

Offerings of Grief, Offerings of Rage: Revisiting Tree of Life Synagogue and George Floyd Square

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- ¹ The Tree of Life Synagogue building (Pittsburgh) and George Floyd Square (Minneapolis) became sites of commemoration through the gifts left in the aftermath of tragedy. Expressions of both mourning and militancy, the objects articulate political outrage, deep grief, and sadness. The “offerings,” so aptly officially named by Rise and Remember, the grassroots organization that governs commemoration efforts at George Floyd Square, act as sacred forms of doing justice not only to George Floyd but to the vast number of other African Americans and people of color who have lost their lives at the hands of the police. They also provide a form of doing justice to those who died at the Tree of Life Synagogue.¹
- ² Following historian and religious studies scholar Paul Christopher Johnson, I understand these enactments as forms of civil religious engagement.² They constitute a central part of what Johnson describes as organic civil religion—a full range of embodied religious practices enacted at such sites. The offerings: humble gifts, heart-felt gestures of love, solidarity, and acknowledgement, become crucial acts of commemoration. They express what it means to do justice to those who died and to those who continue to be harmed (in these cases), by racism and antisemitism. Often overlooked or dismissed as kitsch, such simple gestures speak directly to their power as artifacts of civil religion.³ Although articulated somewhat differently at each site, the offerings constitute a critical part of their distinct enactments of civil religion.

Offerings: Beginning with the Objects

- ³ Whether sent or hand-delivered, the “offerings” include votive candles, teddy bears, and baseball caps, flowers, T-shirts, balloons, and banners. An internal report by the Tree of Life Congregation Gifted Items Committee explains:

Among the most immediate and visible symbols of support are the hundreds of gifts sent to people and organizations throughout the city. Each gift is a personal offering made by someone who joined us in our sorrow and who offered to carry some of our pain in our hour of need.⁴

This statement captures the reverence and care that characterize such gifts and in turn, reflects the ways that both communities, those in Minneapolis and in Pittsburgh, understand and appreciate such material tributes. As the Rise and Remember

website explains, just after “George Perry Floyd was lynched by the Minneapolis Police Department, just steps away from the intersection of 38th Street East and Chicago Avenue South . . . People came from across the world to pay their respects, lay expressions of pain and hope as offerings, and grieve the ongoing violence against black bodies.”⁵ The website goes on to describe how the memorial at the Square began very simply but grew over time, “it would take a museum several years to build a collection of the magnitude to which the memorial has grown. Since the 2020 uprising, caretakers have built a greenhouse for the plants and delicate offerings and developed a temporary conservation room kindly provided by the Pillsbury House & Theater and supported by the Midwest Arts Conservation Center.” The organization goes on to say that “they [the caretakers] continue to tend to the offerings at the intersection of 38th & Chicago laid in memory of George Floyd and other black lives lost in this community and across the nation.” The Tree of Life Congregation’s committee report and Rise and Remember’s description of care for offerings together make clear that those on the ground in each community have embraced the power and importance of collecting the offerings.

- 4 The language of “offerings” is particularly compelling because it captures how those who came to the sites left pieces of themselves behind. What the teddy bears, votive candles, rocks, and banners express may be as varied as those who left them in Minneapolis and in Pittsburgh. In some instances, letters describe such tributes, like those sent to the Tree of Life Synagogue and its three congregations, Tree of Life, Dor Hadash, and New Light, as gifts from the heart.⁶ At George Floyd Square, posters and artwork capture sentiments like—“we love you and we are with you.”
- 5 Collective pilgrimage has been an immediate and enduring response to acts of public violence, with people from all walks of life drawn to the sites to leave a piece of themselves behind. At George Floyd Square, the landscape is filled with handmade signs, portraits of George Floyd both grand and intimate, and the defiant, raised-fist sculptures that stand guard at each intersection. Amidst many powerful displays, smaller offerings persist—the familiar comfort of teddy bears, each bearing silent messages of solidarity, love, and presence.
- 6 In Minneapolis, the air vibrates with cries for justice. “Say their names” and “Black Lives Matter” are constant refrains, a litany of grief and demand. The names of 169 Black and brown people killed by the police are inscribed on the street where George Floyd died, a testament to the devastating toll. The space became a global focal point, igniting marches, vigils, and protests fueled by a potent mix of mourning and militant action.
- 7 In Pittsburgh’s Squirrel Hill neighborhood, even now, signs remain in shop windows alongside hand-crocheted Jewish stars as tokens of remembrance and solidarity.⁷ There is also now (as of winter 2024) an art exhibit, “#Hearts Together: The Art of Rebuilding,” presented in loving memory of those who died on October 27, 2018. The artworks, like at George Floyd Square, are offerings, here rendered on durable waterproof vinyl panels. Each panel, one after another, is attached to the metal fence that surrounds the current Tree of Life site. The artistic offerings cover the construction site. They hide the wound of the now demolished major sections of the original building where the massacre occurred and where the new memorial museum will be. But the October 27 Archive at the Rauh Jewish Archives holds the full array of

offerings presented to the community. The collection includes all the items that made up the makeshift altar in front of the synagogue building just after the shooting as well as those gifts that came in packages sent to the congregations from across North America and the world. To date the October 27 Archive includes over 3400 individual objects.⁸

- 8 I was especially taken by the array of knitted and crocheted prayer shawls and quilts, items carefully made, and, in the case of those shawls, prayerfully created by members of Christian congregations across North America. Distinct congregations presented offerings in their own idiom, many from a diverse group of Prayer Shawl Ministries.⁹ Other soft gifts include pillows and comforters made by whole schools and individual classes of young students that express their solidarity and concern.
- 9 It is easy to note the heart-felt nature of the offerings, but much harder to stay with them, to appreciate their power and importance. I hope to do so by taking seriously the sacred nature of these efforts at both sites even as I acknowledge the ways these same gestures are all-too-often dismissed as merely sentimental and unimportant.



Fig. 1 George Floyd Square, September 2020.
Courtesy of Shana Sippy.



Fig. 2 Tree of Life. October/November 2018.
Brian Cohen Wilkins Avenue Memorial Digital
Photographs/Rauh Jewish Archives at the Heinz
History Center.

Religion of the People or Organic Civil Religion

- 10 Johnson's essay describes what he calls "organic civil religion" after 9/11 in New York City. Although modest, gifts of civil religion have the power to evoke vital connections of love and solidarity. Johnson presents a vivid description of organic civil religion after 9/11: "under rare circumstances like the crisis of 9-11, something like a moment of 'collective will' may occur that is *relatively* innocent of political strategy."¹⁰ He describes the whole site of what was once the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center as a kind of altar, "a collection of material objects in space assembled and treated with specific techniques so as to evoke memory, disclose meaning, and present sites of exchange with deities and with the dead."¹¹ Ground Zero and other memorial sites like it, are "hallowed ground." For Johnson the altars are "always unfinished, uncensored, and in

porous process.”¹² They occasion enactments of reverence that are at once militant and mournful.

- 11 Johnson offers lush descriptions of the makeshift constructions as he attempts to appreciate what they might say in all of their quotidian materiality, a bricolage of once ordinary objects, baseball caps, teddy bears, “T-shirts from manifold places and organizations each with a message: ‘University of Virginia,’ ‘Toledo Lutheran Youth,’ ‘God Bless America,’ ‘Union 825, Albany,’” origami birds, and, in one instance, an array of purple orchid leis.¹³ But he also observes the presence of already ritual or religious objects: crosses, votive candles bearing the images of various Catholic saints, yahrzeit candles, plastic angels, Christian nativity scenes, images of Ganesha and other Hindu deities, and banners of all kinds expressing “the solidarity of towns, civic organizations, unions and countries with New York.”¹⁴ And there were so many flowers and balloons, and all those teddy bears. The tokens of acknowledgment, solidarity, love, and connection are deeply familiar to us, so ubiquitous in the aftermath of acts of horrific violence, loss, and death from the most traumatic to the more formal, flowers left after the death of Princess Diana and later after that of Queen Elizabeth in London, but also arising in the wake of a growing number of mass shootings at schools and churches, as well as at the Pulse nightclub in Florida and at the Route 91 Harvest music festival in Las Vegas. The altars created after the killing of George Floyd and in the aftermath of the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue building share something with all of these expressions of organic civil religion.
- 12 But heart-felt as they are, the memorials described are also uncomfortable sites. Some visitors are unnerved by their excess, the vast nature of the collections, while others disparage them, dismissive of so many repurposed ordinary objects. Johnson confronts the discomfort around these practices as they enact what religion scholar Sally Promey describes as “sensational religion,” physical, visceral expressions of faith or, as in Minneapolis and Pittsburgh, grief and mourning.¹⁵ Johnson argues for the power of such expressive public displays even as he recognizes that they can be an affront to dominant notions of discretion or perceptions of religion as a kind of private enactment. He forcefully rejects these dismissive judgements.
- 13 Journalist Mark Oppenheimer, however, adheres to this critique. As he writes in his book on the massacre and its aftermath, he was unpersuaded by the efficacy of the makeshift memorial created following the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue building. He describes the massive outpouring of flowers, banners, rocks, long strands of origami birds, t-shirts, teddy bears and so much more as kitsch. He sees these gestures as “utterly impersonal” and dismisses “Nearly everything in the visual vocabulary of mass mourning, already on display at Tree of Life” as coming “from an American Christian idiom.”¹⁶ He raises concern that the offerings might be alienating to members of the Jewish community and disparages those who made pilgrimage to Pittsburgh, who came from all over the country to witness, and pay tribute to those who died, as seeking out tragedy for their own macabre curiosity rather than out of genuine care.¹⁷
- 14 In his book, Oppenheimer’s disdain for the pilgrims who came to Pittsburgh encompassed Greg Zanis, a man whose mission, up until his death from cancer in 2020,

was to bring handmade white crosses (but in this case, Jewish stars) to sites of mass shootings across the United States.¹⁸ Oppenheimer dislikes the ecumenical nature of these efforts and their materiality. He instead insists on explicitly Jewish ritual acts, on the one hand, while admitting, on the other hand, that there were indeed thousands of stones left at the site, a decidedly Jewish gesture. For Oppenheimer even Jewish acts of civil religion are not Jewish enough.¹⁹ He worries that even the rocks were somehow not meaningful, asking, why would anyone want to see these objects, all those stones in the archive?²⁰

- 15 I am dismayed by the dismissive discomfort expressed in Oppenheimer's account, which is already present in other popular notions of the crassly materialistic nature of a civil religion of the people, Johnson's "organic civil religion." I want to honor this religion and its vastly democratic expressions of solidarity, love, affection, and care across religious and cultural differences. Material gestures are each a form of witness both intimate and public.



Fig. 3 Rocks in the Rauh Archives, December 2024. Author Photograph.

- 16 Johnson asks if there is anything "beyond the obvious" statement of "co-presence," that "I (or my group) was at Ground Zero, as marked by this object now contacted both by myself and the place, the object now representing our meeting and passing co-presence?"²¹ I do not think so. It seems to me that the notion of being there, being with, standing alongside, beside, in the presence of those who are no longer there, is something, something to value in and of itself. It is a form of witness, a form of acknowledgement, recognition, and mourning of individual and communal tragedies and, as such, it is both a form of doing justice and an act of civil religious expression.



Fig. 4 Photo of the Rise & Remember Offering Room at Pillsbury House & Theatre in Minneapolis, MN. Photo by Chasing Joy Photography courtesy of Rise & Remember.



Fig. 5 Rauh Jewish Archives, December 2024. Author's photograph.

Holding

- 17 Holding is an act of resistance, resistance against the logic of trivialization. The hands of people, the hands of the community, of the archivists and the conservators, make ritual objects available to those of us who come to commemorate the tragedies at George Floyd Square and at the Tree of Life Synagogue building. They make the rituals possible.²² And because their efforts are abiding, we continue to appreciate these sacred sites. The gifts connect us to all those who care and stand with those who died, but also, sadly with all those who continue to be victimized by racist and antisemitic violence.
- 18 Let us turn to consider the labors of those on the ground who hold and preserve the artifacts that memorialize horrific events. I want to honor their efforts to let the offerings help tell the communities' stories. As Jeanelle Austin, the executive director of Rise

and Remember, explained to me in the early spring of 2025, just before the five-year anniversary of the murder of George Floyd, the people always come first, people over property. The love, pain, and hope expressed in their voices as they convey the meaning of this place and its objects must be central.

At George Floyd Square: Rise and Remember

- 19 Committed to forging their own practices of and by the people, Rise and Remember, formally The George Floyd Global Memorial is an organization of local residents and family members who have become guardians of the site and its memory: the memory of the murder of George Floyd, the People's Uprising that followed, and the broad collection of offerings that continue to be brought to the site. Through their ongoing work, including leading pilgrimage tours, they have consistently used the offerings to showcase the stories of the people in the neighborhood, the stories of those who remain in harm's way at the Square and across the United States as they remember George Floyd. Rise and Remember carries on the fight for justice and reverence even in the face of tremendous backlash as some now see the Black Lives Matter era as over.²³
- 20 To do this work, Rise and Remember is committed to forging new alliances and new practices from the ground up. Working closely with Black conservators and museum professionals alongside conservators from the Midwest Arts Conservation Center, the organization watches over the makeshift altar that remains standing at the square while carefully preserving the most fragile and delicate of the offerings in their conservation center, especially works on paper and cardboard, including any number of portraits of George Floyd and thousands of hand painted signs of protest and solidarity. The organization is devoted to preserving the sacred nature of the site on the one hand, and the sacred nature of these particularly vulnerable offerings on the other. I want to highlight some of the ways that Rise and Remember's conservation efforts are helping to reshape the field of art conservation more generally before I consider their decision to allow the altar to remain standing at the square. I will then conclude this section by looking at some of the communal exhibitions of the preserved offerings that Rise and Remember has helped mount in Minneapolis and at other sites in the United States.
- 21 The goal of Rise and Remember's formal efforts at conservation is primarily to maintain offerings on paper and cardboard so that they can continue to circulate and tell their stories. The organization's innovative community-based conservation work with these materials is already having an impact on the field of conservation. In May of 2025, Jeanelle Austin was the keynote speaker at the annual meeting of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) held in Minneapolis. As Austin explained in her address to the society, what we choose to keep and preserve "makes us who we are."²⁴ According to Austin, decisions about conservation become a form of doing justice. *News in Conservation*, the trade publication of the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC), covered the address, quoting Austin's words: "Racism has worked historically to misremember and disremember stories. We're preserving truth."²⁵ *News in Conservation* went on to interpret her argument, noting, "Each item saved is a defiance of erasure—a piece of history that cannot be ignored or rewritten."²⁶

According to the magazine, Austin went on to ask those assembled to consider what it means to have “the communities to whom the objects in question belong” make such judgements about what gets saved.²⁷ This is exactly what Rise and Remember is doing in Minneapolis.

- 22 Even as Rise and Remember carries on the work of conservation, part of their decision-making process early on was to respect, as much as possible, the placement of gifts in the locations at the square where they had been deposited. In other words, many of the objects on display at George Floyd Square are not being preserved in the same way as the more delicate posters and art works. Instead, teddy bears and baseball caps, votive candles, Mardi Gras beads, and bouquets of flowers remain outdoors as an abiding altar at the site. Given this, the objects that make up the memorial weather the vicissitudes of the elements, rain, wind, snow and ice, and, in so doing, they remain expressions of civil religion. New and returning visitors continue to pay tribute to George Floyd by leaving offerings at the square.
- 23 The wear and tear left on many of these gifts speak to their staying power. They remind visitors of how time can diminish and change how and what we remember. Rise and Remember’s dual commitment to both conserve and to let be, differentiates the conservation practices at George Floyd Square from those in Pittsburgh where there is no longer an altar. Instead, with the help of the Rauh Jewish Archives, all the items in the initial make-shift memorial and the offerings sent to the congregations once housed in the Tree of Life Synagogue building are now a part of the archive’s collection.



Fig. 6 George Floyd Square offerings in the elements, April 2024. Author photograph.



Fig. 7 George Floyd Square, close-up view of offerings, April 2024. Author photograph.

- 24 On a pilgrimage tour with my colleague from Carlton College and our students in the spring of 2024, we were led through the neighborhood by some of Rise and Remember's local guides who not only told us the story of George Floyd's death and the uprising that followed but their own stories—a mother who worried about her children not making it home from school that day, a brother shot at the very intersection where George Floyd died and the banner that is now there on display in his name. On that pilgrimage tour, the offerings that make up the altar at the square occasioned the telling of more intimate tales of violence and loss alongside the story of George Floyd's life and death. The faded plastic flowers and wind and water damaged teddy bears spoke powerfully to us about the sacred nature of the memorial. In their fragility, their ephemerality, we were made keenly aware of the challenges around memory and forgetting. Rise and Remember's attention to those offerings that remain in the square helps visitors like us learn about and remember the stories of the community.
- 25 Rise and Remember is also partnering with Black and brown communities in the United States to create exhibits with the posters and artworks they are preserving in their conservation center. Through such projects, local students and activists spend time with the collection and decide which pieces they want to display in their communities. They come to the offerings from George Floyd Square with their own stories of racial injustice and find solace and inspiration in pieces from the collection. Communal exhibits bring posters and artworks offered in memory of George Floyd to local communities, as they did in 2024 in Phoenix, Arizona. Working with Arizona State University (ASU)'s Art Museum, the exhibition, *Twin Flames: The George Floyd Uprising from Minneapolis to Phoenix*, was conceived "[i]n partnership with ASU's Center for Work and Democracy and the George Floyd Global Memorial (now Rise and Remember)."²⁸
- 26 *Twin Flames* was the first exhibit of material offerings outside of Minnesota and was intended to raise "important questions about the role of art and community as a vehicle for bearing witness and creating deeper understanding and empathy."²⁹ As the museum's website explains:

In contrast to traditional monuments, "Twin Flames" is a powerful, community-led exhibition that showcases a selection of the thousands of offerings laid by mourners and protesters at George Floyd Square, collected by a group of community caretakers and cataloged by the George Floyd Global Memorial team. This exhibition recognizes that creative and artistic expressions of pain and hope exist beyond the walls of museums, in all forms and a myriad of cultural expressions, and that George Floyd Square is a public space that can teach us how to mobilize as we mourn victims of police violence and imagine a more just world.³⁰

In Phoenix, images from the Square not only memorialized George Floyd, but they also called attention to ongoing acts of police violence. In Arizona, the offerings—creative expressions of pain and hope—served as inspiration for local community organizing against racial injustice.

- 27 I was able to see such a communal exhibit on display in the Minneapolis Central Library in the winter of 2024. *Voices of the Unheard* was conceived in conjunction with school children in the area, a statement on display in the library as part of the

exhibit description explained: “This exhibit was designed by entering into the classrooms of black youth, retelling the events of the 2020 Uprising to the students, and allowing them to choose a protest sign that resonates with how they feel.” Signs were “intentionally selected by over 120 youth” from in and around the city of Minneapolis.³¹ Although a few of the students had participated in the Uprising, most had not as many were still in elementary school, some just finishing second grade when George Floyd was murdered. The exhibit aimed to “create space to lift up the voices of youth through the language of protest.”³² The students brought together pieces to create their own altars and new assemblages, placing posters and artworks in conversation with each other through shared themes and images. The exhibit consisted of large poster boards covered with multiple signs and drawings that shared themes like “His Life Mattered,” “Justice for George Floyd,” or a hand-written letter to George Floyd coupled with a formal “get out the vote” poster with an image of a young Black woman as the Statue of Liberty.



Fig. 8 From Voices of the Unheard, February-March 2024. Author photograph.

- 28 When Austin gave her speech at the annual meeting of the AIC, Rise and Remember had already been enacting their commitment to community-based conservation through work with the Black Art Conservators Group, the Midwestern Arts Conservation Center, and young Black and brown interns in their conservation space.³³ These young summer interns learned the craft of curation as well as conservation. As the Rise and Remember website explains, the interns produce small exhibitions of their own made up of selections from offerings they carefully work with over the course of their summer internships.
- 29 Through both the preservation of thousands of offerings left at the square and through their commitment to maintaining the ritual site, Rise and Remember commemorates the murder of George Floyd and continues to fight for the future of the square as a sacred communal site.³⁴ It also uses its vast holdings to allow other communities to continue the work of commemoration through the creation of community-led exhibitions like those in Phoenix and at the Central Library in Minneapolis. In all these ways, Rise and Remember is changing how we think about the work of conservation. Its novel community-based approach recognizes the stakes in who controls and tells the stories of objects held in all kinds of collections. These efforts are a part of the ongoing labors of civil religious expression as the offerings at George Floyd Square continue to

circulate and tell the stories of communal outrage and grief in the face of state violence against people of color.

In Pittsburgh, Rauh Jewish Archives

- ³⁰ Like Rise and Remember, The October 27 Project and Rauh Jewish Archives are committed to the community as they tend to the objects in their care. In its mission statement of 2024, the Archive explains that the Project “uses historic preservation as a community-building tool by engaging the public in the process of caring for documentation of the October 27 attack and its aftermath.”³⁵ The Project is “actively collecting and preserving this documentation, identifying documentation in other repositories, making all of this documentation accessible to the public, and working with broad and diverse partners to showcase effective and innovative uses of the collection.”³⁶ Unlike Rise and Remember, a newly created grassroots organization, in Pittsburgh an already established entity, the Rauh Archives, became “the lynchpin, helping all local and global partners to easily and effectively advance projects that involve documentation of October 27.”³⁷ But here, as in Minneapolis, the values that propel the work are community focused. The Archive is committed to being responsive to stakeholders; transparent to the community; eager to build partnerships; and dedicated to long-term relationships that are victim- and trauma-centered while committed to best archival practices.³⁸
- ³¹ By contrast to efforts to maintain the makeshift altar in Minneapolis, in Pittsburgh the community decided to disassemble their altar after only a few weeks. From the very beginning, Rauh Archives chief archivist Eric Lidji determined the historic significance and importance of the collection as a whole.³⁹ Starting in 2018, just after the massacre, Lidji and the archive oversaw emergency collecting to preserve the outdoor memorial and then took temporary custody of most of the collection.⁴⁰ They then began work on an online preservation initiative to start cataloguing the materials; only later did the archive take formal custody of the artifacts.⁴¹ The archive also created a website with the help of a federal Antiterrorism and Emergency Assistance Program (AEAP) grant. Here virtually all the offerings are being preserved with the understanding that only some of them, at any given time, will return to the site as part of the new museum and memorial.
- ³² Since 2018, the Gifted Items Committee from Tree of Life has continued to review donated items. They worked diligently online through the COVID-19 pandemic and in 2023 the archive signed an agreement for the October 27 Tribute Collection as it launched its online archive with guidelines for its use. Like Rise and Remember, Rauh Jewish Archives was also able to create its first display of materials from the collection in 2024, and, with the support of the Fine Foundation, the University of Pittsburgh’s Jewish Studies program initiated an academic fellowship with the archive to bring scholars to Pittsburgh to work with the collection.⁴²
- ³³ The October 27 Tribute Collection, although housed in an established institution, is a new kind of collection. From the very start, Eric Lidji appreciated the power of t-shirts, baseball caps, stuffed animals, votive candles, chains of origami birds, rocks



Fig. 9 Quilt from the October 27 Archive at Rauh Jewish Archives. Author photograph, December 2024.



Fig. 10 Rocks from the October 27 Archive, Rauh Jewish Archives. Author photograph, December 2024.

(decorated and plain), and the many signs and artworks that made up the altar in front of the synagogue building. Lidji made putting together a digital repository of the gifts a communal activity. Volunteers continue to work closely with the archive to this day photographing and cataloging each and every item in the collection. Together they are creating the metadata necessary to ultimately be able to track, access, and use the objects collected going forward. As at George Floyd Square, conservation and the labors of remembrance are ongoing communal practices at Rauh Archives.

- 34 The community in Pittsburgh is, as of Fall 2025, in the process of establishing its forthcoming museum and memorial center on the Tree of Life Synagogue building site, and as noted, the collection will play a vital role in its commemorative displays.⁴³ Meanwhile, although the collection is in temporary storage at the archive, the space needed to permanently house the offerings will have to be quite a bit larger than their current home. These are some of the challenges that the community faces as it continues its work of commemoration.
- 35 While I worked with the collection in December of 2024, I not only spent time with hundreds of the objects collected, but I also found myself working alongside some of the community volunteers who continue to catalog the collection. Among the catalogers was a woman who had served on the original Gift Items Committee and has been a regular at the archive ever since. As she introduced herself to me as Molly Pascal, I recognized her name as a contributor to a compelling anthology of essays by writers from the community.⁴⁴ Pascal's essay opens this collection with an intimate account of her Tree of Life congregation as a vital part of the Squirrel Hill neighborhood. Meeting

community members engaged in the work of commemoration at both sites; I am moved by their commitment to engage in this work. In Minneapolis and Pittsburgh, caring for offerings is an intimate endeavor that requires many hands.

Mourning and Militancy Revisited

- ³⁶ As Douglas Crimp made clear so long ago in his classic essay about the AIDS crisis, activists then and now need to recognize the importance of mourning as “a psychic process that must be honored.”⁴⁵ But, as Crimp goes on to explain, such crises also demand deep and robust calls for political action.⁴⁶ Both the murder of George Floyd and the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue building call out to us with such demands—a cry for social justice—an end to racism and antisemitism—and, at the same time, a need to grieve. This is what ritual does. Ritual allows grieving and protest through acts of civil religion. And yet, the valence between mourning and militancy has played out differently at the two sites. The differences have a great deal to do with whose lives matter, who can and who cannot be mourned, and how such grief can and cannot be expressed publicly. One of these tragedies was the act of a lone gunman, the other an act of state violence.
- ³⁷ In her essay “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” Judith Butler considers whose lives can be grieved and whose deaths can be honored.⁴⁷ Butler questions why some of us can express our grief in public, while others cannot. The act of grieving, the work of mourning is always political even if it does not seem that way. Writing in the early 2000s, Butler describes a series of obituaries that can and cannot be published in American newspapers, our dead verses theirs—“the 200,000 Iraqi children killed during the Gulf War and its aftermath” in sharp contrast to the *New York Times* brief obituaries for each and every one of those who died on 9-11 in the United States.⁴⁸ In response to the Tree of Life massacre and George Floyd’s violent death, personal losses were understood as public tragedies. Both events represented instances of structural violence. The racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, and white nationalism (as made explicit in the manifesto of the Pittsburgh shooter) made already collective experiences of violation and loss public and yet the political nature of their respective enactments of civil religion differ and, in turn, the objects deposited at each site came with somewhat different messages.⁴⁹



Fig. 11 George Floyd Square, September 2020.
Courtesy of Shana Sippy.



Fig. 12 Tree of Life Memorial, October/November 2018. Brian Cohen Wilkins Avenue Memorial Digital Photographs/Rauh Jewish Archives at the Heinz History Center.

- 38 Because George Floyd's death was at the hands of the police, the state was directly implicated in the racism that precipitated his murder. A police officer killed George Floyd in broad daylight, and it was only through a brave act of witnessing by a young Black woman who saw the murder that the world came to know about this crime.⁵⁰ The video immediately made George Floyd's death into a national story and a movement for racial justice. This was state sanctioned violence, and the case demanded a political response. The collective will of the people was heard around the world and George Floyd Square was at its center.
- 39 The political uprising was not only in response to the killing of George Floyd, but to the deaths of so many Black and brown people who have been and continue to be killed by the police, who continue to die because of the racist structure of state sanctioned violence. All those who came and made pilgrimage to the site and left offerings expressed both their rage and sorrow as they proclaimed that George Floyd's life mattered and that "Black Lives Matter." In response to this crime, the Uprising was itself an enactment of what Johnson describes as organic civil religion. Politics can be and certainly were an immediate act of "collective will" where mourning and militancy came together. There were, according to the *New York Times*, at least 140 different protests in the United States and countless others across the globe.⁵¹ The protests brought together unusually diverse collections of people, who shared their outrage at having seen the video of Floyd's death at the hands of the police. The protesters included those allied with many other political causes: feminists, queer and trans folks, those engaged in immigrant justice, among many others. They came out from their COVID-19 isolation in solidarity, insisting on the connections between acts of racist and xenophobic hatred and other forms of systemic violence and discrimination, but mostly they were there to express their outrage in response to Floyd's death and others like it.⁵² The collective will of the people was heard around the world.

- 40 In the immediate aftermath of Floyd's murder, the community came together, providing food and support for each other and for all those who flocked to the Square to be present, to show their support and solidarity, and to share their outrage at what had happened. Protestors brought with them offerings of all kinds: food, plants, art, candles and flowers, protest signs. This is what Rise and Remember is remembering as it holds the offerings it has collected and sends them out into communities across the United States to bear witness.
- 41 By contrast, the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue building was decidedly not an act of state violence and, therefore, garnered a different kind of political response. The massacre was the act of a lone gunman with a radical white nationalist anti-immigrant, antisemitic, and racist agenda. The gunman went to the synagogue to kill Jews because of what he believed to be the role of Jews in promoting immigration and racial diversity. The authorities in Pittsburgh—police, fire fighters, and other first responders—arrived at the synagogue building within three minutes of the first 911 call and they were there to help, not something that happened at George Floyd Square. State actors came to the synagogue building in response to the violence in ways that such state actors rarely do in Black and brown communities. In response, the Jewish community in Pittsburgh remains profoundly grateful.⁵³ Their relationship to state authorities is thus significantly different from that at George Floyd Square. This is not to say that those in Pittsburgh did not respond politically as they mourned, but their more positive and privileged relation to local authorities distinguishes the civil religious response to the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue building from the response to the murder of George Floyd.
- 42 Among the first and ongoing overtly political responses from various sectors of the Jewish community of Pittsburgh was the more local protest organized by the Pittsburgh Jewish social justice group, Bend the Arc. Bend the Arc requested that Donald Trump, as president of the United States, renounce the racist, anti-immigrant, and deeply antisemitic white nationalism that fueled the shooter's rage in the first place. The president made no such statement. Having not received a response to their demand, the group gathered as President Trump came to Pittsburgh immediately following the shooting.⁵⁴ Bend the Arc protested Trump's visit by publicly and collectively performing *kriah*, an act of traditionally private Jewish mourning, making the ritual into a public form of protest. *Kriah* is an embodied ritual that consists of rending one's garment as a sign of grief.⁵⁵ The crowd that gathered that day tore large pieces of fabric in unison in the streets.⁵⁶ In an editorial, independent Jewish newspaper the *Forward's* Jane Eisner explained, "This tangible, visible expression of Jewish grief was broadcast live on national television, as if to say: 'This, America, is how Jews mourn. This is how Jews protest.'"⁵⁷ The ritual was its own act of collective will, an enactment of organic civil religion in a Jewish mode.⁵⁸ The protest was at once a ritual act of mourning and a political intervention where an embodied practice took center stage, here the large pieces of fabric made the protest material and visceral.
- 43 Oppenheimer explains in his book on the massacre and its aftermath that not all of those in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood were supportive of this political protest. He writes that some members of the Jewish community were deeply reluctant to align "official public acts of commemoration of the shooting," like the first anniversary event,

with overt political positions. And yet, as Oppenheimer goes on to explain, even the “nonpolitical” gathering commemorating the first anniversary was briefly disrupted by a speaker who raised concerns about gun control.⁵⁹ For many it remains hard not to see the connections between the shooting and other violent acts of hate. But because George Floyd was murdered by a police officer, by a representative of the state, the political stakes are different. Some mourners and community members in Pittsburgh found it possible to disassociate the political from their grief, but this kind of distinction was unthinkable and indeed impossible in the cases of George Floyd and other Black and brown people killed by police officers, agents of the state, make grieving their deaths inseparable from demands for political change.

44 I now want to turn to two related efforts in Pittsburgh that draw on the connections between racist violence and antisemitism as was expressed by the shooter in Pittsburgh and how Black and Jewish communities came together in the aftermath of this tragedy. The first was a protest that responded to an act of state violence against a young Black man in Pittsburgh, the second, a case of another lone gunman, an earlier shooting in a Black church in South Carolina. I want to be clear how these cases are both similar and different from each other even as I suggest that after the synagogue shooting, the urgency of building such alliances became more salient in Pittsburgh. In both instances acts of civil religion help forge such connections.

45 The Purple Rose campaign was a grassroots effort to mourn the death of Antwon Rose, a young Black man killed by the police in Pittsburgh in June of 2018, a few months before the shooting at Tree of Life. The campaign built on a shared grief and concern that linked the synagogue shooting and Rose’s murder.⁶⁰ Hundreds of volunteers from within the Jewish community made small purple roses in March of 2019 and then decorated the neighborhood around the courthouse so that Antwon Rose’s mother, Michelle Kenney, would know that she was supported when she had to face the trial of the officer who killed her son. This effort initiated by Pittsburgh’s Bend the Arc worked in tandem with 1Hood Media, a Black Arts and Activism organization, to call for justice for Antwon Rose.⁶¹ Together with 120 other businesses and organizations they signed an open letter as concerned citizens of Allegheny County demanding the conviction of the officer who murdered Antwon Rose.⁶² Sadly, that officer was not convicted. As in so many of these cases, the state did not hold itself accountable. As in the case of George Floyd’s death,

46 Antwon Rose was a victim of state sanction violence, of structural racism, but, unlike George Floyd, the murderer in this case was not convicted. Like the vast majority of cases of police killings, Antwon Rose received no justice.

The gesture, the small handmade purple rose offerings were a sign of comfort and solidarity, an act of mourning not unlike the prayer shawls and quilts sent by churches near and far to comfort the Jewish congregations that had met in the Tree of Life Synagogue building after the shooting. These small acts done in conjunct with Black communal organizations like 1Hood Media help forge and reinforce solidarity and alliance in the face of injustice. In this respect the small roses are not unlike the offerings brought to George Floyd Square.

47 Alongside this act of solidarity between members of Jewish and Black communities in Pittsburgh in response to the synagogue shooting, is an enduring connection

between Tree of Life and the Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Like the congregations at Tree of Life, the Mother Emanuel Church was devastated by the violent act of a lone gunman in their house of worship in June of 2015.⁶³ The congregations have been in contact with each other and the Rauh Jewish Archives is in conversation with the church about Mother Emmanuel's similar efforts to archive the offerings that were brought to their congregation after the massacre there. Here the circumstances that brought these communities together were much closer. In both instances, religious congregations were devastated by acts of vigilante violence as distinct from the deaths of both George Floyd and Antwon Rose at the hands of the police.

- 48 Public acts of solidarity expressing grief and outrage in Minneapolis and Pittsburgh insisted on recognizing lives lost but spoke in different political idioms. The structural racism, the state-sanctioned violence that killed George Floyd demanded an urgent political response. By contrast, in Pittsburgh the violent act of a white nationalist racist and antisemitic shooter rallied first responders. State actors responded, yet despite the efforts of Bend the Arc, the President of the United States refused to make a statement renouncing such acts of white nationalist racist and antisemitic violence.

Some Concluding Thoughts: Making Connections as a Scholar of American Jewish Life

- 49 In her essay, "Rethinking the Historiography of American Antisemitism in the Wake of the Pittsburgh Shooting," Rachel Kranson, historian, activist, and member of the Squirrel Hill Jewish community of Pittsburgh, calls into question many of the ways that the field of American Jewish History has minimized the legacy of antisemitism on this continent.⁶⁴ Kranson describes her own search, after October 27th, for "critical historical analyses of how American antisemitism worked in tandem with racism and xenophobia to produce violent and deadly outcomes."⁶⁵ She argues that far too little scholarship has drawn connections between forms of hatred and calls for a different scholarly paradigm, a "relational approach" that would draw on these critical connections.⁶⁶ I concur, but even as we put these legacies in conversation with each other, we also need to recognize how they differ. Relationships move in both directions. They acknowledge similarities and differences.
- 50 Kranson writes: "American racism does not *compete* with antisemitism but *amplifies* it, rendering Jews (of all racial backgrounds) more vulnerable at moments of heightened racial tensions."⁶⁷ She further demands that historians begin to address how "various manifestations of American bigotry and violence have intersected with and shaped one another over the course of American history, and the impact this had on the lives of targeted minorities."⁶⁸ Acts of bigotry and violence often intersect, as do the ways we commemorate their legacies—the ways so many of us feel compelled to leave offerings, parts of ourselves at such places—but the politics of these enactments again can differ even radically depending on the nature of the violence.

- 51 In the present, as antisemitic and racist acts of violence proliferate, we find ourselves asking new questions but cannot afford to give up on the relational challenges Kranson poses. I write as a scholar of American Jewish life and have tried to heed her call. With the proliferation of presidential edicts and Supreme Court decisions rolling back civil rights protections and efforts at police reform, and even a new trial that may exonerate the former police officer who murdered George Floyd, it seems that hate has only grown. Efforts at diversity and inclusion that address race, gender, sexuality, and disability among other forms of inclusion, and here I would add, antisemitism—although not always included in these discussions—have been reversed in both the public and private sectors of the United States’s economy.⁶⁹ At the same time, antisemitism continues to grow especially after the devastating Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent genocidal Israeli war on Gaza.
- 52 There are now new challenges about what constitutes antisemitism, often casting critiques of Israeli policies as equivalent to hatred of Jews. In these discussions the kind of white nationalist forms of antisemitism that fueled the shooter in Pittsburgh and those engaged in the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville before him shouting “Jews will not replace us,” seem to go unheard. Instead, the politicians and communal leaders who most loudly decry demonstrations on college campuses that protest Israeli state violence against Palestinians seem to have little interest in challenging white nationalist antisemitism and racism. To be clear, I do not believe that protesting Israeli state violence is antisemitic and I am concerned that this conflation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism risks losing sight of the growing power of white nationalist movements in the United States, movements that continue to garner the support of politicians and pundits who are, among other things, both antisemitic and racist.
- 53 Even as we respect the differences between the structural violence that killed George Floyd and the growing state-encouraged vigilante violence that killed those at the Tree of Life Synagogue building, civil religious acts of solidarity and compassion have a role to play in doing justice to all those who continue to die. And so, I want to conclude by remembering all the gifts, the offerings that were brought to George Floyd Square and to the Tree of Life Synagogue building: the rocks, the candles, the protest signs and portraits of George Floyd. Humble heart-felt gifts speak to the promise of civil religion as not only a way to mourn and to protest the violent injustices that continue to shape our daily lives, but as a vehicle for bringing disparate communities together.

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Citation Guide

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Notes

- 1 Sadly, since I initially completed a draft of this essay in the Fall of 2025, more tragedy has struck the people of Minneapolis. ICE's pervasive presence in the city and the brutality it has inflicted on the people of Minneapolis has been devastating. The killings of two civilian citizens of the city who were performing acts of solidarity and protest to protect their neighbors are now themselves sites of mourning and militancy. These new sites of trauma and loss are being commemorated through any number of offerings, similar to those discussed in this essay left at George Floyd Square and the Tree of Life Synagogue building. For more on these new shrines see "Minneapolis left to decide the future of Renee Good and Alex Pretti memorials," *MPR News*, published February 15, 2026, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2026/02/15/minneapolis-to-decide-future-of-renee-good-alex-pretti-memorials> and Elicia Eler, "How outdoor public memorials change the landscape of everyday life," *Minnesota Star Tribune*, published February 4, 2026, <https://www.startribune.com/why-do-people-create-outdoor-public-memorials/601571131>. In her story, Eler makes clear the religious significance of these memorials and the gifts brought to these new sites of mourning, including food, art, candles, and music. See also this related and disturbing story about arson at one of these sites, "Policing investigating after fire damages Renee Macklin Good Memorial in Minneapolis," *MPR News*, published February 18, 2026, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2026/02/18/fire-renee-macklin-good-memorial-in-minneapolis-causes-damage>. On the importance of protesters and mourners coming to these sites to honor our neighbors, people we know and live with, and the significance of this language in modern Jewish thought in particular, see Minneapolis resident and scholar Sarah Zagar's moving blog post, Sarah Zagar, "Protecting Our Neighbors, Ethics beyond encounter in Minnesota," *Sightings*, published February 5, 2026, <https://martycenter.org/sightings/protecting-our-neighbors-ethics-beyond-encounter-in-minnesota>. I am indebted to Sarah Zagar for sharing these pieces with me.
- 2 Paul Christopher Johnson, "Savage Civil Religion," *Numen* 52, no. 3 (2005): 289-324.
- 3 This disparagement is both addressed in Johnson's essay in relation to the altars created after 9/11 in New York and by Mark Oppenheimer in his account of the memorial at the Tree of Life Synagogue. See Mark Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill: The Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting and the Soul of a Neighborhood*, (Alfred A. Knoff, 2021). In Johnson's essay he explains his use of the term "savage" in his essay's title, explaining that "'savage' refers not only to the materiality of the altar-building comprised as it was of modern fetishes—common objects endowed with strange and extraordinary power, and treated as scared . . . but also of the altars' semiotic resistance to modern closure and disclosure." Johnson, "Savage Civil Religion," 293. See

discussion below of Oppenheimer's disdain for both the altar at the Tree of Life Synagogue site, and those who made pilgrimage. Oppenheimer, chapter 12, "The Visitors," 167-179. Many officials in Minneapolis remain uncomfortable with the ongoing display of artworks and offerings of various kinds at George Floyd Square as well. See Ernesto Londoño Photographs and Video by Joshua Rashaad McFadden, "What is the Future of George Floyd Square?" *New York Times*, published May 18, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/05/18/headway/george-floyd-square-minneapolis.html>.

- 4 I am grateful to have been able to read this and many other critical internal documents. "Tree of Life Congregation Gifted Items Committee, Interim Report," May 2022.
- 5 "Rise and Remember," accessed June 1, 2025, <https://riseandremember.org/about/>.
- 6 Offerings sent to the congregations that met in the Tree of Life Synagogue Building often arrived with hand-written notes and cards expressing these sentiments. These include notes from congregations like the Prayer Shawl Ministry at Shady Grove United Methodist Church or from the Sewing Circle at Fox Valley Presbyterian Church of Geneva, Illinois. The holdings for Shady Grove United Methodist Church as part of the October 27 Tribute Collection at the Rauh Archives include: an envelope, TOL_002. 2020.002_10109; cards, TOL_002._10109_P001a; TOL_002._10109_P001b; TOL_002._10109_P002a; TOL_002._10109_P002b; TOL_002._10109_P002c; TOL_002._10109_P003a; TOL_002._10109_P003b; TOL_002._10109_P003c; and prayer shawls, TOL_002. 2020.002_1010; TOL_002. 2020.002_1011; TOL_002. 2020.002_1012; TOL_002. 2020.002_1013. Those from Fox Valley Presbyterian Church in the Rauh October 27 Tribute Collection, include: a quilt, TOL_187. 2020.002_10117; two envelopes, TOL_187. 2020.002_10117_P001a and TOL_187. 2020.002_10117_P001b; and a letter, TOL_187. 2020.002_10117_P002. The quilt in Fig. 9 from Countryside Christian Quilts in Mission, Kansas at the Rauh Archives is TOL_011 2020.0002_10541_a.
- 7 On the Jewish Hearts of Pittsburgh Project, see Jodi Eichler Levine, *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis: How Jews Craft Resilience and Create Community* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 146-156.
- 8 According to an internal report. "The preliminary review identified 32 broad categories . . . [T] hese . . . include prayer shawls, quilts, blankets, pillows, paper cranes, kipkot, stones, books, CDs and DVDs, paintings, illustrations, banners, crafts, photographs, candles, Teddy bears, and cards." Tree of Life Congregation Gifted Items Committee, Interim Report," May 2022.
- 9 For more about Prayer Shawl Ministries see Prayer Shawl Ministry Home Page, accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.shawlministry.com/>.
- 10 Johnson, "Savage Civil Religion," 305. Here Johnson attempts to frame this rare act of collective will as innocent and not political. Although he calls this a "modest" claim, I think it is crucial. I appreciate the ways that he takes this presumably crass materialism seriously. Although he raises some concern about being accused of making these practices into something utopian, I think he avoids this problem. In some ways, unlike George Floyd Square and the Tree of Life Synagogue, the altar-building after 9/11 didn't last and soon those very heart-felt enactments were taken up or "co-opted" by a more instrumental form of civil religion. That said, there are important connections between the kind of instrumentalized civil religion that Johnson writes about after 9/11 and what happened post October 7, 2023, in Israel.

The dynamic Johnson describes the quick slide from acts of organic civil religion or a religion

of the material into an instrumental deployment of those powerful sentiments to support the war on terror, was itself a deeply politicized form of civil religion. Used for instrumental ends as in the case of 9/11, civil religion can lead to war. I believe this slide can be seen in Israel in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack. The initial outpouring of love and solidarity for those who died, for those who were displaced and lost their homes, and especially for those taken hostage were everywhere apparent in the protests and vigils across Israel and in the powerful artistic works that were on display in Tel Aviv, including most poignantly in the Shabbat Table with over 200 empty place settings, one for each of the those in captivity. These were acts of what Johnson describes as organic civil religion, but the redeployment of these powerful expressions of grief and outrage were quickly taken up by the State of Israel in its devastating war on Gaza and the militarizing of Jewish settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank. As in the aftermath of 9/11, trying to unravel these tangled connections between such powerful acts of solidarity and care on the one hand, and how they were then taken up and used to justify war on the other, is as Johnson argues, extremely challenging. On the Shabbat table as it was first displayed in front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art before being replicated around the world, see Linda Gradstein, "Empty Chairs at The Empty Shabbat Table: Israel's heartache for the hostages," *The Jerusalem Post*, published November 3, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/gaza-news/article-771524>.

- 11 Johnson, "Savage Civil Religion," 306.
- 12 Ibid., 307.
- 13 Ibid., 306-8.
- 14 Johnson, "Savage Civil Religion," 306. For a powerful story about one man's efforts to repurpose the Pittsburgh Steelers's logo, making one of its stars a Jewish star and adding the tagline "Stronger than Hate," see Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, chapter 3, "The Gentiles," 57-70. This chapter also includes a moving "Go Fund Me" story.
- 15 Sally Promey, ed., *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (Yale University Press, 2014).
- 16 Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, 84.
- 17 On the various people who made pilgrimage to the Tree of Life Synagogue and Oppenheimer's concerns about these visitors, see Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, chapter 12, "The Visitors," 167-179.
- 18 For more on Greg Zanis, see Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, prologue, especially 9-11 and 16-17.
- 19 Oppenheimer poses the question in archivist Eric Lidji's voice, explaining on the one hand that perhaps the stones might be meaningful, but ends the chapter with a question. The final sentence of the chapter is "But, on the other hand . . . is a researcher really going to come and say, 'I'd like to see Blank Stone 248?'" He also raises questions about what he deems more authentic acts of Jewish mourning in the make-shift altar that formed just after the shootings at Tree of Life. He writes, "The Jewishness was there, but to anyone driving by, looking out a car window, it was hard to see. Because Jews, by tradition, don't build crosses or leave stuffed animals. They leave stones. Stones arrived almost immediately." And even as he writes about how "unJewish" he finds these expressions of civil religion (my term), he has to admit that there were lots of Jewish stones. Although he wrote about those Jewish stars held up on crosses, he emphasizes that these are still Christian crosses and efface the specifically Jewish nature of this tragedy. I want to stress that these were Jewish stars and that here civil religion was able

appreciate these specifically Jewish victims. Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, 85.

- 20 Ibid. On a personal note, I found the rocks a particularly meaningful expression of love and support when I was working in the archive in December of 2024.
- 21 Johnson, "Savage Civil Religion," 309.
- 22 These words are inspired by an email correspondence with poet and historian, Rachel Kaufman, December 26, 2024.
- 23 Nesrine Malik, "The Black Lives Matter era is over. It taught us the limits of diversity for diversity's sake," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/may/20/black-lives-matter-diversity-racial-equality>.
- 24 As an article in *News in Conservation* explained about Austin's presentation:

What began as a grassroots response to George Floyd's murder in 2020 has evolved into a full-fledged effort to conserve history. "There were people whispering in my ear, 'We have to tell our own story,'" said Austin. That whisper became a mission. Today, Austin and a team of caretakers operate from a classroom at Pillsbury House Theatre, where they have archived approximately 2,500 offerings with as many as 10,000 still awaiting documentation.

From murals to paper signs, piano keys to plant holders, each item is treated as sacred. "Everything was somebody's message," Austin said during an interview. Her team uses cataloging systems, digital inventories, and preservation techniques learned working in tandem with conservators to preserve even the most delicate pieces. Rain-damaged cardboard offerings are reformed in homemade dehumidification chambers. Mold-infested items are treated and stored with care, while torn paper is mended with Japanese paper and wheat starch paste.

Sharra Grow, "Preserving Protest: Rise & Remember Safeguards History at George Floyd Square," *News in Conservation* 108 (June-July 2025): 4-5. <https://www.iiconservation.org/news/preserving-protest-rise-remember-safeguards-history-george-floyd-square>.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 For more on the exhibition, see "Twin Flames: The George Floyd Uprising from Minneapolis to Phoenix," ASU Art Museum, accessed October 9, 2025, <https://asuartmuseum.org/event-exhibition/twinflames/>
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 The students came from Harvest Best Academy, Anoka High School Multicultural Perspectives Course, and the Best Buy Teen Tech Center at Minneapolis Central Library. This information comes from the Exhibit description that accompanied the exhibit.
- 32 This information comes from the Exhibit description that accompanied the exhibit.
- 33 For more on Black Art Conservators, see the group's website with links to their podcast, "Preservation for the People," and other resources, accessed April 29, 2026, <https://blackartconservators.com/>.

- 34 In my conversation with Jeanelle Austin, I learned about the community's efforts to take over the People's Way space, a former defunct gas station at George Floyd Square, for a public memorial space and garden. On these efforts, see this local news report from Minneapolis, "Minneapolis Announces Applicants in the People's Way Redevelopment," February 4, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WFA4REHzXo>.
- 35 They are "creating a central repository of all known documentation of the attack and its ongoing aftermath." The October 27 Project, Mission Statement, internal document.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid. To meet these goals the archive worked closely with the community's Healing Partnership Memorialization Working Group, designated professionals skilled in addressing trauma, to make their policies around this special collection as sensitive as possible.
- 39 Eric Lidji was especially thoughtful in his efforts to figure out what needed to be done in terms of collecting these materials carefully, consulting with others who had had to put together similar collections from other such violent sites. These included Pam Schwartz, a curator at the Orange County Regional History Center in Florida who had documented the response to the Pulse Night Club shooting. Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, 80. Lidji was also in touch with people at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina who were responsible for documenting the response to the massacre there on June 17, 2015. Private conversation with Eric Lidji at the Rauh Jewish Archives, Pittsburgh, PA, December 2024.
- 40 At first the items that made up the altar were placed on reams of brown butcher block paper on every free surface in the shattered and shut down synagogue, with only a few items on display in the synagogue's entryway windows to be seen by those who came to the site to pay tribute. This display was not "abiding" like the ongoing display at George Floyd Square. The butcher block paper was crucial to immediately preserve the rain-soaked offerings and allow them to dry out. Eric Lidji told me about this initial part of the collection process as well as the small display. Private conversation with Eric Lidji, Rauh Jewish Archives, Pittsburgh, PA, December 2024.
- 41 Some of the gifts were given to family members of those who died, and a few others were held by the three congregations that met in the Tree of Life Synagogue building. Most of the offerings now make up the October 27 Collection at the archive.
- 42 I am especially grateful to Rachel Kranson and the University of Pittsburgh's Jewish Studies program for spearheading this initiative to create what is now the Fine Fellowship program. It has been my honor to be the first Fine Fellow. This fellowship allowed me to work with the October 27 Collection and to write this essay. I am indebted to Eric Lidji and Jill Josophowitz for their expertise and guidance as they carefully introduced me to the collection. I am grateful to them as well for sharing with me their powerful archival work to make this collection accessible to the public. I have also appreciated learning some of their own stories about these events and these objects. This project would not be possible without these important interlocutors and this fellowship.
- 43 For more on the groundbreaking for this memorial museum see Campbell Robertson, "Tree of Life Synagogue to Break Ground on New Sanctuary, and New Mission," *New York Times*, June 22., 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/22/us/tree-of-life-groundbreaking.html>. The new structure will include an education center "dedicated to combatting bigotry," and a museum devoted to the history of antisemitism in the United States, the first of its kind. The

- new building will also house a new sanctuary for the Tree of Life congregation, one of the three congregations that had worshiped in the building before the massacre. For more on the design of the new facility by award-winning architect, Daniel Libeskind, see Daniel Jonas Roche, "Studio Libeskind reveals Tree of Life outdoor memorial, five years after Pittsburgh attack," *The Architect's Newspaper*, December 8, 2023, <https://www.archpaper.com/2023/12/studio-libeskind-tree-of-life-outdoor-memorial-five-years-after-pittsburgh/>.
- 44 Molly Pascal, "Here is Squirrel Hill," in Beth Kissileff and Eric Lidji, eds. *Bound in the Bond of Life: Pittsburgh Writers Reflect on the Tree of Life Tragedy* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 9-20.
- 45 Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (Winter, 1989): 5.
- 46 I want to thank Jeannelle Austin for her thoughtful reading of an earlier version of this essay and most especially for helping me appreciate the difference between state-sanctioned violence and vigilante violence. Private email, April 29, 2026. I have tried to do some justice to the power of her words in revisiting this final portion of this essay.
- 47 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004), 19-49.
- 48 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 34. The short pieces about those whose lives were lost in the attacks on the World Trade Center were published every day for 15 weeks in the *New York Times*. These pieces were collected and published in book form in 2002. See, The New York Times Staff, *Portraits of 9/11/01: The Collected "Portraits of Grief" From the New York Times* (Times Books, 2002).
- 49 For more about the Pittsburgh shooting and the shooter see Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, chapter one, "The Attack," 25-39.
- 50 On Darnella Frazer, the 17-year-old who recorded this crime, see Joe Hernandez, "Read this powerful statement from Darnella Frazier who filmed George Floyd's Murder," *NPR*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/26/1000475344/read-this-powerful-statement-from-darnella-frazier-who-filmed-george-floyds-murd>.
- 51 Derrik Bryson Taylor, "George Floyd Protests: A Timeline," *New York Times*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html>.
- 52 Most but not all the protests and responses to the death of George Floyd were nonviolent. I want to be clear about the diversity of these protests, the vast range of people who came out to express their solidarity across so many differences. For more on these protests see some of the following: Taylor, "George Floyd Protests"; Jason Silverstein, "The Global Impact of George Floyd: How Black Lives Matter Protests Shaped Movements Around the World," *CBS News*, June 4, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/george-floyd-black-lives-matter-impact/>; Dana R. Fisher, "Lessons Learned from the Post-George Floyd Protests," *Brookings*, July 22, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/lessons-learned-from-the-post-george-floyd-d-protests/>.
- 53 On this issue of the community's gratitude, see Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, 110.
- 54 According to Oppenheimer, the community was split on how to respond to President Trump's visit to Pittsburgh after the shooting. He writes about Bend the Arc's domestic political agenda

and the letter that the group composed asking the President to renounce the white supremacism of the shooter before coming. This demand for a public statement from the President was supposed to be a compromise to enable the visit without protest, but that did not happen. The President made no statement. Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, 110-112.

- 55 On this Jewish ritual enactment, see Bend the Arc Pittsburgh, "Mourning in Pittsburgh is Jewish—And Political," November 9, 2018, <https://forward.com/opinion/413941/mourning-in-pittsburgh-is-jewish-and-political/>. See also, Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, 123-24.
- 56 On political ritual and more specifically religious acts as a form of political protest in this manner, see Molly Farneth, *The Politics of Ritual* (Princeton University Press, 2023).
- 57 These passages all come from Jane Eisner, "One Month After Pittsburgh, This is How we Mourn," *The Forward*, November 27, 2018, <https://forward.com/opinion/414819/one-month-after-pittsburgh-this-is-how-we-mourn/>.
- 58 As we have seen, Oppenheimer was committed to imagining proper Jewish responses to the October 27th massacre at Tree of Life. On this ritual of mourning, see Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, 123-124.
- 59 On the efforts to keep the community-wide first-year anniversary event, "Remember, Repair, Together," nonpolitical, see Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill*, chapter 18 "The Anniversary," 240-251. In this chapter Oppenheimer describes some of the tensions around a lone voice that expressed a political stance against gun control at this communitywide commemoration.
- 60 For more on the Purple Rose Project and the exhibit *Stones and Roses* done in conjunction with the Project, see "Trees Outside Allegany County Courthouse Decorated with Purple Roses for Antwon Rose," *WTAE News*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.wtae.com/article/trees-outside-allegany-county-courthouse-decorated-with-purple-roses-for-antwon-rose/26867195> and Adam Reinherz, "'Stones and Roses' Exhibit Links Response to Antwon Rose and the Oct. 27 Shooting," *Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle*, December 25, 2019, <https://jewishchronicle.timesofisrael.com/stones-and-roses-exhibit-links-response-to-antwon-rose-and-oct-27-shootings/>. I am also grateful to Rachel Kranson for sharing some of these details with me about the Purple Rose Project. Private correspondence, August 2025.
- 61 For more on 1Hood Media and their work at the intersection of the arts and activism, see their website, accessed June 13, 2026, <https://www.1hood.org/>.
- 62 The roses were a part of a broader communal effort seeking justice in this case. For more on the trial and the open letter, see, *CBS New Pittsburgh*, "Antwon Rose Shoot Trial: Organizations Show Support for Rose Family with Display of Purple Roses," March 19, 1990, <https://www.cbsnews.com/pittsburgh/news/antwon-rose-shooting-trial-bend-the-arc-roses-display/>.
- 63 Not only has the archive been in touch with the congregation at Mother Emanuel Church but so have members of each of the congregations that met in the Tree of Life building. On some of these efforts, see, for example, Brandon Fish, "Fighting Hate from the Tree of Life Synagogue to Mother Emanuel-Church," *Charleston Jewish Federation*, January 30, 2019, <https://www.jewishcharleston.org/news/fighting-hate-from-tree-of-life-synagogue-to-mother-emanuel-church>. I want to thank Eric Lidji and Rachel Kranson for sharing with me their reflections on this alliance Eric Lidji, private conversations, December 2024 and Rachel Kranson, private correspondence, August 2025.
- 64 Kranson writes:

In the immediate aftermath of the shootings, I found that the informal discussions I had within my embryonic activist collective about the relationship between antisemitism, xenophobia, racism, and white supremacy sustained me more than the academic field to which I had devoted the previous sixteen years of my life.

Rachel Kranson, "Rethinking the Historiography of American Antisemitism in the Wake of the Pittsburgh Shooting," *American Jewish History* 105, no. 1/2 (January/April 2021): 248.

65 Ibid., 249.

66 Here Kranson's relational approach echoes some of the kind of work that Michael Rothberg has done around what he calls, "multidirectional memory." See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

67 Kranson, "Rethinking," 251.

68 Ibid., 252-253.

69 Part of what makes this more complicated when we talk about antisemitism in the present is that it circulates in often contradictory ways. The kind of white nationalist antisemitism that is linked to racism is often overshadowed by public discourse around antisemitism that has focused on criticism of the Israeli government and most especially its war on Gaza. This has had the unfortunate effect of decoupling the connections between antisemitism and other forms of hate.



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