THE GLACIER GRAVEYARD: UNLEARNING GRIEF AND GUILT IN ANTARCTICA

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***ABSTRACT*:** Transformational learning theory is a cornerstone within the field of adult education. However, are all learners ready for their disorienting dilemma which instigates transformational learning? To answer this question, this autoethnographic paper unpacks an adult learner's personal journey on a research expedition to Antarctica. Using Antarctica as their disorienting dilemma, this reflective memo presents a critical self-assessment of unexpected feelings of grief and guilt experienced framed by the author's experiences as an adult learner on a research expedition. In doing so, the researcher explores the ways experiencing and unlearning grief and guilt are untidy and discursive emotions during a transformative learning journey. This paper considers how confronting grief and guilt can deepen the transformative learning process and reframes these emotions as lessons in the self. While the adult education discipline limits its interaction with grief and bereavement studies, this paper puts these emotions at the center of a learning journey to uncover just how Mad grief can be.

"It's called a glacier graveyard."

I turn back from looking out at the Antarctic waters near Cuverville Island and face our expedition leader.

Pointing at a nearby ice sheet, he continues,

> *See—when parts of these glaciers cleave into these waters, some pieces are too big to exit this bottleneck area. Lots of times, the resulting icebergs stay floating in this area around Cuverville. The warmer saltwater from the Drake will keep chipping away at them and eventually they'll break apart. But sometimes, the ice from these glaciers can't escape this area. So, it's become its own glacier graveyard.*
>
> *It's where this ice comes to die.*
>
> (J.W., personal communication, November, 23, 2023)

In November 2023, I embarked on a research and study abroad program to one of the most barren places on earth: Antarctica. Joining thirty-one other Texas A&M University students and four faculty members with interdisciplinary expertise across the atmospheric sciences, oceanography, cruise tourism, and educational psychology, I undertook this learning journey to test the boundaries of transformational learning and adult education theory in an extreme environment. Armed with waterproof notebooks and shoes approved by the international Antarctic Treaty System, I spent the year leading up to my journey to the seventh continent reading up on Antarctic policy, glaciology, eco-tourism, and more. Finally, stepping foot onto our vessel named the *Ocean Victory*, I felt as ready as any researcher could when preparing for the treacherous waters of the Drake Passage leading to Antarctica.

However, even equipped with the best gear and academic articles, I was wholly unprepared for my journey to Antarctica—not as a researcher or practitioner—but as an adult learner

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confronted with sudden emotions of grief and guilt. While adult education has taken tentative steps towards considering educational and school-based trauma that shape the learning trajectories of adult learners, we the field rarely confront the ways in which these may echo in our own learning journeys as researchers and practitioners. This paper illustrates the ways in which grief and guilt can manifest in an adult learning journey—often in the most surprising ways. While our instinct is to speak about our work solely as researchers or practitioners, I hope to draw us towards an often-overlooked identity within adult education: ourselves as learners. This autoethnographic study reflects on the ways in which grief and guilt manifested in my learning journey to Antarctica via four grief narratives, followed by a critical reflection on the unlearning of grief and guilt norms during a transformative learning process.

A Starting Point: Transformational Learning

My academic starting point for learning in an extreme environment was to test a hypothesis: in what ways could Antarctica be my disorienting dilemma? Informed by Mezirow's transformational learning theory (TLT), I wanted to see how my prior learning experiences of being a global scholar and researcher would inform my learning experience on the seventh continent. How could Antarctica help me face habits of learning that I have internalized? How would the regular cadence of my meaning making processes be disrupted by the blank space of the southern continent? Would Antarctica help me uncover new facts of my frames of reference—from my habits of mind to my points of view (Mezirow, 1990; Mezirow, 1996)?

I planned for Antarctica to be my disorienting dilemma—that it would surely help me uncover the convictions I held as part of my "mental furniture" (Dewey, 1933, p. 4). This seemingly wild continent felt like the perfect backdrop as a space without tradition or institution. I could observe, think, and react how I wanted, to what I wanted, and in whatever capacity I wanted. Antarctica is a decolonization theorist's dream, and I planned on writing about the travel experience of a woman from the Global South by observing, researching, and learning in the southern continent—a frame of reference that has little to no available literature since women were barred from stepping foot on Antarctica until as recently as the 1990s. In theory, my well-intentioned plan felt impenetrable.

Implementing this plan revealed an entirely different pathway. While Antarctica was my disorienting dilemma, a self-examination of my resulting feelings made me realize how ill-equipped I was for this disorientation. When I could learn without observation, supervision, or judgment, feelings of overwhelming grief and intense guilt inundated my learning journey until I was unable to do anything but critically assess my emotions. I assumed that I had dealt with the trauma of my past and successfully tucked it away into the furthest recesses of my being. Antarctica allowed me to face my feelings without the medicalization or individualization of these emotions. Instead of shamefully turning from these emotions, I realized that I needed to face them head on and do what Mezirow (1996) suggested: practice empathetic listening, critical self-reflection, and involve myself in informed discourse. With an initial sample (n=1) focusing only on me, my first challenge was to be empathetic *to myself*. This paper is a testament to that process.

Research Methodology

I decided to utilize an autoethnographic qualitative approach to catalog and analyze my learning journey by reflecting on a central research question: *how does a historically marginalized woman from the Global South experience transformational learning in*

Antarctica? Autoethnographies leverage the personal narrative and storytelling techniques for the meaning-making process within scholarly research (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Heidelberger & Uecker, 2009). Personal storytelling emphasizes reflexivity, or the continuous self-reflection and self-critique of a researcher on their research and contexts within the research process, thus making it merge well with Mezirow's push for critical self-reflection during a transformational learning journey (Ellis, 2011; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Autoethnographies are typically relayed via epiphanies or confessions from the researcher's experience. This study shares four personal grief narratives, their potential root, and an informed discussion to critically self-reflect their impact on me.

Data Collection Methods

An autoethnography relies on the singular views of the researcher taking on the mantle of *researcher-as-participant* (Ellis, 2004). To this end, personal journaling, field notes, recording voice memos, and observations were the primary data collection methods for this qualitative study.

The voyage comprised a total of thirteen days, during which the research team began our expedition at the port of Ushuaia, Argentina. On our third day in Ushuaia, we made our way to the launch point for our vessel, the *Ocean Victory*. After roughly two days spent crossing the Beagle Channel and the treacherous waters of the Drake Passage, we reached Antarctica on the fifth day of our expedition. Over the next five days, we explored the Antarctic Peninsula and the South Shetland Islands through nine different excursions:

- Yankee Harbor
- Spert Islands
- Mikkelson Harbor
- Neko Harbor
- Cuverville Island
- Orne Harbor
- Wilhelmina Bay
- Telefon Bay
- Walker Bay

During each landing, I took extensive photographs to catalog my expedition experience and maintain points of reference to review later. After each landing, I reflected on my experience in either written or verbal form to capture my emotional state and learning outcomes. I also participated in daily discussions with fellow researchers during evening meals and end-of-day debriefs, resulting in necessary discourse and meaning-making moments to improve individual and group reflexivity by narrating experiences, reflecting on bias, and reclaiming moments from the day.

In the following section, I will share four grief narratives revealed by my study data. An inductive analysis unpacking my data artefacts failed me. I was undoubtedly uninformed and ill prepared to participate in discourses on grief or guilt. I support my critical self-assessment with literature on grief and bereavement to help me unpack my experiences.

Grief Narratives in Antarctica

Iceberg, Straight Ahead

I saw my first iceberg from my cabin's port light on the fifth day of our expedition. Located on the bow of the fourth deck of the ship, my shared cabin had a four by three-foot rectangular port light instead of a porthole. There was also a small seating area in front of the port light so passengers could comfortably sit and look out at the Antarctic waters. While I expected my excitement, I could not understand why I would not stop crying at the sight of my first iceberg. I obsessively planned for and waited for this moment for over a year; yet, I sat in my cabin's port light, eyes blurred and tears streaming down my face, watching my first-viewed (albeit now fuzzy) iceberg float in front of me.

I roughly dried my tears and berated myself saying, "*You're so ungrateful. You're lucky to be here. How dare you ruin this moment by being emotional and teary. You are pathetic."* In that moment, I felt such deep shame over my outburst—even if it was in the privacy of my own cabin. I kept asking myself why I was being so emotional but could suddenly only think of my father, who had passed away at the age of 46 when I was in seventh grade. It had been years, and I had come to terms with his death. Why think about him now?

Three more days passed for me to come to a quiet realization during this journey. I was standing on the shores of Orne Harbor looking out at an unbending horizon and faced again with feelings of grief and guilt. I realized that while I had accepted my father's absence, I was faced with the heavy realization that I would out-live and out-experience him. My father was a kind and gentle parent, instilling in me quiet confidence and a strong sense of self. The idea of out-doing him in anything—experience, education, or expeditions—seemed unfair and disrespectful. Knowing that I was undergoing this transformative learning journey, with opportunities he never had, felt like a crushing burden. I have seen the Antarctic as a scholar and researcher, but he never got to see me as an adult.

Knee-ding a Hand

Ushuaia, Argentina, commonly referred to as the end of the world, serves as a major launch point for most Antarctic vessels leaving from South America. Built on the shores of the Beagle Channel, Ushuaia is surrounded by subpolar forests and abuts a mountainous region referred to as the Martial Glacier. Important to this anecdote: many of the streets in Ushuaia are built at a steep incline with cobbled stairs.

On the second night of our expedition, returning from dinner, I twisted my foot going uphill on an uneven cobblestone and felt a snap in my right knee. With pain burning in my side, I slowly made myself walk back to our hotel and covered my knee in pain medication. Throughout the rest of the expedition, I was too afraid to speak out about my injury. I was afraid that someone would stop me from hopping in and out of the Zodiac boats or wading up the Antarctic shoreline during our excursions. Even with a ship doctor on board, I hid my injury and pretended to use ski poles when walking around to "look the part" of an Antarctic researcher.

A deep source of my fear stemmed from the cost of this expedition. Even with scholarships and student pricing, this 10-day expedition cost almost US$15,000 out-of-pocket. I knew the expedition was an investment in the chance of a lifetime to test myself in a space I would never again get the opportunity to visit. I knew this excursion was the right academic move for me.

But it was also money that I spent on myself and not the entire family. When my mother became widowed, she found that we only had US$95 in the bank. My father loaned his life savings to his younger brother who needed help with a business investment; which said brother later denied receiving. For the next decade, my mother, sister, and I lived on the edge of financial ruin. With every step burning as I made my way shakily across the soft ice of the Antarctic, the snap in my right knee and unending pain felt like divine punishment for spending an egregious amount of money on myself.

Looking back, this mindset and my silence seem ridiculous. I should have asked for a hand; however, already ashamed by my emotional state, I didn't want to come across as needy and unprofessional. To this day, I still feel the guilt of spending US$15,000 on a trip to Antarctica with every *click* my right knee makes.

The Drake Shake

My excursion on the *Ocean Victory* was the first time I had been on an overnight cruise. Though much smaller than other cruise lines to Antarctica, the *Ocean Victory* can house up to 200 guests (as compared to other cruise lines, which can accommodate up to 2,000 passengers). Though smaller and without the marketing gimmicks of an on-deck water slide, the *Ocean Victory* provided a luxury cruise experience complete with a daily buffet, on-board Wi-Fi, a gym, and nightly games such as cruise karaoke. In reality, no amenity can save you from the Drake Passage, a 500-mile stretch of some of the most treacherous water in the world. Once the dreaded *Drake-Shake* starts, passengers can expect 30-feet tall waves for a continuous 36 to 48 hours. You rise and fall the entire time, feeling your heart in your throat. Looking out of your porthole, all you can see is water in every direction. The Drake Passage is so deep that its water looks inky black. Palpable fear runs through your body.

Anytime I felt fear I also felt grief and guilt. The only other person I know who has been on a ship was my maternal grandmother, who migrated as a teenager during a period of colonial unrest. My great-grandfather was a post office clerk for the British Crown and was transferred from Ludhiana, India to Entebbe, Uganda at the start of his marriage. Born in Entebbe, my grandmother and her four siblings were raised in Uganda until their late teens. In the late 1930s, with the rise of the Second World War and the waning power of Britain over South Asia, my great-grandfather sent his wife and children back to Ludhiana for their safety. With only lemons, crackers, and some water, my grandmother, her mother, and younger siblings embarked on a two-month long steam ship journey from Kenya to India. They ran out of water before the journey was over. As my body rose and fell with each wave of the Drake, I asked myself what right I had to feel fear. I had access to buffets and hot chocolate machines, pampered by a diligent crew who served me with smiles on their faces. The guilt of simply experiencing fear and dread twisted my insides, making me feel ungrateful- like I was somehow denying the luxury of my surroundings.

Service in the South

I was one of three people, and the only woman, from our expedition group who needed a visa to enter Argentina. The majority of the guests on our vessel were from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. However, the service crew staffing the kitchen and dining areas were from the Global South, particularly Indonesia, the Philippines, India, and Pakistan. They immediately recognized me as one of them; and they were so proud of me. The *Ocean Victory*'s staff were thrilled that I was onboard as a guest and not as a cabin attendant or

waitress. I was their daughter and their little sister—the one who had made it. One server had a 9 year old son back in his village in South Asia. He said, "*I'm going to tell my son about you. I'm going to tell him that we can see the world too.*" Thus, I became a role model for unseen children.

The guilt of being a marginalized learner in a position of power is confusing and upsetting. I tried to deny this reality whenever they held breakfast for me or would run to give me a glass of water at lunch. Twice, the kitchen staff surprised me by making a single serving of a South Asian dessert—*jalebis and savvayian*—just for me. It was all to celebrate me. Despite being enrobed in grief and guilt across my learning journey, I became an accidental role model for the staff on my ship—adding unexpected layers to my learning transformation. It is a role of colonial power and mobility that I am still coming to terms with.

Unlearning Grief and Guilt

While Mezirow's transformational learning theory provided an appropriate structure to my learning journey, it did not have the content I needed to further unpack my grief narratives (1996). I turned to literature on grief and bereavement to find my thoughts a home.

Much of the scholarship on grief and bereavement cites seminal scholars such as Freud, Lindemann, or Worden. From Freud's perspective, mourning and melancholia result in his theory of loss, suggesting that individuals in grief and mourning must relinquish their emotional ties with a loved one and reattach those emotions to another person (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2010). Once a bereaved individual realizes that such a transfer of emotions is possible, they can pull themselves out of a mourning state and avoid deep melancholia. Similarly, Lindemann presented crisis theory to resolve grief —echoing Freud's argument that a disengagement from the deceased individual is necessary (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2010). Lindemann's crisis theory has three steps to resolve grief. First, an individual must relinquish their attachment to a loved one. Second, this grieving individual must adapt to life without their loved one. Finally, this individual must establish new relationships with others. Finally, Worden proposed a task-oriented framework to mourning, with threads similar to Freud and Lindemann (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2010). Worden argued that mourning and grief can be resolved by completing four tasks. These four tasks include: accepting the reality of their loss; working through the pain of this loss; adjusting to the environment without the deceased; and emotionally relocating the deceased to move on with life (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2010).

While I recognize the importance of giving seminal scholars their due consideration, my experience did not resonate with Freud, Lindemann, or Worden's works. My grief and guilt were not neat—how could I 'emotionally relocate' my love for my father and grandmother to another person? How could I simply disengage from the crew of the *Ocean Victory*? How would these theories help me as an adult learner on a transformative learning journey? Why did these guidelines sound so clinical?

The most critical question arose: is this how I conceptualize grief and guilt, shaming myself for experiencing basic emotions? With a dearth of literature investigating adult learners in grief, does the field assume either that grief impacts adult learners in the same way as it impacts children and young people in learning settings or that grief does not impact adult learners at all? Neither hypotheses resonate with me. Fortunately, I found critical grief theory to help me unlearn grief and guilt.

Lessons from Mad Studies and Critical Grief Theory

Western social norms related to grief and mourning center on masculine patriarchal rules framing grief and its associated emotions as something that should be "quiet, tame, dry, and controlled" (Poole & Ward, 2013, p. 95). In this sense, "Good" grief is private and encourages individuals to return to "normal" as quickly as possible (Granek, 2009, p. 45; Willer et al., 2021, p. 28). In this subconscious vein, educators tell their students to "leave their emotions at the door" or to "act professionally"—implying that strong emotions such as grief, guilt, and sadness are wrong or bad. In contrast to this, the concept of Mad grief draws from Madness studies and the feminist perspective as "*a resistance practice that allows, speaks, names, affords, welcomes, and stories the subjugated sense of loss that comes to us all*" (Poole & Ward, 2013, p. 95). Mad grief rejects the notion of silencing grief in public or professional spaces—particularly in contexts of learning where students already may be facing isolation, anxiety, depression, guilt, and more. Mad grief argues that grief is not and should not be civil. It is meant to be felt and to bind us together in the experience (Willer et al., 2021).

Mad grief, in turn, gives rise to critical grief pedagogy (CGP), which turns away from the notion of tidy grief and presents a crucial communication pedagogy encouraging students and teachers to address grief in learning settings (Willer et al., 2021). The authors outline four tenets of CGP, including de-medicalizing inappropriate grief; unpacking power that delimits grief; witnessing grief narratives; and developing compassionate communication skills (Willer et al., 2021). Using CGP for my personal growth, I reframe the grief narratives presented in this study as untidy, transformative moments of self-reflection meant to help readers and myself articulate these emotions during a learning journey. They are not inappropriate or uncivil. They are crucial facets within me.

Conclusion: Delimiting Grief and Guilt

Antarctica is a silent and persistent specter in my journey of critical reflection. The continent's barren landscape allowed me to transform as an adult learner in unexpected ways. Grief and guilt are not tidy and linear, but discursive. Looking back with a more empathetic and informed lens, I wish I had not stifled my tears or emotions; that I simply allowed myself to exist within my learning transformation. I should not have bound my feelings. My grief and guilt did not make me ungrateful or pathetic, nor did they signal a need for medication or supervision. These emotions hinted that I was trying to escape a glacier graveyard of my own making to better understand myself, my past, and my future. It was a transformation that needed to be unpacked, witnessed, and communicated to others.

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