Narrating Pandemics across Time and Space

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SUMMARY  The unexpected arrival of the novel Coronavirus in January 2020 has changed many aspects of our daily lives and our sense of normalcy. This is not the first pandemic humans have faced, however. Older generations still remember their parents’ stories about the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic, for example, which, like COVID-19, caused serious respiratory problems, death, and fear of the unknown. Through my autoethnographic explorations across time and space, this essay examines how stories of past pandemics (re)emerge at a fast pace, reinforcing embodiments of dread and fear during COVID-19’s trying times. [1918-1920 influenza, autoethnography, COVID-19, narrative, pandemic]

A deep sense of dread and helplessness invaded my entire body when, in January 2020, I first heard that a deadly virus was circulating among humans at an uncontrollable speed. Two years have gone by, and lockdown orders, border patrols, travel limitations, continuously changing rules, and an overall economic and financial crisis have now become part of our new everydayness.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I used to travel to see my family and conduct research in Northern Italy at least once a year. I planned to visit my parents in the summer of 2020 after two years of absence from Italian soil. However, COVID-19 got there even before I could book my flight, with the first cases and deaths recorded in February 2020. Distressing scenes started to populate the news coming from there, while my parents were terrified of what was happening under their eyes. “They are preparing so many tents outside our hospitals; all this is unreal,” said my mother in late February 2020. Her fast speech over the phone unveiled her anxiety and fear of what would happen next. Her fear of the uncertain was quickly transmitted to me. Social media have helped us feel physically close despite the distance. Still, they have also had the power to create more embodied fear and dread given the unprecedented speed through which (mis)information, images, videos, and stories have been circulating.

Soon after she received her first Pfizer-vaccination dose in March 2021, my mother, who had just turned eighty, called me to share the news: “Did you know that your grandma would have been over one hundred years today?”
I stayed silent and thought about how much I had desired to have my grandmother among us again. I immediately remembered that March was indeed the month of her birthday.

“I am at least happy that she didn’t have to go through another pandemic,” my mother continued. “She had already survived the Spanish flu as a young girl; did you know that?”

I felt disoriented. I thought that I had known my grandmother’s life in all its nuances, but I hadn’t known. My grandmother was very young when the 1918 flu hit the world, including Northern Italy, where she lived with her family. She survived that pandemic, World War I, and World War II. I distinctly remember her tellings about the two wars, the lack of food in her house, her early morning work making bread for family members and neighbors, the many hardships she went through when the Fascists persecuted her family during World War II. Yet, she never brought up the 1918-1920 pandemic with me, not even once. Did she forget about it because she was too young? Did her parents never mention it after she grew up? Is there anything that humans could forget about a deadly pandemic?

These and other questions prompted me to read past and present pandemic survivors’ stories, perhaps to better capture how humans, including myself, can be (dis)oriented during these distressing times. Friends and family members have shared traumatic stories about death and dread from Northern Italy, one of the earliest epicenters of COVID-19. In March and April 2020, Italians posted images of overflown hospitals and military trucks transporting the many Coronavirus victims to their unknown graves. Pictures and stories of past pandemics have also been revisited. Whether from the past or our everyday realities, storytelling practices are key tools to navigate recurring challenging times, such as pandemics of unprecedented proportions.

Autoethnographic primary and secondary (or recontextualized) narratives are also useful ways to engage within various spatiotemporal coordinates. Inspired by autoethnography as a research method (Adams et al. 2015; Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2022; Reed-Danahay 1997), in this article, I examine fears and uncertainties across time and space in storytelling practices about two pandemics. More specifically, I reflect upon how COVID-19 has been reshaping humanity, not only through annihilation but also by changing the way we experience the world around us. On the value of storytelling practices in autoethnography, Adams and his colleagues (2015, 23) point out that researchers “turned to narrative and storytelling to give meaning to identities, relationships, and experiences, and to create relationships between past and present, researchers and participants, writers and readers, tellers and audiences.” I extend this approach by incorporating a more embodied autoethnography (Desjarlais 1997, 2018; Mackinlay 2019; Stewart 2008), one that allows researchers to unveil more nuanced, almost real-time, emotional stances in their stories. More specifically, I follow Merleau-Ponty’s (1962 [1945]) phenomenological insights on how the human body, going beyond the Cartesian division between subject and object, should be more prominent in academic research. I thus show how our fears, emotions, and senses of uncertainty and puzzlement can be more meaningful if perceived through descriptions that
include our body’s reactions as we perceive and experience our surroundings and actions (Jackson 1989).

As Throop and Desjarlais (2011, 90) have contended, “Central to the temporal and embodied structure of human experience is the existential fact that we are emplaced in a world that always outstrips the expanse of our being.” This continuously creates new situations that are difficult to grasp, measure, or predict. If “uncertainty, ambiguity, and indeterminacy are the norm” (ibid.), this is even more so in a world that has been sickened by a long pandemic. That is how my fears, as experienced in my body and mind, are prompted by present and past pandemic and family narratives while I have been experiencing a long, involuntary isolation in a small town in upstate New York.

**Family Narratives across Two Pandemics**

I felt troubled for a long while after my mother recounted that my grandmother, with whom I had a very intimate relationship, survived the 1918 flu pandemic. I spent many days pacing around, thinking about the sufferings she must have endured on top of all the other struggles I had already known from her many stories that punctuated my childhood and adolescence. My parents have been apart for too long for me to remember them as a couple. Still, two months after my mother told me that story, my father added another layer of uncertainty and puzzlement to the overall picture of my family history.

In May 2021, during a WhatsApp call, my father explained the continuously changing rules of the first lockdown moments in Northern Italy a year prior and how difficult it had been to stay inside his apartment for many days in a row. He reminded me, with deep sadness, that he had never seen anything like that. People, especially old people, were “dying like flies,” he recounted. Northern Italian hospitals were full of COVID-19 patients. His sister, my aunt, had just passed away in March 2020. She could not have handled that dreadful reality, he confided. “And,” continued my father, “all this is so ironic: my sister was the only person who would have remembered the stories about our mother’s sister, who died of the Spanish flu. She was in Milan at that time.”

As had happened during the phone call with my mother, I could not utter any sound. I had never heard this family story either. Why had the story of my paternal grandmother’s sister’s death been veiled for so long? How did it emerge, naturally, in May 2021? I wanted to ask my father these questions, but my entire body was unresponsive for several moments. My mind, by contrast, was scanning through past stories and situations, searching for thoughts and memories of my conversations with both my grandmothers to see if there was any mention of these important life events. But nothing came to mind. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both my parents shared touching stories about the 1918 flu pandemic, stories that affected our closest family members. Another pandemic of unimaginable proportions had to hit humanity for those stories to resurface and be shared. My autoethnographic telling now recontextualizes and objectifies them in written text.

Defining narratives could be challenging and controversial, given the many ways we can interpret, study, and conceive of stories. Given that stories of the
past can become “present” during the narration through speech participants’ interactional moves (Perrino 2007), it is important to note that my parents’ stories have been part of a recontextualization process that started over a hundred years ago. It might be tempting to define these stories as “second stories” (Sacks 1995; DiDomenico 2019), stories that have been reinterpreted and retold across different timeframes and by various social actors. But limiting their circulation to a first, second, or even third retelling would underplay the richness and complexity of these discursive practices, which are continuously embedded in newly formed interactional realities. Looking at these stories as recontextualization processes, which go through a first entextualization, various possible de-contextualizations, and then uncountable recontextualizations, depending on the circulation of the story (Bauman 1977), is, in my view, an ideal way to consider these discursive practices as they travel across time and space (Perrino 2015). Within this perspective, narratives that have been recontextualized always assume new meanings depending on how many times they have been through this process and on how many contexts of which they have been part. Every step of this process influences the story in unpredictable ways, thus changing it significantly. In this respect, within a century, my parents’ narratives have undergone many recontextualizations before becoming part of my autoethnographic tellings here, another step in their transformative process.

My parents’ piercing stories have prompted me to read more about the 1918-1920 pandemic, in finding possible parallels, in trying to feel how it was to experience a pandemic a century ago when humans couldn’t even be vaccinated, be tested for the disease, or, simply, have all the technology and hygiene measures that some of us have had available during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Pandemic Stories in and through Digital Spaces**

Stories like my parents’ have been more common since the beginning of 2020 when the virulent COVID-19 started to spread among humans. COVID-19 related images, videos, and narratives have populated our everyday lives and conversations. I often find myself and others talking about the virus, its Delta and Omicron variants; the available Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, and AstraZeneca vaccines, their doses and booster(s); the anti-vaxxers’ movements and demonstrations; and the changing rules around mask use. Furthermore, some scholars have engaged in writing and distributing short dispatches, chronicles, and other short stories recounting their first-hand experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Bassetti, Fine, and Chan 2020; Black 2021; Desjarlais, Perrino, and Reno, forthcoming; Fassin and Fourcade 2021; Gora 2020; Lynteris 2020; Žižek 2020a, 2020b). Moreover, social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube have become essential digital spaces for many individuals in isolation during lockdown orders (Anderson and Putta 2021). My friends and family members seem to post stories, videos, and photographs much more often than they used to do before the pandemic. As many of them confessed to me, they feel closer to one another by posting multiple times a day and reading and reacting to others’ posts. Since storytelling is part of our human nature, digital storytelling practices have thus emerged in these sites.
(De Fina and Perrino 2019; Falconi and Graber 2019). Reading about survival stories online, for example, has been therapeutic for me in the midst of so much uncertainty.

“We are almost out of this pandemic,” said my father one day soon after he received his Pfizer booster in October 2021. His optimism was very contagious, but I was still troubled by my mother’s and his stories about my relatives struggling through a lengthy pandemic a century ago. Two years is a long time. While in isolation, teaching my classes virtually and in person, I spent innumerable night hours frantically reading books on the 1918-1920 flu pandemic, hoping to find stories like my parents’. Digital spaces have offered narratives of past and present pandemics, for example. Even the Centers for Disease and Control Preventions (CDC) website features stories collected from people who lost loved ones during the 1918 flu. One of them piqued my curiosity. Linda Palmer (2014), the storyteller, recounts how her grandparents survived that long, deadly pandemic in the United States:

My paternal grandparents, Clifton and Nellie Taliaferro[, were living in Washington D.C. during the [1918] influenza pandemic. I remember their stories of bodies piling up in the streets, waiting for the undertaker. Everyone was ordered to stay off the streets. A designated runner was allowed to make deliveries to each household for necessities, but suppliers were limited, and money was short. Nellie and her five children (my father, the youngest of seven, had not been born yet) resided in a boarding house. She struggled to care for the children all alone since Clifton was often away, traveling with the railroad. Every day came stories of families who lost loved ones. No one was allowed to have a funeral or any gatherings during that time. Fortunately, they all survived.

It was comforting to read that Linda’s grandparents, like my grandmother, survived the pandemic despite all the risks they had to face daily. Stories such as Clifton and Nellie Taliaferro’s were widespread during and after the 1918 flu pandemic. Everyone around them was becoming ill of an unknown disease while bodies piled up in the streets. They witnessed dreadful scenes daily while everyone was asked to stay inside their homes. People interrogated themselves about the nature and provenance of this dreadful illness. Still, it took high death tolls to understand that it was a lethal virus believed to have originated somewhere in Europe. Like my grandmother, but unlike many, the Taliaferro family survived the 1918 flu. They were the lucky ones.

Historically, it is unclear from where the strain of influenza that caused the catastrophic, two-year long pandemic came, even though it was first observed in Europe, the United States, and some areas in Asia before spreading to almost every other part of the world within a matter of months (Spinney 2017). The 1918 flu became known worldwide as the Spanish flu since Spain was one of the first countries to be hit hard, but there is no evidence that the 1918 flu originated in Spain (Spinney 2017). Analogously, there have been debates around the origins of COVID-19 in China, with China and Italy having been hit hard in early 2020.
Two Pandemics across Time and Space

Recently, I have been tracing some parallels between these two deadly pandemics. The 1918-1920 flu, which, for now, “remains the deadliest influenza pandemic in recorded history” (North 2020, 3), had two main lethal waves. The first wave was in the spring and was generally mild, with patients experiencing flu-like symptoms but recovering after several days. However, a second, highly contagious wave of this virus attacked the world in the fall of the same year, 1918. Patients died within hours or days. It is believed that one hundred million people, three percent of the world’s population, died from the 1918 pandemic (North 2020). However, the exact numbers are unknown because of the lack of precise medical records in many locations, the various complications due to other diseases, and an ongoing World War (Barry 2005; Spinney 2017).

Analogously, COVID-19 has spread disease, death, fear, and political and economic tumult (Fassin and Fourcade 2021). Similar realities that already happened during the 1918 flu should be helpful information in avoiding possible missteps or consequential behavior, such as large gatherings without the necessary precautions of social distancing and mask use. Alarmingly, however, there is a recurring embodiment of behaviors, mistakes, fear, and dread that were experienced between 1918 and 1920. These similarities might have emerged because both the 1918-1920 flu and the COVID-19 pandemics happened in capitalist and biomedicalized contexts, shaping the pandemic dynamics and the population’s reactions. Racialization processes, injustices, and unfair treatment in hospitals, for example, often occur in these contexts during emergency events (Briggs 2005; Fassin and Fourcade 2021).

Narrating War and Death in COVID-19 Times

I have vivid memories of the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic when my social media circulated many images related to war and death. These images and the stories accompanying them were mainly from China and Europe, including Italy. During these past two years, death has affected humans with more intensity, with numbers growing exponentially across the globe and in our everyday lives. On 9 March 2020, the Italian Government imposed a national lockdown in response to the country’s growing numbers of COVID-19 infections and deaths. The highest rates of infections were in two northern Italian regions: Lombardy and Veneto, the latter where my parents reside.

Videos of the tragic situation went viral very rapidly. In them, Italian Army trucks solemnly transported COVID-19 victims’ coffins across the small town of Bergamo (in Lombardy) to honor them (e.g., La7 Attualità 2020; La Stampa 2020). They were exiting the town to reach unknown graves since the cemeteries in Bergamo did not have any spaces left. Cemeteries were overflowing with corpses, and hospitals were overflowing with COVID-19 patients in very critical condition. The dead bodies were transported in a procession as if they had been brave soldiers.
“It is like a real war,” said my father one day on the phone. “Death is everywhere. It is so sad. This is not like the flu.” My entire body could feel the fear that my father was experiencing when he confessed that what was happening was not like the flu.

He countered many of the initial assumptions I often heard in the United States. “Don’t worry, it is more or less like the flu,” some of my friends were saying in a reassuring tone in February 2020. Being far away from my parents has been incredibly painful. Will they make it through this pandemic as my grandmother did through the 1918-1920 flu?

At the end of April 2020, those war-related images and videos of military trucks transporting dead bodies were still populating my thoughts. It had been more than a month, and Italy’s situation had worsened. There were seven hundred or even a thousand deaths a day. It was unprecedented, dreadful, surreal. I soon realized that similar terrifying realities were happening in New York City, close to where I live. But this time, hundreds of dead bodies were not elegantly transported by the Army military trucks in a procession. Instead, they were first piled up in small and large trucks or minivans and then taken to mass graves outside the city (Feuer and Rashbaum 2020). Images of these tragic events in New York City powerfully re-evoked the ones of the dead bodies transported to cemeteries outside Bergamo a month prior. Sadly, many of us have become accustomed to similar images and stories from across the globe.

Narratives recounting the hardships and traumatic realities of past pandemics such as the 1918-1920 flu have become more palpable and believable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, humans seem to forget about these tragic events quickly. Many people don’t talk about them; they remove them from their memories; they don’t seem to remember death, trauma, and loss; they hope that their children and grandchildren will never know, that they will never experience similar fears of a global, unknown, lethal virus. During our long afternoon coffee hours, my grandmother would tell me all the tiny details and nuances of her past life. Yet, she never mentioned the 1918 flu pandemic. My mother, her daughter, recontextualized her story while going through another pandemic. My father’s aunt died during the 1918 flu. She was five years old. Yet, he probably remembered her in May 2021 because he was forced to live through a similarly lethal pandemic.

Like Linda Palmer’s, my parents’ stories will continue their recontextualization processes across time and space. They will be reread; they will be recounted to children and grandchildren; they will become part of new tellings of dread and fear in other, future, uncertain times.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Robert Desjarlais and Josh Reno, with whom, in April 2020, I started a collaborative autoethnographic project focusing on the intensities of life during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has inspired this article. My deepest thanks go to five anonymous reviewers, whose astute comments and criticism have been invaluable, and to Katrina Daly Thompson for their insightful editorial suggestions and vital guidance during the review and publication processes. Any remaining mistakes and infelicities are my own.
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