Online memorials:
the virtual as the new vernacular

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Abstract: This paper explores the significance of virtual space to the bereaved, as a site of remembrance and focus for mourning practices and expression of emotions. It is argued that in the countries of the developed north west, such as the UK, where a high proportion of the population are computer literate and are used to working with and communicating through virtual technology, such as social networking sites, the internet has been established as a normal place for remembering the dead. Remembrance is in part shaped by typical net practices and terminology, as well as by the technological possibilities of the internet, which, combined, accommodate ongoing uploading and editing of images, text, music and gifts. This gives these memorials a vibrant and dynamic contemporary character which is often expressed through colloquial idiom and popular culture, thereby representing and constituting aspects of the vernacular. Some social networking sites and more formal memorial hosts, such as commercial or charitable sites, place constraints on how online memorials are organised and what might be included, but the majority retain an emphasis on the deceased as an individual, and attempt to reflect their character, interests and relationships. The vernacular qualities of virtual memorials facilitate interaction with the memorials, which can constitute therapeutic environment for mourners through providing space for action, narrative work, meaning-making, expressions and negotiations of continuing bonds with the deceased, and virtual support networks.

Key words: internet, virtual, vernacular, colloquial, memorial, performative

Introduction

While bereavement researchers and counsellors are aware of the significance of specific locations for the bereaved, and conditions such as bereavement-induced agoraphobia are well known, the wider significance of the spatial dimensions of loss is less familiar territory (Maddrell, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010). In addition to sites of remembrance and memorialisation, for many people significant places play an important role as spatial triggers for emotional responses, as well as focal points for expressions of loss and/or continuing bonds with the deceased. It should also be noted that any society's understanding of death, space and technology are cut through, coloured, structured, discursively framed and inflected by social and cultural norms – what has been described as the 'cultural lens'.

Locality, socio-economic class, ethnicity, religion and so on all play a role in shaping experience and practices. Space itself is more complex than may first appear, referring not only to the material world, physical places which can be touched and seen, but also the non-material world, including those individual and collective emotional and psychological mappings and virtual space (Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010. It is the latter which is the focus here and is understood to refer to 'spaces' and relationships which are not grounded in the physical arena, but take place through networks of belonging which are not associated with particular places. The following discussion centres on the significance of the spaces afforded by virtual technology, namely the internet.

Some forms of memorialisation and memory inscription are very familiar cultural practices within the British landscape, such as cemeteries, war memorials and park

benches. Increasingly these represent an ever-more multi-faith and secular society. Whether associated with a formal belief system or not, there is a definite trend towards highly individualised expressions of vernacular memorial-making (Walter, 2001; Maddrell, 2009a, 2009b, 2011; Margry and Sanchez-Carretero, 2011; Wojtkowiak and Venbrux, 2010. There is also a parallel trend to memorialise away from the site of bodily disposal, often close to home, which Kellaher and Worpole (2010, p169) have described as 'cenotaphisation'. While the memorial bench, roadside cross or bunch of flowers, have become iconic as spontaneous and informal markers of remembrance in public space, it is worth making a point here regarding terms associated with these spaces and practices. 'Spontaneous', 'informal' and 'vernacular' are often used interchangeably, however while there are some important commonalities, there are also significant and helpful distinctions between these terms and their usage. 'Spontaneous' is often used to refer to any non-official memorial in public space, and rightly captures the essence of a common immediate response by family, friends and/or the wider public, to a sudden and tragic death eg., the near instantaneous blossoming of flowers, candles, graffitti etc at the site of a fatal road traffic accident or shooting. The term 'spontaneous shrine' was adopted in preference to the media's somewhat derogatory use of 'makeshift memorial': 'spontaneous' captures the immediacy and informality of the process, and 'shrine' captures not only its sacred status for the bereaved, but also their active and dynamic engagement with it, compared with what is perceived as the more passive response to memorials (Grider, 2001; Santino, 2004, 2006). Indeed Santino (2004, 2006) who stresses the performative dimension to such shrines, offers the term 'performative commemoratives' or 'spontaneous sacralisation' (2004, p371) in an effort to capture the symbolism, processes and performances at play. However, if the flowers and candles are still being maintained a year later, or graffiti over-painted by commissioned wall art (see Cooper and Sciorra, 1994), one has to question the description of this as 'spontaneous'; similarly, replacing the flowers and candles with a memorial bench or engraved marker stone indicates a degree of permanence, planning and even official sanction which undercuts the notion of 'spontaneous'. For Margry and Sanchez-Carretero (2011) the term 'grassroots memorial' captures the unpremeditated, informal and non-regulated form of these memorials, which gets away from critiques of the term 'spontaneous'. 'Informal' is another useful umbrella term for private, non-civic memorials found in public spaces, connoting both their separation from officialdom and an indication of their style, and part of that informality or 'grassroots' character is that they reflect the 'vernacular'.

The vernacular refers to the local, the indigenous, the homely, the domestic, the everyday, the informal, set in

contrast to high art, literature and formal liturgy: backstreet graffiti rather than fine art exhibition, YouTube clip rather than arthouse cinema, homespun rap rather than orchestral performance. Although the semantics of these popular memorials may be debated, especially if the divide between so-called high and low culture is critiqued, their pervasive presence in western society is not. They are no longer emergent, but are 'emphatically present' (Margry and Sanchez-Carretero, 2011, p10) and have become a tradition in their own right, especially in relation to untimely or tragic death (Santino, 2004; Foote and Grider, 2010). Including the less immediate and ephemeral of the broader category of 'informal' memorials, such as benches, trees and semi-permanent wall art, extends the range of these vernacular forms and their surrounding practices in both space and time, including more everyday deaths as well as the untimely and tragic that tend to inspire the truly 'spontaneous' memorials. In his study of vernacular tombstone lettering, George Thomson (2006) suggests that vernacular lettering, free of the inhibitions or imposed styles gained in apprenticeship, reflects local culture as well as individual creativity. Inscriptions diverge from professional memorials as a result of creativity and/or disrespect for established practice and they have a 'naïve visual liveliness lacking in more formal memorials' (2006, p1). I have argued elsewhere that these 'lively' characteristics are not confined to the visual aesthetics and the text found on memorials, but also apply to their form, eg. the memorial tattoo, graffiti or bench, as well as more informal narrative text (Maddrell, 2009a). Thus informal vernacular memorials are not *necessarily* homemade or handcrafted, but they reflect and incorporate popular culture and the idiom of everyday life. These include objects gifted as markers of identity and affect, such as flags, jewellery, photographs, letters, windmills, toys, sports paraphernalia, candles, windchimes, cigarettes and alcohol, exemplified by the spontaneous informal shrine to singer Amy Winehouse in July 2011 (Kingsley, 2011) which are also increasingly to be found within formal spaces of memorialisation, such as cemeteries (Maddrell, in press). Vernacular memorials can also include the cultural practices of migrant and minority groups, as seen in the influence of Latino folk art and religious practices on graffiti memorials in the USA, which translate three-dimensional Latino Roman Catholic memorial iconography into two-dimensional spray-can art.

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Vernacular memorials are not only more democratic in style and form, but also in terms of who commissions and who is memorialised by them. Public memorials in the past have typically reflected the socio-economic and gendered elite, ie. the rich, publicly active and/or prestigious, or those who have died in tragic and often public circumstances (Johnson, 1995; Maddrell, 2009a). For example, formal public statuary, including memorials, is profoundly gendered, with very limited representation of women (Johnson, 1995) even in contemporary contexts which espouse gender equality (McDowell, 2008; Marschall, 2010); similar arguments can be made of ethnic minorities and the working classes (with the exception of memorials to collective tragedies such as fishing or mining accidents). By contrast, the relative affordability and cultural accessibility of vernacular memorials can cut across the divides of socio-economic class, gender and ethnicity, resulting in greater representation of women and ethnic minorities *in memoria* in public space (Cooper and Sciorra, 1994; Collins and Opie, 2010).

The focus here is on vernacular memorials outside of the cemetery and other formal spaces of memorialisation. Indeed for those mourners who have no grave, for whom the grave is too distant or inaccessible, or for those who find the materiality of the cemetery too distressing, informal vernacular memorials located in more 'neutral' public space, can function as an intermediary liminal 'third space' of remembrance in five key ways: i) mediating between painful loss and happy memories; ii) providing a spatial focus where absence-presence can be negotiated; iii) accommodating a public expression of private grief; iv) (in the case of medium-term memorial forms such as benches, trees etc) mediating between the short- and long-term place-temporalites of ephemeral and permanent memorials; and v) mediating between notions of 'sacred' and 'secular' space and practice (Maddrell, 2009a, p47–48).

The internet has been described as 'global, participatory and open' and a medium which accommodates religious and other ritualised and/or communal practices (Brasher, 2004, pxiii); the following section explores the extent to which the internet accommodates a new form of vernacular memorial in a different sort of public space.

Virtual memorials

'*In a democratized and mediatised society, it appears that every individual must count, and not have his or her existence pass unnoticed*' (Margry and Sanchez-Carretero, 2011, p10).

In the last 15–20 years geographers, along with other social scientists, have become increasingly aware of the body as a social space, a site of identity and performance (Moss and Dyck, 2003). Adrienne Rich (cited by Valentine, 2001) has described the body as 'the geography closest in'. However, for 'generation Facebook', perhaps the

virtual space of the internet is the 'geography closest in', or at least the social platform where many feel themselves most at home, most expressive; whether on Facebook, Myspace or Twitter. For this generation text speak, with its colloquialisms, brevity, and consequent abbreviations, is a natural idiom, the textual vernacular of the computer- and mobile-rich society of more economically developed countries (MEDCs). This is particularly the case for the younger generation: 'The internet is an increasingly important medium among adolescents and young adults, who use it as a source of information and to communicate ...' (Becker & Schmidt, 2009 p78). Given the widespread incorporation of the internet into the socio-economic and cultural lives of many (eg. for work, shopping, leisure and social networking), it is not surprising to find that the internet has been adopted as a site of memorialisation and bereavement support. This includes interest-based bereavement support groups which have a strong web-presence such as the Way Foundation, the network for young widows and widowers, dedicated memorial websites such as www.gonetoosoon.org or social networking sites, such as Facebook, used as a medium for memorialisation.

Dedicated memorial websites have been described as 'web cemeteries', but descriptions such as 'remembrance garden' clearly represent a semantic distancing from the notion of cemetery

Virtual memorials, are created, maintained and visited through the medium of information technology. In the initial phase of their advent in the 1990s, such memorials were commonly private and although sometimes linked as 'webrings' between people with common experiences of loss, they were often difficult for those beyond the immediate circle of the bereaved to access (Roberts, 2009). However, the exponential growth of the internet has included a corollary growth in scope and usage of specialist web-based interest groups and services, including memorial spaces, for example Gonetoosoon had more than 100,000 memorials in 2011. Providers may be profit-based companies, such as MemoryOf (www.memoryof.com) which charge a fee to host and archive online memorials, private, non-profit or charitable sites (for example www.tenovus.com, the Welsh anti-cancer charity which has its own memorial pages), or memorials created within existing social networking sites such as Facebook. Dedicated memorial websites have been described as 'web cemeteries'

(Roberts 2009, p58), but descriptions such as 'remembrance garden' clearly represent a semantic distancing from the notion of cemetery in favour of more idealised locations for remembrance, as well as a representation of Kellaher and Worpole's (2010, p169) 'cenotaphisation'. Memorial sites typically include biographies and photographs of the deceased and condolence books. The biographical sketches, often supported by a set of chronological photographs, constitute a life narrative for the deceased, including interests, achievements, relationships and cause of death. Thus virtual memorials clearly represent an opportunity for the writer to work on both the narrative of the 'enduring biography' (Walter, 1996) of the deceased and as a therapeutic space (Conradson, 2007; Williams, 2007) to explore their own experience of loss and issues of sense-making around the death. This theme will be explored further in the second half of this article.

For those fluent in the medium, the internet offers a very accessible, fluid and dynamic sense of memorial space. Templates make it simple to upload photographs, text and so on making the construction of an e-memorial 'e-asy' (Lomax, 2011, p19). Such web memorials can be added to and updated at the touch of a button, whether by a mourner leaving a message of condolence or by an administrator adding, removing or editing memorial content such as photographs or biographies. Even those memorial sites which charge a fee are a modest price compared to commissioning a headstone or statue, so are less socio-economically exclusive. As with other forms of contemporary vernacular memorial (see Batchen, 2004 on 19th century popular photography; Cooper and Sciorra, 1994 on graffiti; Maddrell, 2009a on memorial benches), there is a greater representation of women compared with formal, officially sanctioned memorials.

Allowing for the caveat of those with limited access to information technology, in the present day UK and similar societies virtual memorials can be seen to represent a democracy of the dead and bereaved. In some ways this echoes the popular mobilising of the technological developments of photographic art as a means of memorialisation in the 19th century. Within the relative democracy of online memorials, both public figures such as celebrities and everyday folk can be represented. Anyone can contribute to or participate in the creation or ongoing life of a virtual memorial, including friends, those who have often had great significance in the life of the deceased and who can experience a deep sense of loss, but 'are frequently disenfranchised in death ...' (Doka, 1989, cited in Roberts, 2009). '...posting a web memorial honors the importance of friendship, which may be overlooked in traditional post-death rituals' (Doka, 1989, cited in Roberts, 2009). Through their presence on the internet they provide a tangible memorial space which, like bereavement support websites, can be visited any hour of day or night, across

timelines and from any computer or palm-held messenger wherever an internet connection can be found, thereby creating a potentially global online community of the bereaved including partners, immediate or extended family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances. This accessibility is important at a time of high domestic mobility and international migration. Early empirical evidence suggests accessing online memorials is not limited to individuals but can be a communal activity shared by friends, co-workers or family members (Doka, 1989, cited in Roberts, 2009). The computer-poor (for example the very elderly or impoverished) may be relatively excluded, but access to internet facilities through libraries and schools and the portability of many information technology services has the potential to ameliorate this technology exclusion, at least temporarily, for example a grandchild sharing an online memorial with grandparents on an internet-enabled mobile phone.

Within the relative democracy of online memorials, both public figures such as celebrities and everyday folk can be represented

Virtual memorials also provide space for socially marginalised bereavements, what Andsager (2005) describes as 'disenfranchised grief', such as pets (Lomax, 2011), suicides and stillbirths and miscarriages (Maddrell, 2009b). For example, even a cursory survey of online memorial sites gives witness to the significance of these virtual memorials for those who have experienced miscarriage, stillbirth or neo-natal death. Whether located on a specialist support group webpage (for example the Stillbirth and Neo-natal Death Charity at www.uk-sands.org) or generic memorial site, virtual memorials provide a space for testimony to the short lives which often have a tremendous and ongoing impact on their families (also see Maddrell, 2009b on the witness cairn in Galloway). They also provide discursive space for parents as parents, especially if their parenthood is not acknowledged elsewhere, for example by some medical practitioners (Kohner & Henley, 2003), as well as a safe space to share their feelings and an opportunity to access a community of others who have had a similar experience. Contrary to the 19th and early 20th century traditions of post-death photography, display of photographs of the dead has become a sensitive issue in the UK and other western countries, not least pre-term dead infants (Godel, 2007). Web memorials allow display and sharing of these photographs and other remembrances, which might

nonetheless be deemed by others to contravene social norms of mourning and taste, in a public arena outside of the domestic space of the home. These parents are using the medium of virtual space to push the boundaries of socially accepted remembrance practices in order to assert their rights as parents and the right to mark the lives of their deceased offspring.

In an early account of internet sites of remembrance, Roberts argued that their unregulated character resulted in idiosyncratic content and format: 'With no common cultural rules dictating their content, length, or the accepted symbols to employ, web memorials vary according to their creator's tastes, needs, and computer skills' (Roberts 2009, p57). Certainly the now multi-paged online memorial affords more scope for extended narrative, whether for biography of the deceased, ongoing bereavement blogs or messages and virtual 'gifts' from other visitors to the memorial. The size of the space (albeit defined by computer memory space) may allow complex visual representations of the deceased's life or personality through photograph albums or video films, often set to the deceased's favourite soundtrack. As the Much Loved site (www.muchloved. com) states: 'Your webpage is provided with sufficient memory space to add thousands of pages, lots of photos and music tracks, and even upload a few select video clips'. However, while this suggests great flexibility, the growth and formalisation of the commercial and charitable online memorial sector has resulted in a degree of structure and scripting to memorials. For example the Much Loved website has 'memorial gardens' and 'candle sanctuaries', which echo the traditional form of material spaces and practices of memorialisation, even if the memorial garden might include a soundscape of rock music. Gonetoosoon includes 'gifts' and an opportunity to make 'friends' within its online community, mimicking Facebook, with the latter extending its social networking practices to memorial pages for deceased members or those whose friends or family want to memorialise them via the site.

The Nevis Partnership, in response to the proliferation of remembrance artefacts on the summit of Ben Nevis, has removed the material vernacular memorials and provided a communal physical site of contemplation near the visitor centre and a virtual memorial page on their website (Maddrell, 2010). The latter is called a book of remembrance and includes 'plaques', with simulated stone textured backgrounds, in muted natural colours, with traditional British funerary symbols of doves and Celtic borders. With the exception of the image of walking boots on one of the plaque schema, these virtual memorials reproduce much of the iconography, aesthetics and discursive framing of material memorials. Regulation of informal memorials by overseeing authorities such as local councils or landowners tends to result in more limited opportunities for expression and form; it has also been

noted that discursive norms have quickly been established in informal memorialisation practices (Maddrell, 2009a; Foote & Grider, 2010; Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011). However, while the wider framing of informal memorials can be narrowed by constraining regulations and discursive norms, textual expression often retains a degree of the vernacular (see Maddrell 2009a on memorial benches). This is exemplified by the Ben Nevis virtual plaques, not least because many reproduce the words of those micro-memorials which were found on, and are now removed from, the mountain. As with many of the memorial pages discussed below, many of these sentiments are expressed directly to the deceased and in the everyday idiom, the vernacular, and are part of the ongoing narrative of relationship and 'durable biography' of the deceased (Walter, 1996, 1999), for example '... much loved and missed [-] at last on top of the world'; '... this one's for you Bruv ...'; 'Love you always Mum x' *(www.nevispartnership. co.uk/memorials.asp).*

Interactive memorial pages also represent 'space for action' as well as reflection and remembrance

An initial survey of a sample of images, written messages and biographies on 20 publicly accessible memorial pages, across four memorial page providers, suggest that many contributors value an opportunity to express their emotions, in two main ways: i) directly to the deceased and ii) to the 'chief' mourners (parents, partners, children, siblings etc) and to a lesser extent to the wider community of mourners. This supports Margry and Sanchez-Carretero's (2011) contention that social forces inhibiting the public expression of private emotions have been undermined by a culture of self-broadcasting through YouTube and social networking sites.

In common with other informal memorials (Santino, 2004; Maddrell, 2009a, 2009b) virtual memorials can be places of communion between the living and the dead, and communicating directly with the deceased is exemplified by the following quotes: 'I love you with all my heart darling and miss you so much. Your husband, Alex XXX'; 'Hi Jacob, Can't believe it is 3 years today. time has flown by so fast, and whilst things have changed so much, my memories of you remain the same. love to you on this day Shelley xxxx'. These postings may involve sharing memories and updating the deceased on what has been happening, and clearly demonstrate continuing bonds, as the following posting 'Mother to deceased Son' illustrates: 'Went to [X]

for [...] Easter...remember when we went camping there and it rained the entire time! Those ancient bikes we hired... really laughed that weekend. Miss you so much xxxx' (www.muchloved.com).[1] For some mourners, there is a day-to-day need to continue in dialogue with their loved one, marking not only significant occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries, but everyday relationships, such as 'Have a good day.x' and 'goodnight' messages. While direct appellation of the deceased could be read as a form of denial of their loved one's death, messages frequently negotiate the paradox of absence-presence, (e.g. 'HAPPY *HEAVENLY* VALENTINES DAY' (www.gonetoosoon. org, author emphasis). This ongoing sense of day-to-day relationship is not limited to partners, parents etc. One lad expressed his appreciation of a sense of support from his deceased friend when going for a job interview: 'Everytime i got nervous it was like you sent me another gesture to let me know you were there and helping me through it. Thanx Mate... ...xXx' (www.muchloved.com). Others use postings and photographs to express the passing of time, for example a child's recent graduation photograph posted on a parent's memorial page, a message on the anniversary of the death (see Shelley's message to Jacob above). Gender plays an important role in individual identity construction, with socialisation resulting in common – although not determined – gendered responses to grief (Martin & Doka, 2000). Scripted gendered norms in western society result in women tending towards more intuitive approaches to grief centred on the need to express and share affective responses, and the more common masculine response is an instrumental approach to grief, centring on cognitive evaluation and/or the need to act (Martin & Doka, 2000). It is this need to act that will be emphasised below. Computer-literate men who are familiar with social networking and professional communications also appear to find interactive virtual memorials to be a space that accommodates intuitive grief through expressions of their feelings for the deceased. These feelings can be demonstrated through actions such as uploading pictures, leaving a virtual token of remembrance, or contributing to or co-ordinating a memorial fundraising activity; alternatively it can be expressed verbally, through a mourning blog, messages of condolence, sharing memories or directly addressing the deceased. For example Andy, the son of Dave Niehaus, Seattle Mariners (USA) baseball commentator, posted on his father's memorial page a photograph of himself as a baby with his parents. The following text accompanied the image: 'Father's Day is around the corner, I thought I would share this [the photo] since it was before Dad's first one, and its my first without him. That's me all bug-eyed. Happy Father's Day, Dad, I miss you, I love you' *(www.facebook.com/.../Dave-Niehaus-Memorial)*. Note that Andy's post initially addresses other mourners and then his deceased father, and is used
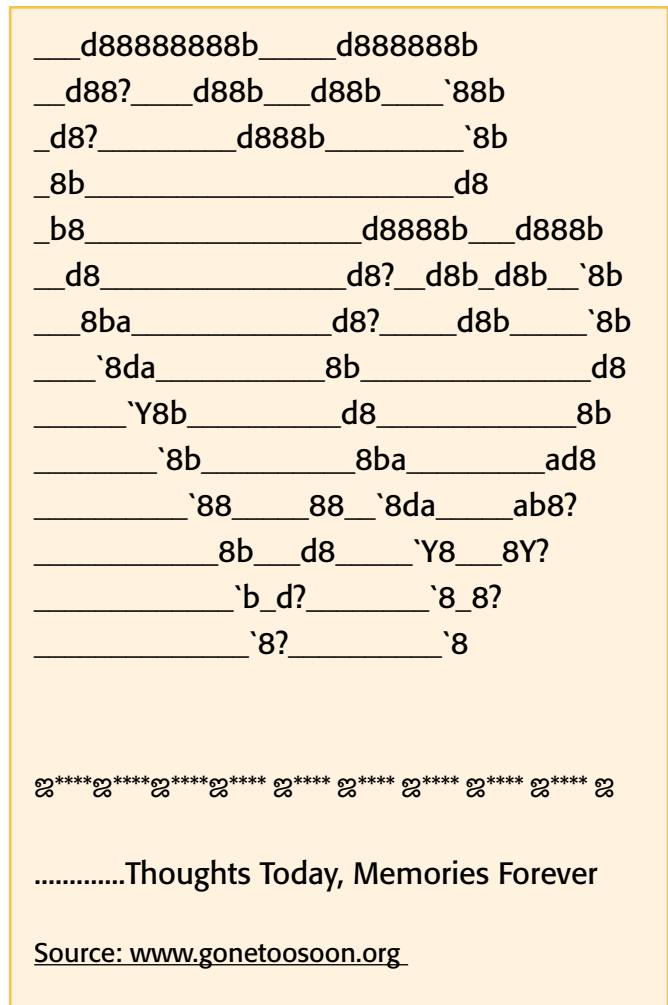

Figure 1: Memorial text art

to express his feelings, narrate his own and his father's interwoven life stories and negotiate the experience of father's day without his dad.

Use of everyday language on virtual memorials suggests continued use of the vocabulary memorialists would have previously used with the deceased in conversation, such as colloquial terms and contemporary social and cultural references (reflecting their class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, belief, interests and so on). This includes significant use of what is known as text speak, whereby abbreviations and terminology of mobile phone text messages have been translated to social networking sites and virtual memorials. As one friend wrote, combining text speak and Scottish dialect: '1st time av bn oan here wee Fred!! was jst talkin bout u the other day there buddy[.] yer badly missed [.] god bless [,] Andy (mate)' (www.gonetoosoon.org). This initial survey suggests that vernacular text art is also a common feature of memorial pages (see Figure 1), especially in messages left by women who make frequent postings on their loved one's page. These can be used either as standalone messages or in association with other messages, for example well-circulated mourning poems which help

capture the bereaved person's feelings in more formal language. They are also frequently used in association with seasonal 'gifts' or tokens such as text images in the form of candles, Easter eggs and so on.

Interactive memorial pages also represent 'space for action' as well as reflection and remembrance, the opportunity to 'do something': lighting a candle, leaving a message, posting a picture, co-ordinating fundraising or other charitable events. This is evidenced in those memorial pages with bereavement blogs by one or more 'lead' mourner, for example a partner, parent or child, where they are able to express, record and share their ongoing emotions and experiences, and others are able to respond in a likewise ongoing fashion. This may include expressions of continuing bonds (Klass *et al*, 1996) with the deceased. This might be expressed through maintaining the web memorial 'much like one tends a grave' (Roberts, 2009, p58), but continuing bonds can be expressed in a variety of other ways through the virtual medium, through posting tributes, including monologues directly addressing the deceased (see below), and other forms of 'memory work' and 'gifting' of tokens added to the assemblage of the online memorial. The opportunity to add a photograph, leave a message or gift, is a central element to the active dimension of memorial web pages. This reflects 'the active agency and performativity of [material] grassroots memorials' (Margry & Sanchez-Caerreto, 2011, p12) and graveside gifts in cemeteries (Francis *et al,* 2005) whereby material objects are deemed to bind the living and the dead, the tangible standing in for the intangible (Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Collins & Opie, 2010). While memorial pages commonly reproduce western iconographies of remembrance such as candle-lighting and gardens, some sites have complex gifting options. Gonetoosoon has more than 80 pages of 'gift' options for purchase, ranging from symbols of national or religious identity (eg. the Bible, Koran, chakras and menorah), to icons representing items of food or drink, pet supplies, celebrations and seasons. Images symbolising an event or emotion are typically accompanied by a short text communiqué, which underscores the message of the act of giving and its semiotic significance and adds to the collective assemblage (Santino, 2004) of the memorial and its meaning. Whether birthday balloons, summer flipflops, a sports car, laptop or toy, mourners are potentially able to signify aspects of the identity of the deceased, evoke memories, act out relation to and affection for them, actively contribute to the assemblage of the virtual memorial, and be part of the wider performative community of mourners. In so doing, the bereaved may also be able to work through some of their own feelings. However, it is of note that while there are tokens of thanks as gifts for the deceased in Gonetoosoon's gift catalogue, there are none associated with difficult relationships, regret or apology: 'sorry' appears not to be in the lexicon of

vocabulary, reflecting a rose-tinted view of pre- and post-mortem relationships.

Virtual memorials as therapeutic space

Virtual memorials have been described as a 'unique grieving tool' (Lomax, 2011) which, while similar to other vernacular memorial shrines in their interactive and dynamic character, offer unique temporal and spatial accessibility to anyone who has use of the internet. Grief has been described as a personal journey characterised by psychological oscillation between orientation to loss or restoration (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, cited in Machin, 2009). Some mourners use the narrative space of virtual memorial tribute walls or blogs as spaces to express and log their own emotional ups and downs on that journey; what a bereavement professional might recognise as therapeutic writing'. For example, 'not sure why but finding today particularly hard, miss and love you so much [,] Phoenix xxxxxx' (www.muchloved.com). Visiting memorial shrines has been likened to pilgrimage (Grider, 2006), another therapeutic space (Williams, 2007), whereby the pilgrim-mourner seeks to 'negotiate the chaotic and traumatic event of the past and hold out the possibility of a bearable future' (Collins & Opie, 2010, p107). This processes of negotiation – of the death and absence of the deceased, of the ongoing life of survivors, and their emotional challenges – can be seen as contributing to, if not constituting, the 'enduring biography' of the deceased (Walter, 1996) and that of the *mourner*. Textual outpourings may also provide an indication of the writer's ongoing experience of different stages of grief (eg. Bowlby, 1980) and sense-making, including yearning and searching, disorientation and disorganisation, or reorganisation of the mourner's life, both practical and affective.

While Roberts (2009, p59) argued that 'all indicators suggest that creating web memorials has a positive impact on the bereaved' there are a number of issues with regard to the nature of virtual memorials and their use. The first is with regard to the longevity of the memorial page and the wider site. Some providers counter this by assuring users of a fixed or minimum term; others are offering to archive sites in perpetuity, for example the September 11 web archive (Despelder, 2003). This may offer greater longevity and a more sophisticated narrative biography of the deceased than that made on a 'permanent' headstone or print media obituary. Cyber security has become another issue, particularly as a result of 'troll' attacks on memorial pages on social networking sites, including offensive postings which are disrespectful to the dead and very hurtful to the bereaved. A man living in Reading, Surrey, was recently convicted for adding abusive posts to an online memorial (*The Telegraph*, 2011*)*. Social networking sites such as Facebook appeared initially resistant to use of their platforms as memorials, but have

become more accommodating in the face of growing use. This has included introducing anti-cyber troll measures and modifying automatic online reminder functions which in the past prompted friends to contact someone who was actually deceased.

There are also other *social* issues around the use of online memorials and their usage. While, as argued above, they can facilitate action and observance on the part of the bereaved, for example lighting a virtual candle in memory of the deceased or leaving a condolence message online, this could be consciously or subconsciously used as a substitute for face-to-face contact such as actually attending the funeral or visiting parents or partner. Engagement online could also constitute an avoidance of the full emotional impact of the death of someone of significance to one's life. A further issue is that a mourner who over-relies on virtual communications and memorial sites may withdraw from direct face-to-face contact with people, with negative effects on their social interaction and ability to live with their grief: '[Excessive] Internet use diminishes other modes of communication and heightens social withdrawal, causing a rise in psychopathological characteristics' (Becker & Schmidt, 2009, p79). On the other hand, virtual memorial providers variously offer a range of support materials and links, such as information on how to organise a funeral, reading material on bereavement, a counselling service, experience-based community discussion boards (eg. spouse, child or pet death), or an opportunity to make 'friends' within the site, the majority of which will be accessible when needed, whether during office hours or in the middle of the night.

Conclusion

While there is evidence of both social discursive norms and regulations framing virtual memorials, they are nonetheless frequently rich in vernacular expression, through contributors' choices of the informal and everyday in photographs, music and the wording of their tributes. Those remembering the dead through virtual memorial sites do not feel obliged to draw on 'high culture', unless that is the cultural norm of their immediate social group. Precedence is given to remembering and celebrating the dead in a form or style which reflects their own cultural taste and preferences. In some cases, typically sub-cultures or those marginalised by type of bereavement, these expressions can subvert the norms of what is acceptable in mainstream memorial culture and practices. This can be seen as part of the wider trends to what has been described as 'bereavement entitlement' (Clark & Franzmann, 2006) and narrating the life of the deceased through increasingly individualised markers and practices of remembrance. Another shift can be identified in greater representation of women in virtual and other vernacular memorials, compared with public statuary. The number of men who

create sites, for example for their partner or child, suggests making web memorials, including writing life stories, organising photographs and co-ordinating fund-raising, may constitute an important opportunity to express (often gendered) instrumental grief, as well as providing an outlet for more intuitive grief through tributes, blogs etc. Axes of difference, eg. gender, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and age represent an important agenda for more detailed interrogation as factors influencing both representation in and interaction with online memorial sites. Online memorials undoubtedly do represent a new vernacular, but even vernacular forms may appeal to some while excluding others; Santino (2004, p369) noted that spontaneous shrines were 'truly "popular", that is, of the people ...' , but the question is – which people?

Like other vernacular memorials such as benches, virtual memorials can represent a 'third space' between grave/crematorium and private domestic space of the home; the permanent and the ephemeral; the sadness and pain of loss and happy memories; absence/presence – testified by messages to the deceased on memorial websites: sadness at death, missing loved ones, birthdays and anniversaries. The dynamic and interactive character of virtual memorials allow them to be updated and to provide ongoing and active remembrance at least in the medium term, as well as a possible sense of continuing bonds with the deceased and shared community between mourners. The memory capacity and relative informality of virtual memorial sites can accommodate a variety of media and degrees of individuality, however both the proforma most sites use – in order to maximise access – and emerging discursive norms, serve to script virtual memorials. Despite this, the vernacular character, the originality and liveliness, is ultimately found in the idiom of, and engagement with, virtual memorials, and the relationships that that idiom and engagement encapsulates. It is in the acceptance of these relationships between the living and the dead that virtual memorials represent not only vernacular expression of remembrance, but also a therapeutic space for the negotiation of continuing bonds and continuing life. ∎

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1   Names have been changed, but spelling and typographical errors etc. retained, as indicative of writing practices of the medium and the idiom of users.