Cynde Valenti

Thesis Proposal

Stetson University

MFA in Creative Writing

July 24, 2026

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Thesis: ***Central Concept***

The central concept for my work in this MFA program has been death, which began to appear in my work from the beginning as I was still grieving the loss of my husband of 25-years to Covid. Midway into the program, I experienced divorce and the grief of a dying relationship. My work includes the processing of these deaths in two ways: as a widow and as a divorcee. Significant grief is involved in the ending that comes with these two life experiences. What was my life like while facing these times of death? What's on the other side of these endings? Is it possible to pick up the pieces and move forward? If so, how does that happen? These are questions my work strives to answer through the realization that "the end is the beginning." For my thesis, I intend to use this realization as the central focus around which my work will be presented.

I propose that I will complete a book of poetry, including written poems, graphic and concrete poems, photographs, audio and video poems, and possibly excerpts from my Covid memoir. The book, tentatively titled *The End is the Beginning,* will be interactive with QR code links to audio and video poetry. The book will express grief, examine the reality of widowhood, recognize divorce as a sort of death, and point readers to hope — to new beginnings and the possibilities of life renewing itself when least expected. Death will hold hands with life while discovering the important connection between them.

Thesis: ***Traits of Genre, Craft, and Form*** **(*written words, graphics, photographs, videography, audio, abstraction, typography, and performance)***

My work in this program began with an obsession around breath and breathing. This was presented at my first residency in an interactive video that led the audience through breathing that took them back to Covid — including a jolting scream that caused them to feel the reality of my loss. That loud scream and the audience's reaction hooked me on performance, which I've included in each of my residency presentations since. In class with Terri Witek and Cyriaco Lopes, I began practicing breath and vocal work. They led me to record my own voice for my video poems. Using my own voice and performing are huge steps of growth for me. I recall Terri asking me, "What's wrong with your voice?" She really made me feel like it was okay to speak and to speak up — finding my voice.

Photography and videography are comfortable mediums for me, and I could not produce complete work that didn't include them. Graphic design is a way that I can reduce poems to their best words. My semester with Kenzie Allen allowed me to expand my words and focus on specificity. I dug into my Covid memoirs and used more specific language, such as my husband's last words. I explored a storage unit that holds items from our time together. I traveled to Ameila Island, Florida and Jekyll Island, Georgia for photos and footage of the driftwood beaches, also known as boneyard beaches, when I was writing about my husband's cremation and questioning, "What happens to the bones?" I also traveled to Savannah, Georgia to visit the SCAD Museum for poetic inspiration. Abstract visuals are among my favorites, and they often pair well with poetry — as do abstract sounds and glitch. My work has a focus on circles and the colors red, white, and black. My photography has been mostly black and white, which I will continue using to complete my thesis work and final presentation. This semester, I intend to photograph images that juxtapose those I've taken relating to death — images of recovery, renewal, starting over, and moving forward — light and life.

Thesis: *Influences*

My list of influences during this program is extensive. For breath work, Hannah Foley's *Breathing Backwards (Breath Score)* and Bob Cobbing's work with vocals. For performance, Pina Baush's *The Fall Dance,* Carolee Schneeman (body works), and Fluxus artist Alison Knowles. For erasure poetry, Kate Baer's *I Hope This Finds You Well* and Alycia Cook's *Sorry I Haven't Texted You Back.* For video work, Lawrence Weiner's *Blue Moon Over,* Len Lye's abstract videos, "A Color Box" and "Trade Tattoo," Ken Jacob's "Celestial Subway Lines / Salvaging Noise Ch. 3," and Laurie Anderson's "O Superman." For abstraction, Cy Twombly. For typography, H.N. Werkman, especially his "Mit Schreibmaschie 1923-29" and Stefan Sagmeister. For glitch and visual art, Rosa Menkman. For red, black and white images, Terry Frost and Barbara Kruger, and Piet Mondrian for geometric shapes. Poets: Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, T.S. Eliot, Etel Adnan, Andrea Gibson, Raquel Gutiérrez, Richard Blanco, Matthea Harvey, and Mary Elizabeth Frye. For images depicting death and influencing poetry, Hans Balding Grien's "The Three Ages of a Woman and Death" and "Death in the Sickroom" by Edvard Munch. For the concept of preservation, Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living.* For black and white photography and images, Sebastião Salgado, Ruth Berhard, Ansel Adams, Clyde Butcher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Arrayah Loynd's "Pain Always Finds the Surface," Käthe Kollwitz's "The Widow I (Die Witwe I)," Lee Krasner's "White Squares," and Pablo Picasso's "Guernica." Chay Schmidt's *100 Ad Poems,* inspired a series of graphic design poems. On widowhood and grief, Tim Guthrie, the American Widow Project, Jonathan Santlofer, Jennifer Loeber, Donielle Young: The Grief Disruptor, A.F. Moritz's "Conversation with a Widow," and Margaret Atwood's "Widows."

Thesis: *Installation and Performance*

I plan to exhibit photographs and videos alongside my written poetry, as well as have copies of my completed book at my final thesis presentation. I will also perform. On the walls, I will have large black and white canvas photos to accompany each section of the performance, as well as a few poster-sized poems. I will create a breath score to play on a Bluetooth speaker as people are engaging with the images and poetry. I would also like a television to loop videos.

For the performance, I will continue with red, black, white, and circles. I will have three six-foot round, red, area rugs on which I will perform while wearing black and/or white. On the first circle, I will be dressed in black as a widow while handing out 2x2 inch black cards with my graphic design poems series printed on them. I will tear the black veil and scream. On the second circle, I will have my wedding dress on a stand (to which I have stapled items from my relationship with my ex-husband). I will still be dressed in black, to contrast the white wedding dress, while using scissors to cut and tear the dress. On the third circle, my current thoughts are to remove the black robe I'm wearing to reveal a black and white fun/party outfit — with dancing. This third circle doesn't feel complete in my mind yet and could change during the creative process. I've been known to make performance alterations day of and during the performance, so this could all change — but there will be performance. If possible, I would like to set this up in the dance studio at the ACA and perform on Saturday evening.