

## ARTICLE

### To Mourn, To Re-imagine Without Oneself: Death, Dying, and Social Media/tion

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“Death’s in the good-bye.”  
—Anne Sexton

## Abstract

This paper incorporates and reflects on Steinberg’s particular vantage as a dying person whose blog engages the transforming ecologies of mourning and the place(s) of dying in the emergent spaces of social media. The paper homes in on the distinction between the repudiation of death and the repudiation of mourning in the collective project of “re-imagining without oneself,” that is, of re-imagining another life, another death, beyond the liberal coordinates of a “you” and a “me.” As an “intermediating” place, we argue that the blog serves as a virtual portal that both problematizes and (re)mediates the personal and the political. In so doing, the paper touches on key feminist political questions concerning bodily self-sovereignty; the broader racialized, classed, and gendered cultural imaginary; and

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the place of mourning in the analogy of the personal body in crisis with the myriad crises of the body politic at this significant and difficult cultural moment. Particularly, with the outcomes of Brexit and the Trump victory in the American election, this is a time of loss as the complex consensus of liberal democracy has broken down and neoliberal body-affective practices morph into isolationist nationalisms and the resurgence of movements against social justice and equality.

## I. On Repudiations

First, a word about the genesis of the text you are reading, which departs from several academic conventions for the essay form, and not least from the conventions of co-authorship. Several days before her death, and knowing she would not live to write the essay she had promised for this special issue, Deborah Lynn Steinberg emailed me to ask if I would be willing to co-author this piece with her — in her case, as we both knew then, posthumously. It would be our final collaboration, an essay incorporating and reflecting on her blog, which was live for about one year: from January 2016 to January 2017, but most actively from mid-September 2016.<sup>1</sup> According to her own blogged words, a few months earlier, this posthumous collaboration is not what she had originally envisaged, either in form or in content: *Catalyst* got back to me today to ask me to submit an abstract for the special issue. I didn't expect that. So I need to think on it now. What to propose. What I might be able to do. It was a nice letter. I'd like to think of something. Not this blog, but maybe some kind of sequential short essays on the topics they list (24 October 2016).

Not this blog. At the time of her request to me, I reflected back on these blogged words and projected the untimely future from which I now write, imagining my friend who was then still alive from a future in which she would not be. A discomfiting temporality this, but I agreed in part because I was and still am reluctant to end our conversations and collaborations. And, I confess, at that moment, and in others preceding it, my grief yielded to guilt, for I was mourning someone not yet dead. In the

grip of this presentiment, it was little solace to know that when we mourn, we mourn a future — our future together — that will be taken from us, and irrevocably transformed, when someone we love dies. That future “is not owed to us,” as Deborah once quipped in her disarming way, yet its voices call to us, prevail upon us with a spectral presence. And if not owed to me, or to us, I felt a keen debt to that future, something I was destined to owe but not own.

Judith Butler offers a wonderful account of such interrelationality and loss in a text that Deborah herself invoked, as you’ll see below. Butler writes: “It is not as if an ‘I’ exists independently over here and then simply loses a ‘you’ over there, especially if the attachment to ‘you’ is part of what composes who ‘I’ am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss but I become inscrutable to myself” (Butler, 2004, p. 22). I write, then, in and from a certain inscrutability. A form of ghost-writing, if you will. My tone is personal, at times more so than makes me comfortable, but this is an extension of our conversations, Deborah’s and mine, and I find myself caught in my own repudiation of loss. Perhaps all authorship is co-authorship, and all writing a reckoning with the transitivity of death. I wouldn’t be the first to say or feel such things.

“We live in a culture that repudiates death,” Deborah would write on the occasion of David Bowie’s passing, “even as it is cultivated through public policy — austerity is nothing if not a harbinger of social excommunication and lonely death. In public conversation, death is frequently discussed as an existential wrong (no child should die of ...), or as ‘giving up’, or as a ‘lost battle’” (Steinberg, 2016).

The sad strange irony of our time is that death is at once cultivated — by capital, the military, the police, public policy, in the name of security and “life” itself — and morally repudiated as one’s own *singular* failure to go on living, sometimes despite oneself. The pervasive idiomatics of survival, Deborah posted on her blog, emblemized as a heroic figuration — the indefatigable warrior of cancer survivalism. I see this as a cult, an insistent fantasy of the will — an offering, *quid pro quo* of *willing life* so as to have it (11 January 2016). Life: as

indefatigable survival, and as cultish “body-affective imperatives of will, affect, and action” (Steinberg, 2017, p. 149). In Deborah’s terms, these constitute an imperative field, a biopolitics of heroic livingness, but also an insistent phantasy — a latent wish, a cultural unconscious — that we are somehow immortal, that we will cheat death, that it will not come for *me*. The pronominal shift from *we* to *me* here is no mistake. Rather, it frames our question, a problem of singularity that is mine as much as — and by virtue of what is — ours, in writing, in public conversation, and in the spaces of social excommunication and lonely death. I am alone in this. Even though I’m not (23 October 2016).

David Bowie’s death was a private-public event considered by many as untimely, sudden, unforeseen, for us if not for him. In her short published piece, Deborah reflects on her earlier work theorizing the phenomenon of public mourning that had marked, spectacularly, the prosaic death of Princess Diana (see Kear & Steinberg, 1999). She had argued then, she writes, that the public intimacies of mourning celebrity deaths such as Bowie’s or Diana’s “could stand in for more personal losses, or create moments of unexpected catharsis and identification with those things about which we cannot bring ourselves to speak” (Steinberg, 2016). “But of late,” she continues, “I have come to have a new vantage point on these questions as they have taken a personal turn and I find myself in an odd parallel with Bowie — in human condition, if not in public prominence” (ibid.). The “personal turn,” in human condition, was all too human, too personal, for those of us who knew Deborah as someone living with — and dying from — metastatic cancer.

Two passages in Deborah’s Bowie piece I find particularly haunting: “There is something about mourning that crosses a threshold, where one must re-imagine without oneself, as if it is me who dies, if I mourn a death” (ibid.). I was moved then, as I am still, by the distinctively transferential nature of death and mourning in Deborah’s sentence. We cross a “threshold” only to return to ourselves in another form. Our relation to others — dead or dying — is bound up with that relation we have to ourselves, a self-relation that seems at times inscrutable and

unable to survive those losses we nevertheless live through, survive. And the second passage: “Some of the public mourning comes from those ... like me, who would not mourn ourselves if we could help it” (ibid.). Here, then, the wish not to mourn *oneself*, perhaps the inability to do so, and the unwillingness to re-imagine life without oneself, across an impossible temporality, a future anterior, yet with the dim acknowledgement that one is anyway helpless because ultimately the choice is not mine or ours.

These passages hold open a strange tension: I mourn the loss of another who stands in for me, “as if it is me who dies,” and yet I do so (publicly) in order not to mourn myself (privately). As I’ll argue below, Deborah’s blog is written in the tense and tension of privately mourning oneself publicly.

Deborah would write that, “Like him [Bowie] and many others, I have found a way to turn my own precarity into words and work, albeit in my case with a studied and distancing focus on culture rather than on myself” (ibid.). But in a blog post just one week earlier, the sublimating power of words and work, their promised distantiation, were less certain: I was asked today if I would consider writing something about the death of David Bowie and about public mourning. This is awkward timing. The subject of mourning has become a vexed and maybe unwelcome one for me (11 January 2016). Her blogged words were less a meta-commentary than a proto-commentary, the private face that precedes and subtends, here in blog form, what would appear in print as her public face — or at least one of them.

I recall a Skype conversation with Deborah at this time, when she had been rewriting her Bowie piece based on an editor’s feedback — also vexing and maybe unwelcome — and, feeling frustrated by the rewrite, abandoned it and told the editor, “take it or leave it,” arguing that hers was an original perspective and a personal one, albeit one that had to compete with the spate of Bowie “tributes” in the public sphere. The editor either agreed or backed down and Deborah’s original piece was published. Even so, her blog entry was more personal, more expansive, including these words that would not appear in the published version: perhaps it is not death that is repudiated, or not only death that is

repudiated, but mourning — the accepting of loss, its empathetic identification, its non-heroic *grievability* — to draw inexactly on Judith Butler (11 January 2016).

These passages suggest a dual repudiation, a contrapuntal and at times reciprocal relation between death and mourning. The cultural repudiation of death, on the one hand, does not clearly map onto the repudiation of mourning, on the other; after all, these two hands belong to one body. Death does not necessarily precede mourning, and neither death nor mourning obey the logic of cause-and-effect. Nor can they be characterized as distinctly public and private phenomena, respectively, for they cross and meet along moralizing borderlands, porous as they are. And it is here that they are, at times and in time, both mediated and mediating, indistinguishably public and private. Deborah's blog carves out a place in this misty terrain, neither living nor quite dead, where the lively repudiation of one's own death-to-come meets the repudiation of one's mourning oneself, and in words that nonetheless mourn, and remain, to tremble in this tension.

To focus for a moment on the first, the cultural repudiation of death is not in a straightforward sense the willful “denial” or “negation” of death (in Sigmund Freud's German, a *Verneinung*, translated as “negation” by the English editors of the *Standard Edition*). Indeed, repudiation is a more complicated, moralizing articulation within which some spectral “life itself” rises up as a sacred and self-evident *something*, which is steadfastly affirmed, from its most material instantiations — molecules, genes, blastocysts, embryos — to its most aestheticized and angelic — breath, spirit, life-force, *ch'i*. Reverent of “life,” we turn a blind eye to that death with which we are nevertheless quietly complicit: collateral damage, social and opportunity costs, negative externalities, and other euphemisms for “legitimate” delivery unto death. To invoke another Freudian term, repudiation is more akin to a “disavowal” — a *Verleugnung* — a pro-“life” deception or lie deeply invested in an avowed affirmation that permits the repudiation to operate clandestinely, and thus all the more powerfully.<sup>2</sup>

As Deborah writes in a piece we once co-authored for a special journal issue on “bioconvergence”: “we see in the mediatized imaginary that biology, the natural environment, and human life are subjects of — and inescapably subject to — a technological *telos*” (Murray & Steinberg, 2015, p. 125). If life has become the object and objective, the means and the end, of everything from medicine to politics to war, and if life is now our secular sacred *something*, understood in technological terms, then it saturates our mediatized imaginary, and it fosters a *bioethos* — Deborah’s coinage for the widespread cultural character and social comportment organized around the specter of “life itself,” and in which a discourse on death is drowned out by the cult of the cancer warrior, the vitalizing accomplishments of biomedicine and genomics, and their digital avatars, which might well include the veritable industry of cancer blogs and other illness narratives. Deborah was critical of these affirmative biodiscourses, full-mouthed (dis)avowals in and by which the cultural repudiation of death becomes tacit commonsense. In this respect, she was critical foremost of the manner in which “life” is culturally curated, mediatized, and regulated, by capital, by the state, and not least through the moral orthopedics and affirmations of biomedicine and technoscience, including the cancer industry itself (e.g., see Jain, 2013).

Here, among other things, Deborah’s work interrogates the formative *desire* for the kind of livingness promised by (bio)technology, and correlatively the death and precarity it disavows. As one reviewer of her *Genes and the Bioimaginary* (2015) aptly states it,

“Steinberg argues that the seductions of genetic research are based on the very things that genes can’t explain. What makes genetic science attractive therefore lies partly in fantasies of mastery and control of human uncertainties: securing identity, preventing crime or illness, fostering desired capabilities, easing suffering, righting wrongs.” (11 October 2015) (citing Copland, 2015; also see Murray, 2017a)

The “bad patient” of whom Deborah writes — herself included — is one whose body fails or who refuses the body-affective imperatives of will,

affect, and action. She refuses *that* life, on *those* terms, and the singularizing death it renders unspeakable, shameful, and undignified. In this failure or refusal, in this indignity or disaffirmation, we may discern a glimmer of hope, for another life, another death. But more on this below.

As for the second repudiation, the repudiation of mourning, I believe Deborah's position became increasingly ambivalent, vexed.<sup>3</sup> The problem is I don't want to die. But am anyway. I want to stop it. I'm fighting unconsciousness. I won't have peace or acceptance (23 December 2016). And yet, it would be mistaken to see in the *cultural repudiation of death* little more than a *personal repudiation of mourning* writ large. To explore the first demands a nuanced critical position that deconstructs the disavowal, while the latter cuts closer to home and leaves us bereft. For those in mourning — *in*, as a state-of-being and place of disconsolate loneliness — it is tempting to fall back upon social rituals and the cultural repudiation of death, to cling avowedly to their affirmations and desires. Last rites ... rituals ... that stylize what is real into just enough regimentation and surreality that you can accept it? (10 December 2016). We gather, pray, recite conventional words. Sometimes we execrate, call down curses, and decry the cosmic injustice and meaninglessness of it all. And sometimes we feel a sense of irony in this — something that was never lost on Deborah. She writes:

I have found that I particularly like [The Onion](#)'s diabolically funny and [contrarian treatment](#) of the cancer culture — I find it bracing. I have greatly enjoyed Erin Gloria Ryan's [diatribes](#) in Jezebel against the 'pink crap' of the corporatized cancer industry. And I like Clive James' [dilemma](#) that he has outlived his own death — and how awkward this is. I think I enjoy these examples because they don't require me to mourn. Indeed, they assist me in the endeavour of *not mourning*. (Steinberg, 2016)

She continues: "Other articles I find more bothersome. Some are those written by doctors grieving their patients or family members grieving the loss of loved ones. With these, I find myself in a strange transference — identifying with those left behind, not the dying or dead themselves"

(ibid.).

In the “strange transference” of mourning, Deborah suggests, we identify with those left behind, empathize with their loss, and we mourn so as not to mourn ourselves (even as we sometimes see through this veil). If Deborah is unwilling to mourn herself, this is both private *and* public, an unwillingness to accept her own death at the same time as an unwillingness — if she could help it — to imagine and to inhabit the grief of those she will leave behind. These positions are not mutually exclusive; for Deborah, they appear to be inextricably entwined. In a blog post titled, “harder to manage,” Deborah reports receiving an email from her oncologist: A wrote. She is sorry more can’t be done. I don’t envy her her job. Would be hard to treat and then lose patients. Must be hard to protect yourself (16 December 2016). These compassionate words are hardly a repudiation. We might say, then, that the repudiation of mourning is the desire to protect oneself *and* others from a grief that is consummately transitive — yours, mine, ours. This paper theorizes Deborah’s blog as opening a (re)mediating space, an intermediary place of sorts, somewhere in the tension between death and mourning — hers, mine, ours — but a place, moreover, that is not at heart repudiatory.

I am of course unable to write something Deborah would have written, as much as I freely weave her words together with mine. I hope the change of font, indicating Deborah’s blogged words, does nothing to diminish the equivocation of authorial voice we intend. All authorship is co-authorship, all writing a reckoning with death, and across these thresholds we have refused the convention of quotation marks to offset Deborah’s words: her voice is very much alive throughout. Deborah was uniquely positioned to comment on the mediatized cultures of life and death. I would note a long research trajectory that includes not only *Mourning Diana* (Kear & Steinberg, 1999), but earlier work, such as *Made to Order: The Myth of Reproductive and Genetic Progress* (Spallone & Steinberg, 1987), *Bodies in Glass: Genetics, Eugenics, and Embryo Ethics* (1997), and most recently, *Genes and the Bioimaginary: Science, Spectacle, Culture* (2015). As a critical media theorist and feminist scholar

of culture, she described her methodology as immersive: I intensively embed myself in multiple media milieux in order to gain a larger insight about the rupture points and anxieties of the larger culture (11 January 2016). She methodologically gathered and analyzed announcements of celebrity deaths, for instance — I've been collecting them, wondering sometimes if that makes me a bit unhinged (11 January 2016)!

By contrast, and with much less humor, I have found myself decidedly unable to immerse myself in the depressing avalanche of cancer blogs or the scholarship on them. Apart from my own self-protection, I am uninterested in performing a media content analysis of these blogs, nor am I terribly interested in the critical uptake of them by academics. In many ways, I suspect that Deborah's blog is not dissimilar to others that also bear witness to the quotidian realities of living with cancer — withering body, visits with healthcare providers, treatments, pains, fears, indignities, rage. These blogs seem to write themselves into and from — rather than simply comment on — the rupture points and anxieties of a larger culture become monstrously personal. And yet, I think Deborah would have refused the idea that the purpose of her blog was testimonial. She disliked the publicness of such things — well, ... mostly. The point of religious discourse and its relationship to power. Its jurisdictional functions through rhetoric. Maybe the transference I seek through a blog is just that kind of authoritative standing. Some magic, some stardust, some claim on something, some self-elevation, some inflation beyond my own horizons (30 October 2016).

What strikes me most about Deborah's blog is not so much what it says, its distillable content, but what it does not say, and how it works to represent the unrepresentable, to make a claim on something unclaimable, owed but not owned. Perhaps this is by now a tired trope in cancer blog scholarship, I don't know. But my particular interest here lies in the chasm that opens up, at Deborah's own suggestion, between death and mourning, between competing or convergent repudiations, and

the (re)mediating space of her blog — and my reflexive reading and writing about it, and your reading, too — in her project, and ours, of re-imagining without oneself, that is, to re-imagine another life, another death.

## II. On Intermediating Places

Deborah's blog inhabits a mournful space of self-inscrutability and in this is an equivocal site of transference, for her as much as for this reader. Equivocal: literally, of more than one voice, undecidable. The express purpose of the blog was itself a recurrent thematic, and Deborah was anxiously self-reflexive, reluctant, doubtful. Acting on a suggestion from my friend L yesterday, it occurred to me that I could try to make use of this erstwhile neglected semi-pointless blog space that no one knows about to include my below-the-line comments (14 September 2016). Below-the-line comments, then, much as we find beneath online news articles: *heteroglossic* space (to reference Bakhtin), which Deborah imagined as cultivating a critical counter-public, of sorts, in her brief responses to the news, the tropes and rhetorics and tones of reportage, including Tory policy on everything as it destroys democracy, education, the health service, the welfare and rights of the many, the social contract itself; political corruption, the gross spectacle of Trump and the obsequious avid media machine purveying him, media framing, media ethics, the fallacies of false equivalence, the shrinking state and the hate (14 September 2016). These, too, represent losses, public-private ones, and there is a mourning again here, for others she will leave behind and abandon to the world.

In the context of Donald Trump's election: I can't see redemption in any direction. What was the point of living just to arrive here, at the end of the world, and it's a bad end. I am horrified at people. The selfish, cruel whatever-it-is in people that they would even contemplate voting for such a terrible man.... I am worried about my family and my friends. What kind of life awaits K or T or S.... *I can't imagine what life is going to be like for girls and women, minorities,*

*the disabled, the ill, the low-earning and poor* (9 November 2016). The decay of the body politic, the ravages of neoliberalism and its sequelae — Neofeudalism, I once suggested to S (30 November 2016) — yet another of Deborah’s disarming quips — are all set against, alongside, perhaps within her own body, a woman’s body, a body ravaged by breast cancer. The embarrassment of not being able to talk, or wash without assistance, of having to give up the quietude and cleanliness of body that I had before. There is no capacity to hide, dependent as I now am. It breaks boundaries I wanted to keep intact. It is not something I want witnessed (8 December 2016). *Cancer is like pregnancy— both states in which you get recast as a public body, subject rightfully to other people’s opinions, intrusions, moral estimations and unasked-for advice* (20 October 2016). Also see Deborah’s critical perspective on the gendered and racialized faces of the cancer industry (Steinberg, 2017).

In a blog post titled, “numbers,” Deborah lamented, I just figured out how to check and found out that three people read this blog. I’m not sure that isn’t worse than none. And I guess feeling that means I wish it was part of something, a conversation at large, a performance on a larger stage. I know that the three who read it have dialogued with it as they have written or spoken to me about it. Why isn’t that enough? (30 October 2016). Despite her lamentations, in Deborah’s case I do not believe the blog was intended for broad public “consumption,” at least not at first, though it would eventually become somewhat more public: a link appeared in an obituary published in *The Guardian* (see Epstein, 2017), and now there is this essay alongside an archive of her blog.

The audience of three gradually grew, but we, this audience, would probably not have thought of ourselves as blog “consumers,” or even “prosumers” for that matter, although some of us would recognize ourselves at times as contributors, when Deborah would cite an email or refer to an ongoing conversation. Dialoguing with close friends and family members, the blog increasingly became a question of practicality. When

the pain in Deborah's hands left her unable to respond to individual emails, she sometimes posted on her blog responding to those emails in one sitting, anonymizing her friends and family members by discreetly referring to us only by our first initials.

Sometimes I guessed or knew who these people were, sometimes I didn't, but no matter, I felt connected to a wider community of interlocutors whose precise identity mattered less to me than the fact that they were there, listening. I found myself checking often to see if Deborah had posted, especially in the last weeks of her life, or when I hadn't heard from her for a few days. There are only so many emails that can ask, "How are you doing?" We already knew the answer and we didn't want to know. So the blog offered the strange kindness of not being addressed directly, by email or by Skype, and the occasion to look with some trepidation, when the bustle of the workday had faded, and when, in the privacy of the screen, without the ping of an email, you might read and reflect and respond. Add to this the time difference between Canada and the United Kingdom, and I found myself checking before bed, in insomniac moments, and emailing a note as Deborah's day was beginning, when she was at her best. I liked this idea, a new day. Finally, the blog also found its way into her funeral service in Los Angeles, where her blog entry, "intermediary place" (1 November 2016), was distributed to mourners — some via Facebook Live — who might, in their own time, read in her story a place that they too could imagine for Deborah.

"Intermediary place" is one of Deborah's longer blog posts, and I suspect most carefully edited. It was described at her funeral as "aspirational fiction," an imagined afterlife, perhaps, shaped by words and architectures and peaceful spaces free of pain and full of creaturely comforts, including companion animals and favorite foods. Those who knew Deborah will recognize in her narrative not so much an otherworldly scene but one that is replete with those worldly things that Deborah so loved. We read a self-description that is familiar — a favorite lightweight black ribbed knit pull-over with a high neck and long

sleeves; love tokens she remembered, a notebook and a pen; a small medallion, enameled orange on silver; A peace sign. On the back was the name Lola. Not her name; Her scarf was long, knit of multiple wools, asymmetric, gold and black. With gold fringes. My mother made me this, she remembered (1 November 2016).

The intermediary place itself, the way station, as she called it, is indeed aspirational, yet homey and full of familiar things. There were occasional tables with glass bowls and vases. Apples in one bowl, foxglove sprays in a clear glass vase, sunflowers. And orchids. There were framed prints — Miró, she recognized, Lichtenstein, de Lempicka (1 November 2016). Her personal quarters here are also well appointed, with kitchen, living room, bedroom, and bathroom. The granite was *oro stupendo*. She knew the design. She had picked it out. The floor tiles were smoke black semi-glossed slate; she knelt down. The tiles were warm; a small beautifully appointed black gloss kitchenette ... small cupboards holding pots and pans, bakeware.... There was a Dualit kettle and toaster on the worktop ... a small set of white dishes and bowls, clear glasses, a set of nested glass mixing bowls, a small silver *cafetière* next to a vacuum-lipped blue porcelain coffee urn (1 November 2016). And as she crawls into bed, weary from her journey — A small brown dog with melting eyes and silky fur looked up to her with begging intent. Come up, she said patting the bed. The dog leapt up in a graceful arc and dived under the covers, laying itself against her back and sinking quickly into soft dog snores (1 November 2016). Two days later she would write: I am glad it occurred to me that I might build worlds that give me comfort. And that I can compose out of the beautiful things I care about (3 November 2016).

It is not simply the yearning for home, for a body in a time and place of peace. It is written in the third person — at a distance from yet opening onto, invoking, that person, that place. Two weeks earlier she had imagined her own burial, writing: But let me take some things that mean something with me.... I told G that I want to be dressed in

something I like.... I would like a notebook and a pen. Tokens from loved ones. Some food. Something to keep warm. Something sensible to walk on, but still beautiful.... Someday, I would like Lola [my dog] with me. I wish I could have her name tag so she can find me (17 October 2016).

The intermediary place is not, above all, a transitional place filled with “transitional” objects as the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1971) theorizes them, nor is it the generative potential space that he envisages between the analyst and analysand. Deborah would not have overlooked this detail; indeed, she had mentioned object relations in an interceding blog post (24 October 2016). Although the traveler in Deborah’s story is in transit, journeying from one life to another, Deborah did not write “transitional,” and settled instead — rather decidedly, I think — on “intermediary.” I’ve never believed in any one thing or another about death. Assertions that death is a journey, or a better place, or a place at all — haven’t been particularly persuasive to me. Maybe it is mawkish to think these things (17 October 2016). The fictional place and those objects in it, much like the blog itself, *mediate* by building a virtual world on a social media platform, composed out of real things and events — not all of them beautiful, certainly.

I cannot help but read this intermediary place as synecdochal of Deborah’s blog as a whole. The blog itself is an intermediary place, a multifaceted world given voice in a mediatized “third person,” a subjectivity of sorts, situated between the one who writes and the one who reads. It is a place where anything might still be possible, some magic, some stardust. If Deborah projects herself there, into that world, that intermediary place, so do we; the world takes on an ethos, speaks to us and back to her, and acts on both. In psychoanalytic literature building on the work of Thomas H. Ogden (1994), this might be theorized as an “analytic third,” a therapeutic agency independent of the patient-analyst dyad. In the psychotherapeutic scene the analytic third represents a third subject, an unconscious co-creation of both, and a particular site of transference and countertransference for each, respectively. The third

takes on a life of its own and stands in tension with the patient and the analyst, and is an active site of reflection that is independent yet has no meaning beyond the relationship of the two. The third is an intermediary, much like Deborah's blog was for her and for those of us reading it.

The feminist psychoanalyst, Jessica Benjamin, in describing the analytic third "emphasize[s] the reciprocal, mutually influencing quality of interaction between subjects, the confusing traffic of two-way streets" (2004, p. 6). Benjamin rejects the object relations view that one person is subject, the other object — that one does, the other is done to — or for our purposes here, that one speaks and the other is spoken, or spoken to. Benjamin writes:

To the degree that we ever manage to grasp two-way directionality, we do so only from the place of the third, a vantage point outside the two.... My interest is not in which 'thing' we use, but in the process of creating thirdness — that is, in how we build relational systems and how we develop the intersubjective capacities for such co-creation. (p. 7)

It is perhaps no surprise that Deborah admired Jessica Benjamin's work. Her blog, then, builds a relational system, and is a process of creating thirdness, a vantage point that is occupied neither by she who writes nor she who reads, but by both, and by creating a capacious space of intersubjectivity. It is "agentic" without quite relying on the familiar coordinates of the liberal subject, a subjective "me" or an objective "you."

The blog's intermediary place is nevertheless not a utopia, a placeless place; rather, I'd suggest it is what Michel Foucault has called a heterotopia, an *other* place. Tellingly, Foucault uses the metaphor of the mirror to describe this phenomenon. In one respect, the mirror is indeed a utopia: "In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface" (1984). But from another vantage,

it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy.... Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed

toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. (ibid.)

Much like the “agency” of the analytic third, we might think of the heterotopia as a place that fosters the recognition of our interdependence. It exerts a sort of counteraction; it is a relational system, and co-creational. If Deborah’s blog is in some sense a utopian, unreal, and virtual space, it is also a heterotopic place, which intermediates or “mirrors” precisely because it is tethered to us and to those people and things we hold dear.

These passages on Foucault’s heterotopia were in mind when I emailed Deborah to respond to her blog post, “last edits,” which had described Deborah’s experience of watching a video of herself at her [book launch](#) in the summer of 2016. The thing that I found myself improbably liking was how I came across, compromised voice and all. I seemed nice. And my comments were good. Well-chosen words. Watchable. It’s not what I expected. Or how I remember it exactly. I found myself thinking as I was watching it, what a shame she is on her way out (21 October 2016).

Caught off-guard, I had sobbed when I read her last line: to read — and to watch, as it were — Deborah watching herself, and reflecting on that, and then for her to close her post here in the thirdness of the third person, “she.” I found myself lost in these reflections, unsure what to feel, between “I,” “you,” “she,” and “us.” I was grieving and selfishly aggrieved. Fuck cancer and its parade of pink crap! Was this what it felt like to mourn? If so, at the very least mourning is no solitary pursuit, and certainly not mine to repudiate. Mourning together, even at a distance, somehow eroded the repudiation co-creatively; the feeling became no less disconsolate, but we were together avowing a disavowal, and by sharing it exposing just a little of its clandestine powers, its loneliness. In Benjamin’s terms, I understand this as “a certain letting go of the self”: “the third is that to which we surrender, and thirdness is the

intersubjective mental space that facilitates or results from surrender” (2004, p. 7).

I emailed Deborah, telling her that her blog post had made me think of mirrors, another image of ourselves, a reflection that looks outward, an image that does not settle, that unsettles, and does not stop moving between that mirror image, what we see of ourselves, how we wish to be seen, and others seeing us, in a way that brings us back to ourselves reflectively, across that threshold, and in another form. As a child, I told her, I was captivated by standing between two mirrors, seeing myself seeing myself, almost to infinity. An early memory, this, and probably the apogee of my career as a media scholar! A mirror stage quite unlike what Jacques Lacan describes, where that mirror is supposed to consolidate my corporeal boundaries, my body-ego. Rather, I felt myself opened up, unconsolidated, more in a curious than frightening way—a *mise en abîme* where the *abîme*, the abyss, is not empty or lonely, but full of infinite reflections, full of wonder, a heterotopia.

Deborah responded in blog form. S wrote to me about mirrors. His thoughts were compelling. The double mirror to infinity. The single mirror to the walls we might erect between self and self. The strange abyss, into which we might watch ourselves fall that might nonetheless be replete with something. I was very moved by this reflection on my reflections. I did always want to say meaningful things. I am concerned about being morose, self-serving, trite. What stopped me from writing in this space in the first instance, and then stopped me from circulating it when I did start using it.... How do you stay in conversations, when everything is conspiring to monologues, to solipsism, to mirrors only of one mind? (23 October 2016). I cannot be certain there is a connection, but this was the day Deborah wrote an email of enquiry to *Catalyst*, copied and posted on her blog, stating her interest in contributing to the special issue you are now reading.

Morose, self-serving, trite: fears of narcissism, of self-

entitlement appear frequently in Deborah's blog. She struggled with feelings of embarrassment, by the bag of bones I've become, by the way I choke on my own saliva; loss of dignity ... my inclination is to withdraw (6 December 2016). Yet her blog was an intermediating force, on her, on us. I realized today that I must ensure I've saved this blog in some other format, including printed out, so it won't be suddenly lost. I don't know why I think it's important ... to leave something behind, an imprint, an imprimatur, a hauntological artefact. To say I was here. And that it made some difference. Romantic narcissism, I can see that. But it is a deep feeling too and I can't repudiate it with criticism or scorn, or even simple self-awareness (30 November 2016). Deborah had imagined this essay as engaging new media ecologies of death, of mourning, and troubling the distinctions between private and public — all things her blog does. "And also the way self-mourning now asserts into a blogosphere," she wrote to me. "These are both communal and narcissistic times we live in. We are private and public at the same time" (personal email, 12 November 2016).

In a blog post titled, "this is the way the world ends," Deborah wrote: The world does not end with a whimper. It ends in conflagration, drowned at sea in the search for a haven, crawled up on banks of rock or sand or mud, with no prospects, holed up in bed with the drapes closed, racked with pain and hopelessness, in the crass bombast of a demagogue [Trump] turned now on flesh to flesh out a terrible world (24 October 2016). From a dying body increasingly disabled and in pain, her blog nevertheless declares war on these losses, these endings, as a third voice between the singular body and the body politic, even as these are woven together, each a metaphor for the other, the private, the public.

But there are times for war, she would write. To be pacific in the face of the end of security, rights, equality, justice, hope. That is not peace. This is not a time for refuge in established routines, or pat wisdoms that no longer relate to the reality of the world. And by the way, those established routines, at the least, were ugly compromises

that pushed back the parameters of acceptability. We've been shrinking violets over years of violations, pretending that compliance will stave something off. But it didn't. Appeasement is a weakness, a stance of fear, and at times, it is a stance of complacency, or privilege, or the denial that comes with those (17 November 2016).

Times of war afford little time for goodbyes; there is work to be done, and a debt to those to come, to the future.

### III. On Goodbyes

*On goodbyes. I don't know. I feel the same as you. I want to hold to people I care about forever. I don't want to say goodbye to myself either.... Much of the time I just wish it was done. To go to sleep and not wake up so I could stop suffering and stop being afraid.... The district nurse thinks I'm on the way out for real now. I can't tell. A, my oncologist, when I asked her, said that I would be able to tell when it was happening. But who knows. I think we all have to live in the indefinite conversation. What else is there? It makes time easier to bear. And it's part of what is hopeful about life, and politics too* (30 November 2016). Above, an email to me replying to an email to her, remediated as a blog post, and here again in these pages, on your screen, in your hands.

Death's in the goodbye, announced in and as language — intermediating places, indefinite conversations — words that resound and remain despite the loss of a “you” or a “me,” attesting to that loss without quite ceding on it. Words are tokens of exchange, intermediaries, tokens that promise reunifications, or the means to sing or say, without choking or gasping for breath. Some reminder of what I did. When I was here (17 October 2016). If this blogged, intermediary place is a repudiation of mourning, it transmits none of the certainty of those repudiations of which Deborah was so critical: no phantasmatic certainty of “life” arises there, no *willing life* so as to have it, no *quid pro quo*. On the contrary, we enter onto a place of non-teleological mourning, neither

repudiatory nor affirmational. And, if there is a transference onto the third voice — hers but less hers, and less mine, than ours — the transference resists identitarian politics, and does not permit a “me” or a “you” to stand in or speak for the other or to usurp this harrowing, hallowing, hollering place between us.

The intermediating place of the blog forms part of the transforming ecologies of mourning and the place(s) of dying, to recall Deborah’s words. I take these to be media ecologies, and the ways they constitute and sometimes contest the “proper” or “expected” destitute place(s) of dying in our culture, from deathbeds to hospitals — those very real sites that contain and constrain in the ways that they do — but also “place” in a deep ecological sense, as metaphor for those interconnected lives and losses that define and gather us, and that constitute the larger scene on which words are spoken, circulated, and inhabited as worlds across indefinite conversations. Wor(l)ds that permit us to imagine a passage, a movement, and that do not simply contain or constrain. I like the way station. I like the textures I invented. I like the way it feels to be there. It suggests a direction without being one. It feels like movement even if it doesn’t mean going anywhere (7 November 2016). This is virtual, and yet it is not. Indefinite conversations: part of what is hopeful about life, and politics too.

As a collocated artifact, a series of moments gathered as one static document, Deborah’s blog today is a much different text than it was in and across its own time. For those who read active cancer blogs regularly, as I did Deborah’s, there is often great anxiety, a fear of refreshing the link, a fear of finding a new entry, but also a fear of not finding one. While the end might have been known as a disconsolate fact, an inevitability, in the life of Deborah’s blog time unfolded in and across the written word. Slowly, and at times cruelly so. Can’t leave fast enough. Close down. Get away (31 December 2016). And here I still am, trapped in a chair, barely moving, hands inexorably contorting to their own calamity. Nothing I can do now. All the things I wanted to be throughout my life were active. Poet, scholar, activist, actor,

director, editor, artist, designer. Maker of things. Now ending like this. Except it's not ending. Why not? It needs to end. I need to end (1 January 2017). Feeling so much worse. But on and on it goes. No more energy for things. Goodbyes. Good wishes. None left in me (20 January 2017). As a gathered artifact, however, we begin to read at the end, with last words, and scroll back in time to reconstruct the *dénouement*. A historical record. Not nothing in itself but nothing at all like it was for those who read and write in real-time. I lack the poetic skills to bring her blog to life; I don't have the heart to relive it; and I would not bring Deborah back to relive it either. All the time. I'm angry. I'm aggrieved (11 December 2016). No. No.

I have begun to gain a better understanding of Foucault's enigmatic claim, that speech begins after death. This is at first a highly counterintuitive proposition: after all, is not *life* the condition of speech? "Speech," Foucault says, "isn't only a kind of transparent film through which we see things, not simply the mirror of what is and what we think. Speech has its own consistency, its own thickness and density, its way of functioning" (Foucault & Bonnefoy, 2013, pp. 36–37). Here speech is a "transparent film," very thin, but also a density, a thickness. Speech does not "mirror" reality perfectly; it is in this sense "heterotropic" (if I can coin this word) — both a heterotopia, an *other* place, and a transitivity, a tropological movement and intermediation, even if it doesn't mean going anywhere. Foucault parses this paradox in the following way: "Naturally, it seems to me that I could talk about the things that are quite close to us, but on condition that there exists, between those very close things and the moment in which I'm writing, an infinitesimal shift, *a thin film through which death has entered*" (p. 43; emphasis added). This is a recognition of the intimate proximity and transitivity of death in the act of writing, and perhaps speaking (he uses these words almost interchangeably in this text). Foucault shares in this moment more than he might care to admit with psychoanalytic theory, and some philosophy of language, which understands language — writing or speech — as predicated on a death of sorts. That is, death or simply loss are the

necessary conditions of language, because if there were no absence, no lack, no rupture with being — even temporarily — we would have no need of words, and no need to turn elsewhere, tropologically.

Words stand in for what is absent or hidden, and they try to represent what is lost, to represent the unrepresentable, as a mere sign or symbol, a token. Signs substitute as it were for being, and open for us a world of symbolic meaning that is cut off from the Real, to borrow Lacan's term. But words also have their own agency, and create worlds, textures, places that are unreal or imaginary, and that dwell less on what is than on what might or ought to be. And we must not forget, too, that writing or speech addresses someone, an addressee, an other — actual or potential — who might read or hear across time and distance. Speech is indeed “heterotropic,” the tropic turn and return of an address, yours and mine, mine in yours, the other irreducible to the selfsame, and vice versa. And this is true even if my addressee is me myself, as it always is to some extent, inscrutable as I am to myself, bound up with and through my attachments to others. In Foucault's terms: “We can never reach the end of language through speech, no matter how long we imagine it to be. This inexhaustibility of language, which always holds speech in suspense in terms of a future that will never be completed, is another way of experiencing the obligation to write” (p. 66). I find something hopeful in this obligation, in what is owed but not owned, and in the inexhaustibility of language and its indefinite conversations; also, in the agency of language, which carries me beyond a “me” or a “you,” where the subject who speaks, as much as the addressee, tremble and are cradled in the murmurs of an intermediary place.

How does this, my theoretic account, figure into a feminist politics of the body-subject? But this is not (just) theory: if the singular body and the body politic stand in a tropological relation, each troping the other, spoken, addressed, in turns and returns, it is also a profoundly material one, in other wor(l)ds. But words matter. And in so many respects, *are* matter (11 December 2016). As we know only too well, crises in the body politic have profoundly material effects on individual bodies, which

are beholden, if not hostage, to the institutions and infrastructures and social services responsible for delivering care. Deborah once again: “Austerity is nothing if not a harbinger of social excommunication and lonely death” (Steinberg, 2016). In the context of a feminist politics, I think back to some of those indefinite conversations with Deborah, and lively debates concerning her concept of self-sovereignty (also see Shildrick & Steinberg, 2015). Self-sovereignty: A problematic concept, Deborah wrote on her blog. And yet what else is there that expresses one’s right to determination over one’s own body? The inalienable right over the disposition of one’s own self and life, vis-à-vis someone else’s interest, whether that is intrusion, or exploitation, or ownership, or life and death, medical treatment or not? (20 October 2016).

My own concern with this term, sovereignty, is its history and alignment with liberal conceptions of “autonomy” and the ways this latter has been deployed by patriarchal politics and paternalistic (bio)ethics. “Sovereignty” seems to me to cling to an outdated language, conceding a politics that polices in advance the boundaries of autonomy, and what it might mean to make a valid — legible or legal, rational or agentic — claim from this ostensibly autonomous subject-position or “self.” It reduplicates violence, in my view. In the words of Deborah’s friend, Margrit Shildrick, bioethics, like medicine, is a disciplinary power: “[T]he discipline has effectively duplicated the master discourse and maintained the split between a secure sense of the transcendent self as moral agent, and a more or less unruly body that must be subjected to its dictates” (Shildrick, 2005, p. 3). Deborah did not disagree. And yet. She was right: how *e/se* might we express one’s right to determination over one’s own body, one’s life, one’s death?

The fallacies of individuation, sovereign selfhood apart from others, a denial of the interdependencies of bodies and lives that are in fact the human condition. Who is an island, really? And yet. I think of the ways in which secrecy — call it discretion, call it hiding, call it dim lighting my own lights — has dominated much of my own

life. The sense of obligation that has driven it. The embarrassments in its wake. S is right that shame and guilt are cruddy, cruel oppressors. But even so they are embedded in the fabric of so much (8 December 2016).

In an act of self-sovereignty, Deborah had signed an advance directive for her medical care. M from palliative care told me that she was concerned that one of my provisions in the directive is not legal in the UK. The one about terminal sedation. Yes I am aware of that, I told her. But it is what I wish for. The law is wrong. And I protest it. And it stays in (20 October 2016).

When the time came, Deborah's wish was not honored, it could not be, by law: I asked for Propofol sedation ... she said it was illegal in UK. This is illogical. I didn't say kill me with it... C said, well, the law is trying to protect people from feeling pressure to die. Well fuck that because it is fine with forcing people to live in suffering. Why is that pressure OK? (23 December 2016).

THEY GET OFFENDED AT MY INTERROGATION OF THEIR ILLOGICS. AND ARE FRUSTRATED BY MY FIGHTING TO KEEP MYSELF IN MY OWN TERMS INSTEAD OF GRATEFULLY SUBMITTING AS A COMPLIANT PATIENT. THEY WANT TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE DOING. AND I MAKE THAT DIFFICULT (24 December 2016). *It would be better if I were a dog or a horse. Someone would stop this* (8 December 2016).

Yet even here, Deborah felt the obligation to write, to speak. These passages were and remain difficult for me to read. In our indefinite conversations I had argued (feebly, I confess, full of hesitation) from the perspective of a feminist ethics of care, premised on the fact that we are, in birth as in death, ultimately relational beings, nonautonomous, and interdependent (see Murray, 2017b). The agony, and the injustice, is that one is forced to concede the "master discourse" in order to be heard, to make a claim on *its* terms, to be judged by medico-legal institutions, the court of public opinion, and by those microfascists deputized to act in their name, which becomes yours despite yourself. The problem is, it

would seem, that the entire discourse — liberal human rights discourse included — is flawed, based on false premises, and held by established powers. And yet the power of the people, and of a populism that claims to fight established powers, also offers little refuge beyond social media trial-by-tweetstorm. A feminist ethics must resist the populist seduction too.

Writing in the wake of the Trump election, Deborah looked toward the struggles ahead. I suspect that everything will have change. The music. The films. The books. The conversations (25 November 2016). An ecological shift in consciousness, a reckoning with misogyny, racism, warmongering, and the alt-right ghouls who know very well how to reverse-engineer algorithms and populate our social media screens with their content. Despite our debates, and in my own desire to honor her self-sovereignty, I don't think Deborah would mind that I close by saying that as much as her blog was and remains an extension of herself, she was not, and is not, sovereign over it. It inhabits, opens onto and speaks from, another place. And it is not the place of the populist imaginary, not *subject rightfully to other people's opinions, intrusions, moral estimations and unasked-for advice* (20 October 2016), of which Deborah was so critical.

The "subject" of Deborah's blog is both a private and a public one, narcissistic yet profoundly communal, wrought in language that refers to "you" and "me," what is "yours" and "mine," but in and from a place that is, moreover, ours. In this, it is *almost* free from the claims of bodily self-sovereignty; its body is virtual, subtle, but for all this no less real. A digital body politic, if you will. It is not that self-sovereignty is irrelevant there, in this intermediary place; rather, it is, perhaps, that place without which any claim to bodily sovereignty, to a "me" and a "you," no longer makes sense, no longer has purchase. It suggests a very different ecology, a future that calls us despite the diminishing places of care in a culture that repudiates death even as it is hell-bent on delivering it, often to those whose self-sovereignty was never more than a cruel deceit, a false form of popular "empowerment." In a radical reading, one I would close with

tentatively, this intermediary place — and others like it — is primordial, originary, and cultivates a relationality from which our sense of “me” and “you” *derive*, and upon which they *depend*. It is owed but not owned, and yes, this subverts a certain Enlightenment philosophy of the subject, it undermines a liberal ethics founded in the fetish of autonomy, and would re-imagine, if we could — and this “we” is nonnegotiable, a beginning — a different life, a different death, for all of us who find ourselves in places between.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An unedited transcript of Deborah’s blog, <https://darkcloudblog.wordpress.com>, is archived in PDF format and accompanies this essay. In keeping with Deborah’s wishes, throughout this essay I have made minor editorial corrections and added capitalization at the beginning of sentences. Her blogged words, woven together with mine, appear in a different font, followed by the date of the blog entry: I seem to be learning all over again how to type, this time with no hands, just single claws and I have to watch the keys. I have to go back again and again to make corrections (21 October 2016).

<sup>2</sup> On the psychoanalytic distinction between *Verneinung* (“negation”) and *Verleugnung* (“disavowal”), which I invoke loosely here, see Laplanche & Pontalis (1973, pp. 261–263 and 118–120, respectively). I see parallels between Freudian disavowal — originally the repudiation of woman’s lack of a penis, when subjects nevertheless report *seeing* one there — and the repudiation of death where one fetishizes “life” as phallic virility, and which covers over the reality of loss.

<sup>3</sup> I should note here that the repudiation of mourning is not the failure to mourn, but might be seen as arising in response to mourning and the feelings that accompany it. In this sense it is not what Freud (1957) describes as melancholia, where the lost object is introjected, installed in the ego as a narcissistic identification, and becomes there a super-egoic agency that morally castigates the ego. The words “melancholy” and “melancholia” never appear in Deborah’s blog.

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