

Through the Eyes of Five: Combating Pandemic Amnesia Through the Collection and
Preservation of COVID-19 Stories

by
Alanna Celaya

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Public Health
(Honors Scholar)

Presented November 13, 2023
Commencement June 2024

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Alanna Celaya for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Public Health presented on November 13, 2023. Title: Through the Eyes of Five: Combating Pandemic Amnesia Through the Collection and Preservation of COVID-19 Stories.

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Courtney Campbell

The 1918-1919 influenza pandemic led to a phenomenon termed as pandemic amnesia. It is apparent that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a disturbingly similar pattern. My thesis investigated the prevalence and perils of pandemic amnesia in the context of COVID-19. I explored this issue through a review of scholarly literature and my conducting of interviews. From these steps, I discuss the results of my research and their implications for my thesis research.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, coronavirus, pandemic amnesia, prevention, history, memory preservation, 1918 influenza, stories

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Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Public Health project of Alanna Celaya presented on November 13, 2023.

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Alanna Celaya, Author

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Captain Planet, Arab Spring, L.A. riots, Rodney King

Deep fakes, earthquakes, Iceland volcano

Oklahoma City bomb, Kurt Cobain, Pokémon

Tiger Woods, MySpace, Monsanto, GMOs

Harry Potter, Twilight, Michael Jackson dies

Nuclear accident, Fukushima, Japan

Crimean Peninsula, Cambridge Analytica

Kim Jong Un, Robert Downey Jr., Iron Man

We didn't start the fire

It was always burning since the world's been turning

We didn't start the fire

No, we didn't light it, but we're trying to fight it

More war in Afghanistan, Cubs go all the way again

Obama, Spielberg, explosion, Lebanon

Unabomber, Bobbitt, John, bombing Boston Marathon

Balloon Boy, War on Terror, QAnon

Trump gets impeached twice, Polar bears got no ice

Fyre Fest, Black Parade, Michael Phelps, Y2K

Boris Johnson, Brexit, Kanye West and Taylor Swift

Stranger Things, Tiger King, Ever Given, Suez

We didn't start the fire

It was always burning since the world's been turning

We didn't start the fire

No, we didn't light it, but we're trying to fight it

Sandy Hook, Columbine, Sandra Bland and Tamir Rice

ISIS, LeBron James, Shinzo Abe blown away

Meghan Markle, George Floyd, Burj Khalifa, Metroid

Fermi paradox, Venus and Serena

Oh-oh-oh, Michael Jordan, 23, YouTube killed MTV

SpongeBob, Golden State Killer got caught

Michael Jordan, 45, Woodstock '99

Keaton, Batman, Bush v. Gore, I can't take it anymore

We didn't start the fire

It was always burning since the world's been turning

We didn't start the fire
 No, we didn't light it, but we're trying to fight it
 Elon Musk, Kaepernick, Texas failed electric grid
 Jeff Bezos, climate change, white rhino goes extinct
 Great Pacific Garbage Patch, Tom DeLonge and aliens
 Mars rover, Avatar, self-driving electric cars
 SSRI's, Prince and The Queen die
 World trade, second plane, what else do I have to say?

We didn't start the fire (we didn't start it)
 It was always burning since the world's been turning (oh)
 We didn't start the fire (we didn't start it)
 But when we are gone, it will still go on (oh-yeah)

And on, and on, and on, and on
 And on, and on, and on
 We didn't start the fire (fire)
 It was always burning since the world's been turning
 (Fall Out Boy, 2023)

As I sat on my two hour and five minute flight home to Los Angeles, I was listening to my On Repeat playlist on Spotify. As I looked around the flight and even before I boarded, I took note on how many individuals I saw wearing a mask. That number was four, three if I do not include myself. In that moment I was taken back to something that happened only six hours before I boarded my flight. I was eating at a café in Portland that still had every COVID-19 precaution in place. All employees wore K-N95 masks, there was a plexiglass divider separating the employees taking orders from the customers in which they spoke through a microphone that echoed throughout the entire café with each order taken. Tables were placed six feet apart with laminated notes taped to each table stating, "Please do not move tables as we are still following social distancing." I made a comment to my boyfriend how I thought this was a tad odd and I felt that we were back in 2020 the whole time we were eating there. I was then snapped back into reality when my new favorite song at the time came into my headphones, Fall Out Boy's cover of Billy Joel's 'We Didn't Start the Fire'. As I listened to the song I decided to really listen to

the words and kept thinking about my café experience. Finally, after hearing the song played a few more times over, I realized the song was missing something.

On June 28, 2023, the band Fall Out Boy released a cover of Billy Joel's 'We Didn't Start the Fire,' which covered all major historical events from 1989-2023. As you listen to the song, it covers both fun and very serious topics that can be seen in the long lyrics mentioned above. Therefore, as I swayed back and forth in my tiny aisle seat and the song ended, I finally realized there was one big topic that was not covered in their song. I thought that could not be possible as the song covers events up until the year 2023. I pressed play again just to make sure. There was no reference to COVID-19. I pressed play again, and again, and again. For the last 40 minutes of my flight, I had the song on loop as I was surely missing the reference somewhere. Once we landed at the airport, I pulled up the lyrics and was shocked that my findings were correct, there is no reference to COVID-19 in a song with an album cover that states "A Fall Out Boy Cover of the Billy Joel Song 'We Didn't Start the Fire' Covering Newsworthy Items from 1989-2023." Surely COVID-19 is a newsworthy item, is it not? Fall Out Boy got to choose all historic events to put in their song and deliberately chose not to include the COVID-19 pandemic into their new hit single. I recognized this was an example of pandemic amnesia right in front of me. So were the completely parallel universes I experienced only six hours apart from each other from the café in Portland to the passengers on my flight home: Pandemic amnesia, right in front of me, not once, not twice, but three times in only 6 hours.

The inspiration for this thesis comes from an idea I had back in June of 2020, which was the summer before I started college. That same week the idea came into my mind was supposed to be my high school graduation, COVID-19 cases were at an all-time high, and a black man had been brutally murdered once again by the police, sparking protests across the US and the world. As the news stations flipped coverage between the protests, the ever-climbing COVID-19 cases

and deaths, and hearing my parents talk about how the National Guard just passed through our neighborhood, I felt as if I was living in a movie, and not the good kind. I thought to myself that somebody had to document this somehow and someday. That's when it hit me. I wanted to collect different individual's pandemic experiences and stories and somehow make a book about it to preserve the chaos the world was experiencing for others to learn about. Looking back at this now, I was fighting against pandemic amnesia long before I even knew what pandemic amnesia was. It was then, during the winter term of freshman year that I took an Ethics of Pandemics class when I first learned the term, "pandemic amnesia." To practice the preservation of pandemic memory, the class was assigned an interview project to interview someone and get their experience from the pandemic. This assignment reminded me of my idea for the book on the COVID-19 pandemic that I had eight months previously. Since that assignment, the idea of the book continued to linger in my mind, ultimately inspiring my thesis. Without the preservation of pandemic memory, society is at risk of developing pandemic amnesia. As seen with the COVID-19 pandemic, this can then lead to lack of pandemic knowledge and the downplaying of the seriousness of the pandemic, leaving future generations ill equipped to handle future pandemics.

This idea ultimately led to the research question: is society at risk of developing pandemic amnesia regarding COVID-19? And, if society is at risk of developing pandemic amnesia with COVID-19, will the collection of unique experiences and common lessons from stories help society develop resilience and aid in the prevention of pandemic amnesia from occurring in the post COVID-19 pandemic era?

To answer these questions, I conducted an extensive literature review and interviewed five individuals each with a unique story and perspective from the pandemic. The second chapter of this thesis consists of a literature review covering topics regarding pandemic amnesia,

comparisons between the 1918 influenza pandemic and the COVID-19 pandemic, and lessons to be learned from both previous pandemics and the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter three then introduces the five interviewees with the identities of CM, MG, MT, CR, and SL, chronicling their background and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using these interviews, I will discuss five common themes seen through the literature review and interviews as well as statements from interviewees reflecting these themes. The final chapter reflects on pandemic amnesia and what a pandemic truly is to society. It then asks the question of how individuals can help with pandemic memory preservation and honor all those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To quote George Santayana, “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” While some may view the word condemned as a harsh use of verbiage, it is in fact very fitting for what happened to society during the COVID-19 pandemic. To get through the 1918 influenza pandemic, society moved on and set its focus onto other topics to return to normalcy. Moving forward and suppressing personal experiences affected the public’s memory

of the 1918 influenza pandemic, thus leading to pandemic amnesia. Given the lack of awareness, society was not able to learn lessons from the pandemic and could not apply them to the COVID-19 pandemic that occurred 102 years later. The same mistakes were then made throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. If society does not remember what occurred during COVID-19, it will fall victim to pandemic amnesia and be condemned to repeat our pandemic past once again.

Pandemic amnesia does not start with COVID-19, it has affected society since the 1918 influenza pandemic. The effect of pandemic amnesia prior to COVID-19 is seen in the Decades Television Network's documentary *Pandemic amnesia: Recovering the memory of the 1918 influenza outbreak*. This documentary discusses the 1918 influenza outbreak and how it was handled by the public. It then discusses how the public responses to the pandemic may have led to pandemic amnesia. The documentary defines pandemic amnesia as an event that is very common following pandemics, where individuals essentially are "unable to recall and record any sort of collective remembrance following the catastrophic events" that happened during the pandemic (Decades TV Network). The film begins by having an epidemiologist discuss how she never knew that her great grandparents died of the "Spanish Flu" until her grandfather died. She states that her grandfather never spoke to her about the event because he simply "did not want to." The epidemiologist then states that after the pandemic was over, "Americans simply silenced that story" and that the "event was essentially forgotten...publicly" (Decades TV Network).

The documentary then focuses on how the pandemic was handled by the public and government officials. One historian states that since the beginning of the outbreak and moving forward, the "story of the flu was essentially forgotten" (Decades TV Network). An estimate of 50 million people died from the "Spanish flu," which is equivalent to 400 million people today (Decades TV Network). Despite the massive loss of life, there are no well-known or prominent memorials or memory sites for people to visit to learn about the history of this flu.

As stated previously, the story of the flu was forgotten from the beginning. The “Spanish flu” went largely unnoticed at first and many public health officials downplayed the seriousness of the flu, saying that it was “just influenza” or that it was “just in the military camps,” all which were far from the truth (Decades TV Network). Additionally, “the federal government played no role, except a negative one” (Decades TV Network). The government wanted the United States to stay focused on World War I and not the flu. In fact, despite the numbers of rising cases and deaths, President Woodrow Wilson encouraged a “Fourth Liberty Loan” Parade in Philadelphia; some days after the parade the city was overwhelmed by the number of cases (Decades TV Network). Additionally, the federal government played a negative role during the pandemic by opening cities in the US once the war was over for celebration, which ended up leading to the third wave.

The documentary then touches upon government and media censorship of the Spanish flu pandemic. According to the documentary, newspapers deemed what was important by using lots of censorship to keep the nation's focus on the war (Decades TV Network). To illustrate, the front page of *The Washington Post* carried a headline about the war, whereas on the back page of the newspaper, it said “influenza will claim more deaths than the war” (Decades TV Network). This censorship was used due to fear of public panic and a mob mentality, thus leading to the public forgetting the pandemic. People during this time had memories of the pandemic, but they simply moved on. The documentary ends with an epidemiologist stating, “so many people lived through a traumatic experience” but due to the lack of public acknowledgement, they “never had a chance to process the event with others” (Decades TV Network).

Moreover, the article, “*The 1918 flu faded in our collective memory: We might 'forget' the coronavirus, too*” by Hershberger, draws upon the fear of pandemic amnesia occurring with the COVID-19 pandemic. Hershberger compares the 1918 flu pandemic to the COVID-19

pandemic and how the 1918 pandemic was forgotten, fearing that this too will happen with the COVID-19 pandemic. The article begins by discussing how a two-volume history of the 20th century was published, but not once does the volume ever mention the influenza pandemic (Hershberger, 2020, p.2). Hershberger then discusses the many monuments, museums, and movies that have commemorative events in the 20th century, including museums devoted to World Wars I and II, and films about the Titanic and the Apollo moon landing (Hershberger, 2020, p.2). The question is: why are these events remembered and not the flu pandemic that changed the lives of so many people? According to the author, many people believe that “if an event is historically significant, if it affects many people...and if many people die from it, then it will inevitably be remembered” (Hershberger, 2020, p.2). This idea, however, is not the case, in fact “that’s not at all how it works. And the Spanish flu is exactly a warning for that” (Hershberger, 2020, p. 2).

While there is fear of pandemic amnesia occurring with the COVID-19 pandemic, there are a few lessons the United States can learn. These ideas can be seen in the article, “*The 1918-1919 influenza pandemic in the United States: lessons learned and challenges exposed,*” by Stern, Cetron, and Markel. The authors state that the “events of 1918 have served as both a reference point and as a severe, if not ‘worst-case’ scenario” (Stern et. al, 2010). The first lesson to be seen from the 1918 pandemic is that “pandemics typically unfold across a wide spectrum of communities that are diverse in race, ethnicity, age, gender, and socioeconomic status” (Stern et. al, 2010). Additionally, pandemics require a multidisciplinary response by both the public citizens, government officials, and those who work in health care (Stern et. al, 2010). This means furthermore that during pandemics one must consider the biological history of the virus and there must be proper public health parameters set up to keep the public safe (Stern et. al, 2010). The last lesson touches upon the topic of how pandemics affect minority groups. This topic can

further be broken down into two sub-lessons on social and cultural issues. With pandemics, the article mentions there will always be some sort of ethnic group scapegoated and acted out against. Additionally, the article discusses how minority groups are more severely impacted by the virus leading to an epidemiological issue (Stern et. al, 2010).

Hershberger discusses how collective memory plays a role in both the 1918 and COVID-19 pandemics. Collective memory is defined as “how we remember ourselves as part of a group [...] that forms our identity” (Hershberger, 2020, p.3). The “groups” strongly recall certain events that make them have a shared sense of who they are, thus strongly affecting an individual's memory (Hershberger, 2020, p.3). A perfect example of how collective memory works is given in the article. Years after World War II ended, a group of researchers studying collective memory asked different nations what the most important events from World War II were and each nation replied with very different answers (Hershberger, 2020, p.3-4). The findings from this study displayed that the events that were most strongly recalled by each nation were the ones that “reflected that nation’s narrative framework, or schema, for remembering the past” (Hershberger, 2020, p.4). Additionally, collective memory also depends on a narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and end; hence, why so many people are unable to recall significant events with the 1918 flu pandemic reveals there is no clear beginning, middle, and end in their collective memory, but it varies from person to person. There is now a growing fear that the same will occur for the COVID-19 Pandemic (Hershberger, 2020, p.4). There is also no clear narrative on what and who was involved in the 1918 pandemic. The narrative for World War I was quite visible, the trope of heroes and villains, but this was not the case for the 1918 flu pandemic as it was essentially invisible; there was no clear hero nor villain (Hershberger, 2020, p.5). Therefore, “without a narrative schema to anchor it, the pandemic all but vanished from public discourse soon after it ended” (Hershberger, 2020, p.5).

There is one huge difference between the collective memory of 1918 and of 2020 onward, social media. Media plays a huge role in collective memory and in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, “since the internet and social media have enabled ordinary citizens to publicly document their lives during the pandemic, there’s going to be richer material about what people actually were going through” (Hershberger, 2020, p.7). Interviews, photographs, social media and any first-hand accounts can help build a collective memory of COVID-19 (Hershberger, 2020, p.7). There is one downfall however that also occurred during the 1918 pandemic: the media and photographs tend to stop at “the doors of the sick or of the hospital rooms” (Hershberger, 2020, p.7). Hershberger concludes by emphasizing the importance of a clear narrative for establishing collective memory for COVID-19. In order to remember, it is important to realize that “it’s only by knowing the end that we know the beginning and the middle” (Hershberger, 2020, p.9).

While a majority of the COVID-19 pandemic was “learning as we go,” there are some major similarities between the 1918 influenza pandemic and the COVID-19 pandemic. In her article, *“Reconsidering the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic in the age of COVID-19,”* Nancy Bristow proposes nine comparisons between the two pandemics. The first parallel that can be drawn is “America’s shock at the pandemic’s power” (Nichols et.al, 2020). While the US at the time was quite advanced in medical studies, the 1918 pandemic still raged throughout the country causing mass illness and death, which ultimately shocked citizens, health care workers, and public health officials alike (Nichols et.al, 2020). The second theme is the suffering of the victims of the illness: not only did the victims suffer, but that suffering was passed down through generations (Nichols et.al, 2020). The third parallel between the two pandemics is the “smorgasbord of public health responses” (Nichols et.al, 2020). According to Bristow, “because the United States Public Health Service had no policy-making power, it was state, county, and

city governments that determined the responses to the pandemic.” Although this approach may seem a bit backwards, it is very important to note that “the options available in 1918 for controlling the influenza pandemic were essentially the same as those we use today” (Nichols et.al, 2020). The fourth parallel is the powerful role of social identity; ultimately, each individual has their own unique experience throughout the pandemic and every experience plays a significant role in forming the history of the event.

Bristow also suggests three lessons to be learned from the influenza pandemic in hopes that they will not be forgotten when dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The first of these lessons is being aware of pandemic amnesia (Nichols et.al, 2020). The pandemic experience was not commemorated in any way and not acknowledged publicly, hence, much of the information and history was lost. Americans focused on more important things such as the war or returning to life as they once knew it (Nichols et.al, 2020). The second lesson to be learned is the failure of the US to respond to the lessons learned from the influenza pandemic. Bristow was shocked to learn about how little the US changed after the influenza pandemic (Nichols et.al, 2020). There was no strengthening of the healthcare system and especially no rejection of racism and discrimination of the marginalized groups that were the victims of othering due to the pandemic. The last lesson to be learned from the influenza pandemic that Bristow hopes will be different in the COVID-19 pandemic is that with pandemics comes private trauma and remembering (Nichols et.al, 2020). While the pandemic's public memory may fade, it is essential to remember and consider the experiences and memories of others and help preserve them.

A historical perspective is very important when analyzing the mistakes made during previous pandemics and what to avoid during future pandemics. In the article “*History in Crisis—Lessons for Covid-19*,” Jones focuses on past pandemics and lessons learned from the perspectives of historians. Jones draws on the work of Charles Rosenberg, who created the idea

that pandemics “unfold as social dramas in three parts” (Jones, 2020). The first stage is the early warning signs. They are normally subtle, but these warning signs lead to a need for personal self-reassurance of safety and a need to preserve economic interests (Jones, 2020). During this stage, people are often in denial about the spreading of the disease or seriousness of the disease. Once people recognize the illness and its severity, a second stage emerges during which people demand answers but also come up with answers themselves (Jones, 2020). This leads to the third stage of hysteria and scapegoating, which can be almost as dangerous as the disease itself (Jones, 2020). Finally, Rosenberg believes that pandemics often die out either through disease eradication or societal eradication, where the epidemic is absorbed into and forgotten about by society (Jones, 2020). To summarize, Rosenberg states that pandemics ““start at a moment in time, proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, follow a plot line of increasing revelatory tension, move to a crisis of individual and collective character, then drift toward closure”” (Jones, 2020). Pandemics also serve as a societal lens to see what and who a society truly values. Often, society finds a group to assign responsibility to for the disease, which is seen in persecution of Jews in medieval Europe during the plague, discrimination against gay men during the AIDS outbreak, and hostility towards the Chinese population during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jones, 2020). This system of blaming individuals “exploits existing social divisions of religion, race, ethnicity, class, or gender identity” (Jones, 2020). Jones points out other parallels from previous pandemics, including that the government is slow to act on diseases. Additionally, with every pathogen, hostility grows both in society and towards different groups. Lastly, medical and public health measures are often not followed and tend to be viewed as a failure (Jones, 2020).

In order to fashion a better normal, what lessons can society learn from the COVID-19 pandemic? Katella discusses several lessons in her article, “*8 Lessons We Can Learn From the*

COVID-19 Pandemic.” The first lesson concerns the usefulness of masks especially during pandemics. Throughout the pandemic, the CDC recommended both indoor and outdoor mask requirements, which helped keep individuals healthy and protected from the respiratory droplets that carry the COVID-19 virus. What was learned from this was that not everyone followed this mask mandate. Dr. Juthani from Yale speculates that some of this resistance may come from a lack of education in diseases: “I do think many people have learned a whole lot about respiratory pathogens and viruses, and how they spread from one person to another, and that sort of old-school common sense—you know, if you don’t feel well—whether it’s COVID-19 or not—you don’t go to the party. You stay home” (Katella, 2021). A second lesson is that telehealth may become the new normal. It was learned that many diagnoses can be made without even coming into a doctor’s office and risk getting exposed to different diseases (Katella, 2021). The third lesson learned is that vaccines are quite powerful tools. While the COVID-19 vaccines help lessen the severity of the infection, the “vaccine is not the magic bullet” (Katella, 2021). The fourth lesson to learn from the pandemic is that not everyone is treated equally in our society. Ethnic minorities ended up having the highest hospitalization rate and jobs in which they did not have the option to isolate or work from home (Katella, 2021). Many wealthy and well-off individuals throughout the pandemic had the luxury of working from home and isolating themselves. This was not the case for minority groups however: “one thing that has been recognized is that when people were told to work from home, you needed to have a job that you could do in your house on a computer” (Katella, 2021). The fifth and sixth lessons go hand in hand: we need to take mental health seriously as a society, and humans are capable of resilience when it comes to difficult times (Katella, 2021). While society was able to quickly adapt to the ever-changing COVID world, it did have a heavy toll on mental health. The seventh lesson reflects on the importance of community. According to Dr. Juthani, many of us “became aware

about how much we actually need people” (Katella, 2021). The last lesson to be learned from COVID-19, according to Katella, is that we sometimes need a small dose of humility. The COVID-19 pandemic is an ever-changing event and scientists have had to essentially make changes to their beliefs and predictions every day. Dr Juthani states, “we have been doing the best we can with the knowledge we have, in the time that we have it,” and “I think most of us have had to have the humility to sometimes say, ‘I don't know. We're learning as we go.’” (Katella, 2021).

While society learns as it goes throughout the pandemic, public memory of the pandemics may fade. However, one practice seems to keep tradition through each pandemic. In their article, “*The politics of pandemic othering: Putting COVID-19 in global and historical context*,” authors Dionne and Turkman discuss the topic of pandemic othering and its impacts on different society groups as well as pandemic policies. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, political leaders and citizens from around the world have tried to find a source to blame for the pandemic (Dionne, Turkman, 2020). In past pandemics as well as this one, those who have been blamed for the events that transpired have been those of marginalized groups ranging from various ethnicities, minorities, and religions (Dionne, Turkman, 2020). Such examples of this type of scapegoating can be seen in calling COVID-19 the “Chinese Virus” and the influenza pandemic the “Spanish Flu.” While COVID-19 was painted as the “Chinese Virus” or even the “Kung Flu,” it has been reported that other marginalized groups, specifically those of Asian descent, have been discriminated against or have been faced with acts of violence (Dionne, Turkman, 2020). The authors maintain that “social scientists refer to these acts of targeting marginalized groups as “othering.” Othering is a “practice that occurs when one group of people—usually a majority group or an in-group—treats another group of people—often a marginalized group or an out-group—as though there is something wrong with them” (Dionne,

Turkman, 2020). Health crises, epidemics, etc., bring to the surface this type of practice as they create, for lack of better terms, an “us” and “them” point of view. Othering causes stereotyping, stigmatizing, and overall leads to the blaming and severe discrimination of marginalized groups (Dionne, Turkman, 2020). The practice of othering throughout pandemics has been seen throughout history: AIDS being linked to Haiti and South Africa, SARS and H1N1 being linked to China, and Ebola being linked to those of African descent (Dionne, Turkman, 2020). Many immigrants or individuals of the previously mentioned lineage have faced severe backlash and sometimes hostility and violence during these times of health crises; this can also be seen with those of Asian descent and COVID-19. Therefore, when looking at how our society handled COVID-19, it is not shocking that our “response continued the tradition” (Dionne, Turkman, 2020).

Why does society forget pandemics? In an article, “*Why Do We Forget Pandemics?*,” Nina Burleigh discusses the significant impact of pandemics in the United States and considers the reasoning behind why pandemics are frequently forgotten. In February of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic had killed around half a million Americans, which is more deaths than occurred in World Wars I, II, and Vietnam combined (Burleigh, 2021). Burleigh then mentions how typically when there is that much loss, a holiday or memorial is usually built to honor the memory, such as Veterans Day; however, that has never occurred for the influenza pandemic and has yet to be done with the COVID-19 pandemic (Burleigh, 2021). In the case of the influenza pandemic, no memorial or commemoration happened, instead “our grandparents and great-grandparents turned away and did not look back,” simply “dropping it from memory” (Burleigh, 2021).

Burleigh then discusses the “eerie and even uncanny similarities between the American experience of that pandemic and this one” (Burleigh, 2021). These similarities include riots

against racial injustice, controversies over masks and mass gatherings, and severe healthcare professional trauma. But if there are so many parallels and such drastic death, then why does society forget? According to medical anthropologist Martha Louise Lincoln, the “tendency to look forward, and away from disaster, is an American trait” (Burleigh, 2021). Burleigh adds that Lincoln also believes that Americans tend to believe they are untouchable and will not be affected. This sense of exceptionalism is due to the fact that although American history is “full of painful losses” we as Americans are conditioned “not to take them in,” thus leading us to forget (Burleigh, 2021).

These historical challenges and lessons, however, continued into the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. In the article, “*The Pandemic’s Legacy is Already Clear: All of This Will Happen Again*,” Yong discusses the failures of the US during the current pandemic and how those failures will ultimately continue throughout the next pandemic the world faces. The article begins by stating that a week after around 2,700 Americans died from COVID-19, President Biden announced that the pandemic was officially over (Yong, 2022). At the time, COVID-19 killed as many Americans each week as were killed during the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Yong, 2022), yet American leaders and citizens have been trying to call the pandemic “over” since its very beginning. In fact, “future pandemics aren’t hypothetical; they’re inevitable and imminent” as new diseases are quickly forming, and climate change is on the rise (Yong, 2022). When dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States accounts for 16% of all COVID-19 deaths worldwide...despite the United States only making up 4% of the world’s population (Yong, 2022). Additionally, the United States is ranked 67th in worldwide vaccination status. All this shocking information did not live up to the 2019 ranking of the United States being the most prepared country in the world for a global pandemic (Yong, 2022).

Yong maintains that responsibility for the pandemic failures of the US falls neither on the Trump nor Biden administrations, but instead the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the country's many failing systems. These social failures included the "country's many failing systems: its overstuffed prisons and understaffed nursing homes; its chronically underfunded public-health system; its reliance on convoluted supply chains and a just-in-time economy; its for-profit health-care system, whose workers were already burned out; its decades-long project of unweaving social safety nets; and its legacy of racism and segregation that had already left Black and Indigenous communities and other communities of color disproportionately burdened with health problems" (Yong, 2022). America's flaw when dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as previous disease outbreaks, is the urgent need to return to normalcy. The United States "furiously races to rebuild the same foundation" that in fact is known to collapse (Yong, 2022), illustrating the United States will fall once again to future pandemics.

Yong identifies a further cultural flaw the US has when it comes to battling the COVID-19 pandemic: the American need for individualism. American cultural beliefs that prioritize individual freedom and valorize self-reliance become quite hazardous when it comes to dealing with pandemics (Yong, 2022). This belief system leads to an excessive spreading of diseases and contributes to a greater impact that a disease has on lower socioeconomic status communities and minority groups. The view of "treating a pandemic as an individualist free-for-all ignores how difficult it is for many Americans to protect themselves" (Yong, 2022). American individualism is also demonstrated in our current healthcare system. When help is needed, it usually goes to the wealthy, the famous, and people in power (Yong, 2022). This leaves the most vulnerable and infected communities to fend for themselves during a time of need. To conclude, more pandemics are bound to happen, it's inevitable. The urge to return to normalcy will lead to the

United States' downfall once again during the coming pandemics. As Yong states, "Normal led to this. It is not too late to fashion a better normal" (Yong, 2022).

When analyzing the previous literature, all sources displayed four common themes or findings regarding pandemic amnesia in society. One major aspect that drives pandemic amnesia following every pandemic is the American way of life and the overall urge to return to normalcy. Additionally, society, specifically American, tends to turn a blind eye and ignore the ever-growing problems at hand, which is reflected in how individuals dealt with and comprehended both the 1918 influenza and COVID-19 pandemics. This ignoring of the problem tends to then lead to lack of responsibility and scapegoating of specific minority groups. These social patterns in turn lead to distrust in public health officials and political divisions until the outbreak is simply forgotten. Keeping these themes in mind, I wanted to see if these ideas were also reflected in the five individuals I chose to interview.

Chapter 3: Process, Methods, Interviews, and Findings

The idea for my thesis soon came into play when deciding how to test the findings presented in my literature review. Inspired by both my book idea and my oral history report for my colloquia class, I chose the route of conducting interviews to help preserve memory. The interviews I conducted serve as an agent of memory preservation for the COVID-19 pandemic. To test my findings from my literature review, I conducted interviews with five different individuals. When it came to selecting individuals, I wanted to showcase different points of views and experiences throughout the pandemic. While getting perspectives from individuals in the medical field is very important, I also wanted to get the perspective of others as well, as I feel like there is lack of representation of the diverse experience of the pandemic beyond the medical scope. As I explained this idea to someone, I wanted to highlight the not-so-average, average Joes of the pandemic, the ignored experiences from society. I interviewed two current college students, a high school history teacher, a registered nurse, and an ICU nurse to further gain unique perspectives and experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic. All these interviews were conducted over Zoom. Each participant was asked a series of questions about their experience with the pandemic and thoughts regarding pandemic amnesia. When comparing the literature to the interviews, four overall findings of contributions to pandemic amnesia were reflected: an urge to return to normalcy, ignoring problems, political divisions, and lack of education.

Methods and Interviewees

Before the conduction of interviews, several steps were taken. First, a set of 18 questions were developed to set the basis for the interviews. These 18 questions were prompted by the themes and ideas found throughout the literature review, the interview project I was assigned in my ethics of pandemics colloquia class, and themes seen throughout that course. Upon

completion of these questions, they were submitted to the OSU (Oregon State University) IRB, in which they were approved. This set of questions is contained in an appendix for the reference of readers.

When deciding what participants to choose to interview for my thesis, it did not come easily at first. There were so many different individuals I could choose to include. However, as I continued to think about who to pick, the idea came to me. During the COVID-19 pandemic, you heard stories of medical professionals, government leaders, or people in power. However, we never really heard from the average person who went through the pandemic. Now, not that a person's experience was average during the pandemic, we each have our own unique story to tell. Therefore, I chose to interview five of what I call "not so average, average Joes" of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interview selection was based upon the person being easily contactable, and if I previously knew them in some way, as I felt that would help establish trust and comfortability when they told me their pandemic story.

After choosing my five individuals to interview, I conducted the interviews via Zoom as that seemed to be the easiest and most accessible for each participant. I provided each participant with the questionnaire 24 hours prior to the meeting and used the questions to both look for common themes throughout each interview and as a script to generate open ended conversations. Upon completing the interviews, I transcribed them, and went through each interview on my iPad, using color coordination to highlight each of the five different themes I was looking for in each interview. I compiled each theme into a document with the quotes and findings from each interview conducted.

Who are these five individuals I chose to interview for my research? For confidentiality purposes, I will be referring to each person by initials. The five individuals are CM, MG, MT,

CR, and SL. Each has their own unique story, but they all reflect common findings from my literature review. However, to get a better grasp of who these individuals are and why I chose them, I provide here a little background about each of them and a brief explanation of what they experienced with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first person I would like to introduce you to is CM. CM grew up in California's San Fernando Valley and is currently a student at a university in California. CM is an activist, nature lover, twin, and ex-runner, and was a member of the Class of 2020 in high school. I chose to interview CM to get a younger individual's perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic. I also chose to interview them as they had a unique experience with COVID-19. CM's father had brain cancer, and once the pandemic hit, his illness progressed very quickly and on April 23, 2020, CM's father ended up passing away. Not only did CM have to persevere through a pandemic, but they were also constantly surrounded by the loss of their father, and the grief and quietness.

The second individual I would like to introduce is MG. MG is a fourth year BioHealth Sciences major with a Pre-med option at Oregon State University, with an ultimate goal of becoming a medical examiner. MG grew up relatively poor in a small rural city in Oregon but pursued their way in order to reach her dream. MG also loves their nieces and nephews with all their heart and would do almost anything for them. MG is very close with their family as well. MG was a part of the graduating class of 2020, in fact they were the valedictorian; during the COVID-19 pandemic, MG worked as a scribe in their town's emergency room, which they found eye opening and terrifying at the same time.

The third person I would like to introduce you to is MT. MT is a high school US History, Government, Economics, and Law teacher who has been anti-technology until the year 2020. MT is also a runner, mock trial coach and one of the biggest fans of Frank Sinatra and Abraham

Lincoln you will ever meet. Having lived through some of the most important events in history such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, The Cold War, and 9/11, MT has pretty much seen it all. They remember bottling up water during the missile crisis and although they were not of age during the Vietnam draft, they still knew of people dying. MT even used to practice going into bomb shelters in school during their childhood. When considering this pandemic, however, MT believes “in terms of historical times, this is the worst by far. This pandemic is not only so threatening to people’s health but also their livelihood. It has also exposed other pathologies and sicknesses in society that we have not paid prior attention to. And more importantly...it’s not over!” MT has never felt such uncertainty in their life, except for the days following 9/11, and this pandemic is unlike anything they have ever experienced.

The fourth individual I would like to introduce is a bit different from the rest. CR is a registered nurse, California native, beach lover, and firm believer of, in their words, “the Plandemic.” The “Plandemic” is a belief that the COVID-19 pandemic was completely planned by the government to control society; there was not actually a disease pandemic. It was the government trying to spread fear to control us. At least that was how CR explained it to me. Reading this may raise some questions as to why I chose CR to be part of my research. I did not want my research to be completely favoring one side, and CR asked me to be part of the project: they know their point of view is looked down on but wanted to bring other opinions and experiences to my research. I agreed to include CR in my thesis research: I reasoned it will be difficult to prevent the progression of pandemic amnesia if there is no pandemic to be believed in the first place.

The final individual I would like to introduce is SL. Gymnast, turned brewer, turned registered nurse, SL started their nursing career on April 20th of 2020 at a medical center ICU in California. During their first month, the ICU received Patient 0 for California, which was the

first clinically known COVID patient in California, and SL was in charge of treating Patient 6. Throughout the pandemic, SL witnessed first-hand the suffering and death that was brought about by the COVID-19 virus. Despite the mental struggles they faced and different beliefs patients had about the virus, SL still showed up to their job to care for those who were severely ill. In the free time SL had to better their mental health, SL took up hiking and fell in love with nature. SL also met their now partner for life on a dating app during the pandemic. For SL, although the pandemic was very traumatic, they still try their very best to remember it, as it still has not necessarily gone away.

After conducting my interviews with each person, I found that each interview reflected three of the four common themes found in the literature review that leads to pandemic amnesia. Additionally, I found one other common theme between interviews that may contribute to the growth of pandemic amnesia within society. I will present these commonalities and then conclude this section with advice from each participant for future pandemics and what they are doing to prevent pandemic amnesia.

The first common theme between my literature findings and interviews is the urge to return to normalcy. Returning to normalcy plays a significant role in pandemic amnesia as society is so eager to return to how life was before the pandemic that getting past it is often rushed and what life was like during the pandemic fades. Throughout almost each interview, the idea of normalcy or returning to the American way of life was mentioned. In discussing the idea of pandemic amnesia, CM stated “I think a lot of us also just really want this thing to be over. We really want COVID to be over and to do so, we choose to focus on other things.” While the grief of losing her father significantly altered what normalcy meant to her, she still “felt the eagerness to return back to normal” like “not having to wear a mask in a class or grocery store.” The want for normalcy extended beyond just masks for MG. MG was hesitant at first to return to normalcy but

felt the eagerness and pressures from the rest of society of quickly returning to life pre-pandemic. MG stated, “I feel like obviously there’s that excitement of returning to normalcy and being able to do things that I did before COVID.”

In the perspective of CR, normalcy never really went away for them, except for the “freedom that was being taken from me.” CR stated they also find it funny how one day the “pandemic just went poof! I didn’t realize viruses had a date to them. One day it was just all gone.” However, while the pandemic has been declared over by Dr. Fauci and Pres. Biden, it was over for the American people long before.

For MT, there was also much anticipation for normalcy. They stated that “the vaccine was a game changer for me...honestly for a lot of people. It was a line of demarcation where we can start to return to normalcy” and “when you get back to normalcy and are in your right mind [...] it would all be fine.” Normalcy gave MT a peace of mind and the urge to feel somewhat sane as the pandemic progressed. In their words, “normalcy relieves anxiety.” The initial vaccines and boosters left MT more comfortable in their ability to find normalcy again. Upon asking MT if there was a reasoning for this beyond the vaccines, they brought up two points. First, they stated, “I think the reason I’m less focused on the pandemic is that it is just not as deadly. It’s just here now. So, there’s sort of a new normal that is cliché, but there it is.” Moreover, when the idea of pandemic amnesia was brought up MT stated that, “overwhelmingly we have COVID amnesia, and I am including myself in this. I think this is because we all just could not take it anymore. It’s just like what everybody said was ‘okay, I’m so done with this,’ and we just returned to normal.”

A major contributor to pandemic amnesia, as reflected in different participants’ interviews, is the continuous pattern in society, specifically America, of turning a blind eye and ignoring

problems. To illustrate, in the words of CM, “As Americans we live in a bubble” and “I will definitely say that I am in my bubble here. It does feel like COVID is over. We don’t talk about it very much.” CM also stated that they think “a lot of people want to not think about COVID [...] or a lot of people want to forget about what happened, so they just will.” MG saw people ignoring the pandemic first-hand as an ER scribe in their hometown. MG stated, “I’ll never understand when people say it’s not real. What do you mean it’s not real? Go to the hospital we’re out of beds, babies are having to be life-flighted. This is a fact. I see it all with my eyes! If you need to go see it yourself, then do. It’s like you just wanted to put those people in the hospital and just be like, this is real. Look! This isn’t made up.”

SL felt in the ICU the same feelings MG did. SL stated, “I was upset at the culture of our own ignorance. America not wanting to do kind things for everyone else. As someone in healthcare, to do a whole career based off that [principle], and then have people blatantly disregard things and [...] just be in it for themselves was the infuriating part.” SL observed that “people ignored rules and grown, decision-making children continuously disregarded the rules” and they were not the ones who died, their parents did. SL added that they were “relieved by the distractions that weren’t about COVID,” which was a feeling we all experienced. They often turned to therapy, and they commented, “as terrible as it sounds, I liked drinking alcohol as well.” However, they stressed that some people “didn’t focus on COVID as much as they should have... or at all.” Additionally, SL sees that if COVID-19 is discussed “people in America aren’t even fazed.” However, for them, COVID-19, “is never really over now for [them] now.

The biggest theme common to the interviews and literature review is politics. Politics contributes to pandemic amnesia as political divisions across many pandemics often lead to the distrust of health officials and science. The theme of politics is seen significantly throughout CR’s interview. First, CR believes in the term “Plandemic.” In fact, when the news of the

pandemic and shutdown were announced, they thought “oh boy, here comes the population control. The corrupt and evil sociopaths in power are taking a bold step.” In their eyes, the pandemic was “a total experimental event” created by the government to “control people who are weak by fear, fake news, and propaganda.” CR believes that the pandemic was made with “the entire point to control and manipulate.” CR did not trust any news about the pandemic, “especially when it was coming from people [they] didn’t trust.” When I asked CR opinions on trusting Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Barbara Ferrer (Director of the Los Angeles Department of Public Health), CR responded “I absolutely, and positively one hundred percent did not trust him, or whoever he had in his pocket, because they are all part of a more sinister plan. Also [...] he isn’t even a medical doctor.”

Furthermore, CR expressed that organizations such as the CDC and WHO “are more fear- imposing than actually focusing on prevention.” When I asked CR about mandates and protocols such as masks and social distancing that were created by these organizations and imposed by the government, CR stated: “I am not going to be having someone who we don’t know, who I have never heard of in my life start telling me how to live my life. Especially in the most freedom operated country in the world! [...] We have to know our own constitutional rights!” When I asked why they did not trust the government or health officials during the pandemic, CR stated: “There always seems to be a pattern. They force people to wear masks. It happened during the Spanish Flu too. I am not too keen on government, so anywhere government is, that is not where I am going to be getting my advice on how to live.” To CR, the pandemic is all about control. In their words “they controlled us to wear masks. They control you if you got the vaccine and now look where we are. We’re at the steps of the big C word...communism, and people don’t see that. But that is exactly what I am fighting against.”

While CM, MG, MT, and SL also agree that politics has played a harmful role during the COVID-19 pandemic, they have a different view compared to CR. In the words of CM, “I was so disappointed to see just how polarizing this situation made our country deal with the pandemic the way it did, and how [COVID] became such a polarized situation because it didn’t have to.” In fact, the shock of political polarization throughout the pandemic often makes CM think, if their father “had passed away a year later, in 2021 when COVID was so politicized, when people weren’t wearing masks, and being irresponsible...what would that have been like for him? [...] he was immunocompromised and so were many other people who died because of people’s decision not to wear a mask [...] and that just breaks my heart.”

MG also quickly saw how politics affected the pandemic. In their words, “I feel like” when the pandemic hit, there was just that immediate divide, I even felt myself doing it, but it was more along the lines of ‘why are you not listening to science?’” She further added that “I think a big part of this whole pandemic is the fact that people were not willing to listen to science. I even know someone who believes the vaccine is a microchip. But I feel like the main divide is like a lot of people were not very trusting of the government.” Additionally, MG informed me that during their time as a scribe, “Seeing a lot of death, as sad as it was, that’s not what really impacted me the most. It was actually seeing how horrible people were still treating each other as death rates continued to rise. Wouldn’t you want to be there for each other rather than have this divide?”

As taught in their AP US History class, MT tells all their students that in George Washington’s farewell address, Washington warned against factionalism, which refers to political parties, as Washington always put nation above party. To MT, the pandemic showed exactly what Washington was warning about in his farewell address. To explain further, MT states “Just wear a mask. Do not politicize it. They are doing this for your own health and the

health of the nation. They are not doing it based on what party you're in. [...] This just goes to show how politicized the pandemic was and just another example of how polarized and toxic our politics have become." In fact, after the COVID-19 pandemic, MT "worries about the state of American democracy."

The theme of pandemic othering and scapegoating of minority groups displayed in the literature review did not emerge throughout my five interviews. However, an additional theme contributing to pandemic amnesia arose within different subjects' interviews that was not found in my literature review. This theme is lack of knowledge and education surrounding health, diseases, and pandemics. In their interview, CM stated, "I think our education system really failed us here because there have been other pandemics in the world that I just never knew about. Or, if I did know about them, I didn't understand the nuances of how actually devastating those types of experiences can be." With their experience, MG stated, "I did the best I could with the very little information I had." Additionally, reflecting on their experience during the pandemic, MT commented, "Early on I, we, did a lot of stupid stuff that in retrospect looks silly now. But, at that time we didn't know stuff. We were flying blind. And so, if there were times we overreacted, it is what it is. We just didn't know! [...] But then there were also times where we were ignorant, and we should have known better." SL felt frustration with the lack of knowledge being shared with the public throughout the pandemic: "the information that was coming out was a little upsetting because the information that was coming out from news sources was wrong. Or it was stuff I had learned about weeks before. So, the stuff we were learning in the hospital and knowing how to treat didn't get disseminated across the country for weeks to months later."

While each of the participants reflected at least one of the five themes contributing to pandemic amnesia in their interviews, each participant had their own thoughts on pandemic amnesia and COVID-19, pandemic amnesia prevention, and overall advice they have for the next

pandemic. CM states, “I believe we definitely are at risk for pandemic amnesia, especially among certain groups for sure. But ultimately, I also think that what this experience taught a lot of people is that health is really fragile.” CM also said they maintain the memory of the pandemic by participating in my thesis, wearing a mask when sick, and taking illnesses more seriously. When asking CM what their advice was for the next pandemic, their words were as follows, “I think just continue to take precautions. Wear a mask. Wash your hands. Keep other people in mind besides yourself. Take care of yourself but also take care of other people. Pandemics are inevitable, they’re unavoidable.” CM concluded by stating, “I think if I were to tell future generations how to be better prepared, it would be to embrace that aspect of caring for your neighbor. [...] How lucky are we to have the power to make change, so let’s make change.”

Following their pandemic experience, MG states, “I feel like I find myself forgetting and then trying to remind myself of the past situations. [...] I didn’t even think about past pandemics before speaking with you. But now I just try to remember. I listen to people like you and other people who study pandemics.” MG maintains the pandemic memory by participating in my thesis, wearing a mask and testing when sick, and always reminding themselves of their pandemic experience and being grateful for being able to do normal things once again. MG’s advice for future pandemics are as follows: “Wear a mask! Listen to science! [...] But also people need to be more aware and way less judgmental. Don’t be as judgmental. Really try to understand where people are coming from. Listen to people like you who study pandemic amnesia. Learn from them. But definitely be less judgmental. Do not be a part of the divide.”

MT has come a long way from the beginning of the pandemic until now. Their daily anxiety has come to an end and they realized they “needed to start living rather than just being in fear constantly. [...] However, that does not mean [they] are not cautious.” MT believes that “we overwhelmingly have pandemic amnesia [...] but I think that in a sense amnesia is a coping

mechanism. [...] However, we must adjust to this new normal and live our lives.” MT emphasizes that it is still important to remember what society went through during the pandemic “even though it is uncomfortable to think about. Sometimes you have to do those things. I find myself a lot not wanting to do it, I want to forget, but I can’t. [...] All I would say is in the end we should do everything we can within reason to mitigate the danger.” MT’s advice for future pandemics is to “learn from the past, mitigate dangers, take care of your health! And wear a mask!” MT’s last piece of advice for future pandemics is to “take everything one day at a time. And in the words of Doris Day, ‘Que Sera Sera.’”

It was difficult to get advice from CR or even thoughts on pandemic amnesia, given that they believe the pandemic was a hoax. In their words “Well, if there was no pandemic how can there be pandemic amnesia?” However, what CR would do for the next pandemic is to be more vocal and to continue what they were already doing. While CR believes there is no advice to give for the next pandemic, I will reference some of their “other advice” they decided to give me that in my eyes could still be applied to a pandemic if one were to happen again. CR stated, “we have to be thinkers and not repeaters” and although CR’s meaning behind this statement was choosing freedom over conformity, we indeed must be able to think about our past mistakes with pandemics and ensure not to repeat them. One way to do so is not falling into the vicious cycle of pandemic amnesia. Another interesting point CR made about why they do not believe in the pandemic actually refers to how people fall victim to pandemic amnesia, whether she was aware of it or not. CR also states to “pay attention to things and how they repeat themselves because if it repeats themselves, then we’re not doing our part to change it and to make things better.”

Out of all my participants, SL is doing the most to prevent pandemic amnesia. SL believes that “everyone’s at risk to this pandemic and pandemic amnesia. It could also be a sign of trauma. In trauma-related events, people tend to forget or try their best to forget about what

happened [...] I would bet money that most people and most Americans don't remember it to be as bad as it was." Additionally, SL stated, "if we even talk about it, people here in American aren't even fazed. We have whole cities dying in other parts of the world and no one is even fazed." However, to play their part in keeping the pandemic's memory alive, SL said "I go to speak to my old high school, and I've even spoken to a number of sociology classes that my friend is a professor of. I meet with classes every six months or so and talk to them. Not so much using death as the key factor, but to just keep reinforcing that public health is something that we need. Also having awareness and how to handle public health emergencies is something that we need to understand and not to dismiss severity of illnesses." In the end, SL ultimately believes that that only way to keep the memory of the pandemic alive is "talking to people because it's really the only way it can continue to be known is if we keep talking about it. If we forget about it and stop talking about it, that's when pandemic amnesia sets in more." SL's recommendation for future pandemics is to "Wear a mask, please don't make it something else. Also, [...] most people don't care about other people. Care about people more."

Pandemic amnesia affects each of these individuals in some way. In my literature review, I found common themes contributing to pandemic amnesia which included politics, normalcy, ignoring of problems, and scapegoating of minority groups. Across all five interviews, three of the four themes in the literature were reflected. These themes include politics, normalcy, and ignoring problems. The theme of scapegoating of minority groups did not appear throughout the interviews, however the idea of lack of pandemic and public health education was found to be commonly expressed throughout the interview process. Overall, across both the literature and interview process, four consistent themes of politics, normalcy, ignoring problems, and lack of knowledge are shown, all of which reflect common findings contributing to pandemic amnesia. Each interviewee contributed their own unique experience and perspective on the COVID-19

pandemic, thus suggesting that there is not one pandemic experience exactly like the other. These five interviews are just five of several billion pandemic experiences recorded to serve as an agent of pandemic preservation. However, while each interviewee was somehow affected by the ever-growing pandemic amnesia, they are each doing their part to remember the COVID-19 pandemic and to combat pandemic amnesia firsthand.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

According to the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” From March 13, 2020, the United States shut down for a little over two years to combat the novel coronavirus that led to the COVID-19 pandemic. Places of work, school, entertainment, borders and more were shut down. Masks were worn to prevent the spread of the virus. The United States soon became divided over whether this pandemic was one of fact or fiction, but it was not until May 11, 2023, that COVID-19 was declared to be no longer a public health emergency (CDC, 2023). Before this news was declared, many states such as Oregon and California ended their mask mandates in late February and early March of 2022, displaying how many people have the urge to return to normalcy. Pandemic amnesia is very common following pandemics, where individuals essentially are “unable to recall and record any sort of collective remembrance following the catastrophic events” that happened during the pandemic (Decades Television Network, 2020). While we can only understand what events took place during the COVID-19 pandemic by looking backwards, how can we live our lives forward, still preserving the history and lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic for future generations to learn from and recall in their time of need?

While this thesis project was able to fulfill my goals of pandemic memory preservation, I know there was one major limitation; the number of participants. Now I know, as a statistics person myself, that the higher the sample size, which is preferably thirty or more, the more accurate a representation of the population will be reflected. So, why did I only choose only five individuals? Besides the obvious reasoning of time limitations and not wanting to have my readers go through thirty interviews and findings, I chose to interview five individuals as each of their interviews strongly reflect each of the findings shown in my literature review. Additionally, if I choose to continue the project in the future I will aim for interviewing thirty individuals or more.

Despite this limitation, I was still able to help contribute to the preservation of the COVID-19 pandemic memory. Despite this limitation, there are also numerous successes with my study.

The preservation of the COVID-19 pandemic memory is what my thesis research was meant to help contribute to. As seen in each of the five participant interviews, pandemic amnesia affected them in some way, however each are finding a way in their daily life to combat it. In fact pandemic amnesia affects us all, whether or not we are willing to admit it to ourselves. I often find myself trying to forget what happened and I want to be an epidemiologist. The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the scariest events that I have ever lived through, so why on earth would I want to study it, write my thesis on it, and switch my entire career path from doctor to epidemiologist my junior year of college, let alone remember it? I am a history buff and have learned through numerous history classes and two Honors College colloquia courses that those who do not invest, listen, learn, and remember their history are bound to repeat it. However, this research is not meant to scare or shame individuals for wanting to go out and live their lives as if the pandemic never happened. That was never my intention. My intention is when the next pandemic occurs that someone can do what little 18 year-old Alanna did the minute her whole world was flipped upside down. When I typed “1918 Spanish Influenza Pandemic” into Google hoping to find any type of information, there was nothing. Therefore, my goal is for when the next person Googles (or whatever the next technology may be at that time) what the COVID-19 pandemic was, they can find a little bit of hope, peace, and advice on what to do and what not to do, everything I could not find that one night in March of 2020 when I felt as if the whole world was collapsing in front of me. However, how could they find that information if there is no pandemic to remember?

In the Mexican culture, we celebrate Día de Muertos to honor our now passed-on loved ones and keep their memory alive, so memory preservation has always come easy to me. While I

never fully have celebrated this holiday in a traditional way, I was taught at a young age the importance of preserving my family history. My parents have told me stories about my ancestors on both sides of the family, passed down family recipes, and every house has either a mantel or hallway wall dedicated to family members who have passed on to the next life. One could say I have an ofrenda in my house in California 24/7. My favorite pastime when visiting my older family members was listening to stories they would tell me. Some of my favorite stories include how Dick Van Dyke loved my grandpa's cooking so much while they were drafted together that this kept my grandpa from going out into the battlefield. The stories of how my grandfather's way of flirting with my grandmother was asking her if she needed a rocking chair since she loved to knit, how the Harry James Band along with my grandfather and great uncle stole furniture from Disneyland's carnation cafe after one of their performances, and how my great uncle accidentally set a donkey loose in my great grandparents' house. Storytelling and memory preservation has always been a part of my history and something I plan on continuing for the rest of my life. However, I know not everyone celebrates that specific holiday or has such an experience with memory preservation.

So, how can we keep the memory of the COVID-19 pandemic alive? A few months ago, I learned that the Memorial Union here at Oregon State University was built to commemorate the OSU students that gave their lives during World War I. Therefore, if an entire culture can dedicate a celebration in memory of their loved ones, families can keep their memories alive through oral history, and a University can make a building to honor these fallen individuals, why can the United States not make some type of memorial to honors the now 1,127,152 individuals in the U.S. who have died from COVID-19 (WHO, n.d., 2023)? Yet, I know in my heart that no memorial will probably ever be made, as COVID-19 is something the United States and the world ultimately wants to forget. This idea can be seen in two very specific quotes brought up

during my interview process. In the words of CM, “We really want COVID to be over and to do so, we choose to focus on other things.” Additionally MG believes that “a big part of this whole pandemic is the fact that people were not willing to listen to science.” These two quotes sparked a question in my analysis of why pandemic amnesia is so prominent. Is a pandemic more than a pathogen or does it stop once the virus is defeated? The virus left behind with the ending of a pandemic may be society’s unwillingness to listen, the inability to change, or in fact, may be the state of mind we are currently stuck in, causing us to repeat the cycle of pandemic amnesia.

In his book, *The Plague*, Albert Camus references that we need to have a memorial or some type of collective memory when it comes to pandemics. Therefore, I leave you with this image. Outside of a high school, about a four-minute drive from my house, is an electrical box painted blue that sits at an always traffic-filled intersection. On the box is an image of stick-figure students with the words “6 ft” written in between them. Each of the two stick figures are wearing masks with the words “We Believe in You Class of 2020” written under the students. Even though this little electrical box is just an electrical box painted by some bored person during the middle of the pandemic, it is still standing. Every few months we drive by the box, my parents’ comment, “I can’t believe that thing is still up” or “Why doesn’t someone just paint over it? The pandemic is over.” To this day, the box has not been painted over yet and I hope it never is. If this box is to one day be painted over, we are literally erasing history and falling victim to pandemic amnesia. This electrical box serves as a reminder to every high school student that walks by, every car that stops at the traffic light, and every person that it catches their eye when driving, to remember the COVID-19 pandemic, even if it is just for the length of the traffic light on Valley Circle and Burbank Blvd in the city of Woodland Hills, California. If we can do our best to share our stories with as many people as possible like SL, get comfortable with the idea of getting uncomfortable like MT, embrace the idea of caring for others like CM, learn about the

past and be less judgmental like MG, and even have the nerve to speak your mind and make sure you are not repeating previous mistakes like CR, we are doing our part in honoring those essential workers, medical personnel, victims of the virus, and every single one of our own unique pandemic experiences. Therefore, what will you do to remember the COVID-19 pandemic and honor these individuals?

Appendix

Participant Questionnaire

Instructions: These questions are to help me with the themes of the books/finding commonalities between the stories. Please answer each of the following questions, but answer them as if you're telling a story. Be raw, vulnerable, truthful, and feel free to elaborate on a certain topic. This is your story! Do not just simply answer the questions. Imagine you are telling this to your children, grandchildren, or even your friend 20 years from now. How would you want them to hear your story?

Questions:

- 1) Tell me about yourself. What is your background?
- 2) What was your first thought when everything shut down and the threat of Covid-19 became real to all of us? Where were you? What were you doing? What did you do?
- 3) What is your experience with the pandemic? How did you handle it? Were there tough days, easy days, a mixture of both?
- 4) How did this pandemic affect you and your family?
- 5) What is the hardest thing you had to deal with during this pandemic?
- 6) What is a lesson you've learned or something you've taken away?
- 7) What advice would you give to people if this ever happened again?
- 8) What is something heartwarming that happened in quarantine or your favorite moment?

- 9) How do you feel about the current state of our world as a whole? Do you feel these events have distracted you from the ongoing pandemic?
- 10) Many scholars talk about pandemic amnesia, do you think we are at risk of that?
- 11) What can you do yourself to prevent it or have it remain in our memory?
- 12) What would you have done differently or is there anything you are going to moving forward that you learned from this? Ex. Have an emergency fund or always having extra toilet paper in the house haha.
- 13) Have you changed any of your daily habits/lifestyles due to the pandemic?
- 14) On a scale of 1-10 (1 worst-10 best) how would you rate your activity rate pre-pandemic? During? And “post” pandemic?
- 15) On a scale of 1-10 (1 worst-10 best) how would you rate your nutrition habits pre-pandemic? During? And “post” pandemic?
- 16) How eager are/were you to return to normalcy? Why? What is the significance of normalcy to you?
- 17) Do you often find yourself trying to forget the pandemic?
- 18) Upon entering a new pandemic, and no guidance from the CDC, would you still wear a mask? How likely are you to follow the same COVID-19 Protocols?

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