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Visiting Digital Tombstones:

Unearthing Questions of Digital Personhood, Commemoration, and Remembrance Processes

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Culture & Performance Studies

by

Francesca Albrezzi

2015

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2015

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Visiting Digital Tombstones:
Unearthing Questions of Digital Personhood, Commemoration, and Remembrance Processes

by

Francesca Albrezzi

Master of Arts in Culture & Performance Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2015
Professor Mary Nooter Roberts, Chair

In this paper, I investigate digital device users and their relationships with devices in order to tease out the ways human and computer interactions are shaping concepts of personhood by utilizing Alfred Gell's concepts of the *art nexus* and the *distributed person* as frameworks for examining digital applications that are being incorporated by some users in processes of remembrance and mourning. First, I consider the metaphorical vocabulary and terminology applied to technical tools and their use, which ascribe a level of agency to the technological objects or systems. Secondly, I dissect two applications that were developed to run in tandem with the social networking platforms Twitter and Facebook, and designed to directly address processes of death, loss, and remembrance through the digital social network. I evaluate the two digital applications, called ifidie.net and LIVESON, to consider the ways in which people are incorporating digital devices and digital media into critical cultural practices, particularly those related to death and remembrance.

The thesis of Francesca Albrezzi is approved.

David Delgado Shorter

Allen Fraleigh Roberts

Mary Nooter Roberts, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

This work is dedicated to:

Polly Roberts and Susan Chervenic,

for taking on one of the toughest battles.

You inspire me. Keep fighting!

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Introduction

What does it mean that we spend hours a day at the altar of our computer screens? Are our mobile phones becoming extensions of our bodies, propping up our memories by allowing us to just "Google it" when we cannot recall the name of the movie we saw last week? Does an avatar, be it an email or screen name, simply represent us in a digital realm or does it allow for another self to exist entirely, causing communities to be born in new ways? [1] Since the first personal computers were bought and built by people in the late 1970s, computer technology has become fluidly integrated into quotidian life in much of Western culture (Turkle 2005: 157). From post-humanist theorists to digital art historians, academics in various fields are attempting to keep their analysis up to date with ever-changing, ever-developing technical markets, considering ways in which technology is shaping cultural production.

In this paper, I look at digital device users and their relationships with their devices in order to tease out new ways that these interactions are shaping concepts of personhood. First, I will examine the metaphorical vocabulary and terminology applied to technical tools and their use, which ascribes a level of agency to the technological object or system. When discussing computing in her book *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, Sherry Turkle (Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT) was one of the first to write about metaphorical language that is used colloquially and professionally to refer to computer technologies. Touching on this foundation, I look at the way that language has continued to change during the rise of mobile technology and the arguable realization of ubiquitous computing, as debated in the field of Human and Computer Interactions (HCI). Secondly, I will dissect two applications that were developed to run in tandem with the social networking

[1] I use the term avatar here in its latest contemporary usage as "an electronic image that represents and is manipulated by a computer user (as in a computer game)." This usage is metaphorical, derived from the word's original context in the Hindu tradition as "the incarnation of a Hindu deity (as Vishnu)" (*Merriam-Webster OnLine* 2015).

platforms Twitter and Facebook, and designed to directly address processes of death, loss, and remembrance through the digital social network. I will evaluate the two digital applications, called ifidie.net and LIVESON, to consider the ways in which people are incorporating digital devices and digital media into critical cultural practices, such as those related to death and remembrance.

Through a concept-driven exploration of this burgeoning field of examination, I hope to spur critical thinking through strategic interaction with new digital applications and cyber objects that will allow closer study of a subject that touches millions of lives today. Digital technology is growing pervasive within social practices of people in many parts of the world. From quieting devices before seeing a performance, announcements asking passengers to "turn-off all electric devices before flying," and an individual's shopping habits being tracked in order to provide customers with personally relevant coupons for future purchases, it seems prudent to continue to note, document, catalog, and question these growing procedures and performances with the digital. There is need to consider ramifications for personal privacy of digital tools, and to evaluate new social practices created by their implementation. I will build on scholarship of those working in Digital Humanities, Digital Art History, Ethnography, HCI, and Cultural and Performance Studies. While many of the technologies discussed may be familiar, the reframing of them within the context of theories of object personhood[2] will offer new and different perspectives.

Scholars in many fields are struggling to answer moral quandaries posed by rapid development and effects of digital devices. This project seeks to be a space for reflection to spur discussion about the influence of technology in daily life. In discussing ways social networking

[2] I use the term "object personhood" to encompass objects that are granted efficacy through metaphoric language or transformative exchanges with those who encounter them. Texts on this subject include: Arnoldi and Hardin 1996, Chuan and Elliott 2013, Coote and Shelton 1992, Davis 1997, Elkins and Morgan 2009, Gell 1998, Jones 1991, Mitchell 2005, Morgan 2005, Pinney and Thomas 2001, Roberts et al. 1994, Roberts et al. 2003.

sites like http://www.caringbridge.org/, designed for family and friends to communicate with loved ones during a health journey, and YouTube channels, such as “Ask a Mortician” (https://www.youtube.com/user/OrderoftheGoodDeath), I want to encourage people to think about their own interactions with digital devices in different ways. My goal is to increase exposure of digital technologies’ cultural impacts and to challenge and engage other institutional staples in communities, such as religious centers, educational facilities, and artistic hubs, to consider ways in which their operations and services have been affected by the explosion of digital technology.

As presented in articles such as “A Cyborg Manifesto” by Donna Haraway, the importance and relevance of this type of research becomes clear. Haraway (Distinguished Professor Emerita of the History of Consciousness and Feminist Studies at UCSC) utilizes economist Richard Gordon’s concept of the “homework economy” — a “restructuring of work that broadly has the characteristics formerly ascribed to female jobs, jobs literally done only by women,”— to emphasize how her theories are applied to real-life conditions (1991: 166). She writes, “The homework economy as a world capitalist organizational structure is made possible (not caused by) the new technologies” (ibid). Before her conclusion, Haraway summarizes “the picture of women’s historical locations in advanced industrial societies,” pondering how the positions of the home, market, salaried workplace, state, school, clinic-hospital, and church have been restructured through the social relations of science and technology (ibid, 170-172). Similarly, digital technologies are providing new ways for people to cope with issues of loss and address mourning in a digital era. We will be looking at two applications for Facebook and Twitter, as well as surveying a number of grief support websites and virtual communities that have been cited by news outlets.

In his seminal work, British social anthropologist Alfred Gell explored the concept of an object's personhood, bestowed on it by the prototype[3] – the human being (1998: 36-37). Hoping to follow in his footsteps, I will consider ways digital objects are involved in practices of memory, meaning making, and ways of holding histories. My aim is to extend these arguments and re-envision relationships between art and technology by considering technology as an "idol," following Alfred Gell's conceptualization.[4]

In discussing current milieux of contemporary computer culture in the United States, I have divided my paper into two parts. In examining ways digital device users are shaping concepts of personhood, I will address how an aura of enchantment and agency, again following Gell, is being implied and applied through language and use – first, more generally, through a few comparative object studies of personal computers, tablets, and cellular phones, and secondly, by addressing specific experiences surrounding loss of life, such as funerals and memorials, and digital applications that have been created in service of these deeply human rites of passage.

Though the subject of digital life and death may seem ghoulish at first, my goal is the exploration of a new phenomenon that is occurring in the process of commemoration and remembrance in U.S. communities that use smartphones and social media. Today, many millions of people use digital applications to stay in touch, get the latest news, share their experiences, and enrich their own lives through following the profiles of others. These digital networking tools, designed for fostering connections among the living, are now at the odd impasse of reconciling what happens to an online account when its user passes away. One result has been the adaptation these digital spaces by people seeking to reach out to others in their times of mourning or to play a part in their own grieving processes.

[3] The concept of the "prototype" is part of the theory of the art nexus, created by Alfred Gell.

[4] The term "idol" is one that Gell uses in his work. Today, in many circles, it is a term that carries a very negative connotation. The past uses of the term in art history, colonial histories, and anthropology make it problematic. I wish to be clear here that I am only using the term in the context of specifically referencing Gell's work.

In order to address this sensitive topic, I will write from the personal place of my own experiences with death and its intersection with current social media platforms. I have conducted interviews with individuals who have shared in my experiences, as well as researched one public interview on the topic and a survey of news articles covering the subject. These dialogs, which I will describe through my own engagement with performed memory, highlight two distinct viewpoints that are being formed around the appropriation of applications like Facebook and Tumblr to serve as mnemonic devices and communal places of comfort for those who have lost someone. In addition, I will complete a textual analysis of the websites, applications, and marketing videos of two new digital services, "ifidie," a Facebook application, and "LIVESON" a Twitter add on. Making offers to users to continue on through digital media after they are gone, the two applications may mark the coming of new practices and standards of memorialization, remembrance, and life after death. In my investigation, I will start to ask questions about where Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and other applications function in the greater context of memory theory.

However, before this inquiry, it is critical to establish a lineage to scholarship that examines the lives of things. In the next section, I will demonstrate a history of scholarship regarding object personhood, utilize the hermeneutics of the field to support my research, and extend these ideas to challenge notions of how social media can be considered, scrutinized, and understood through a legacy of art as anthropology.[5] I will argue that digital spaces are becoming the most energetic and efficacious sites for the construction of personhood than most anything else in our world right now.

[5] To clarify, my usage of the phrase "art as anthropology" is referring to the study of art through anthropological frames and methods, as opposed to those used in the discipline of Art History.

Part I: Objects of Enchantment, Agency, and Exchange

"Folk objects materialize tradition." (Bronner 1986: 199)

American folklorist, ethnologist, historian, educator, and author Simon J. Bronner in his essay "Folk Objects," from the book *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*, describes folk objects as elements of daily life that "reflect shared experience, community ideas and values connecting individuals and groups to one another and to the environment (1986: 199)." He adds that, "to stress those interconnections, the term 'material culture' is often used to point to the weaves of objects in the everyday lives of individuals and communities" (Bronner 1986: 199). Folklorists Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens write that folklore "exists in the physical world and in virtual settings online. It involves values, traditions and ways of thinking and behaving" (2011: 2). From the foundational concepts of histories of enchantment and worship to the studies of art, anthropology, folklore, and ethnography, I will lay the groundwork for understanding digital hardware and applications as "folk objects" outside of strictly quotidian frameworks, and as new elements serving and reshaping long-standing traditions in American culture. While some of the objects I will discuss are virtual, and therefore lack materiality, it is the ways in which they are created and used which express particular perspectives of their user communities and qualify them as folk objects.[6]

From Art History to Anthropology, scholars in humanities disciplines that consider material culture often agree that "the study of objects tends to emphasize aspects of form" (Bronner 1986: 200). In stressing the importance of examining structure, Bronner explains that "with a form that is easily discernible and stable, measurement can be made," and such measurements help us to "describe standards of form within a culture," allowing us to understand

[6] "Virtual" does not always refer to the "digital," as demonstrated in articles such as "Art as a Verb in Iboland" by Herbert M. Cole (1969: 36).

change over time and space (ibid). Comparing forms can also allow us to see where culture may be shared or where communities are exhibiting differing worldviews.

When considering contemporary examples of commemoration processes, digital devices are tools that can become digital folk objects, which some people then utilize in practices of remembrance. While the platforms may be different, there is a distinct form. Early forms include email chains, while more sophisticated websites with blog posting sections for visitors such as Modern Loss (www.modernloss.com) have now been developed as hubs for those who knew the deceased, allowing them to connect with others and memorialize the departed. Most recently, we have seen the popular social media platform of Facebook realize new potential, as the posting section known as "the wall" has become transformed into a place of shared commemoration when the owner of the page passes away. Each of these examples demonstrates a well-known form in memorial process – the shrine – as a palimpsest of remembrances, which I will discuss in detail later.

As Bronner notes, "Objects claim a historical character because they endure (1986: 202)." Their lasting nature can affect our perception of linear time, drawing the past into the present through the existence of the object.[7] While I will discuss the implications for notions of history and memory further in more detail, it is important to note that this warping of the conception of time also tends to affect belief systems. An object's seemingly fixed nature often makes it appear more reliable or truthful.[8] The traits assigned to objects heighten our awareness of human frailty and mortality and the longevity and endurance objects can hold, which can inspire a kind of wonder (Greenblatt 1991: 49).

[7] Others who have developed work on the permanence of material objects for political reasons and the like are Annette Weiner (Weiner 1992) and Brad Weiss (Weiss 1996).
[8] A greater discussion of this would involve dynamic and conservative elements of tradition (Sims and Stephens 2001, 81).

However, as Bronner adds:

> "Although objects stand apart, their relations with their human creators and owners are still recognizable. Human characteristics are attributed to object forms, so that chairs are described as having legs, lamps as having necks, and clocks as having faces. Some individuals interact with objects as though they were people. They give them names, talk to them, and decorate or 'dress' them" (Bronner 1986: 204).

Personification and bestowing of agency will be the focus of this section. By reviewing these cultural exchanges in other contexts and by understanding the foundational elements that exist within the process, I will demonstrate how similar exchanges are arising in contemporary culture for digital-device users.

Gell's Distributed Person: Understanding the Art Nexus

In the chapter entitled "The Distributed Person," British social anthropologist Alfred Gell explores the relationship between idols and their users/worshipers.[9] Be it the way they mimic life forms in their design, express extensions of the body, exhibit growth, or are bound and unwrapped as if they were clothed, idols all cultivate and enact an exchange in order to be what they are. In order to activate these exchanges, special objects receive particular treatment to transition from created object to the level of human being, creatures, beings, and even gods. Ultimately, Gell argues, "In terms of the positions they may occupy in the networks of human social agency, they may be regarded as almost entirely equivalent" (1998: 153).

[9] Again, I would like to reiterate that Gell's use of "idol" is idiosyncratic to him. For many, this term is readily associated with the Bible and carries connotations I do not wish to touch on here, as it is outside the scope of this project. My use of the word in this text is strictly in reference to Gell's usage and intended meanings.

Art History's most traditional forms of study and practice attend first and foremost to the aesthetic nature of particular works, examining the artistic system they are working within and how the works are adhering to or breaking the rules of that structure that defines their role, beauty, and accomplishment (Rubin and Pearlstone 1989: 11). Though the fields often overlap, Anthropology is a discipline that is not primarily concerned with the details of the artwork itself, but rather focuses on social relations surrounding its production, circulation, and reception. However, it is safe to assume that practitioners from each of these areas of study would agree that artistic creations are tools used to achieve certain ends within the context of their society and time period.

Alfred Gell declares, "it is only from a very parochial (blinkered) Western post-Enlightenment point of view that the separation between the beautiful and the holy, between religious experience and aesthetic experience, arises" (1998: 97). He further proposes that all cultural objects should be considered as art objects, and the methodology of the study of art must therefore be accomplished through discourses of the object's agency and how that agency is exercised. "The basic thesis of this work," Gell states, "is that works of art, images, icons and the like have to be treated, in the context of an *anthropological* theory, as person-like; that is, sources of, and targets for, social agency" (ibid, 96).

Gell's method in his anthropological theory insists that we have theory of art that is not obsessed with aesthetics, symbols, or representation. For him, as a social anthropologist in the British tradition, talking about art anthropologically means talking about the way that art is embedded in human social relations. While his method is almost entirely confined to artifacts, focusing on paintings, sculptures, and objects of all kinds, he is also interested in descriptions of those objects out in the world, where they are embedded in human social relations.

At the most basic level, when a person encounters an object that displays any type of human intervention, immediately that person is in a particular kind of relationship with that object that begins to make it into what Gell calls an art object. Because the person believes the pattern or form has been produced by somebody else for some reason, he or she begins to be intrigued by it, creating an exchange between person and efficacious thing. This is what Gell understands as an art nexus. The art nexus consists of the index, the original object; the recipient, the person who encounters the object; the artist, an unknown person who created the object; and potentially a prototype, something out in the world that the object represents. However, if the object has agency this can become complicated – it may *present* rather than be represented, in that case. Gell's theory of the art nexus is a method that looks for descriptions of art works embedded in the social world.

To understand the significance of Gell's reframing of art encounters, Susanne Kuchler, who studied under Gell, suggests that it is "instructive to consider the positions toward this question as prefigured in the aesthetics of Kant and Schiller" (2001: 57). "While Kant saw art as an essential part of contemplative life," she writes, "Schiller saw art as part of active life – one seeing the conception of art as tied primarily to thought, while the other saw it as primarily tied to social relations" (ibid). In her first footnote, Kuchler states that "Gell's argument accords with recent theoretical developments within the discipline of art history critiquing the idea that artworks are passive, that they simply exist in a previously constituted social context" (ibid, 90).

Traditionally, Art History is considered a field that "began with the study of European antiquity, where relationships are clear, and has grown out of a system of shared political, religious, and economic values and ideas" (Rubin and Pearlstone 1989: 11). More recently, it has been understood that this was too narrow a definition to be fair to the varying histories of peoples and their objects around the world. Striving to be more inclusive, a more hybrid

approach is necessary. For example, born from a course offered in the Art History Department at UCLA, the prominent Africanist and teacher Arnold Rubin suggested that an objective of his book *Art as Technology* is "to identify the constraints and variables, the shared characteristics and distinctive differences in the arts produced by people organized into fairly well-defined types of social, political, and economic units" (ibid, 6). "While rooted in the humanistic concerns typical of traditional art historical scholarship, it draws heavily upon the methods, theories, and data of the social sciences, particularly anthropology" (ibid), which resonates with Alfred Gell's argument in *Art and Agency* that cultural context is essential to the study of art objects. Though I focus on very different content than what is discussed by Rubin and Pearlstone, I am interested in the arguments made for the functional roles of art within its cultural setting, and their strong conceptual guidelines for my argument that digital devices can be considered as art objects and analyzed based on their functional properties (ibid, 17, 18, 44).[10]

For addressing objects outside of the historical, Western cannon, many art historians start with a "comparative examination of the structures within which art is produced and utilized, attempting to develop a valid framework for understanding how art operates within its cultural context" (Rubin and Pearlstone 1989: 11). In essence, "rather than being an isolated and essentially self-contained activity, art shapes and is shaped by the cultural system which produced it, and is thus a unique record or trace or reflection of that system" (ibid, 12). While drawing on the work of social scientists to elaborate on aspects of belief and behavior, it is important to remember that "the focus is *art*, and the points of departure and destinations will always be *objects*, where they come from, why they look the way they do, and what they *mean*" (ibid). While I agree with Rubin that "objects are records of cultural process, and they provide

[10] To avoid this confusion, it should be noted that Rubin's manuscript was posthumously brought to press by Zena Pearlstone.

direct, unmediated access to the values and experiences of their producers – if we know how to read them," I think he too quickly dismissed the budding products of digital systems when he wrote that objects provide direct testimonies that "are not filtered through somebody else's consciousness (bias, preconceptions) as are data on social systems" (ibid). While the template nature of many social media platforms and applications are important to consider, memorial pages and message boards created through them are still unique to the producers and grant access to a new cultural experience that is created to address a rite of passage. Written before the dot-com boom of the 1990s and the social media explosion that followed, the benefit of hindsight has proven this to be an oversight. Rubin could have foreseen the advances in computing technology that came so rapidly.

Another crucial aspect in understanding Gell's theory of art and agency is the way in which it relies on a series of exchanges and interactions among objects, artists, and viewers/users. Considering such a perspective in their own way, Rubin and Pearlstone write that "we can identify three broad areas of what art does in society as – apparently – universal. *First*, it establishes and proclaims the parameters of individual and group identity" (1989: 16). Similar to what they discovered, when examining social media networks, "a sense of individual identity is difficult to extricate from the collectivity, the network of social relationships in which an individual participates" (ibid, 16). It is not only through elements like language, religion, and dance, but also through dress, selfies, and use of social media that people define "distinctiveness, [and] the patterns of belief and behavior which demarcate it from its neighbors" (ibid). Secondly, Rubin frames art as a didactic system that enculturates individuals by instilling the concept of group-membership through the sharing of patterns of belief and behavior, usually over generations. This is not unlike the philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* or:

> "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express of mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor" (Bourdieu 1977, 72).

Itself a product of history, *habitus* is produced through individual and collective practices in accordance with historical schemes and it guides the sense of what is normal or proper, without it being explicitly stated by any formal set of rules or laws. The third area Rubin discusses is how art may be described as a form of technology, "a part of the system of tools and techniques by which peoples relate to their environment and secure their survival" (ibid). More and more, we are seeing digital technologies serve in these three ways within the societies that use them. Similarly, Gell's theory of the art nexus helps to focus art analysis on the work an object is performing. So, my motivating question becomes how are digital technologies being used as "a tool for interacting with other people or with environmental or universal forces; … a communicative device; … a tool for making the intangible concrete" (Gell 1998: 17)?

In the introductory chapter of *African Material Culture,* Mary Jo Arnoldi, Christraud M. Geary, and Kris L. Hardin "contend that the production and use of objects have the capacity to transform situations as well as people," and that "this capacity is not inherent in material form per se, but is mediated by or realized through human agency[11]" so that "objects are one means,

[11] It should be noted that their argument is at variance with Gell's insofar as they see all agency through human actors, and none in the efficacies of objects and related arts that Gell does.

then, by which humans shape their world, and their actions have both intended and unintended consequences" (Arnoldi et al. 1996: 1). Focusing on the constructive aspects of material culture within Africa, the writers stress "the importance of agency and practice in the construction and reconstruction of social and cultural forms" (ibid). While the politics of defining or representing African objects may have "more to do with the interests of those with the power to represent than it does with understanding those being represented" (ibid, 2), my examination translates that dynamic into considering the balance of the device user's control, the power of cyber developers and designers, and the content that is generated and consumed. In considering more historical tracing of digital development and its inroads into culture, it is critical to keep in mind that perceptions of societies are shaped by the "interests of those who collected or wrote about material culture and that the shaping of perception is always tied to relations of power" (ibid, 3).

In his most recent book, *Who Owns the Future?* (2013), philosopher and computer scientist Jaron Lanier discusses the urgent economic and social trend of our age. There is a growing concentration of money and power in digital networks. He explains how tech moguls are exploiting big data and the free sharing of information, which he argues has led the economy into recession. Lanier feels that our personal privacy is more and more at risk, since our information is seen as profitable data by large tech companies, leading to a disempowering of the middle class. The digital networks of social media, intelligence agencies, and financial institutions define much of the world, and Lanier cautions they may, at this rate, destroy its economies and governing structures.

Likewise, Jean-François Blanchette (Associate Professor in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA) wrote an article that highlights how digital information is routinely discussed in terms that imply its immateriality, characterizing the digital with a nature of power non-reliant on the media in which it is housed or the signal carriers that make it run and

function. In dealing with this problem, Blanchette asks, “What might it mean to talk of bits as material objects?” (2011: 1). He identifies key elements that contribute to the “thing-ness” of the digital, rooting it in an object-based reality. In his analysis, Blanchette “demonstrates that the materiality of digital information can be understood as the composition of two different sets of constraints: those due to the physical characteristics of the limited resources of computation; and those due to the adoptions that manipulate this information.” Without this understanding, “essential dynamics that animate the built environment of the virtual will remain invisible and unaccounted for” (ibid, 23, 26). As the humanities increasingly move to ground “cognition, identity, subjectivity, and collective action in the body and its material environment, rather than solely in the brain,” Blanchette looks to modes of analysis that are grounded in the “stuff” of computing to expose the infrastructural work of computing to engage with a broader range of stakeholders (ibid, 26-27). His arguments support the notion of apps or webpages as objects, despite their virtual characteristics; however, he believes that “bits cannot escape the material constraints of the physical devices that manipulate, store, and exchange them (ibid, 2).

In contrast, in the post "The Machine Stops" from the Web blog ExtremeTech, tech blogger Sebastian Anthony considers what might happen if the electrical grids failed globally, citing many ways the masses have come to depend on electronic-based machines to play crucial roles within daily life (Anthony 2013). Anthony also meditates on what a recovery would look like, how it could or could not happen, and what might be the sociopolitical ramifications. Important to note are the instances in which Anthony suggests that due to this level of power, these “machines” have come to be worshiped or feared as if they were gods. From examples like

this, we can see a connection between the personification of machines and examples laid out in the works of Gell, Rubin, and others, demonstrating a lineage to histories of enchantment.[12]

In thinking of how objects become more than they are, writer Mary McAllester Jones unpacks *La flamme d'une chandelle*, the last book of philosopher Gaston Bachelard. She focuses closely on the relationship between subject and object and how Bachelard employs poetics to understand that connection in a reciprocal way. Using the example of kerosene and gas street lanterns and the torch bearers who lit them every night, we can see how "the subject creates the object, and is in turn created by it; the object is created by the subject, which in turn it creates" (Jones 1991: 157). Bachelard suggests an kerosene lamp is "more human" than modern electric lamps "because it gives light 'thanks to man's ingenuity'" in trimming the wick and otherwise seeing to the lamp functioning properly.[13] She argues that with the ease of technology in contemporary life "there is a risk that this convenient passivity will completely overtake our daily lives, that we shall be as a result, dehumanized" (ibid, 155, 156). Returning to these premises, I question if the interactivity between subject and object is really being unbalanced through technological progress. I will consider the ways that digital objects and cyber networks are allowing for a reinvestment in "being human" and continuing a relationship or fellowship with Bachelard's "creatures" (ibid, 159).

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[12] "In speaking of 'enchantment' I am making use of a cover-term to express the general premise that human societies depend on the acquiescence of duly socialized individuals in a network of intentionalities whereby, although each individual pursues (what each individual takes to be) his or her own self-interest, they all contrive in the final analysis to serve necessities which cannot be comprehended at the level of the individual human being, but only at the level of collectivities and their dynamics" (Gell 1992: 43).
[13] Mary Nooter and Allen F. Robers expanding on Bachelard's concepts of the exchange between objects and people in the chapter "Fellowship with Objects" (1997).

Objects, Agency, and Exchanges

Returning to Bronner, personhood also comes into play when, "despite the 'otherness' of objects, humans nevertheless project their own ideas and emotions onto them and see them as reflections of themselves" (1986: 204). In considering art objects for more than their meaning or aesthetic value, but as forms for mediating social action, Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Thomas addresses "a range of issues in the anthropology of art in relation to a theory proposing that former emphasis upon significances and aesthetics in anthropology of art have proved unproductive, and that art should instead be seen as a special kind of technology that captivates and ensnares others in the internationalities of its producers" (2001: vii). This compilation is in direct (but respectful) response to Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* and its authors seek to "re-assess questions of agency and meaning in art" (Pinney and Thomas 2001: vii).

Within this compilation, the essay written by Daniel Miller, entitled "The Fame of Trinis: Websites as Traps," is the only application of Gell's theories that addresses digital spaces. Miller's work argues that Gell's posthumous book constructs an approach that can be applied to the study of websites and the development of the internet (2001: 137). While Miller's work is "based on a study of 60 commercial and 60 personal websites created by Trinidadians, in the form they appeared during January–March 1999," I want to argue, much as Miller suggests for a website, that the growing social media forms and their applications, "are best understood, following Gell, as attempts to create aesthetic traps that can express the social efficacy of the creators and attempt to draw others into social or commercial exchange with those who have objectified themselves through the internet" (Miller 2001: 137). Tracing from Gell, Miller states that "the argument has been made that, as aesthetic forms, websites may be considered art works whose purpose is to entrap or captivate other wills so that they will come into relationship with them, exchanging either in economic or social intercourse. They are not mere idiosyncratic or

individual extensions, since even after a very short time they take on conventional forms as a collective oeuvre of art works that enable us to recognize and respond to what is presented, and constrain the individual or company into the techniques and strategies of the web" (Miller 2001: 153).

Gell was revolutionary for his time within the fields of anthropology and art history, and his tragic passing makes it impossible to know how he would have continued to develop his theories. In joining with the academic community that has attempted to build on his legacy, the aim of my inquiry is to fold back another layer and pose the question: Is it possible that as humans we attempt to provide our digital creations with some semblance of personhood by granting them agency through mimetic faculty, emanation, efficacy, and anthropomorphism? However, to foster a new level of understanding by looking at the particular phenomena of virtual mourning, we first have to understand virtual life.

In order to explore this question, I will review a history of literature that connects to Gell's theories of agency and enchantment and draw comparisons to what I argue are equivalents within our exchanges with digital hardware and cyber environments. My aim is to establish a foundation that will allow me to draw parallels from cultural traditions and practices to what are considered routine secular actions with digital devices and applications, suggesting that the growing culture of technology may be replacing once religiously rooted or sacred practices.

There are several concepts that are key to many of these discussions. The first is corpothetics, defined by Chistopher Pinney as "the sensory embrace of images, the bodily engagement that most people (except Kantians and modernists) have with a work of art" (2001: 158). One example of this encounter is through *darshan*, which describes the exchange of gaze between a god and devotees in South Asian and diasporic contexts. From religious iconography such as portraits of Jesus to Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, the auspicious gaze, as it is sometimes

known, creates an acknowledgement of the viewer, which in turn creates a level of agency on behalf of the work of art as the viewer returns that gaze. The feeling of "being looked at" implies that the work can "look."

Many scholars have investigated this concept by addressing specific types of encounters with images. Richard H. Davis explores the "different worlds of belief that Indian religious images have come to inhabit over time, and the conflicts over their identities that have often surrounded them" (1997: 6). In a series of case studies, Davis highlights two ways of valuing art that have created a complex dynamic within India – one as part of ritual practice through which an object/image is an embodiment of certain religious beliefs, and often considered a living entity, and the second as an example of ancient artistic practices that should be studied and displayed in a museum for safe keeping. In the first chapter, Davis (ibid, 29-36) discusses the processes of incarnation and transubstantiation in ways suggesting similarities and differences with the treatment of quotidian digital objects.

Another example is the work of W.J.T. Mitchell. In his *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005), images are understood through three particular elements: images, objects, and media, focusing on the tendency of pictures "to absorb and be absorbed by human subjects in processes that look suspiciously like those of living beings" (Mitchell 2005: 2). In the advancement of picture theory, Mitchell questions considerations of how images have been dismissed as "imitations of life," asking instead how pictures take on "lives of their own" (ibid). The arguments that Mitchell makes concerning our tendency "to lapse into vitalistic and animistic ways of speaking when we talk about images" are closely related arguments I will be making regarding ways users address digital devices in contemporary tech culture (Mitchell 2005: 2). Also pertinent is Mitchell's assessment that "the double consciousness about images is a deep and abiding feature of human responses to representation," and such a line of thought can

be extended to how many people interact with the digital, both in terms of its hardware and software (ibid, 8).

As a final example, David Morgan's book *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* addresses seeing as "an operation that relies on an apparatus of assumptions and inclinations, habits and routines, historical associations and culture practices," with specific emphasis on the sacred gaze, as a "manner in which a way of seeing invests in an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance" (2005: 3). Morgan connects discussions of visual culture with religious studies and provides a historical orientation of critical words such as "gaze" and "belief," addressing why their use can be problematic and very complex. I am particularly interested in the way Morgan describes the sacred gaze that "allows images to open iconically to the reality they portray or even morph into the very thing they represent" (ibid, 259). In the exchange between believers and objects of belief, there is a power, transcendence, and issuing of agency similar to the interactions of digital device users with their technical objects and their understandings of that interfacing. As Morgan writes, "if the gaze is a way of seeing, images are the material relays that exercise it. The study of visual culture promises to excavate the visually encoded social arrangements that help empower, disenfranchise, regulate, invent, inspire, and unite people" (ibid, 258).

These instances help to contextualize Gell's attempts to illuminate the rationale of idolatry by focusing on the relationship between idols and their worshipers. For Gell, personhood is a function of agency. He argues that if a person is defined by the events he, she or it causes within a social environment, a person, by that definition, is not necessarily required to be a blood and flesh human being. Rather, it is the object's efficacy that caused the event to happen that is critical. This is how, through passive agency, idols are able to achieve a level of personhood. While our phones and computers may not have eyes that return our gaze, there are still

encounters or interactions that occur with their use that can imbue them with a sense of personhood.

Take the cell phone as an example. Many people opt to cover their phone with a protective case, which also often provides a level of decoration or personalization to the phone. Many also use passwords to prevent the contents stored on the phone from being seen by unwanted eyes. Screen savers and backgrounds are applied, icons are arranged, and colors are chosen. The phone then reflects elements of the user's personal aesthetics. Instead of physical extensions or exuviae, like hair or fingernails, computers, servers, phones, and other technologies present extensions of our minds and personalities, in the form of photographs, written words, and artistic creations (cf. Gell 1998: 103). This could be interpreted as a kind of binding between object and user, and the result embeds devices with personal memory.

There are strong parallels here to Gell's case studies in which similar practices evoke the concept of skins, shells, binding, and ultimately linkage within the parameters of "internalist" theories (1998 102, 114). Application of many of Gell's important theories allows us to then ask: Is it even possible for us to create without imparting of ourselves, a personhood, onto that creation? What follows is a contemplation of this question surrounding some instruments of technology that may reflect concepts of Gellian "idolatry" more readily than initially perceived.

Idolizing Technology: Are Computers Gods, People, or Objects?

We build the computer structure and input data, which the computer interprets/crunches and produces results for the user. In this process of creating the index, it is clear that the gadgets have been implanted with anthropomorphic elements. "Siri" is the name of the voice program for the iPhone that listens, calculates, and provides an auditory response to the user's spoken questions, commands, and statements. It could be illuminating to find out what was Apple

engineers' consideration while developing and incorporating this type of program into their iPhone – what choices they made about how life-like to make the voice and what it would be capable of doing and why. "Cortana," the equivalent voice command application for the Windows operating system, can sing upon request. When you ask "Who's your dad?" she responds "Technically, that would be Bill Gates, No big deal." How much are tech development companies considering humanizing factors within their construction? Are we essentially feeding our phones and computers by charging them regularly? Are we implying meaningful place rather than alienated space when we say that something "lives" on the Web or "resides" and/or "is housed" in the cloud? Often these tools are decorated in some way, with personalized backgrounds or cases. These cases are like binding or wrappings as well, protecting the "being" within, putting them in the "'patient' position" as Gell calls it (1998: 113). This action again invokes Gell's concept of an outer and an inner, which implies a body and a mind.

This is only verified, reaffirmed, and reiterated by the vocabulary we have created to describe the place where the content and information of the device is stored – the memory. In fact, a number of languages have been developed to exchange with these objects – from HTML, to XML, to wiki mark-up. Noted anthropologists, ethnographers, and cultural theorists Louise White and Dipesh Chakrabarty both touch on the notion that sometimes, with something that is foreign, in order to claim it, you have to name it – give it an identity (White 2000: 7-23; Chakrabarty 2000: 3-23). This concept is in no way new – there are notions of this in the Bible's Book of Genesis. However, it is important to note that "from the earliest days, computer science borrowed terms from everyday psychology to describe the operations of computing machines just as psychology borrowed language from computer science to describe the mind" (Turkle 2005: 2).

Despite this seeming ability to communicate, there are distinct moments when a computer's agency seems blurred, and as Vincent Crapanzano states, it is these horizons, "that determine what we experience and how we interpret what we experience" (2004: 2). We build these elaborate pieces of equipment and in theory tell them what to do, but often find ourselves feeling like the computer is not "listening" or "obeying." It "randomly" shuts down, begins an installation, goes into sleep mode, or shuts out of an application, as if it has been offended or overtaxed. As it processes information, it is often said that the computer is "thinking" about performing the task at hand, which is the cause for the delay. And though often imagined to be capable of solving all problems, we know that hardware is passive. Due to this habit of imbuing computers with a false cognition, disappointment abounds when there is not "an app for that." However, in Gell's argument, passive agency is critical in terms of idolatry. Even in his last example in the chapter entitled "The Distributed Person," the child was rendered passive in order to complete the ritual.[14] Passive agency is what allows the prototype to write the script for the index. Though Gell states that, "the idol is worshipped because it is neither a person, nor a miraculous machine, but a god," I argue that technology is developing so rapidly that it may simulate life well enough at this point to begin to blur its mechanics and start to seem as if it has intention or agency of its own (Gell 1998: 123). Like a car that corrects itself and alerts a sleeping driver of the danger, a sensory intelligence is being developed that extends beyond that of just an efficient machine.

Sociologist Sherry Turkle laid ground work for this discussion when the first edition of *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* was published in 1984, and it "remains a

[14] In this final example, Gell examines "*Kumaripuja*, the worship of the goddess (primarily a form of Durga) in the form of a young virgin girl" (Gell 1998: 150). The ritual described is the consecration of a *kumari*, a virgin girl (at the age of 2 or 3) from the Buddhist caste, that becomes a semi-permanent goddess, once the ceremony is completed. While regarded as Kumari until puberty, it is "only when full made up and sitting on her throne that identification is complete. At other times, especially when casually playing with her friends, she is partly herself and partly Kumari" (ibid 151).

primer in the psychology of people's relationships with computers" (Turkle 2005: 5). Turkle's original study was based on 400 interviews, half of which were conducted with children, modeled after Jean Piaget's methods and theories that establish "child as metaphysician" (ibid, 34). Through her recounting of audio recordings and observations during play sessions with computerized toys such as Merlin and Simon, she focuses on the ways that children blur the lines of what constitutes "alive" (ibid, 24). She closely examines their speech, actions, and understandings, honing in when the child imbues a toy with a consciousness. While they may declare the opposite when directly asked about it, time and time again she provides examples of children implying that the toys are somehow living or have minds of their own. One of Turkle's best examples is when a child declares that the program is "cheating" (ibid, 33). The resulting debate among the playmates is that "cheating" implies "knowing," and if the game does not know what it is doing than that means it cannot cheat, at least not intentionally. While her discussions of animism in this section may seem outdated, as the term carries connotations of colonialism that many ethnographers and anthropologists choose to avoid today, they resonate with many of the theories I have engaged (Turkle 2005: 21, 34, 37, 61). "Children playing with toys that they imagine to be alive," Turkle writes in her Introduction from 1984, "and adults playing with the idea of mind as program are both drawn by the computer's ability to provoke and to color self-reflection" (ibid, 21).

Returning to the notion of a computer's "memory," this section can be concluded with a discussion on how a computer holds a life and histories. Central Processing Units (CPUs) are often described and thought of as the brain of the computer. Thinking of the computer as not just holding information, but holding a history, it effectively assumes the characteristics and functionality of a *lukasa*, enabling us to recall and trace events, experiences, thoughts, perspectives and feelings through icons, folders, files, documents, applications, and searches

(Roberts and Roberts 1996: 17-47, 116-149).[15] It could be significant to find out exactly how much intelligence agencies rely on people's search histories or computer files to create a history, profile and/or timeline for a person or event in this day and age.

As expressed by Nicholas Thomas, "Objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become" (1991: 4). If we animate these technical creations with anthropomorphic features, then in essence the object becomes what those features accentuate and gesture to – a "person." Though Igor Kopytoff (1990: 66) meant it as an anthropological exercise and method of analysis, technical "things" are forming very meaningful biographies, such as Deep Blue, the first computer to beat a world champion chess player. While British computer pioneer Alan Turing created a test to help us measure how well a computer could pass for a person, I find myself pondering the old saying, "If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and looks like a duck, it must be a duck" (Newman 1955).

As she brings the second part of the book to a close, Turkle discusses her findings from her work with the MIT AI Laboratory. In comparing Artificial Intelligence to her earlier examples of hobbyist and hackers, Turkle writes that "the influence of the computer on how hackers and hobbyists saw their own psychologies was personal, and it stayed with the individual. But when the AI scientist talks about program, it is no longer as personal metaphor" (Turkle 2005: 222). In terms of the AI researcher, Turkle notes, "the idea of program has a transcendent value: it is taken as the key, the until now missing term, for unlocking intellectual mysteries" (ibid: 226). Combining the work of Gell and Turkle, I find that AI does not just offer humanity a foil as we attempt to define what we are and how we work. AI offers the possibility of more and/or better – conjuring phrases like "all-knowing" and "all-seeing" into its service.

[15] In Luba culture, a *lukasa* is a memory board often made of wood and beads that is used to recount different stories or histories – presenting a conceptual map of fundamental aspects of the culture.

In Part III, Turkle uses examples from the movie *Tron* to as a model of mind as multiprocessor to understand what is happening to our concepts of personhood and identity as we continue to stretch the metaphor that likens human and computer. "Under pressure from the computer, the question of mind in relation to machine is becoming a central cultural preoccupation" (Turkle 2005: 285). According to some scientists like Michio Kaku, it will be just decades until we can map and store a human mind within a computer (Kaku 2014). While doing so may provide us with a greater understanding of how the mind works, it will open a whole new set of issues and questions. How will we reconcile where that person resides? What will become the definition of a "mind" then?

Surrealism and the Internet: Changing Understandings of Identity and Personhood

"Great inventions cause displacements" (Goldberg 2003: 19).

Often, the Internet is perceived as a body potentially possessing all knowledge in the world and egalitarian in its accessibility and availability. However, the actuality is far from this utopian aspiration. If we consider the ways in which today's World Wide Web is "surreal" by ethnographer and cultural theorist James Clifford's definition, it is perhaps more fractured and disassociating than it is often represented. The role that growing technologies, from photography, film, to the "the cloud" play in securing and interpreting histories and "facts," is expanding.

In his revolutionary paper from 1981 entitled "Ethnographic Surrealism," Clifford asserts that, "the surrealist movement in ethnography is that moment in which the possibility of comparison exists in unmediated tension with sheer incongruity" (Clifford 1981: 563). His use of the term *surrealism* is not just a reference to the Surrealist Movement, but also a way to think about cultural analysis. After World War I following the rise of 19th-century imperialism, the

West was exposed to new cultures, which caused a certain group of ethnographers, such as pioneers Paul Rivet and Marcel Mauss, to do some deep thinking about the ways in which anthropological study and curation were being performed. If culture was perceived as "a system of moral and aesthetic hierarchies" in Europe at the time, the task became, "one of semiotic decoding, with the aim of de-authenticating, and then expanding or displacing, the common categories" (Clifford 1981: 548-549).

The point of this work was to acknowledge that when attempting to understand a new culture, ethnographers were approaching from a Western point a view, which would always be inherent within their comprehension and presentation of the material. This step toward meta-cognition allows for the suggestion that rather than "smoothing over," it might be better to allow the juxtaposition of cultures and perspectives to be obvious and apparent. The argument is that if we attempt to contextualize the work, we are intrinsically branding it with our own point of view (Clifford 1981: 563).

This notion is found particularly often within media that embody elements of "reality," like photography or film. Semiotic nature often becomes foggy and lost, as the mind thinks it knows what it is experiencing, and fills in a context unaware of its cultural kaleidoscope through which the material is being filtered (Sontag 1977). This has become increasingly problematic as certain technologies develop, such as virtual reality and augmented reality.

The histories of photography and film offer useful comparisons for what is being experienced in the present with the rapid development and assimilation of digital applications. These media are revolutionizing much of the world. They changed crucial aspects of Western culture from criminology, to science, to politics, to art. These technologies are opening up the world and allowing for major steps in societal progress. As Clifford describes, "Reality, after the surrealist twenties, could never again be seen as simple or continuous, describable empirically or

through induction" (Clifford 1981: 553). With the invention and wide acceptance of the Internet and the World Wide Web, the world shook in a very similar way.

I have summarized a few of Gell's theories in order to discuss what is critical to my expansion of his method into certain objects of technology. Throughout the chapter entitled "The Distributed Person," Gell covers case studies of idolatry. In my recapitulation and extension of Gell's methods and theories, I have aimed to demonstrate that this conceptualization is not just for those objects in a galaxy far, far away – not even those a plane ride away – but for those in our own backyards, homes, and bedrooms. In my discussion of form and function surrounding our modern technology, exchange is the action and collaboration which, according to Gell's theories, implies agency extending to shared personhood with things. Is artificial intelligence just another set of words for idolatry? In the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the supercomputer space station called "Hal" takes the agency granted him to disastrous extremes (Kubrick 2001 rerelease). Through movies today such as *Her* (Jonze 2013), *Transcendence* (Kosove 2014), *Chappie* (Blomkamp 2015), and *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015) viewers are still pondering how much in our image can we make technology. Is the fear some have of technology and its advancement comparable to those who are devotees of religious faiths?

Maybe we are not yet at the point where we have developed and codified official rituals surrounding our gadgets, but there is a possibility that such a day could come to pass. Waiting in line for the new iPhone does sometimes seem like a processional, and "Church of the iPad" has an interesting ring to it.

Due to their treatment, from the use of mobile phone and computer covers to decorate and protect the object, to the vocabulary we use to say a device has run out of power ("It's dead"), digital objects are imbued with a level of personhood. Exploring this concept of an object's personhood bestowed on it by the prototype – the human being – I look to re-examine

topics surrounding practices of memory, meaning making, and ways of holding histories when a person has passed away for the digital and cyber worlds in the next section.

Part II: Visiting Digital Tombstones: Dealing with Death in the Digital Age

"Ancient peoples sent their dead to the grave with their prized possessions—precious stones, gilded weapons and terracotta armies. But unlike these treasures, our digital property won't get buried with us. Our archived Facebook messages, old email chains and even Tinder exchanges will hover untouched in the online cloud when we die.

*Or maybe not" (*Molly Roberts: 2014*).*

In the past several years, the question of what happens to our digital lives after death has been a growing topic in news stories, blogs, and legislation. As we live more of our lives online, what once was tangible is now digital. Journalist Molly Roberts uses the example of a shoebox full of family photos in her article "A Plan To Untangle Our Digital Lives After We're Gone" (2014). At one time, these would be turned over to the executor of the deceased's will, who would hopefully distribute the tokens of remembrance to family members and friends. Today, many mementos are digital assets, which seemingly lack a tangible or physical component.

As Bronner reminds us, "The designation 'folk object' is not restricted to objects only from the past. New objects are continually emerging" (Bronner 1986: 216). In the second half of this paper, I will present stories, interviews, and articles that focus on emerging digital objects that are being created for private consumption and personal exchange. Examined through the lens of Gell's "art nexus," it is clear that when considering a digital creation, "calling it 'art' creates a distance in time and space between the object and viewer, often implying that the object lacked use and was never embedded in a web of human relationships" (Bronner 1986: 216).

While these objects may result from manufactured or template programs, the curation of content and/or the palimpsest nature of the process used in their creation is linked to a desire to make meaning and communicate. Their significance lies within their function as part of a remembrance and memorial practice.

Consider, "as reliance on craft processes in the twentieth century diminishes, forms increasingly arise that stress arrangement. As the economy comes to stress consumption of ready-made items, the folk response is to alter and arrange such items into new, unofficial forms" (Bronner 1986: 216). In 1917, the artist Marcel Duchamp created "The Fountain" (Tomkins 1996: 186). The piece was a urinal turned on its side, signed, and dated. What would become known in the art world as a "readymade," this piece was a challenge to the field: What makes something an art piece? What qualifies as art?[16] What level of intervention or creation is required?

Looking at Facebook pages and memorial websites, we should keep in mind that "The arranger is exerting control and emulating the making of objects by creating a new appearance and use from prefabricated materials. The emphasis here is less the conversion of natural materials to built landscape than the organizing of commercially manufactured materials to create folk environments which make personal and collective statements" (Bronner 1986: 217). Hannah Seligson, a writer for *The New York Times*, states that "The social norms for loss and the Internet are clearly still evolving. But Gen Y-ers and millennials have begun projecting their own sensibilities onto rituals and discussions surrounding death" (2014). In the following sections, I will also talk about my own encounters with loss, mourning, and remembrance and how they have been shaped by social media and other online outlets. As Bronner writes, "using the very

[16] Such ideas were considered by Susan Vogel in *Art/Artifact*, as an exhibition and book, which was pondered by Alfred Gell in his essay "Vogel's Net" (Danto 1988; Gell 2996).

material and technology of the official culture," these new digital objects "express an unofficial social commentary" (1986: 218).

Also in this section, I will use case studies and published examples to concretize what Bronner describes as such:

> "In today's world, older folk objects endure on the landscape to comment on history and change; meanwhile, new folk objects arise in modern cultural settings. Folk objects provide the tangible evidence of the everyday past, they supply visible proof of the changing beliefs and customs people hold today. Patterns discovered in the objects and technical processes of everyday life can help to reveal the hidden attitudes underlying our world, and perhaps predict the direction of our society in the future. Joining the study of objects to that of words and behaviors paints a broad and vivid picture of the human endeavor" (Bronner 1986: 219).[17]

As I examine the ways digital devices and spaces are being inserted into processes surrounding death, mourning, and remembrance, it is clear that these virtual creations are taking on prominent roles more and more. These encounters are shaping human communication, interaction, and identity. Using elements of memory theory, I want to shift the perspective of web applications from social media platforms to the grave markers and funerary shrines of our time.

Interviews and Reflections

[17] Emeritus Prof Michael Owen Jones also wrote of such matters, as a prominent folklorist, such as his article "Tradition" where he is direct dialog with Bronner's later work (Jones 2000).

A few years ago, I had just finished watching a movie at home on a Saturday night, and commenced the usual processes of getting ready for bed, which includes a final check of my Facebook newsfeed. As I scrolled down the recent postings of friends with drinks, enjoying nightlife, and being out on the town, something unusual caught my attention – one of my closest friends from high school, Kadrian, had changed his profile picture to an image of himself with his father.[18] Now, normally this would not be strange, except for the fact that the series of comments from friends below the picture had somber and nostalgic cadences. One post read: "two handsome, hard working men. I'm lucky to have and have had you both in my life" (Kadrian Alvarenga, personal communication, Facebook page accessed on May 4, 2013). I felt a rush of adrenaline and my stomach turn over at the use of the past tense – who died? Kadrian? His father? Both? What had happened?

"Please let me have misread that or it be a typo," I silently pleaded, but as I began to scroll through additional comments, I realized something terrible had befallen Kadrian's father. I decided to call a close mutual friend first thing in the morning. When I began to describe this series of events to him, he quickly understood that I had called to get more information and ended up confirming that Kadrian's father had, in fact, unexpectedly passed away in his sleep from what appeared to be a heart attack. Calling Kadrian to extend my sympathies, offer what comfort I could, and get the details of the wake and funeral services, I told him how I came to find out about his tragic loss through Facebook. He admitted that he struggled with whether or not he should make a direct post about what had happened and felt uncertain what the most appropriate action was for this unexpected loss. He felt that changing his profile picture reflected his wishes to memorialize his father, but not be overly blatant about what had transpired. "People's comments kind of did the rest," he explained, and I myself had experienced

[18] The names I have used for my personal references are pseudonyms, for confidentiality purposes.

that truth (Kadrian Alvarenga, personal communication, unpublished telephone interview, May 5, 2013).

Though selfishly I admit I was a little hurt at first that I received the news via a social media source, I found myself agreeing with his sentiments and sympathizing with his position in terms of considering appropriate actions. The bereaved are so taxed by an unexpected loss, is it really wrong to let the agency of social media take on the task of informing? Though it is a space where people can connect, those connections vary greatly from good friends, to acquaintances, to acquaintances of acquaintances. In terms of manners, there is no firmly established etiquette yet to guide the dispensing of news of death on Facebook, in which a person's outer circle or weak social ties that are still part of their Facebook world are then exposed to this personal event.

This was not the first time I had encountered this strangeness; I myself was once the distant acquaintance finding out about the suicide of a mutual friend through Facebook. Several years ago, I was trolling on Facebook when I noticed changing profile pictures once again. Many of my friends had uploaded photos of themselves with a mutual friend. Again, subdued comments of remembrance and wishes of resting in peace were posted, alerting me to a tragedy. In this case, I sent a Facebook message to inquire from a shared friend if she knew what had happened. She wrote back quickly informing me that our younger friend had taken his own life, after struggling with depression for a long time. She told me to call her if I wanted to talk or needed support, which I did as I was in shock.

The few encounters that I had with this acquaintance were happy ones, and from what I knew of him through Facebook, he seemed popular, well-liked, and happy. It is not uncommon for those suffering from depression to attempt to hide it, but I have realized that the avatar that Facebook offers can often mislead those outside of a person's inner circle of friends as to his or

her real condition. As president of his house in college during his senior year, all the pictures and posts on his Facebook wall masked any struggle that was going on personally to outsiders. As I spoke with one of his close friends, I realized that this was a tragic end to a long battle that had been waging inside of him for a great while.

Since that time, I have visited his Facebook page a number of times. His parents decided that they would leave it up to allow friends and family to post pictures and comments to continue to remember him and share their memories. This is what I have come to call a "digital tombstone," a marker for those to visit and spend time with their memories of the departed, and leave comments, upload photos, or link to articles, much like leaving flowers, messages, or trinkets at a gravesite. On the surface, the functions seem very similar. However, what is different is the exposure of the grieving processes that becomes frozen in time through this format. Sifting through messages on his Facebook wall, I read comments left by family and friends that contained inside jokes, messages of regret, poems of loss, and birthday and anniversary toasts – and it's unsettling. It is one thing to see others cry at a funeral; it is quite another to witness their personal processes of mourning, while experiencing your own simultaneously.

I spoke with my friend Antha Mack, who also knew the deceased, to compare her experience of loss and where, if at all, it intersected with social media. Since his passing in 2009, Antha has only been to his page once and she found it "creepy" (personal communication, unpublished telephone interview, June 3, 2013). [19] She felt that being on his Facebook page was like going through a dead person's things. Her personal perspective is that those who post seem to be seeking attention and may have unresolved issues with his passing. Though she is not

[19] The names I have used for my personal references are pseudonyms, for confidentiality purposes.

against anything that would bring a family comfort, she felt that in dealing with the loss of her friend, she would rather seek the company of those who knew him where his memory is still "living" as opposed to a "user-less" Facebook page, missing its creator which gave it "life."

As we talked, Antha shared with me how her family honored the dead. Though growing up in California, Antha's mother is from the Philippines, and most of her family still lives there. When she finally had the chance to visit with her mother, the whole family gathered, packed tents, a picnic, and music, and went to visit her grandfather's burial site. Though she never had the chance to meet her grandfather, the family reunion included him through this event and the memories that were shared that day. "Maybe it's a cultural thing, but that's how I would want to be remembered," she told me, adding, "I know we're not that old, but maybe it is a generational thing" (personal communication, unpublished telephone interview, June 3, 2013).

Some are in favor of using Facebook as a means of remembrance, however. In a video news article by reporter Matt Porter, he interviews a woman named Blanche Birtch about "her brother's profile remaining active as a 'mini-memorial'" (Porter 2013). In the interview, Birtch says she takes comfort in seeing what others are feeling, knowing people are still thinking of him, and mourning his loss. The article also offers interesting insight into the legal landscape that is trying to catch up with mounting issues of the digital realm. Attorney Dawn Lanouette, also interviewed within the piece, describes the tenuous property dilemmas involved in family photos posted or accessing accounts if a password was not left by the deceased. The article claims that, "Only five states have laws concerning rights of access to online accounts after death" (Porter 2013). As of an article posted on November 4, 2014, "eight states have passed laws addressing digital life after death" (Heaton 2014). Nevertheless, these online repositories offer the bereaved something interesting in terms of space though lack a tangible place (cf. Yates

1966). Birtch's brother was cremated and therefore there is no physical grave for her to visit, and so for her, "this is him, this is where he's at, this is where I can connect with him" (Porter 2013).

In March of 2014, journalist Hannah Seligson published an article in *The New York Times* entitled, "An Online Generation Redefines Mourning." In it, she covers a number of case studies that demonstrate the various ways that the digital world is changing how loss and mourning are being addressed. She has discovered that "for a generation known for broadcasting internal monologue across the Internet, some of its members seem eager for spaces to express not just the good stuff that litters everyone's Facebook newsfeed, but also the painful" (Seligson 2014). In this brave new digital world, text messaging is not only used to send condolences for a lost loved one but also to help funeral homes have family members identify a corpse remotely (ibid). Websites like "Modern Loss" or "Lisa Frank Mixtape" were created for younger generations to address many permutations of loss, and address "decidedly 21st century topics like what do you do when Gmail keeps suggesting someone who has died as a contact" (ibid; see also http://modernloss.com/deleting-my-mother/). Some, like Caitlin Doughty, once a director of a funeral home and author of the book *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes: And Other Lessons From the Crematory*, see a cultural shift occurring around what she calls "death awareness," prompting her to create a Youtube channel called "Ask a Mortician," which has had well over a million views since her first post in 2011 (Seligson 2014). Seligson even discusses how the television show "Girls" has highlighted "how the Internet has made grief more public and casual, and therefore more fraught" (Seligson 2014).

The concept of "media neutrality," explained by Ben Orzeske, legislative counsel at the Uniform Law Commission in 2014 when interviewed by journalist Molly Roberts, is when "the law gives the executor of your estate access to digital assets in the same way he had access to your tangible assets in the old world" (Molly Roberts 2014). Facebook began a policy in 2007 to

“memorialize” an account upon request of family or friends after the death had been verified, but this meant that the account could continue to be viewed but not edited or managed in any way (Leger 2015). As Roberts notes in her article, sometimes these requests were turned down, much to the frustration of grieving relatives looking for answers and comfort.

While as of February, Facebook has changed its policy to allow users to appoint one executor of an account in the event of death, there are still many other companies like it that see another side to the issue. The new bill, according to Molly Roberts’ article, does not take into account the possible intrusion on third parties who communicated with the deceased. “For someone unfamiliar with the law, then” she writes, “what seemed private in life may turn public after death” (Roberts 2014).

However, more companies are working to find solutions. Yahoo Japan’s Yahoo Ending allows the user to choose by “crafting farewell emails, prepare cancellations of subscription services, and choose certain photos and videos for postmortem deletion” (Molly Roberts 2014). Google, too, has a tool called “inactive account manager,” where users can choose ahead if they wish for their emails to be deleted, saved, or handed over to an executor if your account has been inactive for an extended period of time. In the next section, I will analyze two different applications that are attempting to address similar issues.

Application Examination

Only a few weeks after Kadrian’s father’s passing, I came across a video article online entitled “Tweets from the Grave,” which described two new social media based afterlife services (2013). Glib animated videos describe ifidie.net as “the first and only Facebook application that enables you to create a video or a text message that will only be published after you die” (Willook 2011: http://ifidie.net/). In the event of a Facebook user’s death, selected trustees will

have the ability to enable these previously recorded messages to be delivered through Facebook. According to the press release found on the ifidie website, Eran Alfonta, Founder & CEO of Willook, the Israel based startup company that specializes in time-capsule services and products, had the idea after almost losing a friend to a near-death experience while on vacation (Willook 2011: http://ifidie.net/). The traumatic experiences motivated him to create a service for those who wished to leave messages for loved ones and friends in case anything were to happen. In a way, this is not too different from what many people in Western culture expect in terms of funerary preparations, from drawing up a will to picking out tombstones, burial plots and selecting caretakers. The application simply provides a user with the opportunity to be specific about their digital undertaker, and instead of leaving the key to a safety deposit box, users are entrusting someone with their Facebook will. What is strange about this application in terms of its approach to death preparations, is its offshoot ifidie1st.com, which offers the first subscriber who "bites the dust," as it advertises in the promotional video, the distinct privilege of his or her specially recorded message for this occasion to be featured on various web and news sites, "so that immortality is right around the corner, along with death" (Willook 2011: http://www.ifidie1st.com/). The glib tone taken toward death in the marketing of the app seems to connect to the notions of immortality that are offered up in exchange, as if the ability to record a message for the masses to be distributed once someone passes renders death moot.

This offer of immortality is echoed in the second app described, LIVESON, found at www.liveson.org. By creating a LIVESON account, you will activate an A.I. analysis (a virtual you) of your main Twitter feed, which will learn about your likes, taste, and syntax in order to mimic them. The more a subscriber tweets and engages with the account, the more accurate a portrayal of the user is created. In addition, account holders nominate an executor of his or her LIVESON "Will," allowing them to either keep your Twitter account live and populating or to

prevent the virtual you from Tweeting forever in the event of your death. Though it is not uncommon for loved ones to speak for the dead (e.g. Grandma would be telling you to drink your milk if she were here right now), this use of a computer algorithm to continue to speak for a user from beyond the grave presents a disconnect with how many people currently think of loved ones living on past their deaths. While the constructed nature of memory allows for rewritings of histories or the application of greater nuance and shade in personal conceptions over time, a computer generated equation can only evolve as long as there is continued input.

What this means for LIVESON users is that the person that they were when they died will be the "person" (or algorithmic shell or echo) that tweets from their account from then on. The personality, including tastes, likes, and interests, will be locked in time. For example, if this application existed in the 1960s and an early Beatles fan at that time passed away while Tweeting about the group, the algorithm would continue to search and populate the user's Twitter feed with albums that reflected a pop ballad and 50s rock-n-roll sound. If that user were still alive into the late 1960s, his or her musical taste would have probably changed while following the musical progression of the band that took a turn to a more psychedelic rock style. The point being, LIVESON offers a user the chance to continue on as they were, but cannot actually predict who you would continue to be in the world. Finally, the LIVESON application ignores that people can represent themselves differently online than who they exist as in "real" lives. In the case of the digital or second self, how are we to know "who" is really continuing to tweet?

While these applications present users with digital arrangements for after they are gone that are free of charge and openly available, little is exposed about their corporate nature and what will continue to be the contractual nature of their services if Facebook or Twitter are discontinued. What is clear from the Twitter pages of each of these applications, is that they

have not caught on with any great force – and at this point, one must assume they probably never will. When I began this research in the spring of 2013, LIVESON's Twitter page (https://twitter.com/_liveson) went live that February and has 1,101 followers, but ifidie's (https://twitter.com/ifidie) had been around since March 14, 2011 and it had only 610 followers. As of July 2015, the LIVESON twitter page has lost followers, and now only has 1,028, and there have been no new tweets since November 12, 2013. The Facebook app ifidie has lost Twitter followers too, but is still tweeting regularly from the account. Additionally, the Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/IFiDieApp) for the app has over 62,000 likes, but has not posted since December 2014. Despite their more direct address of orphaned digital media accounts that result when a user passes away, these applications and digital formats seem not to have become fixtures in personal commemorative practices. Instead, these types of services are truly becoming institutionalized within bigger tech company policy practices, and users are expressing how seriously they take the use of digital tools to commemorate their loved ones' lives by shunning these gimmicky options. However, there is no disputing that these applications were pioneers in addressing an important issue in the discussion of digital life and death and helped the public make clear what they did and did not want for addressing that critical life passage.

Questions and Connections

By applying key concepts from memory theory to this growing phenomenon of addressing or encountering loss through digital networks, I hope to be able to better describe and give theoretical context to two rising standpoints as expressed by those whom I have interviewed. Without taking a side, I would like to examine, track, trace, and delineate these

alternate positions clearly, rooting these new actions and understandings of the digital world in the traditions of memory practice and performance.

A popular stance of memory theory holds that all memory can and should be considered culturally constructed (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 27). The personal experiences shared in this paper demonstrate that there are new possibilities for remembrance processes in the context of personal loss that have come out of the influence of a rising digital culture. This is not to say that digital formats will replace other forms, but they do offer mourners new ways to recall their loved ones that incorporate social media communities.[20] In this way, digital memorializing processes are oscillating between personal and collective memory experiences whereby people are experiencing their own reflective associations with the deceased and posting them alongside those of others, creating a palimpsest collective remembrance (Connerton 1989; Elsaesser 2009). Facebook pages go from being individually maintained with collective input to a community space for remembering. In a second interview with Kadrian, he told me about the outpouring of support he was experiencing from people researching through Facebook when they learned of his loss (personal communication, unpublished interview, May 25, 2013). He has taken comfort in creating a Tumblr photo blog of all his father's photographs, so that his family can share in remembering and grieving no matter where they are (ibid).

State law is struggling to define the space, place, "truth," and tangibility of anything that "lives" online. The concept of a Memory Theater, a mnemonic place that can recalled and experienced in the mind, in many ways reflects how many perceive cyberspace (Yates 1966; Roberts and Roberts 1996: 32). These spaces exist only when actively performed or recalled. With this lens, do the Facebook pages of those who have passed become areas where one can visit and freely curate their own mourning process? How does an application like ifidie, which

[20] This could be seen as an extension of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1991).

sends messages to Facebook friends after a user's death, create a structure for or trigger to a memory performance?

Are these recorded messages really very different from the curated goodbyes we already orchestrate in the form of a will or the way we want to be laid to rest? Maybe the power of ifidie.net is that it does not limit these messages to those that would be stipulated within a legal will or could attend a funeral service. In fact, the Facebook cemetery, containing profiles of departed souls, can offer quite a bit of comfort in terms of visitation to those who are in similar positions to Birtch and Kadrian whose loved ones were cremated and therefore have no burial site (Mack 2003). Also maintaining the Facebook profiles of the deceased allows for people to participate in either a communal grieving process if they did not get the opportunity to attend the funeral by posting and reaching out to others connected to the page who knew the individual, or continue a personal commemorative practice for as long as they may need and whenever they may need it in a very private way by simply visiting the page and looking through what has been posted there. In each way, memory becomes embodies and performed through a level of engagement with the website or application (Pinney 2001). In a way, as memorials LIVESON Twitter feeds and digital tombstone pages on Facebook most closely resemble a shrine in their format, purpose, and function.

Scholarly attention to online shrines and devotional activities is growing, with literatures keeping pace. Professors Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts from UCLA have created a website (http://shirdisaibabavirtualsaint.org) to aggregate the innumerable ways people are using online resources to continue visual practices that are integral to devotions offered to Shirdi Sai Baba, a South Asian saint. In their introduction to the project, they write that "most recently, the Internet has proven of immense importance, for one can take *darshan* (visual blessing) and offer *puja* (prayers) at the virtual tomb of the Saint, join Twitter and Facebook

accounts to receive direct blessings, watch live-stream devotions at Shirdi, and participate in discussion sites and related virtual pathways to Baba" (Roberts and Roberts, http://shirdisaibabavirtualsaint.org). The archive that Roberts and Roberts have created demonstrates that these ways of remembering can be just as effective in virtual loci as physical places.

Finally, there is particular poignancy in considering a digital tombstones legacy to Pierre Nora's dichotomy of history and memory (Nora 1989). In his terms, Facebook pages of the deceased become *lieux de memoire*, or landmarks "around which past events structure present memory" (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 32; Nora 1989). But when the individual memories are posted as photos or comments becoming saved within the format of the Facebook Timeline, is that memory experience being translated into historical record? Also how does the concept of cyberspace containing its own reality, with Web avatars upsetting stable ideas of "the self" and embracing the nature of identity-making, present problems to Nora's notion of the documented as being part of the historical? In considering the LIVESON application and its computer generated content, what can we consider that to be? Official record? More of an impression? Who is that really serving? Is there a need for a new categorization in the future, somewhere between memory and history, that could encompass this liminal state? For those who do not participate in social media, what befalls them in terms of remembrance and obliviscence? Does the generational and digital divide mean that those individuals will be "out of history?"

Clearly digital media, like many other cultural objects, can stimulate the performance of memory within the context of memorializing practices. Though minimizing "distance" and providing options for more tailored grieving processes, Websites like Facebook, Twitter, and Tublr and applications like ifidie and LIVESON are changing the "tombstone" or the place and the way we pay respect to those lost and those left behind. Though for some it may be

uncomfortable to consider receiving a Facebook message from a friend of ten years ago that has since passed, saying they always loved your smile or are sorry for the way they bullied you, there are opportunities for fostering comfort, support, healing, truth, connections, closure, resolutions, and reconciliation for those who wish (Hirsch 2008).

Conclusion

In the *New York Times* article, "How Not to Be Alone," novelist Jonathan Safran Foer writes, "Technology celebrates connectedness, but encourages retreat" and explains that "most of our communication technologies began as diminished substitutes for an impossible activity," citing the telephone, answering machine, online exchanges, and texting (Foer 2013). Foer's point is, while they were never meant to be improvements on in-person communications, rather an acceptable substitute, somehow many people began to prefer them. "Each step 'forward' has made it easier, just a little, to avoid the emotional work of being present to convey information rather than humanity," Foer argues, and the worry is that "people who become used to saying little become used to feeling little" (Foer 2013).

In summation, Foer writes:

> "We live in a world made up more of story than stuff. We are creatures of memory more than reminders, of love more than likes. Being attentive to the needs of others might not be the point of life, but it is the work of life. It can be messy, and painful, and almost impossibly difficult. But it is not something we give. It is what we get in exchange for having to die" (Foer 2013).

While Foer makes a very persuasive case for the necessity of "emotional computation" and "corporeal compassion," Steven Petrow's piece entitled "By Sharing Death on the Web, Dying May Not Feel So Alone" (2015) may offer an alternative view point to the digital luddites

and skeptics by demonstrating ways in which people have felt their humanity more deeply through the use of digital tools and not lost at all.

Writing about two years after Foer's article, Petrow presents a very different picture of the Web landscape today by focusing on a few individuals who have become known for "having transformed how we understand death and dying" (2015). Lisa Bonchaek Adams, 45-year-old mother of three, died this past March after an eight-year battle with breast cancer. From her initial diagnosis, "Adams shared her unvarnished story with her 15,000 Twitter followers and untold number of blog and Facebook readers," Petrow writes (ibid). There is a growing trend for people with terminal illnesses and/or those who are fighting for their lives against various diseases, like Death With Dignity advocate Brittany Maynard and the late actor Leonard Nimoy, to be vocal about their own deaths through the use of social media. Petrow discusses his own experiences with this phenomenon when his friend Natalia Kraft started a "Boob Blog" when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had a similar experience when a friend of mine was diagnosed with the BRCA1 mutation and decided to have a preventative double mastectomy. In some cases, these projects rise to the level of official initiatives, such as "Through Positive Eyes" (http://throughpositiveeyes.org/), a global photographic collaboration with Gideon Mendel and the UCLA Art & Global Health Center and part of MAKE ART/STOP AIDS. A generation or two ago, people would often be afraid to even mention some of these illnesses, and while online models were by no means the first ways that people bravely started to share their experiences more openly, they certainly have encouraged the trend.

The response to many of these efforts to be open, honest, and transparent through the use of social media and online platforms about personal experiences with the possibility of death and dying have stirred up a range of emotions from readers. Petrow discusses his own struggle with his friend's choice to post regarding her fight with cancer and adds, "Adams was criticized in

much the same way, begged not to turn her private suffering into a public circus" (Petrow 2015). While Petrow goes on to describe several other cases, what becomes clear is that there is no established etiquette surrounding the intersection of death and social media.

While many may feel uncomfortable with the extent to which details are shared, Petrow points out that these online forums are not just about pain and suffering, but also reveal how much love is truly present through difficult times. "I recalled how the outpouring of support from Nat's friends had seemed boundless. Could they take her to the doctor? Make a meal? Read with her? Comfort her? Do *anything* for her? The 'online community,' often and disparagingly described as virtual, became real and tangible," Petrow writes (2015).

Ultimately, in contrast to Foer's article, Petrow comes down on the other side of the coin, declaring, "While it's common to blame the Net and our smart phones for the isolation that does indeed plague our society as a whole, it must be said that in some very important areas, these technologies and platforms are breaking down barriers. Thanks to my fiend Natalia, Tom Mandel, Scott Simon, and now Lisa Adams, death can be seen as an intrinsic part of life" (Petrow 2015).

If Gell's theories have taught us anything, it is that we make objects *and* we are made by them. While in traditional forms of art history, calling something "art" "creates a distance in time and space between the object and viewer, often implying that the object lacked use and was never embedded in a web of human relationships," Gell's theory of the art nexus allows us to focus in on the encounter and exchange instead. In doing so, I argue that the category for what we consider "art" includes our digital lives that we paint with every status update and blog post we make (cf. Bronner 1986: 216).

"The designation 'folk object' is not restricted to objects only from the past. New objects are continually emerging," and I have attempted to scratch the surface of a growing set of

new objects of study, as the digital realm has much to offer (Bronner 1986: 216). Bronner concludes his chapter writing:

> "In today's world, older folk objects endure on the landscape to comment on history and change; meanwhile, new folk objects arise in modern cultural settings. Folk objects provide the tangible evidence of the everyday past; they supply visible proof of the changing beliefs and customs people hold today. Patterns discovered in the objects and technical processes of everyday life can help to reveal the hidden attitudes underlying our world, and perhaps predict the direction of our society in the future. Joining the study of objects to that of words and behaviors paints a broad and visit picture of human endeavor" (Bronner 1986: 219).

Coming full circle, with the understanding that "Objects, especially folk objects, remind us of who we are and where we have been," it is clear that digital objects are shaping our cultures and our identities in equally powerful ways (ibid, 214).

These objects may not look like folk objects of the past. Bronner predicted that "as reliance on craft processes in the twentieth century diminishes, forms increasingly arise that stress arrangement" (Bronner 1986: 216). And "as the economy comes to stress consumption of ready-made items, the folk response is to alter and arrange such items into new, unofficial forms," be it the way Marcel Duchamp challenged the definition of art with his work "The Fountain" or how I post ecards on CaringBridge (www.caringbridge.org) every day for my aunt who is going through chemo, hoping to lift her spirits and let her know I am thinking of her (Bronner 1986: 216). As the arranger, I am "exerting control and emulating the making of objects by creating a new appearance and use from prefabricated materials," picking font styles, background colors, choice words, pictures, or stickers (Bronner 1986: 217). As I contribute my

post to her online guestbook, "the emphasis here is less the conversion of natural materials to built landscape than the organizing of commercially manufactured materials to create folk environments which make personal and collective statements" (Bronner 1986: 217). And while we are "using the very material and technology of the official culture," from apps to laptops, tablets to smartphones, it is the new ways people are applying the technology that can "express an unofficial social commentary," from the #blacklivesmatter movement to "Selfies at Funerals" (http://selfiesatfunerals.tumblr.com/) (Bronner 1986: 218).

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