Shadow Play

Loss and Performativity

Amy Cook

Nicole, please answer your phone, I want to tell you about your ashes. Your mom gave me some of you to take to Rome to scatter someplace that was special to you. I took them to the pond that surrounds the statue of Athena in the center of Villa Borghese. (Remember the rainstorm?) Anyway, I reached into the bag and pulled out some of you and tossed it into the water. I did that action over and over: grab a handful of bones and ash and toss into the water, with some attempt at solemnity or pathos. Nothing really happened. I didn't cry, I didn't feel you with me, I didn't get over losing you. The truth is, I couldn't finish; I saved some of you and you remain in the baggie next to my bed. I promise to keep this up, repeating the grab & release until you're gone.[1]

We gather and spread ashes, throw dirt on a coffin, give a eulogy, or light a candle. Grief is an act, a gesture, that communicates the "world destroying" pain articulated by Elaine Scarry so that community is built in the shadow of that pain (Scarry 1985:29). We find ways to substitute the lost with something present (a candle flame, a paper lantern, patches on a quilt) so that we can signal to our conspecifics that we've lost someone who was here. The missing one has left a hole, an empty space that must be filled with something else that can materialize the pain of loss. This process involves compression, situated action, and imagination: understanding the substitution involves compression, making sense of the

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[1] I am grateful to the Bogliasco Foundation for a fellowship to work on this project. It was shaped during an ASTR working group on "Repetition and Remembrance."

Figure 1. Kaze no Denwa *by Itaru Sasaki. Iwate Prefecture, Japan 2010. (Photo by Alex McBride)*

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Figure 2. *Spreading Nicole, 2017. (Photo by Ken Weitzman)*

substitution is situated action, and the ability to find what unfolds at the space of the missing requires imagination. What can it possibly mean to lose a million people to Covid? What happens when the loss—from AIDS, racial violence, climate change, the pandemic, war—is too large to metabolize? Contemporary artists find ways to invite performance to stage great loss through spectators' interaction with their artworks. Some works of art and memorials seek not to remember or memorialize but rather to metabolize loss through performance and participation.

Act 1: The Loss and the Silence

Karen Finley's performances are known for chocolate, tinsel, rage, and the NEA uproar. I saw them as a teenager and young adult and vividly remember her naked, chocolate-smeared body, but it is a line from her poem "Black Sheep," included in her performance of *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (the performance at the center of *NEA v. Finley*), that I can still hear, her voice guttural and wracked with pain: "There's always silence at the end of the phone" (1990). The poem, about the "black sheep family" that meets at AIDS funerals and are "outcasts, outsiders in our own family," was cast in bronze and displayed in an open space at the edge of New York's East Village and Lower East Side: "The poem was set in concrete monolith, on location for one year, and comprised of nine stanzas about living apart from mainstream society" (Creative Time n.d.). In writing about the "stickiness" of Finley's work with chocolate, Christine Simonian Bean describes what I remember about the performance of the poem: "She chants, 'There's always silence at the end of the phone' [...] It is upsetting, and evokes a feeling of deep empathy, as if the multiple forms of injustice and abuse depicted in the performance have stuck to Finley along with the food coating her body" (2016:94). Finley transformed herself for us, staging the battering and the assault of years of deaths from AIDS—and governmental silence. By publicly performing her grief, abstracting her loss to point to the many who had died from AIDS, Finley was able to bring us along to rock with her as she repeated "There's always silence at the end of the phone."[2] I can't forget that line, that sense that we need a body, we need closure.

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[2] Also quoted in Marcelle Clements's article (1990) on Finley and her performance of *We Keep Our Victims Ready* as part of the Serious Fun festival at Lincoln Center and published in *Shock Treatment* (Finley 1990).

When I found out that you were in the hospital with leukemia, I called you with a lightness and optimism I did not feel. I knew it's what you needed—you would hear nothing less. You were always sunshine to my Cassandra. I tell you I will give you all my blood, that they can hook us up to a machine and I will make enough blood for both of us. You asked my blood type—it hadn't occurred to me that we could be made of different stuff. "A positive," I say. Your response: "A+! Of course. Even your blood is an overachiever." You make us laugh. I do not have your kind of blood, we cannot be hooked together, and there will never be enough blood to save you.

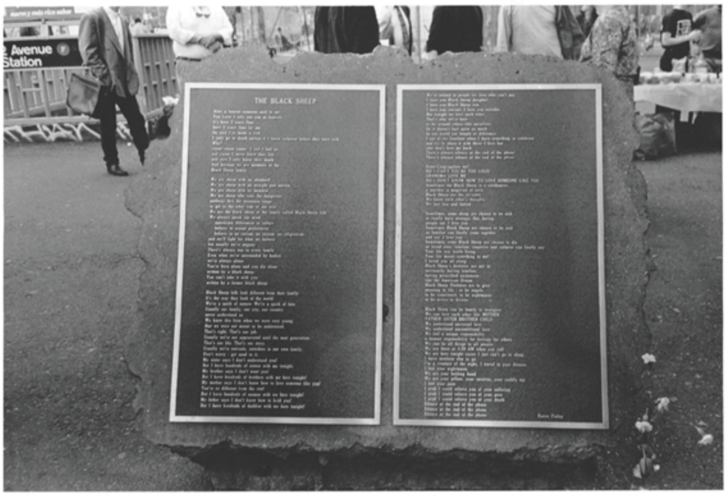

Figure 3. The Black Sheep*, Karen Finley, 1990. (Photo by Dona Ann McAdams; courtesy of Karen Finley)*

"There's always silence at the end of the phone." I love so much about this sentence. I love the way the phone is figured as a path—there's my end of the phone and then there's the other end. On one end is me, reaching through the wires for connection and meeting silence. This connection that I am hoping for happens when I speak and they respond, signaling that they have understood me; I have been heard. And yet, sending and receiving words is not the same as understanding or connecting. As linguist Michael Reddy pointed out in 1979, English language users tell themselves a story in which meaning is placed *in* words and then transferred to another person. You would not think someone illogical if she said, "Try to get your thoughts across better," and yet without what he calls the conduit metaphor of communication, it does not make sense: "After all, we do not literally 'get thoughts across' when we talk, do we? This sounds like mental telepathy or clairvoyance, and suggests that communication transfers thought processes somehow bodily. Actually, no one *receives* anyone else's thoughts directly in their minds when they are using language" (Reddy 1979:286). This metaphor powerfully constrains how we think and speak about communication.

If the meaning is *in* the words—and thus, by metonymy: the sentence, the play, etc.—then getting the meaning *out* should not be too much work. Reddy points out how we can refer to an element of communication (message, poem, etc.) as a discrete set of words and as the meaning within the words. We can say, and be understood when we say: "I got your message, but had no time to read it" and "I get the message. Let's leave him alone" (304). Each "message" refers to something different: one refers to a tangible receipt of a form of communication (email, letter, etc.) and the other refers to a particular meaning conveyed in some way. When we presume that the meaning is *in* a message or a play or that we have "stored" our ideas in libraries, we fail to take into consideration that, without our specific tools and skills (how a codex works in 21st-century America, our nuanced reading of a text, the conventions of the text's genre, connecting the words on the page to our past experiences and the cultural and historical context of the text, etc.), there will not be communication, but rather miscommunication. In a prescient passage, Reddy articulates the stakes of seeing the power of the conduit metaphor by pointing out how it undervalues the work of humanists:

> Humanists seem to be dying these days and administrators and governments seem to feel few compunctions about letting this occur. We have the greatest, most sophisticated system for mass communication of any society that we know about, yet somehow mass communication becomes more and more synonymous with less communication. [...] We have the mistaken, conduit-metaphor influenced view that the more signals we can create, and the more signals we can preserve, the more ideas we "transfer" and "store." We neglect the crucial human

> ability to reconstruct thought patterns on the basis of signals and this ability founders. [...] Humanists, those traditionally charged with reconstructing culture and teaching others to reconstruct it, are not necessary in the scheme of the conduit metaphor. All the ideas are "there in the library," and anyone can go in and "get them." (1979:310)

Reddy's diagnosis is even more scary 43 years later with the rise of the internet, social media, alternate facts, and the continued pressure on the humanities. Looking for how metaphors operate within a poem, play, or sentence—particularly the metaphors we don't notice because they are "dead"—enables us to see how we are composing the meaning of the poem, play, or sentence. This is a necessary first step to actual communication and connection.

Compression is the process whereby we take the complex and condense it to something smaller and more concrete—the kind of idea you can easily manipulate in a conversation; the process necessary for synecdoche, metonymy, metaphor. It is compression that turns other bodies into "persons" with mental lives, intentions, and generally predictable behavior. Where it becomes complicated, where our invisible compression is suddenly made strange, is at the borders—at the beginning of life and death, where it is less clear when the body has life, when the body is (and isn't) a person. Compression is efficient and effective and yet obscures critical operations. Someone who is pro-life cannot debate someone who is pro-choice because they have not agreed on terms from the very beginning. Seana Coulson and Esther Pascual look at how "pro-life" arguments strategically compress relationships to compel agreement. One of their examples comes from the controversy surrounding stem cell research. In testifying about his opposition to stem cell research, a paraplegic whose daughter was a product of the implantation of an embryo that might have been used in stem cell research said, "Would I kill my daughter so I could walk again?" They point out that the rhetorical power of this question comes despite and because of its ridiculousness. To render the argument as a choice to kill the daughter so as to do research on her embryo instead, they conclude, "is argumentatively effective because it brings the pros and cons of stem cell research into a human scale scene involving the two most relevant elements, the paralysis victim (who would eventually benefit from it) and the embryo (who would die as a result of it)" (2006:168). To figure his school-age daughter as the embryo that, in a different future, created the stem cell that cured his paralysis requires complicated—but not time-consuming—compression.

Fundamental to any understanding of theatrical representation is the compression that allows us to keep track of characters. This is how I know that the guy who comes on in act one in the black coat and bad mood is the same person who comes on in the next scene and the next and remains the same character when he comes on in act five and talks to skulls and jumps into graves. We don't need help with this compression, and, in fact, when it's pointed out, we generally laugh. Shakespeare makes the onstage and offstage audience laugh in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when Starveling explains that he is playing Moonshine: "This lanthorn [lantern] doth the horned moon present; / Myself the man i' th' moon do seem to be" (5.1.245). The onstage audience seems less interested in attending to his explained semiotics than they are in playing with his meaning; first they make a horns/cuckhold joke and then Theseus points out that if he were the man in the moon he should be in the lantern, not holding it. Their jokes all rely on playing with the compression he makes visible (unnecessarily) and the alternate ways one can play with the meaning. Seana Coulson calls this kind of humor—when there's a mismatch between the presumed meaning and the received meaning—a semantic leap. One of the examples she gives is the joke, "my father has the heart of a lion and a lifetime ban from the zoo" (Coulson 2001). To get the joke requires that we go back and alter our initial assumption that the "heart of a lion" was meant metaphorically. Our laughter is a sign that we get the joke and this feels good. Laughing uses the creative potential in playing with language to make something new. Language creates a linguistic scaffolding that structures, constrains, and invents future ways of seeing, thinking, and speaking.

As I made my way from the airport to the hospital, I get a message from your mom: she says you have gone a little crazy from the chemo. She seems to be warning me about what I will find when I get there, as if there can ever be something worse than finding you in the hospital to begin with. Before the nurses can stop me, I *climb into the tiny hospital bed that holds you. You were indeed acting weird, but I follow along, like I did when we played Beverly Hills detectives in the backyard. You say that you have Amanda's baby in your belly. You admit to flirting inappropriately with the doctor. When the nurse comes in to help you to the commode by the bed, you are suddenly talking like Scarlett O'Hara. Blood poured out of you, without the clotting mechanism to make it stop. I think of bell hooks, "If the fear of death is all that keeps us away from one another, then I willingly embrace death to reach you, to stand by your side" (1995:134).*

I want to return to the silence. Understood in reference to what it is not, silence is missing sound. Silence at the end of the phone is poignant because of what one expects to hear. David Eng places silence at the center of the experience of the posters showing the missing that went up all over Manhattan after 9/11:

> While initially emblems of hope, these silent posters of the disappeared are now for those who survive tokens of mourning, transitional objects, to use Winnicott's term, as hope evaporates into dread, and dread turns into grief. In this mute space, the shock of trauma slowly transforms into the reality of loss, and in this regard, silence might be considered that moment before—that liminal space from which—loss is expropriated into its symbolic meaning. Silence, then, is not the opposite of speech but, indeed, its very condition of possibility, the precondition of knowing and of meaning. (2002:86)

Powerful in absence, this is how it has become a refrain in the language, first of the AIDS activists and more recently of social justice activists: silence=death. Those who witness and say nothing, who take no action, are framed through this counterfactual as responsible for causing the death. This compression sees action in inaction and loud antipathy in quiet apathy. When something is missing, it must be staged—traced, voiced ("Let's have a moment of silence") to acknowledge the injury sustained to what remains.

I can't stop replaying that last week. All the things I should have done and said: that I did not believe there could be a me without you. That I took you for granted—that you were not my doppelganger but my mold, my inverse, shaping me and determining who I was. Why didn't I cry? When you told me on the phone that your pee looked like Guinness beer? When I called to say that Ali and I were going to fly in the next day—Valentine's Day—and you said it wasn't a good time, that you weren't dying? When I got to the hospital and your skin was yellow and the whites of your eyes were bright red? The doctor on call pulled me and Ali into the hallway and asked us to get you to sign a DNR—your parents couldn't do it—that if extraordinary measures were taken, you would end up on life support and eventually your parents would have to make a decision to end you, rather than just letting you go. I didn't cry when you yelled at me that you were not dying, it wasn't time. I was Cassandra, trying to kill your lifeforce with my pessimism. I slept on the awful hospital chair that night and tried to get some work done because I still thought there was something worth doing.

Act 2: Everything Starts to Fall Away

When garden designer Itaru Sasaki's cousin died in 2010, he built a phone booth in his garden in the Iwate Prefecture of Japan. There he could go to speak to his cousin, to communicate with his dead. When he opened it up to the public after the Fukushima earthquake and tsunami in 2011, it became a work of art used by mourners to reach out to their missing at the end of the phone. The climate catastrophe that swept so many out to sea left tens of thousands of mourners who visit the *Kaze no Denwa* ("wind phone"). They make the pilgrimage to stand in the glass box, pick up the phone and speak to the silence about their pain and loss. The dead are imagined at the end of the phone—listening, available, found.

Nicole, I keep trying to leave messages on your machine. Like I always did. Taking for granted the call and response, despite the silence at the end of the phone. I can't believe I have to do this last part of life without you: the thinning of the skin on our hands, the accumulated rage, the inability to put up with bullshit. "Every day a little death...," I sing now, referring to very different things than what Sondheim meant. I guess the upside of dying at 45 is that you didn't have to go through menopause. Such a soft word for such a hard thing. Also, it is not a "pause": it's years of new things falling apart and leaving you unceremoniously.

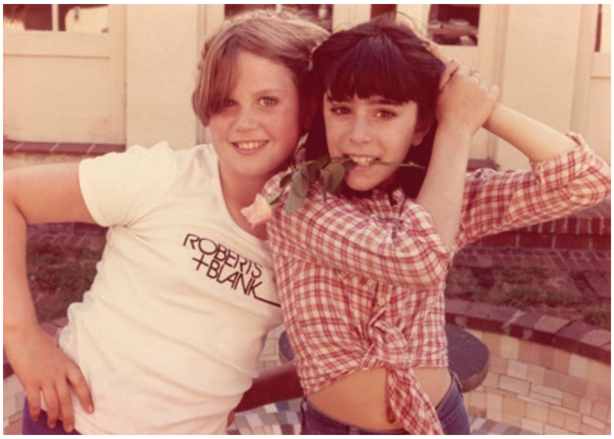

Figure 4. Amy and Nicole, after a dance performance, 1977. (Photo by Martha Cook)

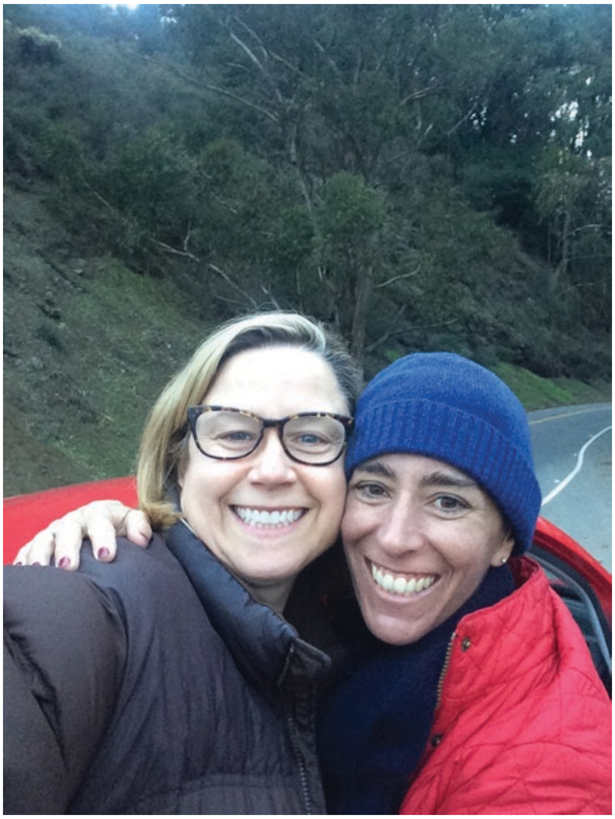

Figure 5. Amy and Nicole, selfie on Grizzly Peak, 6 January 2016. (Photo by Amy Cook)

The performance called for is clear: go into the box, pick up the phone, and speak. Like lighting a prayer candle in a church or throwing a coin in a fountain for good luck, we engage with public art through telling or retelling our own story through it. The mourners enter the booth and pick up the phone because that's what the thing invites; speaking into this phone attached only to air, the mourner can begin to "dance" with it, in Robin Bernstein's formulation. Certain things not only afford certain actions, they demand them. They can hail us. According to Bernstein, "an object becomes a thing when it invites a person to dance" (2009:69). A book scripts us to turn the pages, a circus photo-op cutout scripts us to stand behind it and put our face in the opening. Of course, you can enter the booth and not pick up the phone, or pick up the phone and not speak, but either way you are hailed by the thing to enact a particular action. For Bernstein, these kinds of dances with things "constitute actions: they *think*, or, more accurately, they *are the act of thinking*. Things script meaningful bodily movements, and these citational movements think the otherwise unthinkable" (2009:70). While it might seem self-evident that this action in the phone booth *involves* thinking, the claim is that it *is* thinking. Thinking is situated action.

Shortly before you died you reminded me that you got your period for the first time at my house. You woke me up to point out the blood on the sheets under us. I loved me in your eyes: I simply got up and put them in the washing machine and remade the bed. We didn't celebrate or talk about it. I may have been too afraid that, now that you were a "woman," our friendship would change. You were the first of our group and I was last. We all knew that there was an advanced model of ourselves on the way—a newly hairy, hormonal, bleeding, moody self—and I think we both looked forward to what it might bring and feared what it would take away.

Bernstein refers to these dances with things as "performative," meaning a performance that produces something, that is fundamentally efficacious. Coming from J.L. Austin and John R. Searle and then traveling through thinkers on gender (Judith Butler [(1990) 1999]), cognitive linguistics (Eve Sweetser [2000]), and performance studies (Richard Schechner [2013], Joseph Roach [1996], Rebecca Schneider [2000], Diana Taylor [2003], and others), performativity continues to have tremendous potential for helping us make different sense of the ways in which our actions change us—socially, cognitively, fundamentally. I love the idea of the performative: the idea that some actions generate leftovers, they *do* something. As anyone who has tried to teach the term finds out, however, its definition is slippery and varied. Aaron Thomas rigorously and helpfully explains just how confused and confusing this term has become, even among those of us in theatre and performance studies: "There has been an extraordinary and puzzling laxity around uses of this word by editors and journals in the field so that *performative* has become not only hard to pin down, as Schechner would have it, but, as I argue here, consistently and reliably infelicitous" (2021:14). Thomas prompts us to think more about "how is this performative?" rather than to state that something is performative: What can we say about works of art when we see how some can be performative?

The wind phone depicted in photographs, standing alone in Sasaki's garden, is not a performative work of art. It is not even art, I would argue, until the mourners come and speak to the dead and missing. It affords and calls for a performance that constitutes it as art; this performance is one that can help us work through incomprehensible loss.

Nicole, my dad sent $14,000 in cash to a PO box in Florida because someone called and said his granddaughter was in jail. He didn't ask why he wasn't supposed to check the veracity of this claim with his son, or any of the obvious questions his brilliant legal brain might have come up with years ago. He went to the bank, took out a loan, and FedEx'd the money. Even after he'd been told it was a scam, he would still resort to thinking that he did the right thing, because his granddaughter was in trouble. He couldn't see how the scammers had rewritten the narrative, the logic, in his head. This was not the first sign that he had lost critical sections of his frontal cortex to vascular dementia, and wouldn't be the last, but it was startling for us all to see what can happen when something is lost: a ridiculous story can take the place of logic, facts, and 79 years of experience.

For me, the discussions within performance studies about "performativity" have been usefully expanded and supported by research within philosophy and the cognitive sciences. This doesn't challenge the work of performance studies scholars, but it provides a way of articulating the incredible importance and stakes of the phenomenon that is our bread and butter—performance, meaning, perspective, engagement, spectatorship. The thinking that the mourner does, say, in Sasaki's phone booth, is based on an interaction with the environment; instead of extracting the figure, the individual, from the "ground" on which they stand, theories of embodied, embedded, and extended cognition help me understand grief as an emotional, physical, cognitive, and situated performance that happens with and through the world around me. The performances that I'm interested in, the ones invited, *required*, by certain works of art, are intentional interactions to work through loss.

Public memorials can provide an opportunity to perform with an environment, to stage or render present the loss that escapes sense. This is true for spontaneous memorials and highly planned and executed public works of art. Coming upon the candles, teddy bears, notes, flowers—the makeshift shrine—we must lean down to see the writing on the notes and signs left behind. We listen to the whispers of the other mourners. We smell the scent of the candle as it burns nearby. Architects and urban critics Karen Franck and Lynn Paxson argue that these specific actions, which are invited by the public work, invite us to perform differently: "In all these ways, even as a spectator only, spontaneous memorials engage senses beyond just the visual and invite movements, gestures and changes of position that are uncommon in everyday public life" (Franck and Paxson 2007:140). We perceive loss by tracing the contours of what we invent in its place. Loss must be staged, danced with, performed, to be understood, and this performance generates something new in the chasm.

My dad is no longer a maker of soups. He isn't really capable of cooking at all anymore—another thing that is likely to open up huge gaps in logical reason with disastrous results—nor does he remember that he used to make them. He describes vascular dementia as periodically being unable to grasp anything in his head: he can't find words, or relationships, or logic. It's not memory—or not just *memory—it's occasionally looking up and finding something is not there. No one needs him to make soup anymore, or to be a lawyer, or to keep track of the difference, say, between his daughter, his sister, and his granddaughter, but I can't imagine how hard it must be to lose oneself inside a brain that is falling away, bits at a time. When he's gone, I wonder if I'll know the moment he left. Has it already happened? I feel its shadow, I know the outline of what is missing and the sadness of what's to come and I wish I could weep and wail.*

As of summer 2023, almost 7 million people worldwide have died from Covid, including over a million US Americans. I used to know the death toll and infection rate each week. On 2 October

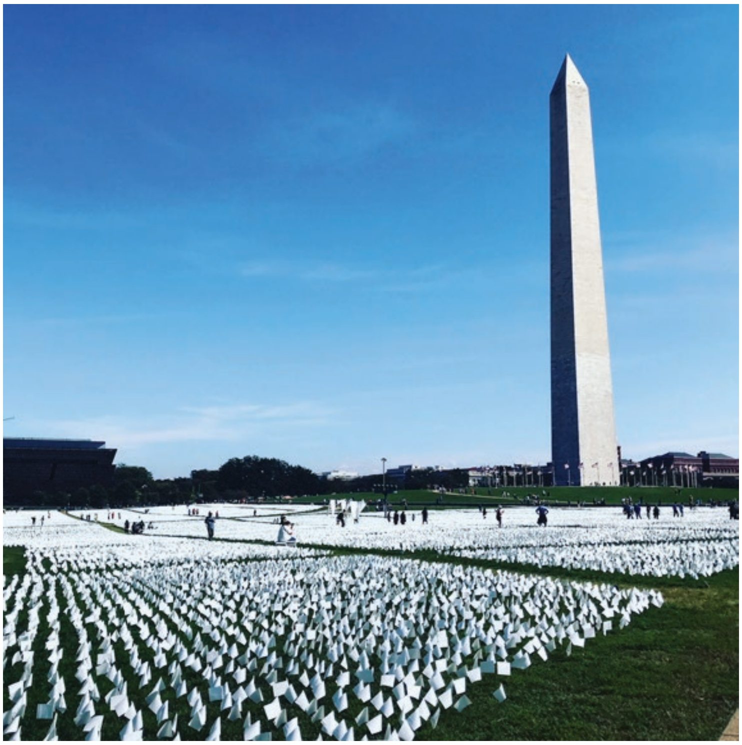

Figure 6. Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg's In America: Remember. *The National Mall, Washington, DC, 2 October 2021. (Photo by Amy Cook)*

2021, I knew that 700,632 Americans had died of Covid so far because the figure was displayed in large white numbers at the entrance to a temporary memorial at the National Mall in Washington, DC: 700,632 small white flags carpeting the lawn. Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg's *In America: Remember* is a work of art meant to represent the size and scope of the dead by compressing each death into a flag in a sea of flags. Even back when the number was 700,632, there were fields and fields of white flags, each representing a friend, father, mother, child. For each of those flags there were many people grabbing and releasing the dust of their dead, putting up pictures, covering mirrors and pictures, wearing black, and lighting candles to try and make sense of the loss. Here, the artist has taken the inconceivable loss of that many people and shrunk it, reduced a whole person to a single white flag, moving in the breeze, among 700,631 other flags.

Another thing: Remember when my dad's friend Bruce died, and my dad gave such a great eulogy that people stopped him after to request that he speak at their funerals? What I remember now from that day was how hard I cried for a dad that was not my own. When my dad was done, I pressed my 13-year-old wet face into his belly and sobbed. He was embarrassed; he told me it wasn't right since it wasn't my dad who died. I was mortified: look at me so upset when my dad is standing right here, and my friends, the two girls who lost their father, are holding it together. But the thing is, as I wish he knew at the time: I was crying for him then, not just Bruce. I doubt I'll cry like that at his funeral now. Sometimes you need a stand-in.

I walked along the pathways between the designated squares filled with flags, bending down to notice that some are blank while others are personalized by their loved ones—one flag says "Mary Ann Gunetis" and sends love from her kids—but even as I kneel down to see what's said about Mary Ann, I'm aware of the sea of flags. With the flag in my hands, I imagine Mary Ann and her bereft kids and then let her go and stand up to take in the view: she's now like a blade of grass in a vast lawn. If we imagine these flags as effigies, we understand them as bodying forth not individuals, but rather a country's loss. The large white monuments to America's founding fathers tower over their dead and the mourners who walk on the green green grass trying to connect the effigy to a loss but who instead generate a performance of mourning in America. The American, the mourner, fills the vacancy of the many mourners on all of the pandemic Zoom funerals. Walking among the flags, we are walking among the dead and we can have an embodied experience of the loss: it's been staged in a way that we can engage with the size of it and, maybe, start to feel the gravity of our collective loss. Further, our presence renders the small flags impossible substitutes for individuals like us; it must be that our loss is national: In America Remember.

"Amy?" my dad's voice asks on my voicemail, as if it could be someone else, "is Moses there with you?" The scammers have called again and somehow my dad has enough sense to check with me, though not enough sense not to need to check with me. I try to convince him not to answer the phone. My dad has always heard

the ringing of the phone as some kind of emergency; no matter how many times we've told him to let it go to voicemail, he insists on answering it. Someone is calling, he seems to think, this is an opportunity not to be missed. Yet, when I call, he quickly hands the phone to my mom. If he doesn't even think that I *am calling to talk to him, why does he still answer the phone?*

When Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was selected in 1981, it set off a political controversy because of its perceived "refusal to explicitly glorify the war or frame the listed soldiers' sacrifice in recognizably heroic terms as an ideological statement, proof of Lin's—and the memorial's—purported anti-war position" (Wolfson 2017). Protestors of the design wanted to add a figurative sculpture of soldiers by Frederick Hart, but Lin insisted that would interfere with her work. Critics like Tom Wolfe, while deriding the art elites, understood the difference between vertical, heroic statues of soldiers and the "black gash of shame" they perceived Lin's wall to be: "Shouldn't public sculpture delight the public or inspire the public or at least remind the public of cherished traditions? Nonsense. Why reinforce the bourgeoisie's pathetic illusions?" (in Wolfson 2017). Lin's memorial staged the creeping expanse of death that the war caused. As Martin Golding described it:

> It is a granite wall which is of uniform height above ground level; but the level of the footway beside it changes according to the number of names that it records in each year, obliging the visitor to descend and rise along its length to follow the sequence through. So the sense of a national catastrophe, a deep instability in the body politic is enacted by what is compelled on the spectators as they mediate, through their bodily movements, something uncloseable, which cannot simply be left. [...F]or this generation the scar is made palpable, as it was then, in the way the structure will not let them rest. (2000:65–66)

Visitors chart a path along the wall, looking for the name of their missing; when it is found, charcoal transfers the name to a piece of paper that can be taken home. You come to look for your lost and the artist allows you something to do to render them present. Of course, there wasn't a risk that the living would forget their lost loved ones: they come with the name they are looking for. The point of Lin's "memorial" is not to remember those lost but to experience how war breaks open the ground under our feet.

I found this very long email my father wrote me years ago when I was struggling with postpartum depression and my older son's emotional lability. I can't get him to stay on the phone when I call, but boy did he have a lot to say when I thought my current challenges might be genetic. Sure, one grandparent killed himself, another drank herself to death, but that was because of circumstances, not some genetic issue. According to my dad, "One possessing the strongest, most upbeat and cheery genetic constitution would have been challenged to stave off depression given the environmental conditions they both experienced." His detail and precision were incredible: the years my great grandfather "may have" worked for Henry Ford, how his older sister Nancy died in childbirth "strangled by the umbilical cord due to the negligence of a doctor with a drinking problem (according to the nurse who attended the birth)," and the fact that that the Air Force "decided to categorize [my mom's dad's] death as an 'accident' while cleaning his service revolver, and not even mention suicide." When I received the email, it seemed clear that he was calling me weak and a bad parent. I re-sent the email to him the other day, to ask what he thought about it. His response: "I just read my earlier history and was amazed at how intelligent and well-spoken I was—as opposed to how I live today. Having turned 80 with some brain damage making it difficult to tie words together, I was truly amazed by my earlier study of how my life evolved. It was, no doubt, a history that I had to lose. I hope that you learn, use the history I wrote about." What I think I've learned is about how some parts of history should be lost, that sometimes memory is not all it's cracked up to be.

Lin's memorial—like the flags for Covid victims on the DC mall lawn and the many other "situated performance" memorials, like the chairs for the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing, or the trees planted at the Sandy Hook Memorial for all of those killed in this mass shooting—provides a place for those who remain to come, to remember the lives lost, and to build from that loss a sense of the collective. In America, Remember. For America, Remember? Many of us feel deep ambivalence about this quick pivot to nationalism, as well as the very selective sense of whose lives are worthy of remembering and mourning (see e.g., Butler 2004). These works command a performance that, in

Rebecca Schneider's terms, remains: the walking deeper into the gash in the land as the names tower above you generates a shifted perspective on the Washington Monument. This walk along the wall that wounds is necessary for spectators so that they can take it in, understand it, even find a name, and this performance connects the individuals lost to a collective loss.

The ubiquity of the idea of a memorial, of remembering, and to "never forget" makes me wonder what we are so afraid of. For the nation, this memory is how we perform and reperform the importance of our unity, our fortitude, our singular power. On an individual level, though, some forgetting is crucial. Lying in bed next to my young child, after the reading and the singing when all he had left was the ingenuity of his questions to keep me there, he asked how old I would be when he was this age and then that age. Eventually, I said "when you are that age, I will be dead." After a brief pause, he responded: "I'll never forget you, mom." I have always laughed at this story: at the hilarity of his assurance that I won't be forgotten by my son. What he doesn't know, can't know yet, is the problem is not *remembering* what's been lost, but learning to move on without it. It turns out that living with a missing piece is profoundly disfiguring.

Nicole, if you are no longer here, maybe I will be different...in a good way. Maybe, because you shaped me so indelibly from 10 months old, my body can now unfold what it folded to fit next to you. Loss is weird: how do you mourn an absence? How can a hole hurt? There's nothing there so what's the problem? But, like a biker thrown from his Kawasaki careening down the Pacific Coast Highway into a tree that severs his arm, the lost arm remains as a phantom and the biker feels the tension of the missing arm gripping the handlebars forever. It's not that I'm not "sorry for your loss," but there are days I wonder what will unfold in your place.

Act 3: The Shadow and the Phantom

At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck apologizes to the audience for the previous story told by the actors:

> If we shadows have offended,
> Think but this, and all is mended,
> That you have but slumber'd here
> While these visions did appear.
> And this weak and idle theme,
> No more yielding but a dream. (5.1.423–28)

At the start of the play, Puck calls Oberon the "king of shadows" and then he ends the play by reminding the audience that all the actors were shadows. Associating actors with shadows is one of the "loose or extended use" definitions listed in the OED, which can be "Applied rhetorically to a portrait as contrasted with the original; also an actor or a play in contrast with the reality represented," and it does not warrant a footnote for the editors of the Riverside or the Folger, so one supposes it makes sense.[3] But *how* does it make sense: if the actor is a shadow, what is the original that these shadows connect to and what provides the light that creates the shadow? The original here is an abstract idea or memory; the character is "bodied forth" by the material presence of the actor. In performance, the actor playing Puck is not a shadow; he is no less real or physically in front of us than the person standing next to us in the yard of the Globe. To understand the actor as a shadow is to make him the void-space where the character is not. The audience sees the body of the actor and *creates* a character from which this representation arises. The shadows are placeholders upon which the audience projects characters. Because there is an actor there, playing Puck, there must be an original that forms and guides the "shadow" we see before us. "Shadow" is a noun that tells a story: there is light, there is an obstruction, and thus a shadow. Of course, where the shadow is depends on where the viewer is in relation to the light and the obstruction. Shadows construct us in relation to an object and a light source.

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[3] *OED Online*, s.v. "shadow," accessed 7 June 2023. www-oed-com.proxy.library.stonybrook.edu/view/Entry/177212?rskey=InpBK1&result=1&isAdvanced=false

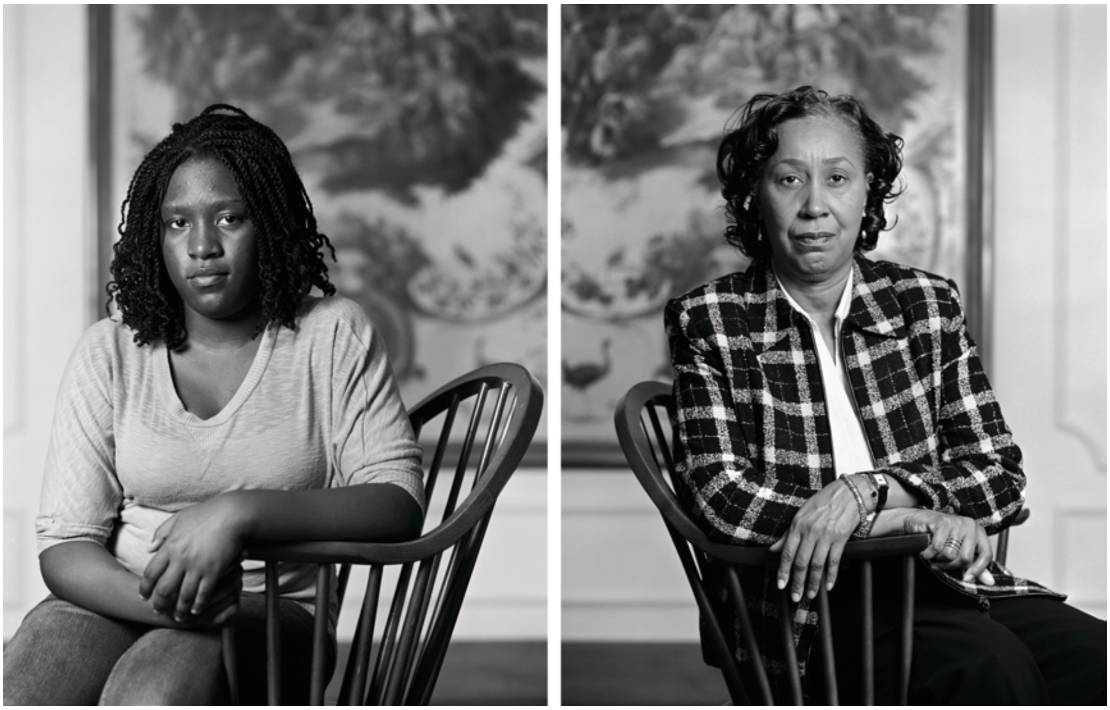

Figure 7. Imani Richardson and Carolyn Mickel from The Birmingham Project *by Dawoud Bey, 2012. (Copyright Dawoud Bey; courtesy of Stephen Daiter Gallery)*

Nicole, I do not know what to do with all the dead. A school shooting again yesterday. Massive natural disaster somewhere else. Climate migrants drowned feet from shore. Another Black mother in mourning. Whales washing up on shores. The parade of animal species falling off the earth for the last time, like Noah's ark in reverse. I admit to what Ta-Nehisi Coates calls the "passive power of whiteness—that bloody heirloom which cannot ensure mastery of all events but can conjure a tailwind for most of them" (2020:32). I finger my own lost and missing, safe in the knowledge that the pattern might be the same, but the scale is incommensurable. The loss repeats at different scales from the daily to the incomprehensible.

In February of 2021, I stood in the cold, masked and six feet away from the nearest person, to present my timed-entry ticket for The New Museum's *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*. I would have liked to view this show close-up with other members of humanity. I was stopped short by Dawoud Bey's *The Birmingham Project*, a series of photographs made up of large, rich diptychs of two people, one relatively young and the other older—60s, 70s. They sit in the same chair, or pew, and their hands seem to fall in similar ways. They look at the camera and hold my gaze. It's called *The Birmingham Project* because of how it is staging—reminding us—of the Ku Klux Klan bombing of that city's 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963. Four girls died in the church and three boys were killed in related violence that day. In his essay for *The New Yorker*, Peter Schjeldahl asks, "How could such elegance serve as a memorial of murder?" (2021). According to Leigh Raiford, "*The Birmingham Project* forces us to ask a series of what ifs: What if that bomb hadn't gone off in the Sunday school basement? What if those children had been allowed to grow to adulthood? What if black lives truly mattered?" (2016:136). Bey's photographs engage the viewer in a performance of loss and grief because we are required to find the dead boys and girls at the intersection of where they are not.

This is not how other archival sources present the historic event. According to the FBI website "It was a quiet Sunday morning in Birmingham, Alabama—around 10:24 on September 15, 1963—when a dynamite bomb exploded in the back stairwell of the downtown Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The violent blast ripped through the wall, killing four African-American girls on the other side and injuring more than 20 inside the church" (FBI.gov n.d.). The National Museum of African American History and Culture's blog insists on the importance of the specificity of the one 11- and three 14-year-old girls:

> We should always keep in mind that the four girls who died, while immortalized in history, were children with children's dreams. Carol Robertson was a straight A student who loved to dance. Cynthia Wesley excelled in math. Addie Mae Collins was quiet, athletic, and had a flare for art. Denise McNair wrote plays for the kids in her neighborhood. (NMAAHC n.d.)

Based on these two descriptions, these two archives, what are we asked to hold on to? What was lost? The image of the bombing on the FBI website is arresting and upsetting; the school pictures of the dead are haunting. But what moves me is Bey's photographs of eight living beings who are not dead. In a statement about the work, Bey explains the project's origins as the moment when he was 11 years old and saw a picture of a badly wounded Sarah Collins (younger sister to Addie Mae) in a hospital bed:

> Everything changed for me at that moment, and it has taken all of these intervening years to craft a response to the ground-shifting personal drama of seeing that picture. I didn't know it would take fifty years (including seven years of repeated trips to Birmingham) in order to come to terms with what that response might be and how I might give tangible and expressive shape to it—but that is indeed how long the project has been unfolding. (2023)

When Moses was 10 days old, my appendix was rupturing. You were there to tell me I could take the drugs. That he would survive for 1.5 days on formula and without me. As I came out of anesthesia, you read me David Sedaris until we quickly realized I could not laugh without pain. Eleven days before, as he was struggling to arrive for his first day of life, my story about Motherhood died. Until the pain, he and I had mythic potential. As he cracked me open, the old me became the detritus cast off to reveal him; I cried for a hatchet to open me up and kill both of us in the process. It seemed to me even a "good enough" mother would at least save the baby. I have been miscast; I will never be enough. When he was 1,628 days old, you listened to him talk about trains for what seemed like forever and you told me you thought I was a fine mom. We dropped him off at college on the day he turned 6,594 days old; you had been gone for 1,990 days. I did not mourn for either of you but I felt gratitude for the person you both cast me as.

Bey casts the dead in the bodies of current residents of Birmingham. Addie Mae Collins at 14 is played by Imani Richardson, and Collins at the age she would never get to be, 72, is played by Carolyn Mickel.[4] They are both ghosts, in a way; the younger Addie Mae was never photographed by Bey and the older Addie Mae did not have a chance to exist. We don't have feelings for these strangers from Birmingham, and yet they evoke feelings in us; they are not dead and yet we grieve. Alexander Hirsch asserts that the work "converts spectators in the gallery into belated witnesses," and cultivates "memorial aesthetics that hone the presence of an absence." In describing the photographs, Hirsch attends to the experience of the spectator: "Though they may not be able to retrieve their lost futures, spectators can reckon with what might have been, and in so doing honor the irreplaceable value such futures held for the children who died" (2017). The photographs are powerful because, to make sense of what we are seeing, we must bring to life that which—she who—is not in the photographs.

To make sense of what I am seeing, I must discover what holds these two portraits together; Addie Mae shows up then, and her loss suddenly feels glaring and excruciating. As Schjeldahl concludes, "As tranquil as the images are, the burning pain of the reference persists. I've tried to shake the spell that they cast but haven't yet" (2021).

I treasure my dreams of you. Last night I dreamed that you were at a party, surrounded by men, with a huge smile on your face. You were in bright color—when you visit my dreams, you come vivid. You reigned in

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[4] Bey does not specify which current resident is supposed to represent which of those killed in 1963, other than the ages. In his statement about the piece, he wrote "This is my memorial to those six young lives lost fifty years ago, and a tribute to the community of people who were in Birmingham at that traumatic moment and to those born there since that fateful day" (Bey 2023).

that room. I caught your eye but you were uninterested in me: you just wanted me to see you there, happy, at home, cherished, like Cleopatra.

Sometimes what is lost must be brought back, recast, and engaged with anew for us to move on. Neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran's work with phantom limb patients illuminates the mind's ability to re-write its idea of the body, suggesting a more expansive notion of where we stop and start. Phantom limbs are common; although the arm (for example) is no longer there, the patient hallucinates its presence, sometimes using it to gesticulate and other times suffering from pain stemming from the missing appendage. Ramachandran countered the standing assumptions within medicine that phantom limbs are "wishful thinking" or a by-product of withered neurons at the site of amputation. By respecting the reality of these phantoms, Ramachandran discovered a way to amputate them (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998).

In one dream you are getting ready to be married to this hot, young, Italian race car driver. You have fashioned a dress out of curtains from the hotel. I tried to pull the dress down so it covered your cute yellow underpants. I suddenly remember that you are just visiting my dream, that when I awake you will be dead again. I hold you tight, in your funny wedding dress, and tell you how much I miss you. You stop me and say: "Shush. You are in my dream!"

Ramachandran created a box with two holes for arms and a piece of cardboard separating the two areas. On one side of the cardboard wall there was a mirror, so that when a patient put his left arm in the left side and his phantom arm in the right, the phantom was visible to the patient in the mirror. The reflection of his left arm became a visualization of the right arm. When the patient sends motor commands to both arms, he can now see his phantom move. After sending the patient home to "work" with the mirror box on his own, the patient called to report that he no longer experienced a phantom arm. Ramachandran hypothesized that when the brain received visual information that the arm was moving again while also getting information from the muscles that the arm was not there, it had to come to terms with what was lost. By seeing the invisible, the patient was able to reimagine his body as it had become since losing the arm. In the years since Ramachandran's mirror box work was published, "mirror box therapy" (MT) has become a tested and effective treatment for phantom limb pain.[5] Even unconsciously, we creatively recast the missing to hold onto what's been taken from us.

Puck ends that speech by calling for a performance from the audience:

> Gentles, do not reprehend:
> if you pardon, we will mend:
> And, as I am an honest Puck,
> If we have unearned luck
> Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
> We will make amends ere long;
> Else the Puck a liar call;
> So, good night unto you all.
> Give me your hands, if we be friends,
> And Robin shall restore amends. (5.1.429–38)

Whatever we felt about the past few hours at the theatre, it's hard not to find yourself clapping when the actor ends the play by asking for our "hands." Giving our hands to Puck means smacking one hand against the other and generating noise and vibration inches from our heart. My rhythm is different from the man in front of me and the lady to my left, but we are all now—after remaining dutifully quiet and attentive all night—visible, loud, and, though not in unison, united by our applause. My clapping, done in a group, becomes singular: applause. Whatever we feel during the performance, this applause experience can feel very good.

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[5] According to a study by Wang and colleagues: "During mirror therapy, the impaired coherence between motor command and sensory feedback after amputation are enhanced" and it concluded by asserting, "There is fair-quality evidence that MT is beneficial for reducing phantom limb pain" (Wang et al. 2021). A recent review of randomized placebo trials, however, found that the efficacy of this therapy is overstated (Guémann et al. 2023).

If grief is understood as a performance, rather than a state of being, then we change the methods and techniques we use to study it. After the catastrophe of the past three years, where over a million Americans have died of Covid, my lost love is banal—as are most deaths seen from a distance—but that does not make it uninteresting when thinking about how we are processing our social loss, current trauma, and anticipatory trauma. Experiencing art can generate connection with others. When we talk to the silence, walk through the flags, tell a story about Imani Richardson and Carolyn Mickel, or find our grandfather's name at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, that is grief working through our system, pain becoming meaning. Art is our mirror box: the thing we dance with to see the missing.

In the last email I got from you, you said that when we talked about our childhood, you could see all of it from my eyes, as if my memories were your memories. Sharing memories with you helped me hold on to them. The last email sent to you, I told you I took you for granite and granted—my rock and something I mostly forgot was there. Well, when that rock dropped out, I got to see all the beauty and love in our years together. I really saw what I lost, I really saw the love that I was capable of and the crazy powerful love that you bestowed on me. That was sublime. Like giving birth: absolutely grueling—like being ruptured open and left for spare parts—but look what is possible? Look what I did?

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