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2016-04-08

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“The Wife, The Widow”: Narratives of Grief in Contemporary American Memoir

Madison McFadden Tierney

submitted to the Department of American Studies of Smith College  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Michael Gorra, Honors Project Advisor

April 8, 2016

## INTRODUCTION

In a 2015 interview, memoirist and poet Elizabeth Alexander explains that “Grief is so singular, even as it is our universal” (Alexander, “After her husband’s sudden death”). An account of her own grief is one of three singular, poetic memoirs of widowhood published by prominent American authors in the past decade: Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), Joyce Carol Oates’ *A Widow’s Story* (2011), and Alexander’s *The Light of the World* (2015). Praised as insightful if occasionally dismissed as indulgent, these memoirs garnered significant attention. Reviews, op-eds, and interviews appeared in major publications while scholarly works in the fields of bereavement studies, literary studies, and psychology took up the work of interpretation. These three are not the only memoirs of widowhood to have appeared in recent years- other notable contributions include Sandra Gilbert’s *Wrongful Death: A Medical Tragedy* (1995), Anne Roiphe’s *Epilogue: A Memoir* (2009), and Kay Redfield Jamison’s *Nothing Was The Same: A Memoir* (2011). But as masters of their craft Didion, Oates, and Alexander are particularly situated for a study of the construction of memoir as well as an examination of ideology surrounding bereavement in contemporary America.

In 2005, Joan Didion published *The Year of Magical Thinking* which chronicles the year following the death of her husband of forty years, novelist and screenwriter John Gregory Dunne. Dunne suffered a fatal heart attack on December 30, 2003. At the time, the couple’s daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne, was undergoing treatment at Beth Israel Hospital in New York City for pneumonia that had evolved into septic shock. Unconscious during the death of her father, Quintana would make only a fleeting recovery, ultimately dying just after the publication of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Didion later wrote a separate memoir to Quintana’s death

entitled *Blue Nights* (2011), but Quintana's illness is nevertheless present throughout *The Year of Magical Thinking*. In the course of the memoir, Didion navigates her husband's death and her daughter's illness, ever critically and artistically conscious of her grief. She carefully positions herself both as a victim of a volatile and irrational grief as well as a cool and calculated observer, crafting an illustrative yet analytic representation of her experience. This duality is present too in Didion's style; simultaneously chaotic and deliberate, her sentences are often short but repetitive and fragments are ubiquitous. Her portrayal was well received; *The Year of Magical Thinking* won the National Book Award for Nonfiction and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Biography/Autobiography. The book was a commercial success as well, even eventually making it to Broadway in the form of a one-woman show.

Joyce Carol Oates published *A Widow's Story; A Memoir* in 2011. Oates is a professor of creative writing at Princeton University as well as one of the most prolific contemporary novelists. For forty seven years, Oates was married to Raymond Smith who first worked as a professor of eighteenth century literature and later as publisher and editor of *The Ontario Review*, a literary magazine founded by couple that features the works of Canadian and American writers, as well as head of the independent publishing house, Ontario Review Books. Smith died unexpectedly of complications from pneumonia on February 18, 2008. His death drove Oates into spirals of agonizing grief, each moment meticulously documented by Oates in *A Widow's Story*. She writes frankly and at length about the difficulty of the quotidian and her dwindling will to live, and so the work takes on a decidedly darker tone than the other memoirs.

Elizabeth Alexander is an acclaimed African American poet and essayist. Alexander lived for many years in New Haven as a professor of African American Studies at Yale

University before moving to New York City, accepting a position as a professor at Columbia University. Her husband of sixteen years, Ficre Ghebreyesus, a chef, painter, refugee from Eritrea, and father to their two sons, died of a heart attack on April 4, 2012. Three years later she published her memoir, *The Light of the World* in which she tells the story of their life together as well as the story of her grief. Unlike the other memoirists, she devotes nearly equal attention to the time before and after her husband's death. Alexander approaches her memoir with a different sensibility, her gently rhythmic prose recounts memories and events with a poet's perception. Her memoir is characterized also by her experiences as a black woman, artist and widow in the African American community.

In putting these three memoirs into conversation, I intend to first highlight the literary intentionality behind the works. Then, through a study of what precisely these authors have chosen to foreground in their narration of widowhood, situate them within current discourse about grief and mourning in the United States. I will first introduce the most common treatment of grief memoirs and my own approach. Then, I will juxtapose Oates and Didion, who, though operating from similar cultural locations, engage with differently with grief. Then, I will move to a closer look at Alexander's memoir, in part because I found her representation of grief most personally compelling, but also because she directly engages with conceptions of grief in a way that merits further consideration.



The contemporary American understanding of death is in flux. As the landscape changed in the twentieth century through industrialization, urbanization, and secularization, so too did attitudes toward death and mourning (*Death's Door*, Gilbert). Except in the case of celebrities and statesmen, public and prolonged mourning rituals fell largely by the wayside (Joralemon 113). In the nineteenth century the mourning period for a widow could continue through the rest of her life, but as early as 1922 Emily Post urged that “shorter periods of mourning are becoming more and more the custom” and advised that widows should in many cases forgo traditional black garments.

Widowhood, a condition once marked by a black uniform, is no longer outwardly visible. The impact however remains significant. Today, men predecease women disproportionately across all races. The wives left behind become widows, a relational identity dependent on an absence. Sandra Gilbert, herself a widow and author of a memoir chronicling the experience, describes the “state [as a] lack or non-being that is akin to, if not part of, the state into which the dead person has journeyed, fallen, or been drawn” (Gilbert 24). I will take up the complexity of this state in more depth in Oates’ memoir, but it is nevertheless clear that this position is profoundly destabilizing. In *Widow* (1974), Lynn Caine writes of the perceptions of widowhood. She feels that widows “are stigmatized by the death of the ones they loved” (81). This is congruent with the 20th century characterization of death as taboo, even at times pornographic (Gorer); While this is an overstatement of contemporary attitudes, it is nevertheless true that mourning, or the cultural script for behavior following a death, is an increasingly brief and private affair.

Donald Joralemon clarifies this shift in American mourning practices in his comprehensive and nuanced overview, *Mortal Dilemmas: The Troubled Landscape of Death in America* (2016). Joralemon attributes the shortening of socially acceptable mourning rituals in part to the “increasing medical management of grief” (24). This phenomenon has led to tension between mourning, the external manifestations of bereavement, and grief, defined as the emotional state following a loss.

With the concurrent rise of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century, grief became a central concern. Beginning most notably with Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), clinical psychologists were preoccupied with the distinction between normal and abnormal processes of grief. Complicated grief, sometimes referred to as “persistent complex bereavement disorder,” is included in the DSM V (2013), a controversial choice that was understood by many a shift towards an even more medicalized response to death. This evolution is characterized by the drawing of distinctions between “the normal and expected period of sorrow at the loss of a loved one and the pathological prolongation of grief behavior that requires medical attention and, often, pharmaceutical intervention” (Joralemon 24). A diagnosis of complicated grief can be prescribed if an individual fails to show “reduced sadness as early as six months after a death” (Joralemon 86). This timeline is not only clinical, but social; There is an expectation that grief be sufficiently completed within this loose six month period and, even more, that it be done in private. Joralemon writes that “Whereas in much of the world “it takes a village” to grieve, in the United States we treat the bereaved as solo sufferers. . .” (91) The danger of this treatment lies in the prescription of a single experience. If grief is not experienced within this pre established

clinical model, the bereaved is considered abnormal, outside both social and psychological norms.

In the course of this lonely journey, many have turned to “experts” like Elizabeth Kübler-Ross who proposed her five stages of grief in the now iconic *On Death and Dying* (1969). First accepted and praised, she was shortly thereafter accused of having “tucked messy emotions into neat packages,” an accusation she would later refute in *On Grief and Grieving* (2005) (5). Similarly, scores of self-help books have appeared with titles like *Healing After Loss* (1994) and *I Wasn’t Ready to Say Goodbye* (2008) while easily accessible checklists like the Inventory of Complicated Grief and the Hogan Grief Reaction Checklist allow the bereaved to numerate the “normalcy” of their bereavement (Joralemon 82). But the failure of these texts, as well as the clinical treatment of bereavement, is an assumed universality.

The grief memoir is born from this complicated culture. Defined by Kathleen Fowler as a work where “the death, the loss, the grieving *the* defining reality—the heart of the text,” the genre has become a popular and diverse site of mourning (527). Memoirs of spousal loss, of the loss of both children and parents by high profile authors as well as relatively unknown names have appeared in abundance over the past twenty years.<sup>1</sup> The memoirs have been met with both admiration and criticism but are undeniably popular. Gilbert attempts to understand why the

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<sup>1</sup> A few of the many significant contributions to the genre of grief memoir include: Mark Doty’s *Heaven’s Coast* (1997) which details his partner’s HIV diagnosis and death, Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother* (1998) describes her brother’s death also from AIDS, Calvin Trillin’s *About Alice* (2006) recounts the loss of his wife, Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2001) chronicles the death of both parents to cancer within the span of a month, and Meghan O’Rourke’s *The Long Goodbye* (2012) tells the story of her mother’s death from cancer.



genre of loss memoir has held such a pull. To explain the interest of readers, she proposes that death and mourning induce both awe and revulsion, a tragic and exciting mystery. For an explanation of the writerly appeal, she supposes that for the authors “one of the most empowering ways of keeping the dead near is through writing, testifying, telling their stories” in a society where there is “widespread cultural confusion about how and where to mourn” (“The Way We Grieve Now”).

But if the grief memoir has taught us anything, it is that this dominant narrative of universality is only a partial truth, at best. While death may itself be truly universal, experiences of grief and mourning are culturally influenced. Joralemon cautions against “generalizations meant to cover ‘American’ dying and death practices,” as the cultural, racial, sexual, and class diversity of the nation should prevent essentialization of any experience (16). While, of course, not all thanatologists (those who study bereavement) fall prey to universalisation, I find that this is the approach too often taken to grief memoirs.

Jeffrey Berman engages with grief memoirs in two recent books, *Companionship in Grief: Love and Loss in the Memoirs of C.S. Lewis, John Bayley, Donald Hall, Joan Didion, and Calvin Trillin* (2010) and *Writing Widowhood: Landscapes of Bereavement* (2016). Berman’s compilations are the only books to juxtapose these memoirs and as a result his analysis merits attention. In the first pages of *Companionship in Grief* he discloses that, as a result of losing his own wife, he is most preoccupied with questions of loss and the potential answers these memoirs may offer:

Why is it so difficult for the bereft to let go of their grief- and how does grief change over time? . . . Can these memoirs offer wisdom or comfort to those readers who have also lost their spouses? What role does writing play in bereavement? What do these memoirs teach us about recovery from spousal loss, including the possibility of falling in love again? (1)

Berman describes his approach to the memoirs as “biographical and clinical.” His approach to Didion’s memoir in *Companionship in Grief* is driven by his desire to answer these questions but the interpretation is encumbered by his methodology. He muddles the memoir in Dunne and Didion’s mental health histories and the details of their marriage, most of which are inferred from the couple’s corpus of supposedly autobiographical novels, largely with the intent of categorizing Didion’s grief as complicated. He writes, “Significantly, when Didion discusses complicated grief she dwells on one of its major causes, the survivor’s unusual dependence on the deceased spouse, but she ignores another major cause, emotional ambivalence. And yet her tendency toward self-blame is one of the major symptoms of emotional ambivalence. Examples of self-blame abound in *The Year of Magical Thinking*” (208). This slightly convoluted paragraph is an example of Berman’s insistence on a clinical analysis of Didion’s grief, complemented by his perceived “emotional ambivalence” toward her husband as documented in her fiction.

Berman investigates Oates in the same way in *Writing Widowhood*. He studies her attitude towards food in the aftermath of her husband’s death and draws parallels to anorexia. He pieces together journal entries, interviews, and theories about anorexia to conclude that Oates’ eating disorder returned in the early days of her widowhood. He writes that there are “few references to eating (or not eating)” in *A Widow’s Story*. (*Writing Widowhood* 14)

In *Writing Widowhood* he specifies that he provides “an overview of the writer’s life and art before widowhood, including her early preoccupation with love, loss, and death. I then discuss the writer’s life as a bereft widow, the aesthetic and psychological richness of each memoir, and the ways in which penning a spousal loss memoir contributes to her recovery.” (6)

While this approach is reasonably effective for someone like Berman, in search for answers in the midst of his own loss, he effectively disregards all artistic agency of the memoirists, which he refers to with distaste, as “manipulation.” He acknowledges Didion’s belief in writing as an introduction of the “writer’s sensibility on the reader’s most private space,” but finds it “inherently troubling” (*Companionship in Grief* 209) He gives little credit to artistic intention, explaining away each stylistic and narrative choice with gathered biographical evidence.

Berman is not alone. This is, in fact, a common treatment of memoir. The lens of biographical factuality is commonly applied to various forms of self writing, each distinct in generic requirements and convention. In the case of memoir, these distinctions are often imprecise, resulting in a misunderstanding of authorial intention. With only subtle and often contentious differences between memoir and autobiography, I believe it is critical to clarify the definition of memoir and the situation of these three works within this discourse.

The most significant and commonly accepted distinction between memoir and autobiography lies in the scope of the work; it is generally agreed upon that autobiography consists primarily of a factual, event-based telling of the entirety of a life. In Georges Gusdorf’s seminal 1956 essay “Conditions and Limitations of Autobiography,” he defines the autobiography as a tool for an assertion of the importance of an individual life. Gusdorf writes that he who indulges in autobiography “believes himself worthy of a special interest.” (*Autobiography* 29) Thus autobiography is written most often by someone of historical significance who chooses to recount the details of their life. Nevertheless, as the genre became increasingly democratized, the term evolved, coming to mean an account of the full scope of life, written by even the most ordinary people. In the years following Gusdorf’s work, a theorization

of the inherent literary and crafted qualities of autobiography became more commonplace. Through extensive debate surrounding the place of autobiography in literary studies, critics have eventually determined that in writing even the most factual of autobiographies the author “artfully defines, restricts or shapes that life into. . . one far different from his original model, resembling life but actually composed and framed as an artful invention” (*Autobiography* 86).

However as these works became more prevalent and varied, those shifting towards a more impressionistic approach found home in the genre of memoir where the emphasis lay on the artistic interpretation of a specific experience. Thus the contemporary memoir has become a genre of blurred lines, dependent on an inherently unreliable memory and the talent of the author in reconstructing, reassembling and altering perceptions of the past. As memories are described through the process of writing, a constructed truth begins to form. Without the necessity for fact-checking and certainty, an interpretive, fictionalized approach is tolerated, even expected. Mary Clearman Blew is quoted in *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art* as saying that she “struggled for a long time with the conflicting claims of the exact truth of the story and the emotional truth as I perceived it” (7). This interplay between the factuality and perception of events has become the distinguishing marker of the modern memoir, manifesting itself both in a recognition of the imaginative nature of memory and through attention to the literary work involved in creating and recasting the past into narrative.

The act of remembering is itself a constructive one. Thomas Larson, author of *The Memoir and Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative*, writes that “when we retell past events - even if it’s simply to reminisce- we invariably embellish our stories. And whether we do this to make better sense of what happened, or if our impulse is simply to make the story

more interesting, we still wind up becoming non-objective, even invented personas” (Larson 4)  
The author is continually processing and reshaping the work between memory and the page.  
Through this process both an impression of the self and a story take shape.

But beyond the inherent malleability of memory, so too come the conscious artistic choices involved in the creation of a memoir. Most important, perhaps, are the questions of inclusion and omission. Mary Karr, author of the 2015 book *The Art of Memoir*, writes that “from the second you choose one event over another, you’re shaping the past’s meaning.” Each inclusion is carefully chosen with particular intention. But even beyond this, Karr writes that though the author must indeed write “all the truth you can wheedle out of yourself,” she must also create, “Memoir done right is an art, a made thing. It’s not just raw reportage flung splat on the page. Plus, memoir uses novelistic devices like cobbling together dialogue you failed to record at the time. To concoct a distinctive voice, you often have to do a poet’s lapidary work” (xxviii) Whether it be through the process of reconstructing long forgotten details or casting oneself within a particular role or image, the work of the memoirist lies in questions of creation and choice.

However, in much the same way that Berman sought biographical and psychological explanations of grief in the memoirs- many other readers expect an unspecified degree of veracity. This is particularly apparent in memoirs where the subject is suffering. Like grief memoirs, memoirs of addiction have proven especially controversial when questions of disclosure arise as in the case of James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2005). A scandal ensued when it was discovered that Frey had embellished, even fabricated certain parts of his memoir of drug abuse. Shortly after the information surfaced, Frey appeared on *Larry King Live* on January

11, 2006 and admitted that parts of his work had been altered. He nevertheless maintained that, “The essential truth of the book is there... the emotional truth is there” (Frey Larry King Live). Of course, neither Didion, Oates, nor Alexander engage in the same degree of fabrication as Frey, but what we see in this instance is a certain preoccupation with the factuality of memoir, particularly in those in stories of addiction or trauma. These memoirs have this same appealing narrative, a body of despair with a small triumph for a finale, a reassurance that the reader too can overcome their challenges, in particular one as universal as death. Just as readers were so enamored with Frey’s gritty, unglamorous depiction of drug addiction, they are also impressed with the “accuracy” of the depictions of loss illustrated in grief memoirs. Berman is perfect evidence of this desire. In reading the memoirs, he searches for guide through his own grief. While not an entirely problematic reading of the grief memoir, the problem arises when this becomes the only version of the narrative that is read. The memoirs are then used to inform a universalist understanding of bereavement.

To combat this, I propose an examination of the stylistic and narrative construction of the three memoirs. While these memoirs depict the experience of only three women of by and large the same social class with the same uncommon extent of intellectual education, the variation among the memoirs is stunning. Reveling in this, I intend to examine how precisely the three authors construct their narratives and to what effect. When reading these memoirs together, as I’ve demonstrated, the impetus is to universalize, to search for an “accurate” portrayal of grief, but in acknowledging the different literary tools at work, I am able to reinstate both artistic agency and restore the diversity of the contemporary American understanding of grief.

*A WIDOW'S STORY AND THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING*

While not personal friends, Didion and Oates are mutual admirers. Didion counts Oates' *Wonderland* fifth among her favorite books, once saying that it "fascinated me as a writer," while Oates has favorably reviewed a number of Didion's novels, calling her "rare among her contemporaries." (Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates 38; *A Taut Novel of Disorder*) Despite parallel careers, the two authors largely avoided both scholarly and popular comparison until their careers converged in 2011 when Joyce Carol Oates published her memoir. Now with two high profile, engaging memoirs of widowhood available, the comparisons came quickly. The fundamental similarities in their marriages and subsequently their experiences of widowhood are clear. Joyce Carol Oates and Raymond Smith were married for "forty seven years and twenty-five days," while Didion and John Dunne were married for forty years. Both marriages were also professional partnerships, living in close domestic and creative quarters, never apart for more than a few weeks. Didion writes that she "had no letters from John, not one," and Oates notes similarly that she and Smith had "no correspondence. . . Not once had we written to each other" (Oates 164; Didion 139) And, ultimately, the deaths of their husbands were both sudden and disorienting, compelling them to write memoirs of their first year of widowhood.

Didion's memoir became the standard against which Oates' work was measured but most reviewers rightfully note that the memoirs are more different than the content and their biographies may suggest. Didion's work is controlled and brief, nearly half of the length of Oates' which is characterized by rambling passages describing her mental decline. Oates remarked on this difference in 2009, two years before her memoir was published "I wanted to

write a memoir about being a widow. It was going to be the opposite of Joan Didion. Hers is beautiful and elegiac. Mine would be filled with all sorts of slapstick, demeaning and humiliating things. Like trash cans whose bottoms are falling out . . . I think that Didion took it on a very high plane.” (NYT, *A Woman’s Work*) But by putting these memoirs into conversation, just as Oates herself does, I intend to illuminate the differences in Didion and Oates’ narrative and poetic design. I begin with an examination of their chronological and (inter)textual reorganization of grief, then to a study of the characterization of their deceased husbands, and finally to their calculated characterizations of themselves as writers and as widows.



Didion’s title itself proposes a timeline for her memoir, a constraint to which she remains faithful. *The Year of Magical Thinking* takes place almost precisely within the span of a year. On the first page she confides that she began writing in January, “a day or two or three after the fact,” but began the memoir in earnest on the afternoon of October 4, 2004 nine months after the death of her husband. (Didion 1) She finishes the memoir just a few days after the one year anniversary of Dunne’s death. She writes:

I did not want to finish the year because I know that as the days pass, as January becomes February and February becomes summer, certain things will happen. . . All year I have been keeping time by last year’s calendar . . . I realize today for the first time that my memory of this day a year ago is a memory that does not involve John. This day a year ago was December 31, 2003. John did not see this day a year ago. John was dead. (Didion 225)

Oates is less rigid in her timeline, with the majority of her reflections taking place between February and August of 2008, but her final chapter acknowledges the one year mark.



She writes a short chapter entitled *The Widow's Handbook*, "Of the widow's countless death-duties there is really just one that matters: on the first anniversary of her husband's death the widow should think *I kept myself alive*." (Oates 416) This sentiment is mirrored at the end of Didion's memoir, "I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us. I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a time when we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead." (Didion 225) The similar emphasis on the division between living and dead is notable considering that, within this documented first year of widowhood, Oates and Didion exist in a sort of limbo between the present and the past, between the dead and the living. As Didion writes, they keep time by a calendar from the past. This altered perception of time is documented by each author's re-organization of events.

Didion begins with a few short sentences written in the immediate aftermath of her husband's death. "Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends. The question of self pity." (Didion 3) These lines reappear again and again, a central truth around which the memoir revolves. She spends a few pages ruminating on the lines, but then shifts quickly to the present of October 2004, the time in which she is writing the memoir. She then sets the scene, introducing in the simplest terms the events she will later tell and retell, then going to explain her motive for writing, "This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, sanity, about life itself." (Didion 7) For Didion, 'making sense' is the principal concern. The drive to comprehend both the logic behind ultimately illogical events and

her own seemingly irrational thought processes is replicated in the narrative construction of the memoir.

After laying out the facts “in outline” and her intent, Didion describes, in at times excruciating detail, every moment of her husband’s death and the moments that followed. Throughout this process, she edits and elaborates on the details with knowledge she acquires later. For example, she remarks that in the hospital on the night of December 30 she “wondered how much time had passed between the time I called the ambulance and the arrival of the paramedics. It had seemed no time at all . . . but it must have been at the minimum several minutes.” (Didion 15) A few pages later she returns to this question and divulges that she requested the doorman’s log for the night of Dunne’s death eight months after his death. From the log, she pieces together the timing of the night’s events. “I noticed that the paramedics were in the apartment for forty-five minutes. I had always described it as ‘fifteen or twenty minutes.’” (Didion 21) In this temporal disconnect Didion exposes how her lived experience differs dramatically from reality. From her vantage point in the present, she is now capable of identifying these inconsistencies and skillfully reproducing them in narrative form. She organizes the events in a cyclical nature, repeating multiple times the evening of Dunne’s death, each time adding new information. For the reader, this reproduces her own incremental understanding, with the future, nearly omniscient Didion as guide.

As she writes, events and memories are woven seamlessly among interpretations, the voice of the past and the present united. In the fifth chapter, Didion confesses that she has “spent a great deal of time trying first to keep track of, and, when that failed, to reconstruct, the exact sequence of events that preceded and followed what happened that night.” (Didion 63) The

majority of the chapter is dedicated to doing just that, but midway through she returns to the day she and Dunne were married, “January 30, 1964, a Thursday, at the Catholic Mission of San Juan Bautista in San Benito County, California.” (Didion 69) This leads to a memory of her daughter’s marriage, which had taken place only 4 months before she would be admitted to the ICU. The chapter, most indicatively, finishes with Didion’s reflection on her place between life and death. She writes:

I myself felt invisible for a period of time, incorporeal. I seemed to have crossed one of those legendary rivers that divide the living from the dead, entered a place in which I could be seen only by those who were themselves recently bereaved. I understood for the first time the power of the image of the rivers, the Styx, the Lethe, the cloaked ferryman with his pole. (Didion 75)

As she writes, Didion draws the reader into her liminal existence by recreating this fluctuation between the past and the present, between the living and dead. This recalls Sandra Gilbert’s description of widowhood, as a state of “lack or non-being that is akin to, if not part of, the state into which the dead person has journeyed, fallen, or been drawn.” She imitates this sensation in narrative form.

Didion terms the process by which she is thrown into memory the “vortex effect.” This phenomenon, not only a side effect of grief, becomes a useful narrative tool. She writes, recalling the time spent watching over her unconscious daughter in the ICU:

I had first noticed what I came to know as ‘the vortex effect’ in January, when I was watching the ice floes form on the East River from a window at Beth Israel North. At the join between the walls and the ceiling of the room from which I was watching the ice floes there happened to be a rose-patterned wallpaper border, a Dorothy Draper touch, left I supposed from the period when what was then Beth Israel North had been Doctors’ Hospital. I myself had never been in Doctors’ Hospital but when I was in my twenties

and working for *Vogue* it had figured in many conversations. It had been the hospital favored by *Vogue* editors for uncomplicated deliveries and for ‘resting,’ a kind of medical Maine Chance.

This had seemed a good line of thinking.

This had seemed better than thinking about why I was at Beth Israel North.

I ventured further:

*Doctors’ Hospital was where X had the abortion that was bought and paid for by the district attorney’s office . . .*

I remember having used such an incident in my second novel, *Play It As It Lays*...

I had avoided thinking for at least two minutes about why I was at Beth Israel North.

I had moved on, into the period when I was writing *Play It As It Lays*. The rented wreck of a house on Franklin Avenue in Hollywood. The votive candles on the sills of the big windows in the living room. The *té limón* grass and aloe that grew by the kitchen door. The rats that ate the avocados. The sun porch on which I worked. Watching from the windows of the sun porch as Quintana ran through a sprinkler on the lawn.

I recall recognizing that I had hit more dangerous water but there had seemed no turning back.

I had writing that book when Quintana was three.

*When Quintana was three.*

There it was, the vortex.

Quintana at three . . . I had finished the novel, I was under contract to begin a column for *Life*, we took Quintana to Honolulu . . . While we were there My Lai broke. I thought about the first column. It seemed to me that given this news I should write it from Saigon . . . [I] called my editor, Loudon Wainwright, to say I was going to Saigon . . . He said that I should stay where I was . . . that as far as Saigon went ‘some of the guys are going out.’ The topic did not seem open to further discussion . . .

‘I warned you,’ John said. ‘I told you what working for *Life* would be like. Didn’t I tell you? It would be like being nibbled to death by ducks?’

I was brushing Quintana's hair . . . I felt betrayed, humiliated. I should have listened to John . . .

See where that particular vortex sucked me.

From the Dorothy Draper wallpaper border at Beth Israel North to Quintana at three and I should have listened to John. (Didion 105-112)

The passage abbreviated here (which in the text spans an entire chapter) is both engaging and disorienting. In elaborately recounting her memories, including such details as the “*té limón* grass and aloe that grew by the kitchen door,” Didion ushers the reader into her past. The return to the present then, proves equally as violent. These episodes in the vortex, which appear throughout the memoir, also serve to illustrate Didion's temporal destabilisation. In the course of only a few pages, she seamlessly shifts between 1969, 2003, and the time at which she is writing the memoir.

Oates, on the other hand, is more concerned with the present and immediate work of grief. While Didion reflects on her own experience grief from the future, even naming the sensations, Oates confesses that “*A Widow's Story* is perhaps 98 percent journal entries with only two or three conventionally composed chapters . . . [It was meant to be] an intimately detailed account of the raw, early weeks and months of ‘widowhood’” (Oates, *New York Review of Books*) But like Didion, she does include her own temporal disorientation. She writes that, after Smith's death, the pace of daily life slows to a painful crawl and that she has little regard for time. She replicates this sensation in her memoir.

The chapters preceding Smith's death, combined in the first section of the memoir entitled “The Vigil,” are meticulously dated, with some even including time stamps. By the second section however, indicatively titled “Free Fall,” very few of the chapters are dated and

the passage of time is more and more indefinite. Only after a close reading does it become clear that just two days had passed over the course of nearly sixty pages. Oates describes this as her own “groggy slow time,” (Oates 89) The protracted pace is replicated in her verbosity and intentional repetition. At one point, she describes the process of retiring to her bed for the night:

In the vicinity of the nest no voice intrudes. In the vicinity of the nest, except for, sometimes the TV- turned to one or the other of the classic music channels on cable TV- there is a reliable silence. The nest is a warm-lighted space amid darkness, for the rest of the house is darkened at night. In a belated effort to save on fuel- for I have been careless about leaving the furnace on too high, without Ray to monitor the thermostat- as I’ve been careless about leaving doors unlocked, even at times ajar- and worse - I make it a point now to turn down the furnace at night- I know that Ray would approve of this- and so much of the house is chilly, and forbidding. (Oates 135)

Her repetition of words, phrases, and themes within the paragraph, renders the reading itself groggy and slow. She repeats the words “nest,” “vicinity,” “darkness,” “careless,” and each sentence gradually builds on the preceding to complete the image. Many of the passages take on these characteristics. Her daily activities, even those as mundane as going to bed or waking, are painfully detailed and repeated, emphasizing the difficulty of each simple task. She writes, “Each day is livable *only if divided into segments*. The widow soon realizes that an entire day, as others live it- that vast hideous Sahara of tractless time- is not possible to endure” (210). Every movement is a “hurdle,” and she illustrates this through repetition and excessive detail (214). At one point she writes:

The smell of Drano makes my nostrils pinch - a pungent, powerful odor- more than fifteen minutes have passed since I’d poured Drano each of the three bathtub drains, now I must hurry to the bathrooms to turn on the hot water, to “flush” the Drano down.

Not that any of this housekeeping needs to be done, just yet. Just now.

This memoir, steeped in the grittiest details as the bed linens of poor Emma Bovary were steeped in her physical agony, yet fails before the prospect of accurately suggesting how much, how very much, how unendingly much, there is for the widow to do following the death of her husband. (256)

Oates here repeats “Drano” three times, which is later reflected in her repetition of “how much, how very much, how unendingly much.” The exhaustion of the daily task is manifested in the rhythm of her sentences. We see then how both Oates and Didion reorganize their grief both temporally and textually, through the employment of different stylistic strategies and to different effects.



The very act of selecting what to include in a memoir is a creative process, but there is also an uncertain, implicit agreement between reader and writer to reveal all pertinent details. Didion and Oates have both fallen victim to this and have been reproached for their failure to disclose what was later deemed relevant information. For both Didion and Oates, the lack of personal information about their husbands led to conjecture and even anger on the part of the readership. Didion leaves many details about her husband and their relationship out of her memoir. Her choice was met with speculation by reviewers and critics each guessing about the nature of her marriage. Oates on the other hand, was more harshly reprimanded for remaining mute on the subject of her second marriage; six months after Smith’s death, she met her second husband, Charles Gross, a professor of neuroscience at Princeton, and by the beginning of 2009 they were married, almost exactly a year after Smith’s death. These omissions prove productive when considered as narrative devices.

Didion describes Dunne's death in great detail. She writes "I actively wanted an autopsy," and so she goes on throughout the book to to perform her own autopsy of John's death, dissecting each moment with excruciating precision. (Didion 22) She studies the events leading up to the moments of his death, sharing the title of the book he was reading and his choice of drink, she recounts his history of cardiac concerns, one of which is dubbed by doctors "the widowmaker." (207) She studies his death because she "needed to know how and why it had happened" (22) Through this process, the reader becomes intimately familiar with his final moments, from the chip in his tooth from his fall after the cardiac event that Didion first notices on his dead body to the precise minute of his death, 10:18pm. (Didion 18; 21) What is absent, however, from this analysis are traces of Dunne's personality. Didion spends very little time overtly characterizing Dunne. She shares that he was a lapsed catholic with blue eyes like his father, from whom he also inherited the heart disease. We learn that he graduated from Princeton in 1954 and he was also a fiction writer who worked parallel to Didion for decades. But Didion at no point describes his disposition, his friendships, and only includes a few moments of intimacy or love between them. This can, at least partially, be attributed to the public nature of Dunne and Didion's lives. Both authors had attained a degree of fame that made a full characterization of Dunne unnecessary. As a regular reader of Didion, this lack of detail may be surprising, considering that in her other works of nonfiction she rarely shied from revealing intimate and, often, unflattering details. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, however, she largely chooses not to describe her husband, an unexpected but significant absence.

This has posed problems for critics who yearn to classify their marriage as either happy or unhappy. In an article profiling Didion after the release of *Blue Nights*, Didion's 2011



memoir about the death of her daughter Quintana, Boris Kachka for New York Magazine describes, “John and Joan’s idyllic marriage [as] the one Utopia in which the skeptical Didion placed her faith.” This description is comically different from Jeffrey Berman’s, who in *Companionship in Grief* attempts to categorize their marriage as troubled. He writes that Didion presents a marriage that is “the opposite of a warm, intimate union” (159) He wants to understand the significance of this, questioning how to “interpret these marital tensions . . . how much emphasis should we attach to them? Should we conclude that the ability to acknowledge one’s marital difficulties, openly and candidly, betokens a strong, healthy relationship, one that does not need repeated claims of love to validate? Or should we conclude, to the contrary, that their marriage was not always good enough?” He attempts to answer these questions by turning ‘to their earlier writings for clues.’ (161) I believe not only that Berman turns to the wrong place for answers but is also simply asking the wrong questions. Rather than searching for clues to the nature of Didion and Dunne’s marriage, whether happy or unhappy, it is more productive to ask what purpose this absence of characterization serves in the greater narrative goal. And certainly, Didion is working towards a creative end. As Tracy Daugherty writes in his recent biography of Didion, that “even as Didion frets about narratives in tatters, she is weaving narrative. She is carefully plotting a story, manipulating details, with a clear direction and and a sense of who’s in charge-Joan Didion.” (xvii) This is evident as we search for moments when she describes Dunne.

The first time Didion introduces us to a living Dunne is in a memory from two weeks before his death. The couple had gone to dinner, during which Dunne dictated a note for Didion, which she inscribed in her journal as he had forgotten his own. After completing the thought he

emphasized that it was his material, not for Didion's use. But the next day, he told his wife that she could "use it if you want to." Didion questions what he meant by this, "Did he know he would not write the book?" (23) She transitions rapidly to another more distant memory, one from years before. She recalls that they would spend their afternoons languidly by the pool, Dunne reading *Sophie's Choice* chest deep in the water, or watching the BBC series *Tenko*, sometimes working in their respective offices and of evenings spent going "out to dinner. Many night's at Morton's. Morton's felt right that summer." She returns again to the dinner two weeks before his death when he requested that she drive home, "It had occurred to me as I started the ignition that I could count on my fingers the number of times I had driven when John was in the car . . . There had been no previous time when he asked me to drive home from dinner in town: this evening on Camino Palmero was unprecedented. So was the fact that at the end of the forty-minute drive to Brentwood Park he pronounced it "well driven" (24) Didion presents these memories in her characteristic frank and factual way. The specifics allow for a sort of superficial intimacy, their restaurant and television series ground their relationship in reality and provide a sense of satisfying disclosure that nevertheless keeps the reader at a distance. But rather than openly eulogizing Dunne, the narrative is advanced through Didion's own perceptions of his final moments. She includes these memories because she considered them to be announcements of his approaching death:

He mentioned those afternoons with the pool and the garden and *Tenko* several times during the year before he died. Philippe Ariès, in *The Hour of Our Death*, points out that the essential characteristic of death . . . even if sudden or accidental, "gives advance warning of its arrival." . . . "You can use it if you want to." John had said when I gave him the note he had dictated a week or two before. *And then - gone.* (26)

These memories serve a purpose. Didion uses them to illustrate her perception of her husband's death as predictable, foreseeable. This enforces Didion's characterization of her thinking as irrational, or magical. "Magical thinking" is an anthropological term, which Didion uses to describe the "power of grief to derange the mind." (34) She writes, "I was thinking as small children think, as if my thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome." (35) Thus, in these few moments throughout the memoir when Didion describes a living Dunne, we see how Didion works not to characterize her husband, but rather to advance her focused depiction of grief as irrational.

This phenomenon is found not only in *The Year of Magical Thinking* but also in *Blue Nights*. The majority of anecdotes date from Quintana's childhood, with Didion disclosing very little about her daughter's later life, including only a few scenes from her wedding day. Didion was reproached for this and her choice faced speculation. One reviewer writes, "What passed in *The Year of Magical Thinking* as the camaraderie of husband and wife becomes, at a stroke, something more disturbing – a kind of parental attention-seeking that again and again drives Didion's sentences away from their subject and back to herself." (Cusk *The Guardian*) Didion is no stranger to this accusation. In an famously caustic 1980 essay, "Joan Didion: Only Disconnect," Barbara Grizzutti Harrison wrote of Didion that "her subject is always herself."

Oates would face a similar charge after publishing *A Widow's Story*. On the other hand, Oates' omission was undeniably more significant. Janet Maslin wrote an unfavorable review in *The New York Times*, accusing Oates of dishonesty:

Ms. Oates can say . . . that people whose long, sustaining marriages end often choose to remarry. Fair enough. . . But it is less fair for "A Widow's Story" to dissemble while masquerading as a work of raw courage and honesty. A book long and rambling enough

to contemplate an answering-machine recording could have found time to mention a whole new spouse. (Maslin, *New York Times*)

This sentiment was echoed by Julian Barnes in an article for the *New York Review of Books* commenting that, “some readers will feel they have a good case for breach of narrative promise.” Oates herself was obliged to join the conversation stating that, “In retrospect I can see that I should have added something like an appendix . . . yet—I hope this doesn’t sound disingenuous!)—I would not have thought that my personal history in the aftermath of early widowhood was so very relevant to the subject.” (Oates, *New York Review of Books*) As Oates clarifies, these questions of inclusion or exclusion are secondary to the work of the memoir. Oates’ editor also writes in defense of her choice to omit her remarriage, “She wrote a book about what it’s like to be in limbo — about what it was like to lose the man she had been married to all her life. Why include the next husband? That’s not what the book is about.” (McGrath, *NY Times*)

But even beyond her omission of her remarriage, Oates is also accused of a failure to adequately characterize her marriage. Maslin writes that the portrait of her husband was “sketchy” and that the “dynamic of the marriage is left blank.” Berman on the other hand determined that the portrait was “loving and respectful, and he comes across as unusually thoughtful and kind, with many talents and interests.” (*Widowhood* 39) But while Berman and Maslin are both preoccupied with the details of the memoirists’ marriages, I have discovered that Oates’ characterization of Smith is similar to that of Didion’s image of Dunne.

Near the end of the memoir, Oates lingers on the details of Smith’s family. She refers to his traditional Catholic upbringing as a “sinkhole” in their marriage. She was incredulous that Smith’s father would disown him for failing to attend mass. Oates writes, “And so, with the issue

of Ray's family, I withheld any opinion. I did not press the issue of wonderment, that Ray's father should actually have believed he would be accountable-- to God?-- if his son left the Catholic Church." (Oates 361) But she writes that in including these details, she feels she is "betraying" her husband, but "in not writing it, I am not being altogether honest." (Oates 361) But the goal of this honesty is not divulging every detail of her marriage, but instead divulging every detail of her grief. Rather than simply allowing the reader into her marriage, she meditates on that which was left unsaid between herself and Smith.

This theme haunts her throughout the memoir. She writes (referring to herself in the third person, as "the widow") that "she will speculate that she didn't fully know her husband" (Oates 97) In fact, these questions of honesty and divulgence are embedded within the first part of a two chapter series entitled "Black Mass I" and "Black Mass II," after Smith's unfinished manuscript of a novel. Oates finds the manuscript and reads it, marvelling at how little in fact she knew about her husband and how this distance affects her grief. She writes, "Later, when we were living in Windsor, Ray worked again on the manuscript, but didn't show me what he'd written; like other subjects, the subject of Black Mass was not one that Ray cared to discuss with me." (374) She fears that, At the end of this chapter she reflects, "As a wife, I had never wanted to upset my husband. I had never wanted to quarrel, to disagree or be disagreeable. To be *not loved* seem to me the risk, if a wife confronted a husband against his wishes. And now I am *not loved*. And what a strange lucidity this seems to bring, like disinfectant slapped on an open wound." (379) Oates' makes the connection between the realization that "*Ray Smith, Raymond Smith, Raymond J. Smith* — has eluded" her and her experience of widowhood, the depth of her feelings of loss. We see then that her characterization of her husband works in the same way as

the omission of her remarriage, both allowing her to foreground her own experience. Both Didion and Oates chose to emphasize the story of their own grief, the story of the widow.



These same questions of characterization are complicated when the lens is turned towards the author. Both Oates and Didion have been accused of sharing unflattering accounts of grief. Oates paints, what one reviewer calls “quite an unattractive self-portrait,” and she is often considered unlikable. (Todd, *The Guardian*) Didion’s memoirs of grief, *Blue Nights* as well as *The Year of Magical Thinking*, have been called narcissistic. (Flanagan, “The Autumn of Joan Didion”) This assessment, correct or otherwise, is a useful tool for examining the two women’s representations of grief.

For Oates, more than both Didion and Alexander, the title of widow becomes a mantle she adopts. In the beginning she refers to herself as “the wife,” during her husband’s illness becoming briefly the “widow-to-be” and finally she becomes “the widow.” (18) The status of the “widow” places emphasis on the former status as wife. She writes that “she cannot accept it- she cannot even comprehend it- that she has no relationship with Raymond J. Smith except as his widow.” (97) Even the title Mrs. Smith reminds her of her status as wife-without-husband, “For there is no Mr. Smith. And how then *Mrs. Smith?*” (106) This absence of identity plagues her. She writes, “I am not anything now. Legally I am a “widow” -- that is the box I must check. But beyond that - I am not sure that I exist” (243) This, again, is reminiscent of both Didion and Gilbert’s description of the widow in the midst of death. But it becomes increasingly clear that as Oates presents this distraught, fragmented widow, there are simultaneously other identities at work.

Oates clearly describes herself as operating between a number of separate ‘selves.’ She draws a clear line between the internal, which is manifested on the page and the external, which appears in the interspersed anecdotes as well as in excerpts from emails she includes in the memoir. In a single chapter she chronicles her attempts to keep professional engagements, “Readings, lectures, visits for which I’ve been contracted for months. My agent has suggested that she cancel all my obligations for the next half year but I’ve told her no, I can’t do that. *Pride in professional integrity. Wish not to be viewed as weak, broken.*” (208) She attempts to remain composed in correspondence while simultaneously fighting suicidal thoughts incarnated in the form of a basilisk, with “glassy eyes and chill saurian composure . . . Ugly lizard-creature that beckons me *to death, to die.*” (207)

This ability to shift between identities becomes increasingly clear when Oates delineates the difference between “Joyce Carol Oates” and “Joyce Smith.” She writes that “on the spines of books shelved in certain libraries and bookstores you will see OATES but this is a descriptive term, this is not a noun. This is a person. Not a life.” (170) Joyce Carol Oates the author of dozens of novels, renowned for her productivity, is an entirely separate entity from Joyce Smith, the widow. Joyce Smith lived a conflict-free life with her husband Raymond, rarely letting her two identities meet. “Most of my novels and short stories were never read by my husband.” (Oates 8) She confides that “I walled off from my husband the part of my life that is “Joyce Carol Oates” - which is to say, my writing career.” (123) This strategy was one she had developed over decades, in a 1976 journal she muses, “Does a normal, ordered, tidy life compensate an interior life of the bizarre, the flamboyantly imaginative?” ( Oates *Journals* 150) But as she writes this memoir, the two identities coexist. Nevertheless, it is clear that Joyce Carol

Oates, not Joyce Smith, is in control of the memoir. It is this disconnect that allows her to make such grandiose claims as “I am not sure that I exist,” or to reflect on events and feelings with such unexpected lucidity.

The split between Joyce Smith and Joyce Carol Oates recalls Tracy Daugherty’s description of Joan Didion as perpetually in control of her work. Control is paramount for Didion, both as author and widow. We see this as Didion weaves throughout the memoir her presentation as the “cool customer.” She first hears this description of her demeanor from the social work at the hospital immediately following Dunne’s death. (Didion 15) She describes this calm exterior as utterly at odds with the internal chaos of her grief. She grasps furiously for any semblance of control, “In time of trouble, I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information was control.” (Didion 44) But she writes that grief proves ungovernable. She is passively sucked into the vortex when driving through Los Angeles and Quintana’s illness also proves beyond her talents for management. (Didion 107) She enters the ICU at UCLA armed with a book entitled *Clinical Neuroanatomy* but the book remains untouched on her bedside table. As much as she once believed she was capable of control, she realizes now, after the death of her husband, that she is not. “Yet I had at some level apprehended because I was born fearful, that some events in life would remain beyond my ability to control or manage them. Some events would just happen. This was one of those events. *You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.*” (Didion 98) But while Didion spends much of the memoir characterizing her own sense of upheaval, the memoir itself retains a sense of tight narrative and stylistic construction.



In *The White Album*, Didion writes “We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience” (11) In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, much of this “imposition of narrative line” takes shape through her use of texts about grief and mourning from the western canon. She writes, “Given that grief remained the most general of afflictions its literature seemed remarkably spare,” but cites C.S. Lewis’ *A Grief Observed*, Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, and poetry by W.H. Auden and Matthew Arnold. But she writes that she turned mostly to studies done by prominent “psychiatrists and psychologists and social workers. . . I learned from it many things I already knew, which at a certain point seemed to promise comfort, validation . . .” (Didion 46). In referencing these works, Didion imposes the ‘narrative line’ of a dominant model of mourning; The same model that prioritizes a universal experience derived from texts by predominantly white men. In citing these foundational texts, she is not only creating narrative but reinforcing a pre-made narrative.

Oates, too, is tempted by a universal narrative of grief. While the title of “widow” is a tool for playing with her fractured identity, it is also a potentially problematic move towards an essentialization of the experience. She explains in an interview that, “I was writing the story of the widow, which I had not experienced before, and can see now is a universal human experience. In its first incarnation the memoir was to be titled *A Widow’s Handbook*.” (Popkey, *The Paris Review*) In playing with the tension between the personal and impersonal, Oates has contributed to the discourse that valorizes a single narrative of grief.

Nevertheless, through a careful reading of the two memoirs, with attention to narrative and stylistic construction, it becomes clear that artistic choice on the part of both Oates and

Didion renders the works far more than simple testimony of their grief. In their textual and temporal reorganization of their experiences and in their characterizations of themselves and their husbands, the two authors construct contrasting but equally effective memoirs which situate them, inadvertently or intentionally, within contemporary understandings of grief.

## THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

On April 4th, 2012, less than a week before his 50th birthday, Elizabeth Alexander's husband Ficre Ghebreyesus suffered a fatal heart attack while running on the treadmill in the basement of their home in New Haven. In contrast to Dunne, whose heart condition had long before been deemed "the widowmaker," Ghebreyesus' death was an unexpected shock. In a short chapter Alexander writes, "Three times a week at bedtime I'd put my tongue out like a kitten and he'd place a single baby aspirin on it. We entered middle age together. Baby aspirin are supposed to prevent heart attacks." (89) The couple had been married for sixteen years. Ghebreyesus, a painter and chef at the now closed Cafe Adulis in New Haven, and Alexander, the poet, playwright, and professor, were wed only a few months after their first meeting. Shortly after, they welcomed their first son, Solomon and later they were joined by a second son, Simon. The boys were aged thirteen and twelve at the time of their father's death. In the wake of the tragedy, Alexander wrote a memoir that marries sorrow and gratitude, truth and perception, and consciously engages with greater narratives of grief.

Alexander, in a 2015 interview for PBS Newshour Bookshelf, describes the process of writing her memoir. She recounts that initially she "was very surprised that I started writing almost immediately after Ficre died, I didn't think that it was anything that was going to become a poem, or become a memoir . . . I knew that I needed to track what I was moving through, even though I wouldn't say it was cathartic or it helped me move through my grief. It wasn't like that. It was, actually, now that I look back on it, more profoundly about processing the world through art and writing." While the healing power of writing cannot be discounted, Alexander emphasizes the centrality of her own artistry. She explains that her memoir is a book of "Poet's

prose. . . It came word first, and word by word and always with attention to music . . . [The chapters] have the economy of poetry.” Alexander’s comment urges us to examine her memoir with the same attention we might bring to her poetry. Both mediums draw from what Alexander refers to as “a visceral place” and, like her poetry, the memoir is also “careful and precise.” She brings her poetic awareness to the experience of her husband’s death by “precisely ask[ing] myself what I saw and felt and knew and remembered” and using this sensibility, which she describes as “poetic logic,” to document the experience of her loss. In this approach, she foregrounds the distinctiveness of individual experience and perception.

In a 2015 interview Elizabeth Alexander explains that while she had read Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*, “the spirit that guided the book was Lucille Clifton.” (Publishers Weekly) In 2010, at the death of the poet Lucille Clifton, Alexander wrote an elegant eulogy for her friend and mentor in *The New Yorker*. She wrote, “As Clifton often reminded her acolytes, ‘truth and facts are two different things.’ Time and again, she made luminous poems premised on clear truth-telling, but always with a twist, and with space for evocation and mystery.” (Alexander, *The New Yorker*) And so Alexander’s *The Light of the World* too unites truth and art.

But just as Alexander writes about her own experience, she too situates herself within greater narratives of grief, in a similar way to Clifton. Her experience as an African American artist characterizes her life, her marriage, and naturally her grief as well. She writes in her collection of essays *The Black Interior*, “Art is where and how we speak to each other in tongues audible when “official” language fails. It is not where we escape the world’s ills but rather one place where we go to make sense of them” (ix) Whether racism or grief, the “world’s ills” can be

processed through art. Alexander's widowhood is no exception. Throughout the memoir, her poetic sensibility and the narrative construction engage with a broader narrative of cultural grief, in a more overt way than either Oates or Didion.



Alexander's "poetic logic" is particularly apparent in passages connecting death and the natural world. She does so first through the appearance of a series of animals and then through a description of her husband's garden. Alexander draws parallels between her mother-in-law and the crossing of a fox as well as between Ficare and the appearance of a hawk in their backyard. In these moments, she "processes the world through art," drawing conclusions from symbols and signs and redefining the relationships of reality, art, and meaning. These moments have none of the desperate intensity of Didion's magical thinking, nor does she attempt to fix a single meaning to the interactions. Instead she uses natural occurrences to establish her methods of poetic perception and abstractions of death and life.

A few years before Ghebreyesus' own passing, his mother, Alexander's mother-in-law, dies after an extended illness. In a short chapter situated among passages chronicling sixteen happy years with Ghebreyesus, Alexander describes the fortitude her mother-in-law showed in the face of mortality and how "she showed me I was much stronger than I'd ever known I was." She writes that, to her surprise, she was now able to "sit by the side of death," foreshadowing the fortitude she herself would show in the face of her husband's passing. (Alexander 72) She concludes this passage with a vignette in which she explains her methods of perception and her relationship to death. She writes, "My mother-in-law's last night on earth, a fox crossed our path

in Branford, Connecticut, as we left the hospice. We knew somehow that it was her, as I now know the ravenous hawk came to take Ficare. Do I believe that? Yes, I do. Poetic logic is my logic. I do not believe she was a fox. But I believe the fox was a harbinger. I believe that it was a strange enough occurrence that it should be heeded.” (Alexander 73) Alexander does not derive a specific conclusion from the appearance of the fox. She even plays with contradiction, the fox is both her mother-in-law and a sign. She indicates also that these connections are not literal, they are fabricated for the purposes of artistic interpretation. Thus this passage establishes the kind of patterns Alexander creates to make sense of life and death through art, a pattern she continues as she mourns her husband.

In the passage about the death of her mother-in-law, Alexander alludes to another encounter with a hawk. She recounts a morning she, Ghebreyesus, and a visiting friend, Lorna, drank their cappuccinos seated in the gazebo in their backyard:

As we walk toward the house, something makes us look back into the yard over our shoulders. There is a giant hawk sitting on the branch of our hundred-year-old oak tree, eviscerating and devouring a squirrel.

We freeze to watch. The raptor is utterly focused on its task. I watch Ficare and Lorna scrutinizing, their artist’s eyes recording what they see. The hawk attends to its business undisturbed. It is rapacious; it takes what it wants. The bloody ribbons of the squirrel’s entrails hang off the branch as the hawk eats the entire remains of the hapless rodent in about five minutes.

Ficare tells us he has seen the bird the day before, with the children, and shows us a short video he took on his phone of the creature on the same branch, eating another squirrel. I have seen a hawk a few times but never one so intent on its survival, never seen predation itself up close and in action. It is pure and elemental, necessarily violent, riveting, nature itself. We watch for as long as we can before we have to go off to the duties of our days.

Some weeks later, on his bureau, I find an acrostic Ficare made, which exhausted variations on the word *hawk*. He'd assigned numbers to the letters and then assigned those numbers to lottery tickets, which I later discover he bought by the dozens and secreted in the pages of the books he was reading. (Alexander 15)

Alexander offers an interpretation of the appearance of the hawk; She writes that she knows that the great predator “came to take Ficare.” That, in the same way that the fox was entwined with spirit of her mother-in-law, the hawk is a harbinger of her husband’s death. But by exploring this parallel in greater depth, we discover that Alexander plays with this encounter to reflect a series of different meanings.

She describes in striking detail the ferocity of the hawk’s instinct of survival. In this, Alexander draws a parallel between the hawk and Ghebreyesus himself. In the chapter following this scene, she recounts the details of his life. Though it never overshadowed his warm and gentle disposition, Ghebreyesus had a violent and tragic past. She writes:

He literally walked across his country through killing fields to escape, when he was sixteen years old . . . He was a refugee in Sudan, in Italy, in Germany, and in the United States . . . He washed dishes in Italy, attended school before he knew a word of the language in a Germany so racially hostile it almost broke him. He went years without seeing his parents. His parents and his community built him to survive. (Alexander 37)

In placing these details of Ghebreyesus’ own fight for survival immediately after the encounter with the hawk, a moment in which she is cowed by the animal’s intensity, she draws a parallel between the two living beings. Alexander is awed by both her husband and the hawk and their willingness to survive. She further plays on this connection as she makes reference to the lottery ticket motif.

An early form of the memoir entitled “Lottery Tickets” was published in *The New Yorker* in February of 2015. In this essay, as well as in the published edition of *The Light of the World*, Alexander makes reference to Ghebreyesus’ fevered purchase of dozens of lottery tickets

just days before he died. She wonders often why in his last days he felt the need to buy tickets so urgently. When she finds the lottery tickets, she also finds “an acrostic Fiere made, which exhausted variations on the word *hawk*. He’d assigned numbers to the letters and then assigned those numbers to lottery tickets.” (Alexander 15)

At one point, she makes reference to a quote from Sylvia Boone, a Yale art historian buried near their home in New Haven, “She wrote that travelers should always commit the ‘charming, hopeful, irrational’ act of buying a lottery ticket in new countries. She called it ‘buying a chance’ it will make you feel lucky, as if anything could happen, even when “you *know* you will not be there for the drawing.”” (Alexander 129) In this, Alexander offers an understanding of Ghebreyesus’ fixation with the lottery. Though there was a small chance of winning, and though he would not be there for the drawing, the lottery tickets were a manifestation of a pure and irrational attempt to “buy a chance.” And by deriving his lottery numbers from the word ‘hawk,’ a creature so viciously alive, he was in a way directing this animal power into his own effort for survival. But as much as it was a longing to continue his own life, it was also a need to continue providing for his family. Alexander writes that he was desperate to win, “saying he had to win it for me.” (Alexander 180) She writes that at the time, she dismissed him as foolish. But after his death, she questions the meaning of his particularly frenzied lottery purchase. Ghebreyesus’ purchase was not uncharacteristic, she writes that “he loved the lottery,” but after his death she ascribes new meaning, his need for survival and his love for his family. She is, at the same time, conscious of her poetic logic at work, often complicating her own interpretations of events and behaviors.



She proposes another understanding of the events with the hawk, as the actions and pace surrounding this moment mirror the patterns of her husband's death. Before the appearance of the hawk, Alexander describes a moment of peace in the gazebo "where he'd painted in the delicate colors of the remembered borders of his mother's gauzy dresses and shawls . . . Hanging inside the gazebo is a mobile he fashioned from some slender twisty branches that blew down in the yard after a storm. The mobile turns gently in the breeze. The morning is gray, and the yard smells of the fresh, damp earth of early spring." (Alexander 15) But this serenity is interrupted by violence both visceral and inevitable in the form of the hawk. This moment mirrors the way the lives of Alexander and her family were disrupted by Ghebreyesus' sudden death. She describes the scene as "pure and elemental, necessarily violent, riveting, nature itself," much in the way that death, beyond human control, is both pure and violent. But the moment ends, and they must "go about their duties of the day." This parallels the disconnect between grief and the necessity of continuing life. They are held captive as witnesses to death, but must wrench themselves from the moment in order to continue living. In constructing this nuanced moment, Alexander is herself studying with her artist's eyes, devising her own meaning from an organic occurrence and describing the moment in a way that allows for her to examine death from a new, abstract perspective.

She draws a similar parallel between death and the natural world when describing the same garden in which the hawk appeared. Ghebreyesus tended the garden, patiently nurturing a range of distinctive and colorful flowers. The year after his death the peonies are double blooming, a rare occurrence she renders significant. She writes, "flowers live, they are perfect and they affect us; they are God's glory, they make us know why we are alive and human, that

we behold. They are beautiful, and then they die and rot and go back to the earth that gave birth to them.” (Alexander 147) As she meditates on the cyclical nature of the garden, it is clear that she is also making subtle reference to human life, specifically her husband’s. Though they had only fifteen years together, their love and shared life was “perfect” and “effecting” before Ghebreyesus died and was returned to the earth.

In this metaphor, Alexander also sets the garden as a place of death and return, where the cycle between death and life is frequent and natural. The flowers, though they die, return again the next year. And so Alexander uses this physical space to represent Ghebreyesus’ return after death. In a place that was both undeniably his and a place where death is less permanent, he returns to her. She writes,

“May ninth, one month and five days after he died, he almost comes back. The children and I amble in the garden, enjoying his domain . . . It begins to rain lightly and the boys scurry inside. I can see Ficare plainly atop his hillock. *Come on!* I say to him from the side door, gesturing towards the house. *Come in from the rain.* He stays where he stands, his eye an infinity of sadness. *Please, please come in* I implore. He is outside and we would be inside, not forever but for a long, long time” (Alexander 97)

Because the garden is a place where life and death are magical and cyclical, and where Ghebreyesus, the gardener had control over this cycle, it is here that he is first able to return to her. But nonetheless, he is unable to enter the house, to come ‘inside’ to a place that is exclusively for the living. While, of course, this scene is not a veritable hallucination, Alexander introduces her own placement on the threshold between life and death. He comes to her often in the form of dreams, and in this liminal place of dreams, much like the garden, she is able to see him vividly.

Continuing in the chapter where she describes their encounter in the garden, Alexander writes that, “The next morning I return to bed in a quiet house after the children leave . . . I wail like an animal and then I sleep, and Ficare comes right to the edge of my dreams, no narrative, just presence . . . He is on the edge of sleep, and all I have to do is go there to be with him.” (Alexander 98) This dream space is a comfort, a place where she is able to enjoy the familiarity and warmth of his presence. But soon the dreams become more complicated, more muddled. She writes of dreams where he is unfamiliar, he wears a coat that she does not recognize and has a missing tooth. This disturbs her, an unhappy reminder that their lives are no longer shared. She writes, “And then he is gone. My own keening wakes me. He will not come to my dreams again, not even to the edge. Soon, he is never in the garden when I go there to find him. He was truly there after he died, and now he is not.” (Alexander 99) The dream space, like the garden, the liminal nature of the surreal is mirrored by the action of writing and the creative, altering power of art. She writes of her husband’s paintings of the garden, “Ficare did not paint what he saw. He saw in his mind, and then he painted, and then he found the flowers that were what he painted . . . He painted to fix something in place. And so I write to fix him in place, to pass time in his company.” (Alexander 147) As Ghebreyesus painted in hopes of altering reality, or creating another possible reality, she in her dreams and in her art is able to bring him to life, transcending the barrier of death. She writes that, “Ficare stops coming to my dreams, so I lie in my bed after I have sent the children off to school and imagine my dreams instead” (138) In this conjuring and in writing the dreams she is able to construct a space in her art where, like in the garden, the barrier between living and dead is less certain.

This liminality is reminiscent of both Didion and Oates. Didion illustrates this sensation through her presence in both the past and present, while Oates plays with her status as ‘widow,’ a wife without a husband. Alexander’s illustration of this experience, however, is best put into conversation with Lucille Clifton’s poem, “The death of fred clifton.” Herself a widow, Clifton wrote the poem the year of her husband’s death, from his perspective. Alexander writes that in this poem “the living and dead speak across the veil,”

i seemed to be drawn  
to the center of myself  
leaving the edges of me  
in the hands of my wife  
and I saw with the most amazing  
clarity  
so that I had not eyes but  
sight  
and , rising and turning,  
through my skin,  
there was all around me not the  
shapes of things  
but oh, at last, the things  
themselves.

The brief poem is included in *The Light of the World*, and Alexander offers her own interpretation and at the end she writes, “I am a widow. I am Ficare’s widow, clutching at his edges. I cannot hold on to the garment.” In Clifton’s eulogy in *The New Yorker*, Alexander writes, a bit prophetically that “the philosophy that this poem exemplifies is now of comfort to the readers and poets who mourn her passing. “Passing”: that particularly African-American way of describing death seems quite Cliftonian. The living pass out of one state into another . . . Those we have loved are just over there, on the other side.” Through her poetic logic, her art and the art of others, Alexander is able to embrace the liminality of her loss.



Food rituals too become a site of memory and comfort. Throughout the memoir, Alexander includes recipes and scenes of dining. Ghebreyesus worked for many years as a chef, a craft that one reviewer writes is aligned with Alexander's art "for the recipe form and the poetic form both effect something miraculously beautiful and nourishing with a great economy of language and proportion." (Popova) Alexander uses these recipes, each brief but precise, to a number of different effects.

The first recipe Alexander incorporates into the memoir is Ghebreyesus' recipe for "Shrimp Barka" This recipe follows a discussion of "authentic" cuisine where she cites a *New York Times* interview with Ghebreyesus. The interviewer asks, "Is all this authentic?" and Ficare responds, "Tricky word, authentic . . . Tricky idea. Food ideas move around the world very quickly today, and if you went to Eritrea you'd find American touches here and there. There are thousands of Eritreans living in the United States, and when they go home, they take new food ideas with them. For us, that's no more foreign than pasta once was." (9) The Shrimp Barka recipe is uniquely Ghebreyesus', not a traditional Eritrean dish. Instead, it comes from his own "inventive imagination" (9). This first recipe mirrors Ghebreyesus in Alexander's eyes; a man situated in a rich African tradition, but who is "culturally diasporic" or "syncretic" blending the ideas of many diverse cultures, and consequently a vibrant individual. She goes on to describe the power of this particular recipe. It was so delicious that "women called for it from St. Raphael's and Yale-New Haven Hospitals after they'd delivered their babies; people said they literally dreamed of it, a fairy food that tasted like nothing else: This is how you make it," and she includes the recipe. (9) Set in a different type face, the recipe is short and factual but

detailed. The recipe serves as a transition as she proceeds to outline his painting philosophy. Alexander writes how, before going to work at the restaurant, he would paint in their garage. Unlike his eagerness to share his food, he was reluctant to share his art with the world, she writes, “he was never quite ready.” (12) Alexander continues, “‘People will know this work after I am gone, sweetie,’ he would say. He said it with a laugh, but he meant it. I don’t suggest he thought he would leave this earth prematurely, but I do think he had faith in in the long-run, and the lasting power of art, and that he also clearly knew what was his and his alone to accomplish. He understood that *ars longa, vita brevis*, no matter when you die.” (Alexander 12) This is true of his visual art, Alexander made certain of it; One of his paintings adorns the dust jacket of *The Light of the World*. Even more, this is also true of his culinary art. The recipes did not end with him, and continue beyond his death. Alexander invokes this each time she includes a recipe, telling the story of how he lives on in his family through each dish they consume.

Alexander includes another sort of recipe when she describes the days leading up to her husband’s death. She pushes him to continue his *suga alla Bolognese* that he is making for an Easter dinner with their “extended family, arriving from various points in our African diaspora.” (Alexander 25) Ghebreyesus’ ability to speak Italian and his familiarity with the cuisine were results the Italian colonization of Eritrea, yet another detail that illustrates the complexity of Ghebreyesus’ character. The recipe for his bolognese is much simpler, a short list of ingredients but she is still sure to specify “no garlic.” Here, Alexander emphasizes the centrality of food to their family, extended and immediate. Food is a uniting force and an axis around which the family revolves.

This use of recipes, specifically Italian dishes, is mirrored much later, when a friend, Michele, shares a recipe with Alexander. This is not one of her husband's own creations, but Michele was a friend of Ghebreyesus' with whom he would speak Italian and share recipes. Days before, Alexander and her sons had dined with Michele and her husband. The spaghetti was the most "comforting and delicious dish I have ever eaten, which we slurp as though we've never been fed before and talk about Ficare." (Alexander 133) She describes Robert and Michele as "among the many dear people who have been feeding us" during their time of grief. This chapter is in fact concentrated on the painful absence of her husband's friendship, but the food brings consolation and friendship. The ritual allows her to assuage the pain and connect with friends, both Michele and her husband. She writes, "Days later it feels like progress when I write to Michele for the spaghetti recipe." Michele responds with the recipe and Alexander includes the details in the text. She goes on, "As I make the pasta I remember Ficare in our kitchen teaching me how to more adeptly use a knife, to preheat a pan, to press garlic cloves so the paper jackets slip off, to simmer tomatoes until they turn sweet and roast beets until they are like candy. The boys and I eat our delicious spaghetti until sated. Our whole bodies feel warm. Ficare is in our stomachs." (Alexander 135) Though the spaghetti is not a recipe of his own, the enactment of friendship with others and the recipe are a means for connecting to her husband. Here again we see the *ars longa, vita brevis* philosophy at work. (Alexander 12) While Ghebreyesus is no longer capable of making his own recipes, they continue on, each time reminding the family of his presence "in their stomachs."

Alexander also includes the recipe for Ghebreyesus' red lentils. While contemplating moving from their home in New Haven, Ghebreyesus comes to Alexander in a dream. He returns

as if he had never passed, kisses her on the lips, and “sets to making red lentils for dinner.” (Alexander 171) But when she wakes up in the morning, she knows “all of a sudden that it is time for us to leave. Ficare isn’t here anymore. I can make his red lentils anywhere.” She then includes the detailed recipe for his “Spice Red Lentil & Tomato Curry.” His red lentils appear again when Alexander’s niece sends a recording of the last voicemail message Ficare left on her phone, inviting her to make “a dish of red lentils” with him. (Alexander 188) Finally, she cites an interview for a blog, where Ghebreyesus’ had taught the interviewer to make his red lentils. In which Ghebreyesus is asked “It’s your last meal. What do you have?” and he responds, “Probably this dish. It’s a very good dish. There are many other things that I could have made that remind me of my parents, but I think this one is the best.” (Alexander 188) And so, in her dream, Alexander links the red lentils to her husband’s death. He himself explains that the dish of Red Lentils is something that connects him to the past and to his loved ones. His parents have died, but he is able to connect with him through his food. Alexander is able to do the same with this specific dish when he passes, whether she remains in their home in New Haven, or moves to New York, as she ultimately chooses to do.

Instead of simply alluding to the dishes or describing them prosaically, she chose to include the recipes in full. She uses them to enforce her experiences with food, friendship, and Ghebreyesus’ continuing presence, but also to draw the reader into this community. Disclosing the specifics of each recipe has a certain effect. She sets a generous tone throughout the memoir and the recipes reinforce this by directly inviting the reader to share the good and beautiful things that her husband created. This is a significant contrast to both Didion and Oates, who to varying



effects, chose not to characterize their husband. Alexander, on the other hand, spends much of the memoir painting a full and vivid portrait of her husband.

In the third part of the memoir, titled for Clifton's poem, "The Edges of Me in the Hands of my Wife," Alexander, in grieving for her husband, describes him. She writes:

Ficre loved the cri de coeur from August Wilson's play *Two Trains Running*: 'I want my ham!' He called those plays so African, the ways Wilson's communities absorb their eccentrics and make space for them, without explanation.

Once on a trip to St. Croix in the Virgin Islands, we went to visit an artist friend of

my parents' who made tie-dyed fabric and dresses. We sat in her atelier on a Saturday afternoon as folks wandered in and out, soliloquized, and left. The preacher, the hustler, the wino, the diva, all came in without announcement, said their piece, and exited stage right. It's so African! said Ficre, in love with the quotidian theater. It's like Africa, and it's like an August Wilson play!

Do you see why I miss him? I call out, to no one. Will I remember everything?

What am I meant to keep? (Alexander 87)

But rather than calling out to no one, she is calling out to the reader of the memoir. In sharing the details of him, in writing all that she can remember, she mourns him publicly and lovingly. The recipes too, can be understood as having a similar effect. The replicability of the recipes is a way for Alexander to share her story and her husband.

In this process, as well, Alexander removes herself from many of the dangers of essentialization. Where Oates unequivocally adopts the mantle of "the widow," Alexander is more nuanced. She writes, "I am a widow. I am Ficre's widow." But in this, she also situates herself with a greater narrative of grief.



Alexander includes the lecture given to the class “African American Art Today” one week after the death of her husband:

It’s a fact: black people in this country die more easily, at all ages, across genders. Look at how young black men die, and how middle-aged black men drop dead, and how black women are ravaged by HIV/AIDS. The numbers graft to poverty but they also graph to stresses known and invisible. How did we come here, after all? Not with upturned chins and bright eyes but rather in chains, across a chasm. But what did we do?

We built a nation, and we built it’s art.

And so the black artist in some way, spoken or not, contends with death, races against it, writes amongst its ghosts who we call ancestors. We listen for the silences and make that art. “Don’t forget to feed the Loas,” Ishamael Reed wrote, and so by making art we feed the ancestors, leave water and a little food at the altars we have made for them, and let them guide the work. We listen; we hasten to create.

Survivors stand startled in the glaring light of loss, but bear witness.

The black folk poets who are our ancestors spoke true when they said every shut eye ain’t asleep, every goodbye ain’t gone. (166)

In these concluding paragraphs, Alexander draws together various threads of her own experience, both as a widow and a black artist. She first makes reference to “how middle-aged black men drop dead,” an obvious allusion to Ghebreyesus. Alexander makes this connection between “stresses known and invisible” and her husband at another point in the memoir. She writes:

Black men die more catastrophically, across class, than anybody else in America. Toni Morrison: “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead negro’s grief.” He was an African man, an Eritrean man, and an African American man. He was a black man. He was not the descendant of slaves. (37)

In this moment, Alexander overtly and consciously interacts with narratives of death in African American culture, linking her own experience with a greater cultural sensibility. Her emphasis on black artistry as “contending with death” recalls once again Lucille Clifton and the poem, “The Death of Fred Clifton.” Alexander writes not only through the guiding force of her deceased mentor, but both women write through and for their husbands. In the chapter following Clifton’s poem, Alexander chooses to include her own,

“He who believed in the lottery.  
 He who did not leave a large carbon footprint.  
 He who never met a child he didn’t enchant.  
 He who loved to wear the color pink.  
 He whose children made him laugh until he cried.  
 He who never told a lie.  
 He who majored in physics, who knew the laws of the universe.  
 He who wanted to win the lottery for me.” (96)

Though Alexander’s poem is traditionally capitalized and punctuated, the succinct, minimalist nature of the poem is clearly in the style of Clifton, flowing with the cadence and humility so characteristic of the poet. Alexander too pays homage to Clifton in both the epigraph and title of the memoir. She includes the line “...the light insists on itself in the world” from the poem “the light that came to lucille clifton.” She includes in the epigraph a line from a poem from another mentor and friend, the poet Derek Walcott, “O beauty, you are the light of the world!” This comes from his poem “The Light of the World.”

These inclusions begin the book with a pattern that is found throughout. Alexander explains in an interview that in the course of her grief she “felt really, really lucky that I was a writer I have a tool, a way to move through, and keep moving forward, all through the ongoing ways of grief. But I also realized . . . that I had art by other people as my companion” (Publishers Weekly). In her memoir she makes reference to many poems, songs, and words said by great

black artists who came before her, drawing from their wisdom and familiarity with death.

Alexander not only makes includes a poem by Clifton, but also works from poets Langston Hughes, Melvin Dixon, and to the singer and songwriter Esperanza Spalding. She makes reference to many others. In one specific moment, she clarifies this connection of her own grief to a larger cultural narrative, and how this bond is facilitated by art. Her son comes home to find her playing gospel music:

I hope you're not turning all Christian, Simon says . . . I am not, but I am listening to Mahalia Jackson in a whole new way. *How I got over, My soul looks back in wonder*, I hear it for the very first time. The gratitude in that song is what washes over me, the word *thank* repeated over and over. My soul does indeed look back in wonder . . . Who we are as a people and how we made our way through sorrows that feel so profoundly intimate and personal but in fact exist on larger continuums. . . About halfway through the song Mahalia Jackson is stirred to clap and stomp, the song now fully in her body, carrying her over to shores unknown. And then, the song moves to astonishment: *How I got over!* In the absence of organized religion, faith abounds, in the form of song and food and strong arms. (120)

She writes that in the absence of other explanations, she is able to find comfort and solace in a “larger continuum,” through the music, poetry, and food of a people who have endured so many of the “world’s ills” through art.

In this passage and in her lecture Alexander makes reference again to the culture of food, drawing parallels between her husband’s recipes, a greater cultural signification, and her own works as an artist. In the lecture she specifies that “by making art we feed the ancestors, leave water and a little food at the altars we have made for them, and let them guide the work.” In this we could even understand that her inclusions of recipes are small offerings to her loved ones who have died, Ghebreyesus and Clifton, the guiding forces of the memoir. Inspired by her husband

and by Clifton, Alexander composed a memoir which fuses her “poetic logic” and a great consciousness about narratives of grief.

## CONCLUSION

Each experience of grief is singular and so each memoir is equally distinctive. In the case of Alexander, Didion, and Oates, it is perhaps their ability to recast their experience into narrative and prose, to illustrate their grief that proves most extraordinary. As I’ve demonstrated, the three memoirists have temporally and textually reorganized their grief, characterized themselves and their husbands, poetically reshaped events and perceptions, and engaged with cultural understandings of grief to ultimately create three particularly affecting memoirs.

Thus I found it curious when, in my early research, I discovered that this literary crafting had been altogether disregarded or, if acknowledged, dismissed as a symptom of grief. Rather than studying the construction of the memoirs, or *how* precisely these artists chose to represent their grief, their works were taken often as testimony. I attributed this first to the desire for a ‘truthful’ memoir, particularly those focusing on overcoming a hardship. I found that this is essentially impossible- all memoirs do, to some degree, form narrative, construct characters, and reshape memories, so fluid and changeable themselves. This is particularly true for the memoirs by these three skilled authors.

I noticed a second pattern in my research on widowhood and conceptions of death culture in contemporary America. More often than not, theorists searched for the common experience of grief, that which was universal. This is both unsurprising and natural, considering the fear and awe in the wake of death and, indeed, the universality of death; Everyone will, at some point, lose a loved one. As readers we want reassurance that what we feel in the irrational throes of

grief as valid or even, in some cases, we want to be prepared for what awaits us. Susan Gilbert and Jeffrey Berman, both having lost their spouses, admit that their interest in grief and mourning is personal. While not inherently problematic, I found that, particularly Berman, approached the memoirs with the desire to understand grief itself, to derive an explanation from the memoirs that could explain his own experience. He writes in the preface to *Companionship in Grief*, “I find myself writing books about death, partly to work through my grief, partly to commemorate and honor my wife’s memory, partly to remain securely attached to her, and partly to help others - my students and my readers- understand and cope with their own losses.” (1)

I admit that I too initially approached the three memoirs with this lens. I identified each point where the three memoirists expressed the same feeling or described the same experience. I marked each mirrored moment. For example, the women all acknowledge technological incarnations of their dead husbands. Oates dedicates a chapter Smith’s phone message, “recorded by Ray several years ago in a somewhat subdued voice.” (203) Didion also documents the answering machine, “The voice on my answering machine is still John’s.” (152) Of a lingering cell phone Alexander writes, “I keep paying his cell phone bill for a year and a half afterwards, because I don’t want to lose the text messages, and I don’t have the heart to read and transfer them.” (141) I found countless moments like these where the three women express similar sentiments or perform the same “death-duties,” as such tasks as sorting belongings and executing the will are deemed by Oates.

I tried also to fit their experiences within preexisting models of grief, initially the “five phases” model devised by Elizabeth Kubler Ross, clearly separating passages into an appropriate stage, be it denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. This approach was not

altogether ineffective, for I certainly believe that there are many shared experiences in the wake of the death of a loved one, but it failed entirely to capture the range of feelings I myself had experienced while reading each memoir. Each widow told a thoroughly different story, whether or not they all expressed denial after the death of their husbands. I could not explain this away with an acknowledgement of literary tone or psychological profiles. I found instead an explanation of this spectrum of experience in the literary- how each author chose to write about her experience, employing which tools and to what effect. This effort proved more fruitful. I was able to identify how precisely Didion organized her text to effect the tension between chaos and control that had so struck me the first time I read *The Year of Magical Thinking*, while Oates' contagious depression was suddenly more explicable, as was the warmth and gratitude that emanated from Alexander's memoir.

In the course of this work towards a more subtle understanding of the memoirs, I lamented the absence of nuance in studies of bereavement. Returning again to my research on American understanding of grief and mourning, the search for universality once again seemed insufficient to explain the range of emotion I myself had experienced at the hands of Didion, Oates, and Alexander. If the memoir is a cultural product, itself constructed and complicated through individual artistic choice, is grief not also a cultural process? Joralemon confirmed that indeed it is, that perceptions and manifestations of grief vary significantly depending on cultural scripts, mores, and beliefs. In linking these concerns, I found that the memoirs themselves also engaged with greater cultural narratives of grief. Oates and Didion, largely inadvertently, take part in a greater conversation about the universality of grief while Alexander engaged more directly with cultural narratives, situating herself clearly within a history of African American

mourning and art on mourning. This skillfully executed move makes an essentialization of death experiences even more obviously deficient.

The stakes in this neglect of diversity in grief memoirs are higher than a simple disregard for literary construction. In attempting to universalize narratives of grief, conversations around dying and grief memoirs fall into a pattern described by Leigh Gilmore in “American Neoconfessional Memoir, Self-Help, and Redemption on Oprah’s Couch.” She writes that the genre of a redemptive narrative, which includes such genres as the grief memoir and the addiction memoir, have moved increasingly towards the valorization of a ‘non-specific and generic self.’ Gilmore describes how “how the confessional energy circulating within the reception of memoir shifts markets away from life narratives, often written by women, that challenge middle-class proprieties by exposing family and sexual violence, as well as from memoirs written by authors who do not resemble dominant, white, book buying audiences in the US, and whose personal stories rely upon a critique of the nation for its subjects’ leg-ibility.”

(659) A similar pattern can be identified among conversations of grief memoirs. In both *Companionship in Grief* and *Writing Widowhood*, Berman failed to treat a single grief memoir by a person of color. Each marriage he treats was heterosexual and each memoirist educated and wealthy. In this process, there is a valorization of certain narratives and, even within the chosen narratives, an erasure of the differences among them, particularly in how they engage with greater cultural understandings of grief and mourning. And so in my approach to these three memoirs, I strove not only to reinstate artistic agency but also to acknowledge the diversity at work among this very small, in many ways homogenous set of memoirs. In recognizing what



artistic and cultural diversity is present even between Didion, Oates, Alexander, I aimed to show that a reexamination of the dominant interpretation of grief memoirs is valuable.

It seems fitting to conclude with the three conclusions to the memoirs. Didion reflects on a memory, “I think about swimming with him into the cave at Portuguese Bend . . . The tide had to be just right. Each time we did it I was afraid of missing the swell, hanging back, timing it wrong. John never was. You had to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change. He told me that. No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that.” (227) Oates, as I mentioned before, takes pride in her hard-earned accomplishment, “I have kept myself alive.” (416) And Alexander emerges from a dream where her husband came to her. She writes, “I wake and the room is flooded with pale yellow light.” (203) In these moments, the three authors draw their narratives to a close. Didion’s conclusion is stoically resilient and Oates is simply content to be alive while Alexander rejoices in her husband’s gentle and persistent presence. These final moments are indicative of their singular, equally artful memoirs of widowhood.

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