Wireless Mourning / Luto sin cables

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That October morning, the green notifications on my cell phone confirmed that my uncle F., my father's eldest brother, had just died of COVID-19 in a hospital in Tuxpan, a coastal city in the north of the state of Veracruz. My mother, who, like my father, is also a physician, revealed the news to me in the morning, when she opened the door of her room. She was crying. At that point, the lockdown had already lasted for seven months and we were still not allowed out. Getting in the car and driving the six hours that separate my town, Orizaba, from Tuxpan to see my cousins and offer our condolences was impossible. It was not allowed by the nation-wide COVID-19 regulations in force.

Now that some months have passed, I have decided to share the experience of my family during those difficult days, because I believe that our story, together with the many stories of loss and healing in the times of the pandemic can be valuable for understanding the long-lasting impact of COVID-19 on our societies and everyday lives. As for the millions of families that are still grieving their dear ones, my uncle F's passing revealed the deep changes that COVID-19 has brought to the way we live, die, and mourn. At the moment of writing, scholarly literature on the subject of COVID-19-related grief and mourning starts to take shape in the medical humanities, in psychological studies, medical anthropology, death studies and in the social sciences. Narrating my story I hope to contribute to the ongoing discussions in these fields by offering a first-person account from the perspective of a family living in the Mexican "province". I believe that this can be an important point of view, because, on the one hand, the globalized and planetary nature of the pandemic has forced very diverse communities around the world to modify their everyday lives under similar sanitary measures (lockdowns, social distancing, curfews, etc.); on the other, the specific impact of the sanitary crisis on the local, lived experiences of individuals and families has varied according to cultural, social, economic, technological and geographical factors. For this reason, current studies on the emotional and

psychological effects of the virus are taking into account narratives and self-reports of affected communities and individuals, in an attempt to construct, piece by piece, a potential "larger picture" and a possible long-term socio-cultural diagnosis and prognosis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the pervasiveness of digital communication technology platforms such as Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, etc. and their new role in mediating the affective domains of grief and mourning during the crisis has made more evident the large-scale re-shaping and re-organization operated by technology in our lives and in the medical domains.[1] From an inter-disciplinary perspective, COVID-19 has made more clear, if it was necessary, that science and technology studies and the medical humanities are deeply in conversation and entangled, as the pandemic and its consequences represent a unique intersection of technological, medical, socio-cultural, and eco-political issues.

Several phone calls came in during the course of the morning. Some people, who were aware of my uncle F.'s COVID-19 infection but did not know yet of his passing, were calling for updates about his health. Others, who had already heard the news, called in to offer their condolences. The rapid progression of the disease compressed the normal times associated with diagnosis, illness progression, and death. The confusing and short timeline of COVID-19 deaths added a new dimension to the pain felt by affected families, including mine, as the "anticipatory grief" associated with a deadly illness was aggravated by the precipitousness of "sudden grief" events (Marsili 2020). COVID gave us no time to process emotionally the last days of my uncle's life. Reading psychological reports, the uncommonly sudden temporality of the illness seems to be an essential factor for the intense emotional distress of affected families (Cardoso et al. 2020). Defined by its unpredictability and abruptness, COVID-time

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[1] This process was brilliantly pre-cognized in Casper and Koenig 1996.

"seems to be a barrier impeding people from absorbing the initial impact of the loss" and consequently "unpredictable and chaotic, atypical situations begin to proliferate, bringing along a sense of unreality in the face of an overwhelming experience in times of pandemic" (Cardoso et al. 2020). The morning my uncle F. died, I was not feeling like answering any calls. I sat on the couch in my room and listened to some music while mindlessly eating cookies. Later on, my parents and I ate lunch. I prompted Alexa to start a playlist of Johnny Mathis to honor my uncle, as he was one of his favorite singers. I cooked a humble egg and ham, warmed up the tortillas and made coffee. Nobody said anything. My mother checked her cell phone. My father's tears streamed down his face, but he didn't make a sound. He just stared at the wooden napkin ring on the table, stirring his café cortado with a spoon, the other hand covering his face: "How are we going to do this," he said, "with the prayers thing. Are we going to Tuxpan?" He sat down in the living room and turned on the TV. The news announced that in Hong Kong someone had been reinfected by COVID-19 in Spain. "Are we going?" he insisted. My father's immediate preoccupation with the "prayers" refer to the *velorio* (wake), the most important funerary rite in Mexico, a death ritual that is, arguably, constitutive of the Mexican cultural identity itself (Brandes 2003; Cadena Cárdenas 2010).

In Mexico, and even more so in Veracruz, the funeral rites that follow the death of a loved one are essential to complete the farewell of the individual on all levels: physical, emotional and spiritual. Traditional death rites in Mexico have deep roots in ancient, pre-colonial history. Even the modern-day, Catholic forms of mourning resemble to some extent the Nahua pre-Hispanic funerary culture (León-Portilla 2009; Sánchez 2019). The strong adherence to these mourning rites can be observed also in the case of indigenous communities outside of Mexico, as, for example, in the Zapotec community of Los Angeles (Nájera and Ortiz 2019).

The *velorio* rites normally last nine days. They begin right after the death of the person and continue with a funerary wake held on the same day of the passing and through the night, when

the coffin is finally locked. The following day, a mass is held for the burial. At this point, in most of urban Mexico, the rite ends. But in the rest of the country, or at least in my home state of Veracruz, it continues for the next nine days as the deceased is prayed over every night. A person, usually a woman, recites the *Glorious Mysteries of the Rosary* from memory or from a text each night and the people close to her, gathered in the house of the deceased, follow and respond with prayers to the verses. It is a sad but liberating time. It is a way of grieving through a shared form of liturgy, and even if one is not a religious person it helps, because family and friends begin to come to terms with the reality of the passing of a dear one. It is the kind of grief work that allows one to seek and obtain comfort from the company of others. It is a way to share the emotional burden of mourning. But unfortunately, this was inconceivable at the height of the pandemic. To begin with, not only could we not meet in person, but we were also not even allowed to leave the house. Going into town always required an acceptable reason, a fact that explained my father's uncertainty when he asked me, "Are we going to Tuxpan?" I wanted to go and be with my dear cousins, be physically close to them and embrace them. But I was scared.

During the pandemic, not being able to properly say goodbye to a loved one was a source of added pain for many Mexican families. My parents and I, as many of the families directly affected by the illness, experienced additional stress and emotional pain from the impossibility of being close to our dying uncle and our grieving relatives. This has been documented as an effect of COVID-19 on communities all over the world (Fernández and González-González 2020; Stroebe and Schut 2021, 522), adding another layer to the psychological fallout of the pandemic in Mexico (Reyes-Foster and Duncan 2020). According to reports, in Mexico the population has shown higher level of post-traumatic stress with avoidance being "the most common symptom of post-traumatic stress and included denial of the meanings and consequence of the event, blunted sensation and awareness of emotional numbness" (Gonzalez

Ramirez et al. 2020). Additionally, COVID-related deaths have shown a higher level of grief "compared to people bereaved due to natural loss." (Eisma et al. 2021). In my experience, it was heartbreaking to imagine the loneliness of my uncle's last moments and not be able to properly say goodbye. As recently found by Cardoso et al., the absence of rituals following a death can favor what is called a *complicated grief*: a state "characterized by long-lasting disorganization that makes it difficult or impede psychological reorganization and the resumption of life" and in which "there may be also exacerbated symptomatic manifestations, such as an expression of intense feelings, somatization, social isolation, depressive episodes, low self-esteem, self-destructive impulse, frequent thoughts directed to the deceased, inability to accept loss, self-blame, and difficulty imagining a meaningful future without the loved one" (Cardoso et al. 2020). In places like Mexico or Brazil, where specific death rituals have a special cultural importance, this distress is intensified because death rituals are often "so naturalized in daily life [...] that their suspension, even if justified, is surrounded by disbelief and distress. The dominating feeling is that a cycle was opened but not closed" (Cardoso et al. 2020). For this reason, one of my family's first preoccupations was to find a way to come together, mourn, cry, heal together.

Then a message came through WhatsApp with an invitation for a meeting on Zoom. The meeting's name was "mass for my father" (*misa para mi padre*). I opened the link and three seconds later I was entering a virtual waiting room where the host, in this case my cousin, was about to give me access to a group video call where the mass for her father's death would be celebrated. By the time this was happening, the possibility of having an online *velorio* did not feel strange anymore and the process seemed perfectly normal to me. Before the pandemic started, though, even making normal video calls in Orizaba was uncommon. Only when a family member was living abroad would they use video calls: the absence of physical proximity would be compensated with the moving image in real time. That way, relatives that were unable

to leave the United States, for instance, could still experience the aging of their parents, or virtually meet newborn nieces and nephews. Otherwise, it was rare to talk to a relative via Skype or Facetime. However, as in many other places around the world, during the days of COVID-19 forced confinement, video-calls became the norm in Orizaba as well and soon, our eyes hurt from looking at the computer screens or cell phones all the time.

As my uncle's passing occurred seven months after the beginning of the lockdown, everyone had already become a little more familiar using Zoom. At night, before falling asleep, I realized how bizarre and extraordinary that day had been. On the one hand, it felt like entering a new phase of coexistence with the pandemic. The virus was preventing us from seeking emotional relief in the ways we had always known: consoling each other and being physically close. On the other hand, it officially marked for me and my family the intrusion of digital technology in the affective, grieving domains of our life. Technology was now being allowed to mediate and shape the way we mourned. Both felt like points of no return.

Social media and digital communication technologies were already used for mourning purposes before COVID-19, and examples of virtual graveyards and digital memorialization for passed loved ones are abundant. These forms of mourning enabled relatives "to maintain the presence of the deceased and facilitate an ongoing conversation with them in which others can also participate" (Lowe, Rumbold, and Aoun 2020), and following the social distancing restrictions introduced by the governments, they became more prevalent on a global level. The death rites and traditional rituals, though, are not the same throughout the world, and if informal memorialization practices can be held on digital communication platforms–allowing more people to come together–more ritualized, local, and religious forms of mourning may be more difficult to perform properly on Zoom, or Skype, as "navigating technical hitches may interrupt the flow of the service and can be a barrier for some" (Muturi et al. 2020).

The following week, we connected on Zoom every night at eight to partake in the prayers of the *velorio*. Little by little we all became more proficient with video calls. On Tuesday, I connected the computer to the screen in the living room with an HDMI cable, and my parents and I were able to see the faces of my aunts in higher definition. On Wednesday, I plugged the audio to Alexa and we heard the words of the prayers louder and clearer. But if this whole ordeal felt just slightly weird to me, it made an even bigger impact on my parents, since the video call allowed many people, probably many more than those who would have attended the funeral in person, to appear, albeit virtually, in our own living room. My parents were amazed by this fact and they weren't alone in this, as many uncles and aunts and cousins from all over Mexico were on screen, moving their eyes, finding the faces of their relatives. Rediscovering them in high definition.

My uncle F. and my father were teenagers in the 1970s when their family bought their first television. Family and friends from all over town would fill my grandparents' living room to watch Raúl Velasco's *Siempre en Domingo.* Together they would listen to the songs of icons such as José José, Juan Gabriel and Rocío Dúrcal. I feel that, maybe for this reason, the experience of appearing on a television screen, even if just for a group video call, still carries more meaning and significance for my parents. I am definitely certain that my uncle F. would have never imagined that his *velorio* could have been an online event, simultaneously experienced all over Mexico, and potentially all over the world.

My family and I didn't give much importance to internet speed until 2020. The online *velorio* for my uncle F. made us aware of the phenomenon of "latency" more than ever. And the reason was that most of our internet connections in Mexico rely on a copper wire infrastructure. That's why when the prayer leader for the night uttered the Fifth Glorious Mystery (*La Coronación de la Santísima Virgen*), her voice would often precede her image on the screen and vice versa.

And then the image would get static and pixelated, dropping to 120p or 480p, and this little hiccup, which happened frequently, would cause sonorous hiatuses in the group chorus and therefore in the response, generating a unique form of liturgical latency. Since the *velorio* happened in October, the rainy season was already coming to an end, but in the occasional days it still rained, the connection slowed down and became even more unstable and we would have to stop the prayers and wait. However, this was not my brother M.'s experience, as he lives in Mexico City and has a fiber optics internet connection. Another technological hiccup was caused by the algorithm regulating the microphone output, which normally works by focusing on the person who is emitting the loudest and most continuous sound. This was indicated by a yellow box appearing around the image of the person designated by the software's algorithm. This also means that any external noise coming from the immediate surroundings can interfere with the virtual world and break the illusion of the ritual. And so, as we were reading the scriptures, our attention would sometimes be distracted by a barking dog, or a crying child, or something falling on the floor at one of my relative's homes, or a police patrol passing outside someone else's. This was even more exasperating than the internet speed problems, because it stripped the ritual of its funereal tone. The algorithm, which was probably designed and optimized for an average office set up in the global North and not for the lively soundscape of Veracruz, was in fact acting as an uninvited master of ceremonies in my uncle's *velorio*. This type of sound intrusions would also happen in a normal scenario, but, in this case, the Bluetooth and the speakers exacerbated it.

My uncle's Zoom *velorio* was an intense emotional experience for my family. The idea of not being able to perform the rites at all was impossible to accept and added a layer of significant distress to the tragedy of loss in the pandemic. The pandemic was acting as an obstacle for us to properly act as a family, and ultimately as humans. Coming together virtually, even if my relatives were just images on the screen and their voices were managed by Zoom's algorithm,

was surprisingly real and heart-felt. On the other hand, the Zoom design, its icons, its user interface and sound ecosystem reminded us constantly that this was in some way a misuse of the platform, and definitely not its "intended professional use". Were we supposed to use this software, the same one we use for work meetings and chats with friends, the same one our professors use to do office hours and for lectures, were we supposed to use it for my uncle's *velorio*? "Throughout human history, funeral rituals have served as existential milestones in the process of elaborating and re-signifying the death of a loved one" (Cardoso et al. 2020), but what happens when we are forced to mediate this human impulse through the same technologies we use for everyday life and work? What happens to the space and time of mourning of the dead when they juxtapose with the spaces of our homes and virtual offices? My uncle's *velorio* did not answer these questions for me, but made me aware of the possibilities and the limitations of communication technology when it is used to facilitate grieving and healing. Similarly, the improper functioning of these technologies exposed in a very simple way the geographical, generational and infrastructural differences that separated my relatives from me.

On the last day of the *novena*, my father wore his suit, my mother did her make-up, and they dressed up as if they were going to my uncle's house. Each person participating in the final video call said a few words. We said goodbye to my cousins, not knowing when we would be able to see them in person again. When the video call was over, the big home screen of Zoom appeared on the TV. The *start new meeting* and *join meeting* icons stared back at us cold, detached, abruptly. Across from the screen, sitting on our gray sofa, holding hands and crying, the three of us hugged each other: my father, my mother and I. "How I wish I could have been there," my mother told me. "Where?" I asked her, "With them," she replied.

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