


## Mourning and Memory in the Age of COVID-19

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### Abstract

Contemporary disasters are frequently accompanied by a rush to memorialization. Although there have been significant grassroots efforts to memorialize the tremendous losses that the United States has sustained during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been no coordinated national commemoration, no single place or moment that has channeled public grief in a genuinely *collective* manner. While acknowledging the political dynamics at play, I also go beyond them to consider the challenges that COVID-19 poses for meaning-making: how it creates obstacles to both ritual and narrativization. Drawing on literary approaches to sociology, I consider how the discipline can respond humanely to ongoing disruption and the protracted sense of liminality that it creates.

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As the COVID-19 death toll neared 100,000 in the United States, the *New York Times* marked the “grim milestone” with the names of the dead. On May 24, 2020, the front page was filled with type — no images — listing the names of COVID-19’s U.S. victims, along with fleeting snippets from their obituaries. “*Alice Chavdarian, 92, Michigan, loving, generous and adventurous spirit.*” “*Kyra Swartz, 33, New York, volunteered for pet rescue organizations.*” “*Israel Sauz, 22, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, new father.*” “*Doris Brown, 79, Gary, Ind. Died on the same day as her husband.*” Tom Bodkin, the *Times*’ chief creative officer, described the all-type approach as “hugely dramatic”, remarking that he could not remember any front pages without images during his 40-year career with the paper (Grippe, 2020). In the online version, headlined “An Incalculable Loss”, readers scroll down, and down, and down (*New York Times*, 2020). Tiny figures in black represent the victims whose obituaries are excerpted. But many more are nameless and depicted in gray, as if they are already vanishing from memory.

By autumn, several groups of activists and artists had mounted temporary exhibitions in Washington, D.C., in attempts to represent the enormity of the nation’s losses and create sites of mourning. In late September, a group called the COVID Memorial Project placed 20,000 American flags on the National Mall, each representing 10 of the dead that, by then, numbered over 200,000. In early October, shortly after President Donald Trump tested positive for COVID-19, COVID Survivors for Change set up 20,000 empty black chairs on the Ellipse, just south of the White House, with the same symbolic rationale. A few weeks later, a public art project conceptualized by Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg began planting thousands upon thousands of small white flags in the ground at the D.C. Armory Parade Ground, outside RFK Stadium. By the time the project concluded on November 30, community volunteers had planted 250,000 flags, commemorating as many deaths.

In the United States and around much of the globe, a powerful impulse toward memorializing victims of disaster has coalesced over the past several decades. Rather than, or at least in addition to, monumentalizing iconic leaders and other public figures, today’s culture of memory revolves around commemorating the loss of ordinary individuals: from the tradition of reading the names of Holocaust victims aloud at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, to the 58,000 names inscribed on the black granite walls of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., to the mourning rites held after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China, “mourning for the ordinary” (Xu, 2013, p. 510) has become virtually compulsory in the aftermath of contemporary disasters. Frequently, plans for memorialization take shape almost instantaneously, before the full shape of an event becomes clear.<sup>1</sup>

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages, this impulse to memorialize and mourn for ordinary people — and, in doing so, to underscore the significance of each individual life — remains strong in the United States. Since assuming office in January 2021, President Joe Biden has begun to oversee rituals for collective mourning: presiding over a memorial ceremony on the national mall on the eve of his inauguration and holding another just a month later, when COVID deaths in the United States alone numbered over half a million. Yet even as plans for some coordinated national commemorations have begun to take shape, no single place or moment that has channeled public grief in a manner that feels genuinely *collective*. Part of the reason, of course, is political: the callousness of an administration that steadfastly refused to mourn the thousands upon thousands of lives lost during the pandemic’s first year. Throughout the 2020 presidential campaign, media coverage juxtaposing Trump’s rallies with those of his rival — and eventual successor — made manifest the moral and emotional chasm that

1. See, for instance, the November 11, 2001, conversation in *New York Times Magazine*, “What to Build”, on the shape of a future 9/11 memorial (Riley, 2001).

opened between Trump's most fervent supporters and their fellow citizens who were (and are) actively grieving massive losses, both personal and collective.

Sociologically speaking, however, President Trump's utter disdain for human suffering, for the pain of mourners whose numbers multiply daily across the landscape, is only part of the answer. That is because meaningful commemoration — commemoration with the power to ameliorate grief, foster solidarity, and restore trust in the social — requires capacities for *ritualization* and *narrativization* that are strikingly absent in the era of COVID-19. In the pages that follow, I juxtapose classical social theory with our disorienting circumstances in the present in order to elucidate the barriers to collective mourning and memorialization in the age of COVID-19. I then consider what sociology can do to foster human connection and restore social bonds amidst the ongoing pandemic, building on sociological frameworks that take their inspiration from literature — including lyricism (Abbott, 2007) and tragedy (Simko & Olick, 2020) — to contemplate how the discipline can reckon humanely with disruption, fragmentation, and loss. Indeed, I argue that a literary-sociological approach to disaster may even help to transform our culture of memorialization more generally: namely, by carving out space for reflection and contemplation *before* constructing definitive representations of events in the form of memorials, museums, and other sites of memory that are designed for permanency.

## 1 Ritual, Embodiment, and the Body Politic

### 1.1 Ritual and the Body

Émile Durkheim's (1912) descriptions of ritual and the emotional electricity that it generates readily evoke contemporary spectacles such as football games and rock concerts: the positive rituals for which so many of us yearn amidst the current need to practice social distancing.<sup>2</sup> Yet rituals are just as crucial in times of mourning as they are in times of joy and exaltation. When disastrous events threaten the moral foundations of a society, Durkheim argued, that society

pushes its members to give witness to their sadness, distress, or anger through expressive actions [...] It does so because those collective demonstrations, as well as the moral community they simultaneously bear witness to and reinforce, restore to the group energy that the events threatened to take away (1912/1995, pp. 415–416).

Durkheim called these collective demonstrations “piacular rites”.

As with all rituals, the essential foundation for piacular rites is physical co-presence. That is, piacular rites restore the spirit first and foremost by bringing *bodies* together in common space, enabling the shared focus and mood that lifts people outside of themselves and into the transcendent realm of collective effervescence (see Collins, 2004). Randall Collins' (2020) research conducted amidst the pandemic confirms that disembodied rituals simply do not generate the same sense of uplift and solidarity as their in-person counterparts. For all its virtues in enabling

2. Some sociologists have argued for using the terminology of *physical*, rather than social, distancing (e.g., Menjivar et al., 2020). Although I understand the desire to underscore our continued interdependency and inspire generosity, as I argue in this section, sociology clearly shows that physical distance in fact *creates* social distance, fraying the bonds that are nurtured and sustained through face-to-face interaction. Accordingly, I maintain the language of social distancing while also seeking ways to illuminate our interconnectedness and common humanity, even during the pandemic.

life to carry on amidst the pandemic, in the end, Zoom generates more fatigue than effervescence.

Sociological accounts of past disasters also confirm the importance of what Collins, combining Durkheim with Erving Goffman (see, e.g., Goffman, 1955) calls “interaction ritual chains”: the face-to-face interactions through which we move on a daily basis, attracted by those encounters that fill us with emotional energy and repelled by those that do not. In one of the most influential and enduring studies of disaster that the field of sociology has ever produced, Kai Erikson (1976) documented the loss of “communality” that followed the 1972 flood in Buffalo Creek, West Virginia. The wave of black floodwater that suddenly swept through the close-knit mining town not only claimed 121 lives. It also left over 4,000 of Buffalo Creek’s 5,000 residents homeless. People whose lives were once bound together by place suddenly found themselves grieving alone and apart. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) created 13 trailer camps to house displaced residents. But there was no effort to replicate the structure of Buffalo Creek’s old neighborhoods. And so the intangible fabric of the community was swept away as well. Erikson (1976, p. 154) describes the effects in the language of trauma: “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality.” In Buffalo Creek, the damage was ultimately irreparable. People found that they were “isolated and alone, wholly dependent upon their own individual resources.” Without the communality that provides a foundational sense of ontological security, Erikson explains, “I’ continue to exist, though damaged and maybe permanently changed. ‘You’ continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But ‘we’ no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body.”

According to Collins (2004), emotional energy is the binding agent that creates an intangible sense of community and sustains our social institutions. Emotional energy is generated in and through satisfying interaction rituals: “momentary encounters among human bodies charged up with emotions and consciousness because they have gone through chains of previous encounters” that provide this intangible charge (p. 3). In fact, Collins goes so far as to suggest that “the individual *is* the interaction ritual chain [...] the precipitate of past interactional situations and an ingredient of each new situation” (p. 5). If people are to feel connected to large modern social formations such as the nation-state, their sense of belonging surely must be mediated through micro-level interaction rituals that offer energy and inspiration.

In Buffalo Creek, Erikson’s ethnographic observations make clear, the taken-for-granted chains of interaction were broken. People no longer felt a sense of connection to the town and community, let alone a broader collectivity. Today, the COVID-19 pandemic extends this phenomenon around the globe. Without the chains binding us to communities both near and far — not only highly ritualized events such as family reunions and Thanksgiving feasts, but also the simple yet emotionally potent day-to-day interaction rituals at the “water cooler” or the yoga studio or a favorite lunch spot — how can we possibly feel the moral and emotional pull of even larger and more abstract collectivities like the nation?

## 1.2 Images of Atomization

Consider another comparison across time, this one visual. As a caveat, I am deeply wary of analogies between the COVID-19 pandemic and the events of September 11, 2001. The war metaphors that almost instantaneously became the dominant frame for understanding 9/11 shaped the trajectory of that day’s events in decisive and profoundly destructive ways. Presi-

dent Trump's claims, in the early days of the pandemic, that COVID-19 had made him a "war president" made analogies between 9/11 and COVID-19 feel particularly alarming. Nevertheless, I agree with the broad Durkheimian insight that very different kinds of disruptions necessitate a similar response on a human level: namely, collective, in-person gatherings that serve to restore our social bonds, providing a kind of security and inspiration that we simply cannot access from the privacy of our own homes.

From this standpoint, then, it is worth comparing the images of New York City in the days after September 11, 2001, with the haunting stillness that fell over the city during lockdown in March 2020. In September 2001, makeshift memorials across the city — in Washington Square, in Union Square, on the Brooklyn promenade — overflowed with flowers, photographs, letters, and flags. They became gathering places for coordinated candlelight vigils and for spontaneous expressions of grief. Looking through the archives of the September 11 Photo Project at the New York Public Library a couple of years ago, I was awed at photographers' impulse not only to witness these scenes in person, but also to document them, to preserve images of the solidarity that arose amidst mourning.

By contrast, during the COVID-19 lockdown in the spring of 2020, even the ads that continued to play on a loop over Times Square had no audience, save for the photographers who ventured out to preserve the disquieting scene. These photographs preserve the visceral feeling of life in a society without sociality: revealing atomization where there was once community, isolation and atomization amidst the human craving for interaction and ritual. In place of the makeshift memorials that mourned the dead and heroized the first responders after 9/11, the photos from the 2020 lockdowns reveal a digital message that calls out for attention amidst the ads: "THANK YOU #HEALTHCARE WORKERS!" The hashtag reminds viewers of the digital spaces to which our interactions are now primarily confined. As a Coca-Cola ad exhorts, "staying apart is the best way to stay united."

But for most of us, unity remains elusive. The chain is broken. Without the gathering of bodies, the body politic withers.

### 1.3 Exceptions

The hunger for co-presence became powerfully evident as spring wore on. On May 25, Minneapolis resident George Floyd perished under the knee of a uniformed police officer. Bystanders captured the brutal murder on video, as Floyd cried out for his mother. "*I can't breathe,*" Floyd said more than 20 times, to no avail.

His words became a rallying cry. Protests erupted in Minneapolis — then across the nation and even around the globe. Notably, these events drew multiracial crowds, all operating under the tacit assumption that the moral urgency of structural racism and police brutality demanded breaking the rules of social distancing.

I cannot claim to provide any definitive explanation for why such widespread and multiracial protests erupted in this precise moment: late spring 2020, months into a global pandemic that had no end in sight. Surely the causes are multiple and intersecting: the absolute inhumanity on display as Floyd drew his final breaths; the longer arc of the Black Lives Matter movement whose leaders have worked relentlessly to promote social and political change; the incidents of racial violence that have captured national attention under the banner of the places where they unfolded — Ferguson, Charleston, Charlottesville. By May, public health data had also laid bare the deep, insidious, systemic inequalities that the pandemic had both illuminated and exacerbated, inequalities that are older than the republic itself. Yet, in considering what motivated

the protests, and what enabled participants to break the rules of social distancing that otherwise garnered support among progressives, it also seems important to consider the deep yearning for something like the piacular rites that Durkheim described.

In Minneapolis, a group of five artists almost immediately transformed the site of Floyd's death into a makeshift memorial onto which public sentiment — anger, mourning, the thirst for justice — could be projected. Their mural situates Floyd's likeness in the foreground of a sunflower. At the flower's center, the artists inscribed names of other Black victims of police brutality. On Floyd's chest is a message of hope: "I can breathe now." The mural provided a focal point for mourners, who left signs and flowers on the ground beneath. Conversations about a permanent memorial at the same site are underway, with funding from the nonprofit National Trust for Historic Preservation (Walsh, 2020).

The state of exception that emerged during the spring and summer protests reveals both the conditions for public mourning and the human longings that animate it. Eventually, the historians, curators, and architects who construct and preserve images of this period will need to contend with the relationship between pandemic and protest. At present, however, we are still in the midst of disaster, groping our way toward safety as well as understanding.

## 2 Broken Chains, Broken Narratives

The word "disaster" connotes a disruption to taken-for-granted narratives. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines disaster as "an event or occurrence of a ruinous or very distressing nature," especially "a sudden accident or natural catastrophe that causes great damage and loss of life." It is an interruption: to lives, to livelihoods, to the life course. As much as I agree with the Durkheimian point (powerfully refashioned for contemporary micro-sociology in Collins' notion of interaction ritual chains) that regenerating emotional effervescence is the first stage in restoring the social amidst disaster, it is not the last. For rituals are not, in and of themselves, narratives. Yet they may be a precursor to narrativization: a way of generating the common sentiments that underwrite a common interpretation of events. Without ritual, which requires that first and most foundational ingredient of *embodied* interaction, people — and their germs, their breath, those invisible aerosolized droplets that now imperil the people we love — coming together synchronously in physical spaces, can we repair the disruption in the narrative? I am not so sure.

Disasters generate moral and existential questions. The only words in Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg's installation, emblazoned on a giant billboard, are: "In America. How could this happen..." Such questions require something akin to what Max Weber (1946), borrowing from philosophy and theology, called *theodicy*: an explanation or interpretation that imbues suffering with meaning. For his part, Weber focused attention on religious explanations for suffering.<sup>3</sup> But secular societies seek after them, too (Berger, 1967). Since the advent of radio, U.S. political leaders, especially presidents, have devoted substantial energy to *political consolation*, responding to disaster with words of comfort and expressions of solidarity, weaving disruptions into familiar collective narratives by addressing the moral and existential questions that they generate (Simko, 2015).

President Trump's callousness, his horrifying refusal to acknowledge the human need for empathy and consolation, is certainly part of the reason why we are still grasping for a COVID-

3. The term originated in Leibniz's 1710 treatise *Theodicy*, which endeavored to justify belief in a Christian God by arguing that the world we inhabit — the world God created — was "the best of all possible worlds."

19 narrative in the United States. But uncertainty, fragmentation, and disorientation are also integral to the pandemic itself, to the *temporality* of this particular disaster.

## 2.1 TikTok Temporality

Strange as it may seem, I first reckoned seriously with the temporality of COVID-19 through the prism of my students' social media habits. After the students in my senior seminar at Williams College were dismissed from campus in March 2020, several of them reported a new preoccupation with the video-sharing app TikTok. "We're *obsessed*," two friends confessed, Zooming in for office hours from their childhood bedrooms.

Initially, I thought little of my students' quarantine obsession with TikTok. The reasons seemed self-evident. They were trapped at home with an unanticipated abundance of unstructured time, and aren't these apps designed to hack our psychology and ensnare us in vicious cycles of clicking and scrolling?

It was only when students returned to campus in the fall that I began to consider TikTok through a sociological, rather than only psychological, lens. To be sure, the psychological dimensions of social media are crucial to their appeal — and crucial to understanding their role in enabling the widespread dissemination of disinformation and fueling ever-intensifying political polarization. But I do not think that psychology can tell us the whole story of why TikTok, an app that many of my students had previously written off as a space for tweens, became so attractive — addictive, even! — amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in particular.

Brevity is the soul of TikTok. Originally, the app limited videos to 15 seconds, though users can now record up to 60 seconds worth of content by stringing four "segments" together. Does TikTok temporality have an affinity with the phenomenological experience of life under COVID-19: *segmented* and choppy, punctuated by continuous disruptions? There would be no senior week, no commencement, no job offer — never mind the promises from last summer's internship supervisor. The Fulbright fellowship was not to be. On Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, users create "stories". On TikTok, randomness, rather than narrative, rules the day. One video is juxtaposed with the next, driven by the mysterious algorithm that we all know about but that none of us seem to understand. What will capture our attention next?

The affinity between COVID life and TikTok goes beyond randomness and disruption, though. It is also evident in a shared repetitiveness. As one widely circulated meme proclaimed, 2020 is a "unique leap year, with 29 days in February, 300 days in March, and 5 years in April." The disaster is never-ending; the days bleed into one another. Likewise, TikToks are designed to be replayed over and over again. I am even willing to admit in print that I have watched Elizabeth Warren and Kate McKinnon's contribution to the #FlipTheSwitch TikTok challenge at least two dozen times.

In short, perhaps clicking and scrolling on TikTok is an entertaining, even soothing, counterpart to the disorienting combination of repetition and disruption that is the hallmark of COVID-19. It just flips the switch.

## 2.2 Biden's Politics of Consolation

Of course, there have also been countervailing forces to the disruption and disorientation of COVID-19. As the Democratic nominee for president, Joe Biden attempted to step into the void that Trump created: to offer consolation, and perhaps even narrativization, in response to the immense suffering that COVID-19 has wrought. In many ways, Biden's biography and temperament seem to have shaped him for the task. His own story is marred by grief, including

the loss of his first wife, Neilia Hunter Biden, and 13-month-old daughter, Naomi, in a car accident, shortly after he was first elected to the U.S. Senate. From its beginnings, then, Biden's career on the national stage was intertwined with his personal losses: he was sworn in at the hospital in Delaware where his two sons, 2-year-old Hunter and 3-year-old Beau, were still receiving care for their injuries. During his eight years as vice president, Biden often displayed empathy and vulnerability, voicing his experience with grief as he consoled people mourning their own losses. Speaking with a group of military families and friends in 2012, for instance, Biden described the "black hole that you feel in your chest like you're being sucked back into it." He recalled his own anger, the way he questioned his faith, and even the moments when he contemplated suicide. He acknowledged the reminders — things as small as a flower, or a "tune on the radio" — that arise "just when you think 'maybe I'm going to make it,'" interrupting a healing process that is never linear (quoted in Slack, 2012). In 2015, Vice President Biden once again grieved on the national stage, after losing his son Beau to brain cancer.

During his acceptance speech at the 2020 Democratic National Convention, Biden channeled these experiences in order to speak directly "to those of you who have lost the most" in the pandemic.

I know how it feels to lose someone you love. I know that deep black hole that opens up in your chest. That you feel your whole being is sucked into it. I know how mean and cruel and unfair life can be sometimes. But I've learned two things. First, your loved ones may have left this Earth but they never leave your heart. They will always be with you. And second, I found the best way through pain and loss and grief is to find purpose. [...] And we have a great purpose as a nation: To open the doors of opportunity to all Americans. To save our democracy. To be a light to the world once again (quoted in Stevens, 2020).

Acknowledging and describing pain; offering hope by gesturing toward an upward narrative arc; connecting the purpose of the individual to one of the nation's animating myths — Biden's address had all the hallmarks of a resonant and uplifting consolation speech.

Yet Biden's efforts to embody the consoler role were frequently interrupted, and at times simply thwarted, by the course of the pandemic and the chaos of the campaign. Condolences delivered to a camera in an empty room — or even on a national mall filled with 400 lights that symbolize 400,000 lives lost, rather than the physical bodies of their mourners — do not have the same force as those communicated face-to-face. The upward narrative arc that Biden projected was relentlessly contradicted by the experience of life — and, more to the point, loss — under an administration that insisted, despite evidence to the contrary that grew exponentially on a daily basis, that the virus was disappearing.

In the first presidential debate, Biden's consoling narrative was literally, and not only figuratively, interrupted. Throughout the chaotic 90-minute exchange, Biden occasionally endeavored to speak to mourners' pain once again, turning away from his opponent and breaking the "fourth wall" to address viewers directly. Time and again, however, the debate degenerated into incomprehensible crosstalk. By the end of the first of six segments, just 18 minutes into the debate, Biden's frustration was plainly visible. Perhaps the most memorable line of the night was Biden's: "Will you shut up, man?" Whether viewers booed or cheered, changed the channel or simply stared aghast at the unfolding scene, they certainly could not have derived much coherence or consolation from the display.

Instead, even with a new administration in place, we are living in the midst of what Arthur Frank (1995) terms a "chaos narrative". This is really a misnomer, though, for the chaos nar-



rative is better described as “an *anti-narrative* of time without sequence, telling without mediation, and speaking about oneself without being fully able to reflect on oneself” (p. 98). To live amidst a protracted disaster, one whose boundaries and contours are not yet clear, is to live with anti-narrative, to be called upon to speak (and perhaps even write for sociology journals) without the time and distance required to process the disorienting daily happenings. If TikTok is a temporary balm for chaos — the heart of a world that may appear, for members of the economically unluckiest generation(s) in U.S. history (Van Dam, 2020), to be heartless indeed — the first presidential debate was both a representation and an unleashing of that chaos at the macro level.

### 3 Lessons for Critical Disaster Studies

#### 3.1 Sociology Without Narrative

What can these ruminations on COVID-19, written *in medias res*, contribute to building “critical disaster studies”? In a moment when I, too, am struggling to formulate a narrative, I find myself drawn to sociological approaches that take their inspiration from literature.

The first is Andrew Abbott’s (2007) meditations on lyrical sociology. Rather than engaging in canonical sociology’s quest for an explanation, lyrical sociology “is in some profound sense *not narrative*,” meaning that “its ultimate framing structure should not be the telling of a story — recounting, explaining, comprehending — but rather the use of a single image to communicate a mood, an emotional sense of reality” (p. 73).

To what end? At heart, lyrical approaches cultivate and foster a specific emotional response that Abbott calls *humane sympathy*. Abbott has in mind something akin to compassion, but with a stronger sense of mutuality. While compassion moves in one direction, *toward* the sufferer and *from* the one who chooses to suffer with them, “the nature of humane sympathy reads both ways; it heightens our awareness of our own limitation in times and space by showing us, in all its intensity, that of others” (Abbott, 2007, p. 94).

I admire the vision of those who have sought to fill the void in Washington, D.C.: to construct sites of mourning and memory in the absence of political consolation by visually representing the lives lost. I am profoundly grateful to hear the words of a president who speaks of loss with compassion, as well as the wisdom of one who has grieved deeply. For me, though, the most affecting reminders of all we have lost — all we are still in the process of losing — have been those that focus on a constructing “single image,” portraying particularity rather than quantity. Consider the gorgeous, haunting essay that appeared in the *New York Times*’ popular Modern Love column in October, under the headline “Thank You for Ruining Me.” In it, writer Jared Misner (2020) mourns and commemorates the best friend who, as he puts it, “ruined” him.

Misner is happily married to a man whom he loves deeply. But he also enjoyed a platonic sort of partnership with his late friend Alison, who embodied an irreplaceable form of companionship.

In college at the University of Florida, and then continuing for the next eight years, Alison and I would say to each other, “Thank you for ruining me.” It was our way of telling each other: You’re so perfect, your understanding of me so nuanced and deep, that no man could ever match you.

What Misner (2020) mourns and commemorates — and, in the process, renders visible to his readers — are 29-year-old Alison’s quirky particularities, inclinations and eccentricities that were magnificently well-matched with Misner’s own. Their relationship was so intimate that, although they were never entangled romantically, they once jokingly claimed one another as partners in a Facebook marriage, changing their status to make their relationship “Facebook-official”. Misner reflects:

Now that I’m actually married (the legal kind), I can say that I love my husband very much. He is pragmatic, kind and handsome.

But he does not pull over for garage sales. He does not smuggle bags of dog costumes and treats out of press events to later give to my dogs and my parents’ dogs. He does not bring friendship bracelet crafts or design-your-own hats to our annual Labor Day trip and does not understand my references to the Beehive. He has no idea why Alison and I, eight years later, still laugh at the thought of when the chickens finally come home to roost.

Like Misner’s husband, we readers are left to wonder about the Beehive, and we are never let in on the joke about the chickens coming home to roost. We cannot fully appreciate Alison’s particularities, or fully grasp the bond she shared with Misner. But, as Abbott (2007, p. 94) puts it, “in their mutability and particularity, we see our own” — in this case, the ineffable power and irreplaceable gift of the people who “ruin” us, and in doing so leave their indelible mark on our lives. In Misner’s lyrical tribute to Alison, the particular conjures the general. Uniqueness and universality interpenetrate.

So it is true, as Biden frequently underscores, and as one of the public displays in Washington, D.C., so vividly depicted, that there are empty chairs at a heartbreaking number of tables where families sit to enjoy that mundane yet intimate act of sharing meals together. We should not lose the sight of the collective toll of those absences, or stop documenting their numbers, even as they grow beyond comprehension. Someday, we should find ways to memorialize these losses together, and to narrativize them not merely as the result of a virus, but as the profoundly tragic outcome of a callous and hubristic administration that nevertheless garnered a shocking degree of support from the general populace to the very end, even as its leader incited a violent insurrection on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Rituals, as Durkheim understood so well, simultaneously express and instill social values. If we are to transform the nature of our social bonds — for instance, to solidify the solidarities that were visible in protests across the country following the killing of George Floyd; to create a healthcare system which understands that each individual’s well-being is bound up with the well-being of the surrounding community — we will need rituals that are both immersive and transformative.

For the moment, however, one of the most humane acts that we can undertake, as sociologists and as people, is to dwell in the particularities of some of those we have lost: to engage the world in a lyrical mode before we cast the complexities of 2020 into a narrative. Speaking from that terrifying yet quintessentially human place of searing grief borne of immense and abiding love, Misner (2020) writes: “To die from this plague is a tragedy. To witness a loved one do so is a merciless, unrelenting kind of sadness — prolonged and filled with false hope.”

Engaging the COVID-19 world in this contemplative, lyrical mode may seem too modest or even misguided in the face of big questions about disaster and modernity. Yet the pandemic has made painfully clear that we in the United States, and in many places beyond, desperately need the humane sympathy that lyricism has the capacity to foster. Much more than President Biden’s inaugural address, the lyric poet (and sociology B.A.) Amanda Gorman offered

uplift and inspiration during the post-insurrection transfer of power, inside a capital city that had been transformed into a fortress for the occasion. Even more, resisting the temptation to narrativize too quickly, to reduce the intricacies and particularities of human experience — especially the experience of suffering — into familiar plot structures, may even have a salutary impact on the predominant culture of memorialization more generally.

### 3.2 Lessons for a COVID Memorial

This essay began with the observation that, for the past several decades, we have lived amidst a rush to memorialization. As a result, we erect statues and construct museums before we have the time and emotional distance to contextualize and historicize events that we are still actively mourning. To be sure, many (and perhaps even most) of the motivations behind the rush to memorialize are noble: the desire to honor and name each individual life extinguished, to offer spaces for the gathering of bodies and the replenishing of the spirit that are so crucial to our very humanity. But moving too quickly to narrativization, to *finalizing* a story of disaster or crisis, may also have unintended consequences.<sup>4</sup> In New York’s 9/11 museum, which presents the story of September 11 over a cavernous 110,000 square foot space that is situated directly beneath the footprints of the Twin Towers, the expansive historical exhibition devotes only a single panel to discussing the War on Terror *and* the PATRIOT Act. In place of a broad historical narrative that chronicles the events leading up to the attacks or traces their ongoing reverberations is an intricate, moment-by-moment account of September 11, 2001: an attempt to recapture the shock of the original events and the pain they unleashed in lower Manhattan and around the globe.

As Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2017) points out, the bounding of events is always a negotiation, and the distinction between “event” and “memory” is not as clear-cut as we ordinarily make it out to be — as publics or even as scholars. One of the dangers of bounding events too narrowly, declaring them “over” before their consequences have come fully into view, is that we allow definitive representations to congeal too quickly. In the case of 9/11, the rush to memorialization has too often entailed preserving raw grief for posterity, nurturing anger and even a quest for vengeance (Simko, 2020). Representations, Wagner-Pacifici (2017) explains, are “copies” of an event that “attempt to stabilize and sediment” historical transitions “in the face of uncertainty, distance, and resistance” (p. 26). When grief is stabilized without the benefit of time, contemplation, and historical reflection, mourning may become melancholia: grief without end (Freud, 1917). Even as she planted flags to remember each life lost as of November, the artist Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg warned against the rush to memorialization. “People called this [installation] a memorial, and I’m kind of hesitant to do that because you don’t memorialize a plane crash in the middle of it crashing, and the plane is still crashing here” (quoted in Buhre, 2021).

Eventually, though, the time will come for emplotting the COVID-19 era: for distilling its complexities and encapsulating its lessons for the future. As Firstenberg notes, in the spirit of our historical moment saturated with commemoration, “in time, I think we will find a magnificent way to honor all of our losses and to allow this to be a real pivot point in who we are as

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4. In *Letting Stories Breathe*, Arthur Frank (2010) draws on Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) to argue that an ethical storyteller does not “finalize” her subjects by “claim[ing] to speak the last word, especially about who another person can be” (p. 193). Portraying an event in the past tense, sites of memory — especially those that are “official” or “national” — make an implicit (and in some cases, explicit) claim to speaking the *authoritative* word, if not the last.

a country” (quoted in Buhre, 2021). In anticipation of this possibility, I turn toward another ancient literary form for inspiration: tragedy.

From its inception, the genre of tragedy was integral to socio-political life. Sociologists have shown that it remains so (e.g., Wagner-Pacifici, 1986; Alexander, 2002; Smith, 2010). In sociology, tragedy is often understood as fostering fatalism in the face of persistent and seemingly intractable suffering (e.g., Jacobs, 2001). Yet, as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2001) underscores, in ancient Greece, “tragedies were vehicles of political deliberation and reflection at a sacred civic festival.” For their original audiences, tragedies “did not bring the good news of resignationism; it brought the bad news of self-examination and change” (pp. xxxvi–xxxvii).

Elsewhere, my colleague Jeffrey Olick and I have argued for sociologists to recover and embrace a tragic sensibility in their own work (Simko & Olick, 2020). Most of all, this tragic sensibility stands to reshape the way that sociologists respond to the suffering they inevitably encounter in the course of their research. Without ever lapsing into fatalism, *tragic sociology* (at least in our view) recognizes the limits and fallibilities that are integral to human experience: our vulnerability and, in the end, our mortality. It strives to ameliorate pain while recognizing that some forms of suffering are chronic or fatal. Like its lyrical counterpart, tragic sociology strives to communicate such experiences in all their complexity, to bear witness and stir the emotions while also demanding the reader’s full intellectual engagement. In doing so, it may even produce something akin to catharsis, a term that refers to both the emotional purgation that is now typically associated with it and a more cognitive kind of reflection that tragedians also seek to inspire (Young, 2013). In the process, tragic sociology may ultimately give way to wisdom.

What would it mean to understand COVID-19 through the lens of tragic sociology? To be sure, any sociology of COVID must foreground the brute fact that the suffering unleashed by the pandemic has been distributed in profoundly unequal ways. It has exacerbated existing inequalities and added disruption to lives that were already precarious. Even more, sociology shows us how the conditions of life that some of us associate with COVID-19 in particular — disruption, uncertainty, unpredictability, chaos — plagued so many lives long before the virus. But a distinctively tragic approach will also linger on the broader human fragilities and vulnerabilities that life in a pandemic makes painfully evident. We do not have the control over nature that optimistic narratives of modernity promised. We are susceptible to infection. We must live with unpredictability. We must live with dependency — on systems, structures, and ultimately, one another. Yet tragic sociology may help us narrativize COVID in order to bring about a world that more fully addresses these dependencies by acknowledging them, and carving out space to contemplate how best to live with them.

As vaccines lead us into a new stage of the pandemic, can we channel the disruptions and arrhythmias that we are all experiencing, albeit to vastly different degrees, into an image of interconnectedness that reflects our social and biological realities? Again, we will never achieve total control over nature. We will all have moments when we are confronted with no choice but to live with uncertainty and fragmentation. But perhaps there is still a way to reimagine and reconfigure our relationships to one another that creates a deeper sense of security, and the possibility for a meaningful future, for a far greater number of people. For our fates are indeed tethered to one another, now and always.

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