

Seiva Cunningham

ANTH 4980

April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Wandern: Childhood, Trauma, Grief

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2024, my twenty-nine-year-old sister died in a hospital in Indianapolis, Indiana with only my mother by her side. Although the opportunity was offered to me multiple times, I didn't go. I decided against being there for my dying sister. Holding her hand for the first time in four years. Trying to capture any white in her yellow eyes. I couldn't sit in that hospital room, while our mother braced herself to outlive her own child. I carry a lot of guilt around my sister's death and the layers of loss that I never experienced when my grandparents died or when my two friends from high school died in car accidents. This felt different. I noticed early on that I was processing my grief very differently compared to others. Some people wanted to grieve with me, to hug me, and give me what they thought were helpful reminders. We were asked about services and how people could help prepare. We were given money in "Thinking of You" cards from people who had never met my sister. At some point, my brother, mother, and I began to wonder if we were bad people for deciding against a service and for choosing to hold off releasing my sister's ashes until after I graduated. Everything we did regarding my now dead sister, including other people, *the living*. I started to think about death in a really different way and I realized acknowledging the dead and subsequently celebrating the dead, meant performing for the living. For my final project I will be analyzing this theory while also attempting to remember my sister.

While doing so, I will discuss "wandern," the German word for hiking or to hike. Hiking for my family and I have always been the way we process hard times. Coming from a family that

didn't talk about grief, sadness, or depression outside of therapy, we used hiking to process the things we couldn't talk about. I will discuss how this tradition of hiking as well as specific anthropological essays have helped me understand grief in a way that I am more comfortable with. I chose three articles to help with my analysis, "Culture and Grief: Ethnographic perspectives on ritual, relationships, and remembering." By Gila S. Silverman, Aurélien Baroiller, and Susan R. Hemer, "Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Well-being: Summary of the Evidence." by Peter Gray, David Lancey, and David Bjorklund, and "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian perspective" an essay by Leslie Marmon Silko. I chose these articles because at the time, it helped me understand grief in a way that I could process.

Through Silverman and co., I realized that grief is as outer personal as it is individual, how much social norms are affecting my ability to grieve and how I want to do it. Gray and team grew my understanding of my own mental health. While it is my responsibility today, it's also my responsibility tomorrow. Because I have made the decision to carry my sister's memory, I need to build a future for myself in which I can do so in a safe and healthy space. Silko taught me the importance of storytelling, I come from a heritage where storytelling was the norm. It's how we taught our young lessons about life and responsibility, it's also how we remembered those that came before us. Our family shared our history on mountain trains, grassy hills, and pampered gardens. We shared memories of those we lost as we spoke their names with pride. I don't want my sister to be lost in this tradition. I want her name and her legacy to be remembered beyond me.

For my final capstone, I created "Wandern" an interactive tour through some of my favorite trails and adventures. Using ArcGIS Story mapping software, I can tell the story of my childhood, the trauma I faced, and how anthropological theory helped me process the important

parts. Some of the hikes seen in the photos I took with Sophie, some I had her in mind. I became an Anthropologist, to help me understand people. To learn about the world from a “why” perspective. Recently, I’ve wondered what my *why* is; for my personal future and my anthropological one. I still don’t know the answer exactly, but I know that without Anthropology and without *wandern* life would be a whole lot harder and a whole lot more boring. I know my sister is watching over me; I know she’s walking with me on that big hiking trail in the sky. I’m going to make her proud and I need Anthropology to do it.

### Bibliography

Gila S. Silverman, Aurélien Baroiller & Susan R. Hemer (2021) *Culture and grief: Ethnographic perspectives on ritual, relationships and remembering*, *Death Studies*, 45:1, 1-8, DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2020.1851885

Gray, P., Lancy, D. F., & Bjorklund, D. F. (2023). Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Well-being: Summary of the Evidence. *The Journal of pediatrics*, 260, 113352. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2023.02.004>

Silko, Marmon Leslie. (1979). Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian perspective. *Literature Analysis*.

[https://canvas.uccs.edu/courses/153278/files/9155148?module\\_item\\_id=2464245](https://canvas.uccs.edu/courses/153278/files/9155148?module_item_id=2464245)