TEXERE: The Shape of Loss Is a Tapestry

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"To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending." bell hooks wrote this line in her formative text *All About Love: New Visions*, and in doing so, she reminds us that there are sorrows in our lives that may never end completely. A kind of partnership with sorrow becomes necessary, then, as loss *becomes an integral part of daily life*—it is not one event that punctuates "regular" life, to be privately grieved for a short time and then put away.

What do we do with loss, then? As an artist, I spend a lot of time in contemplation. I walk the city I live in or find myself visiting. I meditate. I use the quiet hours of the morning to let ideas reveal themselves, thread by gentle thread, so that a larger tapestry may come slowly into view. What has become clear to me is that we need more rituals and collective, contemporary making practices to memorialize the losses in our lives to support what I call a collective grief hygiene.

First, I'm going to talk to you about loss. Second, I'm going to talk to you about weaving. Then I'm going to introduce you to TEXERE—a web-based mental health platform transforming human losses into digital memorial tapestries created by posts from users of the site—which I started working on in the winter of 2019. Finally, I'm going to give you some context for why weaving and computer technology form an unusually special partnership to support us in the grief work we all have to do.

But first, let's talk about loss.

Maybe you've had a loss that left you feeling soaked with sadness—an open ocean between yourself and any relief. Maybe you have had losses that were curious in the way that you saw them coming all along but the timing of them felt almost comic or even cosmic. I've experienced many, many losses in my life—the kinds that submerged me completely and the kinds that in hindsight make me laugh. It's funny how ordinary it all is and how tempting it is to think that we are alone in our grief when we are not.

The process of grieving invites us to rewrite personal narratives about where, how, and with whom we feel a sense of belonging. I had to ask the question, what is as old as the human need to write stories? The answer was near to hand: weaving. Indeed, the production of cloth has been a central technology to narrate the human experience for thirty thousand years. What's your social status? Read the pattern in the cloth. Who won or lost the battle? See the tapestry. The word *text* is rooted in the Latin verb *texere*, which means "to weave." Whether you come from a culture that writes along the weft line—the horizontal thread—or the warp line—the vertical thread—the connection between textile and narrative is long-standing.

That's right, we have to talk about weaving.

We are embraced by cloth from the moment we are born until the day we die. Caressed by cloth from dawn until dusk. The role of woven cloth to mark major life transitions cannot be overstated within human history. I had to ask the question, what would a mourning cloth be made of today? Could you weave a mourning cloth with words? How about images or sound?

Weaving is typically thought of as involving only one maker, sitting at one loom, crossing threads to make a weaving for one person or one household. I wanted to find a way that expanded ideas of weaving to include the interlacing of nonmaterial threads, like text and image, by multiple weavers simultaneously, regardless of where they might be in the world. I wanted to create a collective digital memorial tapestry. I had to draw upon my training as a weaver, a poet, and a performance artist and dream up something that had not been done in the history of weaving for the past thirty thousand years.

Imagine this: TEXERE (texere.space) invites you to choose from the kinds of loss that speak to your own experience.* For example, you might choose the loss of health or a relationship, the loss of drinkable water, or the loss of your Indigenous language or mother tongue. Once you select your focus, you write an entry about how that loss makes you feel. TEXERE then transforms that entry into a digital thread that is woven into a larger digital tapestry of entries from people all over the world who are grieving that same loss. In digital memorial tapestries, strips of images representing the losses in your lives thread themselves over and under lines of text and images of the waveform from audio you have recorded about your loss. The effect is a glowing digital cloth that transforms text, image, and sound into an abstract woven composition, allowing the anonymity of each entry to be preserved while the feeling from each of them seeps through.
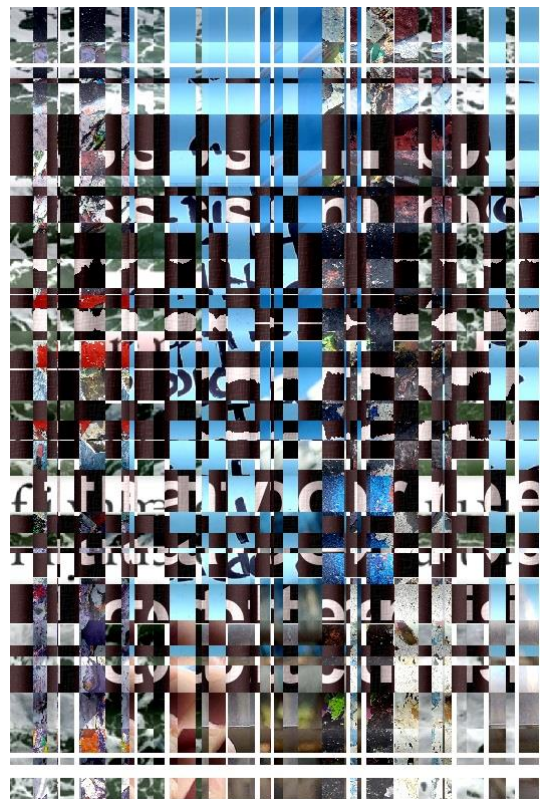

Fig. 1. Indira Allegra, in collaboration with Sassafras Tech Collective, *TEXERE: Loss of A Loved One to A Virus*, 2022–ongoing (image captured May 17, 2022), digital memorial tapestry

Now imagine this: each time anyone makes a new entry, the composition of the tapestry changes, and the tapestry can be changed an infinite number of times. This is a way of tracking how we as a collective are changing in relationship to our experience of loss. The image of the digital tapestry can then be shared to other social media sites or downloaded onto a device to display as an artwork. Images of these memorial tapestries can be viewed and used as reminders that you are not alone in your grief process, because your experience of loss is visually interwoven with others' writings about it. TEXERE uses the narrative comfort of cloth to create a collaborative art platform that can support the grief processes of people all over the world, through the web. In fact, the internet itself would not exist were it not for the weaver's loom.

TEXERE celebrates the relationship between the analogue technology of weaving and computer technology as we know it today—from Indigenous cultures who have stored data elegantly through the use of textiles, such with Cherokee double-weave baskets and Incan quipus, to Ada Lovelace, who used punch cards from the Jacquard loom to program the first computer in the 1800s, the precursor to IBM's first computing system. By weaving in digital space, cloths can be made and used by multiple individuals simultaneously. TEXERE expands the scale of cloth beyond the realm of the individual home and creates a textile that can connect people across the globe.

This is important, because I believe in what I call global grief equity—the ability of all people, regardless of their background or economic status—to have the right to grieve their losses without worrying about the stigma associated with vulnerability or the need to rush back to work to "be productive." I'm excited by TEXERE's ability to be a digital resting place online. So much of social media has to do with individual optics of success, ability, health, and beauty as currency. TEXERE offers a break from these modes of participating in online forums by allowing people to collaborate in the making of an artwork in a noncompetitive space and in a way that respects each person's privacy.

In closing, I think of memorial as a genre vital to life for its ability to hold the tension that grief creates inside ourselves within crafted objects, spaces, and rituals. To identify as a weaver, then, is to champion a way of working that is unafraid of tension—be that tension material or emotional. To be a weaver is to be a storyteller, creating tapestries that narrate human memories and human relationships with one another and the cosmos. Let's transform our losses into something beautiful. It is a service to ourselves and to each other. I believe no life is disposable, which means that all losses deserve to be mourned. Our tapestries can be a gorgeous memorial.

*To learn more, visit http://www.indiraallegra.com/texere.