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Mourning and Museums

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Not for the first time has a plague altered how people mourn.

Philadelphia, October 1918. Thousands died every week from influenza. Demand overwhelmed the hospitals, the undertakers, the embalmers, the supply of coffins. Corpses lay at home for days or were stacked three-high in the morgue. Religious services were hasty, the flow of funerals unending. A shortage of gravediggers forced some families to excavate graves themselves.¹

The current pandemic has also disrupted, or cut off entirely, the usual rituals of mourning. Denied the ability to gather, friends and relatives say goodbye through phones, or screens, or Plexiglas. Memorials are held over Zoom. There is a sense of incompleteness, a lack of closure. Some studies expect a new era of prolonged grief.²

The view is grim: more than a half-million deaths. Probably more uncounted. And that is just in this country. Here is a staggering statistic: one in every 475 Native Americans has died from COVID-19.³ Grasping the toll of these, and other, numbers is difficult, but the ripple effect on kinship networks is wide. As a study conducted in part by faculty at my university concluded, every pandemic fatality is experienced by approximately nine bereaved.⁴

Meanwhile, other plagues persist—some have been around longer. The brutal deployment of state power against Black Americans. The core of violence in daily life: forever wars abroad, mass shootings at home. Opioid-related deaths lately hit an all-time high.⁵ What is to be made of all this carnage?

The cultural pressure to shunt or suppress mourning runs deep. In 1965, the social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer observed the pervasive tendency “to treat mourning as morbid self-indulgence.”⁶ If still too often looked at as a sort of private embarrassment, mourning has also been appreciated for its collective character. Judith Butler, for instance, proposes that mourning “furnishes a sense of political community,” and David McIvor ponders what it would mean “if mourning were envisioned as a kind of civic or democratic obligation.”⁷ Grieving can turn into a form of resistance; it can spur solidarity.⁸

Mourning is a catalyst of recent demonstrations.⁹ Sometimes art museums have been the sites of such action. The “die-ins” staged by photographer Nan Goldin and others protesting the Sackler family and OxyContin-maker Purdue Pharma at the Guggenheim, Harvard, and Smithsonian museums, and elsewhere in 2018 and 2019, are one example. Black Lives

Matter die-ins have occurred multiple times on the steps outside the Philadelphia Museum of Art since 2014—and as recently as June 2020. A similar assembly was coordinated inside the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in 2015. In terms of museum-arranged activities relevant to this topic, temporary memorials at the Cape Ann Museum in Massachusetts and the Orange County Museum of Art in California paid tribute to the pandemic victims of their respective localities in March 2021.

Several recent group exhibitions have brought grief to the fore. In 2018, the Minneapolis Institute of Art organized *Art and Healing: In the Moment*, an exhibition of local art made in response to the police killing of Philando Castile. Last year, *Mourning: On Loss and Change* featured thirty contemporary international artists at the Hamburger Kunsthalle in Hamburg, and *The Work of Mourning* featured seven artists at the Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm. Like them, *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America* (presented by the New Museum in New York until June 2021) was conceived before the pandemic but has taken on new resonance amid multiplying calamities. Bringing together the work of thirty-seven Black artists, the exhibition explored loss and racial violence from the 1960s to the present. The events of this past year are the focus of the six photographers and filmmakers in *On Protest and Mourning*, a digital exhibition from the Caribbean Culture Center African Diaspora Institute in New York. Similarly, *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville was prompted by the shooting death of Breonna Taylor and subsequent protests. Mourning is also a component of *Supernatural America: The Paranormal in American Art*, an exhibition organized by the Minneapolis Institute of Art that is opening at the Toledo Museum of Art in June.

Something more basic, yet tougher to describe, comes to mind as well. Where other than a museum are the dead more with us, except maybe a cemetery? Not for nothing are the two sometimes associated. The connection between museums and death is not new. We find it at the center of the futurists’ hostility: “The numberless museums that cover [Italy are] like so many graveyards”; “Museums: cemeteries!”; and “Museums: absurd abattoirs.”¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, too, glimpsed these mortuary foundations: “Museums are like the family sepulchers of works of art.”¹¹ Museums may well be places where art goes to die, but perhaps, in their orientation toward loss, they can offer the conditions for a vital gateway. Housing the material stuff of the past, “nearly all museums evoke something of loss,” writes the art historian Michael Ann Holly, whose book *The Melancholy Art* wisely encourages us to confront “the undercurrent of melancholy, like a riptide, that tugs at our matter-of-fact faith in the value of the museum display.”¹²

Museums today might take this psychic territory seriously. The magnitude of the loss invites viewing our time not only through political, economic, and scientific lenses, but also through psychological, emotional, and spiritual ones. Museums might—not in a glib or opportunistic way—heed the rage and sorrow of the mourners. To abide with the dead, who still counsel within us, might be a humane and generous way to serve the living.

Notes

¹ Catharine Arnold, *Pandemic 1918: Eyewitness Accounts from the Greatest Medical Holocaust in Modern History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018), 118–25.

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- ² See, for example, Nicole Johnson, "My Mother Died When I Was 7. I'm Grieving 37 Years Later," *New York Times*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/17/well/family/delayed-grief.html>.
- ³ Nina Lakhani, "Indigenous Americans Dying from Covid at Twice the Rate of White Americans," *The Guardian*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/04/native-americans-coronavirus-covid-death-rate>.
- ⁴ Ashton M. Verdery, Emily Smith-Greenaway, Rachel Margolis, and Jonathan Daw, "Tracking the Reach of COVID-19 Kin Loss with a Bereavement Multiplier Applied to the United States," *PNAS* 117, no. 30 (July 28, 2020): 17695–701, <https://www.pnas.org/content/117/30/17695>. The authors note that the multiplier is slightly lower for white than for Black Americans.
- ⁵ See, for example, Abby Goodnough, "Overdose Deaths Have Surged During the Pandemic, CDC Data Shows," *New York Times*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/14/health/overdose-deaths-fentanyl-opioids-coronavirus-pandemic.html>.
- ⁶ Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), xiii.
- ⁷ Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 22; and David W. McIvor, *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), xii.
- ⁸ Patricia J. Lopez and Kathryn Gillespie, eds., *Vulnerable Witness: The Politics of Grief in the Field* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 3, 10–11; and Cindy Milstein, ed., *Rebellious Mourning: The Collective Work of Grief* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 8–9.
- ⁹ I especially think of Claudia Rankine's well-known essay, "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning," *New York Times Magazine*, June 22, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html>.
- ¹⁰ F. T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" (1909), in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 148.
- ¹¹ Theodor Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), 175.
- ¹² Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 130, 131.