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Remembering the Dead: Electronic Literature as Memorial and Meme

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes a multimedia memorial, *Remembering the Dead*, that seeks to remember victims of mass shootings in the United States of America. This elegiac work may be considered a diversity for electronic literature, specifically one focused on social justice. By remembering those killed by gun violence, we recall and reinforce their humanity. Additionally, we gain a broader engagement with community interaction, as well as an increased critical network awareness of how electronic literature might provide bridges between communities. *Remembering the Dead* provides a meme regarding how to move forward with these ideas in an increasingly fractured world.

KEYWORDS

sound-based electronic literature; affiliations; communities; translations; civic engagement; intermedia.

RESUMO

Este ensaio descreve um memorial multimídia, *Remembering the Dead* [Recordando os mortos], que procura lembrar as vítimas de tiroteios em massa nos Estados Unidos da América. Esta obra elegíaca pode ser considerada uma derivação no âmbito da literatura eletrônica, especificamente focada na justiça social. Ao lembrar os que foram mortos pela violência armada, recordamos e reforçamos a sua humanidade. Adicionalmente, desenvolvemos a nossa interação com a comunidade, assim como maior consciencialização crítica acerca da forma como a literatura eletrônica pode proporcionar pontes entre comunidades. *Remembering the Dead* constitui um *meme* para que estas ideias se possam desenvolver num mundo cada vez mais fraturado.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

literatura eletrônica sonora; filiações; comunidades; traduções; participação cívica; intermídia.

I. BACKGROUND

Everyday in the United States of America, on average, ninety-three people are killed by guns (Key Gun Violence Statistics, 2018). This figure includes all gun deaths—accidental shootings, suicides, police shootings, and murders. I want to focus on the latter, gun homicide, the murder of one person by another using a gun. These deaths are reported so matter-of-factly (if at all), and are brushed aside so quickly by passionate interpretations of the United States Constitution led by a very powerful lobbying organization, that the deaths of thousands of people each year through gun homicide seems surreal, distant, impersonal, something that happens to someone else, somewhere else.

However, on 1 October 2015, ten people were shot and killed at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon. I teach at a university in Washington, close enough that the local news media sent reporters to the scene. Certainly it was close enough to make me think, “What if this happened on my campus and the people killed were people I knew, or with whom my life intersected?”

The murders in Roseburg were called a mass shooting, a term defined by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as gun fatalities with four or more victims, not including the perpetrator. Generally, following a mass shooting, there is brief outrage that innocent people are killed while living their daily lives. But the media spotlight shifts quickly from the victims to the person(s) responsible for the shootings, and the extended national debate over gun control and mental health. The victims, those killed, are forgotten in the rush for more attractive headlines.

Following the mass shooting at Umpqua Community College, I felt compelled to make some response, to bear witness to the deaths. How to remember, to memorialize, those killed at Roseburg, and in other mass shootings? Physical memorials to victims of wars, disasters, accidents, or natural causes commonly display the names of those who died. These memorials are larger scale projects designed to create conceptual and social spaces in which the living can recall and reflect upon the dead. However, such memorials must be visited in person, may be difficult to update, may lack from regular maintenance, and may be removed.

As an individual, how could I address these issues if I wished to honor victims of mass shootings in Oregon, and in my country? How could I make a memorial to those killed by gun violence more accessible, and more immediate?

And in making such a memorial, how could I foster communities focused on the act of remembering?

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In conceptualizing answers, I was inspired by two concepts of death, Jacques Derrida, George W. Bush, Jr., and Ray Bradbury. From Bradbury, I was inspired by the notion of memory as memorial. In his novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury describes a dystopian future where books are outlawed and burned. People memorize and recite entire books so that their ideas are not lost. People become memorials to books by sharing them through memory.

A similar commitment was suggested in response to the ban by President George W. Bush, Jr.'s administration and the U.S. Department of Defense against photographing coffins returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom—The Iraq War, 2003-2010—in which more than 4,000 U.S. troops were killed. A remembered but unsourced blog post repeated around the Internet encouraged each citizen to memorize the names of three individuals killed in Iraq and use them whenever possible. In this way, those killed would not be forgotten. Jacob H. Allcott, Alessandro Carbonaro, David J. Grames Sanchez...¹

Jacques Derrida suggests that more powerful than seeing an image of a deceased person is hearing that person's voice:

I am always overwhelmed when I hear the voice of someone who is dead, as I am not when I see an image or a photograph of the dead person. . . . I can also be touched, presently, by the recorded speech of someone who is dead. I can, here and now, be affected by a voice from beyond the grave.... A miracle of technology. (Derrida, 2001: 70-72).

As to why this is so, Derrida explains:

[Recording] is reproduction as *re-production* [emphasis in original], of life itself, and the production is archived as the source, not as an image.... Life itself can be archived and spectralized in its self-affection, because one knows that when someone speaks he affects himself, whereas when someone presents himself to be seen he does not necessarily see himself. In the voice, self-affection itself is (supposedly) recorded and communicated. And this supposition forms the essential thread of our listening. (Derrida, 2001: 71).

¹ In 2004, the *Seattle Times* published the first photograph taken of coffins of soldiers killed in Iraq being shipped back to the United States. Tami Silico, a female military contractor, took the photograph at an airport in Kuwait. Tami Silico's Official Website provides a copy of her photograph, as well as information about its provenance and impact (Tami Silico, 2004). The ban on photographing or naming those killed in combat led to a national debate over whether not showing images of Iraq War dead manipulated public opinion or protected family privacy. The ban was overturned in December 2009.

Extrapolating Martin Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, or human existence as involvement with a world of objects, Derrida says what matters is the *hearing* [his emphasis] of the voice for "this hearing could not open *Dasein* for 'its own-most potentiality-for-Being,' if hearing were not first the hearing of this voice, the exemplary metonymy of the friend that each *Dasein* bears close itself." (Heidegger, 1962; Derrida, 1993: 164).

There is much to unpack in these statements, but we might summarize them thus. We can be affected by vocal recordings of those dead or radically absent. Through recordings, these people are not specters. Rather, they come to life, to presence, to the present. There is perhaps no more fundamental vocal self-affectation than for one to speak his or her name. In their absence, we can speak the names of the dead, creating connection and remembrance through listening (Derrida, 2001: 70-72).

As for the two concepts of death, they are physical death and memory death. With physical death the body ceases to function; the person is no longer among the living. With memory death, when survivors no longer remember the deceased, that person no longer exists. Respite from memory death is sought through community service, creative works, and family descendants, something to evoke the name of the dead among the living. Through such endeavors, the deceased goes forward in time. And as long as we remember the names of the dead, we remember their loss and sacrifice.

From this conceptual framework, I formulated a plan to honor victims of Roseburg, Oregon, and other mass shootings in my country. I would create and maintain a dynamic memorial to mass shooting victims. I would call this memorial *Remembering the Dead* (Barber, 2016a).

III. PRACTICE

I conceptualized *Remembering the Dead* as a multimedia work including text, text as image, and spoken voice. While the work would not include voice recordings of the mass shooting victims it memorialized, displaying and speaking their names could, I reasoned, evoke the connections and remembering as described in my earlier discussion of a conceptual framework.

Like other works of electronic literature, *Remembering the Dead* is designed to be experienced via a computer screen. The basic component of the work is a text file of victims' names, ages, and dates and places of death. At the time I conceptualized and created this project, there was no central, or convenient, data collection offering this information. I used multiple online databases and news sites to identify victims of mass shootings, cross-checked each, eventually ending with the original reports in local and national newspapers. As contemporary mass shootings are reported, I add this additional information. Information about victims of the most recent mass shooting is programmed to display first, followed by randomized victim's names from previous mass shootings.

Remembering the Dead can be accessed at any time via a dedicated website (Barber, 2016). On launch, *Remembering the Dead* displays center screen the name, age, place and date of death of a single mass shooting victim. This information is drawn from the text file described earlier. Concurrently, using text-to-speech technology, the name of each victim is spoken aloud. After its display, the name of each victim is added to a memorial list in the screen’s background. Another name is displayed and spoken. The process continues, eternally. With each name displayed, the list grows longer. With each name spoken, the loss of human life becomes more tangible. Permanence of the victims’ memories is sought through hearing and reflection. The intent is to remember the dead.



Figure 1. A sample screen display from *Remembering the Dead*. After each victim’s name is displayed center screen, it becomes part of the background memorial list.

For exhibits and installations, *Remembering the Dead* can be contextualized in a wooden display cabinet, reminiscent of both a bullet and a tombstone.



Figure 2. *Remembering the Dead* contextualized in its physical display cabinet. The cabinet is 65.5"/166.37 cm in height.

This cabinet supports a computer, a monitor, and a speaker. The monitor rests in a bed of empty brass bullet casings, each one representing a life taken. The computer, connected to the Internet, displays *Remembering the Dead* on the monitor as described previously. The speaker provides for the vocalization of each victim's name.



Figure 3. A closer view of the monitor display, resting in its bed of empty bullet casings. Each victim's name, age, date and place of death is displayed on the monitor while text-to-speech technology evokes his or her name.

IV. IMPLICATIONS

Through its use of text, sound, and technology, *Remembering the Dead* represents a discontinuous textual relation, a productive and poetic apparatus of unexpected combinations, and thus a diversity for the field of electronic literature along three themes: affiliations, communities, and translations.

Affiliations

Remembering the Dead, as electronic literature, is transtemporal. The individuals memorialized are not just statistics, but human beings, each with achievements, dreams, aspirations, and lives cut short by bullets. By transcoding their names and dates and places of death into a digital elegiac literature, this work recreates and provides material antecedent as it promotes a new aesthetic of ergodic sound art or sound poetry.

Communities

Remembering the Dead, as electronic literature, creates global opportunities for communities to examine their practice(s), especially with regard to violence against others. Our world community of nation states is riddled by calls for isolation, protection, and exclusion from the other(s). By remembering those killed as collateral damage in struggles between communities of belief and practice, we gain a broader engagement with how communities form, develop, and interact, as well as an increased critical network awareness of how electronic literature might provide bridges between these communities.

Translations

Remembering the Dead, as electronic literature, is an exchange between language and code. By speaking the names of those killed, we do not necessarily emulate their lives but rather provide a linguistic reflexivity. Speaking the names of the dead recalls their memory, and provides for re-readings and interpretations in and across media, languages, and cultures. Metaphorically, in the broadest sense, we translate their humanity into literary expression focused on memorialization that can help expand our understanding of literature and textuality, and perhaps inspire new approaches to sound-based electronic literature. *Remembering the Dead* provides a meme regarding how to move forward with these ideas.²

V. CONCLUSION

What does all this mean? And, why is it important? One response, as I have said, is that in the past, victims of natural disasters and/or violent acts have been publicly remembered with the placement of monuments or plaques. Such memorials are designed to create conceptual and social spaces, autonomous zones, in which the living can recall and reflect upon the dead. *Remembering the Dead* extends the autonomous zone through the visualization of each victim's name and the sound of that name spoken aloud, thus prompting new perceptual, phenomenological, and personal engagements with the space and act of remembrance. In this temporary space, permanence is sought through listening and reflection. Through our engagement with *Remembering the Dead* we assert the humanity of these victims.

² *Remembering the Dead* has evolved into different translations and/or iterations. In the process of collecting names of mass shooting victims I also collected names of individuals killed in intentional gun homicides during 2015, the year I began this project. This work was translated in French, as "Ses souvenir des mortes," and featured in *bleuOrange: Revue de Littérature Hypermédiatique*. In her editorial, Myriam Watthee-Delmotte, Brussels, Belgium, wrote that the work evokes respect for those killed by gun violence, and that such work is necessary in our contemporary society (Barber, 2016b). Additionally, there is an iteration entitled *Remembering the Dead: Northern Ireland* that recalls the nearly 3,600 men, women, and children killed during the Troubles (also known as the Northern Ireland Conflict), a violent political conflict focused on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, late 1960s-early 2000s. The conflict was focused primarily in Northern Ireland, but spilled over into parts of the Republic of Ireland, England, and Europe (Barber, 2017).

Another response is that through this combination of vision, sound, and culture, a community of remembering and commerce involving electronic literature and other expressive and material practices is formed and maintained for the intent of promoting social justice. We cannot bring back the dead, but through remembering them we assure they will not be forgotten.

As an example of multimedia electronic literature intent to promote social justice, I have three desired outcomes for *Remembering the Dead*. First, *accounting*. By collecting and curating victims' names and other information, I hope to promote comprehensive record keeping of gun homicides in America.

Second, *awareness*. Through the act of listening and reflection, I hope to increase awareness of these victims, their lives and achievements, as people rather than statistics.

And, third, *activism*. By sharing this information in a responsible manner, I hope to prompt others to speak out against gun homicides and loss of humanity.

By speaking the names of mass shooting victims, *Remembering the Dead* speaks to what is lost to gun homicides in America: humanity, lives, achievements, dreams, and aspirations of sons and daughters, mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, friends, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, grandsons and granddaughters, grandmothers and grandfathers.³

As a form of electronic literary expression, a poetic provocation if you will, *Remembering the Dead* provides, from its unexpected combinations, a productive model for civic engagement among communities seeking to address violence and loss of humanity in a world fast becoming more literal and less literary.

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3 Gary Younge chronicles ten gun deaths across America within the twenty-four hour time span on calendar date 23 November 2013. Younge says, "the median age is 17.5; the average age is 14.3 . . . But these were not necessarily all the gun deaths of young people that day. They were all the gun deaths I found. I found them through Internet searches and on news websites that tracked gun deaths on a daily basis. There was no other way. . . . These are the gun deaths that I found that got reported." Suicides are not included. "Unless these tragedies are emblematic of some broader issue—online bullying, academic pressure, or a mass shooting—they are generally not reported. . . . So more children and teens were almost certainly shot that day. These are just the ones we know about" (Younge, 2016: xxi-xxii).

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