

## What is an Event and Are We in One?

Robin Wagner-Pacifi\* 

The New School, New York (United States)

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### Abstract

This article describes the temporal and spatial configurations and limitations of the rupture phase of historical events. It does so through a consideration of the intertwined forms and flows of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the social uprising against police violence targeting African-Americans in the United States. The article argues that these ruptures open up a “double exposure”, one that makes problematic conventional categories associated with events, like those of past and future and inside and outside, thus challenging our ability to situate ourselves in relation to such events.

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\*  [wagnerpr@newschool.edu](mailto:wagnerpr@newschool.edu)

“In the past, I’ve always made these things where the figure changes. Where the figure is kind of animated. And I had this revelation, kind of dumb and flat-footed, this summer: The ground has changed. This was after the George Floyd murder and the subsequent uprising — I was like, *the ground itself has shifted*. I was trying to make paintings that contained the shifting ground and the motion in them.”

– Amy Sillman, in Farago, 2020

## 1 The Rupture

We’ve all been thrown into the deep end of the ocean of history and we are thrashing around trying to stay afloat. We’re not sure where to look, what to pay attention to, or who to believe. It’s genuinely hard to get our bearings and seize the moment. This incomprehension provides the starting point for this essay.

A version of this essay was originally planned as a response to the viral pandemic, but it became imperative to incorporate the collective uprisings, in the United States and elsewhere, against police brutality targeting African Americans most systematically and continuously. I felt I needed to examine the expanding agenda of this uprising, an agenda that made explicit the connection between inequalities of the pandemic and inequalities more general, more historical, and more enduring. All of these reconsiderations of that paper and its remit led me to start with what might seem to be an obvious question: “What is this thing that is happening?”

Deciding what to call our eventful experiences, practices, and emergent structures is a huge part of determining how “these things” take shape and advance in space and time. It matters if something is identified as a natural disaster or a pandemic, an act of God or a human-made genocide. It matters if something is termed a riot, or a protest, or an uprising, or a revolution. It matters if it is identified as *one* event or several, and if several, if they are identified as sequential or co-occurring or co-constitutive. It matters if there is one event that is predominant and defining and one that is subordinate or residual. In our moment these events might include Pandemic, Economic Depression, Racism, Tyranny, and Climate Change.

But we begin all events in a state and phase of incomprehension and unknowing. We are caught by surprise. There is typically a phase of rupture at the outset of an event that is disorienting and disruptive, but not yet named and determined. In my book, *What Is an Event?* (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017), I claim that events erupt in this surprising way and then take shape and flow. The book describes the grounds and backgrounds of events, their moments of rupture, their forms, and their settling into some shape or resisting that settling. It also describes how individuals and collective forces seek to shape events even as they experience them, with all events’ startling powers to unhinge, amaze, and disorient, and ultimately, to change loyalties and identities, relationships and institutions.

## 2 Understanding Events

As noted above, the experiences and stakes of events are elemental and resonant. To say that they are historical (or individual) turning points, while true, doesn’t nearly get at their existential profundity. Events are also restless, continually moving across time and space, carried by the very forms that shape them as variously situated historical subjects attempt to control,

expand, or eliminate them. Some events appear rock solid, sometimes literally, as they are become congealed in stone monuments and memorials. Some seem buffeted by continual contestation as opposing or multiple constituencies seek existential and political purchase on them. In whatever ways a given event is forged, it is through the work of historical and political subjects, subjects differentially situated regarding power and access to media and mediations, that the inexplicable and the formless are made explicable and given a form. While event forms are multiple (some examples are declarations of war, handshakes, manifestos, symbolic gestures of bowing or kneeling, citizens storming a prison, epidemiological projections), the book argues that it is critical to understand these forms in terms of both their innate capacities to carry meaning and their empirical contexts of appearance and action. As well, analysts must attend to the ways forms combine. Importantly, the book claims that a coalescing of forms is required to make a rupture into a transformational event and that the confusion or fragmentation of forms prevents event sedimentation.

One consequence of the open-endedness and mutability of event formation and flow is that they provide opportunities for the invention of new ideas, concepts, institutions, and identities. This corresponds with William Sewell Jr.'s (2005) analysis of the eventful invention of revolution in France in the summer of 1789. In his justly famous article, "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures", Sewell proposes a process of semiotic rearticulation as the central mechanism for the eventful emergence of the new. In the case of the French Revolution, this took the form of

a semantic condition that made the new articulation of popular violence and popular sovereignty possible: the long-standing ambiguity of the term "le peuple" — the people [...] [and thus] the taking of the Bastille [...] as the historical event that articulates popular violence with the nation's sovereign will in the new concept of revolution" (pp. 246, 255).

Precisely these kinds of articulations and rearticulations take enormous effort by historical subjects across multiple domains, and the deployment of objects and acts under the frames of icons, speech acts, gestures, symbols, and more. Forging *new* political subjects, like those Sewell references in the French Revolution, is a massive undertaking.

### 3 Pandemic and Protest

Having thus established a framework for tracking and analyzing events in previous work, some relevant questions have occurred to me during our current turbulent and disorienting moment. These include: How long can a rupture last without taking definitive eventful shape, and what kinds of temporalities best characterize extended ruptures? Are we still in the rupture phase of whatever concatenation of events is currently forming, or are we in a fully flowering historical event? Are extended ruptures ways of warding off the future while enduring a difficult present?

In the disorienting, stuttering, slow-motion beginning of the pandemic in the United States in early 2020, there was a sense that something was happening but it wasn't clear what, where, or how consequential it would be. News arrived fitfully and frighteningly from other parts of the world, migrating from the periphery to the centers of media organ coverage. Then, in March, some significant parts of society and its vital infrastructure shut down precipitously. In the state of New York, for example, the governor's executive orders performing this shut down were strangely and complexly worded, "Continuing Temporary Suspension and Modification of Laws Relating to Disaster Emergency." Continuing temporary suspension — these

words suggested a mixture of temporal orders that simultaneously proceeded and halted, lurching forward with suspensions and modifications in the face of what may or may not be a real “disaster emergency”. *Continuing* and *temporary* plot a world still somewhat linear, orderly, and predictable. *Disaster* and *emergency* are ruptures that puncture timelines, cracking open temporal ongoingness, stopping time. What stands between them in these executive orders are, interestingly, Laws (the most overtly performative of institutions). And these Laws are ambiguously and ominously “modified” in the very naming of the executive order.

The package of these executive orders was called “New York on PAUSE.” Pause is a most interesting word to introduce into a globally mobile and developing event. And in this so-called pause, life did seem suspended, as we experienced the closing of institutions, the halting of normal work processes, store and restaurant closings, the shutting down of modes of transportation. But of course, much was and continued to be happening: a pandemic was on the loose, nations and governments at all scales were struggling to understand it and prepare for it (or ignore it); vital, essential services continued to operate (food being delivered, sanitation workers collecting trash, hospital workers seeing patients) as people still needed to be fed and treated. So the onset of the pandemic managed to appear both immobilizing and mobilizing at the same time. And the PAUSE became the lockdown.

And then, on May 25<sup>th</sup> Minneapolis police officers arrested (for allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill at a convenience store) and killed George Floyd, an African American man in a manner both shocking and indefensible, with one officer, Derek Chauvin pressing his knee into Mr. Floyd’s neck for over 9 minutes. These excruciating minutes were videotaped and the video was circulated widely. Protests began the next day in Minneapolis and quickly spread across the country and around the world. The protests highlighted and decried police brutality against African Americans and connected Floyd’s killing to scores of other cases where African Americans lost their lives in police encounters, most of which began with allegations of minor infractions. It’s important to note how so many of the killings of Black people at the hands of police occur at the compressed end of encounters around extremely small infractions or allegations of infractions, or metaphorical infractions against the dominant culture (selling loose cigarettes, passing a counterfeit \$20 bill, routine traffic stops for things like “nonfunctioning brake lights”, “running while black” in a white neighborhood, walking from a convenience store in one’s own neighborhood while wearing a hoodie).

At this juncture in late Spring 2020, “this thing that is happening” ramified and expanded, with novel forms generated to capture, shape, and control the ongoing rupture put forward by diverse constituencies of protestors, lawmakers, journalists, and health-care workers among others.

The problems and conundrums of time and temporality continued. Eventful ruptures have fluctuating and often contradictory temporalities, seeming to both speed up and slow down time and sometimes appearing to stop time altogether. In addition, our ability to focus on discrete moments or what might be called episodes is under stress. Questions emerge: What is a moment, a single incident? What is a sequence of connected incidents? What is a trend? What is a definitive turning point? What is a new era? During ruptures, we can’t answer these questions, and our inability to provide answers coincides with their reiteration.

Societies require a cognitive and perceptual apparatus to integrate inchoate ruptures into conventional temporal frameworks, including linear time, epochal time, directional time, and even prefigured time (both sacred and secular versions). In addition, they may rarely manage to produce new temporalities (along with new subjectivities) like revolutionary time. Part of the dilemma for those political subjects confronted with and attempting to shape both the pan-

demical and the protests, and their contingent combining, was determining the moment that “the event” started. For example, the event trajectory of the protests against police violence toward African-Americans could be situated within a temporal trajectory of slavery, or Jim Crow, or segregation, or more proximal incidents like the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014 or the assassination of Black church-goers in Charleston in 2015, or the violent demonstrations by white nationalists in 2017 in Charlottesville. But the long and enduring inequality of race in the United States, with its many forms and manifestations, would weave the protests and the pandemic together in history more broadly (more on this below). The pandemic might appear to have a more definitive origin moment of rupture with the appearance of COVID-19 in late 2019 and its initial global migration in early 2020. But the pandemic has had its own temporal conundrums with its wave-like movement across different countries and its sequential sweeps across different regions in the same country.<sup>1</sup> In spite of a myriad of epidemiological charts and graphs, with their rises and falls and re-rises, the time line of the pandemic (along with its spatial contours) has never been entirely clear.

Recalling the way that William Sewell’s (2005) event-defining semiotic rearticulations work their recombinatory alchemy to change identities, loyalties, spatial and temporal orientations, and institutions, we ask if similar rearticulations are occurring now? Perhaps, as an example, we have seen intimations of such rearticulations in the accelerated removals of statues of Confederate generals in the United States central squares and plazas, and in the naming of places like Black Lives Matter Plaza, a two-block-long section of 16<sup>th</sup> Street NW in Downtown Washington, D.C. renamed by Mayor Muriel Bowser on June 5<sup>th</sup>, after the Department of Public Works painted the words “Black Lives Matter” in big yellow capital letters on the street, along with the flag of Washington, D.C., These acts of removal and (re)labeling and renaming occurred as part of the George Floyd protests. So the *pace* of renamings and reconfigurations of public space (statues removed, military bases renamed) accelerates along with the presentations (and potential) passages of national laws, like the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act introduced in the Congress, or local actions upending or, more rarely, promising outright ending entrenched institutions like the police. That would indeed be a semiotic rearticulation of state violence and sovereignty. In any case there have been definite signs that the rupture is taking shape as an event in Sewell’s terms in these formal rearticulations. Nevertheless, more aspirational than settled, these are contingent and reversible semiotic rearticulations, and the echo of the word “temporary” (from the New York Governor’s Executive Orders) lingers.

#### 4 Inside or Outside

Politically forging and analytically grasping such rearticulations in real time is always hard — most are discovered in retrospect. But digging deeper into the dynamics of events and their semiotic rearticulations brings me to another central question — one that concerns ideas and experiences of space along with those of time already introduced. That question is: Am I (and are we) inside of the event or outside of it? And this question started to vibrate in the social ether during the early months of 2020, when the apparent event was confined to the COVID-19 pandemic-in-the-making. Its vibrations have only intensified as the pandemic and the protests/uprising have intersected and, in a profound sense, co-constituted each other.

This indexical question is always relevant to events and the answer almost always appears to be obvious. It seems like common sense that we should know if we are inside an event or

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1. I thank an astute anonymous reviewer of this article for suggesting these insights.

not. However, as I described in my book, these very decisions and calculations are semiotically charged and contingent. On the one hand, even people physically proximal, incorporated (with their very bodies) in an event may find themselves pondering their participation in and relation to it. One example in *What Is an Event?* (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017) narrates the story of a high school student actively calibrating his insider/outsider status on the morning of September 11, 2001, from inside his school in Lower Manhattan, a school that was literally two blocks from the Twin Towers and into whose schoolyard pieces of the towers were falling. Proximity, it turns out, proves to be only the roughest of guides and proximity and distance themselves create multiple conundrums. A more recent account comes from a sociology graduate student at The New School, based in New York, who wrote me earlier this Spring about how the inside/outside dilemma influenced her reactions to her own situation. I quote her astute and thoughtful reflections here, with her permission:

One small example is when the pandemic first broke out in Wuhan, I thought this event is far away from me and even though all my families are in China, they still live very far from Wuhan City. Until the virus spread so quickly across China, and then to the U.S., I still did not feel that I'm within the event. However, 2 days ago, after almost two weeks of self-quarantine, I went [outside]..., which is right across the Elmhurst hospital in Queens. I saw the shockingly depressing images of... patients waiting in long lines, in complete silence, all wearing masks, each of them keeping 6 feet distance, and the line is so long that [it stretches] even across several blocks, ambulances everywhere, police cars everywhere, and those temporary tents for news journalist broadcasting... I went directly back home, and I started to watch the news on my phone, in the news it calls Elmhurst Hospital in Queens the epicenter and hotspot of the Corona Virus patients, in the epicenter of NYC, which is also the epicenter of New York State, and New York in turn is the epicenter of the whole United States. Suddenly I started to realize, I'm not only within the event, but also I'm actually located at the very center of the event. But when exactly did the sense of within and outside of the boundary of event shift? How do we demarcate the shifting boundary of the event?<sup>2</sup>

Many of us may have had similar experiences as we “sheltered in place” and tried to get our bearings in the evolving event. The inside/outside question took on multiple meanings during the early, pandemic dominated, months of the year. One iteration was: do we stay inside of our homes (where, in theory, the pandemic isn't occurring) or do we venture outside of our homes where it may well be? This question, in its turn, suggested several others reflecting power, privilege, and property. Who can afford to stay inside? Who has an “inside” that is capacious enough and equipped sufficiently for full-time occupants engaging in activities that would normally be done elsewhere? Who is deemed “essential” and thus ironically positioned to be “free” to travel in the “outside” yet also expendable, as they are potentially more likely to be exposed (in one meaning of the word) to the virus? The difference between being free to exit one's home and being *required* to exit one's home broke down in this context — exposing (in a second sense of the word) the background privileges of class and race and profession in all their ugly starkness.

In this context, the inside/outside questions vibrated anew. Where is *this* event occurring and how are we to calculate if we are inside it or outside of it? Further, how is this event oc-

2. Thanks to Shaowen Wang for these astute reflections.



curing and *how* are we inside it? In other words, in what capacity are we inside this event? Are we victim, perpetrator, protester? Or, if we maintain that we are outside it (and with what evidence or credibility), are we spectator, bystander, or witness? Some of these questions are explicitly linked to answers that may have been given to the prior (and unresolved) question: What is this thing that is happening? But this “what” question was asked anew as the eventful ground exposed by the pandemic (social inequality in exposure to the virus) set the stage and intersected with the ground exposed by the protests and uprising (social inequality and discrimination in exposure to police violence). As the artist Amy Sillman (2020) noted, the ground itself had indeed shifted.

## 5 Double Exposure

The concept of “exposure” strikes me as central. Two distinct but equally relevant definitions of the word can be braided together in pivotal ways. They are (from the *Oxford English Dictionary*):

1a. “The action of uncovering or leaving without shelter or defence; unsheltered or undefended condition. Also, the action of subjecting, the state or fact of being subjected, to any external influence.”

1d. “The action of bringing to light (something discreditable); the unmasking or ‘showing up’ of an error, fraud, or evil, of an impostor or secret offender” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021).

In the first sense, we risk exposure to external influences (like the virus or police brutality) when we are “unsheltered or undefended” on the one hand. And, in the second sense, we expose things previously hidden (like systemic racism and the active legacy of slavery) by bringing those things to light, on the other. The reference to “unmasking” uncannily also illuminates the material conditions of exposure in our mask-flummoxed pandemic.

What this event’s forms of doubled exposure put in relief was a complicating new apparent choice: to go out, to go into the streets, to participate actively in the protest (putting one’s body on the line in multiple ways) or to stay inside? For some, this called for a new understanding and calculation of the dangers of the outside, with a still active pandemic risk exacerbated by concentrated exposure in crowds. For some, it reiterated an understanding of old, exhausting, and relentless dangers of the outside in the form of vulnerability to racist mis-identifications, harassment, and violence. And here is where the very issue and terminology of choice becomes so central and so charged.

The event (in its formation as protest or uprising or, as antagonists had it, as riot) at first glance, appeared to be occurring squarely “outside”. So for many, going outside during a period of still widely enforced “stay at home” orders meant entering the dangerous inside of the event with all of its risks. And being, or staying, inside, meant being outside of the event. But what if the event took another form, another name? What if the event was actually recognized and named as endemic societal racism or even slavery and its continuing and ongoing legacy? Where is that event? Might not that event live even in the very structures of housing and property and neighborhoods, affording, or not, safety and protection? And who, if anyone, has the freedom or the right to choose whether or not to be inside of it or outside of it?

It’s worth considering if the question of *choice* reveals a false consciousness about our ability to control or manage our involvement and implication in events and our categorical identities in them. At one end of a supposed choice continuum, some believe they have a choice — and in concrete and consequential ways they do. If one has shelter and resources, one can stay

sheltered and nourished. If one “chooses” not to participate in protests, not to go out into the streets, one can probably avoid physical danger of either the virus or police forms. But who is this “one” who believes they have a choice? Is this *one* a white person or a black person, a person working virtually at home or an “essential” delivery person? Such things matter.

At the other end of the supposed choice continuum is a position of *no choice*. You are in the event whether you want to be or not. Even staying in your own home doesn’t guarantee insulation from the event of racism and/or police violence, as the case of Breonna Taylor shot by police in her own home tragically demonstrates.

I would push this even farther. What the concatenation of the pandemic and the protests has illuminated so searingly is that even, one might say especially, those persons privileged by race and class to think they have a choice not to be in the event, not to go outside, even *they* are in the event. The past drags itself along in the present and manages to enter bodies of both privilege and subjection, reviving its demarcations and boundaries in each emerging action and event. In that sense, the event itself creates the inside and the outside and then proceeds to flip them inside out with each new political semiotic act of representation, demonstration, and performativity. Thus are conditions named, attentions focused, and identities transformed.

For our eventful moment in history, there appears to be no way to clearly differentiate between inside and outside. The very concepts of inside and outside seem irrelevant. And it is then exquisitely apt that the origin of the word pandemic derives from the Greek *pandemos* (from *pan* “all” and *demos* “people”). All people.

Inside and outside are concepts that rely on boundaries that demarcate and differentiate. As these recent ruptures have taken their myriad eventful shapes and have restlessly flowed through homes and hospitals and prisons and streets and police cars, the very landscape of our collective existence has been in a state of exposed vibration. It’s become harder and harder to keep things separate, to imagine social zones of relevance or irrelevance, safety or danger, inside or outside. The boundaries keep moving, oscillating, transforming. Even when we restrict our focus to the pandemic in isolation from these other cross-cutting and intersecting events, the question of boundaries is vexed. Taking the restlessness of events to extremes, pandemics only live via their continuous movements across, and through, all of humanity. The terminology of wave formation noted above, much deployed by the epidemiologists charting the course of the pandemic, doesn’t quite capture their spatial and temporal ebbs and flows. And even those wave formations and flows are themselves calculated through probabilities and statistics, demographic actuarial tables and calculations, migratory patterns of populations, appearances and disappearances of masks, and business closures and social distancing. Tracking such forms, their uptake or rejection, and their hands-off to other forms is critical and difficult. The challenge increases with the intersection of the other eventful ruptures discussed above. This suggests that the questions I raised earlier, with all of their trap doors and contradictions keep resonating: are we in or out of COVID-19, in or out of the uprising against police brutality and racism, in or out of economic depression?

As struggles over the forms and labels shaping and defining the events continue, though, a range of subject positions present themselves, as I noted earlier: spectator, bystander, audience, witness, victim, perpetrator, participant, ally, protagonist. So maybe *choice* is reasserted with qualifications and self-consciousness. Maybe it’s important not to abandon all ideas about political consciousness and political agency. But let’s not be naïve, it’s not free and it’s not without consequences.

But how is that agency to be enacted? Events don’t live anywhere but in the forms that achieve them — these include the acts of naming, the declarations, the handshakes or the



foreswearing of handshakes, the gestures (like wearing a mask or taking a knee) the categorizations, the portraits and murals and words written on streets (Black Lives Matter), the narratives, courtroom trials or toppling of statues. But the forms only matter contingently, they are not determinative. There's no *guaranteed* relationship between activation of a particular form and the nature or impact of an emergent event, even as certain processes, patterns or sequences may produce more or less inclusive or democratic events. Elections, constitutions, crowds (or mobs or populations differently named), and assemblies — all have their own powers and weaknesses, all draw on certain types of participation and certain designated participants.

So it definitely matters how we define, represent, index, and perform events (mechanisms I claim function as political semiosis). And here the forms also provide clues about whether and how the various current ruptures or proto events are, perhaps, concatenating into a single over-arching mega-event, one that might well meet the criteria of semiotic rearticulation and transformation of structures established by Sewell. One example of what we might refer to as a braiding of events was that of medical personnel across the United States taking a knee on June 5<sup>th</sup> to support protests against police violence against African Americans. The *exposure*, in all senses of the word, of medical personnel in the pandemic (exposure to the virus, exposure to the socially unequal afflictions of the virus among communities of poverty and communities of color) made them a particularly powerful carrier of the convergence of events into a mega-event. And the gesture of kneeling itself has enacted a collision and combining of images and incidents and meanings, incorporating U.S. National Football League players Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid's kneeling during the playing of the US national anthem at a football game to protest police brutality against African Americans, all the way to police officer Derek Chauvin's kneeling on the neck of George Floyd for those long 9 minutes and 29 seconds. The ongoing protests in the streets of the US and other countries, so many of which include removal of statues and monuments, similarly enact braiding gestures that reorient societies in historical time and political space. In this way, the actual photographic technique of "double exposure" comes into analytical focus here as metaphor. Double exposure is a technique where two images are overlaid and combined, through the double exposure of the same portion of a film, resulting in their superimposition. The act of kneeling, the concept of "essential", the ideas of lockdown, and shelter, and masking — all of these now live lives as double exposure, alternately coming into going out of focus.

Finally, I want to circle back to the title of my essay, "What is an Event and Are We In One?" And it is really the second part of the title that deserves most attention - each word of it comes with a trap-door: *Are We In One?* Are (the word implies the tense and time of the present, something ongoing and not able to be shoved off into the past or deferred until the future); We (who is we? who identifies the we? are there differences among individuals, collectivities, or are we all of humanity pan/demos); In (is there an inside and an outside of our eventful moment); and One (is this one event or several and, if the latter, which is the most consequential, formative, and existential one). None of these questions can be taken for granted and it is the work of sociologists examining events and disasters anew to take them up in all their specificity, their intricacy, and their consequence.

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**Robin Wagner-Pacifici** – The New School, New York (United States)

🔗 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5542-2751>

✉ [wagnerpr@newschool.edu](mailto:wagnerpr@newschool.edu)

Robin Wagner-Pacifici is University Professor at the New School. She has researched and written on social, political, and violent conflict and its termination. She is the author of several books, including *The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as Social Drama* (University of Chicago Press, 1986), *Discourse and Destruction: The City of Philadelphia vs MOVE* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), *Theorizing the Standoff: Contingency in Action* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), *The Art of Surrender: Decomposing Sovereignty at Conflict’s End* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), and most recently, *What Is an Event?* (University of Chicago Press, 2017). She is currently working on developing a theory of anti-charisma as a type of authority.