Witnessing in the age of the database: Viral memorials, affective publics, and the assemblage of mourning

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Abstract
Many terms, such as spontaneous shrines, grassroots memorials and performative commemoratives, have been used to describe the collaborative on-site and online memorials created following the deaths of national and global figures, as well as those of unknown victims of mass-mediated disasters. I argue that the adjective “viral” better captures the temporality, spatiality, materiality, and mimeticism of these formations, as well as their frequent pathologization. Contemporary performative public mourning follows from mediated witnessing in the era of networked digital media, forming a witnessing/mourning assemblage. The corporeal testifying of the witness-turned-mourner contributes material derivatives to an affective network. Breaking from constative, narrative testimony and the exclusionary logic of the monument, these memorial aggregations emerge from processes of database (de)composition and network virality. Through the close analysis of a 2008 YouTube memorial video tribute for victims of a Greek bus accident, I consider shifts in public grieving and memorialization of catastrophic media events in relation to developments in web protocols and platforms.

Keywords
database as cultural form, media event, network virality, online affect, social media memorials, witnessing

A mere two weeks after the 14 December 2012 murders of 20 children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, local authorities decided to remove the myriad memorials that had been erected in front of shops, in yards, and along roadsides. The objects, placed there by town residents, but also sent in huge numbers by strangers, included flowers, teddy bears, American flags, balloons, prayer cards, crosses, angels, votive candles, decorated Christmas trees, as well as personal items such as old dolls and sports trophies. Local officials deemed the sheer glut of these memorial offerings an impediment to moving on, while their unseemly appearance after being subjected to several days of winter weather was felt to have undermined their intended message. The plan, however, was not to discard the memorials: the organic materials

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would be mulched into “sacred soil” and the non-organic items processed into bricks and other building materials for a future memorial (Rivera, 2013).

The memorial clutter that overwhelmed Newtown in the wake of the gruesome shootings might be seen as yet another page in the contemporary history of “memorial mania” (Doss, 2010), a growing cultural trend of spectacular public memorializing following the deaths of national and global figures, as well as those of unknown victims, often children, of mass-mediated catastrophes. Princess Diana’s death in 1997 is usually cited as a watershed in the emergence of this mode of popular mourning practice. Its hallmark is the collaborative production of memorials that have been described with various terms, such as spontaneous shrines, temporary, improvised, impromptu, makeshift, vernacular, or grassroots memorials (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, 2011), performative commemoratives (Santino, 2006), and commemorative emergences (Knudsen and Stage, 2013). For some, these proliferating practices constitute narcissistic forms of therapeutic self-help (Recuber, 2012) that feed into the kitsch consumerism of grief tourism (Sturken, 2007). Others challenge this view of collective memorializing, suggesting that instead of dismissing these practices as symptomatic of an obsessive “mourning sickness,” we attend to them as records of profound transformations in public sentiment (Doss, 2010: 68).

Sympathetic to the latter view, in this article, I argue that performative memorializing takes its particular contemporary form as an extension of the experience of mediated witnessing in the era of networked digital media. I propose to use witnessing as a key concept to address the confluence of the historical, technological, and political in the public space of mourning opened up by traumatic national and global media events. Some might maintain that to “simply watch” things on television or “follow” them on the internet would better be termed spectatorship than witnessing, with its legal, historical, and religious connotations of temporal and spatial copresence with the event. I insist on this word, however, for at least two reasons. For one, these attenuated witnesses testify. They relate (to) what they have seen in multiple times and spaces. Second, the term witnessing entails a responsivity toward the other that posits watching as a civil act (Azoulay, 2008), a form of visceral and affective participation in events that awakens a sense of shared vulnerability and connectedness. Mediated witnessing makes the viewer a potential mourner whose corporeal and contagious testifying produces material derivatives.

In the past decade, much public memorializing has migrated online. While in strictly chronological terms online memorial nodes follow on-site commemorative sites of the pre-internet age, this order of events should not mislead us theoretically. Often intertwined in the ongoing movement between mediatization and materialization, online and offline memorials alike are shaped by the recombinant potentialities of the database and the proliferative dynamics of the network. I believe that the adjective viral best describes the temporality, spatiality, materiality, and mimeticism of both modes of memorial instantiation, as well as their frequent pathologization as “out of control” (with no clear boundaries in time and space, as in Newtown). The focus on database and archive as structuring principles of these memorial productions brackets the intentions and agency of individual witnesses as authors/authorities and dislodges the centrality of constative, narrative testimony, thus directing our attention to the emergent properties and performative force of the witnessing/mourning assemblage: namely, the modular remixing, the frenetic aggregation of testimonial fragments and sentimental objects, the flash occupation (and abandonment) of spaces, the decompiling of the grand narrative of national death into 5-minute video tributes, the contagious emoti(c)onality, and, above all, the mass participation in a sprawling intersubjective network.

I have developed the thoughts in this article after examining a common form of contemporary online public memorializing: a YouTube video tribute for young people killed in a tragic accident. The example I will discuss is a video memorial for a 2003 bus crash in Greece, the nation’s deadliest vehicle collision to date. On a methodological level, I might have analyzed this video as a token
of a type and compared it with other analogous videos, but I have opted instead for a less common, diachronic approach to the ongoing memorialization of specific deaths. This perspective not only provides insights into a particular historical and cultural experience of loss but also illuminates how particular memorial nodes evolve in relation both to other instances of public performative memorializing (online and offline) and to developments in web protocols and platforms.

I was drawn to write about this accident because, even though not recognizably political or historical (and thus not taken up in critical and scholarly discussions of Greek society), my anthropology students in Greece often alluded to it in our conversations about cultural memory. Indeed, the intensity of public mourning catalyzed by this specific experience of catastrophic loss, combined with its effective erasure in informational databases, suggests that the categories of the political and the historical could be productively opened up by attending to the practices of networked connectivity, event virtualization, and social grief through which contemporary affective publics materialize.

**Historicizing memorial media**

In August 2008, user tolis09 uploaded a 2.5-minute video entitled “ACCIDENT AT TEMPE 13/4/2003” to YouTube in honor of 21 teenagers who had died 5 years previously in a horrific traffic accident. The students from the town of Makrohori in Northern Greece were on their way back from a class trip to Athens when their bus collided with an overloaded truck on the narrow road winding through Tempe Valley. On impact, laminated boards, poorly secured to the truck bed, slipped off and scissored through the side of the bus. The accident was widely covered in the mass media, with television images of the surreally mangled bus rerun into national memory.

The mourning of this shocking incident traversed and meshed public and private spheres of grief: the devastated families, friends, and neighbors were caught in the national spotlight and consoled for their loss by political and religious leaders, while the public, through this media event, touched death up close. At the accident site, an impromptu memorial soon appeared with photographs of the dead, flowers, votive candles, and written messages (Figure 1). A marble memorial was later erected, not far from a similar structure constructed for soccer fans killed in a 1999 collision.

![Image of memorial at the site of the Tempe accident](https://example.com/image.jpg)

**Figure 1.** The impromptu memorial at the site of the Tempe accident (2003). Photo by Eurokinissi.
A month after the accident, a memorial website was launched for the “21 angels of Makrohori,” replete with Christian clipart, including an image of Jesus on the home page (Figure 2). This site consists of static pages with a menu at the bottom, linking to statements by local politicians, school officials, newspaper articles, and poems. An interactive feature enables visitors to “light a candle” (a graphics interchange format (GIF) animation in the color of their choice) and enter a prayer (13,000 as of August 2010 when the feature was disabled) (Figure 3). The times I visited, the site felt abandoned: a relic of the Web 1.0 age. In fact, with the advent of social networking and file-sharing services, this particular memorial website was remediated onto those new platforms (by tolis09 among others). In 2008, the same year that tolis09 uploaded his memorial clip to YouTube, a closed Facebook group (“To the Memory of the 21 Angels who Were Unjustly Lost in Tempe”) was established. While photography, that classic technology of mourning since the late nineteenth century, is prominent on the original memorial website, the multimedia social networking environment enables the adding on of video and music, as well as open-ended forms of participation by users (liking, commenting and embedding).

These developments, however, should not be viewed in evolutionary terms: nostalgia for defunct technological forms, for instance, must be taken into account in critical analyses of digital culture. The fact that the memorial website was created by mourners directly affected by the event, its overt religiosity, the fixed information it provides about the accident, and the limited, but direct, interaction it affords with the memorial (rather than with other users) appear to have endowed this site with an aura of sanctity and authenticity, as well as a monumental aspect (reminiscent of a digital tombstone). Indeed, admins of social media memorial pages and videos commemorating the accident reverently link back to this original webpage, while several users turned to the comments page of tolis09’s video to express frustration in no longer being able to “light a candle.”

In the second phase of web memorializing, tolis09’s video tribute stands out as a node, not only in relation to this particular accident but also in contemporary Greek memorial culture generally. With over 600,000 views (a huge number by Greek standards) and a still active comments section at the time of writing, tolis09’s video is usually one of the first items that turn up in an internet search about the accident. One might ask, what has tolis09 made that generates such affective energy? Why has he taken on the role of chief public mourner of this accident and holder of an online condolence book? His commemorative video seems gratuitous, both as gesture and product. As tolis09 explains in his uploader notes, he did not know the victims
personally or experience the accident firsthand. The video itself took minimal time and technical skill to create. Tolis09, whose other uploads identify him as a heavy metal fan from central Greece, explains that he posted the video because the event made Greece “freeze” and had upset him personally because the victims were so young. Tolis09’s basic contribution—which as it turned out was not so basic—was opening a public space of mourning and witnessing.

Comments on an accident: social media users as witnesses

Given that tolis09, like so many uploaders, is less an author, than a fellow user, the comments below a video such as “ACCIDENT AT TEMPE 13/4/2003” should not be seen in literary critical or film studies terms as “responses” or “critiques” of the video-as-text, but rather as analogous micro-acts of testifying on the part of similarly distant witnesses and unrelated mourners. As a result, on a methodological level, the comments to such a video should be viewed as integral, not supplementary, to its function as a memorial node.

Only a few commenters trace filiation to the victims (“I lost my cousin Stavros there,” “the 4th [photograph] was my cousin …”). Some assert an (almost) common provenance with the victims (“I, my friend, am from the next village, Vergina … really when the incident happened I felt that I lost my cousins.”). The majority of the commenters instead locate their bodies in relation to the time and place of the accident. Although commonsense hierarchies of witnessing privilege bodily copresence with the event, commenters to tolis09’s video appear oblivious to such assumptions of relevance and validity.

Only one commenter mentions having actually seen and heard the crash. The rest locate themselves at various distances from the “here and now” of the accident. Given that the same week many schools had scheduled their 5-day school excursion, a rite of passage for Greek students, many commenters note that they too had been on the national road linking Thessaloniki to Athens on the day of the accident. Some mention having passed the same spot just a few minutes before the accident (“I’m still crying we were coming back on the same road 10 minutes difference we were ahead”) or just after (“our bus was behind the bus of the kids who were lost … so close to death”). Some had met the victims at historical sites (“in athens in parliament we were together, even though I’m from a different school I remember the kids … !!!!!!!!!!”) or at rest stops (“their bus left right after us we met at Jumbo [toy store]”). One commenter expressed regret for not appreciating their commonality earlier:

We were coming back from our own three-day [trip] and we stopped at the same place as those kids, some kids from my school cursed them out badly because they were from northern Greece … now I’m 21 and truthfully I am still ashamed on their behalf.

Commenters, thus, appear to identify themselves less as close viewers than as near misses, underlining a reversibility of situation via corporeal affinity with the victims: their bodies serve as locative media mapping their proximity to other bodies, rather than as platforms for aloof and disembodied optical/acoustical observation.

In conventional models of witnessing, the distancing of the witness from the event along either the axis of time or place correlates with a waning of intensity and authority vis-à-vis the event. Yet, for many of the commentators who had been nowhere near the national road on the day of the accident, temporal copresence through the corporeally intense experience of following “live” media coverage justified their providing personal testimony about the accident. Most commonly, they referred to the experience of viewing accident coverage on television: “I remember clearly that I was sitting in the living room and watching the television shocked I didn’t believe it!! :(,” “5
years might have passed since then but I’ll never forget the day that I heard on the news what had happened :-( :-( :-( :-( :-( :-( “when we found out about it we were in rhodes on our five-day excursion and we froze in front of the televisions in our rooms …” One user even witnesses on the basis of his spatial and temporal proximity to the witnessing texts of other mediated witnesses: “I was a soldier and returning from guard duty, some friends of mine were listening to the radio, they told me that an accident had happened and kids from my city had been killed.”

The comments to tolis09’s video underscore the centrality of place and materiality to witnessing against the idea that the site of an event, once transformed into museum, memorial, or shrine, slips into the realm of “historical representation” or “dead” history (Peters, 2001: 720). At the site of the accident, the past is not locked away in “historicity,” but active and revenant. Indeed, Tempe emerges as a national “traumascape” (Tumarkin, 2005) where the accident is (re)experienced viscerally during planned visits or unsolicited encounters (that generate new testimony): “Every time that I pass by Tempe … I see that spot with the photographs and the flowers … and I cannot endure it!!!!,” “in the summer every weekend I pass by there and see the spot where the fucking accident happened … and one day I stopped and lit a candle in their memory b/c I could not endure it anymore.”

The intrusion of the space of the dead in the space of life and the assertion of personal grief in public space at the Tempe memorial draws on the tradition of the Greek roadside memorial shrine (proskynetari), erected by families at the site of deadly highway accidents. Despite clear aesthetic and spiritual continuities, there are also important differences: strangers passing a proskynetari might light the oil lamp that is an integral element of such shrines and burn some incense in the name of a common humanity (Panourgïá, 1995: 171–174), but they would neither construct such a shrine for someone else’s dead nor add structural elements of their own choice to existing shrines. By contrast, the online memorials that I argue arise from mediated witnessing aggregate from the multifarious gestures of mourning performed by unrelated strangers. Rather than distilling particular deaths into symbolism, timelessness, and generality (as in the case of the proskynetari), these memorial formations bring together and imbricate the lives and bodies of unknown mourners and equally unknown dead through transformative, unpredictable, and subjective encounters.

Mediated witnessing, thus, is not solely, or even primarily, retrospective. Indeed, many commenters to tolis09’s video use the event as a barometer to mark time passing in their own lives (“now I’m 21”), demonstrating how witnessing can make the past continuous with the present. Given the discreteness of records in computer databases and their non-linear arrangement, the memory of the accident always can be retrieved when an analogous accident happens in Tempe or elsewhere. The thumbnails of related videos that “pop up” in the YouTube browser are indicative of this spatialization of time in the database. After the 2012 Sierre bus accident in Switzerland that killed 28 Belgians, mostly children, who had been on a ski holiday, one user (re)turned to the comment section of tolis09’s video: “The wound will never close … The little children in Belgium … My little souls … In less than a month 9 years will have passed since we lost you …” As these examples suggest, witnessing involves multiple temporalities (biographical, national, and global). As opposed to the punctuality of broadcast media, the temporality of the web has been described as continuous, connective, and emergent. Remembering is something done “on-the-fly.” Given that memory is distributed across our technological practices and coeval with the present, rather than compartmentalized into linear, chronological segments, we constantly interweave personal and public memory in our evolving digital narrations (Hoskins, 2009: 100).

Users do not simply refresh their personal memory online. They expand it prosthetically through a complex synthesis of materialities, bodies, images, and witnessing texts. Ten at the time of the accident, one user recalled the newsflashes from the day of the accident, but notes that the accident was “rekindled” during a 2008 school trip to Athens when they passed the monument and “our
teachers told us what had happened.” At web memorials, users can learn about an event they did not experience and that no longer occupies media discourse through what, in effect, constitutes an alternative memory network. One user notes, “When the accident happened I was 5 years old and I don’t remember a lot from that day, but I have read about the subject on the internet.” In reality, however, it is not so easy to locate information about this accident online. Greek-language Wikipedia includes just a brief reference. All links to newspaper articles on the “Light a Candle” website were broken when paywalls were erected, and video footage from television news has not been uploaded onto social media platforms. Scrolling through the witnessing texts beneath tolis09’s video, thus, assumes an important role in filling in memory gaps regarding what happened, but also, crucially, what people felt about it. In the comment section, there is even the possibility of making contact with (mediated) witnesses themselves: “Hey, you guys, since I don’t remember, how did the accident happen???” If we release ourselves from prioritizing in situ witnesses, we see that mediated witnessing is an ongoing, collective, and futuristic activity.

The testimonial fragments found in the comments to tolis09’s video do not further witnessing in epistemological terms (what it is to know the event) or ontological ones (what it is to be the victim), but rather attest to the fact of mediated witnessing as a dominant perceptual and communicative modality (Frosh, 2009: 55). Indeed, rather than inhibiting witnessing, the tenuousness and tangentiality of connections to the media event and its victims are what propel it. Instead of marking the distance from the event, these testimonies could be seen as lines moving bodies toward the event from a multiplicity of presents.

The event in/of mediated witnessing

In critical histories of technology, media and memory studies, and affect theory, there has been a growing recognition of the significance of forms of mediated witnessing, involving the so-called “second-order” witness, who though removed spatially and/or temporally from the “here and now” of the event, experiences it via media technologies and goes on to produce testimony about this experience (Ellis, 2000; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009b). Rather than the perpetrator or the victim of an event (key figures in legal, historical, and religious frameworks of witnessing), the media event foregrounds the standpoint of the unrelated stranger.

The fusing of contingency to archivability with the advent of modern technologies of audiovisual reproduction, such as film (Doane, 2002), means that witnessing does not follow the event, but embeds the (singular, unrepeatable) “instant” as a spectral presence in (multiple, communicable) “instances” of testimony (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009a: 297). Contemporary “globital time,” produced by the intertwined forces of globalization and digitization, has led to a striking proliferation of the event’s temporalities and witnessing texts (Reading, 2011: 299). If witnessing involves placing the living, but mortal, body in time (and over time), witnessing necessarily engages these multivalent temporalities: the time of the “event” (“near misses”), the time(s) of the witnessing texts (close to the event or years later, as in the case of tolis09’s video), and the multiple potential times of audience witnessing of witnessing texts, which in turn intersect with other personal and collective memories (p. 304).

Media transmission of the event, thus, is not a matter of reproduction of the original (and, thus, of the production of a distorted and emotionally weaker version of the original), but of constant differentiation. The “transitivity” of the event triggers new intensities and energies, inaugurating and extending the becoming of the event (Massumi, 2002: 81–84). This virtualization blurs established distinctions, opening a field of new possibilities and, above all, turning the certainty of the event into a new problem: in this case, about how the event relates to the present, about our connection to the event and to each other (Levy, 1988).
The sociality of mourning: YouTube as affective network

If witnessing spectacular, deadly media events is less about proving what happened, than about bearing testimony to pain and death (Derrida, 2005), testifying more resembles mourning than giving a deposition, as the witness “depicts in a single operation both the unfortunate’s suffering and what he himself feels at the sight of it” (Boltanski, 1999: 114). The comments to tolis09’s video underscore the corporeal, contagious dimension of mediated witnessing, as tolis09’s “shiver,” materialized as video tribute, reverberates with others. Despite the time and space separating the almost 500 comments and their multiple lines of address and points of disconnect, these witnessing texts could be said to constitute an intersubjective sphere of mourning.

The comments abundantly refer to and reenact viscerally felt, embodied emotions, such as shuddering, trembling, stomach tightening, crying, and weeping. Many comments produce a sense of bodily intimacy and of spatial copresence through the profuse use of the gestural and paralinguistic conventions of web discourse (Schandorf, 2013). If punctuation in print brings bodies to the page, evoking corporeal responses from the reader (Brody, 2008), strings of exclamation points, repeated letters, and all cap(ital)s similarly infuse on-screen discourse with vocal intensity and bodily movement. Emoticons, the emblematic punctuation of texting and web discourse, pictographically enact facial and hand gestures through the arrangement of typographical elements, as in this horizontal image of a sad face: “8 years passed :-((). The deictic @ sign, indicating addressivity among users, produces a communicative contact zone: “@fairyinlove16 I really wouldn’t want to be in your place … :( it’s difficult to lose people you love … :(.” More than what is said, this recursive circulation of embodied energies generates ambience and a sense of connectivity.

Like earlier technologies of telepresence, such as the telegraph (Sconce, 2000), the internet is perceived as a way for the living to contact the dead (Walker, 2007: 126). Many comments hail the victims directly (“we’ll always remember you good-bye …,” “HAVE A GOOD TRIP KIDS!”). In contrast to the individualized memorializing prevalent in the American context, tolis09’s video, like other online and on-site memorial formations relating to the accident, does not dwell on the singularity of the victims by delving into the details of their personal lives or addressing them by name (cf. Knudsen and Stage, 2013: 424). The victims remain “21 angels.” Other comments are addressed to the teens’ family and friends, consoling them for their inconceivable loss, often invoking traditional Greek mourning discourse and Greek Orthodox liturgy. (“May the soil covering them be light,” “May their memory be eternal.”) In his uploader notes, tolis09 addresses the relatives, the dead youth, and YouTube users: CONDOLENCES TO THE PARENTS THE RELATIVES AND THE FRIENDS OF THE VICTIMS. BON VOYAGE KIDS!!!!WE’LL ALWAYS REMEMBER YOU … (IF YOU WANT LEAVE SOME SORT OF COMMENT). The use of parentheses signals ambivalence about mixing these different audiences. Yet, from this “side” conversation among viewers, who reciprocate the uploader with comments and shout-outs (“bravo tolis09!!,” “really great video friend … I shuddered …,” “bravo tolis09 a million bravo from my heart”), an affective network of mourning emerges.

Many commenters share stories of personal loss, often of friends or family who died in vehicle accidents. (“I have the bad luck to have lost a loved one myself … a person really close to me from … a tractor trailer,” “I LOST MY BROTHER IN AN ACCIDENT AND SO MANY YEARS HAVE PASSED BUT I SEE MY MOTHER LIGHTING A CANDLE EVERY DAY AND CRYING JUST LIKE MY FATHER AND EVERYONE.”) Tolis09 himself mentions an uncle who died in a car accident. These comments highlight the injustice of random and untimely death, reinstate the victims’ presence (as well as that of lost others), and, by ritually banishing the incident, plead for such loss never to reoccur.
This collective mourning recalls Nadia Seremetakis’ (1991) insights into the “ethics of antiphony” in the mourning protocols of rural Greek women in the Mani peninsula of the Peloponnese. Her work on the sociality of mourning presages contemporary discussions about ambience and autonomy in relation to the “transmission of affect” (Brennan, 2004). Maniat lamenting is structured by an antiphonal call and response, based on an ethic of helping through echoing and reciprocity. Pain becomes valid only once it has been socially produced through crying, sobbing, screams, gestures, and monologues circulated among the participating women. Affect is external and involuntarily marked on the body (“His eyes betray [martyrané, Gr. ‘witness’] fear”) and, thus, communicable and shareable on the surface of things. Affect’s exteriority is concealed through the effect it brings to the performance of self in (and with) the (mourning) community. Yet, given that the “actor is also the audience of his/her involuntary implication in a sensory horizon,” the sensory exterior can provoke a powerful “moment of sensory self-reflexivity” and pass into the body as perceptual experience (Seremetakis, 1994: 7).

Consider user HellasAboveAll, whose profile flaunts supportive comments for the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party. He writes, “I cried like a little girl when I heard the news.” This male crying (noted in other comments) attests to an autonomous circuit of affect. The shocking shift from actor to audience forces HellasAboveAll to view himself as other: “a crying little girl.” While he might invoke this incident as exceptional to restore order to the public sphere (i.e. gender and age hierarchy, heteronormativity, and rationality), his transgression attests to the new publicness of grief and to grief as a basic modality of publicness.

The antiphonic relations enacted in the comment section of a YouTube memorial tribute, of course, emerge from a much more heterogeneous, contingent, and dispersed collectivity than that of Seremetakis’ subjects, connected through the involuntary and everyday bonds of filiation, cohabitation, and gender. The scanty clues as to the (social, political) backgrounds of most of those commenting enables the “meeting” of previously unrelated, unconnected others. The “context collapse” among users’ social worlds, typical of social media in general, is particularly pronounced at memorial nodes (Marwick and Ellison, 2012).

The visibility and availability of the dead in dedicated web memorials (as well as in social media accounts memorialized after their users pass away) have made them (i.e. the dead) a critical “new ground for user participation” (Karppi, 2013: 15). Indeed, Facebook memorial pages are known for attracting “RIP trolling,” in which users with fake profiles post offensive comments and images, often of dead bodies, thus mocking the tragedy fetish of contemporary media, the “gawking” of unrelated mourners, and the privileging of certain dead bodies over others (i.e. young, beautiful, white). Needless to say, these practices have led to extreme discord among users, the deletion of abusive comments, and often the closing down of memorial pages. While inexplicable and shocking to other users, trolling, as an “anti-social network,” actually demonstrates how social networking protocols not only “encourage but engender user enmeshment” (Phillips, 2011).

In the case of the Tempe video memorial, references in a few comments indicate that tolis09 has scrubbed some negative remarks (“Don’t pay attention to what they write,” “Buddy, don’t pay attention to losers who think it’s cool to make those kinds of comments from behind their anonymity”). As this purging suggests, the technological affordances of social networking and file-sharing platforms do provide uploaders and page creators (who, like tolis09, are often total strangers to the dead) disproportionate power to moderate performative mourning discourse (Marwick and Ellison, 2012). That this particular memorial video has not proved a target for concerted trolling might be explained by the timing of the accident (pre-social media) and the uploading of the accident in social media platforms 5 years after the accident (i.e. long after the high point of public attention and mourning for the accident). In turn, this lack of trolling has contributed to the video’s persistence online.
Returning to the question of “who” congregates at such memorial nodes, it is important to note the openness of accidental, mass and (what are perceived as) unjust deaths to the affective investments of unrelated others. In this case, the fact that the victims were “our kids,” Greek kids from the provinces, innocents with no political histories, made them recognizable as bodies that could—and should—be grieved by a mainstream, (ethnically) Greek (and Greek-Cypriot) national and diasporic public (Butler, 2009: 50). No commenters self-identified as immigrants living in Greece, while many made a point of noting that they witnessed this event “as Greeks” abroad. (“Even in Canada they were shocked by this story and we observed a moment of silence for those kids all the Greek kids who were at the school.”) Chiding the commenter who wrote asking for information about the accident, a Greek-Cypriot responded gruffly: “Give me a break, kid … even I from Cyprus … know … tsk.” Knowing about and feeling this accident in fact appears critical to demonstrating one’s belonging in a broadly “Greek” public defined as a community of feeling. One user describes the ritual of visiting the accident site as a mode of reentry into Greek society:

I’m 14 and when this happened I was 8 years old … We lived abroad then and when we came back here permanently we passed by tempe and my parents told me what had happened … I was very upset.

Finally, as this comment suggests, the circulation of affect around this video is primarily being engaged in by young Greeks who identify themselves as the victims’ contemporaries (and as the social media generation).

Notably, the comments make little reference to political responsibility for the accident or to Greek politics generally. A few commenters do blame the accident on the Greek state’s problematic infrastructure (inadequate inspections, inefficient traffic policing, and poorly constructed roads): “If this incident happened in Sweden the kids would still be alive.” This idea that “Greece kills its children” led some to highlight the responsibility of politicians and the profit motive of companies who cut corners with safety, while others decried the national character (“wanker Greek driver”).

Overall, however, politicization was not tolerated in the comment section. The user NantiaDspAnta SchoolAnarchy chides those who would talk the abstract (male) language of politics:

Hey guys really are you okay … underneath a video like this it’s not permissible to mix up politicians and other imbeciles … it seemed to me really disgraceful instead of expressing our sorrow to rush to hurl out responsibilities … of course there are people to blame—the mass media, but are we going to sit around and deal with them or say good-bye to these kids who left so unsuspectingly?

Other commenters similarly conclude that it is silly to quarrel about politics given the overwhelming fact of death and the desire to live (“we are fighting among ourselves over silly little things and we are forgetting the meaning of life,” “and then you tell me about economic crises and other bunk IT’S GREAT THAT WE ARE LIVING,” “Celebrate life guys every day, every minute every second.”)

As these comments suggest, this mourning is not melancholic: it does not constrain the energies and affects grief releases to a contemplation of the past. This movement from loss toward life and, thus, strikingly away from the “event itself” resonates with Matthew J. Allen and Steven D. Brown’s (2011) discussion of “living memorials.” In the case of charitable trusts established in the wake of the 2005 London bombings, they note how a symbolic investment in telling stories of loss (traditionally associated with the function of memorials) is supplanted by the affective labor of commemoration that connects lives: caring for the life (rather than lamenting the death) of the commemorated victim means extending care to another person in the present, thus transforming the “bodily activities of the commemorating individual” into a “mnemonic substrate” (316).
Gratuitous mourning by distant witnesses and unrelated mourners, exemplified by tolis09’s video and its comments, follows from shifts in the mediatic condition in which “death as scene/seen” on-screen together (by networked viewers) creates a sphere of public intimacy in which a common vulnerability is potentially recognized (Gibson, 2011: 917). The genuineness and necessity of such mourning certainly have been questioned. The derision directed at grief tourists who visit on-site memorials has been extended to the growing phenomenon of “memorial page tourism,” savagely mocked by trolls (Phillips, 2011). Yet, much like digital fandom, to which such social media mourning might be compared, the networks and productive processes in which users become engaged around the dead (as around a fictive work) are too significant to be reduced to a vetting of authenticity, propriety, and proprietary rights (true grief, tasteful expression, and legitimate [i.e. related] mourners).

**Witnessing/memorial assemblage**

Thinking of memorial nodes as technosocial assemblages is a crucial analytical move for refining the connection between mediated witnessing and performative mourning, as well as for conceptualizing materiality, relationality, affect, and authorship.

Assemblages are heterogeneous compositions of material and expressive elements, linking bodies and objects, as well as discursive formations, institutions, and ideologies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Assemblages are dynamic processes subject to territorialization (stabilizing the assemblage’s identity and function) and deterritorialization (unraveling relations, opening the assemblage to transformation). The fact that assemblages have emergent properties does not mean that the parts lose their integrity: the assemblage is eminently decomposable since it is formed through relations of exteriority (De Landa, 2006: 10–11). Assemblages not only have a “distinctive history of formation but a finite life span” (Bennett, 2010: 24).

Mourning, as an assemblage, links the bodies of mourners with matter (corpse, coffin, mourning clothes, jewelry, gravestone, cemetery dirt, ashes, etc.), technologies (epitaphs, embalming, cremation, photography, digitization, etc.), ideologies of mourning (the “proper” burial, traditions of ritual lament), and institutions (church, state). Habits of mourning can reign in the tremendous intensities unleashed by death (especially when untimely), reconfirming the social and political order and its hierarchies. Yet, the mourning assemblage also can disassemble scripted concretizations with unexpected consequences (i.e. AIDS activism).

Mediated witnessing is also an assemblage, which connects transmission networks, bystanders’ digital imaging, individual testimonies, democratic ideals, principles of newsworthiness, and aesthetic conventions (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009a: 298–299). In the contemporary media ecology, in which dispersed strangers and media systems are linked together in complex global constellations, traditional institutional hierarchies of knowledge production are potentially destabilized by viewers’ intensities, semantic ambiguity regarding the event, and, notably, the reversibility of testimony-producers and audiences, (p. 303).

As the contemporary access point to death (given its concealment from everyday perception), mediated witnessing could not but intersect with mourning assemblages. Through database searching, mainstream media outlets and users’ streams can be brought into the same frame, leading professional news media’s renderings of an event to become incorporated into more intimate contexts. As users move serendipitously from link to link, distinctions between getting informed about an event and mourning/commenting on it, as well as between private and public mourning, are redefined according to multiple narrations of self and senses of belonging (cf. Walker, 2007: 131–134).
Death in the database, network virality, and the tagging of affect

Tolis09’s video is the material trace of the movement from mediated witnessing to performative mourning. More of a slideshow, the video individually streams still photographs of the victims extracted from the “Light a Candle” website, interpolates a few informational slides about the accident, and embeds the audio track of a mournful ballad by an American Christian heavy metal band. This product made by “anyone” with “anything,” but also by “everybody,” exemplifies how database modularity, network contagiousness, and the explosion in user-generated digital content inform contemporary memorialization practice.

Storage media and inscribing technologies inevitably mediate our relationship to the dead (Kittler, 1999; Thacker, 2005: 113). The historical shift from the archive (mechanical storage media, analog technologies) to the computer database (digital storage media), thus, has had critical implications for cultural memory and cultural production more generally. In early observations on the database as discourse, Mark Poster (1995) noted that “the database is not only remote from any authorial presence but is ‘authored’ by so many hands that it makes a mockery of the principle of author as authority” (p. 85). In this “second media age,” as the database assumes the role of “super-panopticon,” subjectivity is radically distributed and the private/public distinction upended, turning “our private behaviors into public announcements, our individual deeds into collective language” (p. 87). Meanwhile, the shift from the partially connected media systems of mechanical media (Kittler, 1999) to the totally connected media enabled by binary code has made information (and, by extension, the dead) modifiable, flexible, recombinative, and, thus, highly proliferative (Thacker, 2005: 113–114). While the archive is defined by its exclusivity as a repository of unique objects and structured by alphabetism and name-based hierarchical organization, the database enables users’ access to easily-reproducible digital content by way of search queries and fast retrieval. Rhizomatic user-generated tags and spatial interfaces provide multiple entryways into the data and various modes of classifying (and thus retrieving) a singular item (or death).

The remixes, mashups, memes, and curations that typify contemporary modes of digital production reflect the modularity of database (de)composition: a concept that resonates powerfully with the idea of assemblage, given that component parts maintain their integrity. In a well-known salvo proclaiming the end of narrative in the age of database, Lev Manovich (2001) has pointed to the “info-aesthetics” of new media objects assembled from pre-existing discrete samples (html, sound, image, and video files). Similarly, Hiroki Azuma (2009) describes the simulacra works created by Japanese otaku (manga) fans as quintessential database products. For Azuma, these works are not copies, since they do not refer to (or venerate) an original. Instead, they reflect fans’ penetration of the interface: sidestepping the work’s narrative, they extract elements from the database (a costume, a way of speaking, a setting) with which to construct a new work. Azuma terms these components (e.g. cat ears, green hair) “moe-elements” (moe being something cute, desired, a fetish). For Azuma, this postmodern embrace of the derivative results in small narratives (Lyotard’s “petit récits”), composed around the affective nodes of the moe-elements.

Tolis09’s video is just such a micronarrative, in which the photographs of the victims, extracted via screenshot from the “Light a Candle” website (itself composed of clipart and digital ready-mades) operate as moe-elements, evoking powerfully, yet vaguely, the “original” event (Figure 4). (Notably, he does not include images of the wrecked bus). Tolis09’s video, in other words, breaks down, remixes, and remediates a prior witnessing text to create a derivative testimonial product. Components of this product, in turn, could just as easily be reproduced and incorporated into a new work (even unrelated to the accident), as suggested by a question that turns up in the comments at regular intervals: “Guys, what song is that???” Of course, decomposition can affect the persistence of the work, as when traditional media rights holders delete components of modular user productions, such as a copyrighted song.
That viewers of the memorial video could easily change places with tolis09 and (re)produce a similar product not only testifies to the recombinative logic of composition in the age of the database but also to the reversible intensities of testimony-producers and viewers in the witnessing/mourning assemblage. Reversibility also applies to the relation of testimony-producers to victims. The frequent reference in the comments to being “near misses,” rather than a narcissistic indulgence on the part of “frivolous” users, might be seen as an acknowledgment of interchangeability with the victim of the contingent and meaningless catastrophe of the post-historicist era. That memorials are made by anybody—for anybody—does not so much demonstrate their vernacularity (a term commonly used to describe them) as this reversibility of situation.

These memorial productions are not just made by anybody, but by everybody. In contrast to monuments established by the state to honor the “noble” deaths of national heroes, endowed with sanctity through the durability of the materials from which they are constructed, their studied design and the national-symbolic sites in which they are erected, these ad hoc compilations resemble unsorted lists of individual items in the database. They can unfold on-site—but also anywhere—with heaps of cheap, commercial sympathy tokens. Rather than a finished and bounded monument, scripted into commemorative protocols, to which designated representatives bring impersonal ritual offerings (like wreaths) at anniversaries, these memorials emerge from the massive, unsolicited contribution of many small pieces—a votive candle, a photograph, a song, an emoticon, a poem, a supermarket condolence card, a comment, or even “just” a click (like, view, or donation)—by mediated witnesses. These testimonial fragments might not mean much on their own, but together this aggregation brings unpredictable effects. The carpet of flowers left outside Kensington Palace for Princess Diana by anonymous British mourners, for instance, asserted the significance of a particular death in national-symbolic space, against the protocols and hierarchies that attempted to contain and diminish it.

The aggregative dynamic of memorial assemblage is enabled by database access, but driven by network virality (Sampson, 2012). The most basic principle of the network (as of the assemblage) is its propagation through ‘and’, not ‘or’ (Galloway and Thacker, 2007: 18). If the monument traditionally excludes, with the codes and rituals surrounding it modeling social hierarchy and social time, this memorializing works through unrestricted addition. The comments to tolis09’s video are “infinitesimal imitations” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 219), which manifest the “affective contagion” (Thrift, 2007: 235–243) moving through networked space as connected subjects pass on the actions and affects of others (tolis09’s “shiver”). Given that the accident preceded the social media boom and was uploaded into social networking platforms 5 years after its occurrence, the number of views and comments on tolis09’s video is remarkable by Greek standards and provides a sense of the possibilities for circulation and engagement.
The concept of virality also elucidates the distinctive spatiality and temporality of this memorialization practice. In their sudden appearance, transience, and excessiveness, memorial nodes resemble flash mobs organized via social media platforms. These finite occupations—or scenographies—of urban space are user-generated performative events that blur the line between participants and audience, as passers-by often join in (Brejzek, 2010). As in the globalized performance of an internet meme dance video, viral memorials also can pop up in other spaces at the same or at other times (an early example is the memorial wall established in Prague after John Lennon’s 1980 murder in New York City). I find the term “flash” more evocative of the visuality, transience, intensity (often contentiousness), and revelatory power of public performative memorialization than words like “temporary” and “spontaneous,” which often are used to refer to these memorials. These latter terms do not give a sense of the dramatic course of a viral phenomenon, whose end is anticipated even as its intensity is at its peak. Sometimes after the flash they fizzle out, while other times they are forcibly ended (as in Newtown).

I want to conclude by considering the stuff of these memorials—the anything—of which they are made. If we think about the memorial assemblage in terms of database modularity, we must look more closely at the offerings out of which they are composited, such as flowers, grief poems, and votive candles, but also balloons, flags, and teddy bears (the latter common in the US context, if not in the Greek). These are cheap, widely available, mass-produced items, whose materiality has been recognized as highly significant in performative and commemorative terms (making public grief visible, making deaths “matter”), but also in therapeutic and communicative ones in enabling communion with the dead and with grieving others (Doss, 2010: 68–75). Typically, these objects have been analyzed in terms of their symbolism: that is, the teddy bear (lost innocence, childhood), flowers, balloons, and candles (ephemeral beauty, fleetingness of life). For some, this materiality is suspect due to its connection to consumer culture: in her description of the transformation of traumascapes, such as the Oklahoma or 9/11 bombing sites, into tourist destinations, Marita Sturken (2007) argues that the prepackaged sentiment of kitsch comfort objects (memorial T-shirts, snow globes, teddy bears) inculcates a shallow sense of history and responsibility, ultimately stoking American paranoia. However, focusing chiefly on symbolism or consumerism in relation to these objects, I believe, misses something essential about the role these items play in memorial assemblages as category markers or, as I would call them, tags of affect.

To clarify this point, I first need to explain how I see the logic of the database at work in the physical world. Online memorials have been compared to on-site memorials on the basis of their open-endedness, performativity, interactivity, and visual interest, as well as because they develop out of the affective personal engagement of visitors while continually drawing in newcomers (Knudsen and Stage, 2013; Wahlberg, 2009). For instance, the shiny black marble Memorial Wall at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC (1982), at which so many visitors have left objects, could be seen as an interactive interface: a proto-screen. I want to suggest, though, that online and offline memorials are not simply counterparts, but constitute different moments and modes of instantiation in the unfolding of a particular witnessing/mourning assemblage. This movement involves a constant back-and-forth between a “mediation of things” and a “thingification of media,” especially in the context of Web 2.0 do-it-yourself culture in which subjects are constantly “making things” (Stage, 2011).

Consider the photographs of the victims in Tempe: embedded in digital readymade angel frames for the “Light a Candle” website, they were remediated when tolis09 extracted them along with the digital angel frames via screenshot for his video. (The frames themselves mediatize a wooden frame topped by a ceramic angel.) The photographs, in turn, were thingified into a banner that family members, fellow students, and others displayed at the site of the accident and outside the courthouse during the 2005 trial of the truck driver and trucking company representatives, as well as transferred onto the marble memorial at the accident site (Figures 5 and 6). These image-objects,
in turn, have been photographed and turn up as *object-images* in any internet search. These transpositions attest to the affective potential of images and objects and how in the process of witnessing they are constantly being (re)viewed and handled.

From the perspective of thingification, then, ritual teddy bears look like *materialized emoticons*. The emoticon, like the mass-produced and always-at-hand teddy bear, is simultaneously an intimate and an undemanding gift. Interestingly, while punctuation typically provides an affectual supplement to the sentence, in the context of the memorial assemblage, the emoticon—like the teddy, the florist-perfect red rose, or the lit votive candle—can stand alone: there is not necessarily a “sentence” (testimony). The emoticon resembles popular tags, such as “#cat” or “#cute,” used on photosharing sites. Similarly decried for banalizing feeling into apolitical saccharine sentimentality, these tags can be seen otherwise: as metadata *linking* a given image with thousands of others, bringing into visibility multifarious and hard to characterize bodily intensities (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008: 19). Rather than homogenizing and flattening affect, the emoticon-teddy bear tag exposes affective *heterogeneity* and the desire to connect (with) it.

**Figure 5.** Photobanner displayed outside the courthouse in Volos (2005). Photo by Eurokinissi.

**Figure 6.** Photographs transferred to the marble memorial at the accident site.
Epilogue

On 13 April 2013, I happened to be in a car driving south through the Tempe valley. Behind a traffic barrier and far from a parking spot, the octagonal marble headstone with etched photographs of the smiling young victims of the 2003 accident is both easy to miss and difficult to access. As the car passed by the site, I caught a glimpse of a middle-aged woman in black cleaning the marble slab in the way Greek mourners traditionally tend graves. Not until I arrived home did I remember that it was the 10th anniversary of the accident. Nothing in my everyday news flow had alerted me. I had to actively search for the anniversary online. Sure enough, on that day, tolis09’s video had received a brief flurry of commentary.

Like the unrelated mourner, the mediated witness of contemporary networked publics is a difficult figure to embrace, given the way historical, judicial, and religious ideas of witnessing have trained our sense of meaning, responsibility, and authority in relation to events, but also to the dead. However, given what has been accumulating online and off, we have to acknowledge the cultural salience of this collaborative performative grieving: in the context of online participatory culture, almost “anyone” has something to add to virally aggregating memorial nodes. While the media event and mediated witnessing have long been central to modernity’s temporal schema (Doane, 2002), the technological affordances of networked digital media have affected the pervasiveness, the tempo (the closeness of witnessing to commemoration), and the proliferation and accessibility of once complex processes of (re)mediation and materialization. The shift from the mechanical, analog archive to the digital database has meant that death is not simply recorded, preserved, and verifiable. In computer databases, the dead are productive: they become the grounds for the emergence of new social networks, media forms, and affective experiences.

 Mourning in the context of the mediated witnessing of the database age, then, is not just publicly performed, but also productive of publics. Yet, the profound “cultural renegotiation of grief” signaled by the emergence of these networked mourning practices does not necessarily produce the radical results (social protest, new forms of solidarity, and recognition of the other) that social scientists might anticipate or even seek (Doss, 2010: 112). In engaging the unthinkable loss experienced by unknown others, this public mourning appears to open and preserve a public space for grief (and through grief makes a public space), not superseded by a masculinist language of politics and history. This is important to note, given the long-held association of the public sphere with the exercise of reason by ratified citizens (only “little girls” cry in public). Publicly performing relationships to others through mourning—passing on the shiver—opens us to our own vulnerability, making us aware, potentially at least, of our interdependence and connectivity.

In this case, a witnessing and mourning assemblage emerged from the affective condition of the loss of “our kids” (national-normative bodies) in an accident that mass media discourse has long forgotten and with which social and historical analysis has not been concerned. Web memorial nodes are the place that people go, separately but together, unnoticed for the most part, on anniversaries and other times of shocking loss to reload such memories and potentially work with them anew.

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