Writing Through Tears: Women, Grief and Hope in the Academy

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Abstract:
Grief shatters the body, at once collapsing inwards while simultaneously tearing apart. Is there room for grief in the neoliberal academic body? Is there space for small everyday losses as well as large life-changing losses? What do we do when our workspaces silence our grief? As academics, we are subject to a competitive, pressurized working culture resulting in increasing stress, anxiety, exhaustion. We have also experienced a devastating global pandemic. Yet, grief and loss are not emotions we readily acknowledge in our workspaces. Inspired by Shelton and Sieben (2020), we focus on this very topic and emotion, which has affected us in different ways. We bring grief (deep sorrow from death or loss) centre-stage as a way of speaking-back, stepping away from the competition and the success narratives. We use Hendry et al.'s (2018) notion of *narrative as being* which shifts methodology from a mode of production to a way of being in the world. Our narratives show that loss, even while experienced individually, is felt communally. Grief matters and in writing about grief, we resist neoliberal knowledge, an act which gives us hope.

Keywords: grief, loss and hope in universities; academic subjectivities; academic identities; neoliberalism in universities; women in academia; COVID pandemic

L'écriture à travers les larmes : Les femmes, le deuil et l'espoir dans l'académie

Résumé :
Le deuil fracasse le corps, s'effondrant d'un coup vers l'intérieur tout en se déchirant. Y a-t-il une place pour le deuil dans le corps académique néolibéral? Y a-t-il de la place pour les petites défaites quotidiennes comme pour les grands échecs qui changent la vie? Que faisons-nous lorsque notre environnement de travail fait taire notre peine? En tant qu'universitaires, nous sommes soumises à une culture de travail compétitive et sous pression, qui se traduit par une augmentation de stress, d'anxiété et d'épuisement. Nous avons également connu une pandémie mondiale dévastatrice. Cependant, le deuil et la perte sont des émotions rarement reconnues dans nos lieux de travail. Inspirées par Shelton et Sieben (2020), nous nous concentrons sur ce sujet et cette émotion, qui nous affectent de manières différentes. Nous plaçons le deuil (profonde tristesse causée par un décès ou une perte) au centre de nos réflexions comme un moyen de s'exprimer, de s'écarter de la concurrence et des discours de réussite. Nous utilisons la notion de narration de Hendry et al. (2018) en tant qu'être qui fait passer la méthodologie d'un mode de production à une manière d'être dans le monde. Nos récits montrent que la perte est ressentie communautairement, même si elle est vécue individuellement. Le deuil est important et en écrivant sur le deuil, nous résistons au savoir néolibéral, un acte qui nous donne espoir.

Mots clés : deuil, perte et espoir dans les universités; subjectivités académiques; identités académiques; néolibéralisme dans les universités; femmes dans les universités; pandémie COVID

Grief in Academia

What happens to grieving bodies (both individual and collective) in the neoliberal university? In the entrepreneurial university, faculty and student focus is directed towards particular values: free-market competition, the corporatization of education and the primacy of market logic. We find ourselves under mounting workloads and time pressures, while academic labour becomes increasingly precarious (Breeze et al., 2019). For faculty, work becomes characterized by overwork, distress and exhaustion (Barcan, 2018; Brunila & Valero, 2018; Gill, 2010; 2014; Menzies & Newson, 2007; Mountz et al., 2015). Like faculty, doctoral students also feel pressure as they are apprenticed into academic careers. Many face a barrage of messages of what productivity and success for doctoral students look like. Quick times to completion, professional teaching experience, networked conference presentations, rapid publication outputs in top-ranked journals, a social media profile and a plan for impact have become normalized expectations. Maternity, family and other care responsibilities, including self-care, are relegated to the realm of non-productivity, something to be hidden from the real work (Ablett, et al., 2019). As Ablett et al**.** (2019) explain,

> the nature of being a "good" neoliberal subject at a doctoral level is such that you may feel identifiable only by the work that you have completed, and the work that you still need to do. This is influenced not only by the need to complete ongoing daily tasks, but also by a concern for the future, associated with the precarity and competitiveness of early-career academic posts. (p. 71)

Butler (2009), discussing the totalizing state, notes that our "frames of seeing" are rendered invisible, and our bodies, as well as our desires, become socially crafted by the practices and language of the dominant discourse (p. 3). Subjects are constituted by norms, and the neoliberal norms of academia continue when the doctoral student moves into an academic career (Gill, 2010). These neoliberal conditions, as Metcalf (2017) suggests, strip away the values that make us human. To survive this environment, we lose our ability to discern the subjectivity of the body, and we become good neoliberal subjects, sometimes without realising the consequences. Docile subjects are what allow the system to function well (Di Leo, 2017).

How might we "unmake" the productive neoliberal subject (Ablett, et al., 2019, p. 65)? Critiquing the neoliberal university also requires critiquing our own roles in it, as we are implicated in its activities as endlessly entangled subjects. While we fix our critical gaze on the neoliberal institution, we "remain invested—if ambivalently, reluctantly, critically—in HE [higher education] as a site of hope and possibility" (Breeze et al., 2019, p. 8). Indeed, as Bottrell and Manathunga (2019) have asserted, there are always spaces for "resistances and refusals" (p. 2). Those of us who are tenured faculty have been deliberate in our micro-resistances (Badenhorst & McLeod, 2021), but how do doctoral students give voice to their resistance, given their vulnerable positions and the risks involved? Ablett et al. (2019) suggest that building communities among doctoral students is one way to respond—particularly if those communities disrupt the "neoliberal authorial voice" (p. 68) through collaborative writing about risky topics. In this paper, we use narrative writing about a risky subject—grief and loss—as a way to reclaim a subjectivity of our own making.

Emotions in Academia

Although we use the term "women" in the paper, we recognize the non-binary nature of gender. We have chosen to use this term because we authors are all women, and because of our cisgender experiences, we have been discursively positioned as women. Yet, we advocate from an inclusive post-structural feminist lens for non-gendered language use and for our concerns about the hidden nature of grief to be extended to everyone: to men, as well as non-binary, gender-queer and trans people. Our intention here is to humanize grief and loss in spaces where it is often silenced.

Research consistently reveals that many academics face difficulties in their personal and work lives, especially regarding care (McKenzie, 2021). Research practices, particularly, have sought to remove subjectivity, emotions and feelings (Ridgway, 2022). Leathwood and Hey (2009) contend that universities have embedded a traditionally masculinized approach into their systems, with notions of "rationality" holding prominence and emotions having little, if any, place. This discourse has resulted in exclusions of experiences that cannot be "regulated for disciplinary processes of standardization and homogenization" (Burke, 2017, p. 442). We are often disciplined into the discourse of rationality and become wary of showing emotions. Yet, the neutral and objective subject is a myth since we are always embodied, emotional and visible (Ramirez, 2021).

We quickly learn that academic workspaces are not places to express emotions and that emotions seem disruptive in academia, with its preference of rational, objective and logical arguments. While we all experience emotions differently, expressing emotions, particularly the gritty emotions of grief or loss, often serves to "activate notions of academic weakness and femininity" (Bloch, 2012, p. 120) across the full spectrum of gender. We recognize that, as women, we often practice mechanisms of deception to hide emotions, as a survival technique. An outburst might be labelled "hysterical" or "emotional'' and it is often dangerous for women to reveal anger.

One of the most widely cited conceptualizations of emotions in organizations is Hochschild's (1983) idea of *emotional labour*. Emotional labour is when employees disguise emotions in order to fit in as a particular kind of employee. Emotions are managed to convey a performance and to conceal certain feelings from others in the workplace (Addison, 2016). The rules around emotions are often implicit but govern our working lives. New rules are learned through interacting with others and gauging their reactions. Some displays of emotions within a context are permitted, while others meet disapproval (Addison, 2016). Emotions are managed in exchange for something else of value; for example, it is important for women or those who are viewed as feminine to be seen as rational. As Addison (2016) suggests: "Being seen as 'emotional' has particular consequences" (p. 135). For example, if a woman is emotional, she is often seen as not in control and irrational, with damaging repercussions. Within academia, angry women tend to be interpreted "as having lost control, as being weak and powerless, or as lacking femininity" (Bloch, 2012, p. 127).

Feminist research on academic spaces has long considered the gendered role of emotions (Barclay, 2021). For example, Westacott et al. (2021) suggest that emotional labour is an inherent part

of the neoliberal "good girl" subject who cares for others but not for herself (p. 99). Not upsetting others is a key component of this subjectivity. Barclay (2021) by contrast, asks if it is possible to be unemotional in the neoliberal university, given the barrage of cutbacks, austerity measures, increased precarity and so on. Cvetkovich (2012) contends that while feelings are from individuals, they are also public and emerge from both political and power structures. In other words, emotions are not only individual psychological dispositions but are cultural and political phenomena shaped by society. Sara Ahmed (2014) focuses on the cultural politics of emotions and how analysing emotions from this perspective draws attention to the exclusion of marginal groups. In her book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2014), Ahmed explores "how emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies" (p. 1). She questions the processes where "being emotional" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 4) becomes associated with some bodies, and in most cases, a feminized body. She also questions the evolutionary model of emotions, in which those who are more emotional are perceived as less evolved. Why are some emotions seen as good while others become unruly? She asks: What do emotions do? How are academics institutionalized to feel?

Against this backdrop, we want to acknowledge the impact of the COVID pandemic. The pandemic exposed a global vulnerability—a shared condition of social life around the world. Emotions such as fear, insecurity, loss and loneliness rose to the surface in ways that required recognition and response (Butler & Yancy, 2020). Even in academia, our attention turned to supporting students emotionally as they navigated learning situations during the pandemic. The recognition of global vulnerability is what prompted us to work on this project.

Despite this turn to emotions in the research literature, grief and loss remain particularly hidden emotions in academic workplaces, even though faculty and students experience many types of both. Gillespie and Lopez (2019), for example, showcase the grief experienced through research practice. They describe the stories of those who experience grief through research and fieldwork:

> Woven through . . . were the loneliness and feelings of madness that emerge when trying to push away these emotions or pretend they are not there in order to perform the perfectly disciplined, productive, neoliberal subject (the poised and professional teacher, the prolific writer, the prestigious grants recipient, the well-spoken presenter, the unfazed conservationist). (Gillespie & Lopez, 2019, p. 3)

Other griefs, griefs we've known through our own experiences, include the loss of loved ones, the losses incurred through immigration, the loss of a healthy body and the loss of an identity.

Understandings of Grief

Approaches to grief since the 1960s have been centered on the existence of specific stages of recovery, namely shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Sauteraud, 2018). Recently, however, as a result of clinical experiences, those in the field of grief counseling and therapy, as well as grief counselors in palliative care, have begun to question these models (Granek, 2010; Sauteraud, 2018). Newer theories of grief challenge many past beliefs, stating there is a personal reality of death and loss that is different and unique to each individual, culture and subgroup. In other words, "grief happens within the context of a life story" (Rando, 1984, p. 5). These

new understandings of grief also acknowledge the function of grief as transformative, that we re-learn ourselves and the world at large through grieving. In addition, mourning is also considered as a fundamental inter-subjective process and involves others alongside the bereaved (Harrison, 2021). Grief can be open-ended and evolving, being continually transformed throughout life's cycles as new losses are encountered.

In the university environment, grief is prevalent but out of sight and often a neglected area of concern (Ridgway, 2022; Matthews, 2019). Following the call of Leathwood and Hey (2009), we maintain there is a need to "better design educational systems which consider the informal, the auto/biographic, the historical, the personal, the interpersonal" (p. 436). Part of this process is to listen closely, to witness the voices of the bereaved and those who experience loss within educational settings—and autoethnography/narratives provide a valuable channel through which to do so. As Shelton and Sieben (2020) suggest, higher education is not equipped to deal with grief. There are few spaces for pain and even fewer conversations on what grief looks like. Grief is often characterized by silence within the academy. To humanize grief in this context, it is necessary to normalize the practice of grieving by recognizing the importance of "knowing grief and living with grief" in all the spaces of our lives (Fox & Wayland, 2020, p. 1). In this paper, we aimed to engage in a collective experience to listen to each other's stories of grief. To do so, we engaged in writing that involved huge risks, vulnerabilities and intimate reciprocity (Latremouille, 2018).

Method of Inquiry

In this process, we (two professors, three doctoral students and a recent master's graduate) employed artistic practices—narrative writing, poetry, visual art, photography—that reflexively interrogated our academic subjectivities as women academics. We used Hendry et al.'s (2018) notion of *narrative as being*. This shifted how we saw research and methodology—not as a mode of production, but as an ontology, a way of being in the world. Method, data and analysis are deconstructed and reassembled as relational inter-action (Hendry et al., 2018). In this sense, we were not trying to represent, explain or pin down a truth but rather to "embrace ambiguity, precarity, mystery, vulnerability, humility, and stumble in disorientation" (Hendry et al., 2018, p. 12). This approach to narrative was particularly important because we wanted to honour each person's grief. We have chosen stories as our method as part of our ethics to honour relationships. We focus on relationships to resist the spaces where categorization, classification and codification decontextualize and reduce the complexities of life in ways that are dehumanizing. We engaged in three central premises: prioritizing relationships, deep listening and a stance of unknowing. We viewed inquiry from a relational perspective. We relinquished notions of expertise and interpretation in exchange for an exposed, vulnerable unknowing.

Hendry et al. (2018) conceptualize humans as narrative beings, that experiences are shaped through stories, but these are always only partially expressed, and always assemblages rather than coherent, reasoned polished pieces. Our writing is in the middle of being formed and there is no step-by-step process of interrogating what it all means (St. Pierre, 2018). Therefore, our purpose of sharing stories was to create "a site of revelation" through deep listening and a commitment to

unknowing (Hendry et al., 2018, p. 11). In this site of revelation, we engaged in relational inquiry. We each wrote about grief and loss; some created poems from the narratives; others added photographs or artwork. We then participated in a process of reading/deep listening. Discussions afterwards attempted to process the loss and grief and to make sense of this collaboration. Finally, we created summaries of our longer narratives, which we have included here. Of course, stories and meaning are slippery, improvisations at best and, like bird murmurations, can pulsate into swirls or waves as we watch. We think we understand, only to return once again to our uncertainties and questions. Yet, like Frank (2010), we believe that stories act, that they can become living beings, and it is for this reason we feel it is important to tell them.

Narratives of Loss and Grief

In the sections below, we present our narratives of loss and grief. We have chosen not to provide commentary, explanation or interpretation on each of the narratives because we want the writer to have a voice. For the rest of us, our role is to listen and to witness.

Heather: *Love Coasting Through*

My brother died of Covid-19 and he died alone. We didn't know for days why he hadn't been answering the phone, and in January 2021 it took weeks to piece together an approximate timeline and to lift the contamination declaration imposed on his flat. Shock and grief.

Over the years since leaving home Kirk and I had remained close. Although he was in London in the United Kingdom and I was in Canada, he was always available for a phone chat. We were both interested in the arts, and he knew how to make me laugh. I still think, "Gotta tell Kirk that one—he'll like it!" Few days go by when I don't think of him. A weeping wells up. Which are the words for silence?

I remember the gloriously sunny Sunday he was born. My sister and I were taken on an ocean beach picnic and there was a light breeze. Decades later, the morning after learning of his death I awoke to find all the windows in our old house ajar—pried open by warm gusts throughout the night. Later that year, struggling to make sense of his birthday, my partner and I drifted to our local beach and I read my poem "Summer Birthday Remembrance" to the gentle wind. In it, I link him to nature's cycle and locate him with our parents (also now gone). Here I share the last verse.

> Celebration, brother (eyes of blue)
> Struggled, learned, loved and grew
> Losing father, mother too
> Now just a breeze—love coasting through. . .

Abena: *The Hands That Pull Me Through*

Image 1. The Hands That Pull Me Through. Photo by Abena.

During my doctoral journey I've survived a roller-coaster of grief because five months into my first pregnancy I lost my baby girl. That hurt me to the core. I found comfort in shared tears and hugs, and religious services offered hope; however, I was left in a strange new world—a world where someone who gave meaning to my life was gone.

The scriptures were my source of strength when pain threatened to crush me, and one week later I was in my supervisor's office preparing for my comprehensive examinations. I cancelled my maternity leave, readjusted myself, and despite my profound sadness, I passed my comprehensive exams with distinction. There were grey days, but my baby was my motivation. We had conversations—her presence was felt. Screaming, weeping, groaning, aching, talking—as an academic woman I was broken inside but still moving. . .

Culturally, as an Ashanti mother, we're advised not to grieve too much for a newborn who has passed because too much grief may block your ability to conceive or give birth again. Growing up I'd heard my mum's stories—she'd lost eight babies. Yet my brother and I survived, so along with my fear I dared to hope. . .

Today I woke up to Rosie, my second baby girl. We hold hands and she pulls me through. Facing uncertainty, I sometimes feel I'm at the edge, stressed, anxious and overwhelmed, as both an academic and a new mother. But as I forge towards the end of my program, I understand that I must live and not leave. I must thrive because I have a reason to wake up each morning.

Bahar: *Don't Come Back. . .*

I'm flying home to visit my family—from Canada to Iran. A woman sitting beside me asks about my destination. Which country do I call home, Iran or Canada? I stumble . . . with family in Iran, that country shaped my history and deep roots. But do I still belong there?

"Come From Away", a Newfoundland phrase, describes a person who's not from the province. It mostly applies to "Mainlanders". Do foreigners such as me, with broken English and a thick accent, even fit the definition? In fact, if I'm described as a Come From Away, it's a comfort. As pathetic as

that is, it's better than being a foreigner from a nation that people don't recognize. Or if they do, they associate it with the 1979 hostage crisis, terrorism and nuclear weapons.

Most recently, Iran is known as a country where the military services shot down a passenger jet on January 8, 2020. I was "home" visiting family, with my return flight to Canada booked in only a few days. As we watched the shocking TV news, my tiny niece sat on my lap. I was "home" while we collectively mourned something that we couldn't believe—something beyond our understanding.

Now I was terrified to fly. Airports used to be meaningful and significant places to me. But this time was different. I went to the same airport the 176 now-dead passengers had walked through. I imagined their faces. I saw them saying goodbye to their loved ones. I heard the passengers saying, "See you soon", and while I held my parents tight I felt their presence. So, my loving Dad embraced me, yet he whispered, "Don't come back. . ."

Julia: *Lap-Lap-Lap*

In the bath, I am filled with inspiration, hope, faith and promise. The warmth of the sudsy bathwater on my body soothes a tender ache. Immersed in water, I am authentic, true, clear-minded. I am calm. The gentle swooshing of the water against the sides of the tub reassures me.

Drip-drop-drip

Out of the bath, I dress. It's cold. All my bits, dried, covered, restrained—I get ready for the day. I climb into pants. I struggle into a turtleneck, and it catches my mouth as if to say, "don't"—

don't speak,
don't write,
stay silent.

The past few years, I have managed to hang on for dear life—by the skin of my teeth—as my grandmother would say. It is only now, that life is headed back to a new normal, that a strong feeling of doubt is settling in.

"Hey, old friend," it whispers, "why have you ignored me?"

Slip-slop-slurp

I am learning to live with—stare at—immerse myself in feelings of grief and loss. It is life, I guess—an authentic life. I won't ignore it. This reflection brings an awareness now of what I had, or to be completely honest—what I thought I had.

Grief and loss demand that I now—examine, think and heal.

Squeak-squeak-pour

. . . and bathe.

Cecile: *One Kind of Goodbye*

The year the pandemic began was the year my youngest son was due to immigrate to another country to be with his partner. Instead, he moved back home. During the pandemic, our empty nest was unexpectedly full—for two whole years. My oldest son moved into an apartment a block away. We ate meals together, we debated the ins and outs of the pandemic, we worked together, sometimes all around the dining room table, only moving off into another room for a meeting. I settled well into this routine. Now, suddenly, it's over. I'd been part of the dreaming, planning and scheming. I knew this day would come. Yet somehow, I can't believe it's happened. He packed his bags, boarded a plane and left.

As an immigrant myself, this goodbye has a lineage in other goodbyes. That's what squeezes my heart. Once I belonged to a large family of 30 or 40 at a family gathering. Then when we moved to Canada, there were only four of us. Celebrations and holidays were the hardest, but we created our own traditions. I have a photo album on my phone called "The four of us", tracking our new traditions, our determination to be happy in our new small world. Now, I wonder if the four of us will celebrate our traditions again, in person, on the same continent? Or will I become a guest in his life?

Haley: *Glimmers of Hope Through the Trees*

I'm unravelling at the seams. It's not glamorous. . . I've lost myself in a mess of worries—a high-risk twin pregnancy, pandemic restrictions, making sure my one-year-old feels loved, building a house, countless deadlines I can't meet, from multiple contracts, an obliterated social life, and a rushed thesis data collection process.

Until recently, I painted to manage stress and feel a sense of identity. But now I don't have time for anything I love, besides family and sleep. My art materials are packed away. I'm financially and academically scrambling to "get it together" before the births.

Image 2. Glimmers of Hope Through the Trees: Pain/Painting. Artwork by Haley.

My acrylic and gold leaf painting (Image 2) represents a nostalgic memory of travelling in Hawaii—a fleeting moment when the turquoise Pacific Ocean glimmered through a row of calming trees, a time when I felt competent, accomplished and excited. I was three months pregnant, travelling, and had just passed my comprehensive examinations. It was before I knew how many curve balls life can throw—like delivering my baby alone during the pandemic and a year later discovering I was pregnant again.

I'm climbing a mountain that keeps growing as my energy dissipates with the weight of two new heartbeats. I juggle loss, hope, grief, pain and guilt as a pregnant academic woman and a new mother. Meanwhile, hope springs from the little hand that reaches out, the endless tiny kicks of four energetic feet, and from the supportive gazes of those around me.

Hauntings and Evocations

We found sharing our stories to be a humbling but extremely empowering process. We could not help but cry with each story and each person's pain. The process of sharing and deep listening drew attention to the meaningfulness of the struggles endured and how important it was to share the hurt. As Abena noted, we found "comfort in shared tears and hugs". We witnessed and recognized that we were emotional beings, and that connected us despite our many differences. Julia commented: "I am learning to live with—stare at—immerse myself in feelings of grief and loss. It is life, I guess—an authentic life. I won't ignore it. This reflection brings an awareness now of what I had, or to be completely honest—what I thought I had." Being able to be authentic when we often perform a public/professional persona was a relief and a joy. Knowing that it was okay not to be okay made the interaction authentic and filled with compassion and caring. We acknowledge openly, vulnerably, as professionals and academics, that it is acceptable, indeed even appropriate, for ourselves as women in academia to communicate the pain we experience.

We felt that perhaps the pandemic had played a pivotal role in allowing us to be brave emotionally. Many of us had felt disconnected from each other. Sharing our profound embodied grief allowed us to reconnect, to share the burden of fear and insecurity the pandemic had wrought, as well the scars, which we hid and pretended were not there. Haley poignantly commented, "There's nothing glamorous about suffering. I'm unravelling at the seams. I've lost myself in the chaotic mess of worries." Although we did not experience the same loss, we connected with grief and feelings of being out of control. Our hearts ached when Bahar said, "I heard the passengers saying, 'See you soon' and while I held my parents tight I felt their presence. So, my loving dad embraced me, yet he whispered, 'Don't come back'. . . ". And how could we not weep at Abena's words: "During my doctoral journey I've survived a roller-coaster of grief because five months into my first pregnancy I lost my baby girl. That hurt me to the core"? When Heather writes, "Few days go by that I don't think of him. A weeping wells up. Which are the words for silence?", we are silenced and tears fall. As Cecile describes, these feelings of grief and loss "squeeze" our hearts.

Final Thoughts

We have three streams of thought about what we have experienced through this project.

Firstly, we see that we all carry pain and grief. Each of us had multiple stories to choose from. These stories are written onto our bodies: they are the scars on our skin, the furrows on our faces and the weights on our backs. Carrying pain and grief emerged as an emotional labour. Tucking the grief into our bodies, we continued to work. Abena went on to complete her comprehensive exams, Haley finished her to-do list, Cecile answered her emails. Simultaneously, work was a performance but also a retreat.

Secondly, we see that the process was crucial. The acts of writing narratives and sharing provided an enormous measure of healing. Choosing the words, attempting to articulate specific pain was somehow soothing even though it was difficult. Subsequently, our narratives would focus more on the body and senses: What does grief or loss feel like in our skin? What does it taste like? How does it sound? What does grief smell like? In the same way, our unburdening to each other, while painful and risky, was restorative and empowering. We will never look at each other in the same way again. Our gaze will remain tender, remembering the intermingling of our tears etched into the music of each other's words. Through the process, we moved from individual grief to collective grief. This composite poem, drawn of all our narratives, reflects this shift. Now we speak as a group:

Glimmers of Hope

It catches my mouth,
I knew this day would come.
Which country do I call home?
Celebration, brother (eyes of blue),
a row of calming trees,
the hands that pull me through.

Thirdly, although tears flow now, we recognize these are cumulative tears from many years of emotional labour where we hid our feelings, or pretended to be strong when we were not. Any grief process is long and complicated. It is a path that is often silenced by gendered and neoliberal structures which downplay the importance of emotions (Ridgway, 2022). We need to navigate these complexities somehow—but how much better when accompanied by a group of people with whom we feel safe and comfortable?

We want to end with a word of hope. Hope develops through growth, as one integrates the lessons of loss (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). Hope acknowledges that life can still hold meaning and full experiences, and it helps us navigate grief (Sieben & Shelton, 2021). Grief and loss can be significant disruptors, but they can also be connectors (Ridgway, 2022). For us, sharing our grief gave us hope. Hope is in the authenticity of expression, the heartfelt language used. Hope is in the collective grief, the gift of unburdening which allows us to carry on and move forward, knowing it's OK to experience grief as academic women. The beauty of hope in the midst of grief comes from

emotionally connecting to others and coming together to carry the burden of pain through the sharing of our stories. We want to do "academia differently" (Dwyer & Black, 2021, p. 9), to find ways to support each other that avoid competition. We want to listen to each other, share our pain, and recognize that there are values other than the official metrics. In doing so, we resist the pressures to become the neoliberal subject, the "good girl" who does not cry and always fits in. We intend to reclaim care.

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