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**Reflections on the Past, Present, and Future of Pandemic Memory**

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## REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF PANDEMIC MEMORY

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On May 12, 2022, US President Joe Biden issued a proclamation ‘in memory of the one million American lives lost to COVID-19 and their loved ones left behind’, asserting that ‘as a Nation, we must not grow numb to such sorrow. To heal, we must remember.’<sup>2</sup> Yet, even as we continue to struggle with the challenges of the Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) in its ever-mutating contagious variants, and notwithstanding the availability of digital social media for documenting memory,<sup>3</sup> fears are being expressed that the devastating experience of the global pandemic will not be remembered. Mark Honigsbaum, author of *The Pandemic Century: One Hundred Years of Panic, Hysteria and Hubris* (2019), has warned in a blog essay that ‘despite killing more than six million people worldwide, Covid-19 is already in danger of being forgotten.’<sup>4</sup> What lessons can be learned from historical examination of remembrance of the previous major global pandemic, as showcased in the volume *Pandemic Re-Awakenings: The Forgotten and Unforgotten ‘Spanish’ Flu of 1918–1919*?<sup>5</sup>

In the summer of 2020, the social psychologist of memory William Hirst commented that ‘society would have been better prepared for COVID-19 if it vividly remembered the Spanish flu’.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the commonplace assertion that the Great Flu, which was apparently the most lethal catastrophe in human history within a similar time frame, was simply forgotten is misleading.

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Beiner is the Sullivan Chair of Irish Studies and a professor of history at Boston College. His newly edited volume, *Pandemic Re-Awakenings: The Forgotten and Unforgotten ‘Spanish’ Flu of 1918–1919*, is available now from Oxford University Press; [https://global.oup.com/academic/product/pandemic-re-awakenings-9780192843739?facet\\_narrowbybinding\\_facet=Hardcover&lang=en&cc=us](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/pandemic-re-awakenings-9780192843739?facet_narrowbybinding_facet=Hardcover&lang=en&cc=us).

<sup>2</sup> ‘A Proclamation on Remembering the 1,000,000 Americans Lost to COVID-19’, Presidential Actions, The White House, May 12, 2022; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/05/12/a-proclamation-on-remembering-the-1000000-americans-lost-to-covid-19>; last checked August 9, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Tracy Adams and Sara Kopelman, ‘Remembering Covid-19: Memory, Crisis, and Social Media’, *Media, Culture & Society*, 44, no. 2 (2022): pp. 266–85.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Honigsbaum, ‘Drinking the Waters of Lethe’, *Going Viral*, July 24, 2022; <https://markhonigsbaum.substack.com/p/drinking-the-waters-of-lethe>; last checked August 9, 2022. Cf. Scott A. Small, ‘We Will Forget Much of the Pandemic. That’s a Good Thing.’ in *New York Times*, 9 March 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Guy Beiner, ed., *Pandemic Re-Awakenings: The Forgotten and Unforgotten ‘Spanish’ Flu of 1918–1919* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> William Hirst, ‘Remembering Covid-19’, *Social Research*, 87, no. 2 (Summer 2020): p. 251.

Rather than a straightforward case of ‘collective amnesia’, *Pandemic Re-Awakenings* charts a century of dialectics between remembering and forgetting and concludes that:

This complexity can best be understood as a combination of ‘social forgetting’ and ‘cultural forgetting’, both of which entail subtle forms of remembrance. Social forgetting pivots on the dissonance between silence in the public sphere and the persistence of less prominent private and local recollections. Cultural forgetting is to be found in the marginalisation of representations that are left largely unrecognized outside the artistic and literary canons.<sup>7</sup>

These subtle forms of forgetting intertwined with muted memory were repeatedly countered by moments of rediscovery, as historical interest in the subject could both wane and wax.

The French historian of public health Patrick Zylberman perceptively observed that ‘almost every epidemic revives memories of past outbreaks. It bolsters our hunt for historical analogies’ and asserted that ‘it takes a new epidemic – not a new history book – to reawaken memories of past epidemics sleeping in the collective, family and individual memory.’<sup>8</sup> While the past twenty years have seen a growing preoccupation with the history of pandemics in general, and with the Great Flu of 1918-1919 in particular,<sup>9</sup> this new-found interest exponentially increased following the outbreak of the current global pandemic, effectively facilitating a historiographical boom on the subject.

The impact of COVID-19 as a catalyst for rediscovery and a stimulant of new interdisciplinary research on pandemic history and memory is evident in the essays of this *Oracle* issue. Kate Kemp finds parallels between the popular turn to superstition and folk remedies in 1918 – in consequence of modern medicine’s perceived helplessness in face of the ‘Spanish’ Flu – and resistance to vaccines and the demand for questionable alternative cures in 2020. Similarly, Maeve Pinheiro compares between the ‘anti-mask’ movement launched in San Francisco in 1919 and politicized opposition to mask mandates in contemporary America. By contrast, Emily Kaderabek proposes that in New Zealand remembrance of the failures of public medicine during the ‘Spanish’ Flu resulted in better-informed pandemic preparedness, evident in the commendable local response to COVID-19. Louis Gleason suggests that new satellite technologies can improve

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<sup>7</sup> Guy Beiner, ‘Rediscovering the Great Flu between Pre-Forgetting and Post-Forgetting’, in *Pandemic Re-Awakenings: The Forgotten and Unforgotten ‘Spanish’ Flu of 1918–1919*, edited by Guy Beiner (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 346.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Zylberman, ‘Influenza Epidemics and the Politics of Historical Analogy’, in *Influenza and Public Health: Learning from Past Pandemics*, edited by Tamara Giles-Vernick, Susan Craddock and Jennifer Lee Gunn (London and Washington, DC: Earthscan, 2010), pp. 85-6.

<sup>9</sup> See Guy Beiner, ‘Out in the Cold and Back: New-Found Interest in the Great Flu’, *Cultural and Social History*, 3, no. 4 (2006): pp. 496-505; Howard Phillips, ‘The Recent Wave of ‘Spanish’ Flu Historiography’, *Social History of Medicine*, 27, no. 4 (November 2014): pp. 789-808.

global surveillance of the spread and impact of pandemics (partially compensating for dearth of statistics in under-developed regions) and provide data for more inclusive remembrance. In all these essays, there is a constructive dialogue between the past and the present with an eye to the future, as critical assessments of recent encounters with the Coronavirus pandemic facilitate new perspectives for re-engaging with the memory of the ‘Spanish’ Flu pandemic.