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## Wailing For My Cultura: Disenfranchised Grief Among Mexican Americans Navigating A Bicultural Identity

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WAILING FOR MY CULTURA: DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF AMONG MEXICAN  
AMERICANS NAVIGATING A BICULTURAL IDENTITY

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### **Dedication**

*We watched you hold it together during a separation, divorce, losing jobs. You didn't let any of that break you. Instead, you faced it head on and you just handled it. Sure, there were tears, but you didn't let life break you. So now, we can't let your death break us.*

Sandra Ramirez, personal journal entry, August 15, 2017

This thesis is dedicated wholeheartedly to my late mother, Teresa Guillen Ramirez, whose unexpected death in 2017 devastated me, but also granted me the opportunity to explore and understand my grief in ways I could have never imagined. Thank you for guiding me through this process.

WAILING FOR MY CULTURA: DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF AMONG MEXICAN  
AMERICANS NAVIGATING A BICULTURAL IDENTITY

by

SANDRA RAMIREZ, B.A.

THESIS

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## **Abstract**

There is a gap in grief research in the field of Communication that is related to the Mexican American experience. Mexican Americans navigating two often opposing cultures may experience additional complications as they attempt to maneuver the differences in grief rituals that align with either American or Mexican customs. This may result in the bereaved experiencing disenfranchised grief. This study aims to examine the significance of Mexican American bicultural grief rituals as a third option to determine how that relates to disenfranchised grief.

The first part of this study is a textual analysis of media coverage of Mexican American grief rituals as they were publicly performed following the mass shooting in El Paso, Texas on August 3, 2019. The second portion of this analysis embraced autoethnography in the form of a textual analysis of my personal journal entries following my mother's death. The results showed that public displays of Mexican American grief rituals resulted in me resolving my own feelings of disenfranchised grief following my mother's death.

These results suggest that by understanding and acknowledging the significance of Mexican Americans grief rituals, Mexican Americans may lessen the possibility of experiencing disenfranchised grief.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

No hay palabras. Those are the words my aunt said to me outside of the funeral home before my mother's viewing and rosary service. My aunt had just arrived from out of town and it was the first chance she had to offer her condolences in person. There are no words. More than four years later, her words still resonate with me. At the time, I did not realize how much those words would remain at the forefront of my thoughts and in the depths of my soul. I have come to realize there is no combination of words that can offer comfort to someone grieving the death of someone they love. Perhaps that is what prevents people from attempting to offer any comfort at all.

As a Mexican American, my culture and my family, both immediate and extended, taught me to turn to faith in the face of any crisis, especially death. In my experience, it is only acceptable to openly grieve at the time of a loved one's passing and in the days that follow, during their rosary and visitation, during the funeral, and during the novena that proceeds in the nine days following the death. While crying may be tolerated during those rituals, I instinctively knew wailing is not. Reading Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) words years after my mother's death resonated so deeply, "wailing is the Indian, Mexicana and Chicana woman's feeble protest when she has no other recourse," (p. 33). Yet when I felt no other recourse when faced with my own grief, I still did not wail. The letters leaped right off of the page as Anzaldúa (1987) described the level of restraint for a Chicana woman who "does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her," (p. 20). She was writing about my experience 30 years before I experienced it. Without anyone ever having said it aloud, I somehow subconsciously knew

wailing would have been seen as irrational. In the face of death and through unimaginable grief I understood wailing was a display of grief that I should reject, so I did. Once the grieving rituals ended, I was encouraged to continue praying for my mother, to hold special birthday and anniversary masses for her, and visit the cemetery on Dia de los Muertos. What my culture and my family failed to teach me was how to grieve my mother's death outside of the rituals and customs of my Catholic faith and my Mexican roots.

My mother was born an American citizen to a Mexican American mother and a Native American father. My father, who came to the United States in the 1970s, was born and raised in a small pueblo in Michoacán, Mexico. It is through my mixed-status family that I learned Americans in the United States and Mexicans in Mexico grieve in two very different and often conflicting ways. To which was I to clutch to navigate my grief? While I have always embraced my Mexican culture, suddenly I felt it had become a burden that prevented me from openly grieving my mother's death. I felt as though I had to "keep it together," only cry in private, and not dare burden anyone with my sadness. My grief was my cross to bear; something to overcome that would make me a strong Mexican woman, more steadfast in my faith. These are all things that, in my experience, are revered as achievements in my family and in my culture. I felt an overwhelming response to dissect this familial and cultural burden, to unpack why I felt the obligation to grieve in what I would later realize is an unhealthy and traumatic way.

Following my mother's death, I felt a connection to every friend, co-worker, and neighbor who lost a loved one. Then on August 3, 2019, I would connect with nearly two dozen families, strangers who were suddenly and traumatically faced with the death of a loved one when a man walked into a Walmart in my hometown of El Paso, Texas and started shooting, killing 22 of my neighbors. Nine months later, the shooting claimed its 23<sup>rd</sup> victim who died

from injuries he was unable to overcome. My heart broke for each and every person who felt the need to scream, cry and wail over their loss. I felt the emptiness in the pit of their stomach, the silent gasp as they tried to catch their breath from the *susto*, the shock, and the confusion of trying to understand why this was happening to their family. A large makeshift memorial was erected outside of the site within hours. People flooded the public memorial every morning, day, and night for weeks to publicly mourn for their neighbors, with their neighbors. Many of the victims were strangers, but there was a spirit of communal grief. There was often music by local artists, bands, and mariachi groups. Juan Gabriel's "Amor Eterno" became the community's battle cry, during a time when there was a lot of crying. It was almost immediately apparent the public dynamics following the El Paso shooting embraced rituals that connected with Mexican culture. One challenge I faced in my own grief was weighing whether I should embrace the cultural practices of my Mexican roots or adhere to socially acceptable American norms. The cultural limitations on my grief restricted openly expressing my grief. Media coverage focused on telling the stories of the victims from the perspective of those who loved them. People told stories about their parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters and even a 15-year-old boy whose uncle said he could not protect. The entire nation was listening, and this binational, bicultural community refused to suppress discussions about death and grief.

What happened in the days and weeks following the August 3 shooting empowered a community and a culture to openly grieve the loss of many lives, and they embraced that grief on their own terms. That is powerful. While it was not the equivalent of my grief experience following my mother's death, it has served as the catalyst for this project. This project is rooted in the communal acceptance of grief as it was publicly performed following the August 3 shooting in El Paso. Just two and a half years before the shooting, in the same border town, I

experienced equally destructive grief, yet there was no one ready and willing to listen to me tell stories and talk about what a wonderful person my mother was. I felt as though silencing grief was an intentional unspoken norm. This project explores these diametrically opposed approaches to grief that unfolded in the same border town, among the same cultural norms.

In this thesis, I outline the rationale for the communicative study of grief through a performative lens. I do this by first outlining grief as a communicative act, including talking or not talking about grief. The literature presented in this project portrays grief in American culture as something to be ignored. However, following the El Paso shooting, grief was openly displayed in public settings outside of traditional rituals. Wailing was publicly witnessed, acknowledged, and seemingly accepted. This work focuses specifically on how public displays of grief following the August 3 shooting seemed to transcend the limitations of performing socially acceptable grief in the United States, and specifically in the cultural and literal borderlands. I analyze this topic through a textual and rhetorical analysis of news stories and videos following the shooting. This project also includes an autoethnographic approach in which I draw on my own performance of grief following my mother's death, and how it differed from the public performance of grieving the victims of the El Paso shooting. I explore Kenneth Doka's (2002) concept of disenfranchised grief, which occurs when losses are unacknowledged or unrecognized by others. I approach this project as a bicultural woman with roots in two countries, a cultural and literal border dweller, as someone who is grieving a deep, personal loss, and as someone who experienced a communal loss on August 3, 2019.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Grief as a Communicative Act**

Grief is something the bereaved communicate through words, stories, performances, rituals, and through the emotions they express and withhold. However, Gamba (2018) asserted there exists an absence of grief in health communication research. Grief is often a research topic explored by psychologists or psychiatrists interested in understanding how the grief process impacts survivors' mental health, but grief and bereavement are not only a psychological process. Instead, Bosticco & Thompson (2005) found grief is "manifest and negotiated through communication, primarily through communication within family units and subunits" (p. 274). In support of grief as a communicative act, it is important to recognize that while grief is experienced as an individual, the process is also a social experience that may be subject to emotional regulation (Barney & Yoshimura, 2020; Archer, 2008). The bereaved may regulate how they express emotion, if they express emotion at all, to preserve their interpersonal relationships (Lopes et al., 2005). Additionally, the death of a loved one becomes part of a bereaved person's identity, sense of self, and ongoing personal narrative (Barney & Yoshimura, 2020; Goldie, 2011). That narrative is constructed through stories, an inherent communicative phenomenon. Neimeyer et al. (2014) argued that grief is a communicative process as "both the story of the death itself and our changed relationship to the deceased are personally narrated, socially shared, and expressed in compliance with or contradiction to widely varying communal rules" (p. 486). Grief as a communicative act is supported in that once it becomes part of a bereaved person's identity, that individual may expose their grief not only through their expression of emotions, or lack thereof, but also through the stories they tell.

Grief is also considered a communicative act because it is an interpretive experience, according to Neimeyer et al. (2014). Barney & Yoshimura (2020) argued “the meanings associated with the life and death of the deceased are created through social interaction between surviving family members and friends” (p. 82). Grief performances such as attending support groups or ritual ceremonies also contribute to constructing meaning around grief “by reflecting the variety of scripts that cultures adapt and promote” (Barney & Yoshimura, 2020, p. 82). The bereaved also seek to receive social support from their community following the death of a loved one through cards, flowers, and memorial services. The bereaved may then go on to provide that social support to others who are grieving. This communicative process may or may not include open expressions of grief in front of others. Social and cultural norms surrounding the performance of grief dictate that people should not grieve too much, or too little, which means the bereaved may withhold emotions such as anger, sadness, or even happiness so as to maximize the social function as a way to avoid experiencing loneliness or social isolation, (Moran, 2016; Fischer & Manstead, 2016). Neimeyer et al., (2014) argued that the bereaved are both subjected to and subjugated by a “script” for expressing grief, and that “families, organizations, and cultures may either implicitly or explicitly assert expectations about the particular times, places, ways, and degrees to which the loss is communicated when one is properly grieving” (p. 83). Barney & Yoshimura (2020) contended those who are not willing or able to follow the script for grieving may be stigmatized. Establishing grief as a communicative act also asserts grief as a performative act that necessitates closer examination, especially in the context of those experiencing and performing grief while navigating two diverse and conflicting cultures.

### *Talking About Grief*

After losing my mother, I can painfully recall the uncomfortable moments I tried to talk about it and felt tension immediately fill the space, or the times my brain urged me to open up, but instead I sat silently willing the overwhelming sense of grief to let me enjoy the moment and engage in “normal” conversation instead. Discussions and expressions of grief by the bereaved are often received with discomfort from friends and even relatives. Research supports that death is still very much a taboo topic in American society. Corr et al. (2019) viewed the American culture as a death-denying society. Paxton (2018) insisted grief is seen as something that can be recovered from by severing ties with a dead loved one, and “as something to be defeated, resolved, or avoided” (p. 5). Sleeman (2013) maintained that avoiding the topic of death in communication is common in Western culture where it is often viewed as a disease. Becker (1973) described death as haunting:

The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man (p. ix).

Fernandez (2011) claimed people avoid conversations about death because they are deemed socially taboo, and that there still exists a stigma surrounding the topic of death. There are other scholars however, who disputed the intentionality of avoiding conversations about death.

Basinger et al. (2016) asserted that those who are not grieving a death or have not experienced a death may avoid talking about the subject as a matter of politeness, or to be considerate of the bereaved and making an effort to avoid upsetting them. A “normal” bereavement process is part of the dominant narrative that Neimeyer et al. (2014) described as detaching from those who have died, placing a time limit on grief, and abiding by social norms when it comes to expressing grief. Those terms are then policed by society, which in turn instructs the bereaved on how to

think, feel and behave. By not conforming to those social expectations, the bereaved may risk being labeled as grieving too much, grieving too long, or not grieving enough. The bereaved may try to align their behavior or the intensity of their grief with socio-cultural expectations of proper or normal grieving. This can become problematic if this process does not align with cultural norms.

It is also imperative to recognize the role of privacy in the grieving process. The bereaved make a conscious decision to protect the privacy of their grieving process. Petronio (2000) found the bereaved may create metaphorical communication boundaries around private information. Cohen & Stamp (2018) asserted those who are grieving use those boundaries as a way to intentionally avoid communication about grief. Basinger et al. (2016) conducted interviews with families who experienced the death of a parent or a sibling, and determined bereaved participants felt ownership over whether they chose to communicate or avoid their grief. Communicating grief requires the bereaved to be vulnerable and share an intimate experience, and Barney & Yoshimura (2020) argued the bereaved may not necessarily believe that others should be privy to that intimacy and vulnerability. James & Wells (2002) suggested some people experiencing grief may avoid talking about it to avoid feelings of anxiety associated with physical and emotional pain. While there may exist a hesitance to open up about grief, Peterson et al. (2013), Rosenblatt & Elde (1990) and German (1981) argued that open communication about death can help the grieving process, can alleviate emotional distress, and communicating with others about grief can help the bereaved make sense of the loss. Jakoby (2014) maintained “talking about grief is considered to be one of the most helpful remedies in the case of bereavement” (p. 13). While communicating about grief may prove to be beneficial to the bereaved, it is nonetheless a sensitive and personal topic that the bereaved must choose to open up about.



Additional research supports the benefits of talking about grief. Rosenblatt & Elde (1990) interviewed a group of adults who had lost a parent, and the participants revealed that they felt that sharing stories with their siblings about their deceased parent helped their grieving process. Black (1998) supported the finding that families who openly communicate about death have a healthier grieving process. Klass et al. (1996) introduced a “continuing bonds” paradigm that supports maintaining a relationship with the deceased. Hedtke & Winslade (2004) expanded that concept to include storytelling, conversations with the deceased, celebrations, and artifacts through processes referred to as the act of “re-membering.” Existing in a world without a significant loved one after they have died can be confusing and overwhelming. Attig (2001) proposed finding new and different ways to talk about grief and different methods for maintaining relationships with the deceased, such as family storytelling, can help those who are grieving relearn to navigate their world. What we can amass about talking about grief is that while it may be helpful, avoiding the topic of death can be an intentional act by people who see the topic as socially unacceptable, or can be an element of control by someone who wishes to grieve privately. Similarly, not talking about grief can also be an unintentional act by someone who is trying to protect the feelings of someone who is bereaved, or by the bereaved who avoid the topic out of their own fear of not confirming to social expectations.

### *Disenfranchised Grief*

There are certain expectations of support when someone experiences a death. For example, when an immediate family member dies, there is an expectation that some relatives will be granted time off from work. Sympathy and condolences pour in, and certain rituals including funerals are performed. However, when certain social and cultural norms do not occur and a bereaved individual does not experience the social recognition, sympathy, or support that is

considered typical, the consequence may be what Doka (2008) introduced as disenfranchised grief. Doka (2008) defined disenfranchised grief as something experienced by those who felt they had “no right to grieve” and

results when a person experiences a significant loss and the resultant grief is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned. In short, although the individual is experiencing a grief reaction, there is no social recognition that the person has a right to grieve or a claim for social sympathy or support (p. 224).

Essentially, when grief is not acknowledged or the bereaved do not feel supported in their grief, there is a likelihood they will experience disenfranchised grief. Some examples Doka (2008) provided that commonly result in disenfranchised grief include the death of an ex-spouse, the death of a lover in an extramarital affair, or the death of a partner in a homosexual relationship in a culture that does not recognize or condone gay relationships. Doka (2008) asserted that disenfranchised grief can also occur within non-kin relationships, like those with neighbors, co-workers, and friends who had not recently been in contact. In this context, I argue disenfranchised grief can be applied in the grief of those who mourned the death of 22 strangers who they did not know personally, but still may have considered neighbors.

The circumstances of the death, such as in cases of suicide, AIDS, or alcoholism, may also lead to disenfranchised grief because the deaths are devalued. Doka (2008) noted grieving rules that “govern what losses one grieves, how one grieves them, who legitimately can grieve the loss, and how and to whom others respond with sympathy and support” (p. 225). The concept of “grievability” and which deaths are worthy of grieving will be explored later in this thesis in the context of whether the lives of Mexican/Mexican American/Immigrant who were killed in

the El Paso shooting are considered “grievable.” There are some losses that are not related to death that Doka (2008) argued can also arouse grief like divorce and the loss of a job. Doka (2002) explained that a person may experience disenfranchised grief if they felt their feelings were discredited or overlooked, if they felt they did not receive socio-emotional support, or if they felt pressured to experience their grief alone.

Placing limitations on someone’s grief may also result in disenfranchised grief. Doka (2008) argued that affective displays of grief are expected early in the grieving process but are considered less appropriate later in the grieving process. Essentially, extreme moods, feelings or attitudes may not be received as well after a certain amount of time following the death, or in certain environments. These are additional rules the bereaved may not be aware they are supposed to abide by. Kauffman (2002) pointed out that disenfranchised grief can also happen by choice when some people refuse to share their grief out of fear, shame, or blame, therefore disenfranchising themselves. Grief becomes a part of a bereaved person’s identity, but Barney & Yoshimura (2020) argued the dominant narrative of grief assumes that it is linear, temporary, and external to a person’s sense of self. Without acknowledging that grief is an ongoing part of a bereaved person’s identity, then the grief becomes perpetually disenfranchised. This can also occur if at any point a grieving person no longer remains constrained to the parameters of socially and culturally acceptable grief. Conforming to social expectations of grieving is a performance of the dominant narrative of grief that may conflict with the bereaved person’s actual experience. Park (2010) maintained the mismatch between their experience and the social expectations they live within may result in them feeling isolated, misunderstood, or disenfranchised. Goodrum (2008) expanded the idea of disenfranchised grief to not only include situations when others interact with the bereaved and avoid the topic of death, but also when they

display an over-sympathetic response, or press a time limit for grieving. Doka (2008) argued that culture also plays a role in disenfranchised grief because, “In some cultures, certain ways of grieving may be understood as valid expressions of grief whereas in other cultures the same behavior may be disdained or inappropriate” (p. 228). There is an inescapable connection between abiding by American cultural norms of avoiding the topic of death and the bereaved feeling as though their grief is not being socially acknowledged. In the autoethnographic portion of this thesis, I will explore the presence of disenfranchised grief. I will also examine if the concept of disenfranchised grief can be linked to Mexican Americans who are defying or denying their own cultural traditions surrounding grief to instead embrace American standards.

## **Grief in the Mexican American Culture**

### *The Mexican American Family*

The Mexican American culture is generally centered around family and community, and while that can be comforting during the grief process, it can also be a burden. Kalish & Reynolds (1981) emphasized that Mexican American families are tightly knit with a concentration on emotional support in the family unit. Diaz-Guerrero (1994) defines this family solidarity and the togetherness of Mexican American family as familismo. Oboler & González (2015) developed familismo as a cultural value that “often requires putting the needs of the community or family unite above those of the individual.” Whitaker et al. (2010) applied the concept of familismo to grief and determined it is imperative to the grieving process among Mexican American communities since that is where they receive most of their support. Diaz-Guerrero (1994) discussed another cultural trait of simpatia among Mexican Americans that is based in avoiding confrontation and maintaining interpersonal harmony. He indicates that in confrontational

situations, Mexicans are more prone to change themselves internally to accept the distressing situation and adjust to it. Someone who is simpatico is willing to lose an argument, time, and other things during interpersonal conflict to retain the internal satisfaction, affection-laden, smooth interpersonal contact. Anzaldúa (1987) maintained “Much of what the culture condemns focuses on kinship relationships. The welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual” (p. 18). I argue that Mexican Americans may avoid openly expressing the emotions of their grief as a way to maintain harmony within the family and to avoid burdening the family with their grief. Considering family is such a central influence among most Mexican Americans, it is likely they will grieve according to cultural norms as a show of solidarity.

### *Religion and Rituals*

Faith and death are commonly linked. Puchalski (2001) maintained the bereaved rely on faith to help them make sense of a loved one’s death. Daaleman & Dobbs (2010) found a person’s relationship with God may make it easier for them to accept death. In a study by Omilion-Hodges et al. (2019), people experiencing the death of a loved one spoke positively about it when it was related to life after death (i.e. heaven, eternal life). The study found that faith may help the bereaved accept a loved one’s death, but there was also a desire among the bereaved to openly talk about death outside of their spiritual realm. Doran & Hansen (2006) determined Mexican families who experienced a death found faith-based practices helped those families maintain a relationship with the dead. According to the Pew Research Center (2014), 55-percent of Latino adults in the United States, which includes Mexican Americans, are largely Roman-Catholic. That is an estimated 35 million people. A commonly cited bible verse encourages Catholics to pray in private. If Catholics acknowledge their grief only through

prayer, it is likely happening in private, which I argue could leave them feeling isolated in their grief.

When Mexican American Catholics experience the death of a loved one, there is a series of rituals incorporated into the process that are linked to religion. Those rituals include a prayer vigil, funeral mass, and burial. Another common tradition among Mexican American Catholics following the death of a loved one is a novena. It involves praying a rosary for nine consecutive days, beginning the day after a loved one's funeral and usually includes a gathering of family and friends. This ritual invites the community to offer support to those most closely grieving the deceased.

Some Mexican American families engage in practices to stay connected to those who have died. Clements et al. (2003) affirmed Mexican Americans believe in a continuous relationship between life and death. Doran & Hansen (2006) upheld that maintaining a connection with the deceased through photos, storytelling, keepsakes, and faith-based rituals is seen as part of an ongoing cycle that includes reunification in the afterlife while also maintaining a connection to those still living. A tradition unique to Mexican and Mexican Americans is Dia de los Muertos, observed on November 2, and has become increasingly popular in the U.S. Observing the day typically involves displaying items in an altar dedicated to the deceased, offering food to spirits of the dead, and family visits to the cemetery. Corr et al. (2019) indicated that as rituals evolve, it is possible that some Mexican families living in the U.S. may not celebrate Day of the Dead, and those that do, may observe it in other ways.

A common response to the death of a loved one is crying. Among Mexican Americans, Hardy-Bougere (2008) found that they encourage crying as a healthy expression. In terms of

intensity of grief Whitaker et al. (2010) assert that Mexican Americans express grief in ways that are different from white populations, while Grabowski and Frantz (1992) determined “Latinos/Latinas grieving sudden death had a significantly greater grief intensity than Latinos/Latinas grieving expected death and greater than Anglos grieving either kind of death.” Similarly, a grief study conducted by Oltjenbruns (1998) showed expressions of grief among a group of Mexican American college students showed more noticeable expressions that increased physical symptoms of grief, when compared to Anglo college students in the same study. However, openly crying or expressing emotions may not necessarily be universally embraced or even experienced among Mexican Americans. Falicov (1998) argued that culturally, Mexican Americans may be discouraged from expressing their emotions, and Corr et al. (2019) asserted that applies especially Latino men who are expected to be strong for the family. Meanwhile Andrade (2018) described his internal reaction to the death of his madre and writes, “I could not find the will in my body to fulfill the socio-cultural expectation to cry after someone’s death...I wish I had cried. But my body betrayed me and it – not I – repressed emotional release” (p. 137). These differing claims do not resolve whether either openly crying or masking emotion is inherently linked to Mexican American culture.

### *Grief as a performance*

Grief is also a performative act. Identity itself is performative, and grief becomes part of a bereaved person’s identity. Butler (2004) identified a collective “we” of humans who have experienced the death of someone. She describes the vulnerability of our own bodies to violence and death, and also the loss and vulnerability of being connected to other people. Butler (2004) acknowledged a transformative effect that a bereaved individual undergoes when they lose someone. It is during that transformation that we reveal who we are and that who we are is

connected to others. By losing someone, we lose ourselves. Butler (2004) argued that experiencing grief in solitude denies our social conditions and that we are undone by each other:

What grief displays, in contrast, is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control (p. 23).

While the bereaved may try to conceal their grief, it is a social condition that they may have no control over. Butler (2004) applied the state of ecstasy to emotional grief as the bereaved being ec-static, literally outside oneself, or losing their identity during the grieving process. This experience, Butler (2004) argued, exposes our inherent vulnerability to our dependency on social norms. If there is an inability to successfully grieve, Butler argued the bereaved may never re-establish their identity after a loss.

To examine the performance of Mexican American grief specifically, we must explore the duality of performing Mexican American identity. Delgado (2009) described his experience performing his “Latino self” in U.S. academia as tiring, and provoking fear of losing pieces of his Latino identity. Calafell (2005) also wrote of Chicanas wearing different masks at different times, as well as mourning the loss of her culture. Anzaldúa (1987) expressed the fear associated with cultural loss:

We’re afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la *Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid



rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows (p. 20).

I argue Mexican Americans may conform to the values of Mexican cultural grieving to avoid culture loss and to remain a part of la raza. This may result in pushing unacceptable parts of grieving into the shadows (i.e. wailing).

The loss of culture is inextricably linked to the process of acculturation, which Amaya (2007) defined as a performance that “typically refers to the modification of the culture of a person or group due to contact with a different culture” (p. 198). There is typically a dominant culture, which he argues is often the Western (American) culture. Amaya (2007) also indicated that “experience exists in a dialectic relation with the environment, culture, and history,” (p. 197). We explore the process of acculturation through Amaya’s experience as an immigrant. He acknowledges that he fragments himself and performs according to the audience. Amaya (2007) considered achieving the goal to *hacerla*, or make it, and debates that it is attainable only by betraying his commitment to other Latinos who he identifies as kin. As a result of acculturation from living in the U.S., I suggest Mexican Americans may feel inclined to perform grief in a way that is more in line with the American culture.

Social integration can be viewed as a goal of acculturation. Amaya (2007) explored his own aspirations toward social integration by invoking Michel Foucault’s ethics that explore “the self through practices individuals engage in order to become better people” (p. 195). Prior to Foucault, Erving Goffman echoed the concept that “Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way” (p. 13). Foucault referred to a rule as the mode of

subjection, “the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice,” (p. 27). Amaya (2007), however, cautioned that the “rule was normalized by a mainstream culture that, in its effort to reconstitute racial hierarchies, constructs a culture of difference where normalcy is racially white, economically middle and upper middle class” (p. 205). Based on these arguments, I formulate that Mexican Americans seek self-improvement to achieve a certain desired treatment and social integration by adopting practices and characteristics that are acceptable to the white middle and upper class. When applied to grief, I argue the desire to achieve this level of acceptance may result in Mexican Americans feeling pressured to perform grief in a way that promotes the goal of social integration into the white middle and upper class, since it is what Amaya (2007) identified as “the most desirable social community to enter into” (p. 205). It is at this crossroads that I introduce the concept of grief acculturation as a contribution to the field of communication and performance studies. The goal of grief acculturation is to do what is necessary to function as an equal, and that goal is achieved through the performance of acculturation and cultural adaptation techniques. This is despite the possibility that it may conflict with or compromise the interior Mexican self. For instance, Mexican Americans experiencing grief in Mexico or with relatives from Mexico will adapt accordingly and may feel that their interior culture (subjectivity) is in harmony with their external culture. Conversely, when Mexican Americans experience death and grief in the United States while trying to adapt American norms, they may feel disconnected from their interior culture. Amaya (2007) clarified that all immigrant experiences are different, and by comparison, I maintain that all grief experiences should also be recognized as different.

When writing about performing acculturation, Amaya (2007) embraced an autoethnographic approach based on his experience as an immigrant, and the effort to perform

his “self” to others. He writes of the need to rewrite the self, what he calls a reconstruction – not a recreation – of the original self. Amaya (2007) argued recreation of the self is not possible when the environment has radically changed, therefore a reconstruction accounts for the changed environment. In the literature above, Barney & Yoshimura (2020) argued that a death becomes part of a bereaved person’s identity. Calafell (2005) offered her own narrative as a rewriting of the space and finds:

All along I had been mourning the loss of my voice, culture, and story not realizing that in this process, in this space of anticipation and finally in this space of reclamation and reconciliation through the traversing of my past, present, and future I have created a space of new possibilities (p. 52)

Death not only changes the bereaved person’s identity, or self, it also inevitably changes their environment, which results in the reconstruction of the self.

The autoethnographic perspective of this project seeks to apply the concept of grief acculturation as an experience that complicates an emotionally overwhelming process and places the burden on Mexican Americans to simultaneously identify their audience(s) then perform a socially acceptable form of grief in front of them. I argue these performances may conflict entirely with what is happening inside the self and could be the start of an involuntary or subconscious social and cultural transformation. I couple these autoethnographic elements with a textual/rhetorical analysis of news coverage following the August 3 shooting in El Paso to exemplify what can be viewed as a rewriting of a grief space when Mexican traditions were not only accepted but embraced in an American city.

## Theoretical Approach

The theoretical framework for this research will be grounded in Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory, and what she referred to as "nepantilism," being torn between ways, and the inevitable "cultural collision" (p. 78). I, along with the families of 23 victims, experienced the death of a loved one and continue to experience the grief of their loss along a literal border, in a town that separates the U.S. and Mexico with a dry Rio Grande. However, the death and the grief also occur along a cultural borderland, what Anzaldúa refers to as a "psychic restlessness," a constant state of mental nepantilism marked by the internal strife and mental and emotional perplexity that results from the mestiza's dual and multiple personalities. The victims of the El Paso shooting were from the U.S. side of the border, some from Mexico, and some transborder commuters whose daily lives regularly take them between the two. While there may be some distinctions between these groups, they are one:

We say *nosotros los mexicanos* (by *mexicanos* we do not mean citizens of Mexico; we do not mean a national identity, but a racial one). We distinguish between *mexicanos del otro lado* and *mexicanos de este lado*. Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul – not one of mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 62)

Anzaldúa's words reflect the cultural response exuded from Mexicanos on August 3, 2019 when Mexican citizens were among the victims. A hate-filled four-page manifesto posted online by the shooter minutes before his rampage would later confess to police that he had targeted Mexicans. Seven of the victims were Mexican Citizens, 16 were American, and one was German (El Paso

Police, 2019). In the days and weeks following the shooting, there was no distinction between Mexicanos from the other side and Mexicanos from this side.

While there is no clear roadmap for dealing with grief, I argue that the grief process is only further complicated and confusing for Mexican Americans who are straddling the boundaries of multiple cultures. Anzaldúa (1987) wrote of the *conciencia de la mestiza*, walking out of one culture and into another, while being in all cultures at the same time; your soul in multiple worlds and the confusion of existing in contradictory worlds. Anzaldúa, (1987) described it as being “cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (p. 78, emphasis in original). In this struggle, Anzaldúa (1987) argued that by “having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages” and the coming together of the two “habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision” (p. 78, emphasis in original). In writing about *la conciencia de la mestiza*, Anzaldúa upheld a new consciousness. She described an attack on the Mexican culture by the white culture, something chicanos see as an attack that results in a defiant counterstance that challenges patriarchal, white conventions. In order to reach a new consciousness, Anzaldúa (1987) suggested we will have to see things “through serpent and eagle eyes” (p. 100). The symbolism of the eagle and serpent originates in the image that Anzaldúa (1987) described as an eagle perched on a cactus with a serpent twisting and squirming in its mouth. It takes place in what would later become Mexico City, and she explained “the eagle symbolizes the spirit (as the sun, the father); the serpent symbolizes the soul (as the earth, the mother). Together, they symbolize the struggle between the spiritual/celestial/male and the underworld/earth/feminine,” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 5). She argued this illustrates the patriarchal order. In a broader sense, the

serpent and the eagle are opposites, “heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror,” (p. 47). I argue this concept can be applied to the fusion of opposite cultures when dealing with grief: the American as the dominant eagle, and the Mexican as the serpent, which is in line with Amaya’s argument that the American culture is typically the dominant culture (2007). Anzaldúa (1987) proposed the possibility of disengaging completely from the dominant culture and “cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory” (p. 79). According to Anzaldúa (1987), the result could also be a balance or combination of cultures, or it could result in complete abandonment of one of the cultures. Grieving Mexican Americans could find themselves battling between a grief process that embraces the Mexican cultural norm of maintaining a relationship with the deceased after death, and the American norm of avoiding the topic of death and severing ties with the dead.

When considering the cultural restrictions of grieving, wailing seems to be an act nearly forbidden, which is possibly what makes it so powerful. Anzaldúa (1987) claimed that

Aztec female rites of mourning were rites of defiance protesting the cultural changes which disrupted the equality and balance between male and female, and protesting their demotion of lesser status, their denigration. Like *la Llorona*, the Indian woman’s only means of protest was wailing (p. 21, emphasis in original)

I assert that embracing the act of wailing in grief symbolizes decolonization, freedom for the Chicana resisting a history of patriarchy. Wailing is an opportunity for Mexican Americans to reclaim their grief by embracing their native cultural traditions, while rejecting the notion that their grief traditions carry a lesser status to those of American norms. It is in fact a protest for bicultural Mexican Americans to deny American grief norms as dominant. Tugging at

Anzaldúa's feminist roots, embracing the act of wailing is a way to protest the internal struggle between two cultures and instead embracing Aztec rites of mourning as having equal status.

## **Research Questions**

The literature thus far outlines the dominant American model for socially acceptable grieving, illustrates cultural traditions surrounding death and grief in the Mexican culture, while also considering the concept of disenfranchised grief. Exploring these topics individually instead of aggregately illuminates a gap when it comes to performing socially acceptable grief while simultaneously navigating two, often conflicting, cultural traditions, and the relation that may have on creating conditions for disenfranchised grief. To speak to the gap this thesis addresses the following research questions:

1. What does the media coverage of public displays of grief following the El Paso shooting tell about grief in a cultural borderland?
2. How does the media coverage of public displays of grief following the El Paso shooting relate to the lived experience of navigating bicultural grief?
3. What is the relationship between disenfranchised grief relate and a bicultural/binational identity?

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

In order to answer these questions, I relied primarily on two research methods, textual analysis and autoethnography, to understand acculturated and disenfranchised grief. I outline how I used these methods and the artifacts that will be used.

#### **Textual Analysis**

This thesis utilized textual analysis to identify, analyze, and interpret the cultural implications in the public displays of grief following the El Paso shooting. McKee (2003) defined textual analysis as a data-gathering process for researchers “who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live,” (p. 1). This is a fitting method to explore how Mexican Americans make sense of their Mexican culture and American culture, and how that fits into their grief experience. McKee (2003) guided us to interpret texts “in order to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them” (p. 1). An analysis of media coverage of the El Paso shooting provided insight into the political culture surrounding the event and provides an examination of wider values and beliefs in El Paso and across the nation at the time.

The textual analysis examined news stories that depict public displays of grief following the El Paso shooting.

1. The first is a video recorded hours after the shooting that aired on local and national television networks and shared on social media. In the video, Edie Hallberg is searching



for her 86-year-old mother who she believed was at Walmart the morning of the shooting. Edie is surrounded by news cameras and reporters asking her questions. I selected this artifact because this woman shrieks, cries, and openly wails not only in front of the large group of journalists, and also in front of the thousands, possibly millions of viewers who would watch the video. Hallberg's response seems to defy cultural norms of grief.

2. The live musical performances at the site of the makeshift memorial, which often included mariachi groups. This is a common cultural traditional in Mexican American communities and border towns that was extended to a national and international audience.
3. Artifacts left at the memorial site itself, including Mexican flags and religious images including images of the Virgen de Guadalupe, Patroness of Mexico.
4. Dia de Los Muertos altars erected in honor of the Walmart shooting victims. The Mexican tradition has been practiced in the U.S. in the past and has grown in popularity in recent years. The cultural tribute to the El Paso shooting victims reached a national audience.

As part of the textual analysis I engaged in line-by-line (in vivo) coding of online news articles related to the categories listed above. After the materials were coded, I engaged in an iterative process to ascertain larger meanings and themes informed by my theoretical frameworks. As I read each line, I considered questions such as:

- How does this relate to socially acceptable grieving norms in the United States?
- How does this relate to Mexican cultural norms of grief?
- How does this relate to the other artifacts being analyzed?

I then placed reoccurring words and phrases into groups and further sort them into rhetorical strategies and primary themes. The final state was an analysis of the content that emerged from the text and how it related to Borderlands theory and my proposed research questions.

### **Autoethnography**

In addition to the textual analysis of media coverage, this study also relied on autoethnography. This autobiographical approach (Tracy, 2013) connected the analysis of my own identity, culture, feelings, and values to the larger societal issue of socially acceptable expressions of grief. I followed Paxton's (2018) own grief-inspired book written from an autoethnographic perspective in which he asks, "*What do we do now that the ritual, the show, of death is over, and we're left with the hard reality of loss?*" (p. 38, emphasis in original). It was Paxton's belief, and one that I relate to, that through our common experiences of death and grief, we can realize the power of autoethnography. This methodology included systematic introspection and emotional recall about a painful experience and writing about it as a form of inquiry (Ellis and Bochner, 2000 & Richardson, 2000). Denzin (2014) argued that autoethnography seeks to "give notice to those who may otherwise not be allowed to tell their story or who are denied a voice to speak" (p. 6). Neumann (1996) pointed out, "forms of cultural representation...matter deeply in the lives of others who find themselves portrayed in texts not of their own making" (p. 191), and autoethnography reveals how. As a communication scholar, exploring my own personal experience and tragedy as a contribution to current research on the topic of communication from the standpoint of a Mexican American woman living not only existing in a cultural borderland, but also as a Mexican American woman who physically lives on a literal borderland along the U.S. Mexico border. It is not only relevant, but essential and personally obligatory for me to share my experience with death from within the cultural

borderland of my Mexican roots and my American assimilation to offer something for others who are grieving to relate to and possibly rely on for guidance and/or reassurance.

In the first section of the autoethnography chapter, I examined posts on my personal Facebook page that reflected my grief. In the second section I reviewed personal journal entries written in various stages of my grief process following my mother's death. Taken together, these autobiographical pieces reflected my encounters with grief, both personal and public. This autoethnographic perspective also included my experience as a near life-long resident of El Paso who was living in the city at the time of the shooting. I did not intend to speak for anyone in a similar position and draw on Ellis & Bochner (2000) to assert that my experience contains authority and authenticity.

### **Implications and Limitations**

The potential implications of this project include illustrating the benefits to the bereaved when they acknowledge their grief privately and publicly, as well as the significant benefits to the bereaved if they feel free to perform that grief socially and publicly. It also seeks to highlight the damaging effects and increased possibility to experience disenfranchised grief by succumbing to socially acceptable forms of grief that may misalign with societal expectations. This project seeks to demonstrate the significance of creating a space to openly and publicly communicate and perform grief outside of customary rituals and traditions. There are also cultural implications for this research. Mexican Americans may not realize the limitations associated with their grief that may be linked to cultural norms or traditions. Becoming aware of those limitations may inspire a larger conversation in their families and communities that would

ideally lead to healthy change. Ultimately, it is the goal of this project to promote dialogue about grief and encourage change surrounding the perception of publicly acknowledging grief.

One of the limitations of this project is that it is based solely on my experience following my mother's death, as well as my personal experience following the El Paso shooting. The implications of this research could be expanded by compiling the experiences of multiple Mexican Americans navigating their grief through both their Mexican cultural traditions and American norms, as well as others who experienced their personal grief while simultaneously experiencing communal grief following the El Paso shooting. A second limitation is that while this work is specifically focused on Mexican American cultural traditions, not all Mexican Americans may relate to my experience, or the experience of other Mexican Americans. Similarly, Americans may not relate to traditional Western norms about grief as described in the literature review of this project. Research on this topic might also be extended by exploring grief among other cultures who live in the United States and are not as geographically home to their native country. Finally, all grief experiences are different. This may be an obvious statement but cannot be understated. My experience may not resonate with those who experienced the death of a mother, or any other death, including grief related to the August 3 shooting.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Media Analysis**

In this chapter, I will provide a textual analysis of online news coverage that exhibited cultural performances and rituals of public grieving following the El Paso shooting. I will identify and describe the emergent themes in 34 selected articles following the shooting. The reach of the articles ranges from local news outlets to national and network news organizations. The search for the articles focused on music, images from the makeshift memorial at the site of the shooting, and correlations between Dia de los Muertos altars in honor of the El Paso shooting victims. I selected these specific categories because I recall they were prominent topics in media coverage following the shooting. I recognized the cultural component in many of the articles and grasped the significance of these particular cultural norms reaching an international audience. The journalists reaching those audiences seemed intentional in their efforts to relay what was happening in El Paso, including Ornelas (2019) who wrote, “On both sides of the border, art and music have become a way to express pain and foster healing” (para. 17). Contreras (2019) also offered context for what he witnessed noting, “Instead we offer some music to help us mourn, remember, and hopefully in time, heal” (para. 2).

While reflecting on the content of certain news articles and digesting the words journalists used to describe life on the border following the El Paso shooting, I was drawn to Anzaldúa’s words about existing in a cultural borderland. Anzaldúa (1987) wrote of life in the borderlands as an “intimate terrorism” in which a Chicana is “alienated from her mother culture, ‘alien’ in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self” (p. 20). Anzaldúa (1987) described the Chicana woman as “petrified,” unable to respond as

she is caught between “*los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits” (p. 20, emphasis in original). Those words resonated with my reality as a Chicana experiencing grief in my internal cultural borderland and the literal physical borderlands of my community. It awoke in me the realization that I had been confined in my borderlands identity, and my challenges navigating grief were associated with my fear to maneuver the intersticios in my own identity. Anzaldúa (1987) further described this phenomenon:

We do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our faculties. We abnegate. And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible and to blame (being a victim and transferring blame on culture, mother, father, ex-lover, friend absolves me of responsibility), or to feel strong, and for the most part, in control. (p. 21)

I engage in this analysis from the vantage point of having worked in the news industry for ten years, including working as a reporter in El Paso when the shooting happened on August 3, 2017. Like many of the journalists whose articles are included in this analysis, I also compiled news stories at the memorial site, public masses, and spoke with relatives of the victims. It is through the lens of this experience, in addition to my familiarity with the El Paso community as my hometown that equipped me to competently conduct this media analysis. In conducting this analysis, I realized I experienced *nepantla*, caught in a liminal space between the objectivity required to work in a professional capacity, yet experiencing the same grief my community was feeling after we suffered this attack. Experiencing this in-between state occurred subconsciously for me, and not something I recognized until the conclusion of this study.

I recognized that in the early stages of my grief, I had taken on the role of a victim who blamed my inability to openly grieve on what I perceived as performative limitations instilled by my culture(s). Yet, what I was witnessing following the El Paso shooting was quite the opposite. The community reclaimed control of its collective grief, and found strength in openly expressing that grief and memorializing the victims through specific and intentional markers like traditional cultural music, culturally relevant artifacts at the makeshift memorial site, and culturally significant rituals like observance of Dia de Los Muertos. This analysis focused on news articles that reflected those specific subjects.

## **Music**

The first and most prominent category of the media coverage was grief expressed through music. University of Texas at El Paso professor Ernesto Chavez expressed the cultural significance explaining that, “Mexican culture is imbued with music at times of mourning, a feature of the national identity that translates to U.S.-born Mexican-Americans even after they might assimilate or become English-dominant” (Hernandez, 2019, para. 6). While examining the category of music, three subcategories emerged: corridos, Juan Gabriel’s “Amor Eterno,” and the presence of mariachis.

### *Corridos*

A corrido, or folk ballad, is a genre of music produced in narrative form, viewed by many as the first draft of history that often tell stories of loss and tragedy. The corrido originated along the Texas-Mexico border in the 1800s and grew in popularity during the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Mexican Revolution. The genre is deeply rooted in the cultural and national conflict between the Mexican hero and U.S. authorities, namely the Texas Rangers (Flores, 1992). A hero is central to the

corrido, and it often includes a villain. The corrido emerged in this research following a viral social media video depicting a young man singing in Spanish alongside another young man wearing a traditional mariachi outfit and playing a guitarrón. The song is called “El Llanto de El Paso,” a mournful, yet appropriate corrido that translates to “The Cry of El Paso.” The songwriter composed the lyrics only hours after the Walmart shooting (Carranza & Villagran, 2019). True to the nature of corridos, “El Llanto de El Paso” includes elements of tragedy, heroism, national identity and conflict at the U.S. Mexico border. As Smith (2019) explained following the El Paso shooting, “The corrido is a form of acknowledging the people who died for their cause and their culture” (2019). In this context, “El Llanto de El Paso” depicts the 22 people who lost their lives that day as the heroes of the story. The villain in this corrido is referred to as a monster. I will explore the lyrics of “El Llanto de El Paso” in closer detail under the emergent themes below.

#### *Juan Gabriel’s “Amor Eterno”*

The second subcategory of music in media content following the El Paso shooting was Juan Gabriel’s “Amor Eterno,” or Eternal Love. The song has been embraced by Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and other Latinos as the ultimate farewell. “It is played or performed at funerals and memorials large and small, and pushes people to tears in nearly any setting, from bars to supermarket aisles. Singalongs, often pressed through sobs, are unavoidable” (Hernandez, 2019, para. 1). Gabriel’s tormented lyrics from the song give reason to its power, “How I wish that you still lived, that your precious eyes had never closed, so that I could see them now...Eternal love, unforgettable” (Hernandez, 2019). The song has been used widely for mourning, including following the 2016 mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando during Latin Night, which claimed the lives of 49 people, many of them Latinx (Calafell, 2017).



Shouting the words to the song following the Pulse shooting was a means of collective grief recorded by Andrade & Gutierrez-Perez (2017), “On the dance floor. Out of the innermost parts of our body, our souls scream. They let out, give in, forcefully sing *déjenme llorar, mi amor eterno e inolvidable, tarde o temprano estaré contigo, para seguir amándonos*” (p. 502, emphasis in original). The words “dejenme llorar” do not ask for permission to cry, they unapologetically dictate that is what is happening. The song was written by Juan Gabriel, a beloved son of Ciudad Juárez where he was raised as a tribute to his mother after her death (Smith, 2017). Much like the tribute of a corrido, Amor Eterno has become a way for some to say goodbye to their personal heroes as one Twitter user was quoted for writing, “For most Mexicans, Mexican Americans and other Hispanics, this was the song that we said goodbye to our real life heroes with. Our abuelos, abuelas, tios, tias, ninos and ninas” (Brito, 2019, para. 7).

Following the El Paso shooting, Juan Gabriel’s “Amor Eterno” reverberated during large community vigils as well as small impromptu singalongs at the site of the makeshift memorial (Hernandez, 2019). Those singalongs often accompanied with unavoidable sobs as chronicled in the *New York Times*, “...a young woman broke out into the familiar lyrics, shakily and for no listener in particular, before wiping away tears,” (Hernandez, 2019). The emotions evoked by Amor Eterno are among the identified and documented displays of grief in this analysis. Additional examples will be examined under the displays of grief theme section.

### *Mariachis*

Mariachi groups are a familiar sight at family events or other large gatherings in the El Paso and Juárez borderland region. According to Mulholland (2007), the tradition of the mariachi dates back Mexico in the 1930s and originated with singer-songwriter legend José

Alfredo Jiménez. The group is made up of a lead singer who is backed by a mariachi, an ensemble of musicians who play violins, trumpets, guitars and guitarróns (a large bass guitar). The group is dressed in traditional charro suits and sombreros. Mariachi performances are traditional throughout Mexico and have extended to become popular in the United States, particularly in areas with a large population of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Mulholland (2007) argued the mariachi is an influential performance of mexicanidad, or a representation of Mexican identity. True to tradition, mariachis were present for planned and impromptu performances at the El Paso shooting memorial as well as multiple public vigils. Mariachis are central to the Mexican identity, which is why international media coverage of their presence throughout the grieving process following the shooting is relevant/critical/significant to this particular analysis of cultural grieving.

### **Cultural Artifacts at Makeshift Memorial Site**

The second category of media content is the cultural implications of the items left at the makeshift memorial including Mexican flags as seen in Figure 1 (Tama, 2019), signs written in Spanish, and images of the Virgen de Guadalupe, patron saint of Mexico.



**Figure 1.**

*Makeshift Memorial Site in El Paso, Texas.* (Source: Tama, 2019).

I selected photographs of artifacts that I identified as culturally relevant through my experience as a Mexican American. In order to have a larger selection of photographs specifically of the memorial site, I also included photographs from additional news articles about the shooting. The content of those articles did not include text on the cultural components of the shooting, therefore the text of those additional articles was not used in the analysis. Including an analysis of the cultural artifacts left at the memorial site is essential to this project because I argue it is a direct lens into how people in this border community expressed their grief for their neighbors. In an article about the size of the makeshift memorial for the *New York Times*, Rojas (2019) captured this sentiment in a paragraph that started with, “A week ago, the spot did not constitute a place,” and ended, “Now it could almost pass for the soul of El Paso” (para. 6).



**Figure 2.**

*Mexican and American flags side by side at El Paso memorial site.*

The most common photos of the memorial site showed the U.S. and Mexico flags flying side by side as seen in Figure 2 (Locher, 2019). The most obvious symbolism was a tribute to the

victims from Mexico killed in the shooting. Flying the Mexican flag at the memorial site was also a way to recognize the bicultural, binational identity of the El Paso/Juárez border community. The location of the Walmart store where the August 3 shooting happened is less than 10 miles from an international border crossing. The New York Times acknowledged the families from Mexico who still frequently drive across the international bridge to make their purchases and cited statistics from a retail analyst who said 65,000 customers shopped at this store per week, compared to an average of 14,000 customers at most other stores (Romero et al., 2019). Those numbers made this particular store one of Walmart's top ten stores in the entire country. The contribution of Mexican shoppers is not only fundamental to El Paso's identity, but also to its economy. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, Mexican shoppers accounted for 10 to 15 percent of El Paso's retail sales in 2017 (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2017). Displaying Mexican flags of all sizes at the memorial was a symbol of the strong relationship with Ciudad Juárez, and the strong connection many El Pasoans feel to Mexico. When Anzaldúa (1987) wrote about *mexicanos* from the U.S. side and *mexicanos* from Mexico, she described it as a single identity:

Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul-not one of mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders.

(p. 62)

Additional cultural artifacts at the memorial site that resonate with the Mexican American community was the countless *velas*, prayer candles with images of patron saints. The most predominant image – the Virgen de Guadalupe, patron saint of Mexico. Growing up in a

Mexican American household, I was accustomed to seeing the tall votive candles wrapped in images of different religious images. The Virgen de Guadalupe was also a common image in our home. Arteaga (2015), a Jesuit brother, explained that in Latino culture, the spiritual meaning of lighting a candle is to begin a conversation with God, and to light a candle with the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe is to ask specifically for her intercession. Arteaga (2015) characterized the vela as “a powerful tool for finding God in the midst of our greatest tragedies. It can be the start of a conversation with God, the start of our healing” (para. 13). In a community like El Paso, which is about 80 percent Catholic (Catholic Diocese of El Paso, n.d.), the velas represented the beginning of their healing from this tragedy.

### **Día de Los Muertos Altars for El Paso Shooting Victims**

The third category of this media analysis is media coverage surrounding Día de Los Muertos altars erected throughout the country in 2019 in honor of the El Paso shooting victims. Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is a ritual for honoring the deceased and combines Indigenous Aztec traditions with Catholicism (Desai, 2020). The holiday is observed November 1 and 2 on All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Days, feast days required by the Roman Catholic Church. However, most of the activities connected with the holiday are separate from the liturgical requirements. Those activities typically include decorating burial sites with flowers, candles and food while relatives watch over the graves of their loved ones. Other tributes include ofrendas, or food offerings, and elaborate home altars (Brandes, 1998). While the tradition is linked to Mexico and Mexican national identity, Brandes (1998) argued “the degree to which the overall celebration of the Day of the Dead is in reality unique to Mexico is a source of ongoing debate” (p. 363). Nevertheless, Day of the Dead is significant to the Mexican identity in the context of this project because it offers some perspective into the Mexican view of death, which I

established earlier is very different from North American views. In the widely read *Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz (1961) wrote about the Day of the Dead as a ritual that symbolizes death as an obsession and that the Mexican is “familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love” (p. 57). Brandes (1998) indicated Mexico’s challenges in forging a national consciousness separate from Spain and the United States when a majority of Mexicans speak Spanish and practice Roman Catholicism, both features of Spain. While both language and religion can be a way to set Mexico’s identity apart from the United States, Brandes (1998) pointed out the significance of U.S.-Mexico relations, and the overwhelming disparities in national wealth and the suffering of the Mexican “at the hands of the economically and militarily powerful neighbor to the north” (p. 361). It is through that quest that Brandes (1998) referred to Mexico’s Indian as a “resource” that separates it from both Spain and the U.S., and it is the Indian heritage that Mexico chose to elevate symbolically. Mexican folklore, and Day of the Dead, play an important role in that identity - an identity that is complicated for those who consider themselves Mexican American, not Mexican.

Examining Mexico’s Day of the Dead through this ideological context helps us understand why celebrating Day of the Dead in the United States is a conscious empowering act of identity. On August 3, 2019, the shooter targeted the people of El Paso because the cultural and literal borderland embraced that identity. It was a clear act of resistance that the people of El Paso responded by highlighting that identity in front of a worldwide audience. I relate this to Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness, a new consciousness often brought on by a painful, emotional event that subconsciously resolves the ambivalence of juggling cultures and operating as a plural personality. Anzaldúa (1987) proposed creating this new consciousness by changing “the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the way we behave,” (p. 80). Anzaldúa (1987)

described the work of mestiza consciousness as breaking down “the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended,” (p. 80). The duality in this context would be Mexican versus American, as Anzaldúa (1987) maintained, “We call ourselves Mexican-American to signify we are neither Mexican, nor American, but more the noun ‘American’ than the adjective ‘Mexican,’” (p. 62). This new consciousness is a third element that Anzaldúa (1987) characterized by “movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes,” (p. 79). Essentially, the people of El Paso did not grapple with the duality of their Mexican identity, or American identity in their grief, they embraced the uniquely Mexican-American identity of a border community that was attacked for embracing its binational, bicultural identity. Honoring the victims of the El Paso shooting with Day of the Dead altars in El Paso and in cities like Austin, Houston, Chicago and Washington, D.C. was exemplary of Anzaldúa’s (1987) vision that “a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war,” (p. 80). Cesareo Moreno, visual arts director and the chief curator at the National Museum of Mexican art echoed that sentiment when he said, “We want to remember. We want to grieve. The El Paso shooting hit close to home, so this is a chance for us to cope with loss and to present our stories,” (Aviles, 2019, para. 16). The victims received an extraordinary tribute on Dia de Los Muertos in that their lives were celebrated in a way that elevated the borderlands identity.

### **Primary Themes**

Through a textual analysis of 34 news articles that included Mexican American cultural components of grief following the El Paso shooting, I discovered four primary themes: displays

of grief; examples of Mexican, Mexican-American and/or Border culture and/or identity; expressions of unity and resilience; and examples of reclaiming the narrative. I provide details about the categories below, followed by an explanation and of the emergent things, and specific examples identified in the text.

### **Displays of Grief**

There was no debate, no white man calling into question anyone's humanity. There were Latinos and Latinas bearing up under grief.

—Fernanda Echavarri, Mother Jones

As someone who lived in El Paso when the shooting happened, and in its aftermath, I can attest to the somber, all-consuming, almost surreal sentiment of grief. El Paso is known to be a friendly town, where strangers offer a nod and a smile while passing you on the street. I recall this connection was intensified following the shooting. People locked eyes in public, but the smiles and nods were replaced with distressed stares void of any joy, a silent acknowledgement that we were en luto, in mourning. It was equally comforting and chilling. The content that corresponded to the theme of displays of grief included images that depicted obvious signs of grief, like people crying. The content in this theme was also comprised of text written in news articles that sought to articulate the grief they were witnessing.





**Figure 3.**

*Mariachi Sebastian Gonzalez becomes emotional at vigil for shooting victims*

Some of the most powerful displays of grief were not those that were described in detail in the text of the news articles, but more authentically conveyed through photographs. In Figure 3 (Tama, 2019), Sebastian Gonzalez squeezed his eyes closed, seeming to shut out his grief, as he performed with a mariachi group at an interfaith vigil for the El Paso shooting victims (Cepeda, 2019). The photo captured the overwhelming sense of grief felt by many. Figure 4 (Tama, 2019) is another photo that, according to the caption, was taken at the conclusion of the vigil (Falconer, 2019). Gonzalez no longer able to contain his grief as he hugs a woman.



**Figure 4.**

*Mariachi at vigil hugs a woman*

The somber atmosphere was also documented by reporters who did their best to display that grief to the world. Rojas (2019) conveyed the general feeling among visitors at the memorial site, “When they felt overwhelmed by a confluence of emotions, they cried here. And when people sought the embrace of community, this is where they found it” (para. 6). Fernanda Echavarrie is a journalist who wrote an op-ed for the news website Mother Jones about two weeks after the El Paso shooting. Echavarri is also a native El Pasoan. Her first stop after arriving in El Paso was the makeshift memorial site outside of the Walmart where the shooting occurred. She wrote that she was there to hear directly from the grieving local community. She wrote about someone who told her they felt scared in El Paso for looking Hispanic and said they could not stop crying. She described a woman who held flowers in her hand as she cried and asked, “Why? Why so many innocent people? Why so much hate?” (Echavarri, 2019). In the 34 news articles selected for this analysis, there were 86 similar examples of displays of grief. The displays of grief were characterized by reports of obvious signs of grief like crying, wiping away tears, descriptions of people as inconsolable, and even a reference that “the power of prayer was visible” (Cruz, 2019).

One of the most compelling displays of grief was media coverage of Edie Hallberg, a woman who was searching for her mother Angie Englisbee in the hours after the shooting. Englisbee was one of the confirmed victims killed in the shooting. In a conversation I had with a journalist who covered the shooting, I learned Englisbee is originally from Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her maiden name was Silva, from a Hispanic family lineage. According to KTSM-TV (2019) Englisbee's daughter Edie Hallberg arrived at the school campus where El Paso Police instructed family members to go if they were searching for information about victims or survivors. In video clip widely shared on the internet, Hallberg is visibly frantic, panicked because her mother was at the Cielo Vista Walmart that morning. Hallberg directly addressed reporters and media photographers in an emotional plea to find her mother. The nearly two minute clip begins with Hallberg holding her hand up to her face and squeals in agony, "I talk to her every day. I talked to her today." A reporter asked Hallberg why she is concerned about her mother. Hallberg is nearly sobbing as she responded to the question, "She would have called. She has 7 kids." Hallberg became increasingly emotional until she reached what can best be described as wailing, "I got tired of waiting and waiting and I JUST WANT TO KNOW WHERE MY MOM IS!" Between tears, sniffles and gasps for air, Hallberg answers more questions from reporters until she is eventually sobbing and wailing once again, "All I want to do is find my mom. Somebody needs to tell me where she is. I want to know if she's dead or alive, or if she's still in Walmart."

The video is compelling and also extremely relevant to this research. In this moment of desperation, Hallberg experienced Anzaldúa calls (2015) *arreatamiento*, a shattering, that Anzaldúa described as shaking the soul out of her body. It was Anzaldúa's experience following the 9/11 attacks and watching the Twin Towers fall that inspired this concept. Anzaldúa (2015)

wrote that it was difficult to acknowledge or express the depth of her feelings in that moment, so instead se lo trago, she swallowed it. Hallberg, however, did the complete opposite. Without speaking with Hallberg, I would not know if she understood the depth of her feelings in that moment, but what is apparent is that she acknowledged those feelings *and she wailed*. A defiant act of reclaiming her grief. It was the beginning of what Anzaldúa (2015) described as an internal destruction, a fragmentation and dissociation from self that may have initiated a transformation to Anzaldúa's (2015) *conocimiento*.

Nearly two minutes into the video, a woman reached in to pull Hallberg away from the cameras. Hallberg pulled back and turns back to the cameras then said, "We need to find her and this is the only way we're going to do it." This was the first visible attempt to calm Hallberg. Hallberg's intense response was presumably unanticipated. At no point did the journalists encourage Hallberg to compose herself. There are likely multiple reasons for that, including the notion that her emotional performance makes for captivating content, but there is also the possibility that the journalists were shocked by her conduct and did not know how to react. Hallberg was experiencing the fragmentation that Anzaldúa described as what occurs when, "you fall apart and feel as though you've been expelled from paradise" (p. 19). This was Coyolxauhqui, the necessary process of dismemberment (Anzaldua, 2015). This chaotic disruption of violence and death that catapulted Hallberg into the Coyolxauhqui. It aroused the splits in our cultures of grief. When forced to confront the dismemberment of Coyolxauhqui, Hallberg seemed to embrace it. The people surrounding her in that moment, and the woman who pulled her away in attempt to pacify Hallberg, elected to avoid it.

*Displays of Grief Through Music*

Other powerful displays of grief following the shooting centered on music, namely corridos, Juan Gabriel's *Amor Eterno*, and the presence of mariachis as noted above. In an El Paso Times article, Carranza & Villagran (2019) surmised the meaning, "Music has long held a special place in Mexican culture as a way to grieve. This was evident in El Paso over the past week." The corrido "El Llanto de El Paso, Texas" was one of those examples. The title translates to the cry of El Paso, an obvious display of grief, and mentions crying again in the third line, "much gente esta llorando...por lo que ha sucedido," which translates to "many people are crying because of what has happened." Later in the song, the lyrics also refer to the many families mourning. The corrido became the collective cry of the people. Cepeda (2019) described a similar sentiment of witnessing El Pasoans expressing grief through Juan Gabriel's popular song, "El Pasoans have done their best to hold their heads up high, and begin the healing process – often expressing their feelings through comforting and familiar songs, like 'Amor Eterno.'" The song not only resonated with El Pasoans, but Mexican, Mexican Americans and Latinos all over the world. A tweet from Angélica Maria Casas quickly went viral, "If you come from a Mexican family, you know this song" (Casas, 2019). It resonated with people on Twitter and prompted responses like "I managed to watch 4 seconds before I had to stop cause tears were coming down" (Fernandez, 2019), and "No hay canción que llegue más en estos momentos" and "No tengo palabras para explicar cómo me siento cada ves que escucho esta canción" (Salgado, 2019), indicating that the song draws indescribable emotions for which she has no words. The song has long been a collective cry for Mexicans and Mexican Americans as University of Texas at El Paso history professor Dr. Ernesto Chavez was quoted as saying, "People are just trying to find ways to grieve, and I think that song has become that, basically" (Hernandez, 2019). Sanchez (2019) directly refers to the song as an act of consolation:

Releasing the sorrow into the air was central in the healing. The sorrow needed to be let out and breathed in by those around us, stranger and friend alike, so that it does not stagnate within. The song was an essential rite for many.

After conducting this analysis, it clear that listening to this song, singing along to it or crying in the presence of others with this song in the background is an indisputable display of grief for many Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and other Latinos.

## **Identity and Culture**

The borderland culture that exists in El Paso is not limited to geographic area. People who consider El Paso their hometown and move to other parts of the country and the world may still carry their borderland identity. Anzaldúa (1987) maintained that while she also left her home along the border, it remained a part of her identity, “I didn’t leave all parts of me; I kept the ground of my own being” (p. 16). Intrinsic to the identity of someone who lives or connects to an identity crafted along the U.S. Mexico border is the division between and harmony of Mexican and American cultural ideals. This dichotomy and fusion often resonates with Mexican Americans everywhere, not only on the border. While analyzing the selected media articles, it was apparent that the El Paso shooting was quickly recognized as an attack on an entire culture. Navarette (2019) noted the sentiment in an article for the Washington Post, “The pain, sorrow and rage extended far beyond the city limits. All across the country, millions of Mexican Americans doubled over from this body blow.” The gunman targeted Mexicans and he did it along the El Paso/Juárez border, an area that Carranza & Villagran (2019) illuminated as “proud of its binational heritage and connection with its sister city to the south.” It is a connection Anzaldúa (1987) acknowledged, “in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because

*lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back” (p. 21, emphasis in original). Mexican Americans throughout the U.S. carried home with them in their response to the El Paso shooting, which in the past was something Navarette (2019) pointed out had often gone ignored:

Caught between black and white, Latinos are often left out of TV news reports, newspaper stories, Hollywood movies, television shows, textbooks, etc. Stuck between the United States and Mexico, nearly 30 million Mexican Americans are left out of both countries’ narratives (para. 12)

Anzaldúa (1987) outlines the internal and external risks of remaining an outsider to both worlds:

Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity—we don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness (p. 63)

However, following the El Paso shooting, the uniqueness of the Mexican American identity was on full display through the photos and videos that journalists were feeding to television screens, mobile phones, computer screens and newspapers. This identity was displayed through images of Mexican flags alongside America flags at the memorial site; a viral video of a young man dressed in a full black mariachi suit holding his guitarrón comforting the people of El Paso with a corrido tribute that was transmitted to millions of viewers (Brown, 2019). El Paso unapologetically displayed to the world its roots, culture and history. This is the desire Anzaldúa (1987) expressed when she called on Chicanos to voice our needs to white society, “We need

you to accept the fact that Chicanos are different, to acknowledge your rejection and negation of us” (p.85), and went on to call on white society to “admit that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied to her” (p. 86). Following the El Paso shooting Mexican American may not have expressed Anzaldúa’s desires in as many words, but they certainly did in their actions of uplifting the Mexican American culture in the face of white supremacy.

### **Unity and Resilience**

Examples of unity and resilience following the El Paso shooting were extremely evident in media coverage. While I imagine that is not uncommon in other communities that have experienced mass shootings, there was something almost poetic about how journalists broadcast that resilience to the world. I combined unity and resilience into the same category for this analysis because they both almost always appeared in the same sentence. For instance, “As the people of El Paso have already shown in the days after the shooting, they will come together to grieve and to stand up against racism and violence” (Echavarri, 2019). The musical tradition of the corrido offered some of the best examples of resilience, “This monster wanted to break us, but he didn’t succeed and now, we are are more united, thank God” (Echavarri, 2019). The unity stretched across an entire culture with many recognizing themselves or their family in the identity of the victims, “It could have been my children, my mother or my friends for the simple reason of having brown skin” (Ornelas, 2019). When Blanco (2019) wrote about the strength of the Mexican corrido, she described the emotional outpouring among the crowd who grew up listening to corridos and “To many, it may be just a song. But for me and many others, after the deadliest attack targeting our people in recent U.S. history, it’s an act of strength and resilience we need now more than ever.”



Day of the Dead celebrations three months after the El Paso shooting also reflected a sense of unity among El Pasoans and Mexican Americans. A Day of the Dead altar at the Mexican Arte museum in Austin, Texas called “Ofrenda a Nuestra Comunidad Internacional de El Paso,” or “Altar to Our International Community” was not only a tribute to the victims, but the entire community according to a museum associate who said, “it’s our duty to let the community know that we hear your pain” (Flores, 2019). When reflecting on the first Day of the Dead following the El Paso shooting, a local funeral director’s comment about the significance that particular year revealed another example of resilience, “I think of it as the beauty beyond the tragedy. It’s a reflection of our resilience, of who we are as a border community” (Corchado, 2019). In the same article, another woman was appreciative of the support pouring, “I want to thank everyone across the country who are standing with us in solidarity against hate. We’re grateful” (Corchado, 2019). These examples demonstrate a theme of unity and resilience among the El Paso community and the Mexican American community as a whole.

### **Reclaiming the Narrative**

Telling your story from your own perspective is a powerful sense of agency. Your narrative is yours to tell. However, sometimes our narrative as an individual is distorted by someone else’s attempt to recount our experience. This can also apply to cultural groups like Mexican Americans. The act of taking that story back, reclaiming the narrative, is an empowering sign of controlling our identity. Who controls our story matters. Mass shootings and the media coverage that follows have increased in the past two decades. By my own account, it appears to have resulted in a consistent formula for the coverage that begins with media outlets from around the country, and sometimes the world, descending on the town where the shooting occurred, interviewing law enforcement agencies, followed by getting witness accounts, the

community response in the form of vigils and memorials, all while trying to connect with family members or loved ones of the victims killed. The narrative is controlled by the information journalists choose to share with their audience. It is also influenced by pre-existing notions the audience may have about the demographics of the area where the shooting occurred.

Countless news articles were published following the El Paso shooting. Many of the articles selected for this analysis were written by journalists who identified as Mexican American, and even some who are native El Pasoans living and working elsewhere in the country. This is a significant detail, because their stories were being told from the perspective of our people, Mexican Americans, who were reaching audiences across the country, and for some, around the world. It was a detail not lost on Cruz (2019) who felt empowered in telling the story, “In Mexican culture, storytelling is everything. Our stories are rarely written down on a page, let alone documented by government officials, which means it is up to us to tell the stories, so they are never forgotten.” The lyrics of the corrido written as a tribute to the victims will live printed for eternity and not only in the songwriters personal collection, but on websites and news archives. It was an opportunity for Mexican Americans to take control of the narrative and the songwriter seized it, “At a time when Latinos are targeted, stigmatized and falsely accused en masse, it’s critical we reclaim our own narratives. By deconstructing tragedies like the mass shooting in El Paso, line by line, the *corrido* provides a deeper understanding to a grieving community, and says to the rest of the world, ‘this is *our* story’”(Blanco, 2019).

Seeing the value in validating our story as Mexican Americans and reclaiming that narrative as our own is the crossroads Anzaldúa (1987) recounted as the mestizas transition from the sacrificial goat to the far more powerful role of the officiating priestess. It is a recognition that as a mestiza, we have no country, and remain cultureless because of our refusal to accept the

collective cultural and religious beliefs of the Anglo. However, Anzaldúa defines a far more powerful existence:

I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. (p. 81)

The “Llanto de El Paso, Texas” corrido offers yet another example of making an active choice to take control of our own narrative as Mexican Americans in a way that only our culture is uniquely able to do, “The Mexican oral tradition of the corrido allows us to look critically at and heal from disturbing events. It gives us the power to look death in the eye. To name it. The inspire empathy among the masses, and take action against threats on one’s freedom, sovereignty and right to live” (Blanco, 2019).

Anzaldúa (1987) depicted the U.S. Mexico border as un herida abierta, an open wound, “where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to for a third country – a border culture” (p. 3). While it may sound like a painful experience, Anzaldúa’s (1987) intention is to establish the border as a place created to “define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (p. 3, emphasis in original). The El Paso shooting made the distinction between us and them far more apparent. The experience is what Anzaldúa (2015) established as a communal arrebataimiento, a crisis that changed our world as we knew it. This was what Anzaldúa (2015) identified as Coyolxauhqui, the necessary process of fragmentation and dismemberment. Coyolxauhqui aroused the splits in border culture and forced Mexican Americans to confront it. Following Anzaldúa’s (2015) path to conocimiento, Mexican Americans were struggling to

know the world in which we were living. Mexican Americans began to question the doctrines that claimed to be the only right way to live, yet those doctrines no longer accommodated their identity. This journey to *conocimiento* required Mexican Americans to confront what the culture had programmed us to avoid, and to confront the traits and habits that were inhibiting the full use of our *facultades*. Our binational, bicultural border town was torn between two ways, two cultures, and by reclaiming our experience and our story we witnessed a cultural shift that refused to devalue a bicultural, bilingual identity. Instead, it established our borderland as a place uniquely and proudly our own.

## **Summary**

This analysis of media coverage following the El Paso shooting focused on Mexican American cultural components of music, culturally relevant artifacts, and the celebration of Día de los Muertos in honor of the El Paso shooting victims and the El Paso community. Through the analysis of the 34 selected media articles, four primary themes emerged: displays of grief, identity and culture, unity and resilience, and reclaiming the narrative. Examining this content through the lens of Anzaldúa's borderlands theory highlighted a major common denominator in each theme, which is one of empowerment by the Mexican American community. At the onset of this project, the goal was to explore why as a Mexican American in the United States I felt as though I was unable to openly express my own grief. Through this analysis I established that Mexican Americans do not necessarily hide or reject our grief, rather it is expressed through ways unique to our culture. This analysis provided some examples of those unique ways including expressing grief through writing corridos, a musical tradition authentic to the U.S. Mexico border. Mexican Americans gripped tightly to every performance of Juan Gabriel's "Amor Eterno" for strength and comfort. Mexican Americans in El Paso grieved together in

large crowds outside of the memorial site listening to the sounds of local mariachi groups, surrounded by Mexican flags, and candles printed with images of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Mexican Americans across the country built Day of the Dead altars as a symbol of unity with those grieving the victims killed. In doing all of these things, Mexican Americans never denied their grief. They did quite the opposite, they embraced the open wound that was their grief and used it to empower themselves to validate the existence of Mexican Americans and Mexican American culture and identity.

In the next chapter, I will utilize autoethnography to explore my own grief experience following my mother's death through the analysis of personal journal entries and social media posts related to my journey through grief.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Autoethnography**

It was the week before President's Day in 2017. I was living in Albuquerque, New Mexico and my mom was going to drive with my sister and nephews from El Paso to spend the long weekend with me. Their plan was to leave right after work and school that Friday, but the day before, on Thursday, February 16, 2017 my mom left work early to go see her doctor because she had been feeling under the weather all week. It turns out, she had a pretty severe case of walking pneumonia. Her doctor wanted her admitted to the hospital immediately for treatment. This was not a shocking event. For the past few years, Mom seemed to get the same diagnosis right around the same time of year. She would spend a few days in the hospital, then would be released to go home. The plans changed, and I drove to El Paso that weekend to visit her. Typically, my mom would remain in good spirits for the first two or three days in the hospital, before it started to weigh on her. This time was different. I tried to make jokes and lift her spirits, but she did not engage. Over the next few days, she kept telling everyone that this time she felt like she was not going to make it. We all dismissed it. She had been in this situation so many times before, we were certain this time would be the same. A week later, doctors transferred her to the Intensive Care Unit. She had an underlying case of the flu that the doctors had not initially detected. The medical staff suspected that was the reason her body was not responding to the pneumonia treatment. Her first week in the ICU, I spent the night in her room to keep an eye on her. One day the doctors would say she was improving, the next day she was not. After about two weeks in the hospital, she was only getting worse. Mom had underlying medical conditions: diabetes and hypertension. The infection was putting an extra strain on her kidneys and causing her heart rate to increase. The doctors were considering dialysis and were

worried about a heart attack. Their recommendation was a medically induced coma. They said it would allow her body to focus on healing from the infection, and reduce the stress on her organs. Things had never gotten this bad before. We were overwhelmed with information and confused about what decisions to make. We did not know the right questions to ask. Mom was opposed to the idea. I distinctly remember grabbing her hand as she laid in her hospital bed and leaning in close to her face to reassure her that this was a good thing and would help her. She responded, “¿Si me muero?” She was worried that if she went into a coma, she would never come out of it. One of the nurses we had developed a fondness for explained why it was the best option at that point. I could see it in my mom’s face that she was not convinced, but hesitantly nodded in agreement anyway. My sister signed the paperwork and we all gave her a big hug and kiss and told her she would feel much better in a week when we expected her to be out of the coma. A week came and went and she was not improving. What we failed to realize was how much her mental state would diminish in that week. Of course it would. The ventilator was breathing for her and it was pumping most of the oxygen to her lungs, which needed it the most. That meant, far less oxygen was going to her brain. They would give her breaks from the medicine and she would briefly open her eyes, but could not make eye contact. Initially, she would not acknowledge when we would speak to her. Soon after, she stopped responding to the sound of our voice or the touch of our hands. She no longer turned her head in our direction. It was as though life had already left her body. Mom’s premonitions were right. She would not make it out of the coma. She would not make it back out of the hospital. This time was it. After 32 days in the hospital, Mom took her final breath. She was surrounded by her four children, two daughters-in-law, seven of her eight grandchildren at the time, and her ex-husband. In that moment, I felt as though my entire world was crumbling beneath me. It was just a case of pneumonia. She had it

every year. She was walking and working and breathing 32 days ago. What happened? Could we have done more? Should we have made her go see the doctor sooner? Did we make the right choice in placing her in a medically induced coma? Did we take away her choice in all of this? Is she mad at us for the decisions we made for her? These questions and an infinite amount of others plagued me from that day, and continue to do so to this day.

My mother's death was unexpected. It was a *susto* that shocked me to my core and catapulted me into what Anzaldúa coined *arrebato*, a rupture that launched me onto a path of *conocimiento*. In this chapter, I will utilize an autoethnographic approach to explore my own grief experience following my mother's death through the lens of the Anzaldúan theoretical lens of *conocimiento*. This process includes a textual analysis of content I posted to my personal Facebook page about my mother (posthumously), her death, and/or my grieving process. The themes I identified through my Facebook posts are seeking connections with deceased, cultural identity linked to her memory, finding comfort in collective grief, memorializing the deceased's legacy, and finally seeking acknowledgement of grief. The second section of this chapter is an additional textual analysis of my personal journal entries, which started seven days after my mother's death. Through this analysis, I identified five emergent themes that I will describe and for which I will provide examples and context. Those themes are avoiding/hiding grief, guilt, the trauma of uncertainty, questioning if heaven exists, and finally an identity transformation.

## **Part I: Social Media Analysis**

*Picked out Mama's gravestone earlier 🙏 and now spending the afternoon talking about how perfect its going to fit when we plant her grass and her tree. 🌳 Reminding our*



*hearts to see the beauty in eternal life* ❤️#MotherlessMothersDay (S. Ramirez, personal communication, May 14, 2017)

I included my personal social media content in this analysis because while initially I do not believe I was conscious that I was using social media as a coping mechanism, it was something I certainly realized later. Brubaker et al. (2012) noted that popular social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube have provided people with different ways to cope with death. Gamba (2018) argued that sharing thoughts and emotions on social media offered a means of dealing with grief. By using Facebook, Odom et al. (2010) argued users are able to maintain a personal relationship with the deceased. Gamba (2018) cautions that while social media is not a substitute for professional support, “it offers a means of personalized coping by way of a continuing, shared, and narrative bond” (p. 83). Bosticco and Thompson (2005) argued storytelling and narrative are fundamental human processes that are important to coping with grief. I explore the different themes that emerged from my personal Facebook posts based on Gamba’s (2018) position that this digital grief ritual is a space for my expression as a person who is “troubled by loss and seeks out a time, a place, and a personal mode by which to grieve and celebrate the memory of the deceased with relatives, friends, and even strangers” (p. 83). I will achieve this by examining my own narratives.

#### *Seeking connections with the deceased*

*My Mama is seriously everywhere I go...especially now that I’m back home. Even a simple stop at Walgreens today. The cashier grew up with my mom when they were kiddos. I had to read her nametag because I didn’t know her name...but she knew me. She remembered my mom telling her I went to do the news in Albuquerque. She lives in*

*Chaparral so she gets all the New Mexico news stations and apparently she's been watching me for years because, "it's Terry's daughter."*

*She just found out about Mama today. 🙄*

*She told me my mom gave her a job years ago when she really needed it. We both teared up right there at the register as she reminded me how big a heart my mom always had for everyone. She gave me a hug and said, "I'm glad you're back."*

*Me too. (S. Ramirez, personal communication, April 24, 2018)*

The first theme that materialized from my Facebook posts was seeking or sharing a connection with my deceased mother. Like in the example above, this included posts in which I felt my mother's presence based on a memory with her, feeling her presence while visiting her at the cemetery, or when I felt she had somehow intervened in a particular occurrence in my life despite her no longer being with us. In one of those examples, I shared a story about two months after her death:

Random Mama Memory: Made some coffee right before work today and threw the stirring spoon in the clean, empty sink. I immediately remembered one time Mama stayed with me at my first apartment in ABQ. She was up as I was getting ready for work one morning. I made my coffee and threw the stirring spoon in the clean, empty sink. She was so annoyed and insisted I wash the ONE spoon before I left. I didn't. 😊 I chuckled as I walked away from the sink today and said out loud, "Nope Señora, not gonna wash it!" (S. Ramirez, personal communication May 31, 2017).

While I do not know what compelled me to share this anecdote, I do remember that I felt comforted in doing so. It remember it made me smile. Remembering her and sharing that

memory somehow made me feel closer to her in that moment. Gamba (2018) identified this process as narrative mourning and argued it is a form of grieving that perpetuates the bond between the mourner and the deceased.

In another Facebook post, I credited my mom with upgrading our seats to a concert. For context, my sister had purchased tickets for herself and our mom to attend a Garth Brooks concert in El Paso. My mom passed away about a month before the show. I lived out of town at the time, but traveled to El Paso to attend the concert with my sister. We arrived at the venue and were searching for our seats (in the nosebleed section) when we were approached by two young men who said they were a part of Garth Brooks' team and were surprising fans by upgrading them to floor seats. I took to social media as seen in Figure 5 (S. Ramirez, personal communication, April 8, 2017) to thank my mom, "Trying to find our seats @garthbrooks and we got upgraded to FLOOR seats, ROW 2! Like, WTF?!?!?! You guys realize that's not a coincidence, right? Thanks, Mama! ❤️ 🙏 @ NMSU Pan American Center / Special Events

Gamba (2018) the grief narrative creates between the author and the departed.



**Figure 5.**

*Facebook post documenting concert.*

There were also examples of me grappling with my inability to connect with my mother after her death. In another post, I describe a dream in which I am on vacation with my mom and we stand in line to sit down with a psychic medium. While we are waiting in line, a man assured me the medium would connect me with my mom. According to my post, I responded, “What are you talking about? My mom’s right here. I talk to her every day and she goes everywhere with me.” In my post, I noted that I meant that statement literally, not spiritually. In the dream, I left the line because I realized I needed a photo so I ran to retrieve one, but when I returned, the medium was gone. In the social media post, I reflected on my interpretation of the dream, “My subconscious knows this is something I’m struggling with — feeling connected with my mom.” These grief narratives are personal expressions of grief that fostered a connection between myself (the bereaved), my mother (the deceased), and what I established as a grief community (Facebook friends).

#### *Culture linked to the deceased’s memory*

This project is heavily focused on culture and identity so it was inevitable that it would emerge as a theme in my social media posts. After examining my personal Facebook posts, a second theme that emerged was linking my cultural identity to my deceased mother’s memory. I could have labeled this entire subsection according to the Facebook caption in Figure 6 (S. Ramirez, personal communication, October 27, 2018), “Y ahora quién va hacer los tamales?”



**Figure 6.**

*Facebook memory of my mom making tamales.*

There were a handful of separate posts related to her reputation for making the best tamales in the family. The posts also documented our attempts, successful and failed, at recreating my mom's tamales. Typically, tamales are a customary in Mexican American families during the Christmas holidays. It is a tradition that I linked to her, and by default, it connected me to my Mexican American culture:

Couldn't decide if we wanted to try to make tamales this year to keep Mama's Christmas Eve tradition going...or if we should boycott them because it was gonna make us sad. We decided we'll \*try to make them after all. [#ChristmasTraditions](#)  
[#FirstChristmasWithoutMama](#) (S. Ramirez, January 2, 2018)

I would not be wrong in saying that I did it because I genuinely love to eat tamales, but it was more about recreating a recipe that not only connected me to my mom, but also keeps me connected to my culture, and in a position to pass that tradition to future generations.

That was not the only example of my mother's death linking my grief to my Mexican-American identity. As a child, I recall observing Día de Los Muertos, but it was never as elaborate as our celebration the first year after my mom died. My Facebook post documented our efforts, "Graveside dinner, musica, beers and chisme with the Señora Teresa Ramirez & Susie. #DiaDeLosMuertos #AllSouls Day" (S. Ramirez, personal communication, November 2, 2017). I remember preparing for this celebration. My search for marigolds took me to many different stores. I remember I even drove across town to find the traditional pan de muerto. I stopped at the liquor store for her favorite tequila, and bought plastic margarita glasses to partake in her favorite cocktail. I had never put this much effort into celebrating other deceased loved ones on Día de Los Muertos, but this was the first one without my mom and felt like it had to be perfect.

These examples illustrate Anzaldúa's (1987) nepantlism, being caught between two worlds, two cultures. Anzaldúa (2015) also referred to a mestizaje as a new category of identity, a new hybrid that is the result of negotiating borders. I lived nepantlism, straddling two cultures my entire life. Anzaldúa described the mestiza as "a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another" (p. 78). When my mother passed, my role as a mestiza was to transfer the cultural traditions while embracing this new culturally hybrid identity.

#### *Finding comfort in collective grief*

*Some days are just harder than others... I heard this song on my way to work this morning and there were so many tears. I hadn't heard it in YEARS, but I remember the*

*lyrics always made me think of my mom, even a long time go. She was my backbone, and I miss her every single day.* (S. Ramirez, personal communication, April, 16, 2017)

The third category that emerged from this social media analysis was examples of seeking comfort in collective grief. In these examples, the posts seemed to be an attempt to share my grief with others. I also often shared previously posted photos of my mom that appeared as Facebook “Memories” on the anniversaries of the original date I had initially posted them. These photos also appeared to my Facebook friends, as well as my mother’s Facebook friends and drew engagement from people who used the platform as a way to express their own grief in the comments. In one example, I shared a photo of my mom from 2014 with the caption, “We loved to lunch” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, April 10, 2017). This created a space for friends and family to express their grief and share their own memories of her. One person commented, “I miss my Mercedes so much already!!” (M. Diaz, personal communication, April 10, 2017). Two of her sisters each commented, “Miss you so much love you sis,” (M. Maynez, personal communication, April 10, 2017) and “Missing my comadre but you guys will always have good memories of her,” (V. Rede, personal communication, April 10, 2017) while a friend commented, “I remember we went to lunch at El Rincon by Utep and she couldn’t believe I ate so much because I ordered the Mexican plate” (L. Macias, personal communication, April 10, 2017). By posting the photo, I was not consciously seeking comfort, nor was I intentionally creating a space for collective grief, nonetheless that is what happened. Georgakopoulou (2007) argued that Facebook is a platform well suited for narrative mourning and collaborative storytelling and allow for a narrative that is con-constructed by multiple narrators.

There were additional examples of similar occurrences, including my first Mother’s Day without my mom and another photo on the three-month anniversary of her death. In each of


those instances, people were able to share their own experiences with grief with one friend writing, “Im [sic] sorry friend. I remember waking up after Ashley died and going to call her and remembering I couldn’t anymore” (L. Macias, personal communication, May 10, 2017). She was referring to her best friend who was hit by a car and killed in high school. Nearly twenty years later, this friend remembered her own grief. On the Mother’s Day post another friend commented, “The first one \*IS\* the hardest. I can actually say that for sure” (A. Litton, personal communication, May 10, 2017). This particular friend had lost her own mom a few years prior and was offering her grief experience as a way to show support. In another of the comments, my mom’s sister used the post as a way to express her grief, “I was just thinking of that yesterday of how much I miss her calling me or me calling her. This sister of mine left too many broken hearts but I know she is taking care of us I dearly miss her” (P. Vargas, personal communication, May 10, 2017). To this day, I do not know if my aunt had communicated to anyone else how she was feeling in her grief at the time, but the post allowed her to express how she had been feeling.

It may have been unintentional, but the support one would expect to receive in a setting like grief support group was happening on social media. People offered comforting words to console me, and in exchange, had to the opportunity to express their own grief.

### *The Deceased’s Legacy*

*My cousin gave me this photo at my Mom's rosary, and it made me smile so much. 🐱🐱It reminds me that I inherited my mom's beautiful spirit for life. Mama loooooooved to dance, and every single wedding, quinceañera, or other party we went to, she and I would get up and dance together. To this day, I'm terrible at dancing cumbias, even though she tried so hard to teach me, but it was still always so fun to dance with her. 💃*



 *When she had her fall and her hurt knee a couple of years ago, I remember being so sad for her because I knew my mom couldn't dance anymore. Now it makes my heart happy to know that she's dancing in heaven.* (S. Ramirez, personal communication, March 26, 2017).

Facebook posts created a space to preserve my deceased mother's legacy. The examples that applied to this fourth theme provided insight into my mother's character, personality, and the impression that she left on those who knew her. In one example I shared a memory that was three years old at the time. In 2014, my mother fell off a ladder and had to have reconstructive knee surgery. She spent months in a rehabilitation center essentially learning to walk again. In the caption, I referenced song lyrics that alluded to her physical effort, and determination. The caption read, "Can't nobody take (her) pride...Can't nobody hold (her) down... ohh no (She had) to keep on movin'..." (S. Ramirez, November 3, 2017). The comments on the memory were enormously comforting for me with one person writing, "Ay mi comadre siempre luchando" (V. Rede, personal communication, November 3, 2017), which translates to "she was always fighting." Other comments read, "She was a warrior there was no stopping her at anything" (P. Vargas, personal communication, November 3, 2017), and "She was a strong lady never gave up she always wanted to do things on her own" (E. Griego, personal communication, November 3, 2017). Reading those comments gave me confidence to share my mom's legacy as a woman who was a pillar of strength and always had a smile to share.

*Seeking acknowledgement of grief*

Many of the social media posts that did not fit into any of the four other themes mentioned above fit into the fifth and final category of seeking acknowledgement of grief. These were posts, photos, or memories that mostly seemed to serve the purpose of reminding my Facebook friends that I was still in fact grieving. Facebook posts in this category were most common on holidays, my mom's birthday, and her death anniversary. For example, on Mother's Day in 2018 I shared old photos of my mother in the late 1970s and 1980s with the caption, "Happy Mother's Day in Heaven to this beautiful woman who faced motherhood the same way she faced life — with a smile. I love and miss you every single day of my life" (S. Ramirez, personal communication, May 13, 2018). While I no longer celebrate Mother's Day in the traditional sense since my mother is gone, the caption and photos were a way to mark the holiday and acknowledge that I still remember her on this day. The intent was similar when I posted a photo for one of my mom's birthday in which I wrote:

Lucky for us, we have a lot of amazing memories celebrating your life every year you were here on earth. We promise to continue celebrating your life now that you're gone, because I believe you're looking down from Heaven celebrating with us. Enjoy the margs, girlfriend. We'll be sure to cheers to you later. (S. Ramirez, personal communication, August 16, 2018)

According to Gamba (2018), expressing emotions on Facebook in this way allows the transformation of grief into memory. Additionally, communicating the emotions I associated with my mother's death on these symbolic days provided a way for me to personalize my grief.

## **Summary**

In this section, I utilized an autoethnographic, textual analysis approach to examine social media posts related to my grief following my mother's death. Through this analysis, I identified five themes: seeking connections with deceased, cultural identity linked to the deceased's memory, finding comfort in collective grief, memorializing the deceased's legacy, and seeking acknowledgement of grief. My personal Facebook posts about my grief allowed me to construct my own mourning narrative which preserved my bond with my deceased mother. The Facebook posts were also beneficial to other people on Facebook who engaged with the content and became part of an unintended grief community.

## **Part II: Journal Entries**

*I've been dreaming about you a lot lately. I think it's your way of letting me know you're still with me. In my dreams, I talk to you. You always smile back and acknowledge me. (S. Ramirez, personal communication, November 16, 2017)*

In the second part of this autoethnography chapter I identify and discuss the themes that materialized from a textual analysis of my personal journal entries following my mother's death. A few days after my mom's services, I went to the store and purchased journals for myself, my sister, and three of my nephews. I explained that several of the articles I had read about grief suggested journaling as a way to cope with grief. I had kept a journal in the past, but I wanted this one to be intentional. My first entry was essentially a summary of how this chapter started. I wrote down how my mom had died, as if somehow I would ever forget even the faintest detail. I remember I wrote it down because the scenes kept playing in my head over and over again, and I thought, I hoped, that writing it down would offer some mental relief. I honestly do not remember if it did. What I do know is that journaling was a way to have conversations with my

mom, a way to sort through my emotions even if I could not necessarily make sense of them. It has been more than four years and I am still in the practice of journaling, and my mom is quite often still a topic I journal about.

The journal entries in this analysis were included based on their relevance to my grieving process. The five established themes are avoiding/hiding grief, guilt, the trauma of uncertainty, questioning faith, and identity shift. Additionally, I will examine these themes through the context of Anzaldúa's (2015) "Coyolxauhqui," a process she defined by reaching the spiritual knowledge of *conocimiento*.

### *The Coyolxauhqui*

Death and destruction do shock us out of our familiar daily rounds and force us to confront our *desconocimientos*, our *sombras*—the unacceptable attributes and unconscious forces that a person must wrestle with to achieve integration. They expose our innermost fears, forcing us to interrogate our souls. (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 16)

Anzaldúa's (2015) path of *Coyolxauhqui* includes seven nonlinear stages of reaching *conocimiento*: *el arrebato*, *nepantla*, the Coatlicue state, the call to action, recompose personal and collective narrative, a clash of realities, and shifting realities. This analysis will not detail each of the seven stages, and instead will highlight the stages that correlate to my experience based on the journal entries. Anzaldúa (2015) wrote about repeated experiences of *arrebato*, a rupture, or the fragmentation. I would not feel that level of internal destruction until my mother's death. I was broken, fragmented.

My path to *conocimiento* began with *el arrebato*, the rupture, or the fragmentation that occurs and, "you fall apart and feel as though you've been expelled from paradise" (Anzaldúa,

2015, p. 19). I very clearly recall my personal moment of *arrebato* in the context of my mother's death. I arrived to my empty apartment after leaving my brother's house. He had invited me over for dinner in the middle of the week and my dad was there, too. My sister in law wanted us to be together when she told us that my sister had called with an update from the hospital in El Paso. Our mom was not going to make it. There was nothing more to do. Her lungs had stopping functioning and the machines were breathing for her. We made plans to leave for El Paso first thing in the morning. I drove home, opened my front door, and dropped to my knees onto the tile floor of my living room and started sobbing, wailing, shouting. I do not recall everything I said, but I specifically remember repeating, "I'm not ready to lose my mom. I'm not ready to lose her, God." I felt gutted, shattered, utterly destroyed. This was Anzaldúa's (2015) *Coyolxauhqui*, the necessary process of dismemberment. Anzaldua (2015) described her own *desconocimientos*, shadow beasts that for her included numbness, anger, and disillusionment, while also carrying the collective shadow in the psyches of her culture. The weight she carried resonated with me. My personal *desconocimiento* was my own *susto*, my own sadness, and my own helplessness, but it was also my conscious effort to shield my family and loved ones from the burden of my grief. My grief was *una herida abierta*, an open wound that I was suddenly hyperconscious of, yet had no idea how to begin to heal. I knew I wanted to heal, to reach my own *conocimiento*, a transformation that would include self-redefinition, spiritual knowledge, a radical shift in perception, and the end of one way of being and the beginning of another (Anzaldúa, 2015).. I felt immersed in this process related to my mother's death when August 3, 2019 happened and the unhealed *herida* of my grief ripped wide open once again.

I navigated a new path to *conocimiento* by experiencing the grief following the El Paso shooting. Gutierrez-Perez (2020) utilized *conocimiento* to process the mass shooting at Pulse

nightclub in 2016 and described it as “like an earthquake has destroyed the world, and I have lost my footing. So many souls lost. So many in shock. How can we heal?” (p. 388). His *arrebato*, the catalyst for his path to *conocimiento* following Pulse correlated with my own following my mother’s death.

### *Avoiding/Hiding Grief*

The first theme I identified when examining my personal journal entries were instances in which I elected to avoid my grief, or I hid my grief from others so as not to burden them. In one of the journal entries I was attempting to shield my grief from myself writing, “I haven’t been strong enough to write. I was worried I’d get too sad and start crying” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, May 8, 2017). However, it was more common for me to try to intentionally conceal my grief, even from my own siblings, “I don’t want Susie or Jesse to worry about me, and I don’t want to make them sad so I would just talk to myself in the car and cry alone” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, May 8, 2017). The journal entries indicate that I was intentionally isolating myself in my grief, and I was intentionally avoiding dealing with my grief by keeping myself occupied, “Keep your mind occupied and you won’t feel your broken heart. It’s not the best way, but it’s what we know” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, January 28, 2019). These examples correlate with Anzaldúa’s (2015) *arrebato* following the 9/11 attacks. She chronicled being unable to make sense of what she was feeling, explaining that “it was difficult to acknowledge, much less express, the depth of my feelings – instead me lo trage” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 10). She swallowed her sadness, in the same way that I was choosing to swallow mine.

### *Guilt*

The second theme that emerged from this analysis was guilt. There were examples of guilt about the role I played in the final decisions about my mother's fate, and guilt about whether I was properly grieving her death after she was gone. In multiple journal entries, I specifically indicate feeling guilt and regret about the medical decisions we made on her behalf. My journal entries reflect the agony of this series of events constantly replaying in my head, "I'm sorry if we did anything wrong.... We decided for you and that's not fair... I'll regret that forever. I have a lot of regrets" (S. Ramirez, personal communication, May 8, 2017). The deep feelings of guilty and agony that are apparent in my entries also shifted to the Coatlicue state, the third stage of *conocimiento* marked by fear and depression. Gutierrez-Perez (2020) reassured that while grappling with our shadow side in this stage may feel like a detour our distraction, "dealing with fear, anxiety and anger, and facing depression and trauma are part of the path" (p. 389).

Other entries reflected feelings of inadequacy and guilt for believing that I had somehow failed my mother:

I don't deserve how good a mother you were to me... I broke down in the car the other day overwhelmed with guilt... I'm sorry I failed you. I'm sorry if I ever made you sad or broke your heart. You didn't deserve it and I wish I could change it all. (S. Ramirez, personal communication, February 17, 2019).

My feelings of inadequacy extended to sentiments that I was not meeting standards of sufficiently grieving her loss, "I've been thinking a lot about you. That I'm not doing enough for you especially now that you're gone" (S. Ramirez, personal communication, March 9, 2019).

These entries mark a shift toward *nepantla*, which Anzaldúa (2015) characterized as being

caught in remolinos, or vortexes, in which experience a clash in realities and we fail to live up to idealized goals. In this context, it was my sentiment that I was failing to meet idealized goals of grief. Gutierrez-Perez (2020) expressed similar sentiments and wrote, “If I am being honest, I have not been living up to my promise to those lost to live up to my fullest potential. The lives of those lost have not been redeemed” (p. 389). I recall a conversation I had with a colleague following the El Paso shooting in which she said that after she found out the shooter was targeting Mexicans, she felt compelled to embrace her culture and be as Mexican as possible, in as many ways as possible. I remember her comment igniting a sense of responsibility in me to outwardly embrace my culture as a tribute to the El Paso shooting victims.

### *Trauma of Uncertainty*

The path to *conocimiento* is not a linear one. The second stage of *conocimiento*, *nepantla*, is “a psychological, liminal space between the way things had been and an unknown future. *Nepantla* is the space in-between, the locus and sign of transition” (Anzaldúa, p. 17). In the stage of *nepantla*, Anzaldúa (2015) outlined a fall into chaos and a fear of the unknown. This tied directly to the third theme of this analysis, which is the trauma of uncertainty. In some of my journal entries, I am tormented by questions that I will never know the answers. In one entry I wrote, “I hope you know how much we love you. I hope we showed you enough love when we had you here” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, March 30, 2017), and in another entry I contemplated my mother’s final moments writing, “How I wish I could know what was going through your mind. Were you scared? Were you sad? Were you ready?” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, March 31, 2018). This stage of despair follows a state of straddling between *nepantla* and the *Coatlicue* state, which Anzaldúa refers to as the “hellish third phase of your journey” (p. 130). This phase is typically marked by deep depression until you gradually shift



your perception and emotions and rise out of it (Anzaldúa, 2015). Following the El Paso shooting, I remember being deeply impacted by stories of a young girls soccer team that was fundraising outside of the Walmart store the day of the shooting. Listening to their story pained me as I tried to imagine what was going through their minds in that moment, how they could have even made sense of what was happening. The thought of the mental and emotional anguish those girls experienced brought me tremendous heartache.

### *Questioning if Heaven Exists*

The fourth theme in this analysis is based on entries that question the existence of heaven. It is important to note that in my journal entries I do not question faith as a whole, instead question the concept of heaven, “I’ve been struggling with Faith lately. I believe in God, I believe in his only son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and I believe in the Holy Spirit. Without fail, I believe...I’m struggling with Heaven and the afterlife” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, July 25, 2017). Following Anzaldúa’s (2015) path to *conocimiento*, we struggle to know the world in which we were living and began to question the doctrines that claimed to be the only right way to live, yet those doctrines no longer accommodated who we are. I identified examples of reaching that phase of questioning in an entry that read, “I keep praying for a stronger faith...When something like this happens, it makes you question a lot of different parts of your faith...I never thought I’d question Heaven” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, July 26, 2017), and another entry that read, “I’ve never questioned Heaven before. Not until we lost you...Nothing has ever tested my faith as much as losing you” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, February 17, 2019). According to Anzaldúa, each *arreatamiento* is an awakening that causes us to question who we are and negotiate an identity crisis. This is phase four of *conocimiento*, the call to action, which Anzaldúa (2015) argued is marked by a constant

state of *nepantla*, an identity in constant transition. During this stage, Anzaldúa (2015) claimed you reinterpret your past, change your reactions to past events, and rewire your brain to reshape your present.

### *Identity Shift*

These phases lead us to the fifth and final theme of this analysis – an identity shift. In this analysis I identified a shift in identity, acknowledgement of grief, and faith. This theme also falls in line with Anzaldúa’s seventh stage of *conocimiento* – shifting realities. Anzaldúa (2015) established *Coyolxauhqui* as a symbol for reconstruction, putting the pieces of the initial fragmentation together in a new way. The path to *conocimiento* is marked by a struggle to know the world you live in, according to Anzaldúa (2015). My early path to *conocimiento* was marked by such a struggle with my own identity, “Today I felt like I was living someone else’s life. None of this is my ‘normal.’ I longed so much all day for something to feel familiar” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, May 26, 2017). In a journal entry over a year later, there is a shift toward a more empowered identity that is directly linked to going through the grieving process:

I’ve been thinking a lot about finding a new voice, my voice. I feel the need to speak up...I honestly think it’s my mom who made me this spitfire I feel like she was the one who would speak up for and against everyone and now that she’s gone, we all have to take on a little bit of that role. I feel like it’s because of her that I’ve found this voice. (S. Ramirez, personal communication, December 5, 2018).

My journal entries also depict a critical turning point in my faith. As previously mentioned, I questioned certain aspects of my faith early in my path to *conocimiento* writing, “Am I trusting

enough in God? Easily I know the answer is no. I have too many questions, fears, doubts” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, June 11, 2018). My journal entries outline the progression of this shift in perspective. In March of 2019 I directly addressed my belief in God’s presence writing, “I feel like you and God do a pretty good job of reminding us that your spirit is still very much with us” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, March 9, 2019). Nearly a year and a half later I declare my trust in God writing, “I’m not sad or scared or worried. I’ve always placed my life in God’s hands and he hasn’t failed me. Things work out – or they don’t – based on His will. I’m okay with that” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, August 30, 2020).

You will also recall the first theme in this analysis in which I explore examples in which I elected to avoid or hide my grief. A journal entry 13 months later depicts a shift in that perspective in which I quote the Bible “Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). I reflect on the verse in my journal entry writing, “That’s become one of my favorite gospels. It reminds me that God is with me in my mourning. It also reminds me that it’s ok to mourn” (S. Ramirez, personal communication, June 11, 2018). This entry indicates a complete shift to embracing my grief.

According to Anzaldúa (2015) testimonio, our testimony is essential to the healing process of *conocimiento*. For Anzaldúa (2015), it was a way to bring all of her feelings and thoughts together, “Only by speaking of these events and by creating do I become visible to myself and come to terms with what happens” (p. 21). Without a safe space to openly grieve and express all emotions with no time restraints, the bereaved are denied the ability to reach *conocimiento*. This thesis created a space for my personal testimonio. The catalyst to this research was a single lingering question that I could not answer, “Why does no one want to talk about my grief?” My grief was consuming every single remnant of my physical, mental and

emotional existence, but I felt as though there was no physical space to release that. My Facebook posts and my journal entries were small attempts to release my grief, but this thesis has been the most cathartic experience because it was not only an expression of my grief, it guided me through the process of grieving and healing.

## **Summary**

This second section of the autoethnography chapter was an analysis of my grief experience utilizing my personal journal entries and examining them through Anzaldúa's (2015) concept of Coyolxauhqui and path to *conocimiento*. I explored the five established themes of avoiding/hiding grief, guilt, the trauma of uncertainty, questioning faith, and identity shift. The themes guided me through some of the steps of *conocimiento*, but did not include examples of each of the seven steps of *conocimiento*. Nonetheless, this analysis revealed that it was only by embracing the different stages of my grief that I was able to experience the transformative healing of my wounds by reaching *conocimiento*. In the next chapter, I will connect the rituals of mourning following the El Paso shooting with my own experiences following my mother's death. I will then discuss the theoretical implications of this analysis.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Discussions**

Grief is something most people will experience in their lives. It is a complex phenomenon that can be complicated by an infinite number of unique circumstances. Christ et al. (2003) defined grief as a “complex set of cognitive, emotional and social difficulties that follow the death of a loved one. Individuals vary enormously in the type of grief they experience, its intensity, its duration, and their way of expressing it” (p. 555). This often life altering event can be influenced by factors such as gender, the quality of the relationship with the deceased, the type of loss, among other factors (Geneviro et al., 2004). According to Barney & Yoshimura (2020), grief is intensified when bereaved individuals try to align their grief experience with cultural norms, despite those norms not aligning with their actual grief experience. The pressure of navigating how to perform grief while being torn between these two places may result in disenfranchised grief, an experience in which “grieving individuals easily have their feelings discredited or overlooked and lose opportunities for social support because of a discrepancy between the dominant narrative of grief and the actual experience of it” (Barney & Yoshimura, 2020, p. 80).

This study is rooted in exploring this liminal space of grief and applying it to Mexican Americans, who often find themselves in a cultural liminal space. Various studies, many cited in this project, have focused on the dominant narrative of grief and socio-cultural expectations of what so-called normal grieving looks like. However, most of those studies do not extend to specific cultural experiences outside of the American culture. The purpose of this study was to examine that experience through the performance of the Mexican American grief experience as revealed through media coverage of the El Paso mass shooting on August 3, 2019, as well as my

personal experience as a Mexican American following the unexpected death of my mother in 2017. These grief experiences were examined utilizing Anzaldúa's (1987) borderlands theory, a qualitative approach that links the cultural borderland of the Mexican American to the literal borderland of El Paso, Texas along the U.S. Mexico border.

### *Media Analysis*

The textual analysis of this study examined media coverage after the El Paso shooting that exhibited the Mexican American grief experience through music, culturally relevant artifacts, and the celebration of Day of the Dead. Analysis of the news articles produced four emergent themes: displays of grief, symbols of identity and culture, examples of unity and resilience, and instances of reclaiming the narrative. The purpose of this analysis was first to determine what the media coverage of public displays of grief following the shooting told about grief in a cultural borderland; and second, to determine the relationship between media coverage of the public displays of grief and the lived experiencing of performing grief as a Mexican American. The major findings revealed that repeated use of stories and images in news articles that featured the Mexican flag displayed alongside the American flag, images of the Virgen de Guadalupe, a powerful symbol to Mexican Americans and coverage of mariachis singing songs in Spanish uplifted El Paso's bicultural identity. The stories and images that reached an international audience displayed repeated examples of a unique bicultural identity that is different from the Mexican identity south of the border, and different from the American identity north of the border.

Examples of collective grief through the makeshift memorial and large community vigils provided the opportunity for people to grieve together and not feel isolated. Additional Mexican

American cultural rituals that were observed collectively following the shooting, including religious velas and Día de Los Muertos altars in honor of the victims, provided validation for these Mexican American customs. Validating those practices was a form of validating the grief of Mexican Americans, therefore preventing disenfranchised grief, according to Barney & Yoshimura's (2020) argument that grieving individuals might feel disenfranchised grief as a result of feeling pressured to confine their grief performances to expressions that fit within the dominant narrative. While there may be a discrepancy between the Mexican American practices of grief following the El Paso shooting, and the dominant narrative of performative grief in the United States, the rituals performed by the El Paso and Mexican American communities were nonetheless uplifted.

### *Autoethnography*

The autoethnographic chapter of this study was divided into two sections beginning with an analysis of posts from my personal Facebook page that chronicled my grief. This analysis resulted in five themes: making connections with the deceased, linking culture to the deceased's memory, preserving the deceased's legacy, finding comfort in collective grief, and attempts to have my grief acknowledged. The second section of the autoethnography was an examination of my personal journal entries for the purposes of revealing themes related to my grief experience. The themes that emerged in this section were examples of avoiding and/or hiding my grief, expressions of guilt, trauma related to uncertainty, questions about the existence of heaven, and finally an identity shift.

The purpose of including my personal narrative was not to compare the two experiences, but instead to explore my own feelings of disenfranchised grief following my mother's death.

Barney & Yoshimura (2020) argued that cultural display rules sometimes dictate that emotions, including grief, should be expressed through silence and avoidance. In analyzing my journal entries I found examples in which I intentionally avoided my grief, including an entry in which I wrote about intentionally keeping my mind occupied and followed it with a line that read, “It’s not the best way, but it’s what we know” (Jan. 28, 2019). Before the start of this study, I attributed that avoidance to the cultural limitations of my Mexican American identity. In accordance with Anzaldúa (1987), wailing was a defiant means of protest. My interpretation of wailing was not only in the literal sense of sobbing or weeping, but in any outward expression of grief. I wanted to be neither defiant nor rebellious to my culture, so I avoiding any implications of wailing. According to Doka’s (2002) argument, without the freedom to publicly mourn, I experienced the condition of disenfranchised grief. At least that is how I felt for the first two and a half years after my mother passed away. Then the El Paso shooting happened and I subconsciously and simultaneously grieved my mother’s death while grieving the shooting victims.

I provided examples of public displays of grief earlier in this study, including descriptions of people crying in front of strangers at the memorial and public vigils. This collective grief was vastly different than what I experienced in my personal and isolated grief. I also explained how writing a corrido or singing along with the mariachi to Juan Gabriel’s “Amor Eterno” were clear expressions of grief among Mexican Americans following the shooting. While participating in these cultural rituals following the shooting I did not feel restricted by the identity of a Mexican American who exists mentally, physically, culturally in two place, and instead embraced a third identity that resonates with a new consciousness, a new identity characterized by Anzaldúa’s (2015) vivid description, “You hear la Llorona/Cihuacoatl wailing.



Your picture of her coiled serpent body with the head of a woman, shedding its skin, generating itself” (p. 155). It is not lost on me that Anzaldúa (2015) specifically referred to wailing. This is intentional rebellion and resistance. An act that begins the task of rebuilding yourself and your new identity, and “through the act of writing, like the ancient chamana, the scattered pieces of your soul back to your body” (p. 155). That is what the process of this study has done for me. Through the analysis of the media coverage of cultural displays of grief following the El Paso shooting I realized that I participated in many of the same cultural rituals following my mother’s death. I sang along to a mariachi rendition of “Amor Eterno,” I lit velas with religious images, I visited the cemetery on Día de Los Muertos and built an altar in my home. I had done all of these things, but it was not until completing this study that I realized all of those customs were expressions of my grief, and I had in fact grieved her death in a uniquely cultural way that I had not been conscious of. It was through the process of examining my personal grief alongside the collective grief of the El Paso shooting that I was able to reach my own healing, my own *conocimiento*.

### *Theoretical Implications*

In this section, I add my voice to the discourse presented throughout this thesis. Related Anzaldúa’s (2015) path to *conocimiento*, it is intended as a path to healing that includes seven stages. While Gutierrez-Perez (2020) and other scholars have argued that those stages are nonlinear, my analysis determined that some stages overlap, others may be repeated, while others still might be completely bypassed. Additionally, this analysis raises the question about whether *conocimiento* can be successfully reached if someone experiences the path subconsciously. As I pointed out earlier in this text, I was personally not aware that the cultural grief rituals I was practicing were in fact expressions of grief that guided my path to *conocimiento*. It was not until

I completed this analysis that I became conscious of the process. Without recognizing these implications, there is a possibility that *conocimiento* may not be reached and the intended healing may not occur.

A second implication pertains to how this analysis relates to communal trauma. Anzaldúa (2015) wrote of being fragmented following the September 11, 2001 attacks, “As we watched we too fell, todos caímos” (p. 9). Gutierrez-Perez (2020) chronicled the personal, emotional and psychological turmoil he experienced when writing about the Pulse nightclub shooting, “Yet as I relived the emotional, violent trauma of Pulse, my body reacted first, which initiated a spiritual reaction: I reruptured and was thrown into *nepantla* as I was faced with the realities of my life” (p. 389). However, the work of Anzaldúa and Gutierrez-Perez rests in their personal experience, and their personal path to *conocimiento* following a mass tragedy. While the 9/11 attacks and the Pulse nightclub shooting were both experienced and mourned publicly, the grieving and healing process of *conocimiento* as depicted by both scholars were experienced personally, and on an individual level. This analysis built on Anzaldúa’s (1987) concept of *Coyolxauhqui*, a dismemberment after trauma, and applied it to the communal grief and healing following the El Paso shooting. Anzaldúa (1987) wrote of the Chicana not making full use of our faculties and coming to a crossroads between falling victim to someone else in control, or to feel strong and feel in control. According to Anzaldúa (1987), experiencing a painful, emotional event propels the Chicana to work toward reaching a new consciousness that is “greater than the sum of its severed parts” (p. 80). This is an indication that the *mestiza* will heal from the *arrebatos* of the past, and those still to come. Anzaldúa’s (1987) argued, “The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended” (p. 80). These concepts were

broadened beyond the Chicana and mestiza identity and extended to the Mexican American culture as well as the El Paso community, and can expand even further to any person or group willing to embrace the tenets. As a result, and as a contribution to the field of communication studies, this analysis exhibited how healing transcended beyond the personal to the communal.

### *Limitations*

Although this study provides beneficial insight to the grieving experience of some Mexican Americans for the purposes of avoiding disenfranchised grief, there were some limitations. The first limitation was related to the analysis of the media coverage depicting Mexican American grief rituals. The analysis was based on my own interpretation of the content in the articles. Additionally, the Mexican American grief rituals performed in El Paso may be different than those observed by Mexican Americans in other parts of the country. Interpretations might also differ based on the geographic location of the person observing them. This analysis is not intended to generalize beyond the specific contours of the El Paso community. A second limitation related to the media analysis was that it was limited to English language news articles, and did not include content written for a different audience in Spanish.

Other limitations were related to the autoethnographic approach. This study was based on my individual experience and did not include data from the perspective of other Mexican Americans who have experienced their own grief. Another limitation of this autoethnography is that it did not include participants who also publicly grieved the El Paso shooting whether as the relative of a victim, a survivor, or a member of the community. The limitations listed did not affect the validity of the results.

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

Based on the results of this study and the limitations outlined above, there are several recommendations for future research. First, it would be beneficial to expand this qualitative study to include a larger sample size to include additional participants willing to be a part of qualitative interviews that would assess their interpretation of the media coverage. The participants could also agree to include their own social media posts and journal entries for an expanded textual analysis.

This study took place during the coronavirus pandemic that largely impacted the United States beginning in 2020. The restrictions of the pandemic including lockdown, quarantines, and social distancing largely ceased all public grieving rituals. Vigils and funerals ceased, and most vigils, memorials and gatherings were not allowed. The affects of the absence of these rituals and customs are worthy of researching among the general population, as well as examining any unique affects among the Mexican American population.

#### *Journalistic Recommendation*

This analysis demonstrated the presence of grief in the professional setting. Many journalists, myself included, grappled with the emotions they were experiencing and their professional obligation to meet a deadline. This was especially evidence among Mexican American reporters who wrote about how this attack felt personal to them, even if they were not from El Paso. The shooting was an attack on a culture, and it was apparent that it was felt throughout the world. From a pedagogical perspective, this analysis demonstrates that the way journalists are trained should be considerate of the likelihood that they will experience death, dying and grief from a professional standpoint. It is not only beneficial, but imperative that future journalists are trained on how to approach that grief when speaking with interviewees or

potential interviewees who have just experienced a death. Additionally, there is a need for journalism studies to address trauma as a factor of the profession. This is also something that must be acknowledged in the corporate newsroom environment. In my experience while obtaining a journalism degree, there was not one single class that addressed or prepared me for the trauma I would experience as a reporter. In my ten years in the news industry, I responded to countless crime scenes, interviewed countless friends and relatives, and attended countless vigils for victims. I specifically recall a horribly tragic case that involved the murder of three young children in their own home. I was assigned to this story every single day for nearly two weeks in which I was tasked with trying to interview family members, neighbors, even the cleaning crew hired to clear the crime scene. After ten days, I finally called in sick. This story had taken a toll on my mental and emotional health and I felt as though I physically could not do it another day. Despite that feeling, there was no acknowledgement from the newsroom management that this is what was happening, nor was it something I felt comfortable addressing. Neither my educational background in journalism nor my professional experience had prepared me to deal with the trauma of dealing with death as a journalist. My personal experience coupled with the experiences of journalists following the El Paso shooting are examples of how profoundly important it is to incorporate trauma-informed training in university level journalism programs and in the corporate newsroom environment.

### *Conclusions*

The results of this study led to four major conclusions. First, Mexican Americans may experience disenfranchised grief if their cultural grieving rituals are not acknowledged by the dominant culture. This study established that music, culturally relevant artifacts and certain rituals like Day of the Dead provide Mexican Americans with a means of expressing their grief.

However, if Mexican Americans are denied the opportunity to participate in these customs and rituals, or if they feel restricted in practicing these customs publicly, then there is a likelihood they may feel as though their grief is not being acknowledged and may result in disenfranchised grief.

Second, Mexican Americans may be able to reduce the possibility or severity of disenfranchised grief if they recognize that certain cultural grieving norms offer a unique way to express their grief that may not necessarily align with the dominant culture. For example, if the dominant culture embraces wailing or sobbing, but a Mexican American does not choose to embrace that norm and instead chooses to sing along to a culturally meaningful song like “Amor Eterno,” both should be viewed as valid forms of expressing grief. Not validating the Mexican American cultural norms of expressing grief could also result in disenfranchised grief.

Third, experiencing collective grief following a tragedy like a mass shooting could offer a channel for a bereaved individual to process grief from a previous death or loss. This is much like grieving the El Paso shooting helped me process my own grief following my mother’s death. Collective grief creates a space for the bereaved to discuss, express and share their grief with others who can relate to the experience. This is an indicator of the benefits of grief support groups or other public spaces that welcome open dialogue and expressions of grief.

Finally, experiencing grief often transforms your identity. Baddeley & Singer (2010) argued that when a family member dies, other members of the family are confronted with questions about who they are without the deceased person, and their previous sense of self is immediately challenged. This means the shift in identity begins almost immediately. While the sense of self is challenged, so is the cultural identity. As explored in this study, Mexican

Americans may struggle with whether they will embrace Mexican cultural grieving rituals, or the more dominant American norms, or if they will explore a third new consciousness. This cultural component is what had been missing from previous research I read related to grief.

This study offers Mexican Americans an additional perspective to their own grief that may or may not apply to their individual experience. For those who can relate, it may be beneficial to their own healing process toward *conocimiento* if they are able to recognize in the same way I did, that there is beauty and power in the unique expressions of grief within the Mexican American culture that separates it from the Mexican while also separating it from the American. While we may not literally wail in our grief, the customs and rituals that we have embraced are symbolic of us wailing for our cultura.

From a personal standpoint, this study has allowed me to process my grief in a way that I do not think would have otherwise happened. The strength required to overcome the grief of my mother's death was something this analysis helped me realize was a trait I learned from her. I know the lyrics to *Amor Eterno* because it was the song she played over and over after her mother, my grandmother, passed away. I learned the cultural rituals of grief by accompanying her to countless rosaries and novenas. Some people select a favorite religious saint that they pray to most often. For my mom, it was the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. I remember the tall religious candles lining shelves and tabletops throughout my childhood. I embraced these both before and after my mother's passing. Writing this thesis allowed me to see that I am memorializing her legacy and preserving my culture. Writing this thesis also provided a way for me to deal with the trauma associated with my mother's death and the trauma of the El Paso shooting, and forged a way for me to think of these two major events in a new way. Most importantly, writing this thesis allowed me to take a step forward in moving beyond the trauma of both of these events. I

am grateful for this emotional and psychological experience that might not otherwise have happened had it not been for the purposes of this study.



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## **Vita**

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Sandra Ramirez obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Electronic Media, with a minor in Chicano Studies, from the University of Texas at El Paso in 2008. She will obtain a Master of Arts in Communication from University of Texas at El Paso in 2021 after completing a thesis titled “Wailing for My Cultura: Disenfranchised Grief Among Mexican Americans Navigating a Bicultural Identity.”

Sandra has a background in television news in which she worked as a producer, reporter, video journalist, and anchor for a combined ten years in El Paso, Texas and Albuquerque, New Mexico. Following her departure from the journalism industry, Sandra entered the nonprofit sector as a Director of Communications for Diocesan Migrant and Refugee Services in El Paso, Texas. The organization is a ministry of the Catholic Diocese of El Paso and provides free and low-cost legal immigration services.

Sandra’s areas of interest are fields in which she has professional experience including immigration, journalism, and video production, as well as research topics she has explored in the areas of grief studies and Mexican American/Chicano studies.

Sandra’s service work includes being a member of the United Way of El Paso’s Young Leaders Society, which allows Sandra to serve other local nonprofit organizations.