

WE ARE ALL THE 4,645: IMPOSSIBLE MOURNING AND
THE VERANO BORICUA

TODOS SOMOS LOS 4,645: EL LUTO IMPOSIBLE Y EL
VERANO BORICUA

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Abstract: Technological changes are engendering a new “politics of memory” that instrumentalizes both private and social mourning. As mourning becomes virtualized, it becomes de-ritualized, converted into an isolated and alienated interaction. Derrida’s philosophy of mourning critiques Heidegger’s existential analysis and the concept of being-toward-death as well as psychoanalysis’ account of mourning. It rejects the sublimation of loss and affirms fidelity to the introjected lost other. “Impossible mourning” is a form of positive haunting that resists the reductionism of mourning to ipseity in existentialism and psychoanalysis. While technology such as social media are potentiating both “asymbolic death” as well as manipulation of the politics of memory in the service of power and hierarchy, Derrida’s ethics, on the one hand, and social movements like the Verano Boricua, on the other, resist the instrumentalization of mourning.

Keywords: mourning, memory, social media, Verano Boricua, Derrida

Resumen: Cambios tecnológicos engendran una nueva “política de la memoria” que instrumentaliza el luto, tanto privado como social. Con la virtualización del luto viene su desritualización, se convierte en una interacción aislada y enajenada. La filosofía del duelo de Derrida critica el análisis existencial de Heidegger y el concepto del ser-hacia-la muerte, y también la teoría sicoanalítica del luto. Rechaza la sublimación de la pérdida y afirma la fidelidad al otro perdido

internalizado. “El luto imposible” es una forma positiva del “haunting” que resiste la reducción del luto a la ipseidad tanto en el existencialismo como en el psicoanálisis. Mientras tecnologías como los medios sociales potencian la “muerte asimbólica” y la manipulación de la política de la memoria en el servicio del poder y de las jerarquías, la ética de Derrida, por un lado, y movimientos sociales como el Verano Boricua, por el otro, resisten la instrumentalización del luto.

Palabras claves: duelo, memoria, medios sociales, Verano Boricua, Derrida

...the sublimity of a mourning without sublimation...

Our “own” mortality is not dissociated from, but rather also conditions this rhetoric of faithful memory, all of which serves to seal an alliance and to recall us to an affirmation of the other. The death of the other, if we can say this, is also situated on our side at the very moment when it comes to us from an altogether other side.

Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, 38-39

I began the following reflections on mourning, technology and politics pondering losses both personal and collective. I was writing a chronicle of the Verano Boricua, the unprecedented mass protests in July 2019 in Puerto Rico that culminated in the resignation of the corrupt governor Ricardo Rosselló. In this book, titled *4645*, I interpreted the protestors’ insistence on recognizing, recalling, remembering, and respecting the memory of the thousands of victims lost to Hurricane María, which ravaged Puerto Rico in 2017, as a collective act of social mourning. Then my beloved friend from youth, Susan, passed away in October 2019, from cancer, much too young. Her loss provoked an experience of grief that overtook me, that shook and disturbed me with an ineluctable force. I felt ripped out of one state and thrust into another violently: this is what is expressed in the English word “bereaved.” I entered a state of emotional lability, in which I felt

the most lugubrious sorrow alternating with moments of euphoric elation. Despite the enthusiasm with which I had been composing the draft of *4645*, I felt an irrepressible compulsion to instead write about my friend. Involuntary memories stretching back decades came to me: I wanted to recognize, recall, remember, and respect her memory. I also had a desperate need to share with others who knew her, our common friends. But they were in the United States while I was here in Puerto Rico, and so we kept in contact through Face Book. Susan's own profile is still up on the popular social website, and my friends and I still tag her when sharing some old picture, or a memory, on some significant anniversary, or for example, when I posted a picture of a candle I lit for her on the eve of El Día de los Muertos.

Communication technologies are making these kinds of space-bridging connections possible but at the same time are also instrumentalizing both private and social mourning. Social media is digitally eternalizing the afterlife of the deceased. One article predicts that “ten thousand Facebook users die each day, leaving their profiles active. At that rate, within fifty to eighty years, there will be more Facebook profiles of the dead than the living” (Love 2017). Already on Facebook, one can choose one's own “Legacy Settings” to assign who will curate your ghostly presence on the website after the inevitable occurs. Websites like “forevermissed.com” and the “World Wide Cemetery” offer memorial services, for an annual charge, thus providing gradations of eternalization based on wealth. One viral online documentary details how a Korean mother found “closure” with a virtual reality recreation of her deceased seven-year old daughter. Social media, as I experienced personally, are already changing how humans grieve and mourn. But the potential risk of this virtualization of mourning is de-ritualization, its conversion into a private and isolated, alienated interaction. The site for the memorialization of the deceased is now becoming a virtual cenotaph for each “consumer.” The opportunity to mourn with dignity and to practice the loving remembrance of the lost—always already subject to the structures of power and hierarchies of the

living¹—will be exposed to the violence of capitalism anew. It will be subject to new forces of expropriation and commercialization that order experience according to inhuman market logics and their corollary politics. Analogously, on a collective level, this technological and political shift is affecting how societies mourn mass death, such as that which occurred after Hurricane María in 2017. And, one must add, what is to come on a much larger scale globally after the COVID-19 pandemic. Mourning, both private and social, is entering a new phase of the “politics of memory:” a shift, I argue, that merits philosophical attention.

Impossible Mourning

In the sections that follow, I weave together reflections on the philosophy of mourning, psychoanalysis and technology, respectively, with a certain temerity necessary to force together these quite disparate moments. Then in the last section I bring them to bear on the “politics of memory” into which the Verano Boricua inserted itself, I argue, in an explosive and profound manner. I begin with Jacques Derrida’s philosophy of mourning, an insistent theme from the earliest to the last of his writings. It has been succinctly summarized as “a new model of mourning as an ongoing conversation with the dead who are both within us and beyond us and continue to look at us with a look that is a call to responsibility and transformation” (Kirkby 461).² I relate this concept first to his critique of existentialism and then to his critique of psychoanalysis.

Derrida’s concept emerges as an alternative to the much-debated Heideggerian concept of being-toward-death. In his

¹ One considers the violent legacy of segregation in the U.S. South, frequently recalled in African-American literature, in which even the cemeteries were segregated.

² This article also contains a useful summary of Derrida’s philosophy of mourning. Derrida’s model, which proposes an openness to a form of “haunting” of the other as a call and an opportunity, has proved much more apt to my own personal experience of mourning than Heidegger’s well-known discussion of the penetration (*Eindringlichkeit*) of vulgar time and openness to authentic being one supposedly experiences faced with the death of the other. I apply this model to the social mourning which convoked the unprecedented congregation of the multitudes in the Verano Boricua.

1993 *Aporias*, Derrida considers some consequences of being-toward-death, the problem of a “philosophical anthropology” and *Jemeinigkeit* (“mine-ness”) in Heidegger’s existential analytic from *Being and Time*. It continues his much earlier critique of Heidegger’s opposition between “vulgar” and non-vulgar time in his 1968 “Ousia and Gramme: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*,” in *Margins of Philosophy* (29-67). Derrida’s critique is situated within the larger project of an “aporetology” or “aporetography,” an ongoing deconstruction of the logic or spatiality of the limit, in which the second term of binary structures like presence / absence are shown to be both conditions of possibility and of impossibility for the first. Within this reversal of the hierarchy of terms a *differance* is inserted: this is the deconstructive strategy that characterizes his philosophy and for which he creates a long catalogue of instances in the first section of *Aporias*, “Finis,” including “undecideability” and the “double bind” as well as: “the work of impossible mourning; the impracticable opposition between incorporation and introjection in ‘Fors;’ in *Memoires for Paul de Man...*; and in *Psyche: Invention de l’autre*, where deconstruction is explicitly defined as a certain aporetic experience of the impossible...” (15), all of which will be touched upon below.

Aporias begins with the direct assertion that “all people do not die in the same way” and a discussion of the book by the French historian Philippe Ariès *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, (which charts the historical movement of death as a joyful public ceremony to death as something shameful and forbidden). This serves as a segue to a rehearsal of *Being and Time*’s “methodological” stance, according to which any biological concept or “culture” of death is presupposed by a concept of death. Death as perishing (*verenden*) or demise (*Ableben*) already presupposes a concept of death “properly speaking,” an argument that Derrida summarizes this way:

Forms of anthropological knowledge supposedly treat death according to culture and history; bio-genetic disciplines presumably treat death according to nature. No matter how necessary and enriching they may be, these forms of knowledge must presuppose a concept of death properly speaking-this is, in sum, what Heidegger

says. Only an existential analysis can provide such a concept of death ... the founding basis ... (44)

But deconstruction begins with the overturning of first terms and rejects the insistence in Western thought on founding concepts that are “prior to,” which would ground and give rise to the derivative second terms that supposedly arise from the first. In this Heidegger is already contradicting his own project of abandoning all prior concepts of being and of “destroying” Western metaphysics. Derrida rightly positions the methodological priority assigned to Heidegger’s “proper concept of death” within:

the great ontologico-juridico-transcendental tradition, and I believe it to be undeniable, impossible to dismantle, and invulnerable (at least this is the hypothesis I am following here)³ – except perhaps in this particular case of death, which is more than a case and whose uniqueness excludes it from the system of possibilities, and specifically from the order that it, in turn, may condition. (45)

The methodological prioritizing of being-toward-death grounds in turn Heidegger’s definition of Dasein itself. Dasein is distinguished from other beings by its relation to temporality. It is death—and it can only be the death of the other, since one’s own death is not available to experience—that awakens Dasein’s to break out of “vulgar time” with a call to authenticity. *This* death, however, rather than provoking a mourning that would be an “ongoing conversation” and a “project”— is a death that serves, for *Being and Time*, to ground Dasein as *being-itself*. It is a finitude that establishes Dasein *qua* itself, in its ipseity. Heidegger’s account would relegate being-toward-death to Dasein’s self-being, and mourning to a problem of “philosophical anthropology” to be bracketed out of an

³ “Following,” that is to say, accepting the methodological presupposition of this tradition (first principles, “prima filosofia”) that Heidegger is uncritically presupposing, but only for the purpose of critiquing him immanently. The dismantling of the “great ontologico-juridico-transcendental tradition,” that is, the Western “ontotheophonophallogocentric metaphysics of presence,” is precisely what deconstruction aims to do, even more radically than Heidegger or Nietzsche.

existential analytic of “a concept of death properly speaking” that is methodologically prior, presupposed and superordinate.

But for Derrida, in contrast to Heidegger, finitude is always relational *and* differential. Derrida accepts, indeed, mourning for the other as the point of departure for ethics itself:

If Jemeinigkeit, that of Dasein or that of the ego (in the common sense, the psychoanalytic sense, or Levinas’s sense) is constituted in its ipseity in terms of an originary mourning, then this self-relation welcomes or supposes the other within its being itself as different from itself. And reciprocally: the relation to the other (in itself outside myself, outside myself in myself) will never be distinguishable from a bereaved apprehension. (61)

We are constituted as beings in time not by our relation to our own death, but by the death of the other. Thus, we enter into responsibility, Derrida affirms, following Levinas, by way of the other. It is the death of the other (friendship entails the recognition of the inevitability that one friend will die, will pass that aporetic border before the other one does) that calls us—not to a self-relating experience of authenticity, but to responsibility to the other. It is the mortality of the other that always already prepares us for finitude. In this way the death of other bequeaths the surviving friend a problem and project, an aporia that we are called to accept as an absolute responsibility. The other regards us, with the gaze of one who cannot (can no longer) be seen—as a voice that beckons us toward this absolute responsibility.

How are we to hear and respond to this call? It is through the work of mourning, Derrida insists, *le travail de deuil*. Thus, does mourning become the very most pressing question of an ethics, which is not a system to be grounded by a first principle but rather a process that is ongoing and relational, like a mourning that never ends. Derrida’s ethics of mourning position and frame the problem of responsibility. We respond to the other as finite, and it is in our recognition of the other’s finitude calling to us that we find responsibility. The response to the call that the other presents to us, absolutely (which he metaphorizes and ironizes as the “ghost” when discussing photography and film), is constitutive of our self as responsible selves.

Mourning constitutes us as responsible inasmuch as it opens us to difference, a difference even within our self / ourselves that “welcomes or supposes the other within its being itself as different from itself.” It is in this subjectifying interiorization that the lost other becomes a part of ourselves: here Derrida is inflecting his critique of the existential analytic with the problem of incorporation from the psychoanalytical theories of Abraham and Torok from his essay “Fors.” Rather than diagnosing the incorporation of the other in mourning as a pathology, Derrida embraces this “haunting” as an opportunity to respect the otherness of the lost other as constitutive of self.

This becomes more evident in the other text mentioned in Derrida’s catalogue, “Mnemosyne” from *Memoires for Paul de Man*. In this text Derrida theorizes the limit and what he calls “impossible mourning” with respect to friendship, this time with the specificity of the occasion of the death of one who was his friend, as well as an intellectual who developed in parallel to Derrida what is called “deconstruction” in the fields of literary theory and aesthetics:

It suffices that I know him to be mortal, that he knows me to be mortal – there is no friendship without this knowledge of finitude. And everything that we inscribe in the living present of our relation to others already carries, always, the signature of memoirs-from-beyond-the-grave....this finitude can only take that form through the trace of the other in us... the finitude of memory, and thus the approach or remembrance of the future. If there is a finitude of memory, it is because there is something of the other, and of memory as a memory of the other, which comes from the other and comes back to the other. (*Memoires* 29)

Is mourning for the other or for the self? The inevitably undecidable character of this problem is what gives mourning an ethical character. In order for mourning to be about the lost, a loving remembrance of the lost, it must have already been a trace present in the structure of friendship, an anticipatory “remembrance of the future.” In this sense it is not that the finality inherent in our relation to death of the other makes us who we are, it is not that finitude is constitutive of Dasein, so

much as that it is the relation to the other what conditions our relation to death and finality as such. This is how Derrida inverts the binary: but to complete his deconstructive maneuver, he must insert the *differance*: this is articulated under the signature of fidelity, an “alliance” and the preservation of “faithful memory:”

Our “own” mortality is not dissociated from, but rather also conditions this rhetoric of faithful memory, all of which serves to seal an alliance and to recall us to an affirmation of the other. The death of the other, if we can say this, is also situated on our side at the very moment when it comes to us from an altogether other side. (38)

All this is what Derrida calls “an impossible mourning.”⁴

Ghosts Within

If Derrida’s ethics of mourning emerge as a critique of the existential analytic of Dasein as being-toward-death, they are also a critique of an analogous psychoanalytic concept of mourning. In the opening pages of Freud’s 1919 “Mourning and Melancholia” (“Über Trauer und Melancholie”), mourning, or “Trauer” (in German, both grieving and mourning) is considered as an object of scientific interest to psychoanalysis as a process that follows an empirically definable structure. Freud is struck by the congruence between the clinical expressions of melancholia, a pathology that the psychoanalyst is eager to diagnose and treat, and those of mourning, which is

⁴ A philosopher and practicing psychoanalyst translates this process in this simplified manner:

I always mourn not only my lost friend but something lost of myself, of my own emotional world, as well, my mourning is at once both an act of loyalty and of disloyalty to my friend. This inescapable conflict of loyalty is also reflected on the fact that my mourning cannot be directed at my friend who has disappeared; it can only be directed at an “interiorization” of my friend, at a presence who now dwells within me as an absent alterity. Derrida, clearly influenced by Freud, argues that we are who we are in and through these interiorized others. (Stolorow)

Although I accept this characterization, the following section demonstrates why I would take issue with the characterization of the Derrida as “clearly influenced by Freud.”

tolerated without comment by society as a normal and temporary deviation.

In this “normal” mourning, the psyche, adjusting to an intolerable loss, and according to an inevitable economy, enacts in an automatic way a series of adjustments with predictable expressions in the emotional life of the mourner. This has become popularized in contemporary culture as the “stages of grief” model proposed by Kübler-Ross. Mourning overtakes the psyche in such a way as to provoke a period of emotional lability as part of the readjustment in the economy of the psyche that must follow a certain course. If it does not, and if the loss is not “resolved,” that is to say, if the lost object of desire is not internalized then detached, “normal” mourning becomes “melancholia.” It becomes pathological and the subject fixates on the loss, possessed by a repetition compulsion.

But Freud’s discussion of mourning and subsequently, that of his followers, is oriented toward the *overcoming* of the loss and the attainment of a type of closure, all of which Derrida fundamentally rejects. Freud talks about the mechanical process culminating in the severing of libidinal ties to the object as the product of a certain necessitarianism, with his characteristic hyperdeterminism. The result of this inevitable economy, which the psyche undergoes, once successful “decathexis” is achieved after a period of mourning marked by the requisite stages, Freud describes as a “victory.” He writes: “reality testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object,” which is resisted by the ego in mourning, an opposition that “can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a wishful hallucinatory psychosis.” But in normal mourning “respect for reality gains the day (*den Sieg erhält*: literally, “obtains the triumph”) and “when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (244-45). This process, for Freud, can even include a phase of feelings of aggression toward the lost object, of blame for having caused the psyche pain: hatred of the lost.

Freud devotes much of the essay “Mourning and Melancholia” to organizing the mania of mourning within the

schemes of narcissistic object relations. The problem of internalization is modified by Melanie Klein, in her 1939 article “Mourning and Mania,” which elaborated the relation between “unhealthy mourning” and pathological mania, contending that the child’s relation to loss is analogous to the adult mourner’s. But the issue of internalization is taken up most relevantly much later, by the Hungarian-French psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, in their books from the 1960s and 1970s *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* and *The Wolf Man’s Magic Words: A Cryptonymy*, for which Derrida wrote a preface, titled “Fors.” Abraham and Torok contrast psychic “introjection” to “incorporation,” the unassimilated internalization of the lost resulting in the “cryptification” and “phantasmalization” of the deceased, a form of fantasy or “wishful hallucinatory psychosis”:

If accepted and worked through, the loss would require major readjustment. But the fantasy of incorporation merely simulates profound psychic transformation through magic; it does so by implementing literally something that has only figurative meaning. So in order not to have to “swallow” a loss, we fantasize swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost, as if it were some kind of thing. (*The Kernel and the Shell* 126-7)

In this text the authors go on to diagnose the process of incorporation as a process of “demetaphorization” and “objectification” of the lost through which it takes on a life of its own, inhabiting the internal crypt that has been erected.

On the other hand, introjection is the mechanism through which, in “normal” or “healthy” mourning, the other is absorbed within as an extension or expanding of the self. It is the very process through which the self itself is constructed (in its ipseity, as in the existential analytic). We internalize the lost object, that which we love: but as in Freud, this is a step toward the healthy process of *removing* libidinal ties to it, decathexis, so we can move on. Through this process the self is reaffirmed in its indifference and self-sameness. Incorporation, however, results when this does not occur: “When the process of introjection is thwarted, a contradiction sets in... and with it that opposition of forces that constructs the crypt” (Derrida,

Fors xvii). The dead are condemned to haunt that crypt, which operates according to its own law, its own cryptonomy, and in this way the (unstable) self is condemned to be haunted, unable to achieve the “release” (from otherness) that the work of mourning should accomplish. Derrida characterizes their account in this manner:

Sealing the loss of the object, but also marking the refusal to mourn, such a maneuver is foreign to and actually opposed to the process of introjection. I pretend to keep the dead alive, intact, safe (save) inside me, but it is only in order to refuse, in a necessarily equivocal way, to love the dead as a living part of me, dead save in me, through the process of introjection, as happens in so-called normal mourning. The question could of course be raised as to whether or not “normal” mourning preserves the object as other (a living person dead) inside me. This question—of the general appropriation and safekeeping of the other *as other*—can always be raised as the deciding factor. (*Fors* xvii, emphasis in original)

To preserve, to appropriate and safekeep the other “living person dead” *as other* within is the challenge that Derrida’s ethics of mourning poses. The accounts of Freud and Klein, with their own insistent economical language, and ultimately, also the more complex account of Abraham and Torok, with their more juridical language, is what Derrida would characterize as forms of *possible* mourning, which aim to *resolve* loss as a problem. To this possible mourning, in which not just the loss, but also with it our ties to the lost love one, are overcome, “worked through,” “superseded,” or “transcended”—in which the lost is “sublimated” in order to achieve “closure”—Derrida counters the “sublimity” of an “impossible mourning”: “to this thought there belongs the gesture of faithful friendship. Its immeasurable grief, but also its life: the sublimity of a mourning without sublimation and without the obsessive triumph of which Freud speaks” (*Mémoires* 38).⁵

⁵ As always, the word play Derrida engages in here is a frivolity of the most serious kind. Speakers of German will know that “*erhaben*” and “*aufheben*” share no common roots as do their translations in French or English: the connection between “sublime” and “sublimation” is a rendered effect. But

The mourning that Derrida proposes is impossible because, by respecting the otherness of the lost other, we are precisely refusing to sever libidinal ties, we are affirming the love for the other as other, and as if still there, rejecting the process of mourning as a process that resolves something. Mourning is undertaken as project that does not complete itself but presents itself as a non-possibility, something not able to be itself. The aporia of impossible mourning is aporetic in the sense of not being able to pass a border which would allow it to complete itself and thus be itself. Derrida wants mourning to fail, to not achieve the “victory” of a supposedly successful “decathexis,” the passing of that border, which allows us to arrive at “closure” but in the process of which the loved object is forgotten. “Mourning” should be maintained, not resolved, should be impossible as something not “passable” or to be “passed on away from.” Achieving a victory in possible mourning means not maintaining our ties, means breaking the alliance sealed and means not holding the loved lost in faithful memory.

In *Mémoires*, Derrida elaborates the valences of memory with respect to *Erinnering* and *Gedächtnis*, the two words for memory in German that have been philosophized by thinkers as diverse as Hegel and Schopenhauer and Heidegger. The passage I cite in the epigraph continues by connecting *Erinnerung* and the death of the other:

Our “own” mortality is not dissociated from, but rather also conditions this rhetoric of faithful memory, all of which serves to seal an alliance and to recall us to an affirmation of the other. The death of the other, if we can say this, is also situated on our side at the very moment when it comes to us from an altogether other side. Its *Erinnerung* becomes as inevitable as it is unliveable: it finds there its origin and its limit, its conditions of possibility and impossibility. (39)

it is the very force of tradition, of interpretation, of German thinking generally, that makes Freud ring back through words associated with Hegel (*aufheben*) and Kant (*erhaben*), and allows Derrida, with a certain force, to position the death of the other, (when their life has been sublimated, *aufgehoben*), close to the aesthetic experience of transcendence, a brush with the infinite as in the sublime (*das Erhabene*).

Derrida suggests that we should yet interiorize the lost other, in *Erinnerung*, subjective interiorization, hold them within, so that *Gedächtnis*, working operational memory, can be employed to sustain and hold the other, as other, within. This is not presented as a pathology, as mania or psychotic incorporation and cryptification, but rather a form of fidelity to the ghosts within and a being-ethical. *Memoires* concludes with the striking image of this movement from Psyche, the self (narcissistically in love with itself), to Mnemosyne, within which the other is included.

All of this has been rehearsed to arrive at this point: that haunting, for Derrida, is not something uncanny, strange or fearsome, but rather something that allows us to be ethical. Haunting, indeed, is what makes us ethical. We should embrace the other as something that haunts us lovingly. In this way we recognize, recall, remember, and respect their being/non being, their presence/absence, their life/death. The aporia of haunting is their simultaneous absence and presence. But what is the figure of a simultaneous presence and absence, something seen but not there, or there but not seen? It is the *ghost*, and with it we arrive at a certain problem of technology.⁶

⁶ I met Jacques Derrida once, in Baltimore: he had come to Johns Hopkins to present *L'animal que donc je suis*. There were office hours for the graduate students: I went with two German friends and he asked about our doctoral projects. I went first: mine was barely conceived and wildly general—I was thinking about invisibility and *Geist* as a trope in literature—and I said something confused about ghosts. Derrida, obviously, recommended his *Of Spirit* and suggested following the general theme of haunting, memory and mourning so deeply and insistently reflected upon in his writing, before moving onto my friend's more developed projects. I was content to listen. I was impressed with his earnestness. I had imagined him lighter. But I noticed that he kept glancing at my jacket. It was a *trouvée*, a striking, rusty orange-colored, crushed velvet sports coat that I had just snagged that very day at a thrift store for five bucks. I felt self-conscious, like a poser. Only later, looking at images of the fashionable, photogenic philosopher, did I realize his taste for flashy coats. Actually, I bought it because it reminded me of the one a dashing young Noam Chomsky wore in the famous televised 1971 debate with Foucault. Perhaps M. Derrida was looking at me with appreciation, if not for my intellectual, then at least for my sartorial decisions. I never wrote about *Geist* or ghosts in my dissertation, but I am now. Perhaps Derrida is still looking at me.

Being-With

How does impossible mourning connect to the question of technology? And what can it teach us about the virtualization of mourning and the politics of memory? In *Aporias* Derrida had argued, contra Heidegger, that the corollary of originary mourning's constitutiveness of the ipseity of Dasein is its openness to the other. But this means that:

it also includes a political dimension. It may even engage the political in its essence. In an economic, elliptic, hence dogmatic way, I would say that there is no politics without an organization of the time and space of mourning, without a topolitology of the sepulcher, without an anamnestic and thematic relation to the spirit as ghost [revenant], without an open hospitality to the guest as ghost [in English in the original]. (61)

There is no politics without an organization of the time and space of mourning: this is a dictum I accept and wish to expand to our case. The ethics of mourning in Derrida's writings connect, in the manner characteristic of his later work, the philosophical, the psychoanalytical and the political. They link the philosophical deconstruction of the existential analytic with the psychoanalytical theme of introjection and incorporation and with the politics of memory, to arrive at the problem of "the host, the hostage, the guest, the ghost and Geist" (*Aporias* 61).

And the ghost is also the ghost in the machine: the images of the dead mediated through the technologies of photography and film. Derrida discussed the question of mediatic technology and the ghost with Bernard Stiegler in 1990s, in a series of dialogues collected in the volume *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*. In the chapter "Spectographies," they ponder the problem of haunting in film with reference to the movie *Ghost Dance* (1983) by Ken McMullen, in which Derrida plays himself, alongside the actress Pascale Laurier, who later died, tragically young. When asked in the film if he believed in ghosts, Derrida, with her passing in mind and cannily conscious that the movie would outlive them both, replies: "That's difficult to answer, because, you see, I am one." Derrida looks at us, from the screen, yet we no longer can look at him. In *Spectographies* Derrida cites the

“the visor effect” in reference to Hamlet, when the ghost of that haunted son’s father, the King, appears with his helmet on, which

up or down... reminds us that his gaze can see without being seen. A visor symbolizes the situation in which I can’t see who is looking at me, I can’t meet the gaze of the other, whereas I am in his sight. The specter is not simply this visible invisible that I can see, it is someone who watches or concerns me without any possible reciprocity, and who therefore makes the law when I am blind, blind by situation. The specter enjoys the right of absolute inspection. He is the right of inspection itself. (121)

“Spectrographies” analogizes the visor effect to film’s spectralization, and describes the dead person, visible / invisible yet forever beyond touch, as the “wholly other,” that which places an “infinite demand” on us without exchanging a glance with us (120). Film makes possible our own revenance or return as a haunting, in which our right to “absolute inspection” will become the law. This theme, dramatized in the famous line, “I am the ghost of thy father,” is elaborated by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*.

Photography and death: this was the topic of *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes’ much-admired book, which begins with his account of feeling an uncanny touch when observing a photo of Napoleon’s brother Jerome: “I am looking at eyes that looked at the emperor” (*Camera Lucida* 4). Light that touched him (now untouchable) is now touching Barthes: the image haunts us through a “series of contiguities” that are “material contiguities” (*Echographies* 125). Derrida summarizes Barthes’ theory of the photograph’s spectrality in his remembrance on the occasion of *his* death, 1981, in *The Work of Mourning*, citing *Camera Lucida*, in this way:

We are prey to the ghostly power of the supplement; it is this unlocatable site that gives rise to the specter. “The Spectator is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs—in magazines and newspapers, in books, albums, archives....And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any eidolon emitted by the object, which I should like to call the Spectrum of the

Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to ‘spectacle’ and adds to it that rather terrible thing that is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9). (*The Work of Mourning* 41, internal references are to *Camera Lucida*)

Derrida then interprets the passage with reference to the concept of concept:

This concept of a ghost is as scarcely graspable, in person, as the ghost of a concept. Neither life nor death, but the haunting of the one by the other. The “versus” of the conceptual opposition is as unsubstantial as a camera’s click. “Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print” (92). Ghosts: the concept of the other in the same, the punctum in the studium, the completely other, dead, living in me. (41-42)

Barthes had conjectured that photography’s spectrality was facilitating what Edgar Morin had called the “crisis of death,” dislocating the “anthropological place of Death” from religion to photography: “Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death” (92). Photography, he says, is “flat death.” The photograph will yellow and fade, and celluloid disintegrates and burns, and those who could testify, lovingly, to the photographed deceased will also fade away and die, “and nothing will remain but an indifferent Nature” (94). Barthes proposes “that photography constitutes an epokhe”—the phenomenological suspension— “in the relation to time, to memory, and to death” as Stiegler later describes it (*Echographies* 149).

The politics of memory, on the other hand, is memorably invoked by Derrida in his “Exordium” to *Specters of Marx* as the task of “learning to live finally,” learning:

to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But with them. No being-with the other, no socius without this *with* that

makes being-with in general more enigmatic than ever for us. And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations. (xvii-xviii)

This injunction for being-with is also one that I accept and wish to apply to our case. But with social media, the asymbolic death photograph engenders is now even further potentiated through its global, instantaneous, cumulative and infinitely conserved virtual circulation. Combining the thought of the spectralization of television with Barthes' concept of "asymbolic Death," one could say that social media both makes possible *revenance* and literalizes death. It is introducing deathliness into the everyday—bereft, however of the rituals used by traditions to assimilate death individually and socially—and augmenting the instrumentalization of mourning. How are we then to practice Derrida's proposal of being-with?

But then as well the dead with whom we would like *to be* are also now subject to a new politics of memory, to an "artificiality" that Derrida and Stiegler also discuss in *Echographies*, which manipulates the spaces and times in which they can be remembered, unjustly, according to logics of the state and of markets, in the interests of the powerful or of "commerce," or of racisms, or hierarchy as such. But Derrida's exhortation for a being-with ghosts as the task of learning to live *finally* is a political project that the Verano Boricua, I argue, fulfilled in an exemplary manner. The contest that emerges is one between spectrality as the positive haunting in Derrida's ethics of mourning, a being-with ghosts in which we practice fidelity to them through faithful memory, and another concept of spectrality, in which the lost are trapped in virtuality, in which their remembrance is reduced to the machine, or worse, silenced and negated, as happened in Puerto Rico after Hurricane María. The struggle is one between the agency to create a "topolitics" of mourning as a lived social experience, or the relegation of mourning to the virtualizing, artificial machine, within which the lost other is eventually doomed to the hell of an endless "indifferent Nature."

We Are All the 4,645

The Verano Boricua, a political movement with the immediate goal of forcing a corrupt governor to resign, was also a movement of ghosts. The motivation for the unprecedented mass mobilization, I propose, arose from a great refusal of a certain politics of memory and the technology that enabled it, which minimized and marginalized the memory of the María dead, attempting to devalue and silence it. The “brothers” in the chat whose leak sparked the protests were obsessed with mediatic manipulation. They had positioned themselves as the keepers of a technological-political knowledge that was the signature of their administration. With a crew of millennials in their inner circle, a fake plastic telegenicity in the figure of the governor, social media savvy, messaging refined professionally with statistics and strategy by publicity firms like KOI Americas and ties to various media outlets,⁷ the Rosselló administration, the chat revealed, arrogantly prided itself on being the best manipulators ever. Their success met its limit however, when the deaths of the victims of María—symbolized by “4645”—contrary to the public rhetoric of responsible memorialization and token acts of public mourning, were shown to be just another manipulable element of a media strategy. And when a member of the cabinet cynically referred to the dead as “cadavers” to feed to the “crows,” (a reference to opponents in the media), the inhumanity of this reduction and objectification of lives/deaths (which we the living desire to preserve in “faithful memory”) an implicit social alliance with the dead was broken.

What was revealed is that, to the powerful, the dead are disposable, fungible units to be instrumentalized and placed in circulation in manufactured discourses according to the operations of a political calculus. Remembrance of the lost was something to be “overcome,” a burdensome political obstacle, to be disposed of, much like Freud’s insistence on overcoming libidinal attachments to the lost loved one. This occurred at a moment when the US president had repeatedly minimized the death toll of Hurricane María with bald-faced lies that did nothing to veil his racist minimization of Boricua lives. What amounted to an entire white supremacist-colonial-capitalist-

⁷ Compare the Z-93/Sixto George case (Cortés Chico).

mediatic-political machine was revealed as an attempt to intervene in a politics of memory with the message “Boricua lives matter less,” which the people resoundingly rejected with the message: “we are all the 4,645.” The memory of the 4,645 was the realization of the always already present future remembrance of the idea of the people. We are all the 4,645 is a slogan that would have been as equally apt for the movement as the other one, “somos más y no tenemos miedo” (Powers 90-94).

What happened in Puerto Rico is one example of how the politics of memory can be reclaimed, how mourning can be redeemed and de-instrumentalized against the implacable work of erasure that the hierarchies of capital and the State perform in the interest of profit and power. The people of Puerto Rico dramatically reappropriated the ability to mourn through direct action, defending the dignity of the 4,645 victims of Hurricane María collectively by protesting a corrupt government that had profaned their memory. In *4,645* I described the aporetic presence of the dead in the protests:

I remembered all this on the night of Thursday, July 18, at a protest raging in front of Fortaleza. Five days after that first night at the corner it had become a nightly ritual in a Puerto Rico now fully in the throes of insurrection. I trembled as I saw a young woman standing on the barricades, in the full-body paint of a skeleton, alabaster bones outlined convincingly on a pitch-black background, like Catarina on the Day of the Dead. But the mouth on her skull-painted face is muzzled shut with silver duct tape. She stands there with serene sad eyes perusing the agitated crowd, with a simple ¡Ricky Renuncia! sign. The message of her mute performance is evident: the dead cannot speak, but they want what we want; denied justice, they are right there protesting with us. It occurred to me just then that whatever the demographers may say about statistics, the number “4,645” had become the symbol of a righteous haunting, a cypher for loss in general that had become catalytic. (35-37)

The Verano Boricua was not a struggle for the right to mourn. It was not a question of particular rights afforded

within a contractual order between state and society. The silencing and erasure of the 4,645 after Hurricane Maria taught Puerto Rico that mourning cannot be guaranteed as a right. Because rights can be taken away, and even respect for the dead can be taken away under a regime of precarity and colonial dispossession. It was rather the spontaneous creation through direct action of a different, if temporary, order in which the freedom to mourn the dead—and of their ghosts to haunt—was asserted collectively. The call that brought the people together in an unprecedented manner resonated with a generalized intuition that the space of the movement to topple the state—the *¡Ricky renuncia!* movement, fueled by righteous indignation—was also the space of this other order (“the time and space of mourning”) in which we were free to mourn the 4,645—fueled by love—to honor an alliance of friendship and kinship in faithful memory.

I close by stitching together the language and themes I have assembled here to recognize, recall, remember and respect the impossible mourning of the Verano Boricua this way: the Verano responded to the instrumentalization of mourning through mass mobilization that rejected a politics of memory manipulated by the powerful and in so doing it saved the 4,645 from asymbolic death; it created a monument of deeds to rearticulate mourning into the social rite that it should be, and in so doing it made finitude relational; it created through direct action a time and space of mourning (“a to politics of the sepulcher”) in defiance of both elite interests and the dictates of hierarchy and established custom; it seized the artifactual means of memory production from the virtual memory industry and in doing so it appropriated surplus values of memory, retooling them for socially necessary use; it achieved a historical transformation whose symbolic force will resonate, in this way keeping their mourning open, preventing its (fore)closure. By recognizing, recalling, remembering and respecting the María dead, it redeemed them from their shadowy afterlife in a virtual Hades, reclaiming mourning as a redemptive practice for the living, as an act of fidelity, sealing an alliance in loving affirmation of the other.⁸

⁸ Many handwritten signs in the Verano Boricua marked the name or filiation of those lost to Hurricane María (Powers 49, 115-128) a way to say

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their name, as but months later the anti-racist movement for black lives of 2020 would say the name George Floyd: our way of being-with—announcing in public the proper particularity of the name to affirm and embrace the singularity of the other. I say the name Susan Mongillo Guarino (1970-2019), friend, *alma gemela*, and dedicate this essay to her, in loving memory.

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