

## Ghosts in the Machine: Trespassing Memory in the Age of Social Networking

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“Even if one gives me death to the extent that it means killing me,  
that death will still have been mine and as long as it is irreducibly mine  
I will not have received it from anyone else.

Thus dying can never be taken, borrowed, transferred, delivered, promised, or transmitted.

And just as it can't be given to me, so it can't be taken away from me” (44).

—Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*

Death, as Jacques Derrida indicates above, can only be physically experienced by the one that is deceased. The divide between life and death might be described as the penultimate binary, though while in the process of dying, one can, perhaps, inhabit a liminal space; a blurred borderland between life and death. Like the props of an automaton, the lungs and heart may continue the operations of the respiratory system, pumping oxygen through the body while the chemical synapses of the brain stop signaling one another. The chest rises up and down in a cruel mimicry of life and the arms and hands tremble through the throes of death. But then—it all stops, and there is only the finality of death and no one can take this from the one who has died.

Though death cannot be “taken,” “transferred,” or “transmitted” from one to another, it does not mean that the other will not attempt to do just that. Certainly medical interventions can be considered as attempts to evade death, but this essay will not focus on those interventions. Instead, this project centers on the attempts of the living to reject the finality of death—to trespass against it as it were—through the use of social networking websites such as Facebook.com. Though Derrida and numerous scholars have thought through Martin Luther’s supposition that “every one must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone,” it is arguable that the discourses addressed to the dying and deceased on social networking sites present a new attempt to evade the finality of dying. While Facebook is not considered the apex of scholarly or philosophical thought, the profiles and posts on the site addressed to the dead present an existential facade that illustrates Western society’s changing understandings of death which are worth scholarly scrutiny.

In order to demonstrate that Facebook offers a distinct space for considerations of memory, life, and death, this essay will begin with some reflections upon contemporary forms of mourning contextualized by a brief survey of websites related to remembering the dead. Though there are countless websites which have been created as discussion portals to assist the living work through their grief, the particular apparatus of Facebook allows for a very specific set of functions which grants both the living (and possibly the dead) to renegotiate the break between life and death, presenting an ongoing (if one-sided) discourse between the two groups on Facebook.

The new media continues to influence quotidian habits of the living in the Western world, but this set of technologies and expressions, specifically social networking, is also reconfiguring our sense of mortality. Attempts to evade death and negate its finality are not novel to contemporary society, as German art historian and image theorist Hans Belting writes in "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology." Here Belting explains that "archaic societies" often reintegrated the dead back "into the community of living" by fashioning avatars from corpses; reanimating them with shells in place of eyes (307) in an attempt to keep the dead amongst the living. While modern media users may reject the thought of an actual corpse taking a place amongst the living, this ritualistic behavior has arguably persevered from one generation to the next in numerous forms, whether it is through a prominently placed photograph of the deceased on the mantle or the inclusion of the dead's profile page on one's list of Facebook "friends."

Indeed, myriad death rites are evidenced throughout history, yet the rituals and ceremonies have obviously evolved over the last millennia. Due to time restraints, I will not attempt to reflect upon the multitude of these changes but rather note how the treatment of the diseased and dying body has transformed in the last century or so in order to lead to some conclusions about why online memorials and tributes are alluring to the living today.

According to Phillipe Ariés, who offers a wealth of knowledge on the rituals pertaining to the end of life in his *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death Over the Last One Thousand Years*, the manner in which Westerners grieve, specifically Americans and British, underwent its most radical transformation beginning in the second half of the 19th century (561). As Ariés reports, this era ushered in a new sense of modesty about death (562). Beginning in this time period, death, according to Ariés, is "driven into secrecy" (562). The secrecy or "modesty," as Ariés also describes it, is significant because it occurs in tandem with the "beginning of medicalization" of society (563). It is in this era, writes Ariés, that death "ceases to be always seen as beautiful and is sometimes even depicted as disgusting" (569). The "disgusting" body is no longer kept in a home-based sick room, but ushered off to the confines of the hospital. This particular view of death as repulsive rather than transcendent continues into the 20th and 21st century, and is highly relevant to the discussion of the latest configuration of death rituals and memorializations.

There is both anecdotal and scholarly evidence that suggests in the beginning of the 20th century, in-home wakes to mourn the dead were commonplace, yet due to attempts to

purify the culture from the horror of death, we rarely find evidence of this practice today. Rather than viewing a corpse in the home, dead bodies are removed from the house or hospital and typically transferred to the funeral home. In addition to the absence of the dead body from the home, dying bodies of the elderly are also typically transported to the nursing home. This displacement of the elderly functions as another mechanism to obscure the visual signifiers of aging, disease, and death from the general public. According to Ariés, “rapid advances in comfort, privacy, personal hygiene, and ideas about asepsis have made everyone more delicate” [by the twentieth century] and “our senses can no longer tolerate the sights and smells that in the early nineteenth century were part of daily life, along with suffering and illness” (570).

As Ariés draws his monograph to a close, he notes that death rituals in America illustrate a dialectical tension in contemporary mourning processes. He writes “it is as if one whole part of the culture were pushing America to erase every vestige of death, while another part is holding on to it and keeping death in a place that is still quite visible” (596). Ironically, while diseased bodies are hidden in hospitals and nursing homes and dead bodies are ushered off into the funeral home or parlor, attempts to memorialize the dead continue both online and off, the material evidence of which has grown exponentially.

We may find such of evidence of memorializations at the cemetery, online, and even on the side of the road. Part of what Erika Doss accomplishes in her 2008 study titled *The Emotional Life of Contemporary Public Memorials: Towards a Theory of Temporary Memorials* is an enumeration and analysis of this exponential growth, declaring the evidence of a world-wide “memorial mania,” (7) a “veritable explosion of public monument-making” (5). Doss suggests that this contemporaneous memorial making differs from older expressions of grief, explaining that contemporary commemoratives have shifted “from the monument to the memorial; from the monolithic master narratives of the ‘official’ art to the diverse, subjective and often conflicted expressions of the multiple publics” (5). Though Doss focuses on material expressions of grief (collections of cards, balloons, flowers, stuffed animals, etc. that mark the site of a tragic event) and not their virtual counterparts, many of her claims about such expressions are applicable to the online memorial, for the proliferation of online memorials is not only diverse, but multiple. To clarify, there is no unified format for websites related to grief but rather a multiplicity of such sites. There are online support groups for those coping with fatal illness and for their family members, online support groups for those coping with loss, virtual guestbooks for funerals, online memorial websites, blogs dedicated to grief, and electronic elegies. There are also many social media sites that continue to host the profiles of dead users as to be further examined later in this essay. Each type of site offers users a different mode for articulating grief and loss as well as a platform for renegotiating the divide between life and death. If we include the presence of the dead within the social network Facebook, the number of these online memorials is too vast to count.

So while Doss writes that the temporary material monuments are diverse and numerous, their virtual counterparts are also varied. According to Doss, “traditional” markers of mourning such as the obelisque or state-constructed statue do not meet the needs of today’s publics. Doss claims that makeshift material memorials represent diversity,

so the web memorial arguably offers an appropriate mode of expression for the “diverse” and “conflicted” expressions of the public as well. After all, anyone with computer and Internet access and limited training can create a website, start a blog, sign a virtual guestbook, or take part in online discussion forums relating to tragic and traumatic events. One major difference between performing an act of grief online rather than in person is that one need not be limited by their geographical location to take part in mourning a national tragic event. Doss mentions the short-comings of the “master” narratives of loss (as quoted earlier) have led to the material remembrances, yet the turn to online memorials is also evidence of the move away from such master narratives to individualized expressions of grief.

The aforementioned contrast between master narrative and multiplicity has significant theoretical parameters, and here, Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* resonates. For every universal, meta-narrative of an official, state-sanctioned expression of grief, such as the 9-11 Memorial in Manhattan, for example, there are thousands of personal websites, which can be considered what Lyotard describes as *petit récits* (60) or “localized” narratives of grief. The Internet, with its diverse users and multiplicity of channels emphasizes Lyotard’s avowal that humanity cannot be described as a universal subject (66) and in this space we do not find the “regularization” of permitted language games in cyberspace. As Lyotard writes, “we are finally in a position to understand how the computerization of society affects this problematic” (66). Now more than ever, Lyotard’s assertion is demonstrated in cyberspace, which is “governed exclusively by the performativity principle” (67). If online acts of grief are anything, they are performative as well as localized.

Take for example, the numerous utterances of grief relating to 9-11 on the website Grieving.com, a web hub comprised of hundreds, if not thousands, of discussion boards focused on specific events of grief, (such as parents mourning the death of a child) or grief related to specific events (such as 9-11 and Newtown). There are hundreds of posts relating to 9-11, but an entry written by a user called ModKonnie at forums.grieving.com keenly illustrates the writer’s attempt to localize a national event, offering a personal view of the attacks rather than an official, state-sanctioned master narrative.

ModKonnie’s post appears in 2011, ten years after the terrorist attacks. She states: “as an American, I will never forget 9/11. While I do not live in New York City, I was still seriously affected by the events of the day. I live out in the country in Indiana.” Here, we can see that despite her geographical location, ModKonnie emotionally connects to the event via her online discourse. In the three or four paragraphs that follow in her post, ModKonnie outlines the very minutiae of her 9-11 experience. In place of the grand narrative of 9-11 offered by official discourses disseminated through governmental channels of communication, ModKonnie outlines her own personal experience: “Each one of my siblings called to say they loved us, and we discussed our strategies for worst case scenarios in the event it was World War III,” writes ModKonnie. “Honestly, it was such a scary day for us.” ModKonnie describes her trip to the local Wal-Mart in detail, alludes to her thoughts about buying firearms after the attack, and even details the newly purchased American flag unfurled upon her husband’s pick-up truck that day. “To end this rambling commentary, as I

contemplate the 10th anniversary of that tragic day, I will never forget,” reflects ModKonnie. Forums.grieving.com allows ModKonnie and other users a chance to preserve their memories for the foreseeable future. Though many Americans could clearly remember the details of where they were and what they were doing days and months after the attack, that would likely not be the case years later. The websites, then, become a mode of re-negotiating memories so that the details of such events are preserved for the time ahead. The writer no longer must rely upon the human mind to preserve the memory, but can allow their thoughts to live on in perpetuity online.

Signing guestbooks is a common type of the online performative act of grief. Newtownmemorialfund.org, is, according to the site “... not a plaque or a statue or even a building. It’s an ongoing remembrance that provides care and support for those directly affected today, and for the entire community, for the long term,” which allows any user to sign and make posts through the site’s guestbook function, though the posts must be approved by site moderators. According to their posts, many of the visitors offering comments are local to Newtown, but many writers are not from the city. Like the sense of grief illustrated in ModKonnie’s post, entries from non-locals enumerated on Newtownmemorialfund.org also accentuate the writers’ attempts to demonstrate their sense of grief and loss relating to the tragedy, despite their geographical location. A user named Terri Dryden writes: “I can not even fathom how the people of Newtown feel. I have cried right along with these families and the community. I live in Salisbury, MD but this tragedy has had a terrible effect on the entire United States. I feel so terrible being so far away, not being able to help, but I will continue to always keep everyone in my thoughts and prayers.” Dryden’s post alludes to the author’s desire to perform some gesture of assistance, but since this writer is prevented from making such a move in person, Dryden can only rely upon a performative online act.

Localized web expressions are paralleled by the placement of material objects of which Doss describes as the spontaneous expressions of loss one might find collected near the site of a terrorist attack, a tragic car crash, or any other site of trauma and death. As Doss writes, the acts’ meaning “lies in their affective dimensions, and particularly in their cultural negotiations of public grief. As such, their contextualization is highly dependent on contemporary understandings of memory, mourning and public feeling” (8). Online memorials are also affective and as mentioned above, are forms of “public grief.” While the placement of a flower or stuffed animal can be anonymous, the signing of a virtual guestbook does not have to be as the author of the note of condolence may sign their name in order to become a component of the public collective of grief.

Both Ariés and Doss can assist us in understanding the shifts in expressions of grief during the last few centuries, yet neither bring particular attention to online memorials and elegies or the websites that serve as support groups for the bereft. In Ariés’ case, online elegies and memorials are not mentioned simply due to timing of his publication—1981—long before the complete proliferation of Internet usage in the West and Mark Zuckerberg’s time. Doss’ case is a bit more complex. On one hand, it would be relatively facile to argue that web memorials should be included in her study; the memorials are, in a manner of speaking, just as temporary as the cluster of balloons that marks the spot of a fatal car crash

or the flower bouquets that mark where a deadly tornado took the lives of elementary school-aged children. Yet, web content is not thought of as fleeting, though any website risks being only a temporary thing. Though any website, blog, or profile can ultimately be deleted they are not treated as fleeting things just as frail as a human body. It is the illusory sense of the timelessness of the web artifact that makes them attractive to the bereft and warrants further investigation. There is a sense among computer users that the html code will not only outlast the balloons, bears, cards, photographs and other ephemera which coalesces around the site of trauma to serve as an index of emotion, but perhaps, outlast us all.

Evidence in Western society's faith in the immortality of the machine and in the timelessness of the computer code is, in fact, plentiful, and many of the commercial and non-profit websites relating to mourning play into this sense of infallibility. Online-funeral.com, for example, claims to "allow mourners at a distance to participate in the grieving ceremony, even when they cannot attend in person" through the use of web cameras and CD-roms in order to provide "real-time live coverage of the visitation in the funeral home." Web site promotional materials boast that these services "ensure that those who touched our hearts will be Remembered Forever." Obviously, there is no way to prove such a claim. It is impossible to claim that this web site will be in existence "Forever," yet is emphatically stated the site will survive, offering hope and the promise of virtual immortality.

Likewise, the creators Memory.Rain.com, another such website, state that their services allow mortals to transcend their corporeality and exist "forever" online. At this particular site users can save videos, pictures, and stories so that "when your children or your children's children, visit these pages they leave feeling like they truly knew the person. Even though their lives have ended on this earth you can continue to learn from the other people who were impacted by your friend or family member." These claims are not only implausible but likely impossible, yet it appears as though many people are willing to believe that the computer code can grant an immortal status to the deceased.

One explanation for the faith in computer-based memorials rests in the apparent veneration of images. Here, Lambert Wiesing's text *Artificial Presence: Philosophical Studies in Image Theory* is particularly facilitative in understanding the claimed immortality of the web presence. As websites are arguably images, Wiesing's statement that "the idea of an artificial presence produced by images is like a thread running through phenomenological image theory and can be regarded as its main idea" (19) is applicable to virtual images and useful in understanding online memorials and their ability to create affect. Artificial presence is not only the central idea of image theory, but is essential to understanding online activities as well. Being online allows one to step simultaneously in two worlds (or more) depending on how many windows are opened on the desktop. Online presence is purely artificial, the profile or avatar is only a marker of the material in an immaterial space. Online personas are always mere avatars or "artificial presences," yet the avatar is treated as the real person; online chatting or texting is interpreted as a face-to-face conversation. If avatars are interpreted as human beings, then arguably, the divide between living and dead online is leveled, as both the living and dead are equally re-presented as human bodies. If all the

World Wide Web is artificial presence, then the profile of the deceased is on the same existential level of the profile as the one who is alive.

One other aspect of Wiesing's study that is helpful in understanding web memorials, relates to windows—a word synonymous with web usage as well as a common framing device of many other images. Wiesing states that Microsoft's windows (and those of other operating systems) are "that of a pictorial medium for producing and presenting things that are in attendance" (85). Wiesing writes that "a screen is a display for the presentation of things—yet not for the presentation of real things but rather for that of virtual things" (85). The idea of being in attendance is important to considerations of grief and loss. A person may be deceased, but remains in attendance on Facebook. What is more, these windows belie a sense of proximity that viewers are physically close to the subject matter of the window. Wiesing explains that when one watches television for example, the subject matter (framed by that window) appears in the person's home, which gives users a supposed sense of proximity. (That is, of course, one significant attribute of television. One may be physically present in New York, for example, but watching an event occurring in California and feel as though they are "there" also.) This notion of proximity is applicable to viewing web images, but is especially significant to images relating to mourning. If a person who is mourning wishes to visit a material gravesite or mausoleum, they may be limited by a variety of factors including geographical location, time of day and even perhaps the weather. Online memorials are not at all limited by such factors, creating a sense of enduring and timeless sense of availability and proximity for the living person who wishes to visit the deceased.

Another explanation for the rising reception of web memorials has not only to do with proximity but expedience. Writing from a sociological perspective, Jonathan Fast describes the manner in which websites were created and utilized in the wake of the Columbine tragedy. He writes that "within weeks of the shooting, each victim had his or her own Web site, the sites being interlinked as a 'web-ring' so that visitors could more easily from one to the next, as though walking from room to room in a gallery" (487). The fact that these memorials could be created within weeks allowed the sites' creators to preserve their memories while they were still up to date and not blemished by time. The example also relates to Wiesing's thoughts on proximity two-fold. Firstly, the web gallery, as Fast indicates, allows for the victims to be laid to (virtual) rest in propinquity to one another, despite the geographical location of their respective corporeal resting places. Secondly, however, this web ring allows mourners to create an illusion of physical closeness to the victims of the tragedy. Mourners can visit the web ring any time or from any place, and feel a sense of virtual proximity to those that were lost in the tragedy.

Walter Benjamin's prescient words in his renowned essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" also prophetically indicates the lack of spatial and temporal constraints of web material (always a reproduction) and their transmission to a global audience. Benjamin writes that the emancipation of images (in this case, both artistic and virtual) offers "increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products. It is easier to go exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than exhibit the statue of divinity that has its fixed place in the interior of a temple" (225). Benjamin's description of the emancipation of images from a fixed space is exemplified nowhere more emphatically than

on the World Wide Web, for here it is even less problematic to transmit the image across the oceans and around the globe via virtual representation. What is more, the rendering of the image from material original to cyber copy arguably grants the image an extended, if not eternal, life. Once scanned and reproduced as a cyber image, the “mechanically reproduced” image will be freed from a set space, but also a time. For even if the original image is destroyed, it will still remain in the cyberworld, a shift that art theorist Geoffrey Batchen also notes in his book 2002 book, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*. Here, Batchen dedicates a fair amount of reportage to Bill Gates’ purchases of electronic rights to myriad pieces of photography. What Batchen notes as most significant in this purchase (and what is also apropos to this essay,) is that Gates (via the Corbis company) is interested only in the purchase of the electronic rights to the photos, and not in the purchase of the original works of art. Corbis will only offer a representation of a photo, but all photos are representations of an original. As Batchen states, “if there is no ‘original work,’ then there can be no ‘faithful copy’ either” (152). So, then, though cyber images are bound by the same dimensional constraints as any other image, we can successfully argue that because of their unique place in a post-mechanical reproduction space, they are freed from space and time, making them appear “immortal,” allowing humans to exist in a form of representation online.

So far, the websites that have been discussed all illustrate connections to grief, loss, and mourning. While the sites allow the living ample space to express their thoughts about death and even representations of the dead via images, Facebook conceivably allows users to perform an act that is quite different from simply writing about their loss or writing about the victims of the tragedy. Facebook allows users to transcend the divide between living and dead through first person, direct address to the deceased. Rather than talking about a tragedy (such as described in the posts relating to 9-11 and Newtown cited earlier) or about a loved one, Facebook posts allow users to metaphorically speak to the dead.

While Facebook is mostly comprised of the living, even *Forbes* magazine reported upon what it calls the social network’s “existential crisis,” or more crudely, its “death problem.” According to a report from the magazine in early 2011, “about a million Facebook users passed away last year by one estimate, a number that could soar if Facebook’s growth continues unabated. The problem: When a Facebook member dies, friends flock to his or her profile to share photos and stories—until the site kicks the account into memorial status and unplugs the profile.” While this report suggests that the profile is “unplugged” once a user dies, it can often be a matter of months or years before this happens, (if ever), as the impetus for changing a status to memorialized is left to the friends and family of the deceased, and as per explained in Facebook’s own verbiage:

It is our policy to memorialize all deceased users’ accounts on the site. Memorializing the account set privacy so that only confirmed friends can see the profile (timeline) or locate it in Search. The profile (timeline) will also no longer appear in the Suggestions section of the Home page. Friends and family can leave posts in remembrance. In order to protect the privacy of the deceased user, we cannot provide login information for the account to anyone. However, once an account has been memorialized, it is completely secure and cannot be accessed or altered by anyone.



According to this policy, only a verified family member can report a user's death, and the proper form must be completed "under penalty of perjury." One must provide Facebook.com with an obituary or other form of evidence to prove their family member is indeed deceased, but it is unclear from Facebook's Help Center how these forms are processed, how long it takes for them to be processed, or if in fact, all deceased members of Facebook will eventually be deleted or memorialized. The "memorializing" feature is also contingent on the fact that someone actually wants to "unplug" the profile (or that there is someone that is close enough to the deceased user to do that). In many cases, the living Facebook user opts out of this function, preserving the dead user's profile for the future. So while Belting writes that the primitives' inclusion of the corpse was in response to the fact that the community felt "threatened by the gap caused by the death of one of its members" (307), it seems we still suffer from the sense of peril. As archaic as the process of reanimation sounds, contemporary society attempts to reincorporate the dead into the realm of the living in a manner not that different from the primitive societies.

While Belting notes the primitive attempts to reconnect with the dead, W.J.T. Mitchell, renowned image theorist, makes similar claims about images, specifically those relating to the dead. Mitchell is not (here at least) suggesting that the photograph is a substitute for the dead, but rather that images take on a life of their own; or at least are treated as such. As Mitchell writes, "art historians may 'know' that the pictures they study are only material objects that have been marked with colors and shapes, but they frequently talk and act as if pictures had will, consciousness, agency, and desire" writes Mitchell (72-3). "Everyone knows that a photograph of their mother is not alive," he continues, "but they will still be reluctant to deface or to destroy it" (73). Everyone also likely knows that a website is not alive, but they are also reluctant to destroy or deface the profile page either.

Mitchell's assertion is especially highlighted on Facebook pages of users who have died. These Facebook web images are also often treated as though they have "consciousness, agency, and desire," and is demonstrated through close readings of the profiles of users, such as Shawn Koch, who was in his early thirties when he was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2010. Much of this Chicago bartender and bar manager's illness is chronicled online via his own posts on Facebook and later, his wife, Katie Kershaw Koch's posts regarding Koch's progress on Caringbridge.org, an online organization that offers "...personal, protected sites [which] make it easy to stay connected during any type of health event. Family and friends can visit the site to stay informed and leave supportive messages." The messages on Caringbridge are of significance because they offer a contrast to the construction of the messages on Facebook, especially after Koch's death from the disease in June 2011. Caringbridge offers what might be called the "official narrative" on Koch's illness titled simply: "Background Story" though it is unclear who the author of the statement is. The Background Story is worded as follows: "Shawn, 34 was diagnosed with brain cancer in Feb. 2010. He has a wife, Katie and a beautiful two-year old little girl, Charlie Mae. Shawn has already crossed hurdles that most do not even come to with his physical, mental, and emotional endurance and drive. Not surprising because Shawn has always been an amazing individual." This narrative is direct and to the point, and is contrasted by the highly personal, detailed narrative that Koch's wife, Katie Kershaw Koch, offers on the same site. She

chronicles her husband's diagnosis and first round of treatments in her very first post on Caringbridge in the following:

For the past several months, Shawn has been experiencing some physical problems that he was concerned about. Around October, he started noticing some numbness in his right hand and some difficulty with dexterity on the same side.

He began working with a sports medicine doctor to see if there was muscle issues that were causing this problem. It seemed to be getting a little better, but then some difficulty with coordination of his leg on the same side occurred.

On Wednesday, Jan 20th, Shawn and Katie went to the ER because of his difficulty walking. The doctors did some tests and ultimately, they found out that he had a mass in his brain that was causing swelling in the area that is in charge of motor function. That Friday, his team of doctors decided that it would be best to try remove the mass.

Shawn had brain surgery on Friday morning. It was successful in removing most of the mass, and keeping him alive and well in the process. The picture shows the craniotomy/bad-ass scar after the procedure.

Right now, Shawn is in intensive rehab, trying to recover the function on his right side that was lost from swelling of the mass and the surgery itself. He is re-learning the basics, but is exceeding expectations (even his own, which is hard to do!). There will probably need to be some more treatment in his future, but that's what he, his family, and the doctors are figuring out.

Many many many many thanks to all of you for your kind words of support and donations. The road ahead is long and we will keep you updated as the story unfolds.

This post is obviously more detailed and personal than the short paragraph of "Background Story" and offers a decidedly optimistic tone about the future. There are several interesting shifts in narration in the piece that are worth reflecting upon. At times, the post is written in third-person, using a tone that is almost clinical, stating facts such as: "Shawn and Katie went to the ER because of his difficulty walking." These types of statements demonstrate an attempt, perhaps, to distance the author from the severity of the situation. By the end of the post, however, the author lapses into the plural first person, writing "we will keep you updated." This entry is the first of almost 100 that document the couple's experience with the disease. As mentioned, Koch died from cancer less than two years later and this, too, is reported via the Caringbridge web site. Koch's wife writes "Shawn took his last breathe around 430pm tonight. It was beautiful. Harpist played 10 minutes or so- he is free of cancer at last...." and that "Our hearts are sad And it is okay- to be be happy sad..." The latter post expresses a sentiment similar to that of Paul Ricoeur in his collection of notes published under the title *Living Up To Death*. As Olivier Abel writes in the preface to this collection of notes, Ricoeur records how death "takes us in two directions...two ways of

speaking of what is essential...self-detachment, which prepares for the transfer of one's love of life to others, and that of confidence in God's care, which takes up, elevates, and supports my insouciance" (xv). Katie Koch's binary of happy/sad is a sentiment that is mentioned frequently on this site as well in her posts on Facebook to her deceased husband.

While these notes from Caringbridge are of interest expressing the living's sentiments of grief and loss, I bring them up here in contrast to the type of discourse that is offered on Facebook. After Koch's demise, his Facebook profile page continued to be active for several years and is still active as of press time. While the notes on Caringbridge talk about Koch and his illness, the notes and posts on Facebook speak to Koch, as though he can read and respond to the posts, even after his death. Though he had been deceased for several years, Koch's spouse and friends continue to leave him messages on a regular basis, some years after his death. "Call me already," writes Kershaw Koch in a bittersweet message posted to her deceased husband. Later, she writes: "Oh baby- you still checking facebook these days? Prolly something much cooler there- high tech heaven stuff.... Please know your anniversary gift is the same thing I got u last year...just my love :)" (Kershaw Koch). These very personal messages from Koch's wife are coupled with ones from friends and other family members who continue to take note of important life markers such as: "Happy Fathers Day Shawn. I know you held Katie and Charlie in your arms today from up above and smiled as a proud husband and father would" (Principe). Other friends address Koch on his birthday: "Shawn, how many bottles of Dampierre have we popped on lesser occasions than birthdays?!...or even Saturdays realistically :) wish we were celebrating with one tonight-and a weekend birthday no less?!" (Harrison). This small sampling of messages is representative of the larger number posted online; comments to Koch continue to appear to this day, and Koch's profile remains open, it has not been "memorialized."

Thinking again of Mitchell, "no modern, rational, secular person thinks that pictures [or Facebook profiles] are to be treated like persons, but we always seem to be willing to make exceptions for special cases" (73). But why is this so, and why is the digital image a special case? Internet users also know that online profiles are only representations of people (either living or dead), but are not often treated as such. Aside from art theorists, scholars from other disciplines have also recently been interrogating the "lives" of things. Political scientist Jane Bennett's project in her *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* is to ask "how would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?" (viii) Bennett also asks how do "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only...impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own" (viii)? In this sense, we can understand the web presence, which is a "thing" and not a human, as gesturing toward a trajectory or tendency toward a "life" of its own. This propensity is also demonstrated in the Facebook algorithm. Consider how on Facebook, for example, user A can set up her profile to automatically "like" user B's posts. Each time user B posts a video clip, status update, etc, user A is noted as "liking" the post. The concept seems simple enough—except if user A is no longer alive. Does this type of continuing dialog between the "live" user and the "dead" constitute a trajectory or a tendency of its own? Likewise, consider the following post from one Facebook friend to her deceased colleague: "Hi! Got a "poke" from you -- not sure if it's a new one or old, but I suppose pokes don't have

an expiration date. Hope you are well” (Burton). So while Bennett does not address directly refer to computers or online profiles as life-like things, her claims about the vitality of objects is transferable to computers and computer life. Images are vital, and cyber images perhaps have the potential to “out live” us all. Here, Ricoeur in *Living Up to Death* is helpful once again, for if, as Bennet suggests, these images and the stuff of the Internet will outlive us all, then they are prime examples of the form of horizontal resurrection Ricoeur describes. Horizontal resurrection presents a hope that the act of writing allows for some sense of immortality and resurrection. As Olivier Abel explains, Ricoeur suggests that “through the transmissions, reception and the taking up of my words, acts and thought to those of others (xv) part of a persona’s persona will live on in what Ricoeur describes as “horizontal resurrection.”

Some Facebook users with a terminal diagnosis have used Facebook and other sites to attempt this horizontal resurrection. Lee McPherson, writer, blogger, and musician was also diagnosed with brain cancer in his early thirties. Like the Koch family, both Lee McPherson and his wife Dana used the internet to chronicle McPherson’s disease in its early stages and beyond, posting about the surgery to remove the brain tumor, the subsequent remission from cancer, the reoccurrence of cancer, and finally, the death of McPherson. As described on Imermanangels.org, a site dedicated to helping patients with cancer and their family members, McPherson blogged about his experiences as a patient with glioblastoma multiforme, grade IV brain cancer on his blog titled [cancershmancer.typepad.com](http://cancershmancer.typepad.com). Though the blog is now defunct, a white space devoid of words, McPherson’s Facebook profile is still live, presenting the living’s attempts to “speak” to the deceased, as if, perhaps, McPherson is not only able to check his Facebook page, but suggesting that he is his Facebook page. After McPherson’s death, a friend posts: “I am a firm believer that we do not leave, we simply change form. Energy is always there. Yours, along with your bright light, lives on with the many friends with whom you shared your life” (Fedorowych). Other messages to McPherson are less philosophical, but just as personal, as friends leave posts regarding McPherson’s other interests and hobbies. “Heard a new song today with a great bass line and thought of you and how you’d hum your new inventions to me” (Kuechenmeister). Even the posts that recognize McPherson’s death still suggest that he might be able to read the messages: “Lee, you will be missed! You’ve been hilarious since the fourth grade, and tuned me in to some great music. Just thinking of you brings a flood of cool tunes in my head. We’re all better for knowing you” (Martyn). McPherson’s Facebook site is populated with hundreds of such messages including those from both his wife and mother. His site is also active and has not been memorialized.

After studying several examples, we can see that the Facebook sites represent the living’s wish to speak about the dead, but their also attempts to “speak” somehow to the dead directly. These particular sites grant the living user a sense of proximity to the dead. While these qualities allow users to renegotiate their memories of the dead, they also point toward the problematic nature of images and representation in general. While reflecting upon these posts on Facebook and other websites, I am reminded of Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Similar to the arguments cited from W.J.T. Mitchell, Barthes focalizes his discussion around the photographic image, but specifically upon the images of the dead. One of Barthes’ theses in this reflection is that the photo is

always the “presence of an absence.” Here rests one of the major flaws of relying upon the web presence as a stand-in as the living being. The dialectic of the presence of an absence is problematic in the sense that the very thing reminding the living of the dead (in this case, the profile page) simultaneously serves as a reminder of the loss. The online presence of the deceased person in this case is always hopelessly intertwined with the loss.

Another issue with the reliance upon Facebook profiles as representations of the deceased is that they are still indeed only representations. Like photographic images, the virtual representations always fall short, just as Barthes laments over the photographs of his deceased mother: “‘That’s almost the way she was!’ The almost: love’s dreadful regime, but also the dream’s disappointing status—which is why I hate dreams...and confronted with the photograph, as in the dream, it is the same effort, the same Sisyphean labor: to reascend, straining toward the essence, to climb back down without having seen it, and to begin all over again” (66). This is, also then, the labor of re-encountering the dead image online. When engaging with the cyber image, web users strain towards that person, only grasping at residue of the (dead) person, sifting through the fragments of their net “persona”— their likes, dislikes, affiliations, occupations, political stances, musical tastes, and of course, photos and video images—in order to imagine the person. The virtual world is also “that-has-been,” because the Internet is pure simulacrum and representation.

In conclusion, then, we must think of how the aforementioned web presences allow users to renegotiate their memories and create representations of the deceased. As with any other representation, these avatars of a deceased person are always just that—representations of the one, and not the actual one. There is a rift between surface and depth, between the corporeality of the body and the fleeting essence or aura of the deceased. Though the grieving public can look at the deceased’s profile online, full of photographs of that person in their prime, the living public is not forced to look at the harsh truth of the deceased’s illness or corporeal death. The fact that the profiles are transmitted through several layers of mediation (computer screen, window, website) all serve as a buffers between viewer and image of the dead, ultimately shielding viewers from the horrors associated with death and dying. As Walter Benjamin states: “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (220). These profiles are not actually the person, they are not the sum of the person’s unique experience in time and space. So while Facebook and other sites allow for these expressions of grief, in reality they are actually only re-inscribing the dialectal turn regarding death ritual that Ariés describes in his monograph. The use of Facebook as a means of mourning merely demonstrates the ambivalence about death cited by Ariés; users can vacillate between hiding from the reality of death on the one hand and celebrating it through the memorial on the other.

Finally, while creating an online memorial is expedient and grants the living a sense of proximity to the dead, there is one philosophical flaw with this method of preservation. Simply put, we can always turn off our computers and “unplug” the profile of the dead. We can choose to ignore these digital images. Despite the fact that these online memorials do present feelings of loss and mourning, the profiles are always only a re-presentation of the dead, one that also ultimately has a limited “life” online.

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