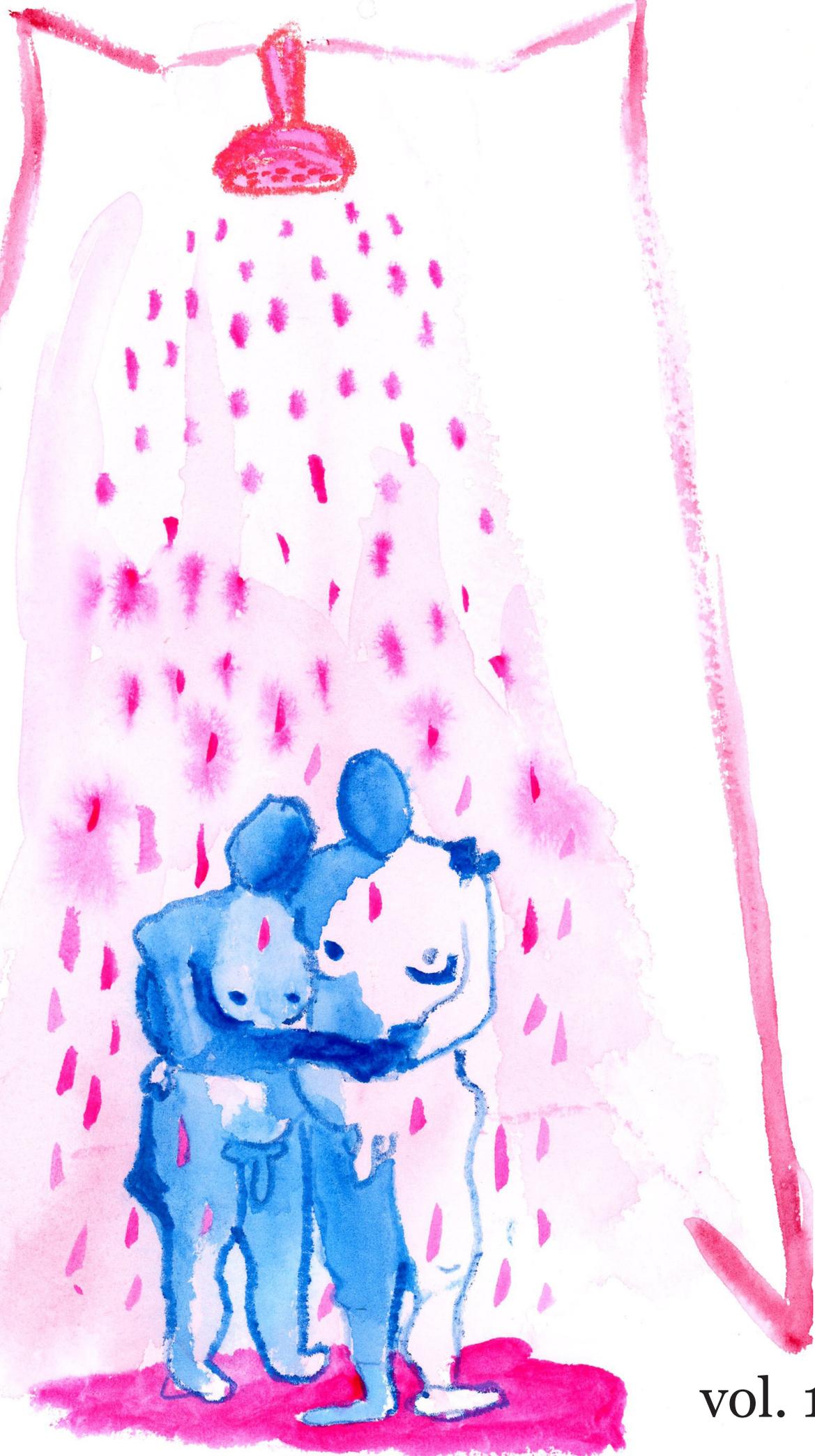


BATHE

BY LEO ALAS

A queer community care data manifesto



vol. 1

Cover Image Story:

"I distinctly remember the last time I took a shower together with my ex. We hadn't done it in a long time and after months of him asking I decided to do it again. I'm sad thinking of it now because the relationship has ended but I remember the feeling of how much he loved and accepted my body even when I struggled to and I hope I can carry that love and self-acceptance into my own life as a single person. Bodies are a difficult thing to reconcile with some times but I find showers and baths are a good time to build that connection and to foster a relationship with oneself"

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INTRODUCTION

I was first inspired to work on this project after my friend, Tinsley, passed away in July 2020. I heard a week late-- our group of friends were scattered and the news travelled slowly through texts and group chats. When word got to me, I was far from anyone who knew them. I felt alone. I was scrambling for any memory that could provide me any answers or solace. I felt a strong sense of protection for them, but they were the type to shy away from that kind of love. They walked around believing themselves to be a burden to everyone. The kind of person who would apologize for apologizing.



I wondered often if my pain was legitimate, I wondered if I ever really knew them, every opportunity I missed to connect felt like a black hole that expanded wider and wider.

Our mutual friends planned a vigil over zoom on Tinsley's birthday, the first week of August. When we first logged on there was silence. We shared small thoughts, but the restraint was palpable. Maybe it was because none of us knew each other that well. Maybe it was the 5 months of isolation. Maybe it was the prospect of being vulnerable about loss. We didn't seem to be able to get where we needed to in our grief.

After 10 or so minutes, my dear friend Colleen (who has been my thought partner in this project) showed up, apologizing for being late. As one of our friends nervously said they felt Tinsley at the beach today, Colleen immediately said, "I want to hear more about that." That permission to talk more, opened up a vulnerability to share more. It was so simple, I couldn't believe that was all it took to get the conversation flowing. Any doubt that what we had to say was worth sharing was shattered.

I was surprised to hear I wasn't the only one who felt blocked from fully knowing Tinsley. Even those closest to them said Tinsley was too embarrassed even to share their music taste. For the first time I felt like I was getting a fuller picture of them that wasn't tied up in my shame and sense of failure as a friend. I have come to cherish the bits of joy Tinsley was able to share with me and accept that what was not shared was theirs to keep.

The experience was sacred to me. I knew at that moment that the experience of virtual grief was only going to be a more common occurrence as time passed. That small spark with Colleen led me to want to dive in deeper to find the tools we need to grieve together, to affirm one another, to see and be seen. The first tool came from this moment: ask, give permission to release. In a way the surveys and focus groups contained in this project were my way of initiating the ask-- casting permission to speak and my desire to listen as far out as I can.



BACKGROUND

This year has been a major time for grieving. Pandemic deaths rise globally every day, alongside public police murders of unarmed Black people. Drone warfare kills endlessly to support global imperialism. ICE detention centers claim lives at the Mexican border. Natural resources are pillaged. Drug abuse deaths climb and mental illness pervades in social isolation. The spectre of death has appeared in our physical and mental health, domestically and abroad.

These experiences impact everyone and cannot be spoken of without the acknowledgement that our political structures have failed to protect us. Mainstream media teaches health and safety are private responsibilities. It treats powerless individuals as agents of their own demise. If we understand that individuals are not to blame, we must also understand individualism is not how we will heal.

While self-care is a necessary skill to develop, it cannot be the only tool in our toolkits. If care focuses only on our ability to help ourselves, who is left out? I am primarily inspired by the four fundamental truths outlined in Bessel A. Van Der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*:

"(1) our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another. Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring well-being; (2) language gives us the power to change ourselves and others by communicating our experiences, helping us to define what we know, and finding common sense of meaning; (3) we have the ability to regulate our own physiology, including some of the so-called involuntary functions of the body and brain, through such basic activities as breathing, moving, and touching; and (4) we can change social conditions to create environments in which children and adults can feel safe and where they can thrive." (pg. 38)

My objective is to design care rituals that shift discourse from self to community. In a time of social isolation, I explore how we can fill the gap of community care while we are forced to manage grief in our own isolated spaces.

Which brings me to the question, why water?

The vehicle I use in my exploration of Queer grief is our relation to water. I think that water has a similar metaphorical ambivalence as our emotional relation to grieving-- an ambivalence that is repeated over and over again in the survey responses and focus groups. Water is both a crucial element of maintaining life, and a terrifying and unforgiving element with the power to destroy (kill, devastate, traumatize). I am thinking about water's relationship to tears. I am thinking about Queer bathhouses that were closed in major cities during the AIDS epidemic. I am thinking about the scene in *Moonlight* (2016, dir. Barry Jenkins) where Juan teaches Chiron how to swim and the infallible connection that moment has to the moments in his adulthood where he uses ice water to self-soothe. This is the power of healing with others. In speaking to grief and pain, I asked participants to engage in memories with water as well, to both engage in tangible memories and to participate in the co-creation of future water-based grief rituals.

A hand is shown reaching out towards a screen. The screen displays a close-up, high-speed shot of water splashing, creating a dynamic and textured background. The hand is positioned in the lower center of the frame, with fingers slightly spread. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of the hand against the dark, turbulent water on the screen.

Take a second before continuing.

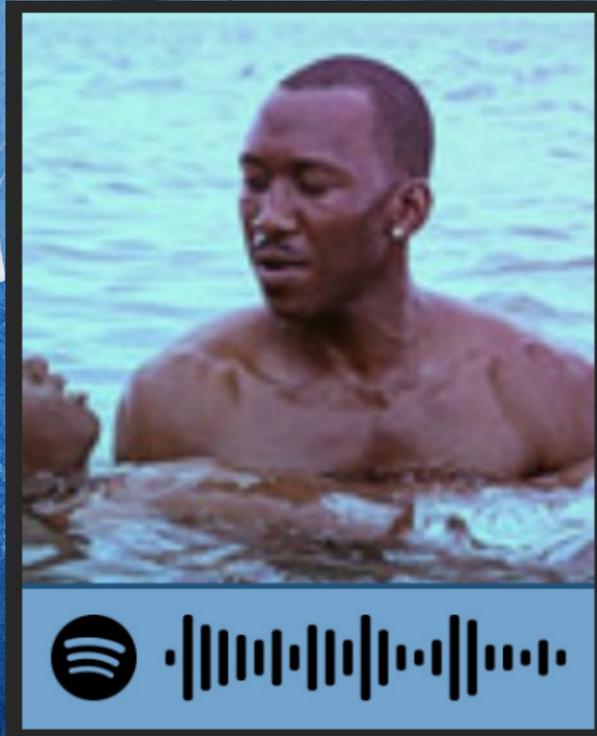
Where are you? Look away from the screen.

Is your body relaxed?

Allow it to find itself.

Release tightness in your jaw, roll your shoulders forward and back.
Smooth your brow.

As you move forward there will be a lot of numbers and percentages. Observe how your body responds, if it does.
Where does tension reappear first? Notice it.



WATER SONGS TO CONTEMPLATE DANCE & TAKE A BATH IN

METHODS

To start constructing data to develop healing rituals, I began by creating a 37 question survey that included questions with demographic information, questions about how people are connecting, experiences of grief in terms of hardships, loss, and current events, and lastly, stories of joy and healing and water related memories. Participants were given an option to opt into a focus group at the end. I advertised the survey on my instagram account and encouraged friends to share on their social media accounts. I reached out to The Wall Las Memorias, Translounge (LGBT Center of LA), and Tia Chucha's Centro Cultural to share the survey with their constituents.

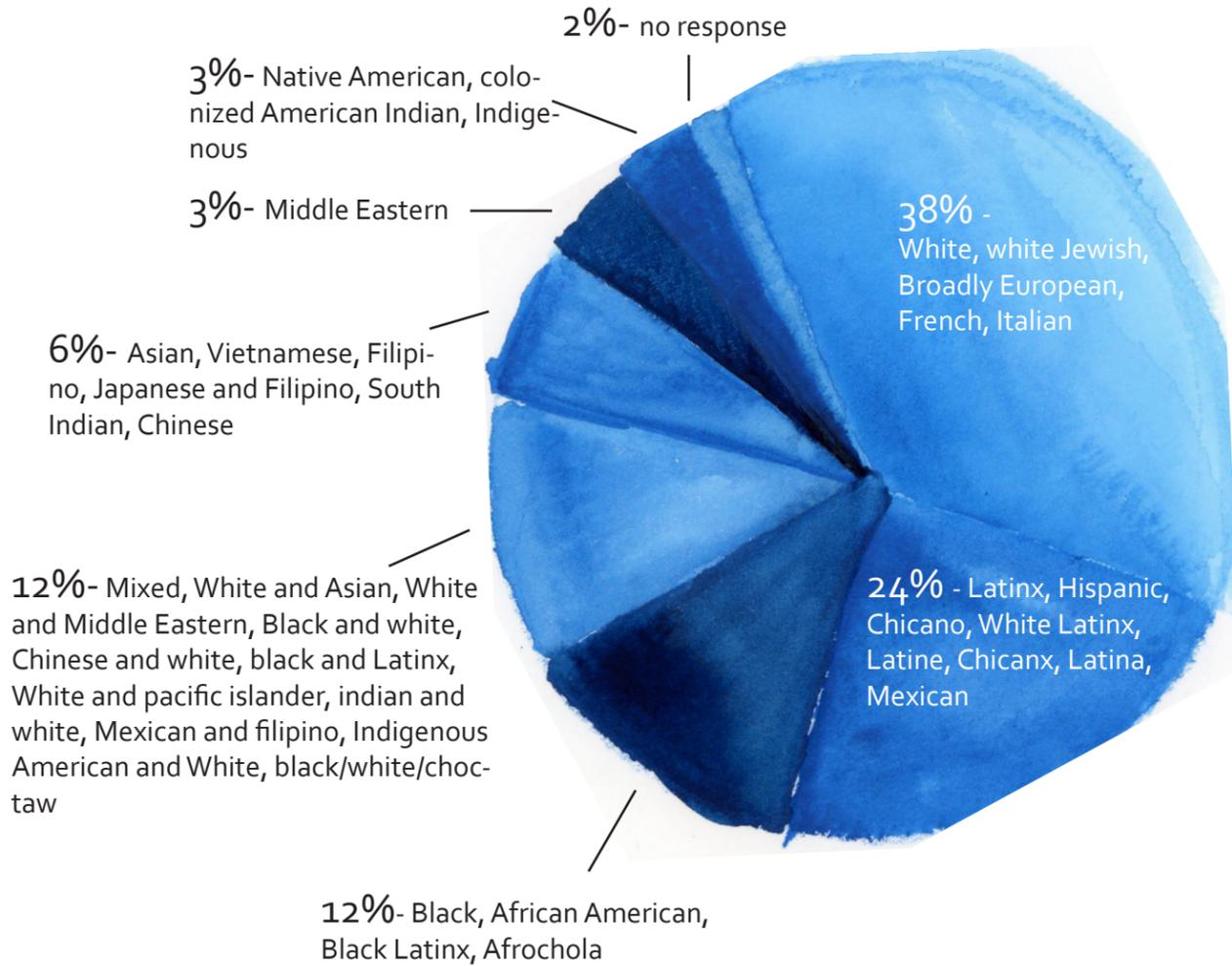
The content contained in this zine is, at present moment, limited due to the limits of the survey thus far. One, most of the participants know me by one or two degrees. Secondly, the majority of participants are in my own age bracket (I am 25). I totalled 100 participants, mostly in Los Angeles, though about 20% were outside of California completely. I decided to include those responses because I see the participants as a diasporic community that extends from my own circles. In some ways I see the project as being for me and the community that I am a part of by degrees of separation. I don't intend to be prescriptive of any universal human truth or claim to represent all Queer people. I hope that the project can serve as a model of connection for any group of people who share community grief.

In regards to the focus group, I invited participants that opted in to being contacted and chose a select few who gave compelling responses to the survey questions and who peaked an interest to hear more. I also paid attention to include a variety of participants with differing racial and gender experiences. The group was structured with a set of guiding questions and the participants participated popcorn-style. Participants gave consent to be recorded and were told that they were able to leave at any point, mute, turn video off, or redirect conversation as they pleased.

Moving forward, I hope to continue analyzing the data I have collected for future zines, make a second version of the survey based on the questions that have come up from the responses to this first one, expand to broader communities with a more specific focus on the Los Angeles Area, hold more focus groups, and begin a network of resources to form our collective grief toolkit and ritual.

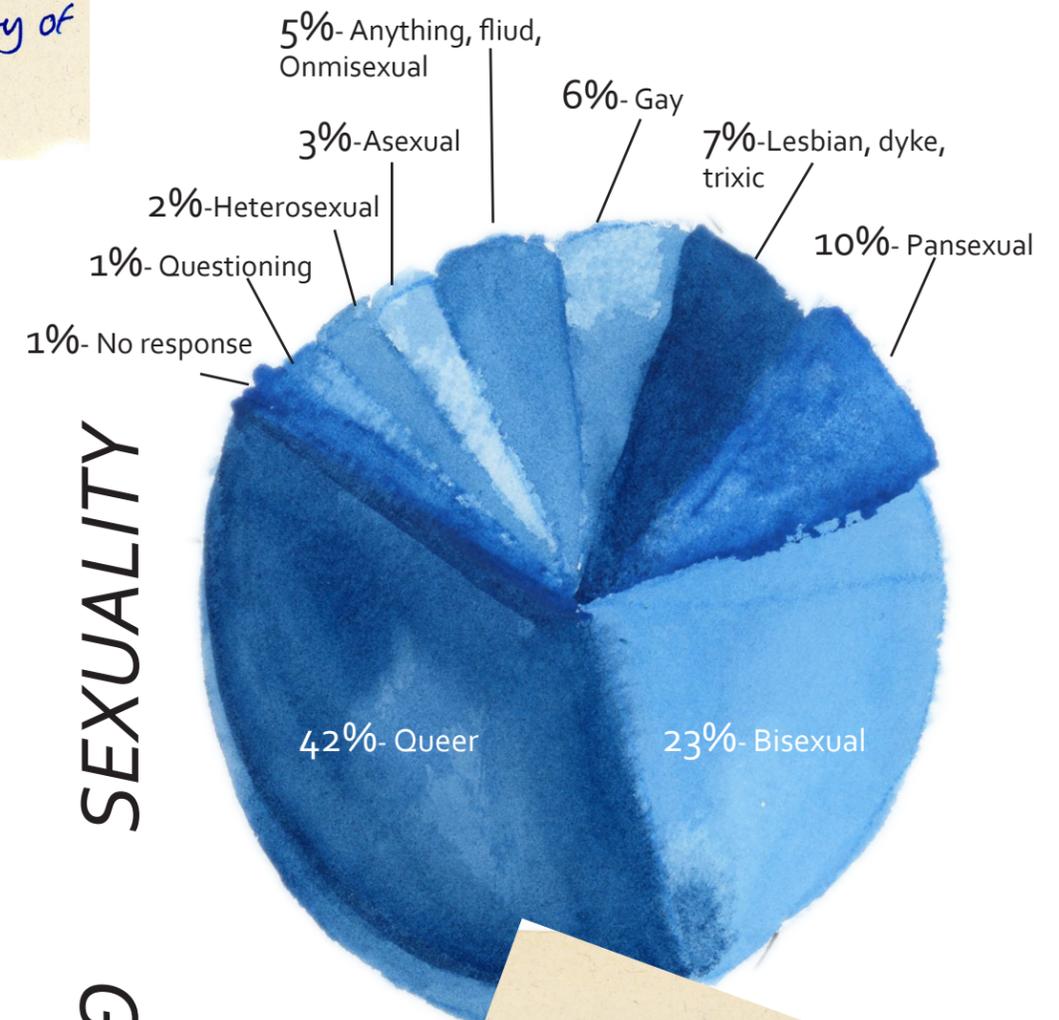
DEMOGRAPHICS

n=100



RACE/ETHNICITY

All demographic info was asked in short answer form to allow for full flexibility of self definition.

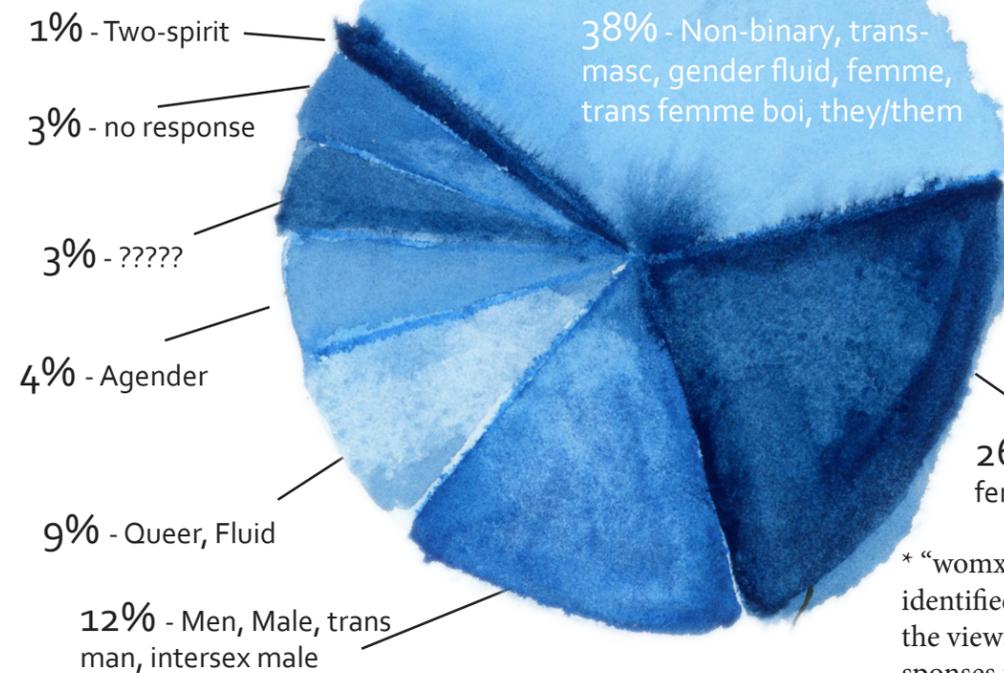


SEXUALITIES

GENDER

12% - Mixed, White and Asian, White and Middle Eastern, Black and white, Chinese and white, black and Latinx, White and pacific islander, indian and white, Mexican and filipino, Indigenous American and White, black/white/choc-taw

12% - Black, African American, Black Latinx, Afrochola

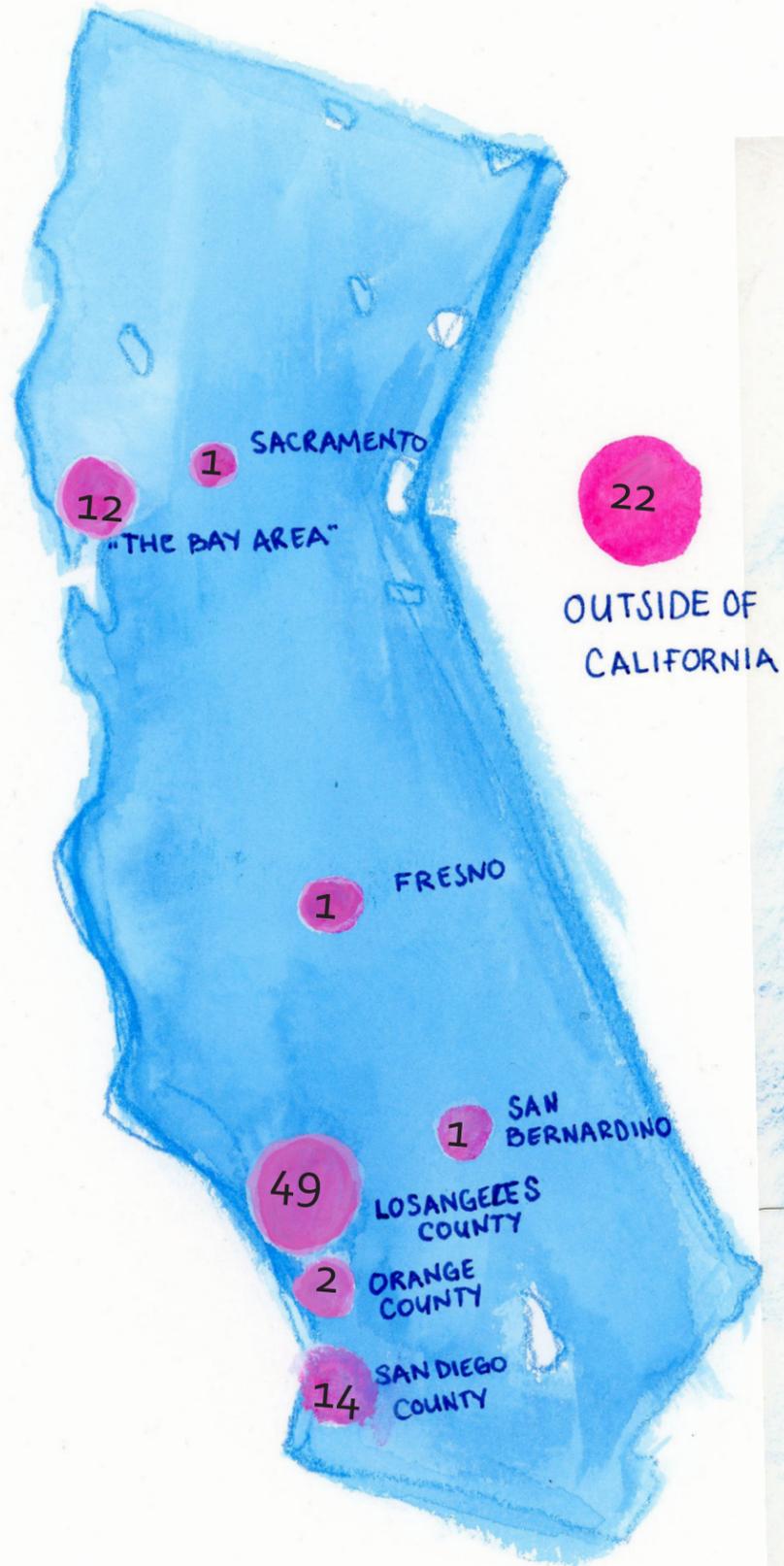


Regretably, I did not specifically track how many participants were trans, though some self-disclosed this information.

12% of participants listed multiple sexualities (e.g. bi/pan or Queer/pan) for the charts, I considered only the first identity listed.

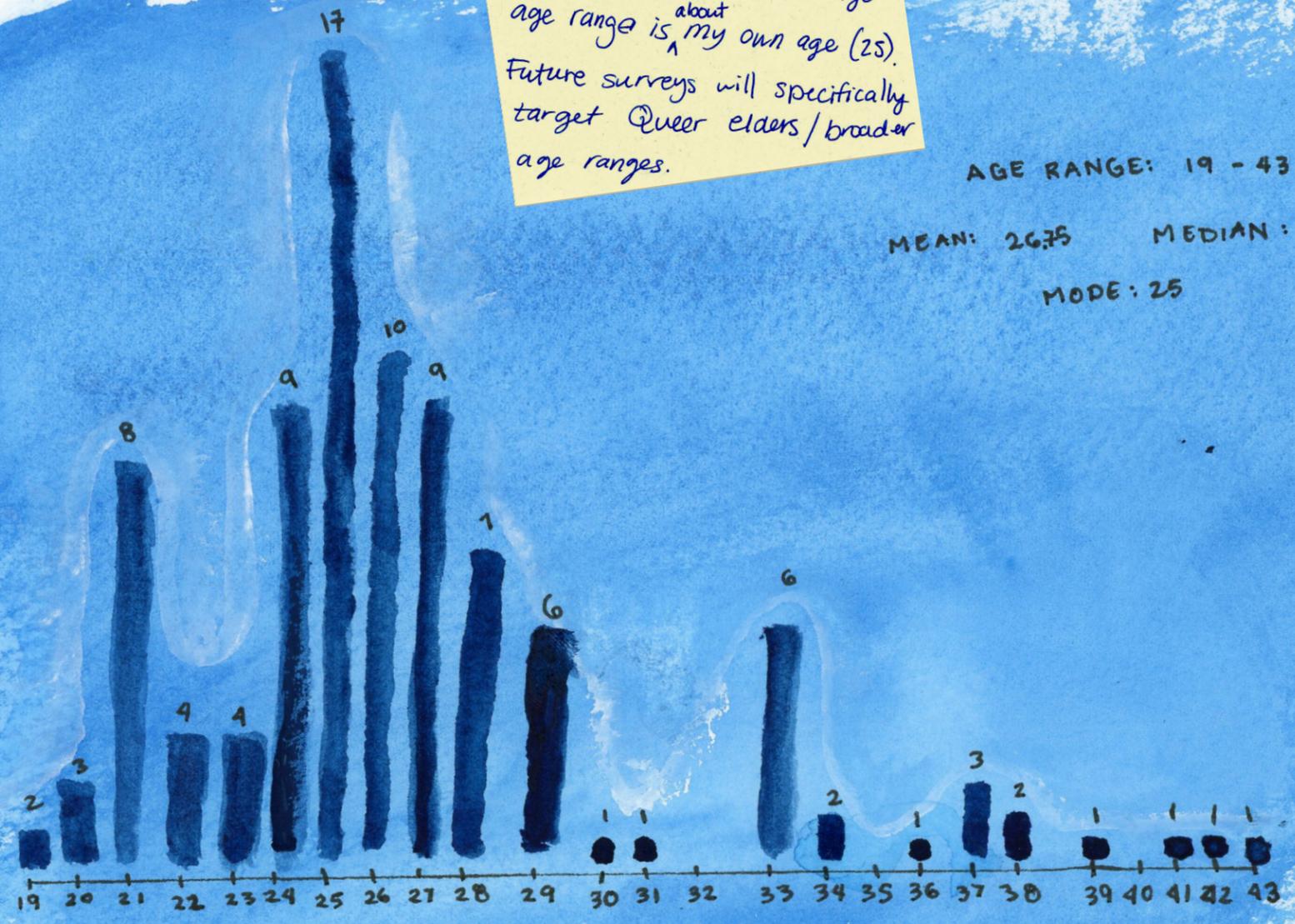
* "womxn" is a transmisogynistic term. I don't know the intention of the individual who identified this way in the survey, but I want to express that the term does not represent the views of the author and the reason for its inclusion is to accurately represent the responses in the survey.

LOCATION

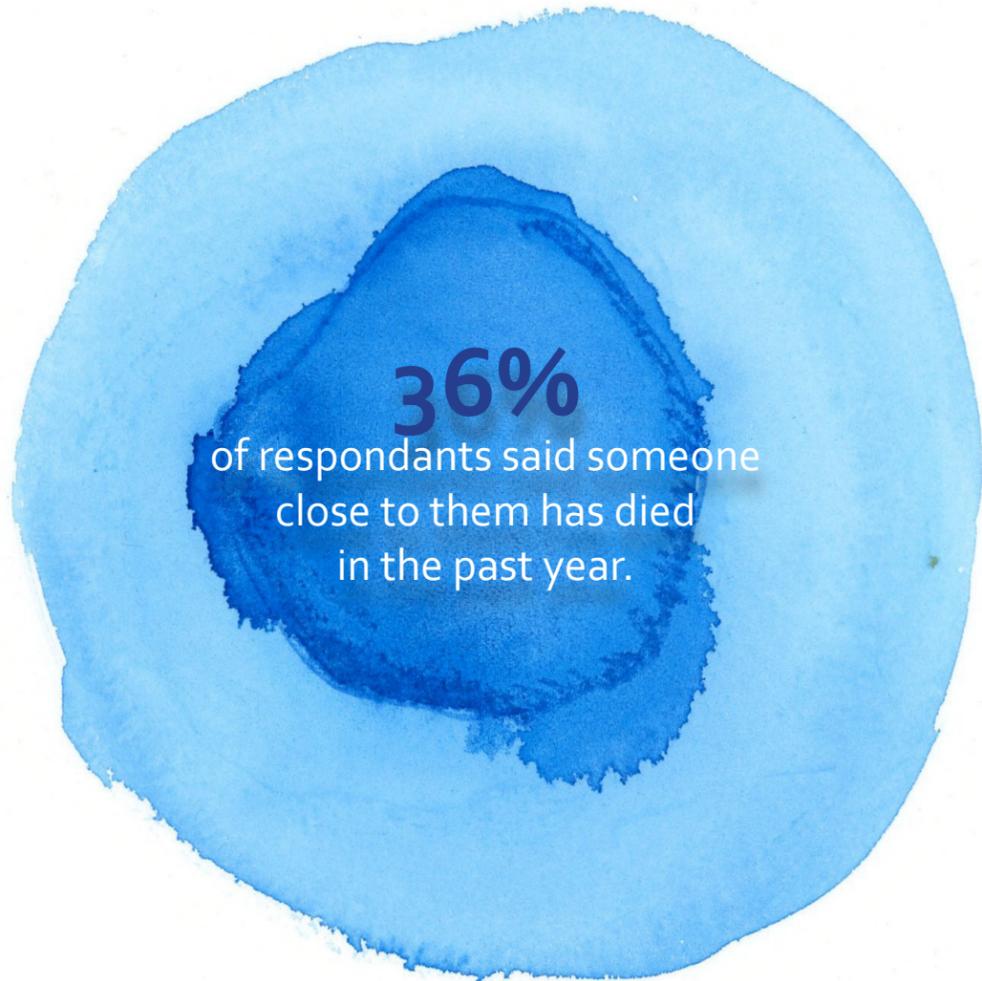


unsurprisingly, since this survey was mainly passed through word of mouth within my own circles, the average age range is ^{about} my own age (25). Future surveys will specifically target Queer elders/broader age ranges.

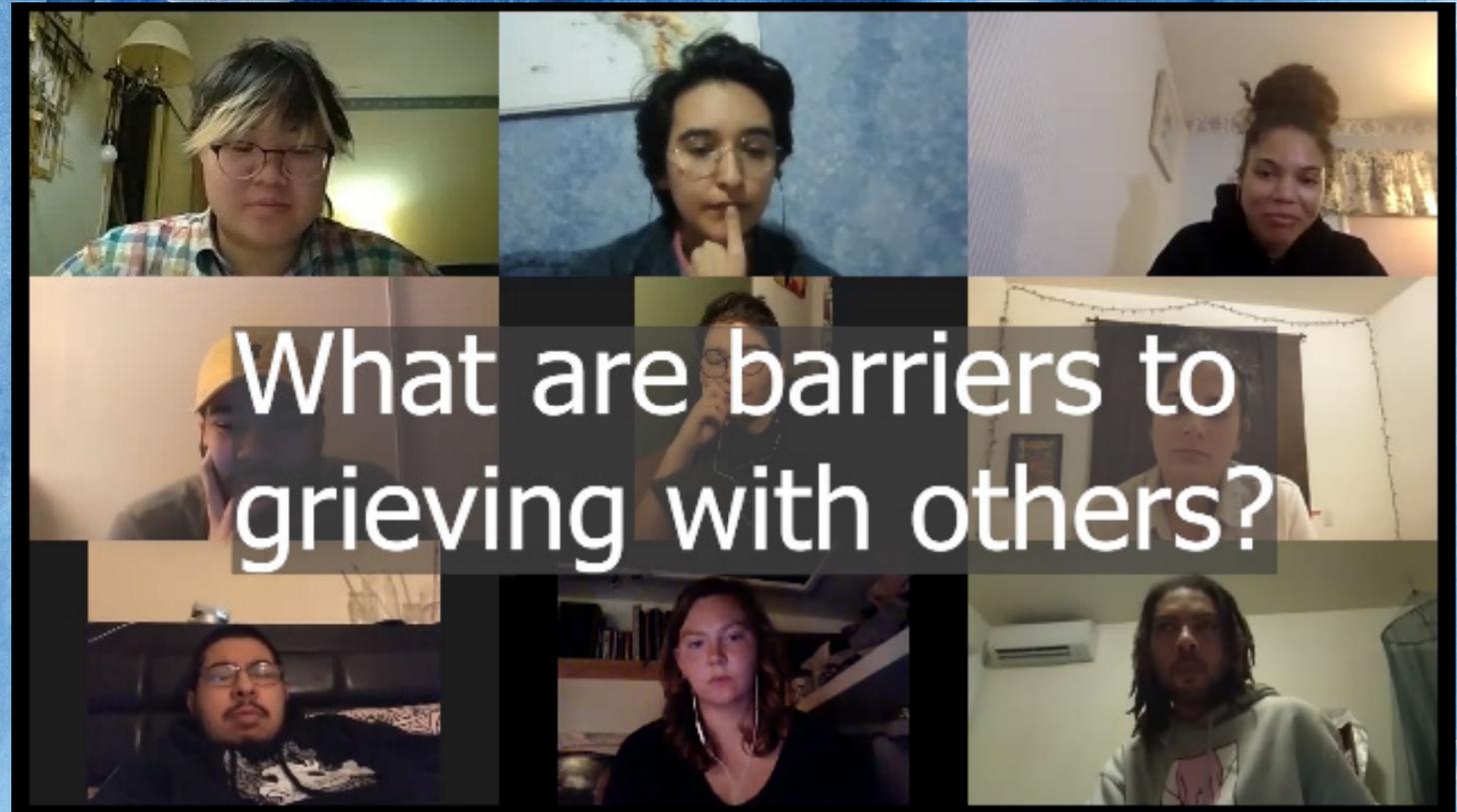
AGE RANGE: 19 - 43
 MEAN: 26.75 MEDIAN: 26
 MODE: 25



AGE



68%
of respondents said someone in their community has died in the past year.



87% said that stress from current events has impacted their ability to experience joy

67% of participants have disconnected from at least one family member due to political, social, or justice issues

62% of participants have disconnected from at least one friend due to political, social, or justice issues

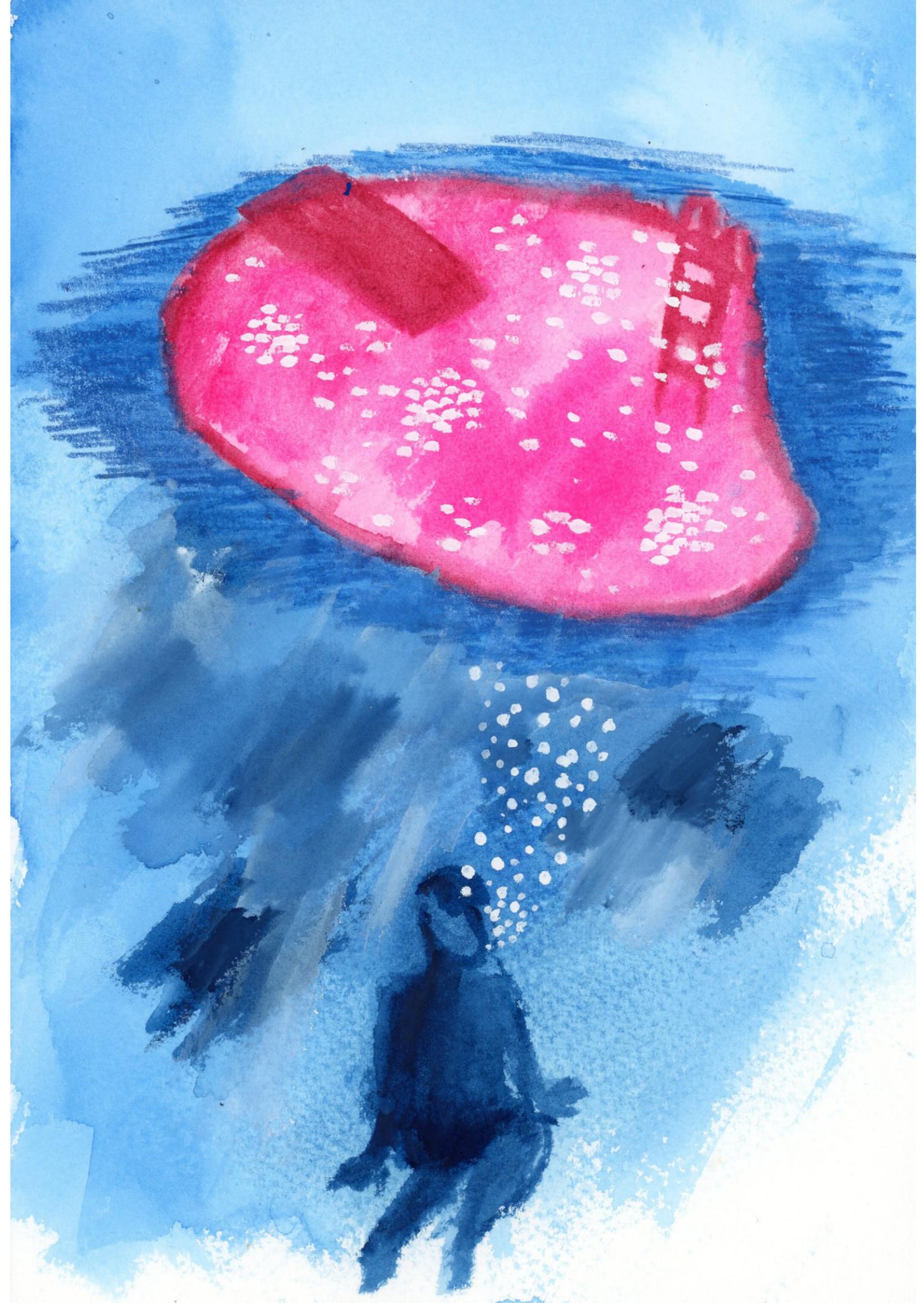
54% have experienced physical pain directly or indirectly related to grief

54% have experienced physical pain directly or indirectly related to current events

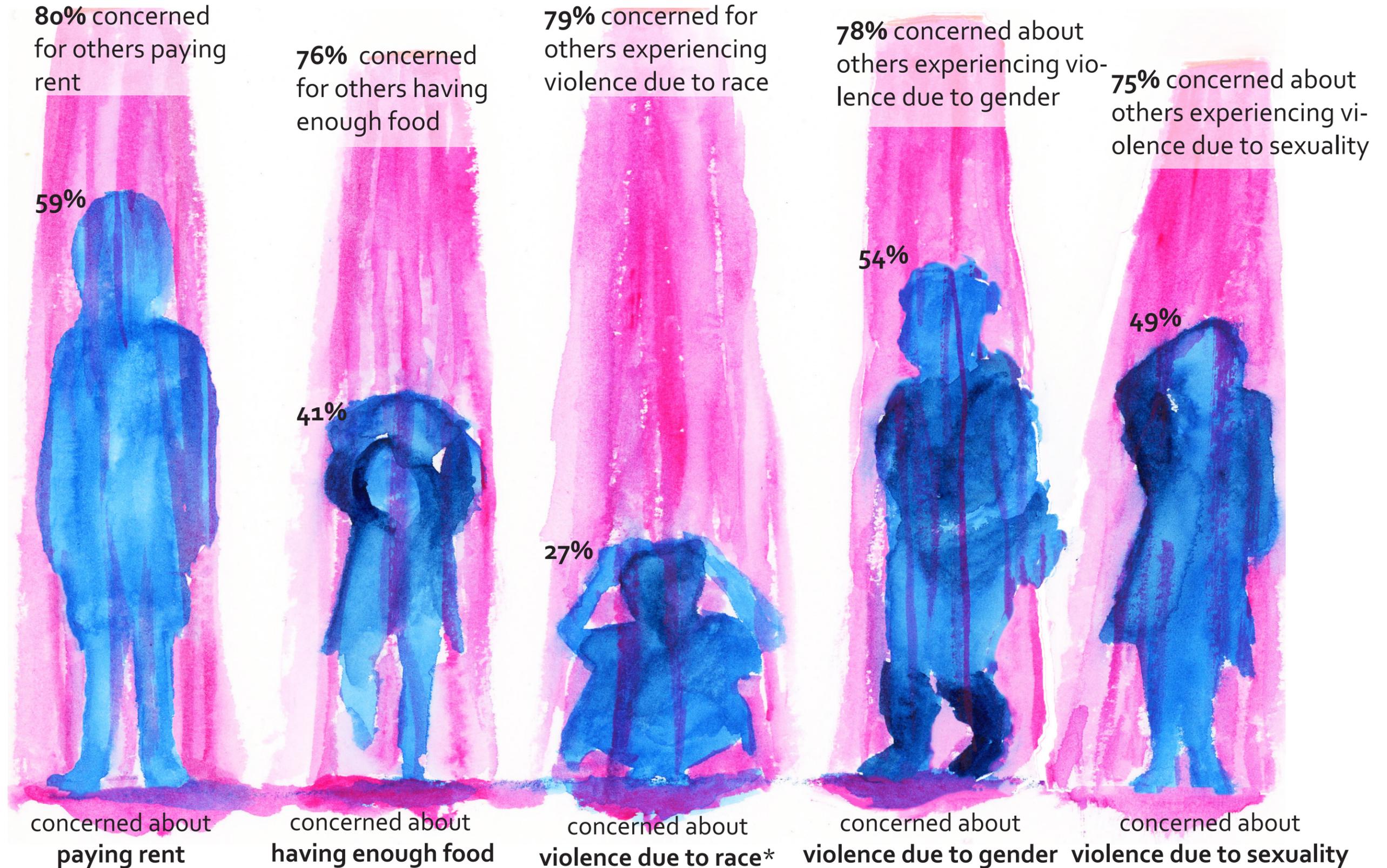
Top six most concerning issues for participants:

- 95% concerned about their personal mental health
- 93% concerned about the future of the country/the world
- 90% concerned about their personal future
- 86% concerned about mental health of others in their community
- 85% concerned about their physical health
- 84% concerned about physical health of others in their community

“As a kid I used to sink down to the bottom of swimming pools and sit so I could be alone. I wanted to experience something different, like an underwater world. I told my therapist that was the closest feeling to safety I can recall as a child and I try to remember that now when I feel I need safety.”



With the exception of personal physical and mental health, respondents were overwhelmingly more concerned for others in their community than for themselves.



concerned about paying rent

concerned about having enough food

concerned about violence due to race*

concerned about violence due to gender

concerned about violence due to sexuality

*reflective of racial demographics of study

89% live with at least one other person.

54% live with 1-2 other people.

Top six primary ways respondents have connected with others:

87% texting

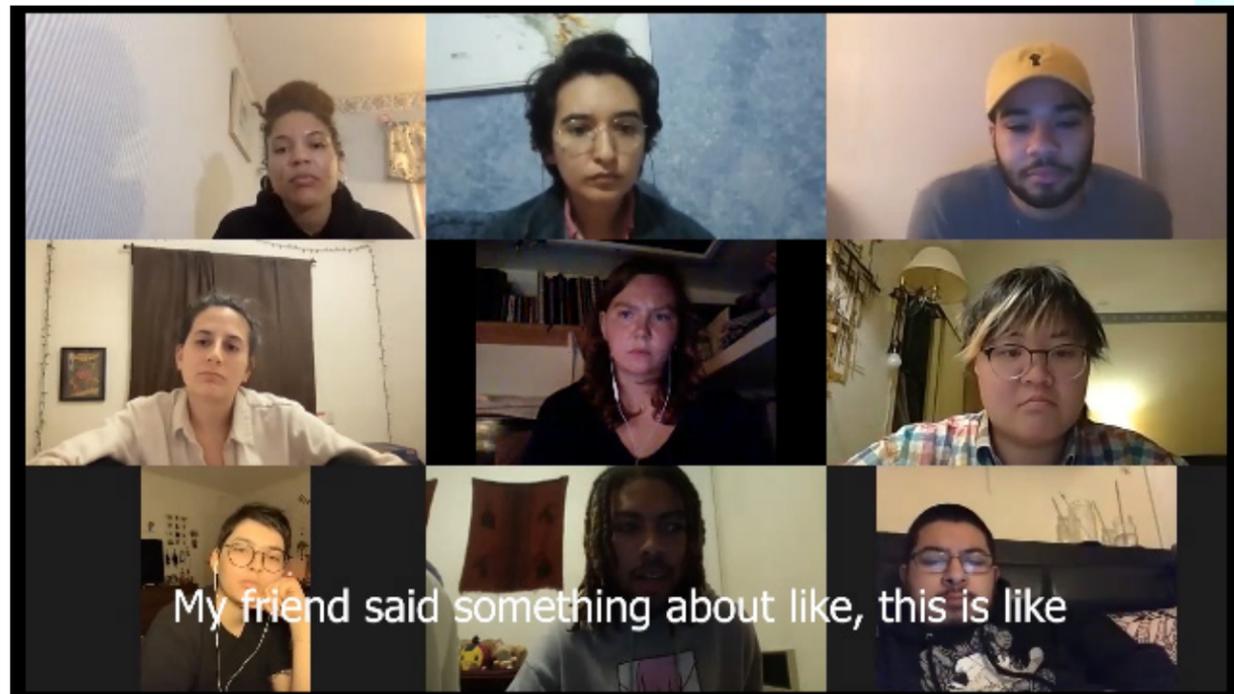
81% social media

78% video calls

69% phone calls

69% in person with the people they live with

51% in person outdoors.



“One day over the summer, I hiked with three friends to a reservoir. I carried an inner tube on our back, found a nice big log to post up, and we took turn floating on the tube in the water. We had a rope and would tie the tube to a tree and chilled for hours. We brought some chips and fruit and were surrounded by pesky lantern flies. One friend is afraid of water and I made them feel safe enough to get on the tube and I waded in the water next to them, holding the tube in place to make them feel safer. It was a beautiful day.”

the things we grieve



"I notice I have a hard time recognizing grief as grief in myself. When I think about it, grief has been a major mode through which I have lived my life. I feel I have lost many foundational relationships or versions of myself and being in the world through being queer, trans, mentally ill, being too political, and other reasons beyond death. I am trying to focus more on grief as a stage of transformation rather than a static marker of loss."

- Loss of job/financial insecurity
- Mental health
- Physical health, loss of ability
- Rise of right wing extremism
- Rise of white supremacy
- Covid-19
- Violence against black people
- Failure of the government
- Police brutality
- Interpersonal tension
- Housing instability
- Food instability
- Large amounts of death
- Transphobic violence
- Wealth disparity
- The state of the world
- Homophobic violence
- Racism
- Isolation
- Political division
- Ableism
- Homelessness
- Uncertainty around personal future
- Community physical health
- Community food stability
- Community housing security
- The spread of misinformation
- Wildfire destruction
- Destruction of neo-liberalism
- The impact of climate change
- Violence against black trans women
- Lack of adherence to covid policy
- Lack of services
- Election season anxiety
- Loss of healthcare
- Loss to suicide
- Loss to drug abuse
- Community financial instability
- Gender dysphoria
- Environmental racism
- BIPOC access and stance towards vaccines
- Gatekeeping/exclusion
- The state of public education
- Community mental health
- Break up/end of relationship
- Medical discrimination
- Loss of "normalcy"
- Loss of work/home distinction
- Loss of LGBTQ safe spaces

54%

have been in contact with other people outside of their household at least once a week if not multiple times a week or daily.

74%

are in contact with others daily through calls, texts, social media, etc.

41%

said they felt **less connected, or much less connected**, with others in the past 12 months.

66%

are **unsatisfied or very unsatisfied** with the amount of time they spend with others.

44%

are **unsatisfied or very unsatisfied** with the quality of connection.



“This summer I went to the beach with a group of friends, a few times, but there was one person in that group who I’d just started repairing my relationship with. The two of us were also the only two who went very far into the water. I stood there looking into the waves, and he came up near me and said, ‘Look at you, being all emo at the beach,’ and it made me laugh. I felt happy he came near me and happy the beach gave us an occasion to simplify our relationship. We were just two friends, playing with the waves. A wave knocked my glasses off and he tried and failed to help me find them.”

74%

felt **equally or more connected** to household.

49%

felt **more connected or much more connected** to their household.

55%

felt **more connected or much more connected** to their “chosen family”

thoughts so far

The grief data that stands out to me is how participants seemed to significantly indicate concern for others over themselves. I brought to mind the increase in mutual aid & crowdfunding that has appeared on my social media. We have come to rely on our communities to compensate for our governments failures.

+ who gets left out?

This suggests to me a direct counter to the "survival of the fittest" mentalities. In crisis, people are largely concerned for others - community care is already a priority.

"i remember one time i was on facetime with october and they were washing dishes and all i could see was a soapy sink and i could only hear loud clinking, in this moment i felt so calm, i was experiencing a vulnerable moment with my favorite person and the ambient noise made my brain go numb."



I was surprised to see that, despite a large percent of respondents indicating that they have felt less connected to others this past year and are unsatisfied with the amount of time they are spending with other people - a large amount also said they felt more/much more connected to their household. A majority (55%) said they felt more/much more connected to "chosen family".

↓
this is consistent with short answer responses that repeated over & over again that people felt the pandemic has "tested" their relationships and forced people to be more selective about their "pods".
I hypothesize that close relationships have strengthened while casual relationships have weakened. Why else would there be such clear dissatisfaction? What is the implication for grand scale interconnectedness?

WHERE WE TURN FOR HEALING

(numbers in parentheses indicate the amount of responses that included this item in response to the question "Where do you turn to for healing?")

BODY/SENSES (58)

- Physical movement (15)
- Music (12)
- Scents (5)
- Non-music sounds (4)
- Hot showers/baths (3)
- Breathing (3)
- Bodily awareness (3)
- Touch (3)
- Eating (3)
- Tea/Health foods (2)
- Blankets/comfort items (2)
- Yelling
- Yoga
- Nudity

SELF-FOCUSED (24)

- Rest (6)
- Self reflection (6)
- Mindfulness (5)
- Writing, journaling (5)
- Stillness (3)
- Imagination/curiosity (3)
- Self-affirmation

SPIRITUALITY (24)

- Spirituality (9)
- Meditation (9)
- Ancestors (2)
- Prayer
- Tarot
- Reiki
- Smoke/water cleanse

COMMUNITY (33)

- Human interaction/community (16)
- Conversation (7)
- Therapy (7)
- Helping others (2)
- Pets

NATURE (29)

- Being in Nature (12)
- Bodies of water (9)
- Plants, gardening, trees (6)
- Sunshine
- Wide skies

MISC. (24)

- Substances (pain medicine, weed, shrooms, alcohol) (9)
- Crying (9)
- Movies/ TV (2)
- Laughter (2)
- Mindlessly looking at screens
- Porn

CREATIVE EXPRESSION (10)

- Artmaking (7)
- Fashion/dressing up
- Singing
- Body modification

Responses around music was unclear if they meant listening to music or making music. Can also fall under "Creative Expression"

Crying & laughing = more an affect of healing than healing itself?

Nature
Body senses
increased mindfulness

Shrooms
↓
enhance mindfulness

PAIN MEDS
WEED
MINDLESS LOOKING AT SCREENS
↓
(porn?) could be bodily?
NUMBING

thoughts so far part 2



"I remember rain. Before the pandemic I worked outdoors and found myself getting caught in the rain on the rare occasions it rains here. I can remember my wet dyed hair on my face and the way the beads of water rolled down my face"



Respondants largely turn to modes of healing that stimulate senses & bodily awareness. This confirms what I have read in The Body Keeps the Score that the body has a primary role in how we process emotions. Van der Kolk tells a story about a study done after 9/11 to see where people went for healing and it was overwhelmingly massage, acupuncture, physical therapy as opposed to a smaller percentage of people who engage in classic talk therapy. — that being said the second most popular category was community including talking & being with others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Women's Center for Creative Work and The Music Center for selecting, funding, and promoting this project.

Thank you to Colleen McCullough for working through the concept with me, helping me organize my thoughts, leading the focus groups, and for inspiring the project in the first place.

Thank you to the multitude of people who engaged in conversation with me about this work, particularly Iris Hu, Carol Zou, Kade Twist, Sam Calvetti, Xixi Edelsbrunner, and Genna Bloombecker.

Thank you a million times to everyone who completed the survey, shared the survey, and showed up to the focus group-- you are all the reason there's anything to write about or think about.

and a sacred dedication to my loved ones watching over me: Delmy Urquilla, Fran Guerra, Moose Morales, Tinsley Nugent, Tia Martina, Abuelito Luciano and Abuelita Maria.

UPCOMING

Spa Embassy (Carol Zou and Carrie Marie Schneider) and Leo Alas would like to propose A Space for Every Body, a project in three parts. A Space for Every Body approaches healing from the perspective that traditional forms of healing like psychiatry and gender-segregated spas have been inaccessible and violent to queer and BIPOC bodies, and that art and somatic methods can provide a way of refashioning queer modes of healing. The project is open to queer-identified individuals and centers trans and BIPOC individuals in the co-creation of new rituals for grief, care, and healing. The project consists of three parts:

- Online focus group with queer identified individuals to discuss healing rituals, healing methods, and to solicit input for care packages.
- Locally sourced care packages distributed to queer, trans, and BIPOC individuals across LA County as selected through coordination with community partners.
- Online workshop with queer identified individuals to collectively build a vision of a genderqueer spa/healing space by using the digital platform gather.town.

Also look out for follow up survey and vol. 2 of BATH.

Follow @leo.alas on instagram or subscribe on www.leo-alas.com for updates on the ongoing work around grief and healing.