Cyber-Spaces of Grief:
Online Memorials and the
Columbine High School Shootings

Maya Socolovsky

Modern memory is, above all, archival. . . . Fear of a rapid and final disappearance combines with anxiety about the meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future to give even the most humble testimony, the most modest visage, the potential dignity of the memorable . . . who, today, does not feel compelled to record his feelings? . . . the less extraordinary the testimony, the more aptly it seems to illustrate the average mentality.

—Pierre Nora

Through the use of today’s technology, we have established Perpetual Memorials, a permanent resting place online to memorialize loved ones. Our mission is to be the unsurpassed leader in the public service of celebrating and preserving the memory of those who have passed. . . . Our goal is to maintain these on the Internet throughout ages to come.

—perpetualmemorial.com

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York’s World Trade Center and on the Pentagon, the issue of memory and memorials once again surfaced as poignantly and as acutely as it did in past debates surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the construction of a Holocaust museum in Washington D.C., and the Oklahoma City Memorials. With architects, citizens, and city planners more than ever aware of the way in which memory is a product of social history and political agendas, debates over the ruins of the World Trade Center began. While an on-site memorial has taken some time and careful planning to establish, the act of memorializing the losses of September 11

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began almost immediately after the events. For example, less than two weeks after the attacks, T-shirts, models of the Manhattan skyline, and American flags sprang up around the country. Commemorative books and magazines also began to appear, all capturing, dissecting, and agonizing over the moment of the attack. If, as Pierre Nora argues above, monuments are built in place of memory, allowing us to displace the location of memory so that we do not have to hold it within ourselves, the nation’s attempts to deal with grief by immediately displacing it onto patriotic consumer objects of memory signal several things. The immediate desire to monumentalize suggests an anxiety about and inability to process grief. It demonstrates a strong resurgence of community and a desire to translate one’s private personal voice into a collective voice. It represents the need to retrieve unspeakable absences and create presences in their place. Finally, it suggests an impatience with, and fear of, the intangibility of loss, the otherness and absence of death, and the sheer incomprehensibility of endings. The speed and immediacy with which an event comes to be memorialized is part of today’s memorializing strategy. Although the desire to de-other death and to translate its absence into presence is an inevitable feature of most traditional and even contemporary monuments and memorials, I argue here that this desire is a particularly marked and nuanced feature of Internet memorials. As a result of this attempt to hide the gap between self and other, and between the bereaved and the dead, the Internet memorial lacks an othered and haunted space in which ghosts, as the most affective carriers or signifiers of memory, might reside.

In recent years, the Internet has become one of the sites of memory, that, like a museum or monument, Nora would lament signals a loss of “real” or natural memory in modern times. Even aside from the web memorials that have begun to appear in cyberspace, computers have long taken on the tasks of memory. Edward Casey argues that “we have turned over responsibility for remembering to the cult of the computers, which serve as our modern mnemonic idols... Human memory has become self-externalized: projected outside the remembered himself or herself” (2). With the undeniably significant growth of Internet use among middle-class sections of the population, and the use of the Internet as a site of memory, we have to ask ourselves how this technological media affects the structure of memory and the ways we understand and experience our temporality and our mortality. Certain features of the Internet and of computer usage affect the way memory is written online. Because words and images are digital rather than physical, the electronic text is always
Maya Socolovsky

a simulacrum with no concrete tangible instantiation of itself elsewhere except as mediated through a representing device. Any webpage invites its viewers or readers to sample, rather than master, the online text, and the cursor, signaling the reader's presence, can change the text itself, processing and manipulating what appears and replacing one page with another, so that no final or fixed version of an online text actually exists. As such, no Internet experience has a center or a periphery, and although we may psychologize homepages as the centers or beginnings of our online experience, a crucial part of being online is the constant vacillation of a page's structure, words, or images. Furthermore, it is our interaction with the text that brings about such oscillation.

Thus, as a highly interactive, continually replaceable, reader-oriented medium, we have to ask what kind of consoling space the Internet can provide for our collective and private memories. Internet readers or surfers are frequently understood as being themselves dispersed and multiple:

In the mode of information the subject is no longer located in a point in absolute time/space, enjoying a physical, fixed vantage point from which rationally to calculate its options. Instead it is multiplied by databases, dispersed by computer messaging and conferencing . . . dissolved and materialized continuously in the electronic transmission of symbols. In the context of Deleuze and Guattari, we are being changed from 'arborial' beings, rooted in time and space, to 'rhizomic' nomads who daily wander at will . . . across the globe, and even beyond it through communications satellites, without necessarily moving our bodies at all. (Poster 15)

If the body no longer serves as a limit to our subject position or experiences, then sociable interactions and acts of empathy online are mediated through a faceless and bodyless community. Citizens of the Internet do adapt to the virtuality of their space: "As participants adjust to the prevailing conditions of anonymity and to the potentially disconcerting experience of being reduced to a detached voice floating in an amorphous electronic void, they become adept as well at reconstituting the faceless world around them into bodies, histories, lives" (Porter xii). That is, a virtual space becomes a place of belonging and even of collectivity. Web memorials in particular are especially anxious to interpellate themselves as archival places (rather than virtual spaces), "resting places" for the dead that can be visited with ease by the bodyless and faceless bereaved. The Internet thus becomes a gravesite, a place of
departure and presence that is interactive and personal enough so that those in mourning can manipulate the details of the memorial and at the same time experience it as a meeting-place for lost loved ones to communicate with them.5

It can of course be argued that physical memorials also act as sites of departure and mourning that give a presence to death, and that, perhaps unlike online memorials, they are more affected by the public’s need to rationalize and maintain power. In physical memorials, loss and absence take root in the concrete and the physical so that their intangibility can take on a shape and form that is known, sensed, and understood. In such ways, we stave off the possible nothingness and unknowingness of mortality. We live with a shared “museal consciousness” that “understands the significance of collecting, ordering, representing, and preserving information in the way that museums do” (Crane 2). As James Young notes, certain varying narratives (political, national, aesthetic) emerge when we look at the diversity of sites of memory. While traditional physical monuments are usually read as relieving us of the burden of remembering, counter-monuments, in which the monument in various ways foregrounds its own impossibility of containing memory, defy our impulse to write presence into absence and to domesticate death through narrative.6 That is, some physical memorials highlight the unrepresentability of death and the amnesia of memorialization, and some do not.7 Crucially, unlike online memorials, all physical memorials have spatiality, and present a sense of lived space that retains a distance between the observer/visitor and the memorial. This distance serves as an enactment or reminder of what lies outside signification; that is, it indicates the silence and absence of death. When we visit a physical memorial, the boundaries of our body always serve as reminders of difference and otherness. Even in a highly interactive memorial such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where visitors are architecturally removed from an American space and encouraged to enter an alternate experience and space, the gap between self and other (the past, death, nothingness) is retained. Physical memorials or museums realize the limits of representing absence, and in lending a physical dimension to remembrance, they are always asking themselves, “What kind of architecture could do justice to an event that resists profound aesthetic expression?” (Linenthal, “Locating” 220–21).

The political debates surrounding the design of Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the public responses to the Wall, also show a
contradiction of narratives that reveal both people's desires to make death dialectical, to bring back the dead, to interact with the dead, and also, to figure death as unknowable and absent. After the dedication of the Memorial on November 11, 1982, critics of the design described it as grave-like, as emasculating and unpatriotic, and as something that induced grief and sorrow rather than redemption (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz). In that sense, the Memorial was read as failing to narrate a heroic story of war, and as seeming instead to go directly into a space of memory and absence that some of the public was reluctant to enter. At the same time, objects left by visitors at the Wall—such as medals, bottles, photographs, dog tags, and letters—can be read as acts of self-expression and self-extension, as people interact with the memorial and self-consciously write themselves into a national memory and history. This archival impulse reflects a desire to make oneself immortal, and to cross the boundary created by time, place, and experience. Internet memorials, however, see themselves as always crossing time and place, and thus, implicitly, as also traversing the boundaries of experience so that the boundaries or gaps are not articulated, and, to an extent, cease to exist. The Oklahoma City Memorial includes The Field of Empty Chairs, where 168 chairs are placed empty as reminders of life lost, articulating the absence that friends and family feel, but also in themselves creating a space of haunting and ghostly absences (Linenthal, "Memory"). Physical memorials awaken ghosts, by introducing the viewer or visitor into a space of ambivalent absence, gaps, and difference. Whether the memorial tries to narrow or hide that gap by narrativizing death and crossing borders of experience, or whether it consciously emphasizes the gap and displaces death and absence as ultimately unrepresentable, the physicality of the space occupied by monument and observer will, to some extent, always highlight the unknowability of absence and the otherness of death in a way that Internet memorials cannot.8

Sometimes writing themselves consciously against the potential decay of physical memorials, web memorials describe themselves as the most recent, and the most effective, form of memory for our time. To an extent, web memorials can and should be read as museums. Susan Crane writes, "To each era its own forms of memory: the recent and explosive evolution of the Internet, like a museum, like any of the prosthetic cultural devices created to supplement mental memory functions, offers an externalized technologized memory" (12). In talking about web memorials, museal discourse must be redefined:
A "museum" may be any real or imaginary site where the conflict or interaction or simulation of or between personal or collective memory occurs. Museums are more than cultural institutions and showplaces of accumulated objects: they are the sites of interaction between personal and collective identities, between memory and history, between information and knowledge production. (12)

Hence, web memorials are not only sites of unhaunted memory, but also sources of information for grief counseling, religious education and inspiration, community-building, and various clearly laid-out political agendas and voices.

The homepage of virtualmemorials.com introduces itself as follows: "We create memorials that celebrate the lives and personalities of those we have lost and provide a place where these cherished images and biographies will have a permanent home." The "we" here collapses the distinction between public and private: a family's personal loss can become, through the memorial, part of a national loss and thus subject to national grief. Like a museum artifact or object, the images and photographs of the deceased, who are ordinary members of the public, affirm the significance of the life lost. As Crane writes, "Being collected means being valued and remembered institutionally; being displayed means being incorporated into the extra-institutional memory of the museum visitors" (2). The reader is then invited to visit a memorial by clicking on any of the many names that appear on the rest of the page, or on one of the three photographs pictured beneath the caption. Once inside a memorial page, you can choose to enlarge the photograph, or to read the biography, travels, reflections, or passages about family life. You can sign the Guest Book, learn about support groups, click on affiliated pages, and read more about “us,” the memorial website.

Crucially, the homepage sees the web as providing a permanent place for memory, even though it also uses the changeability and easy replaceability of images on the web to its advantage. For example, after September 2001, virtualmemorials.com added a new sidebar (now removed) that expressed sympathy to those affected by the events of September 11 and a hope for peace and an end to violence. The site thus wrote itself into a national dialectic of mourning and grief. At the same time, a single click would eliminate this message of sympathy and take the viewer to an affiliated page such as barnesandnoble.com in order to purchase books such as *The Day Diana Died* and *How to Survive the Loss of a Love*. Because all pages on the web memorial are the same distance
away from the reader—one click of the mouse—and are all equally vulnerable to the viewer’s decision simply to exit the site, the idea of an archive of memory has to be redefined. Archival memory on the Internet comes to mean collection and display, but above all, replacement. Although loss or absence are ostensibly at play when we make one image disappear without a trace, the fact that the image is always instantly replaced with another paradoxically means that our experience of loss and death is one of presence, even of an excess of presence. Because there is no distance between the different presences on the screen, and no temporal narrative between pages, the memorial, even as it speaks of death and shows photographs of the dead, lacks any trace or haunting.

A memorial archive on the web also overtly articulates the permanence of memory through this medium, and reiterates its presence as a storehouse for archives and artifacts. Virtualmemorials.com repeatedly assures us that its archive and memories are permanent. It is “a place for reflection and enduring memories to be passed on generation after generation” and also “a place where future generations can learn about their ancestors long after original records, photographs, and writings have been destroyed.” The creator of virtualmemorials.com realizes that “Our lives extend beyond mere numbers on a tombstone” and says that “the Internet and its new technologies have given us the ability to preserve in colorful detail the chosen highlights of our lives as we have never been able to before.” This form of memory offers real documentation, it seems, and an attention to personal detail that turns the anonymous victim of a car accident into someone we feel we know. The site chooses not to linger on how the very newness of the web might make it vulnerable as a medium for concrete memorialization. At the same time, as explorers of an online museum, we cannot help but be aware of the temporary nature of the memorial and of the ways the medium tackles its own temporality. For example, on December 18, 2001, in the Guest Book, the following message appeared: “Apologies for the system being down for two weeks. Virtualmemorials was hacked and its servers were taken offline.” Loss of memory online, however, still does not entail actual absence. Rather, unlike the defaced ruins of physical markers of memory in cemeteries or on tombstones, a recently kaput online memorial is still full of presence. Just after September 11, for example, condolences.com, showed only an American Red Cross sign, with the motto “Together we can save a life,” and an American flag. Beneath that appeared the caption “this domain is for sale. please make an offer.” But even this website was not entirely static: clicking on either the Red Cross sign or the flag would bring you
to amazon.com and its statement about the Red Cross Disaster Relief fund which asked for and enabled you to make a donation. In July, 2003, the site simply announced, in white letters against a black background: "condolences.com FOR SALE make an offer." No ghosts of the past emanate from the remains of this memorial website. Instead, it can only be a comment on events of the recent past: the earlier request for a charitable donation reminded us of recent national tragedy, and the request to buy the domain emphasizes the fragility of real estate on the Internet.

One's experience of the web memorial undoubtedly depends on whether the reader or viewer knew the loved one memorialized online. It is possible to stumble unintentionally onto the pages of a web memorial, just as it is possible to accidentally leave them behind quite suddenly. A web surfer who finds him or herself wading through others' publicly personal expressions of grief is encouraged, as a visitor, to leave personal recollections and tributes and to interact with the memorial website. He or she becomes a voyeur of bereavement, of loss, and of death, and in this way, the experience of visiting an online memorial without already having a connection to the departed becomes emblematic of our desire to have or know death collectively. Much as cars slow down by the scene of an accident and stare, visitors can gaze at the privacy and intimacy of this medium of public grief; they can experience a safe but curious proximity to death without undergoing it themselves. While driving past the scene of a car accident may existentially remind one of the unspeakable horror of death, the narrative of life and death online serves rather to tame that horror and to give it a reassuring voice and presence that is palatable, understood, and known.

For those who have placed a memorial online and return to read it and dwell with it, cyberspace, as a resting "place" for the departed, serves as a point of contact between the world we know and the afterlife. One memorial poem reads: "It will soon be four years since you went away and it still seems like yesterday . . . until we meet again, precious one" (virtualmemorials.com). Another memorial in the same site talks of the remembered one as an angel. The Internet space becomes a heavenly sphere and a waiting place for the departed "angels" to await their loved ones who are still on earth. On December 26, 2001, one visitor wrote, "I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't found this site. I know that I can come in and it is like I can talk to my mom and I feel so much better after I do talk to her." Others directly address the dead: "we miss you. . . I look so forward to seeing you again." Web memorials write the dead
into cyberspace, but these dead are not “other” to the living. The space they occupy is not “other”: it is a place that the bereaved can simulate being in, can signify and refer to, and can know. An article from ABCNews.Com about web memorials that appears on virtualmemorials.com reads, “Perhaps it was inevitable that just as more and more people seem to live online, others are dying there too. For the dead, cyberspace cemeteries serve as memorials; for the living, they are a place to mourn, to offer condolences, to recall other losses.” Being dead online emphasizes death as a narrative, and suppresses its fearful otherness: the lack of spatial distance means we can feel closer to the dead. The lack of physical barriers—stone, concrete, tombstones—means that the gap between the living and dead vanishes and there is no space for emptiness. Instead, death becomes a waiting, and an embrace, figured through language and proximity. For the memorials that offer religious faith as a condolence (and the majority of them do), God, heaven, the departed and the living are all cradled—bodiless—in cyberspace.

The bodilessness of cyberspace, for both the departed and the bereaved, has been cited by most web critics as part of the boundless freedom of Internet existence. In calling this freedom into question, Slavoj Žižek asks, “Is not the notion of cyberspace a key symptom of our socioideological constellation? Does it not involve the promise of false opening (the spiritualist prospect of casting off our ‘ordinary’ bodies; turning into a virtual entity which travels from one virtual space to another)?” (130). For Žižek, this departure from the body and subsequent spiritualist living is actually part of a myth of cyberspace. On the Internet, the “Real”—that which lies beyond language, experience, and the symbolic order, and therefore cannot be expressed—is the digital universe, a series of virtual and binary bytes. It lacks otherness because of its virtualization. Although we Žižek may fear that being online will diminish our contact with real bodily others, the real problem, Žižek suggests, is that the virtualization of the Internet “cancels the distance between a neighbor and a distant foreigner” because “it suspends the presence of the Other in the massive weight of the Real” (154). The Otherness—whether it is the otherness of death, foreignness, absence, or God—is eliminated, in effect, by the collapse of spaces and differences. What we lose is the unrepresentability (otherness) of the Real.

In wandering through online memorials and being voyeurs of death, we are encouraged to think that we can imagine our death or someone else’s death. But the death we get online lacks the very thing that makes it unrepresentable and thus unknowable. While a physical memorial
contains gaps, an Internet memorial says it all. Death is narrated fully, and although the departed are mourned and missed, death itself is understood and mastered. Thus, when the voids are filled in on web memorials, a different kind of loss occurs because the elusiveness of death that usually resides in absences has been articulated. The virtual reality of the Internet fills in the absences to such an extent that ghosts vanish, and we are left with an “excessive fullness.” As Žižek says,

The commonplace according to which the problem with cyberspace is that reality is virtualized, so that instead of flesh-and-blood presence... We get digitalized spectral apparition, misses the point: what brings about the “loss of reality” in cyberspace is not its emptiness (the fact that it is lacking with respect to the fullness of the real presence) but, on the contrary, its very excessive fullness. (155)

The problem, therefore, is not that cyberspace lacks bodies and involves only an encounter with digital phantoms. Rather, “cyberspace is not spectral enough” (155).

What occurs through digitalization is “the almost perfect materialization of the big Other [death, memory] out there in the machine” (Žižek 164). Andreas Huyssen reiterates this with specific attention to our culture’s attitude toward memorialization. He writes that “the obsessive self-memorialization per camcorder, memoir, writing, and confessional literature... can be said to function as key paradigms in contemporary postmodern culture” and that “far from suffering from amnesia, we suffer from an overload of memories” (253). Our experience of temporality has altered: material life has quickened and media images and technology have speeded up. As Huyssen notes, “speed destroys space and it erases temporal distance” (253). The speed with which pages are eliminated and replaced on a web memorial eliminates space, and the ambiguity and otherness of death. Because we can call up the past on the screen at any time, historical continuity or discontinuity give way to “simultaneity of all times and spaces readily accessible in the present.” Consequently, “the perception of distance, both spatial and temporal, is being erased” (253–54).

In this way, web memorials offer us sites of death that are excessively full, articulate, and understood; and while it is in one sense comforting to finally know death through the safe haven of a computer monitor, the death we know does not trouble or disturb in the same way, because in its sanitized form, it lacks the crucial horror of a void. For example, because the creator of virtualmemorials.com feels that “our lives are so much more than the little dash between two numbers of a tombstone,” the void
or gap signified by that dash is filled in and materializes into, to name but a few, biographies, photographs, recollections, and poems.

Nora writes that our modern memory "relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image," and that this concretization of absence and loss is the result of an obsessive anxiety about disappearance (290). Online memorials counter this fear of disappearance by making even the most ordinary citizen a celebrity. If a life is important enough to be documented publicly, then that life had meaning and was not wasted. Online, anyone can be a celebrity. Virtualmemorials.com’s text-only memorials are free, and after that prices range from $35 to $225, depending on whether you choose the basic, classic, deluxe, or premium memorial. Each memorial is allowed up to a certain number of photographs, words of text, reflections pages, email links, and a limited number of free updates. The custom-made memorial, whose price depends on each personal design, allows unlimited photographs and texts as well as other multimedia (music, video). The web memorial is, according to Ben Delaney, president of Sausalito, California-based CyberEdge Information Services, a way “for them to say, ‘Hey, I’m here, I was here, I made a difference...a way to show others that these people existed.’” The technology, according to the website, offers something primal: a path to immortality: “everybody hopes for some level of immortality and everyone craves their 15 minutes of fame...this is their way to get it.” At the bottom of each page, we can read how many times the page has been viewed, and thus measure the extent of the deceased’s immortality and celebrity. The different memorials within the site do not vary a great deal: ironically, all are similarly concerned to convey a lost life that was both unique and universal, and to forge a memory of a loved one that suggests being exceptional yet also ordinary. Some of the memorials are heart-rending, showing children and young teenagers lost through illness or car accidents or suicide, and the similar sentiments and layouts of the memorials suggest that a virtual community of bereaved parents, friends, and family is maintained through the website. The speed and immediacy of the web memorials is double-sided: one person’s memorial can, at a click, be made to disappear and at the same time be replaced by another person’s memorial, putting the two in tandem with one another.

Part of the web memorials’ apparent confidence in their own permanence and ability to signify death and loss comes from the religious faith they demonstrate online. Many of the biographies note that the deceased was baptized or is, for example, now “cradled in the arms of Christ.” The
memorials are supposed to be inspiring, and work as an emotionally healing outlet for grief, but they also serve to make God imminent. Just as death loses its otherness, so does God—or, in most cases, Christ—lose any fearful transcendence or distance. Some pages are almost evangelical in their effort to help others. For example, part of a memorial for a suicide teenager includes a biography that tries to offer help to other parents or teens. It asks the reader to call the number on the website, and “most importantly, place your trust in Jesus Christ.” It continues, “we were never designed to tackle this world by ourselves—God is simply waiting for the invitation into your life to walk beside you. From the moment he created you, God has had a special purpose and an awesome life planned for you.”

God, like death, is comfortably and easily signified and known.

The web memorials developed by parents of the children killed in the Columbine High School Shootings of April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado, share a great deal with the memorials of sites such as virtualmemorials.com. In particular, the way in which Christianity often forms the foundation for memory, and the way in which the websites also serve as informational links and sources, bring the memorials of cassiebernall.com, danielmauser.com, and racheljoyscott.com into the realm of ordinary web memorials. However, from the outset the Columbine memorials are different in terms of celebrity status. While people remembered in virtualmemorials.com depend solely on the website for their celebrity, the work of remembering the victims of Columbine High began before their parents memorialized them online. The news media and national grief and concern that emerged after the shootings all brought the thirteen victims into America’s homes, giving a face to death and loss as pictures of the dead were displayed on the front covers of national news media. Thus, the implications of the Columbine web memorials differ. Often using sources outside the Internet as a departure point for memory, these web memorials are part of a national and public narrative that began outside the Internet. The public’s scrutiny of and sometimes morbid fascination with the victims means that many of those who visit these websites did not personally know the victims but come to the site intentionally, whether for research into the shootings in general, into the gun control and violence in school debates that emerged out of the killings, or for religious inspiration. In this way, the Columbine websites are a site of public grieving and serve as monuments to what in a sense was regarded at the time, and self-consciously, as a national loss symptomatic of the entire nation’s troubled youth. The questions to be asked of the
Maya Socolovsky

Columbine web memorials, therefore, are: How do they figure and narrate national loss and death? How do they write themselves into the nation’s rhetoric of memorials? And, finally, how do they situate themselves as sites that have a responsibility to inform the public, mourn with it, and position themselves as representative voices?

A few days after the Columbine shootings, a community memorial service took place in Clement Park in Littleton, Colorado. Although the service was supposed to include representatives of various religious communities in the area, many felt that the overall tone was evangelical and exclusive of denominations and faiths that were not fundamentalist Christian. Even in the aftermath of the tragedy, as Stream points out, dissent surfaced as critics of the service were accused of “ politicizing” the memorial service. That is, from the point of view of the Christian right, an opposition was established: the religious Christian angle represented a “true” and “unbiased” memory; the secular angle by default “ politicized” memory. This opposition is crucial in the narratives of the Columbine web memorials, as well as in most of the debates that surfaced after the tragedy. The Jefferson County School District, for example, invited members of the Littleton community to make memorial tiles to decorate the hallways of the school as a permanent memorial. Although initially the tiles were not supposed to include any religious symbols, this restriction was eventually lifted. After the tiles were put up, many of them with Christian symbols, authorities changed their mind and removed the religious tiles. The debate—one’s right to freedom of expression versus the separation of church and state—and many of the parents’ desires to demonstrate their right to express religious beliefs, could be resolved online, where private memorials could depend on religious faith and at the same time, because of Columbine’s status as a national tragedy, serve as a public monument for those killed.

The homepage and entire memorial of Cassie Bernall, at cassiebernall.com, is figured around the moment of Cassie’s death and her response to the idea of death. Allegedly, when the killers pointed their guns at Cassie they asked her if she believed in God, and she said, “yes.” Her mother, Misty, wrote a best-selling book a few weeks after the tragedy, entitled She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall, which is heavily promoted throughout the memorial. The inspirational book, which has received awards and gained widespread recognition, turned Cassie into a teen-idol and reportedly helps teens and their parents work through difficulties. At the top of the page is a graphic that says “Cassie Bernall She Said Yes,” with the “Yes” enlarged as it is on
the cover of the book. The killings at Columbine High School are introduced immediately underneath: “On April 20, 1999, Cassie Bernall, a junior at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, was a typical teenager having a typical day; then a classmate trained a gun on her and asked if she believed in God. She said ‘Yes.’” Cassie’s memorial is centered on her “Yes,” marking her death as a beginning and an affirmative presence, rather than an inarticulate void. On the right-hand side of the page is an image of the book, with toll-free phone numbers to enable the visitor to buy the book and get free shipping, to order a video of the book, or to buy it at either Amazon, Barnes and Noble, or Borders. The rest of the homepage features side-bars that can be clicked on to find out about “The Story of the Best-Selling Book,” to learn more about the book (we can read the first chapter and reviews) to read responses to questions about Cassie and to access links to other Columbine victims. In December 2001, in response to the controversy that surfaced around the story of Cassie’s “Yes,” the viewer could also click on the question, “Did Cassie Say Yes?” and find out by linking to an article by Wendy Murray Zoba of Christianity Today.¹⁹

Because Cassie’s memorial depends on her affirmative signification of death—“yes”—it concerns itself with the possibility that the story is not true. However, without the “yes” at the crux of this particular memory, the memorial’s redemptive strategy risks disintegration. The “yes” assures Cassie’s parents:

We know that God is working good out of this horrible nightmare. . . . We know that our daughter was no saint. She was far from perfect, but she was prepared to die for her faith in God. Her final word “yes” will always be a challenge and inspiration to us. Our hope is that her “yes” inspires others to take their faith more seriously.²⁰

Cassie’s affirmative response gives her a voice after her own death that does not even have to wonder whether her life was wasted and meaningless. In terms of the memorial, her life is not over just because of her death; rather, the moment of her “yes” brings her closer to God. The web memorial thus serves to demonstrate the shared place that Cassie, God, and her parents still occupy, and the de-Othered nature of her death. Misty Bernall, in a link that takes the viewer from the web memorial to an article entitled “Voices of Columbine: The Family of Cassie Bernall,” reports that some of the kids who were in the library at the time of Cassie’s murder are “one-hundred percent sure” and responds to others’ doubts by saying
“some people are very cynical” (Wallace). Tackling the same issue, Zoba’s piece in Christianity Today does point out that testimonials depend on the witness’s ability to process events at the moment of trauma, but in the end prefers to wonder why people are so interested in debunking Cassie’s account and affirmative “yes.”

What emerges from a reading of cassiebernall.com is that it is crucially important for the memorial to be able to give a presence to the moment of Cassie’s death, and in this way to know and understand it. While her “yes” signals her faith, the public and private focus on her “yes” signals the need to narrow the gap between life and death, to be present at the moment of departure, and to make it manageable and narratable. The story, circulated continually, allows us to gaze on the moment of death and even imagine brushing up against it without having to come too close. Significantly, her death is remembered as occurring not in a void, but in a place filled with presences: courage, faith, and God, and like the more religious memorials in virtualmemorials.com, cyberspace is interpellated as a place where, through death, an encounter with a knowable intimate God is possible.

Like cassiebernall.com, Rachel Scott’s web memorial also centers itself on a religious message that was prohibited from appearing in the hallways of Columbine High School. An earlier version of the memorial webpage (December 2001) showed a photograph of Rachel at the center of the homepage: the same photograph of her that appeared in newsmagazines and in the media after the killings, but enlarged and more detailed. In the memorial she sat, smiling, with her head tilted and body leaning to one side in what is almost a sensuous pose, and the background behind her consisted of enlarged handwriting, of which the viewer could just about read the first few words: “Dear God.”21 Two columns ran down the side of the photograph with options for further exploration in the memorial. Under the photograph there was a quotation from Rachel: “Don’t let your character get camouflaged with your environment. Find who you are and let it stay in its true colors.” At the time of this memorial, the site was undergoing development; a caption on the homepage read: “A new site for Rachel is still currently under development,” but the viewer could still click on links that allowed them to contact her family, make donations, see some of Rachel’s art, and learn more about her.22

Unlike Cassie’s memorial, this one, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, also invited the viewer to click on a heading that read, “In response to the Tragedy” of September 11. The new page that then
appeared expressed condolences and urged the viewer to turn to God and unite in prayer: “Let us not forget how much bigger God is than what happened on that fateful day. . . . With our faith in Jesus Christ, we will rise victorious and become a stronger, more loving nation that sets an example for the world just as Rachel did.” Rachel was thus written into recent national events: her death and the deaths on September 11 were brought together to create, implicitly, a sinister connection between the events. The teen terrorists, Klebold and Harris, according to Harris’s diary, fantasized about flying a plane into a New York skyscraper. Rachel is the nation, and in her memorial death and absence are again turned into presences: determination, faith, and redemption. On today’s website, Rachel continues to be rhetorically aligned with the nation through a link to a site entitled “Pray for President Bush.” Through this link, one reaches a homepage full of images of George W. Bush, and flags flying, that describes itself as a “non-denominational non-partisan ministry dedicated to lifting up President George W. Bush in prayer as he serves this country as President of the United States.” The site sanctifies Bush and his relationship to the U.S. by quoting from Romans 13:1 (“Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God”), and notes that it is God who “has placed” Bush “in the office of the Presidency.” The site is interactive, asking viewers to let it (the website) know that they are praying for Bush. The fact that this entire page is linked to Rachel Scott’s web memorial suggests that the writing of her memory continually involves the creation of a rhetorical relationship between her and God, her country, and her faith.

Of the three Columbine memorials, racheljoyscott.com is, in terms of its graphics and aesthetic layout, the most similar to a traditional memorial plaque. The biography lists her favorite things in order for us to know her, as do other web memorials, but it does so in the form of asides, while the central text—a contemplative biography that focuses on her devout Christianity—describes her personal relationship with Jesus Christ and the faith and love that she wanted to share and witness to others. The biography also describes her as “a girl from Littleton, Colorado, who said ‘yes’ to God, everyday, even in the face of death,” implicitly referring to and echoing Cassie Bernall’s own martyrdom but also repositioning Bernall’s faith as one that pivots around a singular word and event (her “yes” at the moment of death). In turn, this frames Scott’s own faith as apparently more authentic, less commercialized, and more pervasive than Bernall’s. The tension between Scott’s desire to witness, and her quota-
tion featured on the earlier homepage—be yourself and stay with that; don’t be influenced by your environment—is not addressed in any of her memorials. Instead, the memorial pages function as inspirational sources, and as messages of hope. Death and tragedy, they suggest, are beginnings, not endings. Like Cassie’s memorial, Rachel’s also refers to a memoir that lies outside her web memorial, but promotes it more lightly. *The Journals of Rachel Scott: A Journal of Faith at Columbine High* (by Beth Nimmo—Rachel’s mother—and Debra Klingsporn) appears under a link to “Products,” which in itself links to amazon.com’s page, and to another book written by Rachel’s father: *Rachel’s Tears: The Spiritual Journey of Columbine Martyr Rachel Scott*. This latter book appeared on the homepage of the earlier Scott web memorial, featuring excerpts from her private journals, and asking, in its byline, “Was there a prophesy in Rachel’s Tears?” It added, “Her life ended! Her legacy began!” Like Cassie’s memorial, Rachel’s various memorial pages center on presences: a certainty of faith and proximity to God, and on the fateful inevitability in her death, which lends more credence to the idea of God’s personal role in bringing it about.

While cassiebernall.com and racheljoyscott.com function as memorials that narrate death as an affirmative presence and see it as their responsibility to educate and inform the public through evangelical rhetoric, Daniel Mauser’s web memorial stands out in honoring the deceased through a directly politicized form of memory. Like the others, it is clearly dedicated to him as a victim of the shootings, and features links to his life, a photo album, memories, guest book, and words of comfort. But unlike the others, this memorial features links to debates about guns and violence and to photographs of the other Columbine victims.26 The memorial attempts to educate and inform the viewer about the event at Columbine as a whole, and not just on the way it struck this particular family. In this sense, it speaks in national terms and expresses national anxieties, but without an explicitly religious overtone. At the bottom of each page of this memorial are the words “we are all Columbine!” embedded between the image of a memorial ribbon and three columbine flowers. As a signature to whatever has come before it, this emblem serves to unify all the various aspects of the memorial (which makes wide use of the Internet’s hypertext abilities) no matter whether it appears beneath photographs of Daniel and his sister as children or articles about the gun control debate. This bringing together of the personal memorial with the public domain collapses the distinctions between the two, articulating the grief over Daniel’s death also as grief over the wide
dissemination of guns in the U.S. Its message also draws in the viewer, nationalizing the specifics of the tragedy, while at the same time keeping them intimate and domestic with the graphics. That is, through this memorial, all of America suffers from the Columbine syndrome and is the violence and tragedy of the event, but the universal sharing of responsibility also implies a communal bond and collective survival in the face of teen anger.

Through the memorial, we learn about the HOPE Columbine Atrium and Library Fund—the project designed by parents of the Columbine victims to tear out the library and build a new one—and Tom Mauser’s work with SAFE Colorado, an organization that pushed for Amendment 22, the law that closed the gun show loophole in Colorado. The links to pages that discuss gun control are extensive, featuring among other things letters written to U.S. Senators regarding gun issues, and Tom Mauser’s own discussion of and responses to gun clichés. It becomes clear that the political nature of this memorial has elicited negative responses from the NRA and from other gun defenders, so much so that, according to information on the memorial, Tom is featured on “Wanted” posters for the NRA and receives hate mail from them. The guest book, in the past, has been home not only to expressions of sympathy toward the family, but to slurs, insults, and attacks from pro-gun individuals; and the website has also featured a response to these attacks from Tom Mauser. For example, under the heading “Why the Personal Attacks? Why the Hate Mail?” Tom discusses visitors’ messages that attack him, and he quotes some of them. He notes that in writing to these people, “some said they didn’t mind my publishing their names and words herein—they just see it as a ‘badge of honor’ in promoting their beliefs.” The memorial website thus becomes a voice for the opposition, as Terry Chelius of Whitewater, Colorado writes, “Get a life. . . . This is a great vehicle to get your fifteen minutes of fame, but try to get on with your life . . . get a job and buy a good gun. . . . Tommy boy, you and Linda have ridden the tragedy like a roller coaster, never missing an opportunity to get your face on TV or in the papers.” Or Richard W. Pope of Des Moines, Iowa, who calls Tom “a weak pitiful man . . . who is trading on the dead body of your son . . . to get your name in the paper.” Another accuses the Mausers of “using the death of your son to desecrate the constitution . . . Quit using your son as a political tool.” The implication, clearly, is that memory has become politicized because it no longer expresses or reiterates a “truth” or fundamental preconceived right or belief. That the Mausers have chosen to leave the slurs there and make them part of the memorial suggests that
a conscious part of the memory-work in this memorial is the understanding that no memorial is apolitical.

Daniel Mauser's extensive memorial also features descriptions of his vigil, funeral, and burial procession. In referring to these outward events of death and bereavement, the web memorial refuses to offer just one narrative of death. But we do learn that Tom and his wife barely visit the grave "because of painful memories." The absolute absence of the physical gravesite is countered by the presences that fill his website memorial, where activism, information, and education, as well as a careful expression of personal religious faith, and narrative biographies and memories, help to mediate and temper the void and silence of death. All the Columbine memorials thus nationalize their private grief and loss by writing in collective and informative voices. Whether their agendas espouse religion or gun control, they reenact the fundamental "excessive presences" of all web memorials: eliminating undialectical death and filling the space between the bereaved and the deceased with the politics of protest and prayer.

East Carolina University
Greenville, North Carolina

Notes


2. For example, some T-shirts showed the Manhattan skyline and read "The may destroy our buildings, but they will never destroy our faith—in memory of lives lost on September 11."

3. Don Handelman and Lea Shamgar-Handelman write that "death necessarily turns presence into absence," and they argue that the dead are used for the needs of the living (3, 4).

4. Nora explains "real" memory as follows: "We have seen the end of societies that had long assured the transmission and conservation of collectively remembered values, whether through churches or schools, the family or the state . . . 'real' memory—social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies" (284–85).

5. The continual replaceability and instability of the web are one of the challenges I faced when writing about web memorials. Far from being set in stone or being in any way permanent, pages are updated, new information is added, and sometimes old information vanishes. My paper is based on removing the website from its location online: I printed out the pages and studied them as if they were paper-based texts. Thus, in writing on it, I had to make it, to an extent, "unInternet," freezing the information of the moment.
An example of a countermonument is Harburg, Germany's *Monument Against Fascism*, designed by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz. It was unveiled in 1986, and consisted of a black pillar that over time was sunk into the ground. Visitors were invited to inscribe their names on the pillar. The monument thus demanded interaction from viewers, and challenged traditional monuments by suggesting, through the lowering, that memory consists of an absent monument rather than a present one. See Young 29.

7. Katie Trumpener points out that "writers have become... critical of older public monuments and ceremonies, as chilly abstractions from lived experience and individual memory. In tandem with (and to some degree inspiring) such critiques, a new breed of countermonument has tried both to underline and to circumvent such abstraction" (1096).

8. Casey emphasizes the otherness of physical memorials when he writes that commemoration is a "highly mediated affair" that "involves a quite significant component of otherness at every turn" (218). He also suggests that it is "the very hardness and hardiness of granite or marble" that "concretize[s] the wish to continue honoring into the quite indefinite future—and thus, by warding off the ravages of time, to make commemoration possible at any (at least foreseeable) time" (226).


17. The Internet plays a loaded role in the Columbine debate other than the memorials that sprang up out of it. It is well known that the killers, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, had their own websites, which were later examined by investigators. Harris and Klebold themselves seemed to have relished the idea of their own posthumous celebrity status: in the tapes they made, they talk of the movie that will be made out of the killings, imagine which director might direct the movie, and talk of wanting to live forever, as ghosts that haunt the survivors. See "The Columbine Tapes."

18. Money made from the book goes to the Cassie Bernal Foundation, which has funded an orphanage set up in Honduras, run by Christian missionaries from North Carolina.
19. On September 23, 1999, Dave Cullen’s “Inside the Columbine High Investigation” raised the possibility, due to new eyewitness reports and testimonies, that it was not Cassie that was asked the question, but someone else. As of July, 2003, Zoba’s article is no longer linked to Cassie Bernall’s website.


21. This photograph is the same one that appears on the book Rachel’s Tears, written by Rachel’s father Darrell Scott.


23. Harris wrote, “We will hijack a hell of a lot of bombs and crash a plane into NYC.” See “Columbine Killer”15.

24. The webpage’s new design and layout still emphasizes Christianity and Rachel’s faith as did the previous one.


26. Although all three memorials discussed here have links to each other, Daniel Mauser’s is the only one to show photographs of all the other victims, most of whom don’t have their own web memorials.

27. The slurs that appear on Mauser’s memorial are reminiscent of the way in which the Harburg memorial was vandalized. Illegible scrabbles, hearts, stars of David, funny faces, and Swastikas all appeared on it. It thus became a social mirror, reminding the community not only of what had happened, but of how they now responded to the memory of that past.

Works Cited


