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## Mourning and memorializing in the COVID-19 era

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### ABSTRACT

This short essay engages the efforts of artists, activists, and mourners to memorialize those who have died during the COVID-19 pandemic. These commemorative sites provide needed correctives to the physical absences, political opportunism, and statistical abstractions that have tended to personify the pandemic. As with the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the tropes of individualism and tactility materialize frequently in conversations about these displays. Despite the generative impulses of these memorials, it is imperative that these creations move beyond performative gestures of sentimentality to ensure that the civic agony inflicted by anti-science and far-right movements is not repeated.

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Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg's *In America: Remember* is perhaps the most recognizable memorial in the U.S.A. dedicated to those who have died from COVID-19. Firstenberg planted hundreds of thousands of white flags in the shadow of the Washington Monument in the fall of 2021 to capture the enormity of the pandemic and to provide a space for communal mourning. The artist invited people to record the names of departed loved ones on individual flags to facilitate acts of memory and to express their grief. The white flags were meant to visually represent the innocence of individual lives lost, as well as the country's collective surrender to the coronavirus. Looking out on her temporary installation, she told one news outlet, "Those who have come to write on flags, they've told me repeatedly, 'We feel like we're no longer alone.' They realize that all this time they were grieving in isolation – they had a lot of company."<sup>1</sup> This was actually the second iteration of Firstenberg's memorial in Washington D.C. and while it was visually similar to the first production, there was one noteworthy difference: its name. The initial exhibit was titled, *In America: How Could This Happen?* Firstenberg has remarked that the original immersive project was, in part, a critique of the Trump administration's failed policies to contain the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The repackaging of the memorial's name from one of indignation and shock to one that emphasizes remembrance was not accidental. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Firstenberg reflected that her efforts "began in outrage" but after encountering so many bereaved family members her "anger gave way to their outcries of grief."<sup>3</sup> Firstenberg pointed to the imperative of art to fill the void brought by COVID-19 and noted that the last time a project of this size appeared on the National Mall was the AIDS Memorial Quilt, featured in its entirety, in 1996.

*In America* sought to afford some dignity to the 700,000 people lost to the pandemic and act as a reminder of the work yet to be done – just as the Quilt had. Firstenberg’s undertaking to capture the calamity of the pandemic is undeniably laudable but her transition from a sense of acrimony to one of sorrow poses questions about the ways the pandemic is being brought to life in emerging understandings of the COVID-19 era.

*In America* is one of dozens of memorials that have materialized since the pandemic unceremoniously arrived in the early months of 2020. Unlike Firstenberg’s vision, many of these memory projects were created and displayed in specific localities and, as such, their collective character both defies easy classification and resists theoretical tidiness. This is not so surprising: the meaning-making endeavors that emanate from diverse communities due to a global catastrophe are predictably fragmented, manifold, and narratively partial. At the same time, these installations are repeatedly, and increasingly, articulated to familiar national artifacts like the Quilt, whose rhetorical character has always been more semiotically slippery than resolutely conclusive. In this short essay, I engage the efforts of artists, activists, and mourners to memorialize those lost to COVID-19. I argue that these commemorative sites provide needed correctives to the physical absences, political opportunism, and statistical abstractions that have tended to personify the pandemic. I contend that, despite the generative impulses of these displays, it is imperative that they move beyond performative gestures of sentimentality to ensure that the civic agony inflicted by anti-science and far-right movements is not repeated. The tropes of individualism and tactility surface frequently in discussions of these make-shift memorials but both of these figures are politically narrow and scientifically flawed when contemplating America’s botched response to the virus.

## Public emotionality and the emergence of the COVID-19 memorial

The political polarization and social ambivalence that characterizes much of today’s era will most certainly affect how we remember those who died from COVID-19. Practices of witnessing that might cast traumatic experiences into a form of collective memory are currently confounded by the most rudimentary facts. As of this moment, for example, the most fundamental aspects of the outbreak narrative remain in flux. This includes whether or not the pandemic has actually ended.<sup>4</sup> And while consensus about the narrative arc of a seismic cultural event like COVID-19 is in many ways an impossible (and perhaps unwanted) endeavor, there is also little denying that the fragmented accounts of the pandemic are already complicating efforts to memorialize those who died from the virus.<sup>5</sup> Critics such as Alissa Wilkinson argue that a memorial’s most important function is to demand accountability from political leaders, which is unlikely in a sharply divided polity.<sup>6</sup> Some public memory experts believe that the ways COVID-19 has been politicized suggests that a single monument will never capture the totality of the disaster.<sup>7</sup> Still others contend that mass death from medical phenomena are rarely memorialized similarly to pivotal historical events such as wars.<sup>8</sup> The 1918 Flu, which killed at least 50 million people worldwide, stands as one example of an event that was seemingly vanquished from public memory. Despite the barriers posed by political consternation and the yearning to put the past behind us, a number of artists, activists, and grieving loved ones have fabricated commemorative sites to ensure that such erasures are not repeated. A wealth of vernacular memorials have sprouted up around the country and

signaled a collective desire to consecrate the dead and capture the symbolic magnitude of COVID-19 outside the dispiriting recitation of biopolitical abstractions.

The pandemic has, by necessity, been represented through the collection and circulation of statistics that offered a snapshot of its devastation. News organizations such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* provided continuous updates about COVID-19's expanding vectors of disease on their websites. These briefs were usually accompanied with a barrage of graphs and data that estimated the number of people infected, hospitalized, and dead. Such reports often included infection rates at the state and county level, which allowed readers to comparatively approximate their risks. Media talking-heads, such as Brian Williams, frequently coupled these details with familiar nationalistic refrains such as "never forget" in an attempt to hold lawmakers accountable.<sup>9</sup> Yet these metrics of loss, especially when articulated to battle slogans like the one employed by Williams, provide little comfort when one is locked in their home or forced to work in unsafe conditions. For those who were asymptomatic carriers, or did not know a person affected by COVID-19, these denominations may have seemed even more nebulous, if not easier to dismiss altogether. The refrain that we need to personalize the pandemic to ensure that we do not forget its human toll illustrates the limitations of scientifically oriented discourse and its capacity to metaphorically capture the pandemic or persuade the recalcitrant. No doubt, these calls for humanization are also deeply familiar to those who lived through cataclysmic events such as the AIDS crisis.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the AIDS Memorial Quilt was devised as a mode of public emotionality that acted as an antidote to the biopolitical character of the AIDS pandemic.<sup>10</sup> As an iterant mode of remembrance, it personalized and humanized a crisis that was too often constituted with statistics and other measures of scientific rationalism. The formal qualities of the Quilt presented narrative reprisals of historical events and enabled novel forms of stranger-relationality. The peripatetic memorial, with its eclectic panels and diverse composition, attempted to mediate the complex dynamics of individual, communal, and collective trauma. It remains both a sacred artifact and a tactile expression of the profane. Its uniform composition makes it subtly normative, even as the totality of the Quilt is resoundingly queer. Tellingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has been actualized with resonant rhetorics of political malfeasance and a struggle to forge meaning out of chaos and despair.<sup>11</sup> Many of today's provisional memorials, much like the Quilt, emphasize the import of remembering those we have lost as individuals and not statistics, as well as the human desire for touch, both of which seek to mitigate the ephemeral effects of forgetting.

### **Individuality/tactility/memory**

Mourners who organized memorials to those lost to COVID-19 regularly contrasted scientific empiricism against the need to personalize the pandemic. The creators of these memory sites have attempted to mitigate the otherwise biopolitical tendencies of social science or medicine by accentuating their work with various materials and media: flags, chairs, and flowers are among some of the most frequently utilized tools to capture the individual lives that have been lost. Those efforts have been consistently underscored by those who come to bear witness and testify to the humanity these displays

represent. One mourner at Firstenberg's exhibit commented, "My husband passed on our 23rd anniversary ... He's more than a statistic. He's my best friend."<sup>12</sup> In Atlanta, the Coalition 2 Save Lives created a display titled "Loved Ones, Not Numbers" in front of the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. It represented the thousands of Georgians who died from COVID-19 and also implored governor Brian Kemp to implement and enforce a statewide mask mandate. Organizers in Detroit developed the Drive-By Memorial, which featured 1,500 billboard-sized photos of those who passed away, the vast majority of whom were people of color.<sup>13</sup> African Americans makeup 14% of Michigan's population but comprised 40% of all COVID-19 deaths early in the crisis. Governor Gretchen Whitmer remarked, "It's easy to get numb in this environment, but we must not just look at this as numbers. These are people. Men and women, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, brothers and sisters, who had dreams and plans and a story. They weren't finished yet."<sup>14</sup> At the Cape Ann Museum in Massachusetts, curators beseeched interlocutors to resist the impersonal statistics that shape COVID-19's public narrative. Artist Pamela Hersch, who created a video installation that depicts more than 2,000 souls floating from the ground to the sky every two minutes, told the press, "We get used to the numbers we hear each day, but each of these numbers represents a profound loss for so many."<sup>15</sup> The Twitter account FacesOfCOVID, which has amassed over 150,000 followers, communicates the stories of those lost to the virus and states their purpose bluntly in their bio: "They were more than a statistic." And mourners in locations as disparate as Phoenix, Nashville, and Pierre, South Dakota, utilized empty chairs to capture the scope of the pandemic's brutality.

Along with the focus on individualism in COVID-19 memorials, there has been an emphasis on the need to touch such structures. Tactility surfaced as a mechanism of remembrance because it captures the human desire for connection and reflects the inability of people to touch during the pandemic. This includes those who died alone in hospitals and without the comforting presence of a loved one. One woman reflected on Firstenberg's display by noting its reparative interactivity: "They make a seemingly undifferentiated sea of lives individual, tactile markers that can be seen and touched."<sup>16</sup> Emily Godbey, an art and visual culture professor at Iowa State, told PBS, "The more temporary solution, like putting chairs out or putting flags out, is really going to need to be replaced by something that people can go and touch and mourn and get some of their feelings out."<sup>17</sup> A member of MASS Design Group conveyed a similar sentiment, arguing, "I think those memorials which just exist and mark names, but don't force us to act, are less successful. When people walk away from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial with a rubbing of a name, they are tactically engaging the wall. ... They are physically feeling, touching, and reflecting on a name among many names."<sup>18</sup> Artist Rael San Fratello told the *Atlantic* of his plans to construct a giant memorial forged from copper, which is a metal that captures traces of human interaction and smell. "If touched constantly," he observed, "the patina might never occur, and the memorial will remain shiny."<sup>19</sup> A man whose uncle died from COVID-19 explicitly longed for such physicality in memorials: "Give us objects we can touch and regard in physical volume. Make us aware of the physical spaces now unoccupied. A way of giving voice to those we've lost. We were here. We still matter. We didn't vanish."<sup>20</sup> Of course, even as physical contact was absent from many people's lives throughout 2020, we should not forget that COVID-19 itself was not spread via touch but through the air.

Memorials that incorporate vehicles for touching will invariably be semiotically knotty when articulated to narratives about the virus.

Given the focus on individuality and tactility in these memorials, it is not surprising that the AIDS Quilt was repeatedly floated as an inspiration for these creations. Gert McMullin, an activist and caretaker of the AIDS Quilt for over three decades, conveyed its tactile value: “It’s cloth. It’s warm. It’s cozy.”<sup>21</sup> In Los Angeles, 13-year-old Madeleine Fugate began the COVID Memorial Quilt for a final project in her history class. Her mother worked on the AIDS Quilt and the teen reiterated a familiar rhetoric when she stated, “They aren’t just numbers – they are real people who have lives, jobs, families, and friends, a pet.”<sup>22</sup> The reappearance of the Quilt led to a resurgence of talking-points that often accompanied its coverage in the 1980s and 90s, including statistics about its weight and size, which acted as metaphors for the calamity of AIDS itself.<sup>23</sup> These historical echoes of remembrance can also be felt in recent calls for New York City to transform Hart Island into a COVID memorial. The island, which has been a burial site since the nineteenth century, holds a significant percentage of the city’s dead from the most recent pandemic – perhaps up to 10% of all victims. It is also the final resting place for scores of people who died from AIDS, as well as the 1918 Flu.<sup>24</sup>

### Rhetorical remainders in a post-pandemic world

The driving question we are left with is how, exactly, such memorials might capture the ephemerality of lives lost in a time of partisan acrimony in America. Pandemics are shaped by discourse and, in respect to the current crisis, political obtuseness and a blatant disregard for human life exacerbated COVID-19’s treacherous reach. If the AIDS Quilt taught us anything, it is that performances of public emotionality can engender potent forms of political redress in the face of unbearable grief. But the Quilt itself was also met with hostility and ambivalence from queer critics who found its focus on individualism and warmth a lackluster response to those who permitted the AIDS pandemic to rage.<sup>25</sup> In the movement to memorialize those who died we can already glean those places where fiery debate and a contestation over symbols may be wrought by those invested in actualizing the pandemic for specific ends. The gestures toward tactility, for instance, hint at an orientation that is more particular than universal. Those deemed “essential workers,” to take one example, were not able to socially distance or shelter in place.<sup>26</sup> If they worked in a location such as a grocery store they were certainly made to touch surfaces, breathe air in enclosed spaces, and manage the emotions of COVID-deniers who refused to wear masks. Many of them did so to stay afloat financially, maintain health benefits, or care for family members who were too sick to work. Their exposure to danger was not the result of individual choices or options but a duplicitous system that continually exploited them. I fear those stories, decidedly constituted by race and class, will be erased in our memories – the ephemeral experiences of people who will be reduced to a name on a plaque that comforts the living but does not address the consequences of our catastrophic response and our willingness to sacrifice people who are economically vulnerable, chronically ill, or disabled. The focus on individualism likewise has the potential to reinvent neoliberal approaches to public health that have been both ineffective and institutionally bankrupt.<sup>27</sup> We should not just

remember those who died – and assuredly we should remember them – but also those who so callously allowed them to perish.

Dan Brouwer reminds us that the Quilt was perhaps most potent because it remained open to multiple constituencies and retained an ability to foster coalitional politics. Drawing from the work of Tony Kushner, Brouwer notes that “The ‘painful progress’ of building coalitions sometimes requires a willingness to countenance or create ‘revision in the text,’ a willingness to recognize seemingly enduring and intractable stories about origins and trajectories as stories that are subject to change.”<sup>28</sup> The narrative reprisals we build into COVID-19’s telling can help us to remember those who have passed but also remind us of the willful ignorance so many elected to embrace. Already we are being asked by some to forget the pandemic and, for good reason, many are ready to comply. But the pandemic’s ephemeral effects will linger and our most vulnerable will live with its consequences for years to come.

## Notes

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3. Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg, “What the 700,000 Flags I Put on the National Mall Really Mean,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/10/01/national-mall-covid-flags-explanation/>
4. I am not attempting to surmise a utopic cultural cohesion about COVID’s narrative arc. Fragmentation, erasure, and forgetting are all components of the politics of memory. Scholars such as Kendall Phillips remind us that people “look to memory, especially the memories of important events, not only to remember those events for themselves, but also to urge others to remember them, for the promise of the past presented to us.” See Kendall Phillips, “The Failure of Memory: Reflections on Rhetoric and Public Remembrance,” *Western Journal of Communication* 74 (2010): 208–23.
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9. The 11th Hour with Brian Williams, MSNBC, February 26, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vte5U\\_fRcCk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vte5U_fRcCk).
10. Jeffrey A. Bennett, “A Stitch in Time: Public Emotionality and the Repertoire of Citizenship,” in *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris III (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011): 133–58.
11. I am not suggesting that the AIDS crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic are resoundingly similar. They are, in fact, very different. I point to these parallels only to think through

the ways memorials often run counter to the scientific reasoning that sometimes characterizes these two pandemics.

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25. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 265.
26. See Marina Levina, “Queering Intimacy, Six Feet Apart,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ World-making* 7 (2020): 195–200.
27. See, Cecília Tomori, Aziza Ahmed, Dabney P. Evans, Benjamin Mason Meier, Aparna Nair, “Your Health is in Your Hands? US CDC COVID-19 Mask Guidance Reveals the Moral Foundations of Public Health,” *EClinical Medicine* 38 (2021): 1–2.
28. Daniel C. Brouwer, “From San Francisco to Atlanta and Back Again: Ideologies of Mobility in the AIDS Quilt’s Search for a Homeland,” in *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris III (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011): 177.

## Disclosure statement

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