



Fall 2021 Newsletter

Memory in the Moment: Augmented Reality as Opportunity for Students to Memorialize Their Experiences of the Pandemic, Racism and Injustice, and Citizenship

By: Jill Strauss, PhD, Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY
and Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan, PhD, Rutgers University

In December 2019, the United States and the world were overwhelmed by the highly infectious Coronavirus. New York City was hit especially hard in March 2020 and was the epicenter of the pandemic for the US with the greatest number of deaths and hospitalizations in those first months. Yet it is the neighboring state of New Jersey that has had the highest fatality rate in the nation to date. We learned quickly that the virus can make anyone sick, but it is most dangerous for those with disproportionately more underlying conditions and health challenges like the elderly, poor, and People of Color (POC). Coronavirus highlighted how these vulnerable groups tend to have less access to healthcare in general. Due to centuries of white supremacist governance and culture, POC are overrepresented in lower-wage jobs like grocery and pharmacy employees, food delivery workers, and first responders, deemed essential during the nationwide lockdown, and many could not take time off or could not afford to.

A significant decrease in daily hospitalizations and deaths from Covid-19 in early summer 2020 coincided with the murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man by White police officer, Derek Chauvin, in Minneapolis. Chauvin was photographed looking straight at the camera unabashedly, with his knee in Floyd's neck. Protests erupted around the country; they were mostly nonviolent but a few instances of vandalism and stealing prompted some mayors and governors to implement curfews. In New York City there was an 8 PM curfew that, in turn, fueled more protest. An increase in recorded events of police brutality followed.

Memorial/protest statements like *Black Lives Matter* painted throughout a city are low-hanging fruit compared to creating real systemic change. However, when initiated at the grassroots level by those directly affected, they can be affirming and healing. How do those who suffered loss and grief want to commemorate their experience, the turning points and the optimism, the future, and the past?

To discuss ways to commemorate the events of 2020, Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan of Rutgers University-New Brunswick and Jill Strauss of Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), part of the City University of New York (CUNY), planned assignments for their undergraduate students to discuss inequality, racial injustice, spacial justice and to discuss possibilities for change and consider how we can move forward. Kristin and Jill believe that curricula and pedagogy should be based on helping students understand how the content they are learning and methods with which they are engaging in their coursework, especially in the

humanities, should help them conceptualize the social challenges we face and envision life-improving social justice solutions.

CUNY and Rutgers University are public institutions. BMCC is a primarily Hispanic Serving Institution and students come from New York City's five boroughs, Long Island, and New Jersey. Likewise, more than 50% of undergraduates at the Rutgers University New Brunswick campus are of color and come from New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. The collaborative project was designed to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on the events of 2020-2021, using digital tools to commemorate the experiences of their communities during the Covid-19 pandemic and the racial-justice protests. The overlapping crises of public health and



police brutality prompted the project team, two faculty, and one Media Artist Educator, Will Roberts, to think about trauma-informed pedagogy as a way to both grieve the losses and celebrate resilience. In lockdown, the team wanted the project to build community virtually through group projects that activated students' imaginations and collaboration skills. BMCC and Rutgers students learned about the historical, social, cultural, and political roles of monuments, memorials, and commemorative events. They learned about contested histories and marginalized narratives. And they had the

opportunity to learn augmented reality technology and use it to collaboratively design virtual memorials that honor their experiences of the previous year. Augmented reality technology creates an enhanced visual experience by superimposing a computer-generated image on the material world that appears to be in 3D. The [online exhibit of virtual monuments](#) introduces the wider public to new modes of remembrance of contemporary history through online dialogue and continual opportunities to comment in writing on the exhibition site.

These monuments were created to memorialize and to make meaning out of the pivotal shared experiences that defined 2020. They enabled their creators and views to both look back at what had happened and look ahead to imagine how we will remember this period. The viewer will see these intentions in the virtual memorials, but they will also see that the students' creations are snapshots of moments in time. Some of them were created shortly after the radical mourning and



rebirth of the May - August protests and in the dark days of the winter as Covid cases rose. Others reflect the exhaustion and the optimism of spring 2021 when there was a vaccine, Covid cases were down, and we began to take off our masks. They are a window into their experiences facing innumerable challenges and still trying to meet their educational needs, searing into our memories some of the moments that defined those first 15 months.

Image Descriptions

Image One (BMCC CUNY): New Yorkers were ultimately forced to shelter in place, “locked down or quarantined.” Many of us got sick, some of us died, all of us know someone who has been affected by this horrible virus. Likewise, whether or not we have experienced violence just because of being a black person, the existence of racism adversely affects us all.

Image Two (Rutgers University New Brunswick): Several of the monuments/memorials that students designed, such as the one featured here depicting a student reclining on a bed in cap and gown, participating in a virtual graduation, reflected the unique circumstances they faced attempting to engage in and complete education during pandemic lockdowns.