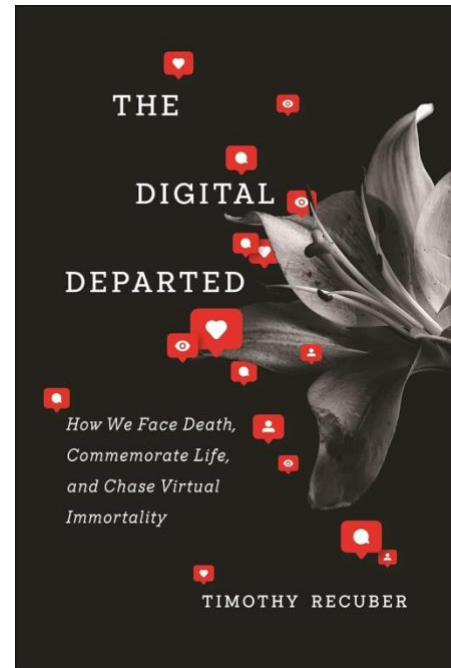


Timothy Recuber, **The Digital Departed: How We Face Death, Commemorate Life, and Chase Virtual Immortality**, New York: New York University Press, 2023, 288 pp., \$32.00 (paperback), \$94.00 (hardcover), \$30.00 (ebook).

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Content Warning: This book review discusses self-harm, suicide, and terminal illness.

“But by the time you read this, I WILL be dead” (p. 1). These words were written on a blog by a twenty-five-year-old prior to their suicide. Before their death, the digital suicide note writer scheduled a series of blog posts to appear in the six months after their death. **The Digital Departed: How We Face Death, Commemorate Life, and Chase Virtual Immortality** examines a series of questions. What happens to our online life after we die? Who controls our story? Are we remembered online more for the manner of our death, such as in police custody or because of a terminal illness, rather than our life experiences? What common themes are found on blog and social media posts by those who have died or are contemplating their death—whether by their own hand, from illness, or through violence outside of their control?



*The Digital Departed* is positioned at the intersection of sociology, memory studies, and science and technology studies (STS)/communications studies. Scholars interested in a broad view of different types of digital media presence after a person has died will find this work a useful springboard for a range of topics that can be investigated more deeply. The research focus of the book are texts created by those who are dying or are dead. Recuber uses a mixed-methods approach combining archival research, digital ethnography, digital discourse analysis by coding themes and their frequencies, survey and interviews to examine how we interact with the dead online, and in some cases, how the dead’s online presence remains with us. Part of this includes social media posts by those who document their dying due to terminal illness or suicide. While the book does not go into graphic or inappropriate detail, this material, especially the material about suicide, may be difficult to read for those currently grieving.

There have been a number of previously published works on online memory studies, including Cann’s (2016) *Virtual Afterlife: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century*, which discusses the evolution of public grief in the United States and modern grief rituals, including online Facebook posts, commemorative t-shirts, and messages on cars; new social media online grief rituals for strangers with whom social media users feel an affinity (Edwards-Hewitt, 2020); and mourning for parasocial relationships with celebrities such as Michael Jackson (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010), actor Paul Walker (Klastrup, 2018), and the fictional

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character Jack Pearson from *This Is Us* (Foss, 2020). *The Digital Departed* adds to the subject by including an original survey of 574 people in the U.S. conducted in 2021 on the different methods of interacting with death and dying online. The interviews conducted for this project are one of its strengths. In addition to new research, Recuber also performs thematic analysis of different types of post-life online lives.

The introduction to the book lays out the author's Affordance Theory perspective and their use of the term *reenchanted* to describe the online self after death. Reenchanted is in opposition to Weber's idea that we live in a disenchanted world because of our devaluing of religion and the emphasis on rationality. Reenchantment, Recuber argues, is the sense of wonder and magic available to us as we explore our sense of self through reading, participating, and interacting with others online. While the concept of reenchantment is interesting, it is not reinforced in most of the other chapters. A better term for what Recuber discusses might be "rememory," as first discussed in Toni Morrison's (1987/2004) *Beloved*, which describes a memory which haunts, but can eventually heal. Rememories are not experienced alone, but as a community. Interacting with others online makes people part of a community. The better argument Recuber makes is our lives are now filled by "digital souls" (p. 22), and we may become digital souls as technology enables us to exist after our deaths. However, this is dependent on the technology and its content continuing to exist.

The individual chapters examine the different platforms where digital souls reside. The first chapter, on the "birth" of the digital soul examines newspaper articles on dying and digital death from 2016 to 2018. The articles are summarized to grasp some of the recent discourses on this topic. But is newspaper coverage of a sociological topic a useful source for understanding a digital culture? Newspapers are limited by space, and there may be bias of inclusion or exclusion of news stories based on different demographic groups. The book's other chapters delve into the interactions between different platforms and explore aspects of suicide, dying, death, and mourning.

The chapter "Absent Presence, Death, and the History of Communication Technologies" explores archaeological and historical records for the link between communication and death, with writing enabling an *absent presence* that is found in modern online interactions with the dead. Discussion in the chapter "Suffering, the Self, and Narrative Freedom in Blogs of the Terminally Ill" focuses on people documenting their journeys through the medical system when they know their disease cannot be cured. Fifteen of the twenty blogs examined were created by women, reflecting more women bloggers on this topic.

The chapter "Self-Destruction as Self-Commemoration in Digital Suicide Notes" explores suicide notes on personal websites and social media platforms and compares them to suicide notes prior to social media. Here a different gender imbalance is represented, with more men committing suicide than women. The main motivations cited by individuals for killing themselves changed over the six decades examined are interesting and reflect how society views or refuses to view mental health issues, even in suicide notes. But even when writing their last online presence, 43 percent of the people's suicide notes choose to present their legacy in a positive way.

The most powerful chapter in *The Digital Departed* is "Race, Racism, and Mnemonic Freedom in the Digital Afterlife." Recuber brings awareness to the lack of agency in the digital afterlife and online

representation for those killed by police or while in police custody. The chapter discusses several hashtags used to bring awareness of the killing of people of color by police such as #BlackLivesMatter and takes a critical view of how the online lives of people of color would be scrutinized seeking negative images. The hashtags #IfTheyGunMeDown and #IfIDieInPoliceCustody were created to communicate after death if a person dies while in custody or is killed by law enforcement. For longer discussions on these topics, Freelon et al.'s (2016) *Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice* and Brock's (2020) *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* are referenced in this chapter and are recommend sources. "The Reenchantment of Technology and the Quest for Virtual Immortality" on preserving a person's online legacy through possible mind extension or preservation after physical death is the least enchanting chapter. The final chapter confronts the ongoing legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social media and video legacies it left behind. Future books should examine the memorialization or lack thereof for both online and in-person remembrances of people gone due to the global pandemic.

Some of the chapter topics could be whole books by themselves, and Recuber's book positions scholars to explore a range of possible future topics. The use of thematic issues across a range of digital and nondigital sources is insightful. A larger cultural issue this book almost explores, but does not, is whether the United States should be considered a grief-denying culture rather than a death-denying culture. Because of U.S. culture's discouragement of expressions of grief in person, it is proposed that we are more likely to explore grief rituals online (Burroughs et al., 2019; Edwards-Hewitt, 2020; Klasttrup, 2018). Throughout the book Recuber is thoughtful and ethical in their use of sensitive data. *The Digital Departed* provides a useful interdisciplinary review of several types of digital afterlives.

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