

COVID-19: Mourning, Knowledge and Improvisation

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Abstract

As we live and die through the continuing pandemic, one particular affect that relates us globally is of the dead awaiting their funerary repose. Assessing the pandemic, Arif (2020) in an early reflection proposes that we might benefit in our assessment of the ‘bio-social’ of the pandemic by admitting to the sovereignty of the virus. Borrowing this premise, I suggest further that the sovereignty of the virus is acutely manifested in the commingled presence of the living and unreposed dead in the temporary, improvised morgues. Although the continuing pandemic is quite unprecedented, it can be partially recognised in knowledges gained in mourning that register how disasters force a ‘descent’ (Das 2006) and ‘fall’ (Rosaldo 2014) into accepting improvisation of life and death forms. This descent and fall can be towards an abyss risking the very continuum of life, but what we also gain from discerning the relation of mourning with knowledge is that life can be regained at many levels of the fall. Just as the unreposed dead manifest the sovereignty of the virus, I suggest this descent and fall can be ethically attested in improvisation as the social surface of regaining life. It is my contention that this full-time improvisation, which in turn must be its own source, energy and end, must operate facing the unreposed dead. Deriving and extending from my own work of studying the dead, the present essay shows this improvisation and regaining of life through two brief assemblages of bacteriophage virus and media morgue. The relation of mourning and knowledge is built through the essay to arrive at the conclusion that

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the classic trope of life cycle in anthropology has to be seen as part of a complex texture of the social where vitality and the unreposed dead are concurrent and overlapping.

Keywords

Mourning, event, descent, fall, virus, bacteriophage, media, morgue, improvisation

Event and the Relation of Mourning to Knowledge

The combination of being home-bound and being driven to (and away from) news sources to get updates of the novel coronavirus' deadly spread is a relatable moment for most people of the world in the first half of the reduplicative year 2020. Given the visible danger and the associated biological and social fatalities, this relatability has come to be harnessed to death as an easily recognisable connection between us. The ease of this recognition brings upon us the difficult condition of discerning knowledge in mourning. It is mourning that carries a knowing sense of where the world diminishes and ceases to exist and also how that same world contingently re-emerges and beckons the survivor to accept the second-hand world (Das 2006; Rosaldo 2014). Drawing and extending from my more-than a-decade-long research on the dead as a social and biological condition across the mixed territories of funeral work, hospital, morgue and proper names, I make an attempt in this essay to show some aspects of our relatability to death in the present, continuing moment of the pandemic. I do this by girding mourning as a way to know how the dead come to (re)inhabit the world of the living. Thus seen, our present pandemic situation is that where passage into a new day must become possible even when the dead cannot be directed to their well-known zones of funerary repose. This inhabitation with the dead where the dead are out of place, for the time being, is not exclusive to the present pandemic but is certainly magnified to a level of globalised simultaneity into the present. It is not a surprise then that the morgue, a modern social and architectural institution that moderates and fills in for this out-of-place-ness of the dead, has come to be, as a temporary improvisation, one of the central descriptors of the unfolding of the pandemic. Responding to this metamorphosis of our global condition into the pandemic requires that we look at mourning and its relation to knowledge to recognise this disaster through the events of other disasters, be them personal or collective or any other way in which disasters can be

classified. My elementary line for disaster is that it is a condition of living that requires full-time improvisation, when the respective dead are still unreposed. Let me then show how mourning relates with thought, knowledge and the world through a discussion on death as an event.

Renato Rosaldo's long-standing work on grief and rage in relation to the Ilongots of Philippines is well known. Here, I draw upon his accompanying notes to his recent work *The Day of Shelly's Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief* (Rosaldo 2014). Adapting from the 'timeline' provided in the book, a brief background to Rosaldo's work would help us place his singular contribution to the classic subject of death in anthropology. Renato and his fellow anthropologist wife, Michelle Rosaldo (Shelly for Renato), with their two young sons, Sam (aged 4) and Manny (aged 1), arrived in Philippines on a teaching fellowship in 1981. Both the professors were deeply invested in Philippine ethnography, and each had a book on the increasingly diminishing and censured practice of headhunting amongst the Ilongots community of northern Luzon, Philippines, that they studied through the decades of the 1960s and the 1970s. In their 1981 journey, while the family was travelling to scout sites for field research in Ifugao village, Renato Rosaldo writes that on 'Sunday, October 11, Shelly walks towards another village with Conchita Cumaldi and her cousin. On the trail, Shelly falls to her death' (Rosaldo 2014: 4). In an affective re-conceptualisation of the relation between death and rage that he had earlier presented on the lines of headhunting as an exchange for the dead, Rosaldo, in his essay 'Grief and a Headhunter's Rage: On the Cultural Force of Emotions' (Rosaldo 1984), writes that he recognises, after Shelly's death, what Ilongots meant by rage at death which led them to headhunt. This recognition is the recognition of a mourner, but it has lasting consequences for knowledge created about death and disaster. In my reception of Rosaldo's ethnography and poetry of grief, *The Day of Shelly's Death*, I see a whole new ethnography that uses mourning as a form of knowledge.

What Rosaldo (1984) conceived as a cultural and emotional force in rage with regard to death and headhunting finds a different conceptualisation as he sets out to write about Shelly's death as ethnography and poetry of grief. Drawing from the French philosopher Alain Badiou, he proposes that death is an event, an 'eruption' that in its 'flash' occurrence founds a trace in mourning. That trace is held as the 'truth' of an 'encounter', and one is 'violently' 'converted' to not 're-enact or reproduce' this event but 'be' this very event in acts of literature (Rosaldo 2014: 101–102). Citing Badiou's conceptualisation of event through a reading of Jean-Jacques Lecercle, Rosaldo writes that 'the ambition of poetry is indeed

“to be the event itself” (Rosaldo 2014: 102, quotes in the original text). We find in his writing vivid descriptions of the work involved in the doing of poetry and the associated unravelling of intuitive knowledge captured by language. I accept his gesture of conceiving both death and ‘ambition of poetry’ as events turning the force of death as event to the force of poetry as force of thought. It is in this sense that we arrive at a figure of mourning as thought from Rosaldo’s ethnography of grief. But, if we were to move away from this nuclei of grief as received by the first mourner that sustains in his poetic work, we will note the ease with which Badiou’s conceptualisation of event fits into recognition of death. Here, we may turn to Badiou’s own description of event to see the direction in which Rosaldo’s reading takes Badiou’s conceptualisation of an everyday word, ‘event’. Badiou proposes the following in showing how the event is scaffolded into an ethical construction:

The *event*, which brings to pass ‘something other’ than the situation, opinions, instituted knowledges; the event is a hazardous [*hasardeux*], unpredictable supplement, which vanishes as soon as it appears; the *fidelity*, which is the name of the process: it amounts to a sustained investigation of the situation, under the imperative of the event itself; it is an immanent and continuing break; the *truth* as such, that is, the multiple, internal to the situation, that the fidelity constructs, bit by bit; it is what the fidelity gathers together and produces. (Badiou 2001: 67–68)

The Evil, on the other hand, according to him is...

...to believe that an event convokes not the void of the earlier situation, but its plenitude, is Evil in the sense of *simulacrum*, or *terror*; to fail to live up to a fidelity is Evil in the sense of *betrayal*, betrayal in oneself of the Immortal that you are; to identify a truth with total power is Evil in the sense of *disaster*. (Badiou 2001: 71)

I have cited both these propositions from Badiou to illustrate how the focus shifts for him from the agency of the event to the sovereignty of the self that is required to sustain the platonic identification of the event, which otherwise threatens to turn into ‘Evil’. In reading Rosaldo’s ethnography and poetry of grief, one instead gets a different exposition of the unending contingencies within which mourning itself is deflected and deferred. In fact, such is the sovereignty of these contingencies that the fall of the dead and the fall of the mourner can only be made legible by going to the depths of autobiography, an autobiography of the other as a relative. Rosaldo’s conceptualisation of death thus takes a different

direction from Badiou's conditional assertion of the event and its actualisation, a direction much closer to what Veena Das calls 'descent' into the 'ordinary' in her ethnography on the survivors of collective violence in post-independence India (Das 2006), where the relationship between violence, descent and the ordinary can become one of 'healing', on the condition that it 'becomes a relationship with death' too (quoted by Cavell: xiii in Das 2006). Evidently, the words 'fall' and 'descent' do not just relay different conditions than those laid by Badiou for an event to be recognised; on an encounter, they announce an imminent and despairing repetition of death. However, this is where Das and Rosaldo's ethnographies based on the biographical and the autobiographical narratives, respectively, hold insights that bring to the fore what mourning does to the knowledge of the world. It is that a regaining of life becomes possible at many levels of the fall and descent, but simultaneously, the knowledge of the world is not a sublimation but an improvisation.

At this, I turn to the assemblages of bacteriophage virus and media morgue to show how this relation of mourning and knowledge can be registered in practices where we have to deal with an invisible microorganism (virus) and a self-described virtual reality (media). In the case of the virus, I will show that it is the register of naming and the associated improvisation with it that enables us to notice the epidemiological fact of death linked to the discovery of a virus. In the case of media, I will show that media, being that great specialist of showing and stating deaths and disasters, reveals in the making of temporary morgues the overlapping of death between home and non-home.

Know the Virus Versus Meet the Virus and Vice Versa

In what follows, I progressively describe the context formed by the discovery of bacteriophages in Ganga's water during a cholera epidemic research, through which the virus operates as a potential social and cultural agent, apart from its general induction into scientific knowledge systems. The same agency of the virus that is associated with threats of disease and death, as in the case of the current pandemic or the preceding ones of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) or Ebola, can hinge the virus to social and political surfaces of rumour and violent socialities in synchrony with other latent setbacks. Using this discussion as backdrop, I approach the present pandemic's handling through improvisations involved in naming it. I note that this improvisation also

ends up highlighting the mourning relation between the names of the viruses (particularly the ‘human viruses’) and their substantial link with death.

My chance encounter with the virus as an intelligible organism happened while researching the handling of the dead at the electric and manual crematoria in Banaras in 2005. Bacteriophage, a phage form of virus reliant on bacteria for its replication, is proclaimed by scientists and scientist activists in India, in the face of rising river pollution, as a self-cleansing living substance to be found in the Ganga. The river, spread between the vast geographical expanse of Himalayan glaciers and the Bay of Bengal through the landed regions of North India, is perceived as a unified complex of maternal and divine form that has the power to hold death unto itself and also, alternatively, give both ordinary (boons and blessings) and extraordinary grace (*moksha*) to seekers. This is the reason why the river is a perplexing site of antagonistic practices, such as return offerings of the dead and its equivalents, pious bathing tied to seeking the boon of childbirth (preferably sons), long life and different measures of well-being. The different kinds of dead and its equivalent offered to her in Banaras would typically include the following: animal (cadavers of cows), human (cremated remains, or a whole dead body in the case of untimely death and special death of *sadhus*), divine (idols brought to life for the calendrical festivals are to be returned back to the river’s waters [*parvah*]) and the miscellany of aborted fetuses, biomedical remains, et cetera (Singh 2016). These return offerings to the river are not bare and are laced with marigold flowers, copious vermilion powder, red- and yellow-dyed *rakshasutra* sacral threads, select whole grains and the very water of the river that in turn is offered as the ritual, *argha*. The medical anthropologist Barrett (2008) interprets this form of disposal by conceiving the river as a ‘cosmic sink’. One might add to that descriptor in a hyphenated form, ‘cosmic spring’, to show how the two cosmic features of the same river sustain a complex concept of its water as practical thought. This paradox makes the question of environmental pollution of the river, in my view, a moral problem.¹ That is, the simple fact of seeing, knowing and registering the environmental pollution of the river through plain sight, everyday usage or scientific demonstration is mediated by the avowal that the Ganga is pure. This

¹ In the span of three decades of the Ganga Action Plan, from the programme’s launch in the second half of the 1980s, the question of environmental pollution of the river has become everyone’s (state, researchers and the people alike) prerogative, but that environmental pollution can be a problem of cultural dilemma and skepticism was framed as such, in my view, within the pioneering work of Kelly D. Alley (1994).

affect has a pronounced historical trace and can be seen storied in this way right from the time of the discovery of the bacteriophage in the late nineteenth century. This was the time of the diffused presence of the cholera epidemic in the ‘tropics’, and oddly, Ganga’s water was cited as the very cause of the disease (Twain 1897). On part of the virus, for a start, foreshadowing its twentieth century ontology of being known through manifestation of parasitism and disease, the bacteriophage too was discovered within the ambience of multiple diseases, such as cholera, dysentery and *Hundeseuche* (see D’Herelle 1922). The serendipitous encounter with it was variously apprehended by scientists, and the descriptors such as ‘mysterious X’, ‘vitreous substance’, ‘ultramicrobe’, ‘minute living being’, ‘[cause of] suicide of bacterial cultures’ and ‘enzyme’ render visible specific aspects of the virus that eventually got subsumed within the name bacteriophage (D’Herelle 1922). The French-Canadian scientist Felix D’Herelle, while introducing the bacteriophages to the world through his book *The Bacteriophages: Its Role in Immunity* (D’Herelle 1922), writes that while the name owing to the Latin word ‘phage’ (eating) might mean that the virus eats the bacterium, it should rather be interpreted as the virus reproducing itself at the expense of the bacteria.² Thus, the discovery held on to the dramatic action of the virus self-replicating by simultaneously enacting a chain reaction of bacterial reproduction and death. Into the present pandemic, we have clearly moved from the early days of the discovery of the bacteriophage and have become familiar with the revised ontologies of the virus. In being introduced to the origin story of the bacteriophage, I gathered that in fact the virus as a species had already been identified, and when bacteriophages were named, their discovery, as D’Herelle’s book’s subtitle suggests, held out some hope against bacteria as paradigmatic germs by the late nineteenth century. Subsequent to the bacteriophages’ discovery, the virus and its many forms have been studied, and thanks to the exclusive way in which the virus replicates itself in the host, as compared to the bacteria, we now have a sophisticated conceptual alternative to ‘reproduction’, what in the scientific literature has come to be called ‘transduction’. The conceptualisation of ‘transduction’

² The question of whether bacterium and virus have sexual or reproductive practices is an interesting and deep one because of the two facets involved, that of the living biological substance and its (re)production. The scientist Prof. Vipin Chandra Kalia of Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology, Delhi (IGIB), is well known and much loved for his humorous lectures on ‘*Bacteria ki Shaadi*’ (the marriage of bacteria) to school children being introduced to life sciences. Whether one can have ‘*Virus ki shaadi*’ (marriage of the virus) lectures on the same line is a difficult question, as we shall see below, because of the inter-species involvement in its (re)production.

(horizontal gene transfer from viral agent to the host's cell) is in some senses a retelling of the same aspect of the virus 'reproducing' or 'replicating' itself as in the case of the bacteriophages described above, but it is an altogether new seeing and sensing of the virus, its 'urges' and its 'crystalline charms', to borrow from the genius work *Biophilia* and the song called 'virus' by Björk (2011). So here is how we arrive at the virus as an agent of inter-species love and death.

The Gangetic bacteriophages kept returning one way or the other in my research. In an attempt to further track the microbial historiographies, I followed the national institutes in India involved in studying microorganisms and learnt that most such state-run institutes in India, like others elsewhere in the world, are invested in elaborate fieldworks in the country to record and classify the microbes.³ Various institutes have in fact achieved sophisticated coverage of different areas in terms of species found. In this elaborate recording of samples and biogenetic profiles of these organisms, there is a potential that the nativity and the spread of the organisms can be conceived as a national and even a cultural resource. In fact, it is through the scientists' accounts that the bacteriophage in Ganga's water has emerged as a cultural resource. It is within this complex scene that the pandemic can also find some illumination. As censuses of the bacteria and viruses continue, in the same zones of scientific censuses, super-bacteria or 'superbugs' are also found (Donald and McNeil 2019). In other words, we do have radically adaptable bacterial strains (superbugs) that live in 'contact zones' with the unknown strains. We may note here that a virus census can only be undertaken through its hosts or through the manifestation of diseases in animals, plants or humans. In other words, a slightly strange illness discovered anywhere in the globalised world can be a chance to know a new species of virus. As we can see, from the level of a drop of water and associated socialities in any part of the world to the level of bio-medical knowledge, the discovery of disease and the potential of fatality would all bring forth infinitely graded levels of epidemiological events to the fore.

Arif (2020), in an early assessment of the pandemic, proposes that the usual biopolitical sweep must be seen from the tangent of the sovereignty of the virus and the biomedical omnipresence (despite its visibly diminished miracle function). One might extend this observation to ask: how do the impacted human and political sovereignties then respond to the sovereignty of the virus? It seems to me that that there has to be an

³ I am referring to the Department of Biotechnology's (New Delhi) 2007 initiative of 'Microbial Prospecting' (for project details and findings, see Sharma 2014).

adoption of improvisation appears evident, but it is worth probing how that might be achieved in terms of ontologising the virus as a social and political fact over and above it being a biological and epidemiological fact. The answer may be in terms of barricading the potential ‘bio-social’ (to borrow from Arif) consequences into an improvisation of naming the virus. Sample the World Health Organization’s (WHO) directives when the disease outbreak came to be touted as a pandemic. On 11 February 2020, WHO’s Director-General, in his media briefing, performatively announced the following terms and standards:

Official names have been announced for the virus responsible for COVID-19 (previously known as ‘2019 novel coronavirus’) and the disease it causes. The official names are:

Disease

coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

Virus

severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2
(SARS-CoV-2)

Now to coronavirus.

First of all, we now have a name for the disease:

COVID-19. I’ll spell it: C-O-V-I-D hyphen one nine – COVID-19.

Under agreed guidelines between WHO, the World Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, we had to find a name that did not refer to a geographical location, an animal, an individual or group of people, and which is also pronounceable and related to the disease.

Having a name matters to prevent the use of other names that can be inaccurate or stigmatizing. It also gives us a standard format to use for any future coronavirus outbreaks. (Director General, WHO: 2020).

Summing up this discussion, one may recall what the discovery and the subsequent social biography of microorganisms can bring forth. Bacteriophages can be avowed as a cultural symbol and resource in the case of the River Ganga, while more common viruses might get associated with disease and death. Notice from the preceding statements of WHO how the knowledge of the virus through the twentieth century, involves its perpetual re-conceptualisation as a biological entity, along with its linkages with deaths and epidemiological disasters. In between this knowledge and meeting with a new species, the name of the disease becomes an improvisation at the face of the death spectre raised by the pandemic, and thus this ‘official name’ allows regaining a foothold amidst the descent into despair. The place of mourning and its relation with knowledge are also tied to this improvisation. After all, what this

official name is doing is creating a diversion from the history of previous events of disaster that the SARS had brought about, a history that in turn connects itself with similar other viruses and disease combinations. Thus, the scientific knowledge of the virus which is privy to this potential of death and disaster activated by the organism, while also mired in their 'crystalline charms' (Björk 2011), must let another naming system come in to handle the unfolding present of a new disease. This diversion implied in the improvisation of the name of the disease, however, does not efface the link between mourning and knowledge but only makes it apparent.

Seeing and Showing the Dead

But does this mean that the COVID-19 virus is that which, in Gilles Deleuze's words, has 'come' to 'break up the integral process of desire' (Boundas 1993: 140)? The answer is yes and no: yes, in the evident sense in which it has forced changes in the flow of materialities and ethicalities in the improvising present; and no, in the sense that it is harnessed into a new assemblage of desire through the news media, the other form of transmission. What I mean is, to borrow again from Deleuze, news media turns the pandemic into an 'ascesis' that is required to dam up an infrastructure of desire (Boundas 1993). My point is that in terms of the COVID-19 reporting, the news media of course has undergone tremendous challenges of securing and selling news, but it is also one of the social institutions whose axiomatic principle has been about being ready for registering and reporting death. Is it in this second sense that the news media has shored up its ascetological might to create new infrastructures of desire? It is, for sure, animated by the idea of the critical through which news is stratified in media, where death makes it to the peak of the other layers. That is, if there is any one institution that can handle death in the pandemic, it turns out, it is not the state and it is not the biomedical icon of modernity, the clinic, but the news media. What does this ascesis then look like amidst the pandemic? It is about reporting the bio-count of the infected and the dead. It is about carrying images of the surplus dead. It is about articulating, with all the performative force it might take, the conditions of the surplus dead and the helpless survivors. It is about the scenes of the dying in the hospital. It is about the grim epidemiological forecasts that have to be followed with the just-concluded news about the actual dead. It is about mourning in a way that cannot be a replication, or even a whole imitation, of ritual

or personal responses to the dead. This leads to complex concerns of both creating new forms of mourning (subsumed in showing the affected public as aggrieved) and improvising forms of mourning (a spectrum of dilemma emerges then, as to whether the dead must be memorialised in-house or if their respective survivors' observations must be covered). Let me turn to one example that illustrates these features while bringing back the theme of the relation of the name to mourning and knowledge to the fore again.

In its late edition, on Sunday, 24 May 2020, *The New York Times* carried the headline 'U.S. DEATHS NEAR 100,000, AN INCALCULABLE LOSS'. The sub-headline says: 'They Were Not Simply Numbers on a List. They Were Us'. The entire front page was covered with one-line sociologies of the people who had died. Each obituary, assiduously gleaned from longer obituaries by the news team, had the name of the deceased, their age and a small description of their characters that spiralled into different planes of life, ranging from the job the person was doing to an exam that she had aced to the size of the meal he had liked (Editors 2020).

There is something darker though that becomes legible only when we keep in mind the ascesis of death mentioned above: the pointing to the approaching 100,000 figure. As that number comes to pass, the reporting reverts back to the routine infection numbers and body count, in a way that such a milestone creates its own desires of more such new milestones. However, in the meantime, media uses the expanse of other scenes. One such scene is of the temporary morgue.

The convoy of military trucks in Bergamo, Italy, carrying coffins that could not be locally stored or put to due process of funeral treatment to another city might be one of the most enduring images to have circulated through WhatsApp globally. Soon, within the span of a few months, images of refrigerated trucks, playgrounds, churches and even airports being turned into morgues started circulating. We get a harrowing but clear picture of the pandemic as an unprecedented global event by seeing how in every region of the world a simultaneous effort towards facing the contingency of the dead is effected in terms of conceptualising improvised morgues. To be sure, full-time improvisation takes a lot upon itself and runs on its own energy, and thus it can do but little for the dead. One came across images of the abandoned dead, left on their hospital beds, left piled as self-supported stacks and stocked at crematoria or burial grounds. Part of this can be explained in terms of the concerns of the handling of the dead. In my fieldwork in Banaras (2005–2010), I observed that at the hospital, the deceased were taken to the morgue

wrapped in the hospital sheet that the person had died on. In cases of homeless dead or accidental deaths, a 'bedsheet' would be sourced, or if time permitted, white 'markeen' shrouds would be arranged for by the police. The unbearable aspect of the dead was their eyes, the dead gaze. People, having discovered the corpse, would cover them as soon as they could. This extended to pet cows and buffalos too. Their eyes were covered till the preparations for their disposal were made. However, a begging practice in the city could use a corpse of a *langur* (because it evokes the simian figure of the deity Hanuman) spread on a red sheet in the middle of a crowded market, leaning on one side, with its black face smeared with vermilion.

Michael Taussig, speeding through Medellin, Colombia, in a taxi in 2006, catching a glimpse at the entrance to a freeway tunnel of what appeared to be a woman sewing a man into a white nylon bag of the kind used to transport potatoes or corn to market and scribbling in his notebook: "I swear I saw this." (Quoted in Stuart McLean 2017: 48)

Sure as I am suggesting that a close seeing of the handling of the dead in 'normal' times too is approximate to the surreal, my point here is that when within the narrative environment of the pandemic these images are portrayed by news media, it is difficult to insert them into any familiar normal bracket. This is where the link between mourning and knowledge becomes apparent in terms of how the normal and the unprecedented come together at the level of recognition drawn from disasters at a personal and a general level.

In 2011, after a brief fieldwork in Aarhus, Denmark, where I did an ethnography of a crematorium, when I visited Banaras, I told my funeral-worker friends about how the corpses are kept in a bureaucratic queue in Denmark and how other than the coffin, which has its turn, the rest are stored in an adjacent morgue. I also made a reference to the 'body bag' that is used for handling unclaimed corpses. To both these observations there was visible repugnance. According to them, the dead must be serviced 'fresh'. They compared the body bag to the plastic 'gunny sack' (*bori*) and expressed similar horror as that of Taussig's in coming to see an uncanny potential in an everyday object like the gunny sack that is commonplace in Banaras. In the same way, the morgue itself is not a stable architectural feature. In my own recording of the simple question of where the dead are kept when a disaster strikes, the answer I have arrived at through poring over disaster archives for over a decade is that based on the pace of the emergency, when the need arises, any

place can become a morgue. In order of improvisation, local schools, multipurpose halls, mosques, gymnasiums and government offices could form the first level, while people's homes and, in India, temples, might form the last level. In other words, what we see in the pandemic is akin to other localised disasters where everyday spaces of habitation turning into a morgue is the distressing potential of the disaster. Of course, in the case of the pandemic, it is the world itself that adapts to the expansive movement of the dead.

To sum up, the twin idioms of the dead as numbers and the emergence of temporary morgues might be two ways of saying and showing the same emergency. However, in the two cases, different relations of mourning are activated, and thus are activated different forms of knowledge. These different forms of knowledge provide an improvisational surface over which life and death form a continual relation of vitality. To the question then, of how the phenomena of temporary morgues, unreposed dead and ascetological presentations of forms of death as an infrastructure of sad desires may converse with the classic anthropological trope of life cycle, the answer this article gives is as follows. Given the pandemic, on the face of it, it may appear that we have landed on the opposite and the exceptional side of the functionalist idea of death and community wherein it is posited that every single death cleaves the community itself and the eventual restoration of the social happens through a proper, communitarian observation of funerary rituals. However, it is only through knowledges gained in mourning that recognises fall and accepts improvisation that we come to understand that such a moral imaginary has a more complex texture where a continuity between life cycle events is based not on a serialised and staggered order of events but on concurrent overlaps.

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