Mourning Wave:

Grieving the Loss of the Natural Environment

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Abstract

Informed and inspired by the sudden passing of my uncle, *Mourning Wave* is a physical manifestation of my own experience with grief as it relates to the natural environment. My own personal grief opened the door to experiencing collective grief. Constructed as a wave-shaped altar composed of discarded plastic, *Mourning Wave* aims to highlight the role of oceanic plastic debris in relation to the damage being done to the environment by humans. The wave is painted black, a traditional color of mourning. Colorful discarded plastic lies within the crest of the wave. This debris was collected several times as a performative act. The photos that accompany the work document the wave's journey and growth. Despite the large amount of literature dedicated to grief, loss, rituals, altars, and the natural environment as individual topics, an interdisciplinary synthesis of these subjects is both absent and urgently needed. Hence, the intent of this project and its accompanying research is to illuminate the ways in which rituals and altars can be used to enhance and transform our experiences with grief and loss, bringing new meaning to our lives. Upon viewing the altar, it is my hope that observers will discover and discuss their fears, thoughts, and concerns about the ecological crisis, while also inspiring them to work towards protecting the environment.

Keywords: Grief, loss, altars, rituals, plastic, and the environment.

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In memory of Patrick K. Downey

1961 - 2014

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Background

During my first year as a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies program at the University of Washington Tacoma, I was focused upon how music therapy could be used to build community in the hospice care setting. As a musician, I have personally witnessed the deep connections that music allows us to develop with one another. Accordingly, I was interested in the potential music therapy held to unite diverse groups within hospice care. However, when my uncle committed suicide in January of 2014, I was struck with immense grief. This personal grief opened the door to experiencing collective grief. I found myself drawn to certain belongings of his and spaces, particularly within nature, where I was able to feel a connection with his spirit. Fascinated by the omnipresence of plastic debris within these areas, I decided to change my topic of study. Through my analysis I quickly discovered plastic, specifically plastic that ends up in the ocean, poses an enormous threat to the health of our ecosystem. Thus, guided by personal loss my project and its accompanying research is a physical manifestation of my own experience with grief as it relates to the natural environment.

Literature Review

Introduction

The main purpose of this literature review is to develop an understanding of how altars and rituals may be used to facilitate grief over loss of the natural environment. Due to its foremost role in the destruction of the natural environment, plastic will also be critically examined. While a great deal of scholarship has been dedicated to environmental loss and grief, inclusion of altars and rituals as tools for survival is lacking. This gap within the literature is problematic because it presents readers with an incomplete picture of grief and hinders mourning. As a result, this literature review suggests that an interdisciplinary approach incorporating the use of rituals and altars is severely needed in order to grieve the loss of the natural environment.

Understanding grief and loss. Due to the subjective nature of grief and loss, additional meaning may be drawn from our experiences upon recognition of multi-cultural variations. As some researchers have noted, it is important to view both grief and loss in context (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993). For example, scholars David Irish, Kathleen Lundquist, and Vivian Nelsen (1993) called for respect of multi-cultural variation by stating, “We should not assume that somebody who speaks our own language and comes from the same part of the world has the same beliefs and understandings and will express feelings in a familiar way. It pays to treat everyone as though he or she were from a different culture” (p. 18). In other words, one must discard any preconceived notions about what grief and loss *should* look like, and instead, respect the way that one chooses to express, or not to express, their feelings of grief and loss. Continuing on, they asserted that we are able to learn the most from loss without such assumptions (1993). As no two experiences of grief and loss are exactly the same, difference is what makes these

experiences meaningful. Essentially, respect for multi-cultural variation allows for greater understanding not only of our own experiences with grief and loss, but also those of others.

In addition to respect for multi-cultural variation, grief in response to loss may also be understood as something that occurs in stages. Observed through her work with terminally ill patients, according to Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, there are five stages of grief: anger, denial, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (2005). Today, these stages of grief are officially recognized as the Kübler-Ross Model. While acknowledgement of these stages is helpful, it is important to note that there may be additional stages, all of which can occur in any order, and may or may not happen for everyone. As cited by scholars David Irish, Kathleen Lundquist, and Vivian Nelsen (1993), after experiencing personal loss in a multi-cultural setting, an African American woman noticed that "different cultural traditions value the stages of grief very differently" (p. 27). Therefore, while the Kübler-Ross Model is helpful for understanding grief at a basic level, multi-cultural variation also needs to be taken into consideration and respected in order for a more complete picture of grief to emerge. Thus, respect for multi-cultural variations and an understanding of grief as something that occurs in stages are paramount to coping with grief and loss.

Unpredictability. As previously demonstrated, although the Kübler-Ross Model is helpful for developing a basic understanding of grief, ultimately, grief is unpredictable. For that reason, several scholars have noted that grief may be expressed in a multitude of ways, all of which should be respected (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993; McCaffree, 2011). As cited by scholars David Irish, Kathleen Lundquist, and Vivian Nelson (1993), Gail Noller, a social worker certified in grief counseling, concluded, "It is always inappropriate to prescribe what grief ought to be for an individual. Each person's journey through grief is unique" (p. 176). In

other words, what is best for one person may not be true of another. Echoing Noller, while grieving the sudden passing of her late husband, Ruthann McCaffree (2011), respected author and experienced life coach, explained that "grief has a life of its own. Even though we go through numerous cycles of change, big loss is unique" (p. 53). Again, here it is shown that grief and the way one processes it is unforeseeable. McCaffree continued by stating that in the wake of unpredictability, one of the best ways to deal with grief is to trust yourself (2011). In other words, listen to what your own heart has to say. Consequently, as grief is filled with uncertainty, individual experiences are to be both respected and honored.

Rituals and altars. Rituals have existed and coincided with human development for several millennia. A vast amount of literature has been dedicated to documenting the various ways rituals have been used in the past as well as how they are currently being implemented (Gablik, 1991; Wall & Ferguson, 1998). In particular, scholars Kathleen Wall and Gary Ferguson (1998) have noted that "Ritual works in three basic ways. It empowers us through action; it clarifies problems, transitions, and new directions; and it helps new perspectives and behaviors take root in our daily lives" (p. xv). This assertion implies that modern rituals are deemed most effective when they are tailored to the individual and their needs. On top of this, Wall and Ferguson have also argued that "The best rituals are like good poetry; absolutely nothing is there by accident" (p. 92). Said differently, it is advantageous to plan ahead and develop rituals from a place of deep self-reflection. The work of scholar Suzi Gablik (1991) has supported this notion. For example, Gablik argued that "Ritual signifies that something more is going on than meets the eye - something sacred" (p. 42). In essence, rituals are actualized and motivated by what lies beneath the surface of an individual. To summarize, modern scholarship surrounding rituals has suggested that there is an alternative mode of being which is only able to

be expressed through rituals. Correspondingly, the more time one spends tailoring and planning rituals, the more revealing and rewarding they become.

Next, although they were initially used for religious purposes, today's altars can take a variety of forms. Typically, *Merriam-Webster*, as cited by scholar Maggie Shannon (2001), has defined an altar as "a usually raised structure or place on which sacrifices are offered or incense is burned in worship" (p. 6). Yet in addition to these activities, scholar Denise Linn found that modern altars can be created with a variety of intentions, ranging from hopes of fertility to remembrance of a lost loved one (1999). This clearly indicates the versatility of modern altars. Furthermore, according to Shannon (2001), what sets an altar apart from simply being a beloved object or place is the intention behind it. Hence, in spite of the notion that altars are often associated with religion, their meaning is primarily derived from the individual's intention. In turn, this personalization of both rituals and altars leads to greater understanding of loss and aids in the facilitation of grief, contributing to one's overall well-being.

Quality of life and well-being. Several scholars have noted that rituals and altars are beneficial to our well-being (Biziou; Gablik, 1991; Linn, 1999; Wall & Ferguson, 1998). In addition to a variety of physical ailments, several researchers have noted that rituals enhance quality of life by adding meaning to the human experience. To illustrate, Kathleen Wall and Gary Ferguson (1998) concluded that "Creating ritual is grass-roots therapy, a chance to open yourself to the full consequences of being human and empower yourself to make new beginnings" (p. 176). This indicates that rituals allow us to make the most of our experiences, improving overall quality of life. Adding to this, Barbara Biziou, a professionally trained psychologist with over 30 years of experience, insisted, "The more often you send positive mental messages to your brain, the more your physical body will respond and facilitate your

healing. Sometimes healing occurs instantaneously; other times it is a gradual process" (p. 1). To explain, when ritualistic, positive thought is incorporated into our lives a variety of ailments may be healed. For that reason, rituals and altars are crucial not only to our mental and spiritual well-being but also to our physical health.

To new beginnings: overcoming loss. Another way in which rituals and altars may be used within our everyday lives is to help us overcome loss. Several authors have acknowledged that while grief is often difficult to process, rituals and altars are integral to developing an understanding of loss and may guide us through the next stages of life (Biziou; McCaffree, 2011; Wall & Ferguson, 1998). For example, Kathleen Wall and Gary Ferguson (1998) have contended, "In those places where no well-developed ritual processes for post-funeral mourning exist, as in much of America, too often people never manage to fully resolve emotional issues surrounding their loss" (p. 186). In other words, without rituals and altars, people may feel as though they do not have safe spaces or ways of expressing their grief and as a result the mourning process is stalled. Indeed, Barbara Biziou found that "Healing rituals are the universal lifelines that offer us deliverance from fears, real and imagined; they resurrect us from the heart of despair and return us to wholeness" (p. 1). As this evidence suggests, without rituals and altars, people will continue to feel lost and incomplete. In effect, rituals and altars aid us in overcoming loss by allowing for the healthy facilitation of grief and mourning.

Native American rituals and altars. As previously indicated, while numerous cultures use rituals and altars for personal reasons and overall well-being, it is important to note that Native American rituals and altars are unique in their inclusion, respect, and honor of nature. For instance, according to one Native American group, "Native Americans believe nature is divine; they are only a part of it, and not here to dominate it. Their ceremonies are for the regeneration

of Mother Earth, a direct contrast to Western beliefs and policies" (Native Americans Online). That is to say that while Western culture often seeks to commodify nature and the natural environment, Native Americans believe that Earth and its resources are sacred. They would much rather admire the infinite beauty of nature itself than to exploit it for a short-term, financial gain. That being so, the intentions behind rituals and altars within Native American culture are distinctly different from those of Western culture.

Art as therapy for grieving and loss. As with grief and loss, art can also provide unique insights. Many scholars have argued that the subjective nature of art allows for therapeutic, personal transformation (McCaffree, 2011; Whittaker, 2012; Wilson, 1984). For example, author Ruthann McCaffree (2011) explained, "This challenge of rebuilding our lives after sudden loss also can be inspired by personal creativity" (p. 66). In essence, no matter the form, art acts as a powerful force for individual transformation. Building upon this, as cited by Richard Whittaker (2012) in an interview, Gail Needleman, a recipient of the Parsons Fellowship from the Library of Congress for research in American folk music, stated, "Art is to transform one's experience, not just to describe it." This assertion demonstrates that art allows us to reconfigure our experiences, adding to their meaning. Echoing both McCaffree and Whittaker, scholar Edward Wilson (1984) has argued, "Just as mathematical equations allow us to move swiftly across large amounts of knowledge and spring into the unknown, the symbols of art gather human experience into novel forms in order to evoke a more intense perception in others" (p. 74). Again, this demonstrates the ability of art to reveal new insights and act as a spark for personal transformation. In a word, numerous studies have found that art and personal creativity allow for greater understanding of both grief and loss (McCaffree, 2011; Whittaker, 2012; Wilson, 1984).

Music therapy. Research has shown that music therapy is an efficacious tool specifically for grief management (Bright, 1999). Bright (1999) presented vignettes of patients dealing with grief whom she had worked with over the past 38 years as a multidisciplinary therapeutic team member. Through an analysis of her own practice and supplemental case studies Bright concluded that music therapy was an efficacious means for hospice patients to express their emotions and deal with grief. Interestingly, Bright warned that although the vignettes presented highlighted music therapy's success in grief management, suicide and chronic illness may persist. Nevertheless, while it may not be the answer for every patient, music therapy has been shown to resolve grief for some.

Folk art. Another art form which may assist those who are grieving is folk art. Some scholars have asserted that the temporary nature of folk art allows us to realize the impermanence of life itself (Mack & Williams, 2011). For instance, speaking of folk art created specifically for Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico, scholars Kitty Mack and Stevie Williams (2011) suggested that "Meant to last only a short time, the materials used symbolize the fleeting nature of life itself. Thus the care and effort with which each item was created underscored the importance of life, however impermanent it might be" (p. 84). This exemplifies how folk art allows us to develop an understanding of grief by recognizing the transient nature of life itself. Another example of where the therapeutic value of folk art may be observed is through the creation of sand reliefs. Akin to temporary *ofrendas* or personal altars created by those celebrating Day of the Dead, immediately following their completion, sand reliefs are to be "swept away, yet another symbol of life's fragility and impermanence" (p. 100). Here, again, the impermanence of life itself is observed through the materials used to create folk art. Accordingly,

through recognition of its fragility, folk art has the potential to act as a therapeutic modality for those who have experienced loss and are grieving.

Eco-art. Often utilizing natural materials and outdoor spaces as backdrops for the works themselves, eco-art, or environmentally-based art, seeks to address the relationship between humans and the environment. Due to the accelerated depletion of natural resources, a number of scholars have begun to insist upon a reconfiguration of the way we view the environment and create works of art (Gablik, 1991; Naidus, 2009). Through an analysis of several well-known eco-artists and their work, art critic and art historian Suzi Gablik (1991) found that there is a need for art which emphasizes "our essential interconnectedness rather than our separateness, forms evoking the feeling of belonging to a larger whole rather than expressing the isolated, alienated itself" (p. 5-6). In other words, eco-art is the means by which such interconnectedness may be realized and expressed; therefore, this form of art is imperative to our well-being and further, to human survival. On top of this, Gablik noted that "Whereas the aesthetic perspective oriented us to the making of objects, the ecological perspective connects art to its integrative role in the larger whole and the web of relationships in which art exists" (p. 7-8). This demonstrates that eco-art is a precious form of expression whose intrinsic value extends far beyond the market. Hence, through creating work which emphasizes and examines the importance of our relationship with Earth, eco-art can serve as the means by which restoration and recovery of the ecosystem can begin.

Next, in order for eco-art to be most effective, Gablik (1991) found that "reenchantment" or, "change in the general social mood toward a new pragmatic idealism and a more integrated value system that brings head and heart together in an ethic of care, as part of the healing of the world" (p. 11), is necessary. Gablik has argued that this sense of reenchantment is vital to

developing an understanding of the damage that humans have done to the environment. For instance, she noted, “We cannot heal the mess we have made of the world without undergoing some kind of spiritual healing” (p. 12). Stated differently, mental transformation, or reenchantment, may allow for physical restoration of the landscape. In accordance with this, her research has also suggested that “As we begin to see the world through the lens of ecology, we also begin to reshape our view of ourselves” (p. 22). In other words, eco-art is the way in which humans can become reenchanted with the ecosystem and develop an increased sense of responsibility for its overall well-being and protection. In sum, Gablik’s investigation has shown that reenchantment with nature adds to the power of eco-art as a form of expression by allowing us to become acutely aware of the substantial damages that humans have done to the ecosystem.

Wasteful cultural mindset. Although pollution is often attributed to individuals’ carelessness, a significant number of scholars have insisted that the real problem lies within our wasteful cultural mindset (Humes, 2013; Klein, 2014; Kostigen, 2010). To begin, through an examination of how personal actions and behaviors eventually make a mark upon the ecosystem, scholar Thomas Kostigen (2010) found that “It would now take the resources of five planet Earths to support the current world’s population at US standards of living” (p. 10). This is a clear indication of how the mass production of one-time use goods has created an unsustainable rate of consumption, furthering the depletion of natural resources and the destruction of the natural environment. Kostigen then asserted that the rate and severity of the ecological crisis can be influenced by “the products that we buy and the choices we make” (p. 64). In other words, the only way consumers may take back power from manufacturers and break free of the wasteful cultural mindset is by refusing to purchase goods which contribute to the destruction of the natural environment. Even though pollution specifically within the United States occurs as a

result of individuals' actions and behaviors, ultimately, these actions and behaviors are driven by consumer capitalism and a wasteful cultural mindset.

Building upon this, the work of Edward Humes (2013) has suggested that although consumers play a role in the destruction of the natural environment, the mass production of disposable, one-time-use goods is considerably more problematic. Through his research of our "dirty love affair with trash," Humes argued that instead of the consumers themselves, manufacturers and the manufacturing processes which create harmful, one-time-use products are primarily to blame for our ever-growing landfills (2013). For instance, he found that "The creation of products and packaging that end up in those [garbage] trucks contributes 44 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions that drive global warming, more than any other carbon spewing category" (p. 7). This implies that while there are many forms of waste being created on a daily basis, packaging, often made of plastic, is the worst offender. In essence, through its insistence upon the use of cheap, disposable goods, the manufacturing industry has promoted a wasteful cultural mindset which has destroyed the natural environment. Consequently, numerous scholars have contended that while consumers play a role in this destruction, manufacturers are largely to blame as they continue to ignore the effects of their greed and attempt to cut costs by relying upon inexpensive, yet highly toxic materials such as plastic (Humes, 2013; Klein, 2014; Kostigen, 2010).

Cleaning up our act. As mentioned above, while some scholars believe that responsibility lies within individuals to protect, maintain, and preserve our planet, other scholars have insisted that large corporations and companies should be held accountable for their destruction of the natural environment (Carson, 1999; Humes, 2013; Klein, 2014; Kostigen, 2010). The work of these scholars is highly critical of capitalism specifically within the context

of the United States. Their work has acknowledged that individual and collective action are both controlled and stalled by an elite minority whose wealth is used to justify unfair, environmentally damaging practices and policies. As cited by Rachel Carson (1999), former Vice President Al Gore summed up this notion nicely by stating, "Cleaning up politics is essential to cleaning up pollution" (p. xxii). In other words, without a recognition of the disparities between the public, private, and political sectors, such superfluous contention will continue to act as a blinder for what is really at stake: the ecosystem and fundamentally, human survival.

While taking the wasteful cultural mindset into account, many scholars have called for stricter enforcement of pre-existing legislation as well as the implementation of harsher penalties and fines for offenders in order to protect the natural environment (Carson, 1999; Humes, 2013; Klein, 2014; Kostigen, 2010). One of the first scholars who insisted upon the implementation of strict, governmentally-enforceable penalties and fines is Rachel Carson, a founder of the contemporary environmental movement (1999). Carson's seminal work, *Silent Spring*, brought public awareness to the harmful effects of DDT, which was eventually banned in the U.S. in 1972 largely due to her efforts. To accomplish this, Carson argued that "The first necessity [of the environmental crisis] is the elimination of tolerances on the chlorinated hydrocarbons, the organic phosphorus group, and other highly toxic chemicals…. A vigilant and aggressive Food and Drug Administration, with a greatly increased force of inspectors, is another urgent need" (p. 183). This objection to the use of toxic chemicals coupled with a call for improved inspection drew public attention to the hidden dangers of pesticides as well as the inadequacy of the Food and Drug Administration. Without Carson's groundbreaking research and advocacy against the use of DDT and other toxic chemicals, public exposure to these pollutants would have persisted. Thus, due to the initial efforts of Carson, several scholars have subsequently demanded that there

needs to be governmental regulation of toxic chemicals as well as harsher penalties and fines for offenders.

For example, although Thomas Kostigen (2010) contended that individuals are partially to blame, mainly, he suggested that the lack of stringent governmental policies combined with minimal enforcement poses the greatest threat to our ecosystem: "We can send messages by the things we buy.… But government policy will wage the real power and the battle to lower pollution levels" (p.69). Here, while Kostigen is arguing that consumers do have some power in their ability to make better choices when purchasing goods, above all, governmental policy will dictate the rate of environmental depletion. Kostigen also concluded that in addition to recycling, consumers must also complain about wasteful packaging practices used by manufacturers (2010). Elimination of these harmful practices, he asserted, is one of the best ways to combat environmental degradation. In effect, without strict governmental policies and enforcement of pre-existing laws and regulations, the wasteful cultural mindset will continue to thrive until we are left with a barren remnant of what the earth once was.

Similarly, the work of Naomi Klein has provided a critique of the capitalist system (2014). Through her research, she declared that the lack of attention to outstanding environmental loss is not due to consumers' ignorance, but rather due to the fact that "the actions that would give us the best chance of averting catastrophe – and would benefit the vast majority – are extremely threatening to an elite minority that has a stranglehold over our economy, our political process, and most of our major media outlets" (p. 18). In other words, our ability to protect the natural environment is stalled by capitalists' desire for power and wealth. Klein continued, arguing that swift policy changes will need to occur in order to protect the natural environment. Of these changes, Klein explained, "Most of all, these policies need to be fair, so

that the people already struggling to cover the basics are not being asked to make additional sacrifice to offset the excess consumption of the rich" (p. 91). Here, by suggesting that the excessive greed of the elite minority is detrimental not only to those who are already struggling but also to the environment, Klein is condemning the capitalist system. Finally, she argued that "Politicians must be prohibited from receiving donations from the industries they regulate, or from accepting jobs in lieu of bribes; political donations need to be both fully disclosed and tightly capped" (p. 151). By providing full disclosure of where politicians and their campaigns derive their funds from, the public can begin to elect officials based upon their dedication to environmental protection or lack thereof. Hence, as the research has shown, although humans have been entrusted with the gift of Earth, we have been quite uncaring about its resources and health in comparison to our own. Thus, according Klein, changes must be made to the current capitalist system in order to protect the natural environment.

In Summary

Despite the large amount of literature dedicated to grief, loss, rituals, altars, and the natural environment as individual topics, an interdisciplinary synthesis of these subjects is both absent and urgently needed. As indicated by several scholars, rituals and altars have been shown to heighten and transform our experiences of loss and grief. The subjective nature of both rituals and altars may be observed through several different art forms. These include but are not limited to: music therapy, folk art, and eco-art. This suggests that the therapeutic value of rituals, altars, and art may assist those who are mourning the loss of the natural environment. To conclude, an interdisciplinary framework encompassing altars and rituals as they relate to grief and loss over the natural environment is crucial.

Problem Statement

Plastic: For Better or for Worse?

While trying to find an alternative to shellac, plastic was accidentally created by chemist Leo Baekeland in 1907 (Wicks, 2007). According to scholar Susan Freinkel (2011), plastic became prolific within the United States during World War II when "the director of the board responsible for provisioning the American military advocated the substitution, whenever possible, of plastics for aluminum, brass, and other strategic metals" (p. 6). Shortly thereafter, plastic began to take the place of nearly every natural material and "By 1979, the production of plastics exceeded that of steel" (p. 6). At the time, plastic was instantly and ironically hailed as a means to "free humanity from the tyranny of nature" (Humes, 2013, p. 124). However, today, many researchers have argued that plastic poses an extreme threat to the ecosystem (Freinkel, 2011; Humes, 2013; Kolbert, 2014; Kostigen, 2010).

Currently, the rate of plastic production exceeds that of its return which has led several scholars to insist that the usage of plastics must be reduced in order to protect the environment (Freinkel, 2011; Humes, 2013; Kostigen, 2010). For example, the research of Thomas Kostigen (2010) has indicated that "Around 60 billion tons of plastic are produced each year, about 10% of which ends up in the sea. About 20% of this is from ships and platforms, the rest from land" (p. 144). This indicates that as plastic proliferates, so too does the litter which ends up our oceans. Making matters worse, Kostigen continued, "Just 7% of all plastics are recycled" (p. 136). This low recycling rate is extremely problematic because it shows that the majority of plastics are not being properly disposed of and therefore, are contributing to the demise of the natural environment. As a means to combat this, several scholars have asserted that the key to

reducing such plastic waste is to waste less and avoid buying one-time-use goods (Freinkel, 2011; Humes, 2013; Kostigen, 2010). For instance, Kostigen (2010) found that "If those of us who drink bottled water could cut our use and half by refilling each bottle once before we tossed it, we would save more than 1 billion pounds of plastic from being sent to landfills each year" (p. 127). That is to say, the prevalence of one-time-use goods which often become litter is only propelled further by consumer demand and lack of proper disposal. To summarize, the amount of plastic that we waste can be reduced greatly if consumers begin to utilize it less and are mindful of how harmful it is in regard to the health of our ecosystem.

The synthetic sea. Aside from destroying the land, many researchers insist that plastic also has become ubiquitous within our oceans, putting the entire marine ecosystem at risk (California Coastal Commission; Humes, 2013; Kostigen, 2010; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2010; Weisman, 2008). Contrary to popular belief, plastic is *not* biodegradable. Instead, it breaks down into smaller, and smaller fragments which end up being ingested by marine and coastal animals alike (Kostigen, 2010). According to the California Coastal Commission, these fragments along with other forms of oceanic plastic debris are often mistaken for food and ingested by marine animals. After consuming these bits and pieces of plastic, many animals choke to death or starve as the synthetic materials become lodged in their stomachs and provide a false sense of being full. In addition to these "micro-plastics," there is also increasing concern over what University of Plymouth marine biologist Richard Thompson, as cited by Alan Weisman (2008), has identified as "nurdles," which consist of the small resin pellets used in the manufacturing of plastic materials. Thompson has also indicated that "ghost nets," which lurk within every ocean in the world, floating until they become ensnared upon precious coastal reefs or acting as death traps for marine life, pose a great risk to the health of our ecosystem. What is

more, by weight, plastic is now found at a rate six times higher in the central Pacific than that of zooplankton (Kostigen, 2010). In essence, the amount of plastic debris within our oceans has effectively turned them into "synthetic seas," illuminating the disastrous impacts of humans' affinity for plastic.

Furthermore, due to the way in which oceanic plastic debris often acts a sponge for hydrophobic man-made pollutants known as persistent organic pollutants or "POPs" (Humes, 2013), numerous studies have found that humans, by way of bioaccumulation have also begun to ingest plastic (Freinkel, 2011; Humes, 2013; Kostigen, 2010; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2010). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency defines bioaccumulation, also sometimes called "biomagnification," as "the process by which chemicals are taken up by an organism either directly from exposure to a contaminated medium or by consumption of food containing the chemical." In effect, the very material that was meant to protect us from disease, germs, and extend the human lifespan has become one of the most pervasive, silent killers of our generation.

Bioaccumulation is concerning for several reasons. First, as cited by Kostigen (2010), Captain Charles Moore, a world-renowned investigator of what is now known as The Eastern Garbage Patch, has found that "when fish eat plastic and we eat fish, we end up ingesting plastic too; the trash we toss ends up in the fish we eat…. Plastics can hold toxins that are extremely hazardous to our health. And most of those toxins can't be cooked out" (p. 148). Alas, in our haste to create an everlasting material we also unknowingly developed deadly toxins which will continue to damage the earth forever. On top of this, once these toxins have been ingested, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, again, as cited by Kostigen (2010), has warned that "certain chemicals found in plastic when ingested can cause nausea, abdominal pain, loss of

appetite, joint pain, fatigue, and weakness, as well as skin disorders, nervous and immune system effects, as well as effects on the liver, kidneys, and thyroid gland" (p. 148). As a consequence of plastic's inability to biodegrade, while the bulk of plastic pollution occurs within our oceans, humans are eventually impacted as well. Thus, as several scholars have noted, while the endurance of plastic and its tendency to collect toxins presents a unique challenge for humans and marine life, a far greater concern is the risk that it presents to the earth as a whole.

In sum, while several scholars acknowledge the harmful effects of plastic in regard to the physical landscape and human health (California Coastal Commission; Freinkel, 2011; Humes, 2013; Kostigen, 2010; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2010), the amount of research dedicated to discovering the impacts of plastic within our oceans and the overall health of the ecosystem is lacking. Up to the present, scholars have focused primarily on well-known areas and locations such as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and wildlife refuges like Midway Atoll. Despite the abundance of data which these sites have provided, the impacts of plastic upon the world's oceans still remains relatively unknown. As a result, future studies should seek to examine regions where plastic pollution has yet to be documented: remote waterways, beyond the layer of zooplankton and microplastics, unmapped territories. These new data sets will provide points for comparison with the established research that could lead to new discoveries which aid in the subsequent protection and restoration of the natural environment.

Building Process

Overview

Mourning Wave was informed by and constructed using a wide-variety of artistic techniques. The altar combines the use of materials and adhesives such as silicone, hot glue, spray-paint, glass, metal, and plastic. Several elements of visual grammar, or the way in which a work is put into context and translates meaning, including line, shape, color, texture, and composition were also incorporated (Naidus, 2009).

The transition from looking at how music therapy may be used to build community within the hospice care setting, to examining how rituals and altars can be used for grieving damage being done to the environment by humans did not occur overnight. Rather, the decision to change my topic of study was gradual, and solidified by the sudden passing of my uncle. Before I ever became interested in music and music therapy, I considered myself an artist. Painting has always been my favorite medium. When I was younger I worked with watercolors and then I began to experiment with acrylics. In junior high, I started to gravitate towards film and digital photography. I also taught myself how to use Photoshop and proceeded to digitally manipulate my work. While earning my Bachelor of Arts degree in Arts, Media, and Culture from the University of Washington Tacoma, I took several arts courses which provided me with the opportunity to explore different techniques, materials, and tools. For instance, I began to experiment with charcoal and pastels, contour and line drawings, and developed an appreciation for both media literacy and visual grammar. I also continued to explore photography, applying my knowledge of Photoshop to create of graphic narratives and digital collages.

Through these arts courses at the University of Washington Tacoma, I began to build my own body of work. For example, in Beverly Naidus' Body Image and Art class, I created a series

of digital collages expressing the ways in which humans have begun to substitute machinery and indoor gyms for naturally occurring play spaces within the environment. To illustrate, I superimposed images of gym equipment: treadmills, stair climbers, and rowing machines, on top of natural settings like trails, hills, and a lake. I then created a grid and moved each piece in Photoshop to reveal elements of both images; some of the collages' squares showed the natural setting, whereas others showed the gym machinery. I also used Photoshop to add numerical measurements and the letters of clothing sizes to blank squares within the collages in order to show how obsessed society has become with socially-constructed ideals of beauty.

In addition to this work, while in Naidus' course Art in a Time of War, I used Photoshop to create both a graphic narrative and a "war story." The graphic narrative was provoked by the inhumane torture of those who were detained at Guantanamo Bay and areas known as the "black sites," following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. After becoming aware of these human rights atrocities, I felt compelled to show how some U.S. soldiers felt about these abuses. To accomplish this, I superimposed the silhouette of a U.S. soldier into a cell where an inmate had been illegally held at Guantanamo Bay. I placed the soldier on top of a wooden box and connected electrical wires to his hands. I did this because inmates were told to stand on top such boxes and the guards misled them to believe that if they got off of the box or misbehaved they would be electrocuted, even though the wires were not actually live. As inmates at Guantanamo and the black sites were often blindfolded, adding to the fear that they experienced, I placed a hood onto the soldier's face. Text framing the soldier read, "I was just following orders. I had no other choice. Were they innocent? Am I innocent?" These phrases and questions were meant to express the psychological distress that many soldiers were confronted by given their participation

in the abuses, which at the time were presented to them as official orders and then were subsequently redefined as “acts of terror” themselves by the media.

Another piece I created while in Naidus’ Art in a Time of War course which has contributed to my overall body of work was the graphic narrative. As with the war story, this piece was also focused upon 9/11. Through this work, I sought to examine the way that patriotism within the United States seemed to be amplified by the terrorist attacks. Following 9/11, I noticed that several houses within my neighborhood which had never outwardly displayed their loyalty to the country suddenly seemed to be bursting with patriotism, adorning their homes with U.S. flags. I thought that this observable form of solidarity, unity, and pride in our country was beautiful. I wanted to know why some homeowners had decided to display a flag, as well as why other homeowners had chosen not to display a flag. To create my graphic narrative, I mailed letters to local residents asking them if they would share their stories and to send me a photo of their home or flag. If they agreed to share, I promised to keep their identity and address completely anonymous. After receiving several stories and photographs, I ended up using 8 of them to compose the final piece. In addition to the stories and photographs of homes, by layering and digitally manipulating the U.S flag in Photoshop, I made four collages. I then tinted these collages in Photoshop with a blue hue, and placed them into the upper left-hand corner of my narrative to evoke the blue corner of the U.S. flag. Next, I tinted the photos of the homes and flags red to evoke the red stripes of the U.S. flag. I then placed the stories beneath the photos of the homes and flags to evoke the white stripes of the U.S. flag. Together, the collages, stories, and photos of homes formed a new, modified flag, representative of my own community. After generating this initial image I played with it in Photoshop, producing a wind-swept texture that became progressively more intense as one advanced through the images.

Each of the aforementioned works have served as stepping stones for my current research and project. Through the collages, my war story, and graphic narrative I developed a strong grasp of media literacy and visual grammar. I also became highly proficient in creating collages, photography, and Photoshop. Feeling eager to explore new avenues, I decided to teach myself how to play the acoustic guitar. Learning to play the guitar and eventually writing, recording, and releasing my own CD, spurred my initial interest in the potential of music therapy to build community. As a musician, I saw the immediate effects of music upon my audience and how it seemed to bring everyone together. My interest in hospice care, however, was not forged until I entered the graduate program at the University of Washington Tacoma.

Upon entry into the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies program at the University of Washington Tacoma, as mentioned in my "Background" section, I was interested in researching how music therapy could be used to build community within the hospice care setting. This was influenced by my firsthand experience as a musician. The hospice care element was not introduced until I discovered that I would need a project site. After realizing that my Uncle Steve was the Volunteer Services Coordinator at Providence Hospice in Everett, WA, I felt that I could easily connect my interest in music and music therapy to hospice care and community. Although my interest in these areas was earnest, as I progressed through the program I became less and less interested in these topics of study. When my Uncle Pat unexpectedly committed suicide in January of 2014, halfway through my first year in the program, I no longer felt an attachment to my project. Certainly, while the individual elements of my initial study: music therapy, hospice care, and community all still held great personal meaning to me, as a whole, their synthesis paled in comparison to the enormous sense of grief and loss I felt.

As I was not really attached to hospice care to begin with and especially after my Uncle Pat's passing, I wanted to find a project that was more personally fulfilling. This led me to seek out courses within different disciplines that were more relevant to my current situation. While searching through the course catalogue, I stumbled upon Theodore Johnstone's Cultural Grieving class. Immediately intrigued by the title of the course and after reading its description, I knew that I had to contact Johnstone. I emailed him and we instantly clicked. Right away we worked together to develop an appropriate, graduate-level course load. Part of our agreement was that by the end of the quarter, I would compose, write, and then perform a song expressing my grief over a loss. As I proceeded to mourn the passing of my uncle, my song was an expression of the grief that I felt following his death. This exercise along with the class as a whole opened me up to the concepts of grief and loss. I became highly interested in the cultural diversity of mourning and as I continued to study, found great meaning in both altars and rituals.

During the spring, I continued to work with Theodore Johnstone and we tailored an independent study to fit my interests, focusing upon grief, loss, rituals, and altars. By this point in the program, it was clear to me that music therapy and hospice care were not going to be involved with my final project. In spite of my changing interests, I proceeded and enrolled in my final core course, Culture and Public Problems taught by Dr. Ellen Moore. Each quarter the topic of study, or the "problem," changed. For the purposes of our class, Dr. Moore had chosen to examine environmental degradation. From the moment I received the syllabus and began to read my books, I was completely captivated.

I have always cared for the planet and felt a personal responsibility for its well-being. As a child, my mother and father taught me to treat all life forms, human and non-human alike, with respect. When we went to the beach, my mother warned me not to remove crabs from their

"homes" and urged me to leave everything be. Similarly, my father would always scold me for picking flowers. He also instilled in me a love of animals, especially sea life, through the saltwater reef business that we ran out of our garage. In an attempt to mimic my father I often "helped" customers by bagging up corals and snails, and quickly gained an appreciation for the beauty found within saltwater reefs. When my friends from elementary school came over, I proudly showed them our "fish room." It was not until I got older that I realized how genuinely lucky I was to have had this hands-on experience with marine life.

When I was in high-school, inspired by and wanting to emulate the members of my favorite band, A.F.I., I became a vegetarian. Although I was raised in a household where care for all beings was emphasized, we were truly a "meat and potatoes" family. Prior to becoming vegetarian, steak was my favorite meal, closely followed by German sausage and cottage cheese. Hence, when I decided to become vegetarian my family did not really know how to react. As a nurse, my mother understood the nutritional benefits and was proud. Meanwhile, my father did not share the same sense of enthusiasm, and could not understand why anyone would ever want to stop eating meat. Nonetheless, as they are with everything in my life, they were both supportive of my decision in their own respective ways. Two years later, after becoming completely repulsed by the abuse and inhumanity involved in the raising and killing of animals for food, I became a vegan. Not only had I quit eating animals and all animal by-products, I also quit wearing leather and fabrics made of animal fibers like silk and wool. Through this dietary evolution, I became increasingly educated and passionate about animal rights as well as the natural environment.

Therefore, when I registered for Dr. Moore's class in the spring of 2014 and the content of the course was revealed, I was thrilled. However, as my overall enthusiasm for the topic

continued to climb throughout the quarter, I also rapidly developed a sense of immense grief over the damage humans have done to the environment. I had heard the warnings before, but never in this context and never with such urgency. What once seemed like such far off problems: climate change, sea-level rise, species extinction, etc., were suddenly presented as *the* problems of *our* generation; they were dire. After realizing the severity of these changes to the ecosystem and the terrifying consequences, I began to research the natural environment. I soon found plastic, especially plastic that ends up in the ocean, is believed to be the largest threat to our ecosystem. In addition to this, I became both fascinated and horrified by trash, landfills, and oceanic gyres, namely, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. My research in these areas, combined with the sense of both personal and collective loss, motivated me to completely change the topic of my studies.

After spring quarter had ended, I decided to spend the summer examining grief, loss, altars, rituals, plastic, and the environment. Beyond the depressing content of my research, I found the ritual of collection and eventual altar building to be highly therapeutic. As I continued to look at collective loss, my grief over personal loss was also addressed. Even though these forms of loss were completely different, there were correlations which made each of them easier to understand and contend with. Through the personal loss of my Uncle Pat and as I became interested in altars and rituals, I knew that I wanted to create some sort of art piece addressing my grief. Additionally, facilitated by my upbringing and later solidified by the insight I gained within Dr. Moore's class, my desire to conserve and protect the ecosystem became an integral facet of my intended research.

During the fall of 2014, in an effort to process the loss of my uncle, I turned to nature. Having several happy memories of time spent in nature and natural spaces with him, I felt the

strongest connection with his spirit when I was outdoors. Consequently, I began to spend more time outside. Due to the shift in the focus of my research, while running and walking through the neighborhood I could not help but notice the prevalence of plastic debris. Feeling compelled to rid these spaces of the debris, I decided to collect the plastic and turn it into an art piece. On top of this, fueled by my research of folk art, specifically the *ofrendas* and sand reliefs, I decided that an altar would be the best way to express my grief over the loss of the natural environment. Notwithstanding the fact that I had never constructed something like this, the urgency of the topic encouraged me to push myself well-beyond the boundaries of my prior work.

As a novice, the decision to build an altar presented several challenges and in turn, I experienced many failures during the process. For example, one of the largest hurdles I faced was the design of the piece itself. The design of the altar did not emerge until I had already begun to collect the debris. Galvanized by my research about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, ocean gyres, and the sweeping ebb and flow of emotions I felt after my uncle's death, I decided that the altar needed to take the form of a wave. What is more, to evoke the unpredictability of my grief following personal loss, I designed the wave to be cresting, ready to crash at any moment. Next, constructing the altar itself also brought forth a wide variety of challenges. Being new to sculpture, I had very little knowledge of what adhesives would work best and did not understand the importance of manipulating my materials. At first, I was completely baffled by how I would emulate a wave with plastic debris and trash bags; unsurprisingly, several elements of the construction were unsuccessful. For instance, the silicone took much longer to set than I had anticipated. While working on the piece outdoors, the plastic I had painstakingly attempted to secure to the crest of the wave was strewn across my backyard whenever the wind kicked up. Equally, while trying to install a mosaic of CD's into the inside crest of the wave several of the

CD's became detached from the base layer and eventually, the entire mosaic collapsed. Nonetheless, despite these challenges and setbacks, the overall importance of the work in regard to the ecological crisis emboldened me to persist.

To summarize, as a complete novice to sculpture and the building of altars, it is my hope that viewers will recognize the substantial amount of effort which I have put forth into the piece and can appreciate what I have been able to accomplish in a relatively short amount of time. As this is the first altar that I have physically constructed, I realize that there are plenty of flaws and opportunities for improvement. In no way do I assume complete mastery of this artistic form. I do, however, feel as though I have gained mastery as an interdisciplinary scholar and that my overall body of work is significant. In other words, while this work itself may not represent entire mastery, combined with my prior experience and expanded by my extensive scholarship, my total skillset as an artist and as a researcher is both considerable and notable.

Contextualization of the Work

A number of visual artists, photographers, writers, sculptors, and activists' work have contributed to this project. For example, Jean Shin's wave-shaped sculpture composed of one man's vinyl record collection and entitled, *Sound Wave*, persuaded me to spray-paint my altar black. More, the artistry of sculptor Tony Cragg roused me to be playful with my materials. The way that he uses discarded items to create new forms showed me that objects are not static and can be manipulated if one simply uses their imagination. His attention to color and shape also influenced me to be mindful of these elements of visual grammar within my own work, and contributed to the wave-like form of my altar. Likewise, Portia Munson's creative and colorful pieces, also composed of found materials, showed me that there is far more to an object than the

socially-constructed meaning which has been placed upon it. This realization allowed me to reimagine the essence and purpose of the objects within my own piece. Another large inspiration behind *Mourning Wave* is Brian Jungen. As with Cragg and Munson, through reconstituting commonly found objects and materials like Nike shoes and baseball gloves into aboriginal masks and a cigar-store Indian "greeter," Jungen's sculptures propelled me to reconsider the artistic potential of my materials. Instead of viewing them as stand-alone objects, I began to visualize the pieces of plastic I had collected as components of a larger and far more powerful whole.

The elaborate arrangements of Amalia Mesa-Bains' altars energized me to think big in terms of my own and taught me to have fun with my project. The elegance of her work led me to refine *Mourning Wave* and enlivened me to generate a beautiful composition despite the "ugliness" of my materials. Additional inspiration was found in Christy Rupp's display entitled, *Extinct Birds Previously Consumed by Humans*, which recycled chicken bones from fast food restaurants by turning them into skeletons of extinct birds. This piece showed me that impressive works of art can come from some of the most common and seemingly undesirable materials.

Next, Andy Goldsworthy's work has been highly influential. The way that he uses natural materials and then crafts his pieces within natural spaces drove me to incorporate the beauty of nature within my own work. In the same vein, the haunting photographs of David T. Hanson, particularly those in his book entitled, "Wasteland," which documents human-inflicted devastation to the ecosystem, reminded me of the significance of this project. While examination and documentation of the detrimental changes to our ecosystem have contributed to my own grief, I have found that awareness and acknowledgement of these changes is vital to developing an understanding of how we may begin to try and heal these self-inflicted wounds.

The performance of *Touch Sanitation* by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, in which she shook the hands of every sanitation worker in New York City, was highly inspirational and moved me to experiment with how I presented *Mourning Wave*. Her passion for shedding light on the indignity and anger the maintenance workers felt through her art served as a reminder that I must also put myself out there and stand confidently behind my own work. There were several times during the course of this project where I felt as though what I was doing was hopeless and that people did not care but Ukeles' own display of persistence motivated me to continue. *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande* by Dominique Mazeaud is another performance-based work which has contributed greatly to my own project. As I read about her efforts, I saw myself. To expand, we both collected discarded materials with the intent of cleansing certain spaces within the environment. We also both collected in a ritualistic manner, setting aside specific time for the act of gathering materials and focusing our energies upon healing the earth as we worked. As I read about Mazeaud, I was delighted to discover that there are others out there like me; there are other people who share my concerns and want to contribute to the preservation of the ecosystem in similar, if not identical, ways. Following this discovery I began to feel more hopeful about my own efforts.

Furthermore, the writings of Joanna Macy (1998), particularly those within her book entitled, *Coming Back to Life*, allowed me to make sense of my own grief surrounding the depletion of the natural environment and empowered me to act in realistic ways that have practical value. Macy's *Council of All Beings* ritual in which one puts their human identity aside and speaks on behalf of another life form prompted me to look beyond myself, especially as I built the altar. Besides this, her teachings allowed me to realize that my feelings of grief were relatively common and instead of letting fear take over, I could actually become empowered

through participation in the aforementioned ritual and later engaging in discussion. Likewise, Fern Schaffer's (1985) enactment of *Winter Solstice* showed me the usefulness of rituals in helping us to acknowledge changes within the natural environment. While Schaffer's work was aimed at examining the interval of time between winter and spring which is a naturally occurring, expected, and normal transition, as previously mentioned, my own study surveys the devastating, unexpected, and sudden changes taking place within our ecosystem. Even so, this juxtaposition between our intentions aided in my understanding of rituals and how they may be used to illuminate the changes, natural or as unnatural as they may be, that are occurring within the natural environment.

Finally, if it were not for the expertise of Beverly Naidus, this project most likely would have never occurred. As an undergraduate student in Beverly's classes, I was captivated by the way that she tackled tough issues like nuclear warfare and body image head-on. Her work has continuously served as a reminder that if I want to be successful in my own endeavors, I have to be real and I have to be honest. Naidus taught me how to become attuned to my own artistic visions and in the same way, provided me with the platform to freely express myself. Her work has given me the courage and strength to speak out openly and honestly about my feelings of grief and loss, and has contributed greatly to the overall content of this project.

Gathering of Materials

The plastic that I used to construct *Mourning Wave* was collected on four separate occasions from five different locations in University Place, WA. Each day varied in terms of time spent gathering material as well as how much was collected. Collection occurred on: January 28th, February 4th, February 11th, and February 18th. The locations where I gathered my

plastic include: Happy Days Daycare (vacant lot), 27th Street West (along the sidewalks), 75th Avenue Court West (vacant lot), corner of Bridgeport Way West and 35th Street West (vacant lot), and Drexler Drive (along the sidewalks). These locations were carefully selected with three factors in mind. First, I chose locations based upon the volume of observable and easily accessible plastic debris. Secondly, although many of these areas were vacant, they still had high-foot traffic or were close to thoroughfares. Lastly and related to my second factor, I chose areas where I knew that I could work without much interference. Still, I was approached several times throughout the collection process by local residents as well as curious city officials; all of the interactions I had with the public were positive and my efforts were well-received. After arriving at each location, I put on some gardening gloves, unfolded a trash bag, grabbed my industrial trash picker, and went to work.

Day One as a Self-Proclaimed Garbologist, January 28th, 2015 – Today, I went to the now defunct Happy Days Daycare. Upon arrival, I was already a bit on edge. Even though I have picked up bits and pieces of trash while walking before, I have never dedicated myself to a space with the intent of locating and collecting a large quantity of plastic. There were many questions that I had regarding the process: How should I dress? What would I say if someone stopped me? I actually questioned whether or not people would feel threatened by me as I was collecting plastic. For some reason, I felt as though it could be perceived as a suspicious act, as most people do not go around collecting plastic, especially in vacant lots. What would people think of me? Would they look down on me for picking up "dirty" trash? Would they think I was crazy? Despite my reservations, starting alongside the fence and venturing into the grassy lot, I began to grab every piece of plastic in sight. As long as it was not terribly muddy or water-logged due to the recent rains it went into my bag. However, after the first few steps yielded what felt like a

pound of plastic, I knew that I would have to be more discerning with my selections. Not knowing what the final product would look like made the process of collection quite hard.

Initially, I was drawn to straws, lids, and cups as I felt that they could be easily manipulated. I also was fond of shiny candy wrappers and bits of packaging from Swisher Sweets, a popular, cheap brand of cigars. Moreover, plastic forks, bottle caps, and various children's toys that had been cast-off from the daycare all went into my bag. Continuing along the daycare's playground fence to the back of the building, I found a few novelty items. Locating an entire, unused package of holiday-themed, plastic wrapping paper and three miniature plastic Christmas trees complete with strands of lights, I surmised that someone had used this space as a dumping ground for their Christmas decorations. I also found more children's toys, including a fire truck, a tea pot, and several play balls. By this point, my bag was nearing capacity and I decided to call it a day. Having spent the better part of an hour collecting, I lugged the debris back to my car and drove home feeling proud of the work that I had accomplished.

As I was collecting today, I felt a wide variety of emotions, many of which were completely unanticipated. When I first began to pick up the plastic, even while wearing gloves, I was afraid to touch it with my hands. However, the more pieces I collected, the less I worried about the dirt and grime. This shocked me, as I usually always insist on having clean hands; I did not expect to become so comfortable with the dirt and germs. Another emotion I felt was genuine fear. Although Happy Days Daycare is and has been vacant for a while, when I entered the grassy field I noticed that the building had been vandalized. The windows were broken and graffiti had been scrawled alongside the window-frame that read, "You will die in here." Without electricity but illuminated by the afternoon's natural light, I was able to see that all of the cabinets and drawers had been pulled open, and their contents were haphazardly strewn across

the floor. I was afraid that there may still be vagrants inside and collected around the rest of the field as quietly as possible. As I walked to the front of the daycare and my trash bag was beginning to fill, my fear was replaced by a sense of wonder. I began to contemplate how the trash had gotten there in the first place. I wanted to know who owned these items, why these objects were discarded, and whether or not people would feel guilty if confronted while littering. Finally, my wonder turned to shame. The more I collected, the more I realized that without people like me picking it up, the wind blowing it away, or machinery such as a street sweeper, this plastic was destined to remain here, emitting toxins, and eventually becoming a part of the landscape. While this realization frustrated me, it also inspired me to educate others through the completion of my work. I knew that what I had done would be imperceptible to most in the community, but I still felt as though I had made a significant difference.

Day Two as a Self-Proclaimed Garbologist, February 4th, 2015 – This afternoon I went to a vacant lot located at 75th Avenue Court West. Notwithstanding the fact that I've driven by this lot numerous times, all that I usually see are the small shrubs, decaying trees, and blackberry bushes. However, as I physically stepped onto the lot for the first time today, I finally noticed the trash. Entwined within the moss and trees were straws, lids, surgical gloves, needles, and plastic liquor bottles. Every corner of the lot seemed to act as a build-up zone, where the trash looked as if it had been piling upon itself, layer by layer.

As I ducked under the trees and stepped over blackberry vines, I came upon some sort of encampment in the far northwest corner of the lot. Evidence of human activity abounded: I found a large plastic chair, a car tire, paper towels, plastic bottles, food scraps, and wrappers. For all of the times that I had passed by this area, it had never occurred to me that there was enough tree density to allow for such privacy. I felt as though I had stepped into someone's living space

and it made me uncomfortable; I was thankful they were not “home,” and moved on from the area.

This location provided me with the bulk of my plastic bottles, many of which were once filled with liquor. Prior to this experience, I did not even know that liquor was sold in plastic bottles. Compared to soft drinks, energy drinks, various juices, and water bottles, the plastic liquor bottles were ubiquitous and I was struck by their frequency. I attributed their pervasiveness to a few different factors. First, they are easily accessible. After an initiative was passed that allowed for the privatization of liquor sales in Washington State in 2012, liquor sold within plastic bottles became available at a multitude of small, local retailers. The distance that one had to travel in order to buy alcohol was greatly reduced under this initiative, resulting in the proliferation of plastic liquor bottles. Secondly, perhaps another reason why the plastic liquor bottles were more abundant than the non-adult beverage containers is because the areas where I collected my plastic are known for hosting and drawing in people who drink: vacant lots, abandoned buildings, etc. Certainly, not everyone who comes to these areas is mischievous or has the intention to drink, but due to the lack of human activity in these areas, they are often sought out and viewed as places where illegal or negligent activity can be conducted without interference from the law. In turn, the amount of plastic liquor bottles that are neglectfully discarded is considerably higher within these locations. Third, and related to my second proposed factor, as someone begins to drink, their mind becomes less and less aware of their physical actions. For example, when and if they decide to discard the bottle, where they put it becomes of little concern. Consequently, a vast amount of litter, namely plastic liquor bottles, is left behind.

Initially, I was upset with people for being so careless. Yet, on the other hand, I understood that they were probably unaware of how harmful their actions legitimately were. I also realized that they probably have much larger, more urgent problems to combat than deciding where to discard their trash, *e.g.* homelessness. Thus, I had sympathy for them and can understand why they may not have sought out the appropriate recycling receptacle versus throwing it in a bush. However, this does not justify their actions. By mindlessly discarding plastic liquor bottles, above all, they are being destructive and damaging the ecosystem.

Of particular note is an interaction I had with a community member today. It was the first time that I was approached while collecting. As I was gathering plastic, a car slowed down beside me. When the car came to a complete stop, the woman inside rolled down her window and exclaimed, "I love what you are doing!" I thanked her and as we began to discuss my project she explained that as a former educational administrator, one of her prior duties was encouraging youth to become more involved in their communities through clean-ups and recycling efforts. We also discussed various environmental issues: the damages, the costs, and what it will take for people to realize how serious these problems are. Our conversation was cut short when another car drove up behind her. We hurriedly said our goodbyes and she thanked me again for my work. Her encouragement meant a lot to me and I walked away from the conversation with my passion for the project overflowing.

Day Three as a Self-Proclaimed Garbologist, February 11th, 2015 – Today is my 24th birthday and at this point, I can think of nothing more fitting to celebrate my existence on Earth than collecting garbage. As I arrived to 27th Street West, donning my gloves and industrial trash picker, I decided that this is what a birthday should really be about: doing things for others. While I enjoy birthdays just as much as everyone else, doing good for the community felt even

better than throwing a gratuitous party filled with disposable plastic goods. I felt extremely thankful to be able to have this experience, that my body had given me another day, and that I was using my energy in a positive and healthy way.

As I walked up and down the sidewalk, I collected bits and pieces of plastic. Within the low-laying bushes, I found candy wrappers, plastic bags, and a couple of plastic bottles. While I was collecting, one large shrub in particular caught my eye. It was sprinkled with what appeared to be white pieces of paper. Upon closer examination, I discovered that someone had burdened this poor bush with all of their gum wrappers, using it as their own personal trash receptacle. I was angry. I took a photo of the shrub, uploaded it to my Facebook profile, and made sure that the accompanying caption condemned anyone who dare repeat this person's negligence. After venting to Facebook, I continued up the block until I reached the corner of 27th Street West and Bridgeport Way West. Here, in the middle of some low-laying shrubs, I found a pile of ripped up scratch cards that someone had strewn across the beauty bark. Again, I was infuriated and posted a photo of the litter on Facebook with an equally seething caption. Although I was extremely upset by both of these findings, more than that, I was embarrassed: embarrassed of my community, of the world, and of humans. How could anyone think that littering, especially of this magnitude, is okay? What makes someone view a bush as a trash can rather than as a living, breathing being, deserving of respect and admiration for what it brings to the world? After walking back to my car, I contemplated these questions as I drove to my next location on Drexler Drive.

No more than a few minutes into collecting along Drexler Drive, a city worker drove up next to me and offered me a new garbage bag, adding that he would also be willing to pick up the one that I was currently filling. Even though I politely declined, I was still touched by his

gesture. It showed me that there are people in this world who care; you just have to find them or let them find you. While today was quite disheartening in terms of the litter that I found, I was content with the amount of work that I had completed. I also had a wonderful birthday.

Day Four as a Self-Proclaimed Garbologist, February 18th, 2015 – Today I picked up trash from a vacant lot located on the corner of Bridgeport Way West and 35th Street West. Despite the small size of the lot, I was able to collect a fair amount of plastic. I found pens, lighters, more bottles, cups, and a ribbon. As I was picking up trash today, I noticed that a small piece of clear plastic had inadvertently been turned into a mini-greenhouse for some sort of plant. The plastic had become embedded in the soil, trapping the morning dew and acting as a safe-haven for a beautiful, bright-green plant. What I found to be most fascinating was that the plant was flourishing despite the abundance of dead foliage which surrounded it. Enamored by its perseverance and in an attempt to honor its beauty, I took a photo of the plant and uploaded it to Facebook where it could be publicly admired.

While many cars drove by and necks turned with curiosity, I did not physically interact or speak with anyone today. There was, however, a businessman who seemed to notice me from his office located above the lot. As he took an afternoon phone call, he glanced down at me from the window every-so-often. Despite being within his eyesight, the distance between the businessman and I was palpable. Periodically, I felt his eyes judging my activity. I wondered what he thought of my work. Did he think I was a do-gooder or perhaps a high school kid trying to earn some community service hours? Did he even care at all or was I just a distraction from his phone call? If he was not at work, would he have joined me? As I pondered these questions, I was struck by the solitude of this undertaking, of collecting garbage, and I realized that it allows for plenty of reflection. Reflection not only of the self, but of others, of the community, and of the world.

Pensive, I continued to collect plastic until my bag was full and as the sun was setting on the horizon, I loaded up my materials, placed them into the trunk of my car, and headed home.

Design

Primarily, I used a sketching journal to play with different designs. While some of my drawings were meant to be constructed as altars, others were meant to be pieces of a small collection, or as photographs rather than a 3-D work. What all of the sketches had in common was the intent behind them: mourning the loss of the natural environment. My journal included illustrations of a discarded teddy bear whose stomach had been opened and stuffed with plastic debris, a "beached" human puking up plastic while ensnared in a "ghost" fishing net, and an altered can of Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup that read, "Chicken Nurdle Soup." There were also diagrams of a bird's nest made of straws, a clam shell made of plastic fragments, and a spider web made of plastic fibers and cords. Some of the sketches depicted actual objects that I found while others were formulated from my imagination. In addition to these drawings, I created a number of collages and watercolor paintings. I also wrote a few short stories and poems, expressing my grief over the damage humans have done to the ecosystem.

However, after journaling and sketching, I realized that many of the ideas I came up with would be extremely hard to execute. As a result, I narrowed my focus to what I could build with the materials I actually had in the required timeframe. Once I established the materials that I wanted to work with, I realized that they would be best realized as one, large altar, versus being separated into several smaller altars, and set about constructing the work.

Construction

Construction of the altar began on March 7th, 2015. First, I cleaned the plastic by emptying each bag of collected material onto the grass of my front yard. I then sprayed the pieces with a garden hose and after the plastic was dry, I began to build the base of my altar. For stability purposes, the altar was built upon a discarded, metal-framed, glass shower door. Knowing that it would be difficult to attach the plastic to glass and metal, I covered the shower door with a plastic tarp. The tarp was not formally attached to the door but rather secured by the weight of the work itself. On top of the tarp, I arranged large pieces of plastic that I had collected to form the base of my wave and secured them with silicone. While I was waiting for the silicone to dry, I began to work on the crest of the wave.

In order to build the crest, my dad and I cut up an old, 44-gallon plastic garbage can. On top of the can, I placed small fragments of plastic. At first, I tried to use silicone to secure these pieces, but as I was working outdoors, each time the wind picked up the layers I had created were immediately ripped apart and strewn across the yard. I realized that I needed to move the crest of the wave indoors to work on it without interference, oddly and ironically enough, from nature. Part of the reason why the smaller pieces kept falling off was due to the fact that silicone takes a substantial amount of time to dry and set. I knew that if I wanted the pieces to affix quickly and stay put, hot glue would work better. Subsequently, once I moved the crest inside I decided to change my method of adhesion from silicone to hot glue.

As the pieces began to stick and a thick layer of plastic started to form on top of the trash can, I began to play with how the crest should be angled atop the base to create a realistic wave shape. While attempting to adjust the crest, due to the weight of the attached plastic and the uneven surface of the base, the can wanted to keep toppling over. In order to combat this, I decided to make use of a large item that I had found: a desktop computer. At first, the computer

was too long to sit inside of the crest, so my dad and I took it into the backyard and he sawed some of the length off. After this adjustment was made, I was able to place the computer inside of the crest and balance the garbage can atop the base layer of plastic, forming a realistic wave shape.

After completing the base and stabilizing the crest, I spent some time looking at the work and realized that I was not entirely happy with it. I took photos of the partially completed altar from various angles and sent them to my project chair, Beverly Naidus, for review. When I met with Beverly to discuss my progress, we both decided that some refinement was necessary. Composed of hundreds of pieces of multi-colored plastic, the altar was more of an eye-sore than it was elegant. The materials used to create the piece were also easily identified as trash. As garbage is not usually something people want to look at or discuss, Beverly and I went about finding ways to distort the materials further.

Feeling a bit confused in terms of where to go next with the work, I turned to online resources. I searched internet archives for “plastic waves,” “trash waves,” and artists who worked with discarded materials. I quickly noticed that the bulk of the search results featured waves that were made of oceanic colors: blues, whites, greens, and greys. What is more, almost all of the waves that I found were focused solely upon the environment and pollution, rather than acting as altars or incorporating grief, loss, or rituals. As I scrolled through pages and pages of different but relatively similar waves, one immediately caught my eye. This wave was unlike any that I had seen: it was black.

Created in 2007 and entitled *Sound Wave*, New York City-based artist, Jean Shin, fabricated the work from discarded 78 rpm records. Shin melted the records together on top of a wooden armature, sculpting them to resemble a crashing wave. Unlike my own work, Shin’s

materials came from a singular source, the record collection of one man, and her work was focused upon technology becoming obsolete versus the loss of the natural environment. Moreover, *Sound Wave* was meant to be viewed as sculpture rather than as an altar. Still, even with these differences I was in awe of her artistry. As black is commonly worn during times of mourning or loss, the black color palette fit with the theme of my work. Additionally, I enjoyed how the black color added a sense of refinement to her sculpture by masking what materials were used to construct the piece. It was after viewing Shin's display that I decided to spray-paint *Mourning Wave* black. I tested out flat and glossy black spray-paint, settling upon glossy. I chose the glossy black because I felt as though it made the piece appear even more synthetic, and the sheen it provided made the materials I used appear fluid, like the surface of the ocean following an oil spill.

Once the piece had been painted and was dry, I decided that I no longer liked all of the little bits of plastic which formed the crest of the wave. Instead, I elected to attach black plastic garbage bags to the back of the crest with hot glue. I twisted and weaved them to resemble the flow and contours found within an ocean wave. Next, I removed the desktop computer because I realized that it did not fit in with my project's themes of loss or grief. I also felt as though it may distract viewers from being able to see the actual shape of the altar itself. Following the removal of the computer, the inside of the crest looked a bit empty. To fill the space, initially I thought about cutting and pasting environmental propaganda inside. However, I soon realized that viewers would not want to stoop down, nor would they take the time to actually read the material. As an alternative, I chose to create a mosaic made of blank CD's that would cover the inside of the crest.

To create the mosaic of CD's, first, I laid a black plastic trash bag flat on the ground to

act as my base layer. I then assembled my pattern atop the base. Once I was happy with the arrangement of the CD's, I secured them to the plastic bag with hot glue. After the mosaic was dry, I carefully picked up the bag and attempted to slide it inside the crest of the wave. While it held together fairly well, there were a few CD's that became dislodged. Nonetheless, feeling as though the altar was coming along nicely, I took more photos and sent them to Beverly for evaluation.

Upon examination of these photos, Beverly and I decided that the garbage bags covering the back of the crest needed to be manipulated. Subsequently, I played with the piece by attaching more garbage bags to the back, forming them into a pointed crest. I then attempted to re-attach the CD's which had fallen with silicone. Even though silicone takes a while to dry, I thought that it may provide more stability than hot glue. Once I had restored the mosaic, I placed a wooden trunk on top of the CD's to compress them and solidify the adhesion. When it was dry, I tried to re-insert the mosaic into the crest of the wave. However, again, instead of sliding and bending into place many of the CD's fell off of the plastic backing. At this point, I felt completely discouraged about the work. I did not know where to turn so I took more photos of the altar and sent them to Beverly for critique.

Following our third meeting, Beverly suggested that I contort both the CD's and the plastic trash bags covering the back of the crest into new forms. She felt that the materials appeared static and could be used in a much more creative way. It was at this point that I decided to remove the CD's from the work entirely. As they were not collected to begin with, but rather were simply what I had at home, they were not authentic and did not add anything to the piece. Meanwhile, I was reluctant to remove the plastic trash bags from the back of the wave and chose to keep them as they were despite Beverly's concerns.

Finally, in order to develop my project further, I met with Tyler Budge, an M.F.A. at the University of Washington Tacoma. Even though the main purpose of our discussion was to develop a plan for exhibiting the work, our conversation ended up changing the entire direction of my project. Our meeting allowed me to see that more than anything, this work has been about the ritualistic process of collection rather than the altar itself. In other words, what has mattered the most is the act or the performance of collection, the ritual involved in the gathering of debris, and the accompanying message it sends to anyone who witnesses the act. As a result, we decided to turn the work into a performance piece and determined that multiple exhibitions would be necessary in order to fully showcase the journey of *Mourning Wave*.

Exhibition Process and Audience Reactions

My first exhibition of the work occurred on May 3rd, 2015. Completely unannounced, my mom, a photographer, and I transported the wave to several locations in Tacoma, WA. We placed the altar in the bed of my Uncle Pat's truck, and carried the wave by hand from the truck, to the intended location of display, and back. At each location, I collected any plastic that I could find, leaving the work to stand alone as people walked by. When I could no longer find any more debris, I returned to the altar and placed what I gathered into the wave's crest as an offering. As the collection of debris within the crest rose, the physical burden of carrying the work was also increased. This element of the performance was meant to highlight the exhaustive toll, or weight that one experiences while grieving both personal and collective forms of loss. During the performance, the photographer took stills of the altar and myself, as well as some shots of people's reactions to the work. While some stopped to admire my project and inquired about its meaning, others took a quick glance and continued about their day. There were also a handful of people who deliberately avoided the work by diverting their gaze as I walked by.

In total, the wave traveled to six different locations within Tacoma: a grassy bluff on Ruston Way, Les Davis Pier, the Spanish Stairs, the Elks Lodge, on the sidewalk in front of a brick wall across from the Elks Lodge, and Five Mile Drive in Point Defiance Park. Unlike the spaces I chose within University Place to gather materials, my exhibition sites were chosen with a much different goal in mind: interaction with the public. I wanted the work to be seen and accordingly, sought out areas where I knew that people congregated. Another reason that I chose these locations was because of the natural backdrops that they provided. For example, many of these locations were either on or near the water, and Five Mile Drive offered a beautiful forest setting for the piece. Lastly, some of these spaces were selected on a whim due to their proximity

to a prior site. For instance, following my exhibition of the work at the Spanish Stairs, I spotted an area in front of the Elks Lodge and another across the street where I suddenly felt that the altar should be displayed. The closeness of these locations greatly reduced the amount of physical energy it took to haul the altar to and from my uncle's vehicle, and it also made the overall exhibition process much more enjoyable for those who were involved.

What surprised me the most about today's series of showings was that each site yielded far less plastic debris than I had anticipated; in fact, I did not find any at the location within Five Mile Drive. Another surprising discovery was that the altar is far more resilient and travels much better than I had expected. As we drove along the bumpy streets, my heart skipped a beat every time we hit a pothole or accelerated. To my great relief, at the end of the day the altar remained completely intact. The process of transporting the altar itself also turned out to be quite exhausting. Although the work is quite light for its size and the display locations were relatively close to one another, the flexible nature of the materials required a slow-and-steady pace that made it considerably more difficult to carry.

Following this initial exhibition, overall, I felt as though I had been successful and that the wave had truly made an impact on some viewers. Yet, I also felt that there was room for improvement. To illustrate, as I was carrying the work and especially after seeing some of the preliminary photos, I realized that my outfit needed to be modified. For the first showing, I dressed in my normal street clothes which were chosen based on comfort. Upon seeing photos of my initial exhibition, Beverly suggested that I change up my wardrobe by wearing something that resonated with the work itself. Besides this, as previously mentioned, lugging the wave around by hand was extremely difficult. Tyler Budge was the first to suggest that I carry the wave on a cart. I later met with Beverly and we both agreed that photos of me physically pulling

the work along would be far more impactful than static images of the work itself. Hence, we decided that some sort of cart or wagon would be necessary. The final element I wanted to change for the next exhibition was to provide my viewers with an informational pamphlet about myself, the work, and its accompanying research; I wanted to give people something practical that they could take home and think about or share with their friends.

The subsequent week, after deciding upon a new wardrobe, acquiring a cart, and printing out pamphlets, I exhibited the work again in Tacoma. Dressed as a maintenance woman, donning my father's coveralls and some black combat boots, I pushed and pulled the altar along Pacific Avenue. The altar was placed on top of a metal cart and a photographer followed me as I maneuvered the work up and down both sides of the sidewalk. Again, I collected plastic as I went, periodically stopping to pick it up and then placing the debris into the crest of the wave. Due to the fact that Pacific Avenue is a high-traffic area which acts as a thoroughfare for pedestrians and motor vehicles alike, I was expecting to find a large amount of plastic. But instead, again, the streets and sidewalks were surprisingly pristine, and finding plastic was actually somewhat of a challenge.

Speaking of challenges and unexpected findings, as it was a Sunday, most of the businesses were closed. Consequently, the sidewalks which are normally bustling with activity were quiet, and there was far less interaction with the public than I had anticipated. On one hand, I was disappointed by the lack of human contact, but on the other, as people awkwardly stopped mid-stride and had to step aside in order to make room for me and my work, I was glad that the sidewalks were empty because it made navigation much easier. While I knew that carrying the work by hand was difficult, using the cart was also somewhat of a challenge. On the cart, the altar bounced up and down with every squeaking rotation of the wheels. Furthermore, at every

crosswalk, as the sidewalk's incline went down, the entire position of the altar shifted and I had to readjust the work several times in order to make it stay securely on top of the cart. Finally, perhaps the hardest part of today was figuring out how to be a performer. I did not know whether I should smile or look sad, if I should talk to people or be silent. However, as the day progressed, I became much more comfortable and settled upon staring at the piece itself versus making eye contact with people. I lethargically pulled and pushed the altar around, working slowly whenever I saw a piece of trash. By the end of the day, I felt as though I had a good grasp on what the performance should look like and was happy with the character I had created. In sum, despite the aforementioned hurdles, this exhibition of the work was surprisingly productive and fun.

One of the day's most illuminating interactions occurred when I accidentally bumped into the chair of a woman sitting in front of Starbucks. It became evident that the sidewalk was not wide enough to accommodate both of us when the base of the altar struck her chair and I was forced to stop walking. Interestingly, the woman pretended not to notice me. Her friend, on the other hand, made direct eye contact with me, but she also did not say a word. I apologized and waited a moment for them to react. After what felt like a minute of silence, as I awkwardly and unsuccessfully tried to move around the woman's chair, I was finally forced to ask her if she would scoot in so that I could get by. My voice and my question seemed to startle both of them. The woman hastily obliged and they continued to ignore my presence as I proceeded along Pacific Avenue. At the time, I was not offended by this interaction, but after reflecting upon my work that day, I was amazed by their purposeful lack of acknowledgement. I felt ignored and invisible; it was clear that they had little regard for myself and my work. Nonetheless, although this interaction was hurtful, it proved to be extremely valuable and helped me to draw thoughtful conclusions about the process as a whole.

Another notable interaction I had today occurred between myself and a presumably homeless man. Sitting in a wheelchair, his gaze was unlike any that I encountered that day. As I approached, he stared intently; his eyes were wide, full of wonder, awe, and I think, appreciation. Dressed in my father's ratty coveralls and looking like a "cart lady," I was worried that maybe he would think I was mocking him but he did not seem to be offended and admired the altar as I passed by. Our interaction stuck with me for many reasons. For one, the amount of interest he showed in the piece compared to others was substantial. As I walked by, like many people I encountered that day, I could tell that he was trying to process what the work was about and what it was made of. Unlike most people however, once he recognized that the altar was made of trash he continued to stare, perhaps even more intently than before. In contrast, when other people identified the materials, most turned their gaze away or looked at me instead. Being presumably homeless, I wondered if he connected with the work because the materials I used were analogous to how he may have felt: dirty, low, unworthy of attention, ignored. Did he appreciate the altar more because he felt that it represented his situation? Was it because we throw away trash, much like society attempts to get rid of, or throw away, those who are homeless? I believe the trash spoke to him in a much different way than anyone else I encountered. Due to this outcome I am curious to see how other people who may be homeless react to the altar in the future.

In addition to the women at Starbucks and the presumably homeless man, the final face-to-face interaction I had was with a group of people who were leaving some sort of event at the Tacoma Art Museum. Knowing their prior location allowed me to guess that they had an appreciation for art. As predicted, they showed an elevated interest in my work and eagerly accepted the informational pamphlets I had made. In particular, one group of elderly women were delighted by the altar. As I walked by, they told me how much they loved and admired the

message it portrayed. I was struck by their appreciation for the piece as well as their understanding of its meaning and importance.

Even though those who were exiting the Tacoma Art Museum seemed to comprehend my efforts, overall, I think a lot of people did not know what to make of the work. I saw recognition in their faces in terms of the shape and the materials used, but the meaning behind it was lost. Notwithstanding my feeling that this exhibition was successful in terms of educating at least a small portion of the public, and certainly in terms educating me on what it means to get into the work on a performative level, there are still a few improvements which could be made to elevate the display. For instance, in future exhibitions of the altar I could carry a sign reading, “R.I.P. Earth” on one side, and “In loving memory of the natural environment” on the other, to specify the intent of the piece. I also would like to experiment with expressing grief more, either by painting my face like a sad theater mask or perhaps smearing eyeliner and mascara down my cheeks. Another element I would like to incorporate into this work is to record both audio and video of the performance of pushing and pulling the wave along, collecting debris, and audience reactions. All of the aforementioned modifications would enhance the meaning not only of the altar itself, but also of my performance.

Following the exhibitions in Tacoma, the photographer sent me images from both outings. I selected a handful of shots which captured the true spirit of the work from each day, and asked Beverly to do the same. After Beverly had sent me her preferences, from the group of photos we had selected together I chose thirteen images. I then edited their color profiles and cropped them with Photoshop. Other than color correction and cropping, no additional edits were made to the photographs. Next, I created a Powerpoint depicting each image on its own, as well as three-panel, grouped-image narratives. This Powerpoint would later be shown in a continuous

loop behind the altar at my solo-exhibition. During this time, I also made an additional Powerpoint which was displayed exclusively during the presentation portion of my solo-exhibition to highlight the findings of my research.

On Friday, May 22nd, I held a solo-exhibition of the work at the University of Washington Tacoma. Again, I wore my father's coveralls and some combat boots. As with prior exhibitions, I used a metal cart to transport the work and ended up incorporating it into the display of the piece itself by leaving it underneath the altar. In contrast to earlier exhibitions, I followed through with my aforementioned desire to smear black mascara, eyeshadow, and eyeliner down my cheeks in order to show my grief over the loss of the natural environment. I also wore my hair down in an unkempt and frazzled-state; I made absolutely no effort to style my hair or apply any makeup other than the mascara, eyeshadow, and eyeliner. Moreover, I adorned myself with black plastic trash bags which cascaded down my body and the coveralls in a shamanistic fashion. The swooshing and swishing noises the bags made as I walked through the room were an unanticipated, yet delightful, addition to the performance. Together, all of these elements seemed to both enamor the audience and intrigue the general public who happened to be walking by. Before, I don't think people knew what to make of me and my work. However, after these adjustments were made to the performance people seemed to know I was an artist of some kind and as a result my work was taken much more seriously.

As guests entered the room, they were greeted with informational pamphlets which I had spread across a small table. The Powerpoint depicting images of the wave's journey and growth was on a continuous loop that people could admire as they mingled before I began my presentation. While some socialized quietly, others took note of my outfit and makeup and asked me to do a twirl. Feeling empowered by my shamanistic ensemble, I happily complied with this

request multiple times throughout the night, spinning around, waving my arms, and then striking a variety of poses. When it seemed as though everyone who had indicated that they were coming was in the room, I began my presentation. As I spoke about my research, surrounded by a group of people who have uplifted and encouraged me throughout this entire process, I found myself feeling more confident than ever in both the project itself and in my abilities as a scholar; I could not have been more proud of this work. My presentation flowed effortlessly and I thoroughly enjoyed sharing my research with such a wonderful audience.

Before concluding my presentation, I asked the audience if they had any questions or comments about the work. Several questions were posed but the ones listed below were the most significant in terms of providing me with a basis for reflection and thinking about the future of this work. (Please note that the first question is addressed at length within my "Conclusions" section and the second question is addressed within my "Reflection" section.)

Question from audience member on 5/22/15

What did people say to you as you walked around Tacoma with the altar?

Question from audience member on 5/22/15

Are you going to exhibit this piece in University Place, perhaps during or at the 2015 U.S. Open?

In addition to this form of group discussion, I also provided attendees with the opportunity to interact with my work on an individual level. Following my presentation, I told the audience that if they had anything they would like to add outside of our public forum, they could voice their opinions by writing their comments and questions on slips of construction

paper. I asked them to roll up their contributions and place them within an opaque plastic bottle for my later review. On the bottle I wrote facts that I discovered through my research, along with two ways in which one could become empowered and combat environmental degradation. To drive my main point home, I also wrote an ominous warning of what will occur if one chooses to disregard the ecological crisis. The first side the bottle read, “Did you know? Plastic never fully degrades.” On the opposing side I wrote, “Did you know? Just 7% of all plastic is recycled.” The third side insisted, “Ditch the bottle! Ban plastic!” And the final side declared, “Plastic = DEATH.” The feedback I received through this interactive element included a few questions as well some comments about the work itself:

Feedback from Anonymous via construction paper 5/22/15

Anyone have their picture taken with it?

Feedback from Anonymous via construction paper 5/22/15

What will you do with this altar after tonight?

Feedback from Jessica Warner via construction paper 5/22/15

It has been so cool to see your project progress from the earliest stages of our first quarter; the final product is amazing. Congrats on a wonderful piece.

Feedback from Anonymous via construction paper 5/22/15

A wonderful show, Andy Warhol would love it!!

Feedback from Anonymous via construction paper 5/22/15

Movement is great! Reminiscent of an oil spill. Double jeopardy for the environment. Great.

I dubbed this interactive element, “Message in a Bottle,” as this was my initial name for the project itself and because I feel as though there is an opportunity to educate consumers with every bottle via labeling which has not been realized. Although most manufacturers indicate that their products *can* be recycled, few indicate that they *should* be recycled; it is far too easy for consumers to look the other way as they carelessly discard their trash. Through something as simple as a label, change can be affected through increased awareness as well as higher recycling rates. In the future, I hope that manufacturers will be more assertive with their labeling.

To conclude, all in all, I was extremely pleased with my first solo-exhibition of the altar. The audience was engaged through the performative elements and educated by the informational pamphlet as well as my presentation about the project and its accompanying research. Many of the people who were in attendance complimented me on the impacts of my research and said that they felt awakened by my project. I was deeply appreciative of both their interest and their open-mindedness in relation to the difficult themes which I have chosen to explore. I look forward to future exhibitions of this work and plan to continue documenting the wave’s development as it travels.

Conclusions

As previously mentioned, the question and answer portion of my solo-exhibition provided me with the most profound basis for developing my conclusions. For instance, one of the first questions I received was about the interactions that I had with the public as I exhibited the altar in Tacoma. This question helped me to realize the most significant finding of this entire project: people are immobilized by their fear of detrimental changes to the ecosystem and are unwilling to discuss their grief with others. Through my exhibitions of the work in Tacoma, I quickly ascertained that the public was silent and had no desire to speak. The few that were brave enough to express themselves, although vocal, did not discuss their grief in any way. They acknowledged the changes but were unwilling to discuss their feelings of "sadness" over the loss of the natural environment in depth. Furthermore, the public generally avoided eye contact and some, as I indicated in the "Methodology" section, refused to even validate my presence. This silence, or gap, between myself and the public as I exhibited the altar is important for several different reasons.

Primarily, this silence surrounding detrimental changes to the ecosystem is noteworthy because it reduces the ability of those who are grieving to take any sort of action. While they may be emotionally supported, those that are grieving must also work towards becoming environmental allies. Without a connection or synthesis of understanding between grief and loss as well as how to preserve and protect the environment, the ecosystem will continue to be damaged. Only when we begin to view ourselves as "caretakers" rather than "conquerors," when we realize that the earth is not infinite and that natural resources are precious, when we understand the importance of becoming attuned to our interconnectedness with nature, will humans begin to understand and mourn the damage we have done.

Additionally, unwillingness to discuss grief shows that people do not believe they have safe spaces in which to confide and there is a lack of support for those who are grieving detrimental changes to the ecosystem. In addition to delaying the mourning process and preventing action from being taken in regard to the natural environment, this points to larger, worrisome social norms surrounding grief and loss. Without safe, positive outlets for people to share their fears, grief and loss cannot be expressed and confusion about how to manage one's grief may intensify. This intensification of emotions could then lead to harmful, physical outbursts. We must create safe spaces then in order to allow for the facilitation of emotions. When these spaces are realized, relationships and bonds are formed which may lead to communal, and perhaps societal, healing and growth.

Another conclusion that I have reached through this project is that many people do not even realize that their feelings about the environment could be equated with grief, loss, or mourning. Although several viewers mentioned they felt "sad" about the damage humans have done to the environment and there seems to be an awareness of loss, very few people described themselves as grieving. This disconnect between feeling "sad" and grieving shows how necessary work like *Mourning Wave* is. Art allows us to develop understanding of difficult issues and topics by presenting them in an alternative form. In this way, art is the medium that connects with us on a level that other forms of information sharing cannot. For that reason, art is of the utmost importance when it comes to grieving the detrimental changes occurring within our ecosystem. Specifically, work which examines and aims to express grief is crucially needed.

The final conclusion I have made through this project is that we must become attuned to the benefits of rituals and altars already present within our lives. Prior to embarking on this project, I did not understand that rituals and altars were so vital to my well-being. I have come to

realize that they provide me with a sense of purpose and direction, allowing for both mental and physical reflection. Without investigations such as this, rituals and altars may continue to be viewed as accessories rather than as necessities of one's well-being. Hence, as it is my hope that rituals and altars become an integral facet of daily life, extending healing throughout society, more research which examines the importance of rituals and altars in regard to health will be imperative.

Reflection

Through the construction of this altar four personal discoveries were made. First, I noticed that life is teeming with altars and rituals. Second, this project has taught me that altars and rituals have the ability to transform one's experiences of grief and loss, bringing new meaning to our lives. Next, my appreciation and affiliation towards nature and the natural environment has been greatly enhanced. And finally, as this project has been so personally fulfilling, I have decided that I would like to continue with this work for many more years to come. Due to my recognition of the potential that altars and rituals have to help us manage grief derived from both personal and collective forms of loss, I am inspired to educate others about the benefits of this work through future exhibitions.

Prior to embarking on this project I was not aware that several aspects of life, especially my own, were already guided and driven by both altars and rituals. For example, after my uncle's death, as my family and I were sifting through his belongings I found a toy motorcycle. I remembered seeing the motorcycle as a child and felt compelled to bring it home as a keepsake. I placed the motorcycle on the top shelf of my bedside bookcase. I intentionally chose this space for display because my eyes often wander there and the recognition felt like a good way to honor my uncle. As previously noted, through my research I discovered that what sets an altar apart from simply being a beloved object or space is the intention behind it. And so, without any prior knowledge or sense of recognition I had created an altar. Another observation I made as a result of this work was that many of my daily routines are ritualistic. From the way I go about making my breakfast to gearing up for a run, my life seemed to suddenly be teeming with rituals. Consequently, these simple daily activities took on heightened meaning; they are not just mere elements of my day, they are much needed forms of self-love which keep me spiritually

grounded. What is more, I am now able to distinguish components of my life that are both steered and strengthened by altars and rituals.

To build upon this, after creating *Mourning Wave,* the aforementioned altars and rituals have brought a renewed sense of purpose to my life by allowing me to transform my struggles with personal loss and grief. As expressed earlier, following my uncle's unforeseen suicide, I was fraught with tremendous grief. The intensity and diversity of my emotions was astounding, and just when I thought that I was done feeling upset or anxious, the emotions hit me swiftly, unpredictably, again, and again, and again. Thankfully, recognition of and appreciation for the altars and rituals within my life provided me with a much needed sense of stability and peace. The afternoons I have spent collecting plastic, researching, painting, and physically constructing the altar have been integral to confronting my own feelings as well as providing me with an outlet to express my grief over both personal loss and detrimental changes to the ecosystem. Thus, my own individual grief opened the door to experiencing collective grief and has allowed me to formulate new meanings from such loss.

The next result of this project is that it has allowed me to develop a deeper appreciation for nature. Aside from simply admiring nature, I now recognize my inner desire to connect with it on an instinctual level and further, to protect it. Moreover, I now see plastic as the physical manifestation of humans' collective carelessness and greed. Henceforth, as a means to show my appreciation for nature and the natural environment, I will continue to collect plastic debris whenever possible. Even though my own actions pale in comparison to the large, cultural shifts that are desperately needed to combat environmental degradation, the sooner we as individuals take action the sooner our ecosystem can begin to rebuild. As we attempt to heal the earth and its landscape, detrimental changes to the ecosystem may be stalled, providing future generations

with the gift of nature. Therefore, by developing an even greater appreciation for nature and natural spaces through this project, I now realize that recognition of our interconnectedness with the ecosystem is paramount to its protection.

Finally, as one of the attendees of my solo-exhibition suggested that I present this work elsewhere, I have decided that subsequent displays of *Mourning Wave* are necessary. Following the success of my presentations within Tacoma, I look forward to showcasing the altar in University Place. Aside from being my hometown, more importantly, University Place is where the plastic used to construct the piece itself was collected. Hence, it will be important to show the work to the residents of University Place, as they are ultimately the ones responsible for the debris. On top of this, future exhibitions will allow me to develop the performative elements of the project even further. Already with just three showings I feel as though a lot of progress has been made in this regard and I know that with future displays, the performance will only continue to be refined and improved.

In sum, informed by the abrupt passing of my uncle, this project and its accompanying research has completely changed my life. *Mourning Wave* has allowed me to develop a much deeper appreciation of the world in which I inhabit. It also has provided me with a greater sense of meaning and purpose than I could have ever imagined. I now recognize the importance of the altars and rituals within my own life and they have become absolutely vital to my overall well-being. Furthermore, as mentioned above, I now see nature in a completely different way. Instead of simply taking delight in nature, I feel a deep connection and my sense of responsibility for the environment has been elevated immensely. Rather than being passive in regard to environmental issues, now more than ever I sense the urgent need to curtail harmful practices in order to protect the earth. Lastly, due to the personal significance of this project and its immediate effects upon

the public, I would like to continue exhibiting the altar. There are so many ways and locations in which the work can be shown that the possibilities of *Mourning Wave* are truly extraordinary. I look forward to evolving alongside the piece and educating others about the potential of altars and rituals in helping us to manage grief derived from both personal and collective forms of loss.

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION

1. What forms of rituals and altars exist within your life?
2. How can rituals and altars be used for grieving damage being done to the environment by humans?
3. How has damage to the ecosystem affected you?
4. What are you most afraid of regarding the detrimental changes to our ecosystem?
5. How are you taking care of your grief in regard to the damage that has been done to our ecosystem?
6. How does this grief interrupt your daily life?
7. Is your grief is a step to taking action, or is it a passive response that feels defeatist? Why do you feel this way?
8. Do you feel alone in your grief or do you have a support system? If you feel helpless in relation to these issues, name something that might help you not feel that way. If you feel empowered to do something, what has helped you achieve that sense of purpose?

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Appendix A

Levison, D. (Photographer).
(2015). *Untitled* [Photograph].

Levison, D. (Photographer).
(2015). *Untitled* [Photograph].

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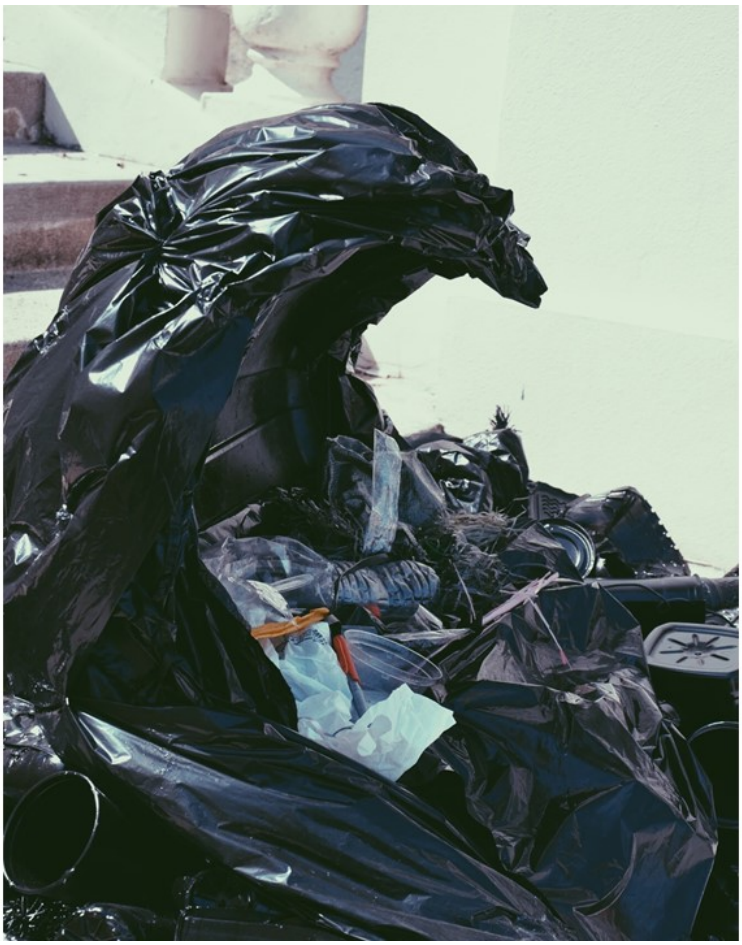

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Stewart, S. (Photographer).
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