

# Transitions: Humanities, Pandemic, and Memory

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Do we not speak of what we remember, even of memory as an image we have of the past?"

— Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*

## Abstract

Our sense of understanding has come under heavy scrutiny in the wake of the current pandemic. From reinforcing hygiene practices to such theories as cover-ups regarding the origin of the virus, there is now a tendency to question everything that we know. While there have been many significant pandemics recorded in human history, the impact of COVID-19 has changed the course of societies forever, mainly because of the state of global connectivity and easy access to information. Refusing to think and understand the crisis only in terms of a biological threat, the paper reimagines the value of the humanities to help us make meaning on a collective level. It explores the trajectory of the past by focusing on the tensions between mediated history and contested memory, and how societies learn to heal from trauma through commemorative practices. The paper calls for the incorporation of new ways to disseminate contributions made by the humanities and sciences through scholarly engagement with populaces to broaden the overall effects.

**Keywords :** Cultural memory; Humanities; Narrative; Pandemic.

We need stories to survive the everydayness of our lives. In the aftermath of the current crisis once we have honed our intellectual skills and abilities to better understand what we have been through the need for storytelling will be far more than it is now. That is to say, the post-pandemic world should also create a safe space where we can move past impassioned debates over budget cuts in the humanities across the world, ostentatious displays of intellect within already shrinking esoteric circles dominated

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by grey and august men and unashamedly exchange our oddities and peculiar doubts with one another. A trained humanist cannot and should not simplify the arduous task of imagining a world where practicality deigns to correspond with idealism to keep the mistrust between the two to the minimum. No doubt, it is an anathema to the histrionics of survival that the relationship between scientific inquiry and humanistic cogency does not acknowledge the capacity for true altruism.

In recent years, the politicization of humanities has become more and more defensive enabling the positivists to greatly undermine the urgency of theorizing the struggles of their counterparts involved in thinking beyond the differences of subjectivity, ethics, history, and so on. How our societies have laid bare the collective preparedness for this crisis demands stiff scrutiny. To make a case for the dwindling significance of humanities one needs to think beyond the diachronic notion of eclectic ambiguity that continues to dominate pedagogical engagement in the university system. Nothing should, therefore, be considered preordained, at least not when disseminating knowledge. The assumption to categorically normalize aberrant, underdeveloped, disinterested science as a conscious force in the matters pertaining to human well-being does not articulate all social experience. That is why there should not be an implicit denial of employing such a strategy that can equate tactic learning with the absorption of intermixture between scholarship and teaching.

Is it too much to say that the humanities have always been about a chimeric fascination engaged with reason? If it is so the current pandemic should become a focal point in our understanding of how valuable the humanities are. Known unknowns are staring at the criminal brazenness with which our societies have evaded and would like to continue evading the very responsibilities that form their core. Since the humanities occupy societal spaces that focus on such attributes as critical thinking, writing, research, we tend to confront the disciplines' humane pursuits as leisurely or simply a vault of arcane profundity. Indeed, the role of the intellectual at large has always been contested. His is the position of an interventionist interrogating the epistemological notions to materialize the variables of multiple interpretations. Marred by an obscure erudition, the humanities have always invited criticism: the overt abundance of a scholarship that offers neither information nor skills in general; that too many scholars are imprisoned by an academic frenzy that has reduced their reasoning to a mere pronouncement of personal advancement, and all this investment of time and energy deters them from their primal duty, that is teaching. While all this may be true in the context of a global race to produce skills

that are employable yet the humanities do not operate within the labels of economic crudeness where everything acquired during the course of learning is sellable.

The traditional humanistic disciplines are unapologetically ideological in nature – transcending both time and space. Indeed, the scholarship produced in the humanities does not yield immediate results but it overcomes the challenges by forging compelling expertise extending into transdisciplinary relationships, to sustain long-term dialogue with the intended publics. If it were not so, why would the German Ethics Council\*\* proactively participate and approach its country’s leadership with measures that are not the results of only hard sciences in the current crisis? The more pressing question at the present moment is that with all the scientific advancement in public health how the pandemic caught us off guard? Did we invest too much of faith in science and too little in the metaphysics of life? Or is it simply the result of vainglorious premises upon which our scientific communities have constructed a sense of security?

There is a need at this point to understand the fundamental sense of things – to propose a conceptualize undertaking of time. That is, how can our response to a historical crisis of this magnitude become productive? The existential threat that we face today is not only limited to loss of lives but total oblivion. Perhaps, more importantly, we should now begin to remember to know what happened. The crisis which the modern states aim to contain is rather peripheral in the natural order of things inasmuch as “the infiniteness of the threat has in some way broken every limit” (Blanchot 1). Any attempt to summarize the ontology, in this case, would refute the claims of an originary experience that could verify the subjectivity of the pandemic. And yet, there remains, perhaps the idea to arrest the persistence of a future memory by valorizing the present.\*\*\* It is so because the lived experience of any society can only be sustained in the form of the narrative when it converses with people both at individual and cultural level.

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\*\* The *German Ethics Council* is a body of 26 experts from various fields, including but not limited to theology, philosophy, sociology – tasked with addressing “the questions of ethics, society, science, medicine and law and the probable consequences for the individual and society that result in connection with research and development, in particular in the field of the life sciences and their application to humanity.” (“the german ethics council”)

\*\*\* NYC *Covid-19 Oral History, Narrative and Memory Archive* is a project started by the Interdisciplinary Center For Innovative Theory And Empirics (INCITE) and the Oral History Archives at Columbia University with an aim to document New York City’s experience of the pandemic.

However, it should be noted that simply archiving information of events and everyday life cannot help to trace the trajectory of the pandemic for there is reason to believe that [r]aising society's threshold of attention with regard to risk . . . means blocking the growth of the social body, or even causing it to regress to its primitive state" (Esposito 62). A representation of the past involves various cultural practices and symbolisms that could be insinuated into the narrative as commemorative. To save the present generation from being labelled as the pandemic generation, the elusiveness of time needs to be linked with the concept of the eternal recurrence as "[l]ives are more than the linear unfolding of a succession of moments—lives in clock time. We are compelled to live through time—a lived time or duration that is always part of something more" (Middleton and Brown 244). What need to be addressed at a global level are the key elements or transnational forms of remembering that can bind both individual and cultural memory of the pandemic.

Existing political bodies and institutions may not be able to help fund any such attempts to actively remember a distant memory that evokes a response so overwhelming that even after years one might be shocked and dismayed by its presence. As a result, the onus to systematically commemorate and historicize the pandemic is on researchers, academicians, and scholars. To that end, there must be an effort to memorialize the crisis to serve as a reminder for future generations so that they are better prepared. In doing so, the focus should be on the tenors of social practices that by contrast are meaningful to the identity of its subjects. We need to understand that memory and identity share a historical relationship with "groups' identities and their memories being social and political constructs" (Misztal 134). How memory and identity reciprocate each other also depends upon the context in which they are relived for it is only in society that people are able to "recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs 38). More importantly, memory specifically cultural memory is usually reflective of a past that is nourished in the conscious expression of a society through which we derive our identity. Dedicated memorials, museums, flags, public holidays are all but part of a politically charged narrative that comes to the forefront especially when the cultural memory and the identity it represents are in a tensed revision.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> It is for this very reason the memories of events involving trauma such as war,

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<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> The recent removal of the statue of Frank Rizzo, a former police commissioner and mayor of Philadelphia, which was erected in 1998, coincides with the death of George Floyd, an African American man at the hands of police. Rizzo who leaves a legacy of police misconduct and brutality was a controversial figure. A staunch opponent of desegregation, his tenure as a police commissioner was overshadowed by coercion, intimidation, violation of constitutional rights and dozens of lawsuits alleging harassment and discrimination.

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genocide, pandemic should be embodied in a way that it reciprocates the authenticity of the causal relationship between actuality and imagination.

Painful memories, in particular, are often dismissed as too fragmented and unreliable to be included into a socio-political narrative or at least are not emphasized upon and celebrated as memories of independence, victory. This miscalculation usually challenges the dichotomy between history and memory as there is a strong link between descendants of victim survivors, perpetrators as well as bystanders who have been witness to traumatic events. This is so because they connect deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past in such a way that the connection is identified as a form of memory. It has also been observed that in certain cases, memory can be transmitted even to those who were not actually there to live an event (Hirsch 3). That memory is intergenerational opens avenues to understand "the postmodern conception of identities as fluid, multidimensional and personalized constructions" (Miszta 134).

As is the case with the history of disaster, once our preoccupation to archive the chain of events is achieved we limit the association with what occurred and what could have occurred. Does that explain the current pandemic where despite a better public health policy and infrastructure than the past many centuries we are still wrestling with the disease? Or is that the narratives that came out in the following years of previous pandemics were misunderstood or treated as implausible? By and large, "[f]or history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (Caruth 18). The inevitable difficulty to presume a commonality in ritualizing memory is a twofold process. First, it is always a risky proposition to believe that progression of a particular memory would impact its subjects in a similar manner. Secondly, there is always a tendency to self-interpret or devalue the pervasiveness of commemorative practices. In any case, the idea of ritual performance has to be "compelling, both for its participants and for its audience, because it has to be completed and because much depends on its completion, into which is built an expectation, be it of peacemaking or rainmaking" (Feuchtwang 282). To what end is the ritualizing a prevailing notion of success largely depends on its immediate significance and how it is collectively acknowledged and remembered. It is not atypical of a ritual cultural or political to be informed by a temporary dissolution but disseminate "[a]t the very least, as in commemorative ritual, the performance [that] does something of itself, [and] brings to mind what might have been forgotten and in a

certain way that will, perhaps, warn or prevent (never again), or articulate solidary resolve (they died for us)" (Feuchtwang 282).

In a seemingly uncertain situation such as a pandemic where loss and fear is rife, the manifestation of such practices not only reengage in historical perplexity but also interrogate the vagaries of memory that emulate the putative modes of interaction in the "form of collective memory, in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity" (Assman 110). What is obvious in this sense is that cultural memory includes social artefacts built on a perspective that pertains to cultural integrity as a whole. Aleida Assmann provides a more distinct explanation of cultural memory:

Cultural memory differs from other forms of memory in that its structure is not bipolar but triadic. It is organized not around the poles of remembering and forgetting but inserts a third category which is the combination of remembering and forgetting. This third category refers to the cultural function of storing extensive information in libraries, museums, and archives which far exceeds the capacities of human memories. These caches of information, therefore, are neither actively remembered nor forgotten, because they remain materially accessible for possible use . . . Within cultural memory, "an active memory" is set up against the background of an archival memory. The active memory refers to what a society consciously selects and maintains as salient and vital items for common orientation and shared remembering. The content of active cultural memory is preserved by specific practices and institutions against the dominant tendency of decay and general oblivion. (220-21)

In this manner, cultural memory accesses a memory that has not been fully utilized yet it is shared by a group of people re-enacting certain notions associated with a selective past and thus preserving the very meaning of this memory. Although for memory to become public, it needs to invoke in us what we have forgotten to remember to heal what we have lost historically. The implication of such affiliations with memory discourses also deploys the idea of "emplotment" since history when presented in the form of narrative allows itself to be interpreted as a story or plot with meaning embedded in it. But in reality, historical events such as a pandemic do not necessarily have meanings or occur as a story with marked beginnings and endings.

Nevertheless, the writing of history as narrative further suggests that its

interpretation largely depends on who writes it and the intention behind the writing as our understanding of history is influenced by what is a “valued work” (De Certeau 64). This becomes more problematic since what might be valued work for a group of people might not be of value for others. At times the historical text is valued only by an elite class that might not be aware of socio-economic problems of their society. But we also know, for instance, that “[t]he Black Death epidemic . . . shifted Western attitudes toward authority on several levels. [T]he authority of landowners and employers declined with their economic position; lords lost their grip on serfs. And because much Western political authority rested with those who controlled land, traditional political authority suffered as well” (Hays 49). Suffice it to say that the interpretation of history is determined by the disciplinary approach used by the historian to revive the past and not the actuality of events as they unfolded. Such a discursive shift should force us to think beyond suspicion and devote ourselves to the understanding of the past so as to “not forget that everything starts, not from the archives, but from testimony . . . we have nothing better than testimony . . . to assure ourselves that something did happen in the past” (Ricoeur 147). The testimony, in other words, is the memory of survivors or witnesses that is usually left out or not systematically included when approaching the past. In the post-pandemic world, there must be a renewed focus on the ways we ascribe meanings to public memory.\*\*\*\* The commitment to reason with generations of postmodernist societies would require deliberative re-contextualizing of how the narratives are institutionalized.

Unlike previous pandemics, the one that the world faces today has far-reaching implications. Researchers in both humanities and sciences may want to reimagine the scopes of their respective fields so as to work in harmony and incorporate new ways to complement each other’s contributions. Literary scholars, historians, philosophers can all help identify the patterns of peoples’ behaviour in the event of a crisis—sharing their

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\*\*\*\* That the current pandemic will indelibly influence the ways in which our memories continue to reimagine the past would be an understatement. In all likelihood multiple versions of the pandemic will result in “restless articulations” since within groups memories vie to claim the experience. It is so because in present-day societies, “mediascapes” of all types are of paramount importance as they construct the memory frameworks—giving way to a new sort of common memory. This becomes possible through the creation of global media events—that might be witnessed by all simultaneously. It has been noted that due to the want of an “Archimedean point” of reference memory of such events like the 9/11 attacks will certainly bear resemblance to the shared memory with its “division of labor” and “calibration of different perspectives” (Rothberg 15). To overcome this perplexity, Rothberg introduces the concept of multidirectional memory as “it highlights the inevitable displacements and contingencies that mark all remembrance” (15-16).

viewpoints of previous such crisis that have shaped our collective past. By adapting and translating the scholarly works and research in the humanities for broader populaces, the public health and disaster response policies could be influenced for “[d]iseases . . . are not simply interchangeable causes of morbidity and mortality. Epidemic diseases have left a particular legacy in their wake. Their singularity merits attention” (Snowden 2). The core values that form the backbone of the humanities are empathy, morality, creativity, critical thinking whereas it seems that the sciences today are driven by a neoliberal agenda aiming at consumerism and mass production.

More than challenges of responses to questions of what to remember and what to forget, the issues that require our immediate attention are how to reinvest in acts of remembrance and use them as points of reference in the post-pandemic world. It cannot be controverted that cultural memory for its most part act as safe haven—and foster a sense of belongingness while encouraging participation. Emphasis should also be on effective ways to address the dynamics of memory so as to read it at the intersection of individual and cultural level—keeping in mind that participatory processes of representing the past could be worlds apart experience for both individual and society. Our work as scholars needs to be informed by an abiding interest that actively explores contexts through which we can contribute to new insights in research and learning. All this considered, it is at such junctures that fortitude and commitment can help us to grapple with the challenges we face in these precarious times.

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