**Who owns your memories? Covid and the desire for hope.**

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Abstract

Factories empty, machines shut down, drills motionless, a lone car engine, emptiness. What are your covid memories? Scientists tell us that we have different types of memory. Some memory requires conscious effort: *explicit* memory.Then, in contrast, we have *implicit* memory with different stages - short term, long term - and sensory memory. Some memories can be episodic, as in biographical life events or semantic where we hold an ability to recall numbers, words, or concepts without even thinking about how we know the answer - 2x2 is four, that colour is red, that blue, and that animal is a dog, those things we know. But read the psychology literature and you’ll find the memory is a liar, our eyes don’t see clearly, as a species we have a tendency to fill in the gaps, change our tune, sugar coat and paper over cracks and tell the story differently. In this performance autoethnography I use songwriting to explore these issues.

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I have my reservations with this and can hold in one hand that sometimes I may not remember everything, and that my story may change, but with the other hand, as I look around me now what comes to mind is vivid. I feel what I remember is a truthful experience of some of the consequences of covid, and it happened.

But there is a tension in what comes to mind, oppositional visions and feelings. A weary and sad sense of those things lost, but too, clinging to the cliff tare some things found, and I don’t believe I am alone. In these shared rememberings I don’t seek validation from scientists to give me hope that I did see what I saw, or to feel what I know to be true.

But I do need hope, I need to know that there will be a tomorrow when we can hold, and touch and be together.

Lost:

News sprang from my laptop, the sound of ambulances, noise, a woman weeping outside a Spanish hospital after her had husband died, she was prevented from being with him, their last moments torn from her hands. A month later it was a British woman I was watching who was unable to say goodbye to her husband of 50 years. Cameras and reporters in hospitals, intensive care with its own peculiar mechanistic signs of life, rhythmic, rows of hospital beds and bodies lying still in dangerous slumber that some never broke free from, as nurses and doctors, shrouded with protective clothing and suited against an unseen threat, carried out their duties. I watched how news of the virus spread, one minute its China, then next Europe,

*“the government are trying to trace a man”*

… too late, one man who had been skiing ... and in the blink of an eye, the colour of the world changes. In India I watched a human train making their weary way from the city and the hand of death marking the journey in corpses, a group are hosed down in a humiliating display of cleansing. And then came the drones, a high pitch whirling, menacing, a lone woman in China, a lone walker in Spain, a jogger in France, caught outside and hounded home. I tuned-in into the daily briefings from my government and then searched for other presidents and prime ministers, the deniers, mischief spread like the virus, while everywhere the death toll was rising, and wiping their lips with blood the daily graphs charted the carnage. Public messages told us “face masks do no good,” ‘we’ - the public - couldn’t be trusted, now they are compulsory, change arounds, U turns, “we just don’t know” “it’s a new virus”. Nightingale Hospitals shot up from car parks and inner city spaces, the exhaustion of nurses and doctors continued. Jobs were lost, furlough for some, exams scrapped. And outside the city there was silence, empty motorways, empty shelves in supermarkets, empty playgrounds, concrete blocks at entrances to parks, walks and leisure activities, signs, red tape, 2 meter marks on pavements,

“Closed due to covid”

Hotels boarded up,

“No money is kept on site”

In every corner of our world human suffering, shared, different, yet so many similarities. The cost of human pain.

But are these memories mine alone, to store, to own, to define, to shape? And where are the moments of hope, that perhaps in the face of so much sufferings we feel too ashamed to voice, too worried that it isn’t the right thing to say, to do? Am I *getting away with something*? Should we only acknowledge loss, pain, sufferings, bow our head?

Found:

“Hello,” smiled the man out on a walk. ‘Hello,’ smiled another out for his daily exercise. A narrowing of the path, “Please, you to go first,” generosity, self-sacrifice, compassion, self-searching, beauty, “if you need me to do your shopping” “can I help”, a bird feeding where usually foot fall takes precedence, rare wild flowers and butterflies find space, the poison from the factory no longer seeps into the stream, the river, the ocean. We see the stars at night, and no plane trails mark the skies. A friend calls on zoom, hello my friend.

OUR memories

written on the wind

Watch how they fly

Fingers across time

Unbroken through the storm

Three things I feel today

Fortunate

Alive

At rest

\*

In the distance there was the light house

Today the dark rocks were visible while the white body of the building was lost

In the grey cloud’s blanket, I heard the sea lap at her shore

A sound of simplicity, consistency, steadfast

Waves

Never have enough,

Sometimes they kill,

Sometimes they toss the boat this way then that

Today they soothe

The sun owns the sky

There are no clouds, did she know she needed to shine

To warm our bodies?

The tide will return to the cliffs, of this I know

\*

I’ve never seen fishermen on this beach before

An old rowing boat

A trailer

Two men pulling a net towards the shore

The sea is clear blue

The beach golden sand

\*

David Carless writes that a song is a gift (Carless, 2018, 2017). Likewise, so many song-writers I have listened to say, of their own song-writing, that songs are elusive, and if you aren’t ready when one arrives then it will pass you by, and bestow itself on another worthy recipient. And so I respond to the call, the feeling, the itch to write, not minding or controlling, allowing all the memories and humanity that fill my body and this moment to respond.

First a riff, with a melody I hum, and I share and wait. When they are ready some words appear and I don’t try to fathom or too neatly line them up. Tell that to the scientists, as I share my memories in song. How dare they assume there is no truth here, we songwriters must disagree, because from within the song there is an opportunity to stand together, sometimes in a truth yet to be made manifest, to harmonise, to maybe bring a little comfort and, just for a moment, maybe a little hope.

**Who Owns Your Memories? [[1]](#endnote-1)**

Who owns your memories?

Where do they hide?

Would dragons slay them?

If fears collide

The dreams you once owned

Weren’t written in stone

Watch them now sinking

But you’re not alone

So raise your voices

Let’s sing together

The heart is willing

To stem the tide

A voice in the night

Calling your name

A candle lights the face

And there is no shame

So raise your voices

Let’s sing together

The heart is willing

To stem the tide

Angels hear your prayer

We know there’s a truth

Cushions for the journey

My hands they are open

So raise your voices

Let’s sing together

The heart is willing

To stem the tide

So raise your voices

Let’s sing together

The heart is willing

To stem the tide

References

Carless, D. (2018). “Throughness”*:* A story about songwriting as auto/ethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry, 24(3),* 227-232.

Carless, D. (2017). It’s a leap of faith, writing a song. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research, 6(2)*, 99-106.

Memory

Short term, long term and sensory

In this section we will consider the two types of memory, **explicit memory** and implicit memory, and then the three major memory stages: sensory, short-term, and long-term (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968).

<https://memorialworlds.com/what-is-collective-memory/>

Durkheim noted that societies require continuity and connection with the past to preserve social unity and cohesion.

Maurice Halbwachs, a student of Durkheim, is the first sociologist to use the term “collective memory” and his work is considered the foundational framework for the study of societal remembrance. Halbwachs suggested that all individual memory was constructed within social structures and institutions. He claimed that individual private memory is understood only through a group context; these groups may include families, organizations, and nation-states.

Finally, Halbwachs departs from a Durkheimian approach by adopting an instrumental presentist approach to collective memory. A presentist approach states that social constructions of memory are influenced by the needs of the present. Halbwachs stated that collective memory is shaped by present issues and understandings. Groups select different memories to explain current issues and concerns.  In order to explain the present, leaders of a group reconstruct a past using rationalization to choose which events are remembered, those that are eliminated, and rearrange events to conform to the social narrative .

Durkheim, Emile. [1912] 1995. The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, trans. by Karen Fields. New York: The Free Press.

Halbwachs, Maurice 1992 [1952]. On Collective Memory, ed. and trans. Lewis Coser. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

Both Halbwachs and Nora suggest that the “collective memory” of any group is actually a manipulated construction of those who maintain the power and status to define those memories. David Lowenthal joins the chorus of instrumental presentists. He suggests that national histories are constructed to address present interests and cites the development and commodification of a heritage and nostalgia industry in the British heritage sites as examples of this social construction. Foucault also suggested that the postmodern desacralization of tradition has created a social void that has been filled with commemorative activity that is used as a tool of those in political power.

Foucault, M. 1977.  Language, Counter-Memory, Practice:  Selected Essays and Interviews, trans. DF Bouchard, S. Simon. Ithaca NY:  Cornell University Press.

Halbwachs, Maurice 1992 [1952]. On Collective Memory, ed. and trans. Lewis Coser. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger. 1992.  Invention of Tradition. New York: Cambridge University Press.

But they don’t mention collective memory, or place memory

Intersubjective memory, adding to, filling in,

A key control process that was extensively investigated was rehearsal, a process that was assumed to be critical for the maintenance of information in short-term memory as well as the transfer to long-term memory

Sometimes we intentionally reminisce, for example when we want to share old stories with friends and family. The retelling of the past in social settings is an intricate dance taught to children early in life.

Some events are so surprising and important that they become flashbulb memories. For example, many people can remember exactly where they were when they heard the news John F. Kennedy was shot, that man had set foot on the moon, or that airplanes hit the World Trade Center.

On other occasions the memories pop up out of the blue, summoned by something as fleeting as a familiar feeling. “(T)he smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us,” is how the French novelist Marcel Proust described it.

Studies have also shown that autobiographical memories aren’t necessarily accurate, that they are creative constructions that may change over time to keep up with new circumstances. And that illness or trauma can affect the ability to recall who participated in remembered events, the details of the events, and the life periods in which they occurred.

1. The film accompanying this piece, along with the song, can be found on YouTube <https://youtu.be/VbFidUPu6zo> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)