For nearly a decade, whenever I return to my hometown I visit Walmart my first or second day back to buy a bouquet of fake flowers. It’s always the same. Go to Walmart, hoping not to run into anyone I know from high school. Pick out season-appropriate flowers that don’t look too fake. Drive out of town to the rural area where I grew up, trying not to get lost in the memories each mile exhumes. Turn right off the main highway into the cemetery. Drive the small road that circles the graves until the car faces the church in which I grew up. Park. Grab my fake flowers; exit the car. Walk slowly, reverently, to my parents’ headstone. Stoop to replace the old flowers I left last time I was home (probably too long ago) with the new ones. Stand for a moment looking at the headstone. The dates of my parents’ births and deaths follow their names, and between them is an image of two figures walking through a gate toward rays of light. “When we all get to heaven” is written in cursive under the image. Etched into the back of the headstone is my name: “Cassidy Danielle, Our Precious Daughter.” It’s always the same. Don’t look too long. Get back in the car. Drive away, glancing into the rearview mirror one last time. This is my grief ritual.

While reading Blake Paxton’s *At Home with Grief: Continuing Bonds with the Deceased*, I found myself feeling “the warm embrace of narrative resonance . . . through the experiencing of [his] experience.”1 I saw myself in Paxton’s experiences both of grief after the loss of his mother and the subsequent self-imposed mental, emotional, and physical distancing from home, loved ones, and romantic partners. As I read, memories of my deceased parents flooded my mind, escaping the dark corners in which I’ve kept them locked away for five, eight, or fifteen years. Having read of the ways in which Paxton, his friends, and his family re-member and continue bonds with his mother Ann, I come away from the book both with a narrative blueprint for how I can re-member and continue bonds with my parents, as well as the academic context to understand these processes.

In his book, Paxton conducts an autoethnographic inquiry into experiences of those left behind after his mother died of a pulmonary embolism. Through interviews with members of his family as well as close friends of his mother, he seeks to understand the ways people continue (or don’t continue) bonds with her. Through his experience re-membering with members of his home community, he demonstrates the ways continuing bonds with his deceased mother also strengthened his relationship with the living as well. Ultimately, Paxton illustrates the ways continuing bonds with the deceased overall positively affected those who had a relationship with Ann and contributed to his own ability to (re)strengthen his relationships with people from his home community. While not all participants used the term “continued bonds,” many were nonetheless practicing continued bonds through sharing stories about Ann, looking for signs of her in their everyday lives, and emulating her ways of speaking when around others who knew her.
By spending a large portion of the book’s first half narrativizing his experience of loss and re-entry into his home community, Paxton helps the reader connect both with him, as an author, Blake as a character in the narratives, and his interlocutors. The first chapter devastatingly sets up the entire book by autoethnographically recounting Paxton’s relationship with his mother and with her death during his adolescence. The descriptions of his emotional numbness following the death, his performance of grief at the funeral, and his participation in the funeral through song are visceral and living. Through them, I see myself compartmentalizing emotions at each of my parents’ funerals to perform strength for loved ones, and I’m reminded of the feeling of standing on stage as an eleven-year-old singing one of my father’s favorite hymns in front of his mourners. As I turn the page to chapter 2, I think to myself, This is what autoethnography is meant to do.

The following chapter allows the reader to understand more of Paxton’s positionality, as it depicts his re-membering journey, which led him through graduate school and ultimately back home. This chapter establishes a transparent relationship between the author and reader, enabling the reader to understand Paxton’s journey to this work and orientation to this project specifically. Chapter 3 continues his autoethnographic journey into his hometown, where he narrativizes interviews with various members of his home community who had a relationship with his mother. Through this chapter the reader learns much more about Ann and Blake (or, Paxton as a character in his narrative) as individuals and as relational partners, and the reader receives further context to understand the relationship between individuals and grief.

The final two chapters unpack the aforementioned narrative portion of the book, situating Paxton’s experience into scholarship on grief, loss, and continuing bonds and demonstrating the ways in which his work fills gaps in that literature, before making calls for future research in continued bonds scholarship. The book ends with a final narrative that allows the reader to see the strength of the relationship Paxton has with his family after completing his project and an appendix elaborating on the use of autoethnography as method. At Home with Grief is an exemplary autoethnography that invites readers into Paxton’s vulnerable experience with grief and relational uncertainty that can follow death. His narratives are evocative, his scholarly contribution clearly evident. Through unpacking small, yet impactful moments such as seeing butterflies or ants when talking about Ann or seeing license plates with particular arrangements of letters and numbers that were significant in Ann’s life, the book is exemplary at finding the extraordinary within the everyday or mundane.

At the close of the book, I’m left with a couple of lingering thoughts and questions. In thinking about my own experiences of parental loss, I’m wondering what re-membering and continuing bonds looks like in relationships that are/were less amicable. Paxton admits that continuing bonds may not be effective for every relationship; however, I leave the book wondering if bonds can be continued with the dead in ways that account for relational transgressions that took place before the person’s death. How can we work through the unfinished business of relational transgressions with the deceased while also continuing bonds? Additionally, I leave the book curious about how re-membering and continuing bonds with Paxton’s mother affected or improved relationships with people.
outside of his hometown. Narratives about avoiding vulnerability and openness with others before reconnecting with these relationships from the beginning of the book feel unresolved by the end. Despite the lingering questions it leaves, the book is a thoughtful and impactful piece of scholarship.

Paxton writes that “through storytelling and reflection, the dead regain membership in our lives—helping us understand others and ourselves better.” I leave At Home with Grief reflecting on my own re-membering rituals and ways I do (not) continue bonds with my deceased parents. As I turn the last page, I realize the relationships in my own life that have suffered due to my family’s grief, often seeking “the tyranny of closure.” Good autoethnography invites the reader into the experience of the author, allowing the reader to see through the author’s eyes and allowing the reader to find themselves in the author’s experience. Good autoethnography, good storytelling, begets other stories and future autoethnographies. I close the back cover of Paxton’s book ready to put pen to paper. Personally and professionally, I look forward to the stories and scholarship Paxton’s At Home with Grief inspires.

NOTES
2. Paxton, 143.
3. Paxton, 2.

CASSIDY D. ELLIS
University of Denver; Email: cdellis@unm.edu