On March 26, 2020, leaked footage from a hospital in Elmhurst, Queens was uploaded to the *New York Times*. The video follows Dr. Colleen Smith, as she shows the inside of the hospital at the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic. Through the video, the doctor makes a plea for community support, asking for precious ventilators to save those from suffocating in their beds. The dying patients’ feet, the image of a refrigerated truck, and the impassioned pleas by Dr. Smith together represents a moment when the Coronavirus became explicit in the United States’ mediated culture.

On April 10, 2020, a *Reuters* photographer posted a series of photographs of the dead being buried on Hart Island, at a potter's field outside New York City. The photographs were taken by Lucas Jackson, sampled from drone footage which was subsequently posted by the *New York Times*. The forty-seven-second-long video shows wooden boxes in a trough hundreds of feet long, stacked side by side, two deep and three high. A forklift brings the wooden coffins, which are stacked by workers in heavy personal protective equipment, covered by a board, and buried in the earth.

Hart Island’s potter's field has been used by the city of New York for centuries, most prominently in recent history it is the resting place for the unclaimed bodies of those killed by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The tradition of the pauper’s grave, which originates out of Christian theology, gave burial space for outsiders of the community, for the unclaimed, and the poor; in the era of the Coronavirus, this space is all that is left for a funerary industry overwhelmed by the dead.

Almost as prominent as Jackson’s images of the dead, seen from the god’s eye perspective of a Predator drone, is the fact that multiple drones were confiscated by the New York Police department. The pretense of keeping the skies clear of surveilling equipment, also
serves to keep the potter’s field sealed from the public, the image of the dead omitted from the discourse.  

On May 24, 2020, the New York Times printed a cover story with a thousand-person long obituary. The subheading for the imageless cover reads, “They were not simply names on a list, they were us.” The difficult image, of course, is that this extensive moment of public grief, made possible through small personal obituaries, is still a list. I do not want to criticize the newspaper for its heartfelt, emotional call to action, so much as to emphasize an increasing loss of image as the Coronavirus plodded through the United States. This slow-motion massacre has become ever more difficult to see, especially for media scholars. Public relations policies have clamped down on images from inside hospitals; practices in the handling of death have slowed the necessary moments for mourning; and the sheer volume of the dead has expanded beyond our technologies, and our willingness to view it. Months into this pandemic, it seems the image of the virus has left our screens, and we as a culture have no spectacle upon which to cling.

As I write this, on June 14th, 2020, the tracker provided by Johns Hopkins University lists more than one hundred and ten thousand Coronavirus fatalities in the United States. Where is the image of those dead? How many long troughs have been dug on Hart Island? How many bodies have been stored into refrigerated trucks? How many are dead and dying in hospital rooms? The spectacle of the dead, as performed by the news reporters at the beginning of this crisis, which aided solidarity between people in the beginning, have become part of the monotonous, dull terror of the nation’s first, unending outbreak.

What is a media scholar to do, when faced by a pandemic whose images recede into the background? Implicit in the Western conceptualization of the dead, as they are mediated, is a feeling of exploitation: when we see the dead, when we reproduce images of the dead, there is something wrong. I am not asking for us to crack open the boxes buried in potter’s fields as a means to better know the pandemic. The victims of systemic violence are the ones whose images are exploited to maintain that violence—as best evidenced by America’s lynching culture.
in the twentieth century.9 What I am asking for is accountability in the face of absence. Implicit in media studies discourse is the presumption that material exists or has existed, that there is evidence to support our claims; however, what do we do when we can no longer mediate that history, that moment, and we are at a loss to address the mass death which has become normalized?

I want to return to The New York Times’s cover, to consider the dead in the newspaper’s fragmentary and generous method. In each obituary was empathy, a generous approach that saw those dead as both being loved and being part of a community. The implicit argument is one of democratic, humanistic value found in the individual subject. By collecting those who have been made dead by the Coronavirus, by emphasizing their lives as specific and remembered, this personal, critical memorial affords seeing the dead in looser terms, enabling a political possibility in the shadow of grief. If the corpse is political, if the mode by which one dies is political, then so are its remnants:10 remains more loosely associated with networks of grief, memory, and the rubble of a life left behind.11 As media scholars, the practices of death and memory are vital to our approach to this pandemic, what remains materially, psychologically, and communally is important.12 We need to learn ways to incorporate these objects into our ontologies, so that we may better address and dismantle the political project that has made these deaths possible.

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1 Robin Stein. “‘People are Dying’: Battling Coronavirus Inside a N.Y.C. Hospital,” The New York Times. (March 26, 2020), Online Video.


The New York Times has also published online a list that corresponds with this cover, providing more detail and portraits of the dead; however, I am relying on the cover as it went viral upon publishing.


