led to the Federal Kidnapping Act or the Lindbergh Law (Bomar, 1934). Prior to the law, professional criminals would often drive their kidnapping victims beyond the state's borderline and outside the jurisdiction of state law. The Lindbergh Law positioned kidnapping as a federal offense, allowing authorities to pursue kidnappers across state lines (Cushman, 2011). The creation of this law demonstrates the impact of public concern toward public actions.

Decades later, the startling story of Etan Patz marked a landmark moment in American culture. Most recognized for being one of the first missing children pictured on the side of a milk carton in the 1980s, Etan Patz's alarming abduction in 1979 fueled a national missing children's movement (Williams, 2001). Countering the consternation of the nation, Hawthorn Mellody Inc. launched their milk and orange juice carton campaign in 1984. Hawthorn Mellody Inc.'s missing children carton campaign helped the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children by distributing nearly 2.5 million cartons a month (Quade, 1985). The cartons first circulated in the Midwest. By 1985, more than 600 dairy companies across the country adopted the campaign (Hughes, 1985). The carton campaign created a shift in discourse because now the faces of missing children could be seen on millions of cartons distributed nationally each month. This created a new national dialogue and awareness, which provided an amplified voice to the families of missing children.

Etan's disappearance spawned a new discourse regarding the safety of children in the United States. The use of "stranger danger" and a "secret word" was building in the dialogue between American parents and children. In 1983, President Reagan declared May 25th would be National Missing Children's Day in honor of Etan Patz (May 25th marking the day of his disappearance). The missing children media frenzy and the advocacy of nonprofit organizations sparked a demand on the federal government to create a missing-children database and new legislation (Dribben, 2012). In response, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children was created by Congress in 1984. In the late 1980s, however, the milk carton campaign was discontinued because it was thought to have placed unnecessary fear in children and parents (Howell, 2010). In the long run, consumers simply became desensitized to the images and no longer paid attention to the faces inside their refrigerator doors. As the milk spoiled, like the missing children "hype" of the 1980s, cartons were simply thrown in the trash. In a 2001 interview on National Public Radio, regarding Etan Patz and missing children, a female caller mentions how she still feels flooded with images of missing children (Williams, 2001). Direct-mail pieces, the new medium for missing children, are seen to her as simply "junk mail."

Although time has passed, Etan's story still remains in media headlines. In 2001, Etan's story reemerged in the news as his parents finally decided to declare their missing child as deceased in order to pursue a wrongful-death lawsuit against the lead suspect (Murphy, 2001). As of March 2016, the retrial of the current murder suspect in Etan's case is still making headlines (Riley, 2016). Hope for justice still stirs emotion in a nation seeking closure 37 years after Etan's disappearance.

The abduction of Adam Walsh in 1981 from a Florida department store also fueled the national children's movement in the 1980s (Howell, 2010). The attention created by Adam's and Etan's stories spurred the formation of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). In 1988, Adam's father, John Walsh, would become the host of *America's Most Wanted.* Gaining large popularity in the 1990s, Walsh's television program became an advocate for victims of violent crimes (Martindale, 2003). The program empowered viewers to help put a stop to these crimes, repeating the line "and remember you can make a difference." In 2006, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act was signed into law, which increased penalties for violent and sexual offenses against children and created a national database of convicted child molesters (Almanzar, 2008).

Although these children never found their way back home, recent stories of the safe reunions of abducted victims with their families gives media viewers, communities, and families a hopeful belief of happy endings. For example, Elizabeth Smart was kidnapped on June 2002 and found nine months later (Reid, 2003). At age eleven, Jaycee Lee Dugard was abducted in 1991. She was finally released eighteen years later. During those eighteen years, she was sexually abused by her abductor and gave birth to two of his children (Hutt, 2009). Regardless of abducted victims returning back home, they along with their family members, will forever be victims impacted by an awful, terrifying experience. Greif and Bowers (2007) suggest how today,

> With Amber Alerts (whereby the public is notified immediately through TV, radio, and roadside messages to assist in a search for a missing child), periodic public service mailings, and media attention now attached to missing children, the potential danger to an abducted child is well understood. (p. 206)

What most communities will not understand is how this traumatic, unresolved loss affects the remaining family members.

How do we as scholars begin to understand the complexity of the communication that occurs as these individuals re(form) their identities as victim/survivor? How does societal discourse, dialogue, and personal narrative (co)construct meaning for victims and survivors of prolonged grief and loss?

(Co)constructing Meaning

Shifting from the empirical approach to interpretive and postmodern paradigms, Gergen (2009a) states when events of violence toward loved ones are "converted to crime statistics the suffering individual is removed from the scene, and we are distanced from those we care about" (p. 60). The individual pain of research participants are masked by statistics and quantified data (Lather & Smithies, 1997). To understand how personal narratives form from the discourses surrounding missing persons and cold case murder victims, I convey how this occurs through social constructionism and relationalism.

Social constructionism.

> Constructions are conditioned upon and impacted by ontological, epistemological, axiological, teleological, and methodological presumptions and the social, cultural, historical, political, economic, ethnic, and gender values (touchstones invoked at choice points) held by the individuals who devise them.
>
> (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 50)

Social constructionism shifts from the constructivist perception that an individual's mind is a mirror of reality and instead sustains an individual's role in constructing reality through an interactive, relational process. A social constructionist perspective "locates meaning in an understanding of how ideas and attitudes are developed over time within a social, community context" (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996, p. 80). Constructivism and social constructionism are closely related in that they are rooted in a semiotic paradigm. Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916/2000) approach to linguistics frames language between the signifier and the signified. This approach to communication brings attention to the demands of language games (Wittgenstein, 1953) on social interaction and meaning making. Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) also creates awareness of how we collectively construct reality through social interaction. "Your own motives also are matters of query and inquiry to yourself except in those regulated circumstances where actions are duly prescribed as if by a social scripts" (Strauss, 1959, p. 50). Based on these constructions of knowledge, social scientists (e.g., Mannheim, 1951; Fleck, 1935; Winch, 1946) began to challenge "scientific knowledge" as a manifestation of a social process from a privileged social group.

In particular, Kuhn (1962) demonstrated how scientific revolutions are not progressive but social processes built primarily on historical traditions. The justification of "scientific knowledge" as the ultimate truth would be questioned by social scientists seeking reflexive agency during the critical movement. This paved the path for an array of scholars to make substantial contributions to the social construction turn. *The Social Construction of Reality*, by Berger and Luckmann (1966), created awareness for how we are socialized into plausibility structures to develop a natural attitude of a taken-for-granted reality. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), "Language marks the co-ordinates of my life in society and fills that life with meaningful objects" (p. 21). Arguing against the limiting language system of positivist researchers, Gergen (1982) explains how select descriptions privilege researchers with social positions of power. Although social constructionism is rooted in the semiotic tradition, it extends to interpretive and postmodern paradigms.

A primary goal of interpretive work is to show how everyday interactions, rituals, and communication produce and maintain perceptions of reality (Deetz, 2001 p. 23). Seeking to understand how realities surrounding missing persons and homicide survivors are constructed through discourse, I focus on the social constructionism and relationalism approaches of Gergen (1985a; 2009b). Social construction "represents a movement toward redefining psychological constructs such as the 'mind,' 'self,' and 'emotion' as social constructed processes that are not intrinsic to the individual but produced by social discourse" (Gergen, 2009b, p. 84). His sociorationalism shifts past the observation of human social communication to an active practice and participation of scholars co-creating reality.

Social constructionism is understood as a perspective that shapes human existence through social and interpersonal interaction (Gergen, 1985a). As a social psychologist, Gergen (1973) sees theories of social behavior as a reflection of contemporary history. He feels the traditional aim of psychology for prediction and control of behavior provides little justification for research, especially since predictability of behavior outcomes becomes limited over an extended time (Gergen, 1973). He explains how social constructionist inquiries manifest one or more of the following assumptions on a metatheoretical level:

> 1) what we take to be experience of the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which the world is understood … 2) the terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people … 3) the degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not fundamentally dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes … [and/or] 4) forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are integrally connected with many other activities in which people engage. (Gergen, 1985b, pp. 266-269)

When inquiring into the functions and structure of societal discourse, Gergen (1987) expresses a lack of concern for ontological warrants. The greater interest is in how discourse functions to enable and inhibit human relations (Gergen, 1987). Self-identity and self-conception are anchored to an ongoing social interchange and intersubjectivity.

Exploring the impacts of social constructionism and relationalism in my own reflexive accounts of co-created concepts surrounding trauma and loss, I must understand my own identity and memory is constantly in flux and shaping to narratives/discourses. Without external examples of coping with the loss of a missing person, ambiguity and fantasized expectations of hope are the prevailing feelings experienced by the family members of missing persons.

Interpretive or communal traditions embed knowledge within the relational self (Gergen, 2009b). The role of social constructionist scholarship is to sensitize us “to our participation in constituting our world, thus emphasizing our potential for communally-organized change in understanding and thus action” (Gergen & Joseph, 1996, p. 364). Reality is a communal construction proceeded by a linguistic forestructure of shared discourse and intelligibility (Gergen, 2001). The discourse surrounding missing persons filters through mediated images of the missing to form communal constructions of hope.

Relationalism. Gergen (1999) expresses “the significance of relationships in generating discursive meaning, and the influence of historical and cultural traditions on forms and potential relationships are primarily invitations into a dialogic space” (p. 114). Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) work in relational dialectics have been influenced by a praxeology of social constructionism. Communication is a representation of relationships in progress attuned to symbolic interactions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). What is known as real is experienced through the (re)construction of human interactions and dialogue. Relationalism replaces the autonomous self with jointly formed understandings of experience (Gergen, 1989).

A fusion of perspectives between self and others propels dialogue (Baxter, 2004a). This centripetal-centrifugal struggle of competing discourses is where meaning making occurs (Baxter, 2011). A Bakhtinian approach to dialogue creates a relational construction of our social world (Baxter, 2007). Rather than a reproduction of a presumed social world, a dialogic alternative utilizes a constructionist approach to understand how narratives and discourses create social reality. The interplay of discourses provides a generative mechanism for a discursive space for the meaning-making process.

Five interrelated conceptions of dialogue ground relational dialectics theory: (a) dialogue as constitutive process, (b) dialogue as dialectical flux, (c) dialogue as aesthetic moment, (d) dialogue as utterance, and (e) dialogue as critical sensibility (Baxter, 2004b). The *self* of dialogism can only be formed through a dynamic relationship with others. Baxter sees relationships as dialogue, interwoven with dialectical tensions and aesthetic moments (Bakhtin, 1990). Through dialogue, the self and other "can occasionally create a fleeting moment of wholeness in which fragments and disorder are temporarily united" (Baxter, 2004b, p. 12). Past and future utterances are always (re)shaped because language is always in use in the social experience.

According to Baxter and DeGooyer (2001), "In an aesthetic experience, one shares with another the unique perspective that one has as an individual, thereby making the other person more complete than they otherwise would have been" (p. 4). This relational resource allows individuals to form value and belief systems toward their (re)actions to a presumed social reality. The talk of belief derives from extended narratives to justify and validate actions (Gergen, 1993). This linguistic coordination projects presumptions of what is assumed to be right and wrong, good and evil (Gergen, 2007).

The relational being is a multi-being with enormous potential for collaborative co-actions in a relational process. All potential actions are the results of past relationships with both real and fictive individuals and communities (Gergen, 2011a). If the self is a relational, multi-being, then the autonomous individual is placed into question. Relational processes rather than the autonomous self are what form the narrative of the individual (Gergen, 2011b, p. 207). Gergen (2011b) presents a series of propositions that shifts the location of meaning from within the individual to between persons as follows:

> 1) an individual's utterances in themselves possess no meaning … 2) the potential for meaning is realized through supplementary action … 3) supplementary action is itself a candidate for meaning … 5) acts create the possibility for meaning but simultaneously constrain its potential … 6) supplements function both to create and constrain meaning … 7) while act/supplements are constraining, they do not determine … 8) traditions of coordination furnish the major potentials for meaning, but do not circumscribe. (pp. 208-210)

Our utterances and actions are shaped by past and future interactions with others. The fluidity of meaning is bond to on-going interpretations that maintain and constrain action. Meaning and actions are constantly reshaped as we negotiate our sense of self with others.

Memory is also a discourse which needs to be pursued more heavily in future psychological and communication inquiries (Gergen & Gergen, 1999). The relational process applies to our utterances and narratives of our own personal past, present, and future selves.

Interpersonal and internal dialogue is constantly occurring as relational beings. I agree that personal memory and narrative must be included in inquiries regarding the impact of societal discourses on missing person narratives.

Gergen's social constructionism and relationalism reinforces how televised tales of terror trickle into the discourse and narratives of a society trying to transform meaning from mayhem. This communal reality reinforces rituals of self-identification and sets standards on attitudes toward loss. By embracing the lack of ultimate truths, victim/survivors of ambiguous and traumatic loss can construct personal meaning.

Ambiguous Loss

As I began my inquiry regarding missing person narratives, I found limited research from within the communication field on this specific topic. For a moment, I thought I was discovering and communicating something often felt, but not yet named. As I dug deeper and searched further into other social science fields, I discovered Boss's (1999; 2006) ambiguous loss theory. Boss's ambiguous loss theory encapsulated much, if not all, of what I attempted to theorize about my experience of loss throughout my graduate work.

Boss (1999; 2006) utilizes social construction as a theory base for her ambiguous loss theory, especially as resilience to trauma when reconstructing identity to normalize ambivalence. Much like Gergen and other social constructionists, Boss recognizes the need to shift from scientific truths. Reflecting back onto ambiguous loss, she reminds scholars that it is the lack of facts and ultimate truths that make this form of loss so traumatizing and difficult to begin with. Social construction validates personal reconstructions of identity and meaning as a tool to build resilience toward ambiguity (Boss, 2006). A social constructionist perspective allows room for therapists and for researchers to recognize the multiple truths and interpretations of ambiguous loss.

According to Boss (1999, 2006), there are two types of ambiguous loss. The first type is when a loved one is physically missing. This can include missing persons and bodies due to natural disasters, war, and genocide. Without the proof of death, those missing may be *physically absent* but psychologically present. Roles and relationships of family members become confusing due to these unclear relational boundaries and frozen systemic processes. In the second type of ambiguous loss, a person is *psychologically absent*. This may be due to Alzheimer's disease, dementia, or other chronic mental and physical illnesses. Boss (1999) describes the first type of ambiguous loss as "leaving without goodbye," and the second type as "goodbye without leaving" (pp. 8-9). My family experienced the emotions that follow when you are never able to say goodbye to the person who has left you.

When Boss first studied boundary ambiguity among families of United States soldiers missing in action during the Vietnam War (Boss, 1975; 1977), her initial goals were to eliminate ambiguity for these families. She quickly realized that this was impossible. The indeterminate loss of their loved ones increased their uncertainty and confusion. The warmth of hope that their loved ones may someday return home will freeze the process of grief.

Frozen grief. All families will experience loss, in many forms, at some point in time. In American culture, the grieving process experienced after such a loss is constricted by language that implies societal expectations and actions (Betz & Thorngren, 2006). The grieving process following certain loss begins with a notification of death and is followed by societal rituals and ceremonies surrounding loss (Shalev & Ben-Asher, 2011). Ambiguous loss occurs when these societal expectations are not met. The grieving process becomes frozen in the ambiguity of absence and presence.

Boss and Carnes (2012) argue the thought that closure is an achievable goal reached at the end the grieving process is a continued myth by health professionals, reminding us:

> Neither death nor disappearance is devoid of ambiguity; thus closure is a false goal for both. Whether it be popular stages of grief or the process as dictated in professional diagnostic manuals, time lines for closure are unrealistic and culturally biased for death as well as ambiguous loss. (p. 465)

Ours is a society that desires control over our closure within a limited chronological timeline. Typical stages of grief and death rituals do not apply to families endlessly tormented by an uncertain loss (Betz & Thorngren, 2006). Without justification for mourning certain death, families "may try to suppress their grief and move on as they are socially expected without giving themselves permission to mourn their loss" (Betz & Thorngren, 2006, p. 360). Grief itself constructs concepts of identity, social and family roles, and meanings (Shapiro, 1994). People numb with the ambiguous meaning of loss are frozen in grief (Boss, 1999; 2006).

Shalev and Ben-Asher (2011) interviewed adults who were children of parents who were prisoners of war (POW) to understand the long term effects of having a present-absent parent. Comparing the Bowlby's (1980) model of the stages of grief to the experience of the families of POWs and soldiers missing in action (MIA), Shalev and Ben-Asher (2011) suggest the third stage of coping with grief is a far longer and more intense process filled with doubt. The children of POWs and MIAs have a heightened sense of anxiety because the boundaries of life and loss become blurred. They are haunted by the memories of their father's and yearn for their physical presence.

De Alwis (2009) states, "forced 'disappearance' is one of the most insidious forms of violence as it seeks to obliterate the body and indefinitely extends and exacerbates the grief of those left behind" (p. 378). Using Butler's (2004) conceptions of the power of mourning, De Alwis (2009) explores a political identification with suffering by women in Sri Lanka whose children disappeared during the political uprising from 1988 to 1993. She draws attention to the term "disappearance" as a site of political contestation by placing it within quotations. De Alwis (2009) highlights the "inadequacy of the term given the violent circumstances within which it has taken place, and to refuse the project of censoring memory entailed in the insidious practice of making unavailable the violated body as evidence" (p. 379). This resilience to ambiguous loss reinforces the power of meaning making to shape our social world and belief systems.

Finding meaning. Closure is unachievable because of this frozen grief (Boss, 2007). In the absence of a physical body, families must create their own meaning of truth regarding the missing person (Boss, 2006). Families must learn to live with ambiguity and make meaning from a paradoxical tension of absence and presence. Dialectical thinking of both/and thoughts will help to strengthen an individual family member's resiliency to ambiguous loss (Boss, 2007; Boss & Carnes, 2012). A phenomenology of meaning is formed collectively through social interaction (Boss, 2006). As families of missing persons search for meaning, the context of personal interactions with others will influence their understanding of the phenomena. Meaning is ruptured in all forms of loss. The struggle of making meaning from a story without a clear conclusion complicates communication with social support systems such as colleagues, friends, and therapists.

A collective family perception of meaning is particularly effective in interventions (Boss, 2006). Patterson and Garwick (1994) define family meaning as:

> The interpretations, images, and views that have been collectively constructed by family members as they interact with each other; as they share time, space, and life experiences; and as they talk with each other and dialogue about these experiences. They are the family's social construction, the product of their interactions; they belong to no one member, but to the family as a unit. (p. 288)

This search for meaning can often be blocked by barriers of family members suffering with ambiguous loss. These consist of hate and revenge, family secrets, loss due to a violent and sudden death, and disillusionment. All of these barriers block resiliency. When anger and emotions are bottled up, it will result in maladaptive approaches to coping (Greif & Bowers, 2007). Maladaptive coping approaches may lead to substance abuse and sexual promiscuity in an effort to numb unexpressed pain. Boss (2006) suggests therapy methods and guidelines for finding meaning through healthier methods.

Boss (2006) first suggests narrative therapy and dialectical thinking as tools toward finding meaning. These approaches allow for a social deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning:

> Telling and listening to stories in interaction with others who suffer the same ambiguous loss sets the stage for one's identity to be relationally expressed through the symbolic interaction of language, rituals, and cultural, gendered, and generational patterns of coping and adaptation. (Boss, 2006, p. 129)

Using a dialectical approach that permits a "both/and" of opposing concepts at the same time, permits these stories to allow a resilience that begins the meaning-making process. The goal of this type of therapeutic intervention is to jointly reframe meaning through shared stories and symbolic interaction. "As people struggle with the trauma of ambiguous loss, they and their loved ones must sort out what to continue hoping for and what hopes to relinquish" (Boss, 2006, p. 177). Hope is framed by the expectations for good outcomes, but how long can individuals hope for the return of the missing? Long held hope eventually weakens one's resiliency and health.

When hope hinders. Hope hinders when there is an expectation of finding definitive answers and complete closure. Anxiety increases as prolonged disillusioned desires continue. Boss (1999) compares the clinging to hope to the story of Sisyphus (Camus, 1955). In the ancient tale, Sisyphus is cursed with the eternal labor of pushing a boulder to the peak of a mountain. As the boulder reaches the peak, it rolls back down. Sisyphus endlessly repeats the pattern. He never achieves his goal of rolling the large rock over the mountain and to the other side. Hope is the boulder we try to push atop a mountain of doubt. Hope that hinders will never reach a returned status quo or closure. Hope maintains a problematic paradox of changing the unchangeable (Boss, 1999).

When my sister first disappeared, my family hoped she was alive and safe. As the months and years of ambiguous loss continued, this message of hope was reinforced through social and symbolic interactions. This endless pattern of hope can eventually lead to prolonged anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Boss, 2006). The events surrounding physically absent ambiguous loss is an on-going trauma, emotionally paralyzing people suffering from relational loss. However, we can never really lose hope. It simply shifts form. Hope, like meaning, is socially constructed. A more mature hope develops as it shifts to a future with more realistic possibilities.

For over a decade, I struggled trying to communicate through my frozen grief and the ambiguity of my loss. My language of loss did not meet societal expectations. Grief was prolonged by the hope of my sister's return. This desire and need to hope was echoed by friends and acquaintances I dared to share my complicated loss with. The only thing that seemed certain was uncertainty. Hope shifted the day I was contacted by the detective about my sister's ongoing murder investigation; however, uncertainty remains. Now as a cold case murder victim/survivor, grief still remains complicated and void of the rituals of loss. Similar to my experienced ambiguous loss, the traumatic loss of my sister still leaves her physically absent. The language of loss is still limited as families and friends of victims cope with the complicated grief of traumatic loss.

Traumatic Loss

The suffering and struggle of being a homicide survivor begins with a death notice. While the detective's initial notification of my sister's death comprised of a detailed description of her murder, she was presumed dead based on confession rather than hard evidence. Following that conversation, it was my task to notify my family of the possible murder of someone so long lost. Although I yearned for truth for so many years, it did not mitigate the shock of hearing "murder" escape the detective's mouth. The news of my sister's homicide shook my personal understandings of loss and grief (Miller, 2008). The truth did not remove feelings of confusion from the mumbled, mournful conversations to quickly follow. Once that death notification was made, the label of missing person survivor suddenly shifted to cold case homicide survivor.

Homicide survivors/co-victims. In the aftermath of homicide, family members can become secondary victims. For Miller (2008), these secondary victims describe their pain as "intense, persistent, and inescapable," continuing, "the cruel and purposeful nature of murder compounds the rage, grief, and despair of the survivors" (p. 368). Victimology research suggests how poor communication and interactions with the criminal justice system can intensify victimization for homicide co-victims (Bucholz, 2002). When my sister first disappeared, my father attempted to report her as a missing person. The police officer at the station seemed unconcerned with her disappearance. Without the cooperation of the police to file a missing person report on my sister, my family felt helpless and unsupported by the criminal justice system. With the notification my sister was now considered a homicide victim, I could not help but continue to feel frustrated by the mistreatment of my sister's case so many years ago.

Stretesky, O'Connor, Hogan, and Unnithan (2010) interviewed cold case co-victims to discover how the lack of information and a loss of faith in the criminal justice system inhibited the sense-making process—largely impacting the post-loss identity reconstruction process. As police and lawyers assume control of a murder victim's case, families feel powerless from and alienated by the justice process. This alienation "constitutes one of the most potent symbolic assaults suffered by families in the wake of murder" (Rock, 1998, p. 76). The impact of homicide on surviving family members indicates a sense of security in the world is shaken by the violence of the death (e.g., Amick-McMullan et al., 1989; Janoff-Bulman, 2002; Miller 2009; Neimeyer, 2000). Similar to those suffering ambiguous loss, secondary victims will also frequently have symptoms of depression and PTSD.

Approximately a quarter of homicide co-victims will develop PTSD (Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick, & Resnick, 1991). Regardless of survivor diagnoses, these labels underestimate "the complexity of what appears to be a fairly consistent, very debilitating pattern of post-homicide reactions" (Amick-McMullen et al., 1989, p. 24). The duration and intensity of grief experienced by homicide co-victims/survivors can be extreme and manifest in various ways. Survivors are often tormented by the victim's moment of death, embodying their fear and pain (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2013). Emotions of guilt and regret about past conversations and experiences with victims haunt surviving family members. The violent death of a sibling causes an intense feeling of identity confusion, as the new ambivalence of familial roles increases and leads to guilt (White, 2006). Guilt appears to be more related to unresolved relational issues that could have prevented the tragic death when a sibling is lost to murder (Pretorious, Halstead-Cleak, & Morgan, 2010). Guilt and self-blame intensify around the "what ifs" of a past that can never be corrected.

Coping with unsolved-homicide-loss is complicated for both co-victims/survivors and surrounding community of friends, as Asaro (2001) states,

> Survivors reported they often experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation, reacted with anger when others had forgotten their loved one was murdered or were not able or willing to permit them to talk about their feelings or their loved one's case, and felt disenfranchised from their right to grieve. (p. 116)

The expression of grief surrounding unsolved traumatic death is complicated for co-survivors and support systems (Rando, 1993).

Meaning-making in the aftermath of homicide moves beyond the self and collides with a (dis)confirming society (Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002). The acceptance of (re)constructed meaning is stigmatized by society's standards of death and grief, which deprives or complicates co-victims/survivors of cold case murders ability to grieve. "Relearning the self" and "relearning the world" (Attig, 1996; 2001) become essential in identity reconstruction, which must occur in the meaning making process for these traumatized groups.

Armour (2003) suggests meaning making be grounded in a pursuit of "what matters" or intentional acts of symbolic meaning—continuing:

> For homicide survivors, meaning making grounded in action has attributes that are shaped by the trauma: (a) The meta meaning of behavior is to re-establish a moral order by deliberately reacting to what matters as a consequence of the murder. (b) The meaning making initiative is generated by intrusive stimuli such as insensitive responses from friends or violations of privacy by the media, which compel reactions that are either self-protective or encompassing of a survivor mission. (c) Meaning making is composed of many small acts that can occur within hours of the death notification and continue throughout the post-homicide experience. (d) The attainment of meaning is a byproduct of a focused striving to attend to that which is deemed significant. (p. 525)

Unlike natural deaths, the distress of a traumatic loss through an unsolved homicide leads to complicated grief and prolonged bereavement. Meaning is stifled by lack of closure and societal rituals which indicate loss and death in both ambiguous loss and traumatic loss. Meaning-making and identity reconstruction will often come to a halt because of prolonged and complicated grief.

Prolonged and complicated grief. After the traumatic death of a loved one, co-victims/survivors face personal and "social ghosts" (Gergen, 1987). These ghosts can help and hinder those coping with grief and loss. Social ghosts frame societal expectations and attitudes which provide models for action. Expectations of grief become socially constructed rituals and practices that are the results of cultural processes (Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, &

Stroebe, 1992). However, accepted standards of death and grief are violated with cold case homicide victim survivors.

For individuals coping with the violent death of a loved one, “negative or stigmatizing social attitudes received from others about how the death occurred are more common than expressions of concern and support” (Armour, 2006, p. 55). The loss of a loved one becomes storied into the killing event (Rynearson, 1995). Violent deaths can fall under different categories: homicide, suicide, or motor vehicle fatalities. Out of these categories, homicide leads to the highest level of distress (Murphy et al., 1999). Approximately 10% of U.S. adults have had a friend or family member murdered (Amick-McMullan et al., 1991). Due to the lack of closure, stress increases for the family and friends who survive an unsolved homicide.

The traumatic grief endured by surviving parents can lead to symptoms of PTSD, which can last for years (Murphy et al., 2003). Unhealthy patterns of grief, including an extreme sense of yearning and loss, increase over time for individuals suffering with prolonged grief disorder (PGD) (Jordan & Litz, 2014). PGD impairs social interactions and personal health. It is associated with substance abuse and suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Bonanno et al., 2007; Latham & Prigerson, 2004). When reflecting on memories and relationship with the deceased, PTSD can manifest as nightmares, flashbacks, and fixation on the murder. PGD centers more on the past relationship with the deceased. Memories and thoughts of the victim are both intrusive and voluntary, as stimuli trigger the reality of death (Jordan & Litz, 2014). While each possesses distinct characteristics, both disorders can overlap to leave co-victims/survivors emotionally numb.

Everyone, at some point in life, will grieve the loss of a loved one. Regardless if the grief following death is labeled as “normal” or as complicated, bereavement is a personal process guided by social and relational experiences (Charon, 2009). According to Horowitz et al. (1997), those suffering from complicated grief disorder may have symptoms including intrusive memories and fantasies regarding the lost relationship; sudden, severe emotional pain related to the lost relationship; strong desires and yearnings that the deceased were still there; an extreme sense of being alone or personally empty; excessive avoidance of social activities that remind the individual of the lost relationship; high levels of sleep interference; and a dysfunctional degree of loss of interest in work, social, and recreational activities. These impairing grief symptoms lead to overall detachment and difficulty in recovering from loss.

Post-loss functional impairment is often expected for those suffering complicated grief, as a result of their traumatic loss (Neria & Litz, 2003). An inventory of complicated grief (ICG) scale (Prigerson et al., 1995) was presented to measure maladaptive symptoms of loss. Scale items which correlated highest with the ICG total score include “being stunned or dazed by the loss, feeling bitter over the death, and being preoccupied with thoughts of the deceased to the point of distraction” (Prigerson et al., 1995, p. 76). The fixation, reoccurring dreams and hallucinations of the deceased, all correlate with symptoms of PTSD.

Violent deaths may, inherently, mar memories and stifle meaning making. Memories become spoiled by negative cultural perceptions and images associated with homicide (Riches & Dawson, 1998). If the victim’s lifestyle is similar to the murder’s lifestyle, discourse surrounding the deceased may be spoiled. Their deaths become cautionary tales. However, “public perception of the phenomenon of murder contrasts fundamentally with the private experience of surviving family members" (Riches & Dawson, 1998, p. 145). For many of the surviving family members of murder victims, their mourning is mediated and examined as they become initial suspects in unresolved homicide cases. If they are not suspects, they may experience a debilitating personal fear while the murderer remains at large or is not yet sentenced (Pynoos & Eth, 1984). The mourning of family members becomes disenfranchised throughout the murder investigation.

Victims of murder become depersonalized cases and literal bodies of evidence. Barriers to mourning emerge through legal and societal responses to murder. When a loved one's body becomes property of the state, families may be denied access to the body. This postpones important mourning rituals. In situations when the murder victim's body is not found, families may also be denied an official death certificate to serve as a symbolic artifact to initiate rituals of mourning. While the public hungers for information and police investigate the murder, a need for retribution and/or fantasies of revenge may consume family members' internal dialogues (Parkes, 1993; Rynearson, 1995).

After my father read the serial killer's detailed confession on how he murdered and disposed of my sister's body, he shared his fantasies of revenge he had plotted for her killer with me. The thought of this man being released from prison in just a few years disgusted him. His fantasies provided an imaginary form of action. Without the evidence of my sister's body, my family feels helpless and denied a possibility of finding justice. These fantasies were a way for my father to cope with his anger. Coping with the disappearance or unsolved murder of a family member also becomes complicated because the ambiguity of loss leaves unresolved emotions.

Coping with Ambiguous and Traumatic Loss

There are several models of grief cycles. However, these models do not fully capture the coping strategies of those struggling through ambiguous and traumatic loss. According to Kenney (2003), these gender-neutral models ineffectively serve survivors experiencing complicated grief. Janoff-Bulman and Frieze (1987) suggest women are more likely to withdraw from social activities, men are more likely to struggle with disclosing their emotions and reporting victimization, and men are far more likely to express aggressive behaviors. Traditional gender roles and self-identification with gender are reflected in the grief patterns of survivors. For example, fathers may be dominated by emotions of guilt for not protecting their child from harm. Reinforcing societal frames placed on traditional roles of coping can also complicate and prolong the grief experience and cycle.

The National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children, Inc. (1998) identified the following five “thoughts on coping”:

> 1) It is not uncommon to experience strong emotions such as shock, disbelief, anger, frustration, denial, and the loss of faith; 2) Expect to feel numb, confused, depressed, and withdrawn; 3) Do not be surprised by experiences of primal fear, suddenly believing the world is inherently unsafe and violent; 4) Understand that grief takes different paths for different survivors; 5) Seek out support.

My parents experienced the unique transition of being parents of a missing daughter to parents of a cold case homicide victim. DeYoung and Buzzi (2003) compared the coping strategies of parents of murdered children with parents of abducted, long-term missing children. Both groups emotionally mirror each other until the parents of murder victims are given clarification on the death of their child. This clarification shifts parents out of the space of ambiguous loss. As parents of a cold case homicide victim, my parents still cope with the ambiguity of their loss. DeYoung and Buzzi (2003) reported how the respondents of their study primarily sought answers to two questions. First, they asked "am I normal?" In all situations of loss, the term "normal" requires redefining. When applying "normalcy" to parents of ambiguous and traumatic loss, the general definitions "provide a distorted insight into the emotional, physiological, and psychological impact actually endured as a result of the event" (DeYoung & Buzzi, 2003, p. 358). The second question they sought answered was, "have I coped?"

Societal boundaries and expectations shape how coping is self-defined by individuals. In all descriptive understandings of coping, regardless of whether it is labeled as effective or ineffective, it is a continuous process. As Boss (1999) states,

> Ambiguous loss is devastating and can have lasting traumatic effects. But with support and resilience some people use the experience to learn how to live in different circumstances through life, balancing the ability to grieve what was lost with the recognition of what is still possible. (p. 135)

Families will never be able to alter the tragedy of their loss. To cope they must endure and accept the ambiguity of their loss, preparing themselves for a long period of emotional ebbs and flows. Co-victims/survivors must refuse a predetermined concept of "normal" loss and accept the experience of grief as unique to all individuals. Healing begins from the chaos of complicated grief when co-victims/survivors redefine meaning and redefine selves.

Summary

In this chapter, I first highlight historical shifts in the national discourse surrounding missing persons. As mediated images of lost and abducted children entered the average

American home through traditional media and everyday objects, a communal outcry demanded federal and state laws be made to protect our innocent. The nation collectively hoped for the safe return of the missing children seen on posters, postcards, and milk cartons. To understand the impact this collective hope and collective loss has on survivors coping with a missing loved one, I turned to social constructionism and relationalism (e.g, Gergen, 1973; Gergen & Gergen 2000; Gergen & Walter, 1998) to explain how new meaning is co-constructed through our interactions with others. Co-constructions of our cultural perspectives shift over time as we engage with individuals, communities, and the media.

As family members aim to reconstruct their identities and gain resilience to ambiguity and trauma, social construction and relationalism (e.g,, Gergen, 1973; Gergen & Gergen 2000; Gergen & Walter, 1998) allow multiple meanings for truth and interpretations of their loss and grief. The ambiguity of loss surrounding missing persons stifles and complicates the grieving process because of the lack of certainty of death. Finding meaning and closure becomes hindered by the narrative of hope. As a missing person survivor, my identity shifted to a cold case homicide survivor—hope shifted to a desire for justice and closure. The prolonged and complicated grief of surviving both the disappearance and murder of my sister induced difficulties in bereavement as I managed my emotions and pain.

In Chapter 3, I discuss how missing person and cold case homicide survivors can begin to cope with pain and form meaning through shared narrative. I argue doing autoethnography creates a space for members of this cultural group to gain an understanding of the ambiguity and complexity experienced in traumatic loss. In the process of doing autoethnography, I seek to experience the therapeutic nature of narrative. I suggest that the reflexivity of autoethnography for both writers and readers creates experiential engagement in understanding interconnection and commonality of selves and others. By telling my sister’s stories, my stories, and our stories autoethnographically, I provide an opportunity for myself and readers to share in the co-construction of meaning-making through trauma.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Therapeutic approaches to ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006) encourage narrative as an intervention tool for individuals and families reconstructing identities and gaining resiliency. A variety of clinical approaches can be used to assist co-victims/survivors of trauma, “ultimately the communal sharing of narratives helps people to find meaning” (Boss, 2006, p. 88). The narrative tradition utilized in family therapy is based in social construction (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1994; Mead & Strauss, 1956; Reiss, 1981). Pioneering the therapeutic use of narrative in family group therapy, White and Epston (1990) and Anderson and Goolishian (1992) understood the need for individuals to reconstruct personal identity through social dialogue.

The narrative approach emphasizes sharing personal meanings through our life stories (Dickerson, 2004). Turning to the narrative paradigm, scholars work to understand how lived experiences of ambiguous loss are shaped by cultural narratives surrounding missing persons and loss. Autoethnographers share personal narratives that reveal both “relational and institutional stories affected by history and social structure” (Ellis, 2004, p. 38). For this inquiry, I engage autoethnographic approaches to share personal stories of traumatic and ambiguous loss. In doing autoethnography, my project transforms into a therapeutic outlet for the researcher and reader to (co)construct meaning from lived experiences.

In this chapter, I distinguish the importance of doing autoethnography as an automethodological approach (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011) to my thesis. I discuss how autoethnography is a reflexive form of ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), which permits a back and forth gaze of social and personal experience by the researcher.

Ethnography is a methodological approach that combines the personal accounts of the researcher with the history and interpretations of human lives (Tedlock, 2000). To understand narratives surrounding “missing persons,” I first recognize the importance of my own personal narrative as a member and observer of this cultural group and phenomena.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe autoethnography as an “autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). My purpose for sharing this evocative, personally sensitive autoethnography is to achieve “an interior liberation” (Levi, 1958/1987), while repositioning readers as co-participants in the holistic process of understanding and coping with their own life experiences of loss and trauma.

Atkinson (1997), a critic of autoethnography, suggests that if the goal of research is therapeutic, rather than analytic, it fails to be academic text. In this chapter, I include additional criticisms of autoethnography. I address these criticisms by arguing that victims and survivors of trauma are silenced by traditional norms of representation in scholarship. Autoethnography offers a voice to a currently marginalized group of individuals. As suggested by Boss (2006), a narrative intervention can allow a space for victims of ambiguous loss to form new meaning and gain resilience.

I continue this chapter by reinforcing the therapeutic nature of narrative and explain how it is used as an approach of healing through trauma. Next, I discuss the core ideals (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015) of designing an autoethnographic project. I acknowledge the commitment to ethical considerations that autoethnographers make throughout the process of shaping shared lived experiences. Finally, I discuss the writing techniques and goals for processing and evaluating the narrative text of this inquiry for both myself and readers.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a reflexive approach which can reveal the intersubjectivity of storied/theorized lived experiences to uncover shared identity, shared meanings of public performance, and contradictions (Carbaugh, 2007). By shifting between an individual to the collective social dimensions of narrative, I piece together fragmented stories of shared social existence from survivors of loss and trauma to shape new meanings from personal and theoretical perspectives. I illustrate how many voices can intertwine in co-constructive narratives (Vande Berg & Trujillo, 2009).

Beyond my family members, I capture utterances and voices that blur to form the co-constructed narratives, which are performed through and onto me. One result of the narrative turn in the social sciences is the move from modern notions of a singular self to postmodern notions of fluid identities, which are continuously becoming co-constructed through interpersonal and larger societal narratives (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). Narrative inquiry allows researchers to evocatively share storied lives gathered from observations and conversations with others while accounting and respecting a reflexive process of doing autoethnography.

A history of autoethnography. Developed as method in the late 1970s, Autoethnography is related to ethnomethodological approaches to cultural phenomenology (Douglas & Carless, 2013). "*Ethno* means people or culture; *graphy* means writing or describing" (Ellis, 2004, p. 26). Hayano (1979) used the term *auto-ethnography* to describe a methodological approach to cultural anthropology that valued personal experiences (auto) of researchers in understanding broader cultural experiences (ethno).

Douglas and Carless (2013) list several descriptive terms which now describe the multiple approaches to autoethnographic qualitative research including *narratives of the self* (Richardson, 1994), *self-stories* (Denzin, 1989), *critical autobiography* (Church, 1995), *confessional tales* (Van Maanen, 1988), and *autobiographical ethnography* (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Framing a praxis-orientated ethnography based on the work of Schrag (1986; 1997; 2003), Pensoneau-Conway and Toyosaki (2011) explain how praxeology helped them approach their research with a new understanding of "the innovative embodiment of the ethnographer self—his or her discourse, action, and the sense of being together with others (communal participation) in research processes" (p. 379). By examining the "us" in the communication process, I will work to reveal the impact of culturally embedded grand narratives on personal stories involving missing persons.

The communal research process of ethnography moves beyond objective observation and invites a multivocality of meaning through shared voices (Conquergood, 1991). By the 1980s and 1990s, the narrative turn in social sciences was challenging post/positivist's assumptions regarding the representation of self in research. Building from the work of autoethnographers (e.g., Ellis, 1991; Ellis, 1995; Richardson, 1992), Bochner (2013) positions autoethnography as:

> An expression of the desire to turn social science inquiry into a non-alienating practice, one in which I (as a researcher) do not need to suppress my own subjectivity, where I can become more attuned to the subjectively felt experiences of others, where I am free to reflect on the consequences of my work, not only for other but for myself,

> and where all parts of myself—emotional, spiritual, intellectual, embodied, and moral—can be voiced and integrated in my work. (p. 53)

The implications of the intersubjectivity of researcher as narrator is the blurred, merging fragmented-self with the *other* in a culture to process/produce knowledge about/by/for the self (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011). A multivocality of meaning is accomplished through the narrative construction of reality (Bruner, 1991).

Turning to narrative. The narrative perspective relates to both perceptions of the real and fictional worlds of a lived and imagined life (Fisher, 1984). Hermeneutic composability allows for an aesthetic appeal for both the creator and interpreter of narrative—Bruner (1991) continues, "The word hermeneutic implies that there is a text analogue through which somebody has been trying to express meaning and from which somebody is trying to extract meaning" (p. 7). Utilizing aesthetic appeal, narrative becomes more than data and instead a relatable tool to engage with communication.

As *homo narrans* (Fisher, 1984), individuals have a natural desire to re/tell personal stories that form fragmented self-created narratives of meaning. The telling and retelling of stories (re)performs meaning and understanding of particular events and actions (Langellier & Peterson, 2006). My autoethnographic approach provides reflexivity on meaning making through co-narratives and counter narratives. The difficulty of encapsulating history from a single perspective is an impetus for doing autoethnography, which can reveal the (re)making of canons of history. For both my sister and me, our lived histories/stories are first framed through family storytelling. Family stories are told and retold through generations and provide a "narrative inheritance" (Goodall, 2006), which transforms into pedagogical life lessons. The formation of an autoethnographic retelling of family stories combines memory and beliefs and expresses how assumed truths perform meaning onto us (Pelias, 2011). The autoethnographic retelling of family stories demands reflexivity and a strong understanding of and respect for multivocality in stories.

Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson (1967) utilize the concepts of the family myth developed by Ferreira (1963) to demonstrate how this functions as a safety valve in family communication. Ferreira (1963) describes the family myth as:

> A series of fairly well-integrated beliefs shared by all family members, concerning each other and their mutual position in the family life, beliefs that go unchallenged by everyone involved in spite of the reality distortions which they may conspicuously imply. (p. 457)

The family myth forms structures and patterns within family that serve as a self-correction system to avoid the destruction of the myth. This concept of family communication reinforces the storyteller's powerful position to determine which stories are told and which are silenced. In my thesis, I draw attention to the family myths that form among the family members of missing persons. These myths are the stories created to manage ambiguous loss and are a manifestation of hope.

Criticisms of Autoethnography

Ellis (2004) questions the role of "I" in ethnographic research. It is the "I" of the autoethnographic researcher that challenges the third-person, neutral, and scientific voice of traditional social science writing. Bochner (2012) explains how the normative model of research removes embodied experiences and replaces it with "typologies and abstractions that remove events from their context, distancing readers from the actions and feelings of particular human beings engaged in the joint action of evolving relationships" (p. 159). As an autoethnographic researcher, I challenge the norms of inquiry by shifting the ethnographic gaze back onto myself. Freeman (2011) argues this frame creates a narcissistic examination of self as the research subject. He claims that the academic "careerist bandwagon" of autoethnography is simply a more scholarly way of legitimizing autobiography to serve an egotistical need rather than furthering future research based on their cultural experience. It is also argued that autoethnography only welcomes marginalized voices who create a formulaic, cathartic sameness of research structure (Taft-Kaufman, 2000). Some scholars (e.g., Delamont, 2007) suggest how this narcissistic, navel-gazing methodology is essentially lazy and self-indulgent.

Advocates of autoethnography argue against the misconception that writing through pain is an easy form of research. Autoethnographic exploration "generates a lot of fears and doubts—and emotional pain. Just when you can't stand the pain anymore, well that's when the real work has only begun" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 738). Anxiety fills autoethnographers as they reveal vulnerable identities to potentially critical readers (Wall, 2008). Marowitz (1991) dismisses this form of "interior liberation" (Levi, 2001) as a form of self-gratification on paper. On the other hand, Atkinson (1997) questions how any collected form of narrative can reveal an authentic self. Atkinson and Delamont (2006) explain,

> Autobiographical accounts are no more 'authentic' than other modes of representation: a narrative of a personal experience is not a clear route into 'the truth', either about the reported events, or the teller's private experience. (p. 166)

The reliability of data is put into question when the rubric of analysis centers on the self. Narratives seem to be absent of greater social context since it exists purely through a personal lens (Atkinson, 1997). From this stance, personal narratives provide limited data regarding larger social phenomena. Critics believe that “slack social science” has led to the lack of scrutiny onto the scientific analysis of autoethnography (Atkinson & Delmont, 2006). I do agree that narratives must be recognized as constructed by social interactions. However, I feel a scientific analysis does not permit a space for multiple truths within an interpretive paradigm.

Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) questions how the label of autoethnography problematizes a need for researchers to assimilate and legitimize this qualitative approach under the “patriarch’s blessing” (p. 298). Narrative inquiry serves as an alternative to positivist approaches developed from methodological processes of realist ethnography. Autoethnography is caught in the double bind between the epistemic and the aesthetic. The epistemic authority has often been questioned by social scientists (Shields, 2000). Buzzard (2003) problematizes the legitimate ability of an autoethnographer to acquire authoritative knowledge over her/his own culture.

Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) draws attention to how Buzzard (2003) and other scholars legitimize the “we” rather than the “I.” Gingrich-Philbrook’s (2005) suspicions of autoethnography targets the loss of aesthetic merit. “Autoethnography’s devotion to transparency not only divorces it from literary history, it also compromises its commitment to retrieving subjugated knowledge” (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, p. 312). My autoethnography leans away from the authentic knowledge that Atkinson and Delamont (2006) seek from research. Instead, I lean into a subjugated knowledge that shapes aesthetic moments (Baxter & DeGooyer, 2001; Bolen, 2014) of meaning-making for me and readers. My autoethnography acknowledges how authentic and absolute truth is a myth. I allow myself to accept the ambiguity of loss to begin the healing process.

Therapeutic Nature of Autoethnography

During the process of writing this thesis, I (re)experienced the pain of traumatic moments and memories. My inquiry led me to the shared stories of individuals and communities experiencing traumatic loss. The therapeutic intervention of narrative through autoethnography allowed me to share my personal story of ambiguous loss. Autoethnographic inquiry sets the stage for my traumatized identity to be "relationally expressed through the symbolic interaction of language" (Boss, 2006, p. 129). The therapeutic nature of autoethnography is extending boundaries for both family therapy and communication studies.

Foster, McAllister, and O'Brien (2006) advocate autoethnography in psychiatric mental health nursing. They argue autoethnography expands on the extensive amount of interpretive qualitative research toward the exploration of a storied self as a therapeutic tool for practitioners and patients. Foster, McAllister, and O'Brien (2006) continue,

> It can be seen that mental illness challenges a person's sense of 'identity', their relationship with others, and the meaning of experiences and life itself, and that the individual attempts to restore a sense of order through the use of story. (p. 45)

The reflexivity of autoethnography for both readers and writers creates experiential engagement in understanding life's messy and dramatic stories (Foley, 2002). The subjectivity of sense-making can unveil the interconnection and commonality of self with the *other* through shared lived experiences. Shared stories create a channel of accessibility for practitioners, families, and individuals to understand particular experiences of trauma.

Bondi (2013) blurs methodological approaches to qualitative research and psychotherapy to illuminate parallels in meaning-making generated through the telling of traumatic stories. She explains how the psychoanalytic concept of “the subjective experience” is the core of meaning making. The transformative and healing nature of writing autoethnography is “gained through the vulnerability that an individual places him or herself in order to relive and share traumatic events from their private lives” (Custer, 2014, p. 9). The cathartic experience of expressing yourself through narrative text becomes a purging of pain. Mendez-Negrete (2013) expresses how narrative text transforms into a self-therapeutic document for surviving trauma. Autoethnography allows scholars to reveal the messiness of life. Through the personal witnessing of autoethnographic stories, we legitimize, theorize, and destigmatize stories from marginalized groups (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 120). Trauma victims and survivors move beyond canonical stories of loss to disclose the complexity of meaning-making from the margins of uncertainty and ambiguity.

Evocative storytelling (Bochner & Riggs, 2014) always stigmatized stories to break through silent suffering. Ellis and Adams (2014) capture the purpose of writing through pain:

> We often begin autoethnographic research with personal experiences riddled with pain, confusion, anger, and/or uncertainty; experiences that just don’t make much sense and that seem to significantly alter our perceived trajectory about how life should work; experiences that we think about often and desperately want to understand and cope with; and experiences that illustrate interpersonal and social problems that need to be addressed. (p. 264)

I stare down the figurative rabbit hole and into the depth of traumatic loss to come closer to understanding the inescapable tensions of meaning between life and death (Ellis, 2013a; 2013b). Poulos (2009) reminds scholars that healing from the hurt of trauma begins by moving away from the darkness of pain and into the light of shared meaning. Healing occurs for both readers and writers as their complicated grief and loss is validated through "witnessing" (Denzin, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) explain "witnessing" opens opportunities for readers to testify to the personal and cultural phenomena, while writing autoethnography allows scholars to problematize the phenomena. In the process of writing my thesis, I share my experience of ambiguous and traumatic loss with scholarly peers in the classroom and at conferences. Therapeutic healing is occurring as my story of loss is legitimatized through these witnesses of autoethnography.

Adams (2012) suggests another therapeutic quality of autoethnography is it provides a symbolic space for homage. Without the ritual of a funeral or memorial for my sister, the process of writing this thesis has provided me a metaphoric tombstone. I have visited it to work through grief and it has helped me make a "mental break*through* out of a mental break*down"* (Spry, 2011, p. 120). The doing of autoethnography helps researchers manage uncertainty as they write through complicated and painful experiences (Adams, 2012). Although I will never fully be able to heal from the trauma of my sister's disappearance, I write through my complicated grief to gain a sense of meaning. As I engage in practices of autoethnography, I take into consideration how I frame my writing in the ideals and tenets that are at the core of my autoethnographic inquiry.

Core Ideals of Designing Autoethnographic Projects

A change in the idea(l)s of research shifted in social science as the crisis of representation recognized the limitations of scientific knowledge (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988). Reflecting on the crisis, anthropologist Rosaldo (1989) says,

> The once dominant ideal of a detached observer using neutral language to explain 'raw' data has been displaced by an alternative project that attempts to understand

> human conduct that unfolds through time and in relation to its meaning for the actors. (p. 37)

Ethnographers began to question the relational ethics (Ellis, 2007) and invasiveness of traditional research practices onto a culture. Ethnographers were traditionally disengaged and emotionally removed from the observed culture (Richardson, 2000). Social identity politics would also call into question how mainstream research denied local knowledge (Geertz, 1983)—a knowledge that would acknowledge the influences of a researcher's cultural identity on the discovery of truths.

Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) understand how the "nuance and complexity of identities, lives, relationships, and experiences do not easily or neatly translate to an experiment, survey, or list of interview questions" (pp. 25-26). They distinguish six core ideals as priorities and concerns for doing autoethnographic research. In this section, I discuss several core ideals and the implications they have on autoethnographic inquiry. I focus on the following core ideals: (a) foreground personal experiences within cultural phenomenon, (b) illustrate reflexivity throughout the sense-making processes, (c) and describe/critique cultural norms and practices.

Foreground personal experiences within cultural phenomenon. Autoethnography is rooted in a reflexive inquiry into personal experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). As I process my fragmented memories into a storied self, I come closer to understanding how self is co-constructed with cultural encounters with others. My subjective knowledge (Walker, 2009) situates my personal experiences as a starting point for autoethnographic inquiry.

As relational beings, we seek interconnectedness with life's meanings through stories. In an attempt to grasp the ungraspable meanings within trauma, I turn "the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experiences occur" (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). As a survivor of a cold-case murder victim and missing person, I story an insider's knowledge of an often silenced cultural group. The telling of my embodied experience sparks epiphanies into my personal identity that cannot be translated into empirical statistics (Denzin, 2001). Ellis and Adams (2014) suggest by reclaiming narrative voice, autoethnographers can speak on their own behalf about personal and social issues in academic contexts.

When addressing the autoethnographic "I" and *relational* autoethnographic subjectivity, I agree with Gannon (2013)—the textual "I" and "me" are not fixed and stagnant. The subjectivity of our personal experiences allows us to understand *self* as contingent on the multiple discourses which influences our identity (Gannon, 2013). Autoethnography is a relational approach that engages our multiplicity of selves with others and culture (Allen-Collinson, 2013). As I foreground my personal experiences through my writing, I narrate memories.

Storying memory straddles the "dialectic of remembering and forgetting" (Giorgio, 2013, p. 412). My memories our filtered through a personal lens of interpretation. My praxis with friends and families, who have shared in these lived experiences, echoes in the recalling and retelling of these to selected shared moments. We have (re)told these stories with each other over the past years. Through our (re)telling of our stories, we help to influence and (re)shape each other's interpretations of meaning. Yet, there are private, secret moments of pain and suffering that have been hidden and forgotten. These repressed memories have been silenced so long they resist representation in narrative text. The memories that filter through my autoethnographic narrative hold value because this is how my memory has shaped my story into a personal process of meaning-making.

Illustrate reflexivity throughout the sense-making processes. Sense-making is a strategic process of understanding personal experiences and cultural norms to “show how/why particular experiences are challenging, important, and/or transformative” (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 27). Sense-making through narrative inquiry resists a rational-scientific model (Fisher, 1987) of universal truth by focusing on one’s personal experiences. According to Weick (1995), the sensemaking process also counters a rational-scientific model because it is a non-linear, reflexive process without a fixed structure to individually understand personal implications on past, current, and future events and actions.

Understanding communication as autoethnography, Bochner and Ellis (2006) state “sense-making involves turning experiences into stories that theorize experience. The autoethnographer theorizes experience as a story teller. The story is the theory” (p. 116). Comprehending personal experiences into words is an act of emancipation from the scientific language of generalization. Culturally muted groups are provided a voice through autoethnography that challenge these limitations of understanding (Crawley, 2014). As I work through and make sense of the complexities of my lived moments of struggle, I highlight the intersubjectivity of an intrinsic knowledge that enriches meaning.

A reflexive stance makes me aware of how I construct meaning through my personal lenses and limitations. I acknowledge that my personal experiences are not universal. Through reflexivity, I must be self-conscious of how my interpretations and shared experiences are shaped by my personal beliefs and values (Foster, McAllister, & O’Brien, 2006). I argue that narrative confronts historical assumptions to expand personal actions of self-created meaning (Bochner, 1994). Troubling the intersectional praxis (Alexander, 2015) of self within a culture, it is understood that the concept of identity will blur and bleed into messy, multiple selves. Ellis and Adams (2014) explain,

> Autoethnography implies connection: the stories we write connect self to culture; the way we research and write these stories blends social science methods with the aesthetic sensibilities of humanities, ethnographic practices with expressive forms of art and literature, and research goals of empathy, healing, and coping. (p. 255)

My social standpoint permits privileges, power, and control over my articulation of my past experiences and its influence on this inquiry. I reflexively interrogate my process of writing through lived experiences of loss and trauma to make sense of my intersubjectivity with larger cultural norms and practices.

Describe/critique cultural norms and practices. Personal narratives help to problematize taken-for-granted social structures and assumptions. Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) highlight the intentional use of insider knowledge to create and comprehend complicated cultural norms. Critical inquiries into cultural norms encourage both writers and readers to reveal the embedded societal subtexts of privilege and disempowerment. Resisting the repression of silence, personal narratives challenge canonical discourses to assist muted communities (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). As Holman Jones (2005) suggests,

> Autoethnographic texts point out not only the necessity of narrative in our world but also the power of narrative to reveal and revise the world, even when we struggle for words, when we fail to find them, or when the unspeakable is invoked but not silent. (p. 767)

Autoethnography elevates our social consciousness to shift discourses and emancipate the truths of stigmatized and marginalized groups.

This form of autoethnographic pedagogy (Alexander, 2015) seeks a progressive practice of engagement with social encounters to promote positive social change. My autoethnography addresses master narratives of loss to understand how counter narratives of ambiguous loss frustrate cultural norms that disenfranchises a suffering subculture. Exposing my vulnerable self and insider perspective, this inquiry challenges readers to contemplate a different approach to loss, which emphasizes a dialectical both/and approach to meaning. This shared lived-experience of personal self/selves within culture can help those working through trauma to gain resilience.

Ethical Considerations

When considering the relational ethics of writing about/with intimate others who are alive or dead, Ellis (2007) reminds auto/ethnographers it is impossible to not to write about others when we write about ours elves. Ellis (2007) questions, “How do we honor our relational responsibilities yet present our lives in complex and truthful way for readers?” (p. 14). In this section, I address and discuss the ethical considerations autoethnographers face as they write personal narrative of shared lived experiences.

Pelias (2011) warns readers to blame the writer for any negative perceptions they believed may have been conveyed in autoethnographic writing. The stories I share are mere glimpses of a lifetime of stories that have collectively shaped my self-identity. Just as I reflexively understand these stories to form meaning, readers also participate in moments of sense-making. I am guided by Boylorn’s (2013) approach to writing a storied self as I share my experiences of loss and trauma:

> I realize that my story is never my story alone. I am not always able to fully protect the anonymity of the people in my life, nor do I want to. Auto/ethnography acknowledges that truths, memories and perspectives are subjective. (p. 9)

My autoethnographic inquiry serves, in many ways, as a personal memorial for my sister, Roxanne McGreehan. Placing her identity at the forefront of this personal narrative invokes the tensions of absence-presence I experienced throughout her disappearance. Repeating, typing, and reading her name within these pages is like etching the epitaph of her memory onto a gravestone.

Relational ethics (Ellis, 2007) with both the living and the dead means maintaining respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). Many universities do not require Institutional Review Boards (IRB) approval for autoethnographic projects. Nonetheless, autoethnographers make it a priority "to minimize harm and maximize benefits (if any should exist) to the others whom they engage" (Tullis, 2013, p. 250). To maximize the benefits of those who engage with this inquiry, I must also contemplate how I engage ethically with my audience. I cannot expect readers to completely identify with autoethnographic text which is by nature partial and partisan to my perspective (Goodall, 2000). Revealing moments of trauma may trigger emotions and discomfort from readers. Stories effectively told through autoethnography will "enact a dynamic process of making contact with readers, where lives and stories intermingle, resonate, and contrast, generating meaning and perspective in the process" (Berry & Patti, 2015, p. 267). As I write about loss, I must be mindful of the painful wound it may open for myself and readers. As a critical, interpretive approach to personal knowledges, I present my narrative as a communal space to conjure multiple processes and meanings of loss.

Another major ethical consideration of autoethnography is care and protection of self. I choose to revisit the traumatic experience of my sister's disappearance and loss. To do so, I render myself vulnerable, with purpose, to relive the pain of that experience. I choose to do autoethnography because, as Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2013) observe, "inquiry that is vulnerable, forthright in exploring the character weaknesses, struggles, and ambiguities of the researcher, can touch readers deeply and evoke an open heart and mind to self-scrutiny as well" (p. 75). Fully understanding this, I open myself to criticism, personally and professionally. From the beginning, I have felt the therapeutic nature of doing *this* autoethnography outweighs the potential risks. This autoethnography illuminates the significant topic of ambiguous loss and validates my personal experiences with complicated grief.

Writing Techniques

Autoethnography is an approach to cultural witnessing that can allow me, the researcher, to evocatively share storied lives gathered from observations and conversations with others, while accounting and respecting myself and these participants throughout the writing processes (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). The multivocality of meaning is reverberated throughout autoethnography. Autoethnographic texts frame reality as socially constructed (Denzin, 1997). Utilizing autoethnographic writing techniques, researchers and readers can contemplate possibilities of shared "narrative truth" (Bochner, 1994; Bolen & Adams, in press; Spence, 1982,) as a developmental dialectic of storied lives. In this final section, I discuss how I present personal narratives through the use of interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 1989), messy text (Marcus, 1994; Denzin, 1997), and layered accounts (Rambo

Ronai, 1992; 1995). Finally, I suggest ways for readers to process and evaluate this narrative text.

Personal narrative and interpretive interactionism. The most popular and controversial form of autoethnographic text is personal narrative (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Through first-person accounts of life stories, autoethnographers position their experiences as the phenomenon to be problematized against cultural context (Ellis & Adams, 2014; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Personal narrative invites readers to engage with texts so they can understand and cope with life struggles (Ellis, 2004). Personal narrative responds to the crisis of representation of researchers/researched within the social sciences to permit the investigation of embodied everyday moments.

Interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 1989) is an approach toward autoethnographic inquiry that emphasizes life epiphanies as the phenomenon of study. Personal narrative shared through the frame of interpretive interactionism should make connections with larger context and cultural discourse (Denzin, 2009). Based on Sartre's (1963) progressive-regressive method of analysis, scholars engage in interpretive interactionism to process messy fragments of past emotional conditions into meaningful actions for future change.

Messy texts and layered accounts. Autoethnography often displays the chaotic, complex, disjointed moments of life through the use of messy texts (Marcus, 1994; Denzin, 1997). Messy texts resist a scientific desire for theoretical holism by scattering memories in non-linear sequences (Metta, 2013). Polkinghorne (1988) notes how narrative highlights certain events to develop the story. Fragmented lived experiences are intertextually woven to blur lines of self with culture.

Much like messy texts, the purpose of layered accounts is to textually represent the multivocality of selves throughout one's personal history (Ellis & Adams, 2014). Layered accounts use evocative text to invoke an "emergent experience" for both writers and readers (Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995). This form of "postmodern ethnographic reporting" produces fragmented text for readers to "construct an interpretation of the writer's narrative" (Rambo Ronai, 1995, p. 396). Using a layered account allows me to dialectically function as the researcher and the researched phenomenon. Shifting back and forth through "layers of reflection" (Rambo Ronai, 1992), I share a layered account of interpersonal encounters throughout the life, death, and disappearance of my sister. Layers are comprised of personal narratives, vignettes, and cultural narratives. I denote shifts between layers with this symbolic maze graphic: ◎.

Evaluating narrative text. When considering my goals and purpose for my autoethnography, I ask readers to consider how this approach illustrates the complexity of lived experiences. Unlike other research methods, autoethnography allows a subjective description of cultural phenomena (Adams, 2012). Does my insider knowledge illuminate cultural experiences of loss? Does my autoethnography extend existing knowledge of ambiguous loss and complicated grief?

Another goal and purpose of autoethnography is to provide accessible and appealing stories to a variety of readers (Richardson, 1994). Gingrich-Philbrook (2013) explains, "Disorienting stories, by contrast, narrate those occasions when the orienting stories fail to predict—and sometimes actively mask—our actual experience in the world" (p. 609). Are readers able to navigate through my layered account of personal experiences and reorient themselves in the process of sense-making? Does the vulnerable nature of my shared stories stimulate emotion and facilitate a new understanding of the relationality of meaning-making? Finally, I ask if my autoethnography provides an opportunity for myself and readers to "write to right" (Bolen, 2012). Has it provided insight into the cultural phenomena of underrepresented identities and groups? Can my autoethnography promote new ways of communicating with individuals suffering through the trauma of ambiguous loss and complicated grief?

Summary

In my autoethnographic inquiry, I address personal and cultural narratives surrounding missing persons and loss. I write relational stories of coping through traumatic loss to reinforce how meaning is (co)constructed through shared experiences. I remind readers how the communal nature of narratives can serve as a therapeutic intervention in reconstructing identity to gain resilience toward the trauma of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006). I share reflections of memories and interpersonal interactions through the use of messy texts (Marcus, 1994) and layered accounts (Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995).

Throughout this autoethnography, I indicate temporal shifts in the text by the use of three ◎ and the attitudinal continuation of a story through the use of a single ◎ (cf. Rambo Ronai, 1992). These denotations of shifts in the narrative text will assist readers as they maneuver through and interpret meanings from recalled memories. I begin my narrative autoethnography with experiences of loss I encountered during the disappearance of my sister. My positioning these stories first, I emphasize how my understanding of loss and grief is shaped by these shared moments. I then share my story of ambiguous loss.

CHAPTER 4

HOPE: THE LIMINALITIES OF LIFE AND LOSS

The hot water of a morning shower rushes over me. I take in a deep breath. Yawning, I struggle to keep my eyes open. I take in a deep breath. The hot water running over my face awakens me to the day ahead. The drain is covered. Water slowly rises above my ankles. I wish I could rest, lie down and let my body slowly submerge into the water. I wish I could sink down and escape into its comforting warmth. I turn off the water and unplug the drain. I breathe in, watching the water recede. I step out of the tub and into the reality of the day. I am running late. I grab a towel. It wraps around me like a mother's inviting embrace. I step into my room and turn on the morning news.

I breathe out, a deep gasp. The news anchor's words hit me like a tidal wave. Words ripple through the room and smack me: "After five weeks of searching, police officers have finally found the body of, 25-year-old, Ophelia Walton." Ophelia was a high school friend. She was last seen alive on August 11, 2007. The day she went missing, she was enjoying the water of a warm summer's day. She was with friends floating on tubes down a nearby river. River water – drinks – laughs – drinks – sun – drinks – fun – drinks – river water. Then night came. According to the news, Ophelia was highly intoxicated. Her friends didn't want her to drive. But she got into her car to make her way home. That was the last time anyone saw her alive.

For five weeks, images of her beautiful, porcelain, creamy white face and wavy red hair was broadcasted over the airwaves of local and national news networks. Her mother was pleading with the viewers for information. She was offering money for knowledge of her daughter's whereabouts, bargaining against death. She longed to wrap her arms around her daughter again. Her mother, family, and friends fought to keep Ophelia floating on the surface of this liminal space she was now plunging into. For the family and friends of missing people, we hold our breath. We hold our breath in shock. We fight to breathe. We gasp. We hyperventilate. But then…

we breathe in
Hope fills the air
we breathe in
Hope fills our lungs
we breathe in
Hope fills this liminal space
we breathe out
Our denial deepens

Five weeks of subjunctive voices in the media created an "as/if," a space of possibility. Today, the water of that nearby river finally receded. Hope receded. Reality emerged. Ophelia's body was found trapped in her vehicle just eight feet beneath the water's surface. Her cause of death, drowning.

◆

The funeral service is over. Ophelia's grieving family and friends slowly seep out the doors. I step out of the doors and into the warmth of the sun. I breathe in the September air. I see Ophelia's best friend in the crowd. Her face is drenched in tears. I make my way toward her to let her know I have great empathy for the pain she has suffered over the past five weeks. She takes a deep sobbing breath in, and then painfully utters back to me, "I wish they never found her." I could see in her eyes hope was lost and she was suddenly drowning in the depths of this reality. She was still fighting for a different interpretation, hoping for some greater reason behind it all. She tells me about the bruises seen on Ophelia's arms during her autopsy. She felt the bruises were from fighting off some unknown enemy—death. But according to the police, the only thing Ophelia was fighting for was air—life. We breathe in hope. We breathe out denial.

* * *

Gizelle's lips and tongue are stained purple by her recent self-medicating of red-wine. She offers me a glass. Knowing how much we will drink this evening, she should have offered me a bottle. Her eyes are watery. I can't help but wonder if this snake oil is repressing or releasing the beginnings of tears. Gizelle is like me… tough. In all the years of knowing her, I have never seen her cry. Well I guess that isn't true. I have seen her cry at a sappy movie, hidden in a dark theater. But here we are, under a 60-watt light bulb, in her living room. I finish a couple of glasses of wine in an attempt to create a sense of normalcy. I know I will have to broach the topic soon. Each glass provided time to let the dark, plum medication be the excuse for any tears to come.

Awkwardly bringing up the subject, I ask, "How are you doing with everything?"

You never know how to sensitively ask such an obvious question. The tall kitchen trash can filled with empty bottles of cabernet could've answered for her. When you ask an obvious question, you get an obvious answer.

"I've just been staying home, getting fucked up!" she quickly replies.

"Hey, I cast no judgments. Can I pour you another glass?" I say, laughing off any discomfort.

"Fuck yes!" the response comes fast along with a raised glass.

We both smile as I uncork another bottle and pour us both a glass of the room temperature, warm red libation. My lips are changing hue. With each sip, I can start to feel the red liquids of the glass mix with the life giving liquids of my body. They entangle, pulsating as one in my veins.

“So how did you find out she was dead?” I stumble on the words.

“I was at her place when she had died.” The phrase quivered off her purpled stained lips.

Her mother was in the last stages of cancer. Gizelle knew she only had a little time left and wanted to be with her in the end. What a bittersweet gift, to be with someone you love in the moment of their death. It is a moment denied to so many.

She continues, “When I walked into her bedroom, at first, I thought she was sleeping. When I got closer, I realized she wasn’t breathing.”

“I’m so sorry Gizelle,” I mumble back.

She stares past me, as if her mother is lying in the corner of the room. Looking into her sorrowful eyes, I am transported to that moment. She closes her eyes with a long held blink, forcing the forming tears to finally fall onto her cheeks. With a sip of wine, she gathers her courage to admit something to me.

She reveals, “When I walked over to her…she still felt warm. This may sound strange, but I…I…I.”

I lean over and give her a comforting touch. I assure her she can tell me anything. She confesses. She tells me how she got into the bed with her dead mother. How she shifted both of their bodies so she could wrap her mother’s arms around her. How she stared into her mother’s vacant eyes. How she reached over to shift the hair draping over her mother’s cheek to tuck it behind her ear. It was as if her mother's arms were cradling her crying baby to sleep. She lied next to her for hours, shifting in and out of a dream. When she woke up, her mother's body had turned cold. The hue of her mother's lips changed to a pale shade of purple. The red liquid of her mother's blood had drained to the parts of her body that touched the bed. She knew it was time to finally to let her go. With her soft pink lips, Gizelle kissed her mother's cheek and whispered her last goodbye.

* * *

Working as a personal driver is pretty repetitive for the most part. Mr. Lincoln's mannerisms and voice reminds me of those mobsters you see in a Martin Scorsese film—a "goodfella." I have heard other people joke that he actually is a member of San Antonio's Lebanese mafia. Of course these rumors aren't true—as far as legal activities were concerned. But he is a member of a powerful family that owns several successful bars and restaurants in the city. His last name echoes recognition. All extended family… was "family." If you were Lebanese, you were especially family.

"Hey babe, bring something to read today. I need to take a little detour after our morning bank run," his deep booming voice echoes through the phone.

My curiosity is piqued as I pull up to his suburban home. I walk up and knock on his door. His wife greets me with a smile. She is wearing a black dress and is holding a gray neck-tie. Mr. Lincoln slides slowly down the hall with his walker leading the path. He is wearing a black suit. His wife finishes greeting me and runs to his side. I can sense her urgency as she quickly adjusts and tightens the neck-tie around her husband's neck.

"Hey honey, sorry I am running a little late. I had to iron my suit," he apologizes to me.

"Why are you both dressed so nice this morning?" I ask curiously.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you—we are going to a funeral today," he explains.

"I'm so sorry to hear about your loss. Did you know them well?" concern resonates in my voice.

He exclaims, "Nice guy! He was married to one of my wife's cousins. He was really active in the church. Nice guy!"

Finally arriving at the church, I sit in the car as Mr. Lincoln and his wife make their way into the service. The parking lot slowly fills with men, women, and children—all dressed in black. Looking at the degree of emotions on the faces of the guests, I try to imagine everyone's personal connection to this man on the other side of the wall. While everyone is sitting inside praying and looking over a casket, I sit on the outside catching up on some "self-help" book. I look up from the page to see a black hearse pull up to the side entrance of the building. Black suits and dresses file out of the church. Family sedans start to line up to leave the church, heading toward the graveyard miles away.

Like a slow moving machine guided by low beams of light, we force the world to slow down and stop around us. I follow the chain that leads us to the graveyard.

* * *

(Breaking News) "Breaking news…university administrators and local police officers recently released information regarding a suspected kidnapping of a female student from their downtown campus yesterday evening. Stay tuned for more information, later this hour."

(First day) "Police reports state Reynard's vehicle, books, and black hoodie were found on campus; providing evidence of potential foul play. If you have more information regarding the disappearance and/or whereabouts of Eris Reynard, please contact this station or the police at. . .”

(Three months) “If anyone has any information at all that can help me find my wife, I am begging you to please contact the police. She is a beloved mother and wife—I just want to bring her back home safely to me and our two children. Wherever you are Eris—please know that we love you and that we miss you. Please help us bring her back home.”

(Four months) “An unidentified female body was found on the Southside of San Antonio this morning. Investigators are ruling out if this could be the body of missing UTSA student, Eris Reynard. Stay tuned to this station for more details during the five o’clock news hour.”

(Four months and nine hours) “After viewing the body this afternoon, Mr. Reynard has confirmed that it was not the body of his missing wife. The search still continues.”

(Five months) “New leads in the Eris Reynard disappearance suggest that Reynard has embezzled money from a local radio station, where she was the Office Manager and Accountant. Based on this new evidence, it is believed that Reynard possibly planned her own disappearance and is now heading toward Canada.”

(6 months) “Assisting in the FBIs interstate search, local authorities in the Niagara Falls area have detained Eris Reynard today. Reynard will be returned to San Antonio to stand trial for the current charges against her.”

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As my former coworker’s story unfolds on local television news stations, I can’t help but think about the collective hope of an entire city. Missing person posters—dirty and weathered down—are scattered near the campus and throughout the city. As you drive into the downtown area near campus, her eyes watch and follow you along the highway from a billboard above. The billboard the radio station's general manager acquired in hopes of helping bring back his long-time friend and colleague. At least that is what he tells me, as our heads are tilted back watching the news—with beers in our hands and the taste of disbelief in our mouths. The flat-screen television casts out a light in the dim bar. A pale glow flickers on his face as I turn to talk to him about Eris. The stories of tears by various staff members at the station are shared. Regardless of the news and the time that had passed, they maintain hope that Eris can be returned home unharmed.

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I keep thinking of Eris' husband standing over corpses at the morgue and his anticipation of an unwanted reality as he walks toward the stiff body in front of him. I place myself in his shoes and imagine myself having to identify my sister. Holding my breath—the sinking feeling in my stomach, the weight growing heavier in my chest, my heart beating faster as death literally surrounds me.

I think of the look on his face as he realizes he is looking at a stranger.

◆

Could he still love her after this deception? Could he still love her, knowing that she abandoned him and their two children? If someone has been "missing" for so long, can she ever come back to you as the same person? Whether she was kidnapped, a prisoner of war, murdered, or just decided she no longer wanted the life she was living; she will never come back the same. We are all transformed into stranger people. Yet, when a person is "missing," we still hope. We hope she is safe, and will come back unchanged from it all.

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I am watching the opening sequence of *The Lost Boys* on Netflix. This 1980s classic about vampires terrorizing a seaside town starts with that popular song by The Doors.

People are strange when you're a stranger
Faces look ugly when you're alone
Women seem wicked when you're unwanted
Streets are uneven when you're down

The music plays over images of missing persons posters. Posters layered over more posters of forgotten faces. Pictures of young girls, boys, and assumed run-aways flash across the screen. Worn and torn posters peeled from wooden poles, as weathered as the rusty nails which once secured them in place.

Posters put there by loving parents, sisters, and brothers. Posters walked by without a single pause or glance. Re-watching the film I think about these faces. I am curious which ones were taken by the monsters.

When you're strange
Faces come out of the rain
When you're strange
No one remembers you're name
When you're strange
When you're strange
When you're strange

* * *

As I enter the backroom of this small store nestled just off of the side of the highway, the smell of burning sage and jasmine incense penetrates my senses. However, it can't hide the embedded scent of cigarette smoke from the furniture. Meditative music elevates the mixture of musk and mystery in the stale air. The friend who has dragged me here swears the psychic powers of the two middle-aged sisters who own this place can't be denied. She promises their abilities to see into my past, present, and future is well worth the twenty dollars for thirty minutes, as posted on the price range chart upon entering. Curious about the spiritual beyond, I sit down for a reading.

She cups my palms in hers. I maintain my poker face to see how good her psychic abilities really are. Can she answer my unspoken question? Can she answer the question she has requested me to concentrate on… in my mind?

A look of concentration quickly comes over her as she slowly mutters, "I see a man with blonde hair, hmm… is he a love interest?" I shake my head no.

The spirits seem to quickly correct themselves as she clarifies, "No, no, no…I…I…I See a woman with blonde hair, hmm… could this woman be a rival? I shake my head no.

"Okay… I see that you are having trouble with work, but don't worry I see money soon coming your way," she says and smiles assured she has finally gotten it right.

Confidently she asks, "So did I answer your question?" I shake my head no.

No longer pretending to channel questions from the beyond, she gives it a couple more shots in the dark and continues to guess what my question may be. Frustrated, she finally just asks me what I want to know. I tell her the question that has haunted me.

"Awww… yes, I…I…I see your sister is alive," she assures me.

She takes my twenty dollars. As I am about to leave, she says she is receiving a message from the other side.

Repeating words from the beyond, she softly says “I hear a voice. It is saying… you can’t lose hope.”

* * *

My dad and I like to explore the little towns surrounding San Antonio on Sundays. I will usually meet him at his house, but today he decides to pick me up at the house I share with my roommates. I see his truck pull up into the driveway. Before he can get out of the truck, I dart outside. I make my way to the passenger side and open the door.

As I get inside and adjust my seatbelt, he looks at me and asks, “Do you want to go north, east, south, or west?

“Hmm, I don’t think we have gone south lately,” I nod my head indicating south is my choice for the day. My dad leans over to open up the glove compartment. He pulls out an old Rand McNally Texas road map. He carefully unfolds it and begins to run his finger down the grid. He taps at the paper.

He exclaims, “Somerset! Let’s go to Somerset!” He hands me the map.

Road maps are always tricky. I fold it down the middle. Then I follow the creases and fold it onto itself.

As I pinch the edges, my dad notes, “It is always good to carry a map in your car. I don’t trust Mapquest. You can never get lost with a good old fashion map.”

We make our way down south on Interstate 35. The San Antonio city skyscape scrolls past my dad’s window on the left. Dean Martin croons through the dashboard speakers. I have never been to Somerset. It is fun discovering new quaint cities. We like driving to their town squares. We try to go to their local cafés and browse the shelves of small shops. My dad loves to find signs and statues that tell the history of the city. These city markers will tell stories of early settlers, old fought battles, and list of the names of local boys who never returned home from the American wars.

As we hit the town square, we notice that most businesses are closed. We assume most of the residents are abiding to the day of rest. My dad and I still take a moment to walk around and read the signs. It turns out no large battles were fought on this ground. However, the names of young men lost to war are listed on a metal plate. We read the names and try to decipher their individual cultural roots. It seems several Germans live in this town. We get back in the car to discuss what we wanted to discover next.

As soon as the doors to the truck close, I shout out a suggestion, “East! Let’s head east.”

We start driving east on country roads. I stare out at the trees and wooden fence lines. My dad speaks over the oldies song on the radio, “You know I was talking to Ronald the other day on the phone. Do you remember Lara’s bridesmaid… ah, um, her maid of honor at their wedding? Well, he was telling me that… umm what is her name? I can’t remember. Well anyways, Ronald said that her uncle is a private detective.”

I quickly turn my head from the window, “Oh, yeah! That’s interesting.”

He continues, “Well Ronald had asked me if I could give him Roxanne’s social security number. I guess her friend’s uncle said he would do a simple search for free. So I gave him her social security number. That was nice of Lara’s friend and her uncle to help Ronald like that for free.”

“Yeah, that is really nice,” I say in a surprised, yet satisfied tone. I had mentioned the possibility of hiring a private investigator to my dad in the past. He just felt it would be too expensive.

“Do you know how long it will take to learn anything?” I question.

He thinks for a moment, and responds, “Well, I am not sure. I will have to ask Ronald. You know Ronald and I don’t really talk about Roxanne that much with each other. I was really surprised he told Lara’s friend about Roxanne.”

I mention, “Well, maybe Lara is the one who told her about Roxanne. That is really nice of them to want to help Richard. Hopefully her uncle is able to find some information.”

I turn forward and look at the long road ahead of us.

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As I close the door, my dad asks, “So where do you want to go today?”

I linger on my decision, “Hmm…maybe this time we should go north. Maybe we can go to Boerne. I think they are having a farmer’s market or something like that today.” As I utter my reason for wanting to go, I know it is not a new adventure. Today, I just want to discover something new from a place I have been several times before.

So we start to drive north. Boerne is the town just north of San Antonio. It marks the beginning of the Texas Hill Country. It draws in tourists who are looking for a simple and easy get away from the city. Locally owned restaurants and shops line the main street into town. The monthly farmer’s market has brought the tourists to town this Saturday morning, including me and my father.

We finally find a city parking lot that is free. Before walking to the farmer’s market, we head toward the town square. My dad is looking for signs and statues that tell Boerne’s story. As many times as we had come to the town in the past, we never took the time to read the metal markers that told the stories of earlier settlers, the old fought battles of Spanish soldiers, and the list of local boys lost in war. This list of names was longer than the other towns south of San Antonio. I read the names. I wonder how each man's loss impacted this little hill country town so many years ago. It was a much smaller town back then, so each man was a familiar face, a neighbor, a brother, a son.

Strangers walk along the sidewalk behind us. A curiosity comes across their faces as they peek over our shoulders to see what we are looking at. But they don't stop to look at the names.

I turn to my dad and inquire, "Did Ronald ever hear anything from that private detective who was looking into Roxanne's social security number?"

He responds, "I spoke with Ronald a couple of few weeks ago about it. Her name, social security number, and driver's license number were being used in north Texas."

I gasp, "What? Are you serious? So, she's alive! Have you or Ronald tried contacting her?"

He continues, "Well, when Ronald first told me this, I thought that maybe this is where that guy lived…the guy she met on the bus. I just thought that maybe she didn't want us to know where she was. Maybe that is why she ran away."

Confused, I exclaim, "I understand what you are saying, but I think we should still reach out to her. I mean she has a daughter who she isn't supporting or taking care of. It is one thing to run away from Matthew…but why would she run away from Beth. I don't understand why you wouldn't…"

He interrupts, "I spoke again with Ronald a few days ago. This man sent Richard a picture of Roxanne's driver's license. Except it wasn't a picture a Roxanne. It turns out it was another girl who either stole or bought Roxanne's identity. She is using Roxanne's driver's license number and social security number."

I blurt out, “What! Well, what are we going to do? We need to investigate this girl. If she bought her identity, she may have information on Roxanne. What did the private investigator say?”

He explains, “This isn’t good. I am not sure what this private investigator is going to do with this information. I don’t know if he is going to turn this girl over to the police. Either way, he was telling Ronald that if this girl was using Roxanne’s identity, it’s bad news. I don’t know there’s still a chance she sold her identity. I asked Ronald to also look into the identity of the guy on the bus. He is from north Texas, so maybe he and this girl know each other. Yeah, it turns out this girl has been using Roxanne’s name for a while. It’s just not a good sign.”

* * *

It’s nearing dusk, my father and I begin our walk along the side of the ponds just on the edge of the golf course on the military base we live on. It’s our ritual; our shared father-daughter moment. As I look at the sky, I admire that moment of the in-between. We always tried catching that transition of day and night. Glimpsing at the rich vibrant hues of blues and pinks entangled, while dark shadows creep in from the east. The refractions of light made everything around us more radiant, as if walking in a dream. There was something in those moments that stirred shared stories and deep thoughts. As I reached into the ether of memory, I loom over a tenuous thought that seems like a dream—a nightmare. This was the lucid dream that would linger. I am being and becoming like the evening sky.

* * *

I never knew my dad had a younger sister until I was about eleven or so. One night as I am walking by his bedroom, I hear him laughing hysterically. It’s such an unusual laughter that I have never heard my father make before. I walk toward his bedroom expecting to hear a sitcom on in the background. When I open the door, the room is dark and the television is off. It's strange how one can confuse crying for laughter. I am shocked to see my stoic, military father sobbing.

I cautiously ask, "What's wrong dad? Are you okay?" Shaken from his thoughts, he gathers himself.

He softly requests, "I've just been thinking about something. Do you mind leaving me alone right now? I just want to be by myself. I will talk to you about it tomorrow."

I have always been my father's confidant. He knew he could tell me things without judgment, and I could always keep a secret. The next day comes. My father and I drive to the golf course on base to go on one of our walks. We get out of the car and make our way toward three small ponds that sit along the course.

"Dianah, did I ever tell you your grandmother, my mother, was placed in a mental institution when I was a kid?" His question disrupts the serenity of the scene.

My voice stammers with surprise, "No. Wh… why was she there?"

With a calm tone, he shares his story, "Well when I was about five-years-old, I was playing in the kitchen with my baby sister. She was around two or three at the time."

Perplexed, I can't hide my shock, "You have a sister?"

He clarifies, "I had a sister. She died that day."

◆

"My mother always blamed me. Maybe it was my fault. But I was just a kid. I didn't know what I was doing," he gulps down his last words to repress the emotions, which are suddenly overwhelming him.

My father describes what happened. He was playing in the kitchen and found an apple. He threw it into the stove. He explains how stoves were made differently back then. He describes the dress that his sister was wearing that day. How the delicate fabric caught fire as she reached into the stove to grab the apple. He describes his helpless fear as he watched his baby sister become engulfed by flames.

"Screaming… she was screaming so loud. I was just a kid. I didn't know how to help her. I never meant to hurt her. I was just a kid." His mumbled memories almost sound like a confession.

He explains how his mother ran into the room with a blanket and covered her little girl. She just held her in her arms and was crying—and rocking and crying. He was crying—alone in the corner.

She wouldn't survive. It wasn't too shortly after the death of his sister that his mother went—as the doctors would say back then—insane. She began speaking to and seeing the dead. She was hospitalized in a mental ward. I imagine her crying, holding herself. Rocking and crying—alone in the corner of a white room. She is speaking to her daughter. I wonder if it was all in her head or if somehow she could actually communicate with the dead.

* * *

I pull up to the three-way intersection. Rolling slowly to a stop, I tug at my turn signal. It blinks—left, left, left. My complete stop has signaled the driver on the left to enter straight into the intersection. His car passes in front of me. My eyes follow—left to right. Dilating pupils fixate on the woman waiting diagonally on my right side. As his car drifts in front of hers, I am suddenly awakened from my daydream—the mundane mechanics of this moment.

It’s Roxanne! She is right in front of me. Dark brown roots of hair transition into store bought streaks of faded blonde, which makes a strange orange shade in the sun. Blotchy tanned skin flashes as she lifts her arm up and runs her fingers through her over processed hair. Her blinker pulsates—left, left, left. I can only see the profile of her face. Her face is now half hidden under this dye job. Maybe it’s the disguise she has chosen to help her remain hidden in plain sight.

I stare intensely as she enters the intersection. My eyes blink like the shutter lens of an old Canon camera. Frames of reality—blink, blink, blink. She crosses in front of me and now toward me. The shutter speed of my lashes adjust—blink, blink, blink—to slow down reality as I hold that frame; an image of my sister is in front of me. In that same flash, I internalize and ponder so many thoughts.

She looks happy—blink.

Maybe she does want to be missing—blink.

Should I tell people I’ve seen her? Or, should I let her keep her secret—blink.

How can she do this? Why is she hiding from us? Maybe I should follow her—blink.

She’s alive after all this time. And she’s been right here—right in front of me. Right?

Blink.

I adjust the f-stop. The light hits my eyes, as I follow her passing car—left to right. This new exposure is so revealing. I am staring at this stranger so intensely. I can see her face clearly now. Her full lips lightly sing along to an unheard song. Painted nails hang over the stirring wheel. Although she is not my sister, I stare at the curves of her face just to make sure. She never looks at me. She doesn’t know I am looking at her.

My head turns as I continue to stare. I look over my shoulder as her cars starts to drive away from mine. I enter the intersection. Moving forward through the years, I see my sister in random places and in random faces.

* * *

We clink glasses. He winks. I flash a smile in return. Simultaneously, we raise our shot glasses of Jameson in the air. Tilting my head back, I dowse my palate. It is a motion I became so familiar with, when I use to douse away my pain. However, tonight I drink for pleasure. We both tap our empty glasses against the wooden bar.

I gesture for the bartender to bring us two more shots. I shout across the bar, "oh, and two Tecates please!" I giggle at my date and smile. He owns a few local bars and is known to be quite the drinker. I can tell he likes how I can hold down a few drinks myself.

We have just started dating and are still in that awkward phase. You know—the "getting to know ya phase." He is just my type though. He is someone who can show you a good time, without any commitments. He is a bit of a bad boy and easy on the eyes. I used to be quite the bad girl myself.

When my sister first disappeared, sex and alcohol just helped to ease my pain. I loved that numb feeling. I didn't really care about school that spring semester following my sister's disappearance. But luckily, I was smart enough to get by. I still made it to class—hung over, reeking of smoke from the bar the night before. I still found a way to crawl out of the bed of my newest conquest.

That quote from the movie *Risky Business* became my motto, "Sometimes you gotta say… what the fuck." Except my phrase was more along the lines of, "Sometimes you gotta say… I don't give a fuck." I just liked the way that numbness felt.

My face is starting to feel a little flushed as I am chatting with my date.

He asks that common question, “So do you have any brothers or sisters?”

I answer appropriately, “Yeah. I have an older brother, a younger sister, a step-brother and three half-sisters.”

Surprised, he says, “Wow, you have a large family!”

I confirm, “I do… I guess. But my younger half-sisters didn’t live with me growing up. And my sister lived with my mom through middle school and high school. So really it was more so me, my older brother, and my step-brother in my teenage years.”

“So do you and your sister look alike? How old is your sister? He politely asks.

“Umm… actually my sister is a missing person,” I awkwardly state.

He is quick to respond, “Are you fucking with me? Are you serious?”

I reassure him, “Yes, I am serious. She went missing when she was twenty back in 2002. But to answer your question… no, we don’t really look alike.”

He starts asking questions, “So have you looked for her? What do you think happened to her?”

“Well, it has been so long. To be honest, I have a feeling she is dead. I don’t know… I have a feeling something bad happened to her,” I start to tell him about some of the mystery surrounding my sister’s disappearance. I explain my own theory of what I think happened to her, but he seems a bit disapproving of my response.

He jumps in, “Well if that was my sister, I wouldn’t give up hope. I would never stop looking. I am close with my sisters and if either of them ever disappeared, I would do all I could to find them.”

As he is talking, I pull my shot up from the bar top. I tilt my head back and douse away the pain. I am starting to feel a little numb.

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My father often reminds me of the story of my near death experience. He tells me how I almost drowned in the bath tub when I was a one-year-old… or so. My mother left me alone in the bath tub. She was oblivious to how dangerous that was. Fortunate enough for me, we were living in the Philippines at the time. Having a house girl is common in the Philippines. Arriving at our house, our young house girl started doing the daily chores. When she entered the bathroom, she was startled to find me floating face down. My dad always ends this story with regret in his voice. He explains how my mother demanded that the house girl be fired. He knew this young girl saved my life and her version of the story was true.

He fired her.

He has always regretted it.

When he explains why, he just says that my mother needed someone to blame for her mistakes.

◎ ◎ ◎

David and my stepmother moved from the Philippines to live with us when he was only eight-years-old. When he came to the United States, he didn't speak English. He was a fish out of water, removed from his small village. He was in a strange country surrounded by strangers. His mother became his translator and only friend. My family did all we could do to help him adjust to his new life, new language, and new culture.

That first year, my stepmother and David would form their own special dyad. My sister tried so hard to enter their group of two. As a child of divorce, Roxanne lived through those troublesome times of our parent's marriage. All she knew was the yelling, emotional vacancy, and the alcohol. She saw the love David and his mother shared, and she desired it.

She was so excited when they first moved in with us. David and her were the same age and were going to be in the same grade. She could be his special guide around school and introduce him to all of her friends. She could be his friend. She could be his sister. She would make David and stepmother hand-crafted drawings, adding them to crude crayon creations depicting her family.

As he got older, David quickly assimilated to his new American life. It didn't take long for him to make better grades than Roxanne, have more toys than Roxanne, and get more attention than Roxanne. Friends became foes.

◆

My younger sister, Roxanne, was always cast as the outsider within my family. Her nickname was "crybaby." When she was younger, she was always crying to seek attention. She so desperately wanted to be special. Maybe this is why it was difficult when my stepbrother moved in with us. She was no longer the youngest, no longer the baby of the family. Now two people fought for attention. But my stepbrother would always win.

When we first moved to Texas, it was the end of summer. The hot August weather was something unlike we had experienced growing up on the Pacific Islands. The new military base we live on has a youth center located next to our house. Eager to explore our new surroundings, we ask our stepmother if we can walk to the center. Everyone in the family puts their shoes on, and we head out the door.

We walk into a cool air conditioned room filled with arcade games, pool tables, and other eye-catching activities. In the next room, we see concession stands and picnic benches.

Pizza, burgers, and other items suited to youthful taste buds make up the menus. An ice cooler is plugged in against the wall. It illuminates the words "Blue Bell Ice Cream." Eight tubs of ice cream sit under the glass doors.

Excitedly, Roxanne begs, "Oh, oh, oh… Can we have ice cream? Huh, can we?"

David joins in, "Oh, I want some ice cream."

Looking up at the price and counting four kids, my dad firmly says, "No."

As my dad and brother open up to door to the back patio, I turn to see my stepmother hand David a five dollar bill so he can by the flavor of his choice. She whispers in his ear and waves at the girl behind the counter for help.

Roxanne screams, "Hey, why does David get ice cream?"

David starts making faces at Roxanne behind his mother's back. Mocking my sister's complaints, he starts laughing as he licks his ice cream cone. Roxanne starts to cry.

"Stop crying. Next time if you want something you should ask nicely. You're such a spoiled little brat," my step-mother lashes back. David can't help but laugh a little louder. My stepmother, Lilian, turns back to David to shush him. She sees his face still in a mocking position and can't help but giggle a little.

Roxanne pouts on the way home, but no one pays attention to her.

◆

I am following my dad and my step-mother to a new neighborhood development near Randolph Air Force Base. David and his wife Melissa have invited us over to see their new house. My stepbrother just got back from his Afghanistan tour of duty, so it's a bit fitting we are visiting his home of the Fourth of July. Driving past empty plots of dirt, we suddenly enter a suburbia Shangri-La—trimmed hedges, green manicured lawns, white four-door sedans, and American flags waving from cookie cutter houses.

I can hear the laughter of children playing in the streets as I turn down the radio of my parked car. Their mustard and ketchup stained cheeks dimple as smiles explode on their faces. Sparklers are tracing the sunlit sky in the formation of letters becoming names.

As I enter the front door, I am greeted by a cute, crafted wooden board with the engraved words, “God Bless this House.” We are given a quick tour through the house. Melissa points out a table that has been passed down to her by an old neighbor. She notes how they rearrange the room when they have guest over from their church. Wooden crosses seem perfectly placed in every room.

David leads us to the backyard. We each take a seat on a lawn chair and sip on ice tea. David prepares the grill and stands above us. Dad gets up to critique the way he has arranged the coals and explains the best grilling techniques.

In his best passive aggressive tone, David laughs, “Umm, as I recall you always burn the meat.” My stepmother and I quickly laugh.

“Hey that is just the way I liked my meat cooked,” dad retorts. I imagine myself biting into dad’s burnt, charcoal black chicken legs.

I cringe a little as I add, “Umm, I think you are the only one.”

Sizzle. Meats hit the grill. We start remembering our past Fourth of Julys in Hawaii. Bathing bodies on beach blankets, watching the sun slowing slide into the ocean. Reflections of fireworks roll and recede along the shoreline. For a second, my family and I stared into the same beautiful memory.

We go inside to sit at the table. We pass the plate of meat and a bowl of white rice around. We take each other's hands and bow our head, as David says a prayer. Bottle rockets squeal outside as he ends with, "Amen." Polite conversation is passed between bites.

After dinner, my dad and step-mother quickly become tired and decide to head home. They live two small towns away, on the opposite side of the Air Force base. I decide to stay for coffee.

We are standing in the kitchen where caffeinated liquid and trickle-down thoughts are brewing. David surprisingly starts to bring Roxanne into the conversation. We discuss the theories surrounding her. Maybe it was coming back from a war and returning back home that stirred strong emotions in him. Tears are suddenly hanging on the edge of his eyelashes. I have seen David cry as a child, but I have never seen him cry as an adult.

Guilt has created heaviness in his heart. Swallowing back his pain, he admits, "I am the reason Roxanne went away when she was younger. I wish I could change it. Mama treated her so bad because of me. I was just a kid. I didn't know any better. You know maybe if she was more a part of our family, maybe if she was happier, she would be here today. I wish she was here. To be honest, I just feel like this is my fault. I wish I could change it. I wish there was something I could do."

I reassure him, "David, I think we all ask ourselves what we could've personally changed. But you can't blame yourself. I know I have asked myself what I could've done to help her. But we can't change anything. We can't change the past."

He shakes his head in agreement. David's wife places her hand on his shoulder to comfort him. As David collects his emotions, Melissa becomes his extended voice, "I know David hasn't really shared this with all of you, but this has really bothered him for years. I am so happy you are both talking about this now. I have told him he can't blame himself. For now, all we can do is pray for Roxanne. We need to pray she is okay. If she is still out there, we need to pray Jesus helps guide her and protect her."

David continues, "I pray for Roxanne all the time. I pray for her soul. I pray God can help her."

I think about the times I have prayed for Roxanne. When I think about the nature of my prayers, they were often for her forgiveness. I pray for the potential to change things. I pray for a second chance. I pray she is safe. I pray she is alive.

* * *

My father and I like to plan excursions—father daughter time. It's a time to catch up on life and build future memories. For the past year, we often talk about Roxanne. We discuss what may have happened to her or where she may be. My sister has been missing for a year or so now. We reflect on who she was as a little girl, as a teenager, as young woman.

Today we are talking about Roxanne over brunch. The restaurant sits on a vineyard in the Texas Hill Country. Windows wrap around the perimeter of the dining room, allowing all the light of the day to shine through. A picture of spring is framed by the white-painted, wooden surrounding window panes near our table. We stare at life forming before us—at the pollenating bees buzzing about the wild flowers, gently kissed by the rays of the sun.

Maybe it was our morning view that stirred memories of my sister's birth in my dad. Looking outside, my dad sips his coffee. He looks at me and contemplates whether to share yet another secret.

Gently putting down his mug, he confesses, "You know Dianah… to be honest… I am not really sure if Roxanne is actually my biological daughter. Your mother and I were having problems in our marriage, and we were only intimate a couple times before she told me she was pregnant with Roxanne. If Roxanne was never born, I would've divorced your mother much sooner."

"So, wait, are you saying mom was cheating on you?" I ask, surprised by his words.

"She would go out with her friends and be gone for a whole weekend, and I wouldn't know where she was. I don't know if she cheated on me, but I just find it really hard to believe she could get pregnant when we only had sex two times before she told me about Roxanne. I mean, you and Richard look like me and look like each other. Roxanne doesn't look anything like me. And she has always been… I don't know… just different from us. I guess there is a chance she could be my daughter. But I am not one hundred percent sure. Regardless if she is my biological daughter or not, she will always be my daughter. I will always be her father. I love Roxanne. She's my daughter," he is searching for the truth in his last sentence.

There's a brief pause before he picks back up his cup up and gazes back out at the life stirring outside the window. He tells me he has never shared those thoughts with anyone. I can't help but ask a few more questions. I assure him Roxanne is his daughter, and he will always be her father.

◎

My eyes follow bulky black suitcase as I stand at the luggage carousel in the Seattle airport. Black suitcase with colored strings of ribbon tied to the handles serpentine along on flaps of overlapping metal. The look of expectation appears on everyone's faces. Widen eyes, raised eyebrows, and tilting heads of curiosity follow black suitcases with white, disposal identification tags hanging from them.

Anticipation has distracted me from noticing my old, tattered suitcase has passed in front of me. It’s swallowed by large flaps of plastic. I wait for the rotation of the belt to bring my lonely luggage back to me. I am in Seattle for my oldest half-sister’s wedding. To heighten the momentous occasion, she has invited Roxanne’s daughter Beth to the celebration. I haven’t seen Beth since she was a baby.

She was such a beautiful baby. Her big blue eyes were so striking against her creamy skin and dark brown hair. Both my sister and Matthew have brown eyes, so her bright blue eyes reminded me of my father’s. Although, I am sure Matthew would say Beth gets her eyes from his mother, Mindy. Matthew and Roxanne lost custody of Beth when she was around one or two years old. I am not sure exactly why they lost custody. I remember my dad telling me a story about the time Matthew had thrown Beth at the wall, breaking her ribs because she wouldn’t stop crying. She was one years old. Maybe that is why they lost custody. I always thought it was unfair the abusive father’s mother got custody of Beth. Beth’s grandmother, Mindy, moved to Los Angeles shortly after getting custody. I hadn’t seen Beth since she moved to California.

Will she look like my sister? Will she look like Matthew? What will her personality be like? What kind of music will she listen to? What kind of clothes will she wear? Will she like school? What grade is she in? Will she like me? What has she been told about her mother?

My black bag suitcase peaks out from the metal corner. I step forward to retrieve it. Picking my bag off of the conveyor belt, I look up and see my stepfather, Buck. He is followed by my youngest half-sister Jackie. I have three half-sisters: Jackie, Jolene, and Jacelyn. Jacelyn is the oldest and the one who is getting married in a couple of days.

Jackie greets me with a hug. “How was your flight?” she asks.

“Oh, it was good. Is it just the two of you?” I return.

“No. Jacelyn and Beth are in the car—in the parking lot,” she gushes with excitement.

“Oh, Beth is here!” I am surprised and nervous to see *who* is waiting for me. Beth had never flown before and was nervous about it, so Buck drove down to California a week earlier to pick her up and drive her to Washington. My mother, Buck, and sisters had talked with Beth on the phone for the past few years. They have sent photos and received photos in exchange. But this would be the first time for me to see and talk with Beth in over a decade.

I roll my bag toward a maroon mini-van. The side door slides open. There, in front of me, is the baby I once knew. Now she is a sweet, shy twelve-year-old enjoying the summer before the seventh grade in middle school. Trying my hardest not to make things weird, I find myself staring at her face. She looks like a spitting image of her mother. When she tilts her head in different angles, she also looks like my father. Looking at Beth, I start to see my sister and father’s faces merged into a lovely young lady. It wasn’t until I saw Beth I could see the resemblance of my dad in my sister’s face.

“Hi, Beth, I am your aunt Dianah. Sorry if I am staring at you. You just look so much like your mother. I promise I am not weird.” My awkward greeting is put at ease.

Beth comforts me, “Hi, Dianah, that’s okay! Everyone else has said the same thing. It’s nice to meet you.”

We load my luggage into the trunk. I step into the van and find my way to the back row, and sitting down next to Jackie. Beth is sitting alone in the middle row. As Jacelyn closes the front passenger side door, Buck gets behind the wheel. We merge onto the highway and head south to toward Tacoma. I waste no time before asking Beth endless questions for the duration of the ride down to my mom's house. I can tell from Jacelyn's expression that these questions have become the ritual for Beth since her arrival.

I continue chatting, "So… what grade are you about to go into?"

"I am going into the seventh grade next year," she politely replies.

I start sharing words of wisdom to help her on her journey through middle school. I tell her a few of my own stories and impressions of middle school. My overall advice is, "It all gets better in high school."

I continue my questioning, "So do you have a lot of friends? What do you and your friends like to do? When you get into middle school, are you hoping to get involved in any activities? What classes do you like the most?" I laugh. "Sorry, I guess I should give you time to answer," I nervously laugh.

She begins to describe the little details of her life, "Umm… Yeah I have a couple good friends I like to hang out with at school. Except they are gonna be going to a different middle school next year. I like school. I'm not sure what kind of stuff they have at this middle school. But I like acting. When I am not at school, I mainly just hang out with my brothers and sister at home. We pretty much just watch TV most of the time."

After she mentions siblings, I inquire, "Do you live with your Grandmother or with your dad?"

To my relief, she answers, "I live with my Grandmother and my brothers and sister. But I stay with my dad and his wife sometimes."

"What do your dad and his wife do for a living?" my investigation changes directions.

"Umm… He works for the church," she casually replies.

"The church! What does he do for the church?" I exclaim quietly in shock.

She nods proudly, "He is a pastor."

"Wow… well, that's good. I am glad to hear that. It sounds like he is doing well," hiding my perplexed reaction with a smile and sweet tone. The Matthew I know would never be a pastor. I wonder if he was really able to find God in person. Did guilt bring him to Christ? My personal theory for years was that Matthew paid to have my sister murdered. She has been missing now for over a decade, so it's only a theory. But Matthew's new relationship with the church makes me question what led him there. My theory is so engrained into the personal story I have formed around the disappearance of my sister. I can't shake the image of this wolf preaching to followers, lambs of the Lord.

My niece is so sweet. She speaks with a hint of innocence in her voice. Did his salvation shelter her from the pain of having a missing mother? What has she been told about Roxanne? I have so many questions for her.

But instead I just ask, "So, what kind of music do you like?"

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My sister and I shared a room when we were kids. We even slept in the same queen-size bed. We were close. We became even closer after my dad remarried. My dad would remind us how things were different in our stepmother's culture. In the Philippines, girls just aren't respected and revered the same as boys. I was tough, but my sister was sensitive. It doesn't help that her and my stepbrother are the same age. It seems as though she was always wrong about something, or always doing something wrong—and sure to be insulted or blamed for it. I am her defender—her advocate. Needless to say, my stepmother and I don't have a good relationship throughout my formative years. I always imagine the day our conflict will finally come to blows. But that day never comes.

As I enter high school, I don't spend as much time with my sister. I have friends with cars who can free me from the endless tensions in my house. My sister finds refuge alone in our bedroom. You barely will see her interact with others in the house, except for dinnertime. Even at dinnertime, she just takes her meal to our bedroom. She eats alone to avoid any insults about some unknown, future wrong doing. She is like a ghost. Wanting to feel alive again, she asks to move in with our real mother in the middle of her eighth-grade year of middle school. My mother lives in another state, so I would rarely see her the rest of my high school years.

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I walk through the metal side gate of a rundown house on the bad side of town. I am picking up my sister for a girl's night out. I meet her at the door of a beaten down tool shed in behind the house in a shallow backyard. She's been sleeping here. Her boyfriend's father owns the house upfront. He is a rough guy who has spent his share of time in prison—famous for murdering his own brother. I can't remember how the story goes. I think he killed him with a knife. He slit his throat… stabbed him the heart… or maybe in the back, something like that.

My sister greets me. I look past her shoulder and see a makeshift bed under shelves filled with tools and boxes of unmarked, long forgotten items. It is mid-fall, so she has a small space heater on the floor. I can still feel a draft of cold air making its way through loose wooden boards. As I hug my sister, my fingers run over bumps and welts caused by the insect and spider bites that canvas her skin.

We go out to dinner and a movie—my treat. Afterward, I take her to my apartment. My apartment isn't much, but it's so much more than where my sister sleeps at night. Solid walls keep out the cold… the biting bugs. The simple amenities—a warm shower, flushing toilet, cold refrigerator—suddenly seem so taken for granted.

I moved out of my parent's house when I was nineteen. Well, more like kicked out. My sister had moved back to Texas live with my father and stepmother the summer before her senior year of high school. That summer she moved in, I moved out. I needed to escape. But there she was, trapped, again, without my protection. I wouldn't be there to be her shield against any verbal and emotional blows. It didn't take long after turning eighteen for her to also make an escape.

As we enter my apartment, I offer her a soda. We sit down on the couch for a bit. I keep looking down at my solid hardwood floors. In my mind, I can't help but compare it to the weathered, cracking panels of wooden boards that make up the walls of that tool shed. I look around the room. Calculating measurements, I look at its large size and refigure the layout with an additional bed and crib. It all makes sense. It all fits. I can be her hero and save her. I let her know that if she wants to, she can move in with me.

With the angelic smile of a false savior, I turn to her and say, "I don't have much room, but you can sleep on the couch. Or we can move things around and make the dining room a bedroom. You can live here for free. You won't even have to pay for food. I will be happy to take care of you and Beth. You can stay here as long as you need."

My voice, its tone, had a hint of begging in it. I had to persuade her. I needed to get her out of that small, spider-infested shack.

With a look of disgust, she replies to my offer, “I don’t want to live with you. This is your fault. I blame you for everything that has happened to me. You knew how hard it was for me to live there and you left me anyway. You don’t care about me. No one cares about me.” This all took me by surprise. If she needed to blame me, I would let her blame me. I would be her scapegoat. I would still be her shield.

* * *

After my sister disappeared, my father got a call from the woman she was staying with in San Antonio. She lives in the run down house on the bad side of town with the small shed in the back. The shed my sister had slept in. She is the stepmother of Matthew, Roxanne’s ex-boyfriend. Matthew is the father of their child and was in prison at the time of my sister’s disappearance.

When this woman calls my dad, she seems slightly annoyed. She hasn’t heard from or seen Roxanne in a week and wants her things out of the house. My dad didn’t realize Roxanne had been staying in San Antonio, so the call took him by surprise. He certainly didn’t know she was staying with them at their house last week. He has been to this house before. He knows how rough and tough the crowd of bikers who congregate there can be. Matthew’s drunken father had greeted him with a gun the last time he went there to pick up Roxanne. Surrounded by a gang of men in white wife-beaters and faded jeans, Terminator (the man’s known street name) taunted my father and attempted to scare him. My father didn’t flinch and reassured him he wasn’t scared.

He drives up to the house. This time the lawn is empty. Before he can walk up the paved path to the door, Matthew’s step-mother walks out of the house. She is carrying a small backpack and a few of Roxanne’s personal items. According to my mother, Roxanne was scheduled to travel for two weeks. She was supposed to travel from Colorado to San Antonio. From there she was heading to Los Angeles to Beth before returning back home. After she got home, she was going to start a new life in the military. For someone traveling so far, all that was left behind was a backpack and a few personal items.

Reaching out to take the backpack, dad asks, “Is your husband home? If he is, I need to speak to him.”

Slightly defensive, she snaps back, “He’s not here. He left town a couple of days ago. I will be leaving town in a few days myself. Listen, I just didn’t want Roxanne to come back here for her stuff and us be gone and all.” The woman suddenly seems concerned.

They are moving to a new house in a new town—in a new state. He has a few more questions for her. Primarily, he just wants to know, “What was Roxanne doing here?”

Regardless of her answers, he can’t shake how strange this all suddenly feels. He calls my mother, who lives in Colorado, for further explanation. Roxanne is supposed to be living there with her, along with our stepfather and three younger half-sisters. But Roxanne is joining the military, so who knows where home will be for her in just a few months.

Concerned he first asks my mother, “Is Roxanne there?”

“No, she no here… her not with you?” confusion channels back through the receiver.

“No… where is she?” he adds to my mother’s confusion.

In her broken English, she explains how Roxanne has been traveling by Greyhound bus. According to Roxanne’s bus schedule, she should’ve left San Antonio a few days ago. Her next destination is Los Angeles to visit Beth.

She tells my father, “Maybe she there. I try call her and see if she there.” Minutes go by. My mother calls back, “Mindy say she not there. She not get off bus. She no hear from her.”

My mom’s husband gets on the phone. His American voice can explain the details more clearly to my dad.

With a gentle concern, he says, “Well, she is scheduled to arrive back home tomorrow. I will have Gina call and let you know if she arrives.”

But she never made it back home.

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My father didn’t touch the backpack for nearly a year, just in case Roxanne came back home. He wanted to respect her privacy by not going through her things. She wouldn’t like that. So he let it wait for her, untouched. When he finally opened it, he found several diaries and letters she kept. My sister was the private type. She would lock away her secrets in a diary, finding comfort in the solitude of bound pages. It was somewhere—something to share her inner thoughts with.

Going through the bag, my dad pulls out multiple letters from Matthew. In the letters, Roxanne’s ex-boyfriend promises he will kill her when he gets out of prison. The description of a hateful death fills pages. My dad feels disturbed by reading these letters. Roxanne has never shared these threats with anyone in the family. He finds some comfort in knowing Matthew is in prison right now. He doesn’t know what he is in prison for, but he knows while he is there he can’t hurt Roxanne.

Still feeling disturbed, my dad puts down the letters and picks up the diary. He feels bad for invading her privacy. He is hoping that somewhere between the pale pages will be some hidden answers, a key to unlock this mystery. He opens the diary and thumbs through pages. He stops at her most recent entries. Roxanne writes about a guy who she met along the ride to San Antonio. “I’m in love,” is scribbled on the page. She describes the way he looks, their conversations, and their instant connection. She fell in love with the familiarity and comfort this kind stranger gave her. She describes the way he makes her feel. “I just want to run away together and be with him,” is scribbled on the page.

Based on the evidence, my dad comes up with a hopeful conclusion. It was one of those love stories—the kind you find on the clean, fresh pages of a book. It’s a hopeful tale that many in my family will tell themselves and cling onto. His conclusion was Roxanne ran away with this *perfect* stranger from the bus. She ran away to hide from her ex-boyfriend, to escape death, and to find love. It’s a tale with a happy ending.

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Since 2002, my mom makes a birthday cake on March 28th. I am not there for the ritual. Instead, my three younger half-sisters, my stepfather, and mom partake in the celebration. I picture them there gathered in the dark, year after year. I can see my mom turning the corner with candles lit; flickers of light dance and swirl with shadows of smoke against the walls. A heavenly glow is cast upon their faces as they sing, “Happy birthday to you.” I picture my mom tightly closing her eyes with concentration. As if saying a prayer, she bows her head to softly mumble words. She makes *the wish*. It’s the wish we have all held on to. This wish has escaped my lips time and time again.

I see her slowly opening her eyes. The tension of the in-between is in the air. She wants to make the wish. As she celebrates this ritual of birth, she is not quite ready to blow out the flames.

* * *

I’ve been waiting for my refurbished cell phone to arrive in the mail for over a week. It was originally sent to the wrong address or just not sent at all. It’s frustrating not having a phone. I am excited when it finally arrives in the mail. As I let the phone charge for a bit, I am anticipating the number of missed calls I may have.

Once I see the little battery symbol on the top right corner is half alive, I start to review my missed calls. My first message is from an unfamiliar number. I am assuming it’s someone trying to sell me something or some random promotional message. But if a company leaves a message, I will also take time to listen to it. I press the play button on the message first. At this point, the message is nearly a week old.

A deep male voice reverberates in my ear. The recorded voice says, “Hello, this is detective Harry Smith. I am the lead detective investigating the murder of who I assume is your sister, Roxanne McGreehan. If you can please give me a call at the station or on my cell phone as soon as possible, that would be great. I would like to ask you a few questions.”

Although I let the message play all the way through, my mind went into a little a bit of shock when I heard him say he was investigating the murder of my sister. For that past eleven years, my sister has been a missing person. What does he mean, investigating my sister’s murder? My jaw and heart drop. I grab a pen and piece of paper. I play the message again. I urgently write down his name and phone numbers he has provided me.

I pace back and forth. My heart races as I pick up the phone and begin to dial his cell number. With the ring, anxiety and nervousness shakes my body. On the second ring, I sit down on the sofa and start rocking slightly back and forth. Luckily enough, I am home alone.

Only the dogs and cats watch the anxiousness take over my body while I wait for him to answer.

I am finally greeted by his firm voice, "Hello, this is detective Harry Smith. How can I help you?"

I respond, "Ah, yes, this is Dianah McGreehan. I received a call from you about a week ago regarding my sister, Roxanne McGreehan. I am sorry I didn't call back right away. I lost my phone a couple of weeks ago, so I just got your message." I felt I had to apologize.

Relieved to hear my voice after a week of waiting, "Yes, I wanted to ask you a few questions."

I quickly interrupt, "In your message, you mentioned you were investigating my sister's murder… is that right?" I find myself suddenly holding my breath.

"Yes, I am the lead detective on your sister's case," he confirms.

I let out a gasp, and my voice starts to shake. I blink and thick tears run down my face. Years of hoping that she was alive—years of hoping for information—years of hoping to know the truth collided with his calm confirmation. My body starts to shake as I try to gather myself. I suddenly feel a little numb. I apologize for my emotional outburst. I breathe in and then let out a deep exhale.

Wiping my tears, my voice cracks, "I am so sorry… this is just shocking news."

He comforts me, "It's okay. I know that this must be really hard to hear. Are you okay to talk right now or do you need to call me back later this afternoon." His firm voice softens.

I reassure him, "No… no, I can talk. I want to talk. And please, I know that this is hard to hear, but I would like as much information as possible."

“Well, first I wanted to ask you about your brother Ronald McGreehan. Did you know that Ronald hired a private investigator a couple of month ago?” he questions.

I am a bit thrown off from his first question, “No.”

He continues, “So you don’t know why your brother, after eleven years of your sister being a missing person, hires a private investigator now?”

In a slight defensive tone, “My brother has looked into my sister’s disappearance in the past. But he has never hired a professional, private investigator. This is the first I am hearing about it. I think my brother has just always wanted to do something to help Roxanne or just wanted to try to get some information. Why are you asking this?”

He expounds, “I am only asking because… well, I guess your sister was never filed as a missing person when she first disappeared in 2002. Looking at our system, your sister was filed as a missing person for the first time two months ago by this private investigator. Well a month after she was listed, a man who was being interrogated in prison… just randomly, out of the blue, confesses to your sister’s murder in detail.”

I am not sure what he is insinuating, so I quickly assert, “Well, have you spoken to Ronald about this. My brother is a really great guy. He is an officer in the Air Force... umm he was the captain of his football team. He is a really good guy, and I am sure he was just trying to be a good brother. He was just trying to find out what happened to Roxanne.”

He corrects his approach to the conversation, “Actually you are the first and only person from your family who I have spoken to about this. No… no… no, I don’t think your brother was involved in anyway. I am so sorry if I gave off that impression. I am just amazed by the miracle of it all. If your brother didn’t hire that private investigator, your sister would not had been listed as a missing person. If it wasn’t for that, we would not have been able to trace back the murder. Your brother is actually quite the hero in this situation. I don't know, it just seems like a miracle. I really was just curious why he suddenly, after all this time, was moved to hiring this investigator."

I have a short sensation of relief. The detective and I talk for what feels like an hour. He tells me details about the man who confessed. He lived next door to where Roxanne was staying during her visit to San Antonio. It seems Roxanne had asked him for a short ride to the corner store, but that would not be her final destination.

The detective says they believe he murdered my sister. The detective believes this because of how detailed his confession was. The prisoner described what she was wearing that night. Her murderer gives details about the way he looked at her. He retells their conversation. Roxanne was so happy to be starting her life. Roxanne told him about how she was going to be joining the military. She described Beth and how she was finally going to be able to get her back. She was so excited to start her life. She talked about traveling to see Beth in California next. Roxanne talked about Beth so much that this man, Roxanne's assumed murderer, could still remember Beth's name.

* * *

I had a friend ask me the other day how my thesis writing was going. I just said "Oh, you know, I write for an hour and then I cry for two." She laughed so hard when I said that. Except I wasn't joking. I said it as though it was a joke, but it really has been my pattern the last few days. As I emotionally recall and transform past experiences into thick descriptions on the page, it triggers something in me.

I keep going back to my conversation with the detective who is investigating my sister's murder. I guess I keep thinking about that moment. Because for me, that moment was when my sister died. Although she was murdered in 2002, for me, it was that day that my sister died—that call.

The synchronicity of life is so strange. It had been over a decade since I had last seen my niece, Beth. But two weeks before the detective's phone call, I finally reconnected with her in person. She looked so much like my sister—like her mother. She is so sweet. I asked her what kind of things I could get her for future holidays and birthdays. And you know what she said? Do you know what she wanted? She just asked that I send her photos of her mother. That is all she wanted… just to see pictures of her mom.

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So I have been having these daydreams about that moment. Not the moment when he kills my sister. I have been having dreams about the moment my sister knew that something was wrong. That something was out of place. That she was out of place. The moment her happy conversation turned to fear. The moment she knew she would never see her daughter again.

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After I got off of the phone with the detective, I was in a stage of shock. Some scholars suggest there are seven stages of grief while others argue there are only five. The first stage of grief is always denial. My denial came during my sister's disappearance. My family and I denied death and replaced it with hope—hope that somehow my sister was alive. But hearing the details, the reality, of my sister's death, gave me a sense of shock. I can't tell you how long I was in a stage of shock. But I can tell you after that initial shock, all of the other stages—of anger, bargaining, and depression—have been an entangled blur, which come in ebbs and flows.

It was the middle of the second summer semester when I received the call from the detective. I wasn't taking a class at the time, so I was able to process that shock before I moved out to West Texas to attend classes in the communication graduate program at Angelo State University. I think I used my "stage of anger" toward my research and work my first academic year. My pain and loss felt so disenfranchised. As I discussed the disappearance and death of my sister with my colleagues during the fall semester, they weren't able to grasp the internalized anger, pain, and guilt I was experiencing.

* * *

I killed my sister today. This time sh..sh..she's screaming and she's begging him to stop. She doesn't play possum this time. No, this time she's scared—as he leans over to the passenger side of the car to smell her flesh. She fights back—as he grabs her and drags her from the car toward the wooded area by the creek. As she hits the ground, she claws at the dirt—gripping for some hope of escape. As his hands squeeze and tighten around her throat, he presses her into the ground. Her eyes are open and she is looking right at him. Tears are seeping from the small corners of her eyes. She's gasping for air, fighting for life. I can hear her soul scream as it escapes from her body—from the cracks in her skull that met the rock. Her soul is yearning for her daughter, her family, somewhere safe, somewhere to call home. She's lost—her soul is lost.

*

After I finish sharing my dream with my therapist, he confirms that I am suffering from PTSD and prescribes me Prozac. Later that evening, I pop a pill in my mouth and I wait. I wait for the pill to take away the depression and anxiety. I wait for justice. I wait to find meaning. I wait to grieve. I pretend "as/if" life can somehow be normal again.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

I enter my office, turn on the light, and walk toward my desk. I power on my computer and wait for the glowing light to greet me. I open and click the Word document where the fourth chapter of my thesis is saved. The cursor blinks on the blank page. As I am typing, I keep second guessing my words—my choices. I want to capture it all, but I feel like I am failing to truly tell her story—my story. I delete the first sentences over and over again.

Now my anxiety is setting in. I dig into my purse to find the little black tin pill box shaped like an Ouija board. I shake it quickly and hear the pills of Prozac inside. I open the tin and I pinch one of the small white pills between my fingers. I head to my kitchen to grab a glass of water, so I can swallow it down. I breathe deeply and give myself a little pep talk. I walk back into my office and sit down at my computer.

Next to my computer is an old high school photo of my sister. I look at her posed smile and then turn back to the white blank page on my computer. Writing my thesis has been such an interesting journey. I thought it was going to be so easy. But I was naïve to think I could avoid grief and its stage of depression. The depression really hit me in the earlier chapters. When I began to write my thesis, it had only been a little over a year since I was first told about my sister's murder. The timeline of my thesis didn't agree with the timeline of my grief process.

I look up again at my sister, and I think about how I am letting her down. I start to think how I am letting down my thesis committee and myself. I am really behind on my writing. I just start writing a couple of pages. The next thing you know… I am sitting in the dark alone—crying and rocking myself to sleep. As I blow my nose into tissues, I keep thinking, “Why am I crying… I am just writing a freaking literature review?”

Writing my thesis made me face my sister’s disappearance and death head on. I finally found an academic theory that addressed what I had suffered through all these years. The research of these scholars legitimized my frozen grief and ambiguous loss. I no longer felt so isolated in my complicated, prolonged grief. Although I was sharing my sister’s story, I was truly revealing my own personal struggles of coping with loss.

I stare back at the empty white page on my computer and the blinking black curser. Thinking of the connection I made with the work of the scholars in the chapters before this one, I recognize the importance of sharing my own story—of creating a communal space for coping with traumatic loss.

* * *

In this final discussion chapter of my thesis, I will (a) summarize the previous four chapters; (b) reflect on the goals I set for my thesis in Chapter 1, (c) discuss how my autoethnographic inquiry contributes to the field of communication studies, survivors of ambiguous and traumatic loss, and to the relational construction of my identity, and finally (d) share a direction for future inquiry.

Summary

As I started my autoethnographic inquiry, I explored the architectural narratives and discourses that enclosed family members of missing persons in a labyrinth of hope. In Chapter 1, I explain the difficulty of seeking an ultimate truth through the shadow of ambiguity and trauma. Meandering through the messy maze of hope and grief, I follow the crumbs of the academic scholars before me to develop a pathway toward understanding ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999). I begin to (de)construct the protective walls of hope to reshape and reconstruct fragments of meaning. By sharing my personal stories, I shed light on the trepid space between hope and traumatic loss. I explain how the relational construction of identity and reality binds and links our personal experiences and narratives. Twisting and turning through doing *my* autoethnography, I aim to connect myself with readers so we can form a communal space of support. This first chapter begins our path of resilience.

In Chapter 2, I remind readers of the mediated images and posters that plaster the historical shifts in our nation's missing person discourses. Our collective hope and grief hardens our demand for protection from the dangerous monsters hidden it the cracks of society. For the survivors coping with ambiguous and traumatic loss, social constructionism and relationalism (e.g., Gergen, 1973; Gergen & Gergen 2000; Gergen & Walter, 1998) allows multiple meanings of truth. In the co-active process of dialogue, I (re)make my reality to transform new meanings from the confusion of complicated grief.

In Chapter 3, I address the therapeutic nature of narrative as an intervention for sharing and reconstructing identity (Boss, 2006). I describe the functions of my autoethnographic approach as a communication process with relational others co-creating experiences of surviving the fatal blows of death (Bochner & Ellis, 2006). Sharing my stories of ambiguous and traumatic loss, I work to provide a space for myself and readers to communicate the complexities of the cultural phenomena of missing person discourses. I reinforce how the doing of autoethnography requires an active participatory speaking, listening, and processing of lived moments of struggle.

In Chapter 4, I (re)account personal stories and memories of life and loss and share them in the form of narrative. I layer accounts (Rambo Ronai, 1992) of relational stories of certain and ambiguous loss shared with me by friends and family members. Their experiences with death illuminate my own personal understandings of the emotional expectations and rituals which surround loss. The messiness of morass moments are fragmented on the pages (Marcus, 1994) and scattered through temporal shifts in time. I share my vulnerable self through my narrative text to help reflexively gaze back and forth between social and personal experiences of uncertainty (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The importance of sharing these lived stories of loss is to reveal the intersubjective connection of shared identities and meanings between survivors of trauma. I (re)claim my voice and intertwine it with the utterances of others to write through pain (Adams, 2012) and dialogically shift (Baxter, 2011) the construction of meaning as a communal space for sense-making.

Reflecting on the Goals of My Thesis

My thesis was guided by four primary goals, outlined in Chapter 1. Understanding the impact of collective hope and collective loss on survivors coping with ambiguous loss and complicated grief was the first goal for my inquiry. My second goal was to reflexively explore how I processed, communicated, and negotiated a space of hope during the disappearance and assumed death of my sister. For my third goal, I aimed to construct a space for this underrepresented cultural group to gain a greater understanding of their confusing, complicated experiences of loss. My fourth and final goal of my thesis was to honor the memory of my sister, Roxanne McGreehan

Understanding the impact of collective hope and collective loss. As I share my struggles with making sense of the insensible nature of ambiguous loss and homicide, I am haunted by stories and images of children who have disappeared throughout history (e.g., Etan Patz, Adam Walsh). I recall hope lingering on the lips of newscasters, as well as in the hearts of volunteers combing empty fields—hands placed over hands. I hoped for them. I hoped for the one's missing, but more importantly for the one's searching. "I hope they find her," I would mumble from my mouth as I changed the station.

By sharing my own personal stories of ambiguous loss, I show the communal and intersubjective nature of hope for the missing. Collective hope and loss transforms our relational connections and shared realities. During the disappearance of my sister, hope became an inescapable narrative that shaped the societal expectations and actions I placed on myself and on others (Betz & Thorngren, 2006). Hope became a paradoxical action against ambiguity, which trapped me and my family in a liminal space between absence and presence.

Boss (2006) offers, "How we see the world will determine how and what we hope for" (p. 179). In seeking to understand the impact of collective hope and collective loss on survivors of ambiguous loss, I came to learn that the phenomenology of meaning is formed collectively through shared stories and interactions with others. If a family hopes for a story with a happy outcome, their collective hope suspends the life of their loved ones in a positive state of possibility. Hope covers the deep cutting reality of death.

When death is certain, collective rituals also govern the process of grieving. Social ghosts (Gergen, 1987) haunt families coping with the ambiguity that surrounds cold case homicides. As I sought to understand collective loss, I found the normalcy of death to be a myth. Death ruptures our sense of identity and leaves us emotionally wounded in its wake. Healing begins as we redefine meaning and redefine ourselves through shared experiences, stories of loss.

By reframing and reforming symbolic rituals, stories, and performances surrounding death, families, and communities experiencing complicated grief, we can share in a new collective memory and mourning of the missing.

Exploring how I processed, communicated, and negotiated the space of hope. Prior to this autoethnographic inquiry, I struggled to fully comprehend and express the impact my sister's traumatic disappearance and death had on me. My prolonged hope eventually intensified internal emotions of guilt (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2013). My guilt was a result of wanting to express grief, which meant losing hope. This guilt manifested into both moments of anger and withdrawal. After my sister disappeared, I would watch coverage of the newest missing person on the evening news and feel jealous. Although I hoped for their return, I was jealous their stories mattered enough to receive coverage. I would think to myself, "Why did no one care when Roxanne disappeared? She was never on the news—never in the newspaper. A community never searched or cried for her. The cops didn't even care." I would then feel guilty for not doing more myself.

The process of writing this thesis challenged me to reflexively process my sister's disappearance and death fully for the first time. My anger and withdrawal turned inward and manifested into symptoms of depression and PTSD. By writing these lived experiences of loss and pain, I begin to validate my own story and explain why it matters. I started to feel less isolated in my ambivalence and trauma as I read the stories of others and as I share my own experiences.

I (re)tell my personal narrative to (re)learn my identity as a survivor and to begin relationally (re)constructing meaning (Attig, 1996). Walls in the labyrinth of hope begin to collapse as I forgive myself for past events—assumed failings as a sister. Interior liberation

(Levi, 1958/1987) occurs in/through the sharing of my survivor story. I write to overcome and understand trauma (Pennebaker, 1990). I have to let go of the hindering hope for definitive and complete answers. Cooper (2000) explains how the "ability to create, resurrect, challenge, modify, and even renounce our hopes is as good as any other definition of health" (p. 73). My thesis has allowed me the space to understand the power of renaming and redirecting hope. In discovering a new form of hope, families can learn to live with ambiguity and gain resiliency to the absurdities of life (Boss, 2006).

Constructing a space for understanding complicated experiences of loss. Autoethnographic narrative engages and forms a connection between self and others. Everyone, at some point in life, will be a survivor of loss. For those suffering from loss due to a disappearance or cold case homicide, this thesis provides an outlet to relationally recognize the complications of grief formed from uncertainty. By telling my story, I share self and/with/through the identities of others to reinforce a shared interconnection and commonality in our lived experiences of loss.

The accessibility of narrative allows readers to reflect on their own personal moments of vulnerability, allowing for a communal experience transformation and healing (Custer, 2014). Together, we amplify our voices and break free from suffering in silence. I/We bear witness and testify to the cultural phenomena of ambiguous loss (Denzin, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Therapeutic healing occurs as we legitimatize and destigmatize our loss stories.

Through my autoethnographic inquiry, I begin to highlight the taken-for-granted assumptions and rituals of death that complicate meaning-making during uncertain loss. My personal narrative of ambiguous loss challenges canonical discourse and creates awareness of the societal sub-text that works to disenfranchise the complicated grief experienced by survivors (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). By exposing trauma I experienced during the disappearance and death of my sister, I emancipate the voices of an underrepresented sub-culture of victims/survivors in an academic context. I tell my/our stories with/through others to gain resilience to ambiguous loss.

Honoring the memory of Roxanne McGreehan. This autoethnography constitutes symbolic space for homage (Adams, 2012) to my sister as I memorialize/d her in these pages (Bochner, 2007). The ritual of writing was like visiting and tending to her grave. If autoethnography is always a co-constructed story of self with other (Allen-Collinson, 2013), I needed moments of self with her. Much like the obituaries in the back of a daily newspaper, I could only share a portion of her life experiences in the limited space.

Through sharing my story with readers, I offer an invitation to visit her plot, her story. Her memory becomes something readers and I now share (Ellis, 2013a). As I reflexively form meaning from my narrative, readers also participate in making sense out of life's complex tales of loss. Readers experience the tensions of absence and presence as they subjectively form their own understandings of meaning surrounding her/our story (Boylorn, 2013).

As I type and repeat the name Roxanne McGreehan within these pages, I solidify the importance of her story. Even though her story never made headline news, her story matters. Her story is a representation of the "missing-missing" individuals (Quinet, 2007) who go unreported and untold. I write my thesis as a symbolic cenotaph for all missing individuals and for the families searching for meaning. Through the communal sharing of my/her story, I hope to begin the communal process of healing.

Contributions of this Autoethnographic Inquiry

My initial aim for my thesis was to understand how personal narratives form from the societal discourses surrounding missing persons and cold case murder victims. In the process of researching, writing, and theorizing shared stories—my story (Bochner, 1994) of ambiguous loss—I began to understand autoethnography as a powerful resource to push back against the discourse that shackled/silenced me in a frozen state of grief. Rather than discourse acting onto me, I (re)claim my voice as a survivor and emancipate my emotional lived experience through narrative. My autoethnographic inquiry contributes to the field of communication studies by securing a space for survivors of ambiguous and traumatic loss to share their stories through academic text. Through the (re)telling of self with others, I endeavor to reshape discourse and reconstruct my own relational identity in the process.

Field of communication studies. As I started this undertaking, I found limited extant research in communication journals regarding ambiguous loss and missing persons. My autoethnographic inquiry demonstrates an importance of including the topic of ambiguous loss in our academic conversation. I argue that, through the use of interpretive approaches, scholars can begin to validate these stories of loss. To fully understand how individuals communicate the complicated nature of ambiguous loss, scholars should not convert these voices into statistics and quantified data (Lather & Smithies, 1997).

Through the use of narrative inquiry, scholars can resurrect “subjugated voices, breaking the grip and closure of cultural scripts” (Harter & Bochner, 2009). Centering my own personal story as the starting point for comprehending ambiguous loss, I understand that knowledge is co-constructed through my relational interaction with others (Gergen, 2009a; 2009b). By revealing the intersubjectivity of loss through narrative, I construct an accessible space (Adams, 2012) for scholars and survivors to share in a meaningful dialogue about ambiguous loss.

Survivors of ambiguous and traumatic loss. For over a decade, I felt frustrated in my attempts to find words to express emotions and reactions I had toward the disappearance of my sister. I came to learn and understand ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999; Boss, 2006) through this autoethnography. My inquiry allowed me to reclaim my voice and validate my own interpretations of loss. By sharing my narrative with scholars in the field of communication studies, I make stories of ambiguous loss "visible, personal, and real" (Goodall, 2004, p. 188). I invite conversations to challenge current discourses surrounding missing persons and cold case homicides.

I shed light on the dark space of liminality between hope and certain death that conjures guilt and freezes grief. I inform readers of the unique form of PTSD experienced by survivors as a result of chronic ambiguity and chronic trauma (Boss, Beaulieu, Wieling, Turner, LaCruz, 2003). The chronic tension of absence and presence can manifest anxiety and depression. I share my story to remind readers that closure is myth (Boss & Carnes, 2013). As survivors, we have the power to relationally form new meanings from our loss. We can reshape our belief systems and social world by sharing our stories of ambiguous loss.

Narrative medicine (Charon, 2006) allows ambiguous loss survivors to unblock emotional barriers on the path to healing. Moments of shared stories become moments of shared healing. Narrative therapy (Boss, 2006) allows survivors to gain resilience to ambiguity through the dialectical thinking of "both/and." I share my autoethnography to create a space for narrative healing through stories (Harter & Bochner, 2009). As communication scholars, we must make space for these stories to be told and heard. We must validate the narrative significance of ambiguous loss stories in the academic arena.

Relational construction of my identity. Through autoethnography, I create a dialogic space of self-transformation and discovery. The welcomed tension of both/and allows my sister to remain with me in this space of ambiguity. I move toward resiliency as I recall communal words of meaning and memory. This multivocality forms my socially constructed reality and understanding of the phenomena of ambiguous loss. I am a corporal body communicating/performing loss in temporal and liminal spaces of interplay with past, present, and future interpretations of meaning with/through myself and others.

The interchangeable shared identity of self-other resonates in stories of loss. Our collective rituals of death and grief work to co-create culture. In understanding myself as a survivor of ambiguous loss, I learn the importance forming new practices and narratives of loss. I share my own personal story of ambiguous loss as a relational resource for readers searching to understand their own experiences of uncertainty.

As I shift my gaze back and forth, I seek to find an interconnection. I shift my gaze to my readers and remind them my story is never mine alone. My story is our stories, their stories, and her stories. As I share my story, I recognize it is through my personal lenses and filters. I have revealed my vulnerable self, but in doing so I also implicate others (Ellis, 2007). The words, sentences, and pages of this thesis make up the messy layers of my fragmented memories—glimpses of a lifetime of stories (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I have been thoughtful in how I share the stories of my family members and friends, while still attempting to communicate the messy moments of life (Foley, 2002). My narrative shares real yet subjugated stories of loss. By sharing my story—my narrative truth (Bolen & Adams, in press)—I emphasize the importance of knowledge gained from the everyday lived experience of life and loss. I hope readers who have suffered through ambiguous loss and complicated grief can find companionship through my narrative and be inspired to share their own (Ellis, 2013b). By sharing our stories, we can begin to reconstruct meaning and redefine practices of loss.

Directions for Potential Inquiries

As I move forward with my academic research regarding ambiguous loss, I seek to understand the commonalities of my story with other survivors of traumatic loss. Shifting my autoethnographic "I" to the communal "we" (Ellis, 2004), I suggest a critical complete-member ethnographic method (cf. Toyosaki, 2011) will situate an epistemological intimacy (Smith, 2005) and intracultural intersubjectivity between myself and other members of the "missing person" community. This praxeological approach to the research process examines the "us" in missing person narratives (cf. Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011). Collaborative witnessing becomes collaborative writing (Ellis & Bochner, 2006) as a communal voice is echoed through narrative text.

Boss (2006) suggests more longitudinal and intercultural studies on the topic of ambiguous loss. The doing of auto/ethnography provides an opportunity to explore long-term impact complicated grief on survivors and communities dealing with uncertain loss. To understand the cross-cultural commonalities in the experience of disappeared and missing persons, ethnography may highlight how the multivocality of meaning permeates and influences individual and cultural perceptions. By actively participating and sharing stories with cultural groups, I can begin to understand how cultural discourse and expectations are acted upon and through the members of this community. The purpose of a critical complete-member ethnographic approach is to form a textual connection through the authorship of our stories of loss (Conquergood, 1991). Through our shared stories, we can begin to break free from societal expectations of loss and begin (re)making meaning moments of communal mourning and remembrance.

◆ ◆ ◆

After our afternoon Thanksgiving meal, my father and I get into his truck to go on our usual post meal country drive. Today he promises to take me somewhere special. Winding down one narrow paved path to next, we past autumn kissed trees. Changing hues of yellow and red blur outside my passenger side window. My dad finally reveals to me that he is taking me to the spot Roxanne was killed years ago.

"How do you know Roxanne was killed there," I inquire, surprised by our destination.

He discloses, "Well, I asked the detective if I could read the recorded confession. Based on his description, it can only be one of two places. He said he killed her where the road meets the creek. I drove down this road last week, and I just have a feeling this is the place."

As we continue forward, I feel a mixture of emotions come over me. It's a mixture of anticipation, curiosity, and a subtle sensation of mourning. The momentum of the truck slows as it rolls onto a gravel patch along the side of a small concrete passing above a shallow creek. I get out of the truck. Everything seems so peaceful and quiet. It's a sunny and warm day. The simple beauty of the scene is so deceiving in the daylight. What stories would the trees tell me if they could speak? They were the only other witnesses to the crime.

I can't help but imagine this place absent of light. A place of a horrible tale. I stand on the narrow road and stare ahead down the path of the creek. I envision Roxanne's body resting in the water and being swallowed up by the mud. Could any piece of her still remain here? A tension haunts me as I form symbolic meaning from the thin trees, the water, the mud, and rocks. This little place on earth was the location of Roxanne’s murder, as well as her final resting place. I could easily fear it or transform it into a memorial.

I turn, look behind me, and think, “which side of the creek did it happen on?” I then remember my father mentioned it could be one of two places. Uncertainty falls over me again as I stare past the trees into my own liminal space of possibilities.

* * *

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