Living Memory

To publicly commemorate an event is to relegate it to the past – or, at a minimum, to acknowledge that enough experience has accumulated to merit public remembrance. The past, however, is a territory in dispute. For over a decade, I have worked as a peacebuilder and researcher with victims and survivors of violence in Colombia, as well as with women involved in justice struggles in conflict-affected areas worldwide. One of the many gifts they have given me is a curiosity about the prefixes people append to time. For whom is the 'post-conflict' period truly post? Which violence has really ended and which losses and harms continue out of view of the cameras that celebrated the signing of peace accords? Prematurely declaring endings means that ongoing violence will neither count nor be counted, that resources and compassion alike move on to the next site of suffering. Meanwhile, in the present tense, losses still accumulate.

The contests of memory are most alive for those with pain at stake. Covid-19 is lived and remembered in the body. For those who are still experiencing the effects of Long Covid, or for those who became bereaved without the intimacy of farewell or access to the rituals of grief and community, the alleged 'post-pandemic' era is elusive, at once hiding and denying webs of loss. Any attempt to collectively commemorate Covid requires a reshuffling of the tenses, moving gently away from memorialization's fixation with the past. We are living and remembering the present, and even the future.

Witnessing the entanglement of living and dying is at the heart of what it means to exist and to remember in community. We may struggle to render

remembering the present and future in language, so it is helpful, perhaps, to turn to materials. One dimension of Scotland's Covid memorial consists of what Alec Finlay, the artist commissioned to create the memorial, calls 'supports'. Several trees in different areas of Pollok Park in Glasgow are now accompanied by oak support artworks, which Finlay created in collaboration with people affected by the pandemic. A photo archive available online depicts people leaning against, pushing, caressing, and reclining under trees. The supports mimic those poses, new wood against old, wood planted alongside wood, pinned and tethered. Carved down the spine of each support, in different languages, is the sentence "I remember."

Another dimension of the memorial relies on people filling in that sentence. "I remember..." became an invitation, allowing the rest of the phrase to be populated with fragments of experience, the raw material of memory. Hundreds of people across Scotland submitted anonymous testimonials, each brief enough to be read within one breath. There is humour and sourdough, there is pride in key workers and an abundance of birds. There is, as one might expect, lingering grief and simmering anger and an ever presence of love.

One of the shortest submissions was *I remember Andrea.* Andrea remains a stranger to the viewer, listener, or memorial visitor, as does the person speaking this name into memory. Even in public displays aimed to kindle remembrance, some textures of memory will remain partial and out of reach. The "I remember" submissions are collected in a book, available in print, audio, and online formats, and are also linked to the tree supports through a QR code that allows memorial visitors to listen to some testimonies on their mobile phones, read by Robert Carlyle. On the December morning I scanned this code, frost covered the "I remember" carvings on the tree supports. The birdsong in the recording, captured by artist Chris Watson, was incongruous with the season of my visit, but it also held a reminder of life, a telegram from the past and the future alike. *What you're about to hear,* Carlyle began, *are some of the thoughts and feelings of the bereaved.*

The bereaved, in this narrative, are not only people who can claim proximity to death. What they – what we – have lost is varied, and so are our responses to that loss and to each other's pain. People mourn weddings and graduations that didn't happen, they wish for an educational experience not punctuated by *you're on mute.* They lament that there were newborn babies cuddled only by their own parents, and grieve for dreams – of fertility, life partners, a different life – deferred. And there is, of course, still so much death. It matters to name death without euphemism. There were – there are, there will be – deaths from Covid itself, and from other illnesses that were not diagnosed, prevented, or treated in time. Many of these have been deaths without ritual and without farewell. The task, then, for Scotland's Covid memorial is weighty: How to honour such a wide and deep spectrum of losses while also acknowledging that some grief will linger, that some of the bereaved do not wish to remember, while others fear that the world already forgets? Memorials are haunted by absence. This is a fitting haunting, a way of surrendering to the truth that a single site, process, or event cannot and will not reflect all shades and textures of memory. A memorial is not a mirror. It refracts, rather than reflects, experience.

Taken together, the various components of Scotland's Covid memorial hold a chorus of memories. Some dimensions of the memorial, such as the wildflowers that visitors can plant with the help of park staff, remain seasonally out of view. Others, like the tree supports, will weather with time, catching light, birdsong, and frost alongside the gaze and memories of visitors. This is not only a living memorial, but also an aging one, open to showing the marks of time, rather than strictly delimiting beginnings, endings, or experiences worthy of commemoration. It is a memorial that invites, rather than instructs.

When I first saw the tree supports, my instinct was to attempt to figure them out. I tried to match the supports to the photographs by Hannah Laycock, of the people who had leaned against or held the trees in the first place, as though I were trying to fit puzzle pieces together. I also wanted to know who was supporting whom. The oaks have held their weight for years

with little intervention. Do they really need support? And if it is humans who are symbolically seeking support through the oaks, how can attempts at memory make room for the harm those same humans have caused to trees alongside the comfort that trees can provide? Scotland's Covid memorial is dispersed across Pollok Park, rather than being concentrated in a single area. On my first visit, I walked around with my questions and with an online map to the memorial, squinting to distinguish memorial tree supports from branches that had been there all along.

A memorial is not a puzzle. A map is as useful for memorials as it is for navigating grief. Rather than expecting the memorial to singularly carry the weight of representation, experience and meaning, I renegotiated my relationship with it. Memory requires and involves the visitor, the person standing under a tree with her own hauntings and remembrances of loss. I needed to make my own offering, to read and remember into this space what the pandemic has been for me. On subsequent visits to the park, I hope to embark on the same memorial walk, attentive to how the landscape, the memorial, and my relationship to memory alike have shifted with time. The magic, sorrow, and care of Scotland's Covid memorial are most discernible when the visitor squints to make relations visible: the relation of light and loss, of love and anger, the play between frost and wood, between birdsong and testimony.

Roxani Krystalli
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