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Professional Mourners' Laments from Quarantine

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Taryn Simon is a student of grief. To Simon, a multidisciplinary artist whose work has explored subjects ranging from wrongful incarceration to engineered applause, the state of loss is “a space that’s beyond articulation or beyond language.” Her new project in collaboration with Artangel, “Laments from Quarantine,” captures on video wails, songs, and chants of loss during the coronavirus pandemic, which has now killed at least four hundred thousand people worldwide. But the mourners in the videos are not recently bereaved; they’re professionals, people paid to publicly grieve. The tradition of professional mourning has a centuries-long history, in which cultures across the globe have relied on hired hands to aid the living in saying goodbye to those they’ve lost. A lack of intimacy with the dead does not necessarily preclude authenticity; in fact, Simon believes that professional mourners can help us understand how to process loss.

Simon had already worked with these professionals in “Occupation of Loss,” an installation held in New York and London, in 2016 and 2018, in which a group simultaneously lamented and performed their rituals of grief, in what Simon described as “a cacophony of mourning.” When she began to check in with the mourners after quarantines began around the world, they expressed an interest in doing something remotely. (None of the mourners whom Simon has worked with are currently working via Webcast.) A series of video vignettes was born. Some feature traditional modes of mourning that have been passed down through generations. Other mourners are adapting their rituals, Simon said, “lamenting in ways specific to this moment.”

Professional mourners invoke myriad ways of conceptualizing death, which vary from culture to culture. For the Wayuu, an indigenous people of South America, laments are a way to lead souls safely to the Milky Way, while the wails of a Yazidi mourner, displaced from the Middle East, decry the pain of exile. But all of them serve a fundamental purpose for the living: to guide them in their grief.

“Professional mourners operate in this space that shapes loss and guides people through these moments of grief, and it’s both scripted and not scripted,” Simon said. The mourners “simultaneously inhabit that space where it is performative and it is also very real for them—this duality that’s very difficult to articulate.”

Simon observed that ritual has often been used to “navigate nihilism and chaos,” to give guidance during the grieving process, one of most extreme and profound human experiences. Usually, mourners help family members grieve at grave sites. They can stand as proof of how

much a person was loved, sing a soul across the stars, help a family express the sorrow that they cannot yet give voice to. Now, during quarantine, many are unable to do their jobs, at a time when family members themselves are barred from their late loved ones' bodies, unable to witness their final rites. Those mourners who are still able to work note the strangeness of observing strict physical distance between family members, a distance that only exacerbates an already painful mortal divide.

Governments have not always taken kindly to professional mourners. "They threaten that authority, because they're not operating within a space of governance or adhering to whatever the system is," Simon explained. The chaos and vulnerability of grief cannot be allayed by the state. And most of the systems that governments create can only attempt to quantify death, reducing it to a list or a toll, unable to truly illuminate it. In the darkness of that unknown, professional mourners attempt to sing lanterns into being.

Simon added that "people are vulnerable in moments of loss, and can be shaped in moments of loss." The world is being reshaped now, as people mourn those who have died from covid-19, and parse both the sense of isolation and the structural economic inequity that the pandemic has exacerbated. On streets across the U.S., protesters are channelling their grief and rage stemming from the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the countless black lives lost to a system of policing that many Americans are finally beginning to reimagine. For we are all mourners now, trying to guide one another through a world that seems as uncharted as the one that lies beyond the grave.