Posthumous Agency on Facebook

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that, except where it is otherwise acknowledged in the text, this thesis represents my own original work.

All versions of the submitted thesis (regardless of submission type) are identical.
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Dad, I miss you very much. I have finished another one
The concept of agency remains contested in anthropology. One aspect of the debate spans from those who, on the one hand, insist that agency is exclusive to living human beings, with all its accompanying implication, to those who, on the other, believe that non-living, non-human things also exert agency. Posthumous agency straddles this debate with its strange creature: the dead human being. In this thesis, however, I seek to examine how the dead in the context of Facebook challenge existing literature on the agency of the dead. While the agency of the dead has been recently garnering scholarly attention, this interest has focused largely on the agentive capacity of the corporeal remains of the person: corpse, ashes, bones. The dead do not simply remain dead; they remain socially, symbolically, and mnemonically significant. They further live on through distributed instances of their personhood, through their material possessions or through their surviving social relationships. I apply Alfred Gell’s theory of the art nexus to examine how the agency of the dead is abducted through their corporeal, material, and social remains. Building on three thematic treatments of posthumous agency as heuristic, I analyze the presence of the dead on Facebook to demonstrate and expound on their posthumous agency. The findings of this thesis affirm the fuzzy boundaries of agency that make agency slippery enough to be applied to the dead, to be distributed across one’s social network, and to be shared with digital technology.
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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a scenario where the dead will surpass the number of living users on Facebook. This could happen in less than a century from now.\(^1\) Whether or not Facebook will still be extant in 2098, there is a trend towards an increasing number of the deceased on this social network site. Although there are no official mortality statistics released by Facebook, one frequently cited source, *The Digital Beyond*, predicts that by 2016, there will be 972,295 dead Facebook users from the United States alone.\(^2\) This is an increase from an earlier prediction made in 2010, which calculated 385,968 Facebook user deaths from the US alone.\(^3\) With its current 1.71 billion monthly active users and its growing number of dead users, Facebook is poised to become the world’s largest cemetery.\(^4\)

Unlike cemeteries, the status of the deceased on Facebook may not always be immediately apparent. Without protocols for identifying the deceased online, the dead can be indistinguishable from the living (Bollmer 2013, p. 145). When Facebook was launched in 2004, it did not have any provisions nor guidelines for dealing with user deaths. It was only in 2009 when the company introduced “account memorialization for deceased users”.\(^5\) Facebook’s Help Center describes memorialized accounts as “a place for friends and family to gather and share


memories after a person has passed away". One of the company’s executives explained that the introduction of memorialized profiles mirrored the “reality” that “When someone leaves us, they don’t leave our memories or our social network.” Aside from memorializing accounts, Facebook further offers the option to delete permanently the accounts of the deceased. Ongoing activity in the still-active profiles of the deceased evoke various sensibilities. As one bereaved family member commented online:

I have been trying to find out how to get people to stop posting on my recently deceased [sic] family member who was young, as the family we requested people stop tagging him in pictures and stop posting because [sic] it is disrespectful and its [sic] too new of a death to have to see it plastered all over facebook.

Even with these options, deceased accounts are, for the most part, neither memorialized nor deleted. Facebook memorializes or deletes an account only at the discretion of the pre-deceased user who decides beforehand what happens to his or her account in case of death, or upon the request of a family member or friend. While pre-deceased account owners can consent to have their profile memorialized or deleted, these actions could only be triggered if family and friends report the user’s death to Facebook. The dead maintain a posthumous presence through their open and active profiles where they are tagged, liked, and mentioned by others. Their posthumous profiles are enlivened with messages, photos, and videos still

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7 Your profile, is your collection of the photos, stories and experiences that tell your story. Your profile also includes your Timeline. https://www.facebook.com/help/133986550032744?helpref=faq_content
9 https://www.facebook.com/help/community/question/?id=10202627332499825
being shared, posted, commented, and liked on their Timeline. Any activity generated when others interact with their profiles may show up on other people’s news feed, prompting others concerning their abiding presence on Facebook. Moreover, without the restrictions of memorialized profiles, the dead can “appear in public spaces such as in suggestions for People You May Know, ads or birthday reminders.”

The dead on Facebook do not remain as inert presences. Before 2015, when a profile was reported for memorialization, Facebook locks that account from being accessed and modified by other users. Other users who have been privy to the deceased’s password, of course, are able to fully control the accounts of those who have passed away. A recent feature, however, further enlivens memorialized profiles. In 2015, Facebook introduced *legacy contact*, which allowed predeceased users to designate a family member or friend to manage their accounts posthumously. A legacy contact can primarily perform three actions for a memorialized profile: pin a post on the timeline, accept friend requests, and update its profile and cover photo. Although these actions are limited in comparison to what can be done when a user has full and direct access to an account, by generating profile activity which seemingly emanates from the account itself, the passive memorialized profile becomes more animated and active in its social network.

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10 Timeline is the space on one’s profile page where one can see one’s own posts, posts from friends and stories one is tagged in, organized according to the date they were posted. https://www.facebook.com/help/1462219934017791?helpref=faq_content
12 https://www.facebook.com/help/1568013990080948?helpref=faq_content
The exponentially growing number of the dead within Facebook’s massive and global active user population and, consequently, the inevitability of encountering enlivened posthumous presences on this social network site present an engaging anthropological study. How do we make sense of those who have passed away but remain on social network sites like Facebook?

Scholarly interest in death on Facebook has largely focused on how the technology has been appropriated to facilitate the grieving processes of the bereaved. Sofka’s (1997) article on the World Wide Web and the Internet as ‘thanatechnology’ outlined early online bereavement practices that eventually shaped succeeding research interests which centered on grief and memorialization on the internet. Since then, scholars have examined online memorialization through web memorials and virtual cemeteries (Roberts & Vidal 2000; De Vries & Rutherford 2004; Nager & De Vries 2004; Roberts 2004a, 2004b) and social network sites (Lombard & Markaridian Selverian 2008; Brubaker & Vertesi 2010; Brubaker et al. 2013). These studies have emphasized the value of online memorialization as a meaningful expansion and continuation of traditional bereavement practices.

The use of Facebook as a particular thanatechnology by the living to maintain their relationship with the dead complements the “continuing bonds” theory (Silverman & Nickman 1996), which proposes that it is normal for the

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13 Sofka (1997, p. 553) defines thanatechnology as “technological resources such as videos, computer-assisted instruction programs ... and interactive videodiscs that can be used to gain information about topics in thanatology.”
bereaved to maintain an ongoing, dynamic, and interactive relationship with the deceased. The notion of continuing bonds has been employed in recent scholarship as a framework to explain how and why the bereaved use memorialized Facebook profiles (Getty et al. 2011; Degroot 2012; Kasket 2012; Bell et al. 2015; Irwin 2015). Just as these findings provide evidence for the persistence of bonds beyond death, they also authenticate the experience of how the dead in the digital realm are being kept alive and present by the living. That the dead are viewed as having some kind of social existence is a key step in arguing that continuing bonds and the persistent online interaction of the living with the dead are crucial in establishing and ensuring the requisite sociality that confer certain attributes on the online dead. I further suggest that this sociality is in fact influenced by the social agency of the dead.

Classic anthropological writings emphasize the social nature of death (Huntington & Metcalf 1979; Bloch & Parry 1982; Hertz [1960] 2004). Death is more than just the biological cessation of life; it produces social life, as one can observe from various funeral and mortuary rituals across cultures. Through these rituals, the corporeality of the dead is imbued with, and seen as possessing, social presence, which may not necessarily require the presence of the actual physical corpse (Hallam et al. 1999). One cannot conceive, however, of the dead’s social presence without resorting to the mediation of material culture (Hallam & Hockey 2001). I take these insights to argue that the dead, despite the absence of their actual corporeality on social network sites, retain social presence because of the mediation of digital technology.
Agency is commonly assumed to be distinctive of human beings. For Bandura (2006, p. 164), the capacity to carry out an intention is one of the core properties of human agency. On the other hand, however, there are those who contend that agency may not always be appraised by intentionality. According to Giddens (1984, p. 9), “Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place (which is why agency implies power)”. While these opposing notions seem to converge on the idea of agency as capacity, Dobres and Robb (2000, p. 3) remark that “there is little consensus about what ‘agency’ actually means”. Knappett and Malafouris (2008, p. x) further insist that, despite this ambiguity, agency remains contested within the “theoretical margins of a narrow anthropocentric perspective.”

Alfred Gell’s (1998) theory on the agency of art objects attempts to step beyond agency’s anthropocentric preoccupation. While Gell has not completely given primary, self-sufficient agency to objects, he argues that his concept of object agency is “relational and context dependent”. Following Giddens (1984), Gell also focuses on agency as the capacity to effect. For Gell, “an agent is one who ‘causes events to happen’ in their vicinity … (not necessarily the events which were ‘intended’ by the agent)” (1998, p. 16). Recently, scholars have applied Gell’s work to argue for the agency of the dead.

In anthropological literature, the agency of the dead has come to signify many things: the political potency of the dead bodies (Verdery 1999), the social agency of the groomed corpse (Harper 2010), and the post-mortem, effective agency of dismembered body parts (Tung 2014). These anthropological writings,
however, have circumscribed agency to the actual corporeal remains of the dead. This resonates with the prevailing tendency to view agency as “an attribute of the human substance” (Knappett & Malafouris 2008, p. x). I apply Alfred Gell’s theory of the art nexus to examine how the agency of the dead are abducted through their corporeal, material, and social remains. Building on three thematic treatments of posthumous agency as heuristic, I analyze the presence of dead on Facebook to demonstrate and expound on their posthumous agency. This thesis argues that the online dead, in the absence of their corporeal and physical remains, can acquire and exert posthumous agency. I do not intend, however, to pin agency on the dead as an entity, but I argue that posthumous agency on Facebook is socially distributed (Wertsch et al. 1996) and technologically mediated (Dobres & Hoffman 1994). This argument will unfold in the next six chapters.

In Chapter One, I trace anthropology’s contribution to the study of death to show that death is socially constructed. I argue that the sociality of death guarantees the posthumous social presence of the dead. I tackle two main objections to this argument by analyzing the ambivalence created by death’s social character, and by addressing the purported death taboo in modern discourse. I conclude this chapter suggesting that the ambivalent and shifting discourses create a milieu where the dead cannot be ignored.

In Chapter Two, I begin with a general discussion of agency that emphasizes the need for defining the concept despite its contested articulations. I venture into initially defining agency as the capacity to act, suggesting that such a definition breaches a predominantly exclusive view of agency as human property. I
further argue that since the concept of agency is historically contingent and socially mediated, shifting contexts provide new avenues for conceptualizing agency that moves beyond its anthropocentrism. I review the literature on the agency of the dead to frame how I intend to approach the question of posthumous agency on Facebook. Finally, I present how the presence of the dead online have affected the way people are interacting with the deceased.

In Chapter Three, I explore the theme of posthumous agency as the agency of the corpse. I show that the corpse is a unique, concrete entity, which is neither a subject nor an object, but mediates agency through its manifold effects and possibilities. I also show that the corpse matters significantly in evoking posthumous agency because its matter embodies the personhood of the deceased. I further show that the materiality of the corpse creates copresence for the dead, which in turn, generates a phenomenal sense of agency for the corpse. While I show how the corpse’s agency is abducted from the primary agency of the pre-deceased, I argue that the peculiar characteristics of the corpse’s materiality augment and intensify the agency of the dead.

In Chapter Four, I discuss the importance of material culture to our relationship with death and the dead. I show how materiality mediates the presence and agency of the dead; media technology affords them with a platform to preserve and circulate their agency. I argue in this chapter that the objects of the dead become agents through an abduction of the pre-deceased’s agency, which is always contextual and relational. I show the implications of this contextuality and relationality in terms of how objects of the dead can be potent, complex, and
ambivalent agents through their interactions with other agents and with human patients who can make infinite abductions of agency. In addition, I demonstrate how Gell’s art nexus helps understand how objects of the dead can evoke posthumous agency.

In Chapter Five, I explore the theme of posthumous agency through the theory of continuing bonds. I argue that, though continuing bonds might assert the unidirectional agency of the bereaved, it affirms the agency of the dead by highlighting their influence in motivating the bereaved to maintain their bonds with the deceased. I address two major doubts that arise from certain practices of continuing bonds in order to highlight that continuing bonds is a deeply embodied and corporeal agency of the dead. I also show that continuing bonds benefit the dead in establishing a robust sociality that provides them with the context to become co-agents of their continuing posthumous social presence. I further argue that the continuing interest of the bereaved suggests that the agency of the dead encourages this interest. Moreover, I also show that posthumous agency is socially and culturally mediated as evidenced by the widespread but culturally diverse ways that people maintain their bonds with the dead. Finally, I argue that Gell’s theory is still relevant in theorizing the agency of the dead in continuing bonds.

In Chapter Six, I address three questions to determine whether the dead on Facebook can be posthumous agents as well. Firstly, is there a ‘body’ on Facebook? Secondly, is Facebook a thing? Thirdly, does Facebook exhibit sociality? I build on the answers to these themes to explore how the scenario of active and public profiles of the dead on Facebook can express posthumous agency. Furthermore, I
explore how Facebook mediates the agency of the dead by distributing agency throughout the social network and by evoking a phenomenal sense of agency through telepresence.

Finally, I conclude by exploring what posthumous agency on Facebook contributes to the ongoing debate on the nature and definition of agency.
CHAPTER ONE: The Social Construction of Death

It is often said that death is a fact of life. All living things die, from the simplest unicellular organisms like bacteria, to complex multicellular organisms like plants, animals and humans. Death does not exempt any biological creature. Death is the shared fate of life. Unlike the death of other living organisms, humans are the only creatures who problematize death. Death is a universal human experience that finds expression in a diverse spectrum of attitudes, beliefs, and rituals. This diversity alone hints at the peculiarity of the death of human beings. While human death seems like an obvious biological certainty, it is a concept that cannot simply be conceived as a natural occurrence, reducible to the cessation of biological functions.

One of the peculiarities of human death, according to the philosopher Marx Wartofsky (1988, p. 219), is that “a person has to be declared dead, i.e., that human death, unlike animal death, is a socially constituted fact requiring a judgment”. While this peculiarity does not disregard death as a biological fact, he further suggests that the determination and validation of death through medical or scientific procedures may not be as neutral and objective as we assume because “human biology is the biology of essentially social-historical beings”.

A cursory glance at the literature suggests that death for human beings is far more complicated. Conceptualizations and attitudes towards death have changed over the centuries (Ariés 1974, 1981). The experience of dying is contingent on social and historical changes (Kellehear 2007). Not only does death have a complicated history, it is also experienced and understood differently across
cultures. Historical and ethnographic evidence illustrate that death is neither uniform nor ‘natural’ as it is assumed to be (Goody 1962; Rosenblatt et al. 1976; Huntington & Metcalf 1979; Bloch & Parry 1982; Palgi & Abramovitch 1984; Lombard & Ditton; Davies 2005). The anthropologist Douglas Davies (2000, p. 100) sums up this general understanding: “Death is, intrinsically, not natural. It does not belong to the realm of nature, as such, because it befalls human beings, and human beings are social beings”.

In this brief opening chapter, I trace anthropology's contribution to the study of death to show that death is socially constructed. I argue that the sociality of death guarantees the posthumous social presence of the dead. I tackle two main objections to this argument by analyzing the ambivalence created by death's social character, and by addressing the purported death taboo in modern discourse. I conclude this chapter suggesting that the ambivalent and shifting discourses create a milieu where the dead cannot be ignored.

In 1907, Robert Hertz published “Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort” in the French journal, Année Sociologique. When it was translated eventually into English and published in 1960, A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death became a landmark theoretical reference in death studies. Hertz’s (p. 86) important contribution can be summed up in his definition of death “as a social phenomenon [that] consists in a dual and painful process of mental disintegration and synthesis”.
As a social phenomenon, Hertz points out that death does not only result in the cessation of biological life, but it also “destroys the social being grafted upon the physical individual” (p. 77). Moreover, he goes on to show that the social character of death manifests itself in the twofold process of funerary rites—the double burial—where the dead are initially stripped of their pre-deceased status and temporarily excluded from the social world of the living, and then eventually, reintegrated and bestowed a new status in society. In other words, Hertz asserts that death cannot be conceived only as a single event, but an unfolding process that does not culminate in “mere destruction but a transition” (p. 48). The construction of death as transition suggests an underlying sociality that reconstitutes the dead back into social circulation by reconfiguring the relationship between the living and the dead. It means that, ultimately, death does not result in the categorical exclusion of the dead from the world of the living. Instead, the living bring the dead back to life, so to speak, through a process that bestows on them a kind of social presence that outlives their biological existence.

The transitional process where the dead are separated from society, reconstituted, and reintegrated back into the community becomes intelligible through Arnold van Gennep’s (1960) notion of ‘rites of passage’. van Gennep argues that rites of passage—rites which accompany changes in a person’s life and are characterized by separation, transition, and incorporation—facilitate the conferral of a new social status for individuals. He cites funerals as an example where deceased individuals undergo a ceremony where they are formally incorporated into the world of the dead (p. 146). Even though the deceased have been relegated to the world of the dead, it does not necessarily mean that they have
ceased their social standing in the world of the living. Following van Gennep’s idea, death is merely another rite of passage in the course of a person’s life. One does not lose social status in death; rather, one acquires a new social status.

van Gennep asserts that “changes of condition do not occur without disturbing the life of society and the individual” (p. 13). Similarly, death can be seen as a radical change of condition that creates an overwhelming disturbance. Death does not only fundamentally alter the individual, but, more importantly, it also brings about a rupture in the life of a community that its effects on society must be mitigated by rituals. Evoking van Gennep’s claim that “it is the function of rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects” (p. 13), death rituals pacify and smooth out the disruptions that death causes in society. In van Gennep’s view, the dead cannot just be left for dead; they must be brought back from the dead somehow to preserve stability in society. Death may temporarily disrupt the social order, but the ritual practices that attend to the dead, ensure the restoration of what has been disrupted.

Restoration does not necessarily mean that the dead are reinstated entirely in their predeceased state since this would be obviously impossible. Victor Turner’s (1969) analysis of Ndembu rituals clarify how the dead can be meaningfully re integrated. For Turner, rituals are not only indicative of the transitions that happen, but they are also constitutive of the transitions (1973, p. 93), which suggests that Turner views rituals as having a “creative function” (Hockey 2002, p. 215). In other words, the rites for the dead create a social space where the dead can occupy a meaningful place in society. Through ritual performances, the dead undergo a
process of transition that eventually culminates in the re-acquisition of a social status and presence which grants them the stature to wield influence over the living.

Drawing from a wider range of ethnographic examples, Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalfe (1979) further explore the theme of death as transition. Across cultures, death and life are intertwined. Death as transition generates social life. This can be seen in the communal activity that marks funeral rites. In describing the funeral practices of the Bara people of Madagascar, Huntington and Metcalf (p. 115) expound on how "extreme vitality is generated through the various excesses of the funeral celebration". The energy stirred up through the songs, dances, and games occasioned by these funerals have a deeper significance. These activities symbolize the vitality needed to facilitate the transition of the deceased from the world of the living into the world of the dead. Just as the living are assisted when they are born, likewise, the dead are to be assisted as they are reborn in the world of their ancestors. Continuity ensues as the dead rightfully take their place among their ancestors. In this sense, the intersecting world of the living and the dead are harmoniously reconciled. Ancestorship signifies the reintegration of the dead into the normal, everyday life of the living.

The association of death with life can further be seen in the prevalence of sexuality and fertility symbolisms in funeral and mortuary rituals (Bloch & Parry 1982). The liminality in death rituals effects creativity and generativity. Far from being an annihilating principle, death perpetuates the life of a society by establishing continuity through its rituals which attend to the transition that both the dead and the living undergo. Echoing the constitutive function of rituals, Maurice Bloch and
Jonathan Parry (p. 6) insist that these funeral and mortuary rituals produce a social order where the living and the dead coexist. This coexistence thus shows that death does not take the dead out of social circulation.

Anthropology’s contribution to the study of death has largely derived from its focus on funeral and mortuary rituals (Hertz 1960; Goody 1962; Huntington & Metcalf 1979; Bloch & Parry 1982; Robben 2004). In studying these rituals, anthropological literature generally upholds the view that death is a social phenomenon characterized by the disruption and recuperation of the social order. Death exhibits a paradoxical sociality: just as death disturbs social life, it also generates social life. This is evidenced by the publicity and communality of the rituals and mourning practices performed by the living for the dead. These performances constitute the transitional process that happens to both the dead and the living. The construction of death as transition implies that the dead and the living are enmeshed in a robust sociality that vivifies the phenomenon of death and eventually reintegrates the dead back into the social sphere of the living.

What has been outlined above demonstrates that death does not end in the complete/wholesale severing of the ties of the dead with the living. As the living maintain their connections with the dead, the dead continue to be significant and relevant to the living. This relationship manifests a reciprocal and complementary sociality where the abiding presence of the dead is constructed simultaneously by how the dead can influence the living, and how the living remember the dead. In short, I have shown how anthropological literature reveals death to be indicative and constitutive of a sociality that guarantees posthumous social presence.
It could be argued that the sociality of death engenders an ambivalence that can revoke the social status of the dead. The social construction of death validates the claim that attitudes towards death and dying are changing (Ariès 1974, 1981; Kellehear 2007). One could assume that changes in how death is viewed places the dead in a precarious social position. Certain shifts, such as a discourse open to death, could turn out to support favorably the ongoing social interactions of the living and the dead. Certain outcomes, such as evolving taboos on death, however, could also unfavorably restrict the dead and the living to their exclusive domains. Rather than ensuring the dead’s social presence, the inconclusiveness arising from the fluidity of death’s social nature could turn out to be counterproductive.

This uncertainty, however, must not be construed as an either-or, win-lose situation. Bronislaw Malinowski ([1925] 1948, p. 30) demonstrates that people have an “extremely complex” attitude towards death—which translates into ambivalent manifestations of "love of the dead and loathing of the corpse, passionate attachment to the personality still lingering about the body and a shattering fear of the gruesome thing that has been left over". He emphasizes that these attitudes appear simultaneously, often contradictorily, in how people grieve and mourn the dead. As he explains, “never do the negative elements appear alone or even dominant” ([1925] 1948, p. 30). Death appears to be a profound social phenomenon that resists dichotomization. The ambivalence arising out of the sociality of death/social character of death is best construed as situated somewhere within a continuum of complex, contradictory emotional and cognitive responses. The dead cannot but evoke a reaction from the living, implying not only their
emotivity but also their social potency. This ensures the dead of an abiding place in the social world of the living.

It could be also argued that the social status of the dead hinges on the predominant discourse. For instance, it has been claimed that death has evolved into a modern taboo where death has become “unmentionable’ as a natural process” (Gorer 1955, p. 50), “shameful and forbidden” (Ariès 1974, p. 85) and “hidden because it is ugly and dirty” (Ariès 1981, p. 563). The marginalization of the dying (Glasser & Strauss 1965; Elias 1985) the privatization of grief and mourning (Gorer 1955; Ariès 1974) and the effacement, cosmeticization, and sequestration of the dead (Mellor & Shilling 1993; Emerick 2000) have all been cited as consequences of this taboo. Being situated in a death-denying cultural milieu (Becker 1973; Kübler-Ross [1969] 2009) could be doubly fatal for the dead. A widespread denial of death could end up in denying a public and discursive space for the dead.

The death taboo, however, has also received some criticisms. The sociologist Allan Kellehear (1984) in a pioneering essay critiques that there is little sociological evidence to support the claim that death is being denied in society. In another work, the sociologist and death studies scholar Tony Walter (1991, p. 297) argues that the death taboo is “grossly overdrawn and lacking in subtlety”. Interestingly, the works that asserted that there was a death taboo were published around the time when the quantity of academic literature on death was already on an upsurge (Fulton 1976). The psychiatrist Michael Simpson (1979, p. vii) called out
the irony of claiming a taboo when he published his annotated bibliography of death-related topics:

Death is a very badly kept secret; such an unmentionable and taboo topic that there are now 750 books now in print asserting that we are ignoring the subject. At no time in history has there been so much attention paid to death as a subject for scholarly and literary study, clinical and research attention, or for cynical commercial exploitation.

While recent surveys of the history of death in the Western world recognize that, at some point, a taboo may have existed as evidenced firstly, by the paucity of literature on the topic and secondly, by the fact it was rarely discussed in academia; since the 1960s, however, the discourse on death has already burgeoned into a prolific and expansive field (Doka 2003; Kastenbaum 2003; Wood & Williamson 2003; Davies 2005; Green 2008). The growing multi-disciplinary literature on death attests to the changing discursive landscape (Walter 2008). Anthropology, once criticized by Johannes Fabian (1972) for its parochialized understanding of death, has also expanded beyond its original interest in mortuary and funeral practices (Scheper-Hughes 1993; Lock 2002; Rosaldo [1989] 1993). Even scholars who premised their work on consequent issues of the death taboo such as the sequestration of death (Mellor & Shilling 1993; Willmott 2000; Lee 2008; Stanley & Wise 2011) and the invisibility of death in the media and in public discourse (Walter et al. 1995; Hanusch 2008) have opened up conceptual and semantic spaces that attest to the waning of a taboo that previously barred death from being discussed publicly.

Nevertheless, whether death is taboo or not, these shifting discourses are best understood, as I have pointed out earlier, along a continuum of twin,
contradictory attitudes (Malinowski [1925] 1948). While these shifts may influence how individuals and societies deal with the dead, it does not compromise the social significance of the dead. Instead, the variable nature of these discourses attests to the robust sociality underpinning the phenomenon of death. A taboo, as Mary Douglas (1979, p. 2771) explains, “upholds a cultural system...a pattern of values and norms”. Seen from this perspective, the death taboo, which may have raised anxieties about the status of death in modern society, turns into an affirmation of how death continues to be socially mediated. The dead stand to benefit from this social mediation as it ensures that society will always have to deal with the dead.

I have expounded in this chapter on the social nature of death. In outlining the contributions of anthropological literature, I have argued that the dead are embedded in a sociality which grants social existence beyond death. I have further suggested that the ambivalence in terms of attitudes and discourses guarantee the dead's presence in the social sphere of the living. In sum, the dead will always have a place in society; their presence cannot be ignored. The ways the living deal with death establish a sociality that invoke the dead's potent social presence.
CHAPTER TWO: The Contested Concept of Agency

People respond differently when I tell them that my research topic deals with dead people on Facebook. Usually, those who are not on Facebook would look at me with an incredulous expression. Those who are on Facebook, however, would often share an anecdote about their reactions on chancing upon a still-active profile of the dead. My personal interest in the topic goes back to 2009 when a colleague who had died suddenly posted a public status update that appeared on my news feed. His post reminded everyone that it had been 40 days since he died and that he was asking for prayers. In an instant, his profile buzzed with comments:

How did you do this? (FB Friend 1).
Calling Facebook Security! (FB Friend 2).

I found out later that his sister managed to hack into his account and posted on his behalf:

I was able to get in by guessing his security questions in his yahoo email account.

Eventually, the shock wore off as I got used to his popping up every now and then whenever his friends on Facebook would tag him in their photos or in their own status updates. In fact, any activity on his profile page would appear on my news feed. Meanwhile, his sister has desisted from posting and commenting as ‘him’, while she still has access to his account, and sometimes replies to people on his behalf. She has been appending her name at the end of her messages to avoid confusing or scaring anyone off.

I recently visited and scrolled through my colleague’s profile page. Apparently, it has not been converted into a memorialized profile, and so it
remained an active profile retaining the same privacy settings when my colleague was still alive. Since nothing has changed in terms of how it allowed or prevented others from interacting with him on Facebook, his profile page continues to elicit tags, likes, loves, and comments from other people. I found one of the earliest posts left by one of his friends, just a few days after he died:

> It's still nice to be able to "talk" to you here, whether you know it or not. I wonder if they delete inactive pages after a while. I hope not. I miss you. (FB Friend 1).

Fast forward almost seven years to now, his profile page has neither been deleted nor left inactive. In fact, people still greeted him on his most recent birthday:

> Hey! (FB Friend 2).
> You continue to be a blessing (FB Friend 3).
> Watch over us (FB Friend 4).
> Please pray for us (FB Friend 5).
> I know you are watching over all of us (FB Friend 6).

Some of his friends posted more often than others, usually reminiscing on memories and leaving messages addressed to him:

> 7 years, buddy! And it feels juuuuust like yesterday. Demmet. Do you miss us at all? (FB Friend 8).

One would assume that the profile pages of the deceased would remain dormant since account owners would already be dead. On the contrary, it seems that the dead have not left the social space that they have inhabited on Facebook. Furthermore, their presence seems to be enlivened by “friends” who continue to interact with them in the many relational affordances of the social media platform.
In the first section of this chapter, I begin with a general discussion of agency that emphasizes the need for defining the concept despite its contested articulations. I venture into initially defining agency as the capacity to act, suggesting that such a definition breaches a predominantly exclusive view of agency as human property. I further argue that since the concept of agency is historically contingent and socially mediated, shifting contexts provide new avenues for conceptualizing agency that moves beyond its anthropocentrism. In the second section, I review the literature on the agency of the dead to frame how I intend to approach the question of posthumous agency on Facebook. In the final section, I present how the presence of the dead online have affected the way people are interacting with the deceased.

I begin my argument for the agency of the dead on Facebook by clarifying first what I mean by agency, to sustain my argument that the contours of this posthumous presence are indeed agentive. Theorizations of agency run an entire gamut. There is barely a consensus on a universally accepted definition (Dobres & Robb 2000); the concept itself remains disputed in anthropology and in other disciplines. Laura Ahearn (2001, p. 112) concedes that her own “provisional definition”— “agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act”— barely illustrates the spectrum of detailed views regarding the concept. Just because the concept is still being debated does not mean that initial attempts to clarify agency will end up like a cat chasing its own tail. Ahearn (2001, p. 130) proposes that “scholars using the term must define it clearly, both for themselves and for their readers”. Moreover, Webb Keane (2003) makes a case for the responsible use
of anthropological concepts. Thus, the purpose of defining how agency is going to be deployed in this thesis counts as a step towards clarity and accountability.

The word *agency* is derived from the Latin verb, *agere*, which means “to do” or “to act”. This etymological approach shows how doing or acting lies at the heart of the concept of agency. When I do something—write a thesis, for instance—I am manifesting agency. When someone reads what I’ve written, that person is also expressing agency. Agency, however, is not only evidenced by the moment that an act is being done or after it has been done. Going back to our etymological exercise, the infinitive form of the verbs “to do” or “to act” reveals agency to be constituted before the act; an agent is one who has the capacity to do something. Extending these examples can lead us to conclude that anything that anyone does, did, or could do are expressions of agency. Probing this tentative conclusion, however, unravels some of the debates surrounding the notion of agency. In the examples above, we hastily assume that agency, in the sense of doing, being able to do, and having done something, is exclusive to human beings. But what about other creatures who could “do” or “act” or manifest the capacity to do so, such as dogs who excitedly greet you when you come home from work? Are these dogs expressing agency? How about things who can “do” something or are capable of doing something, such as a pen that writes out what you want to write? Is the pen also showing agency? If seeing an apple entices you to eat it, would that apple be an agent that stokes your appetite? As we can see, agency as the capacity “to do” or “to act” could not just be an exclusively human attribute since it can be extended to dogs, pens, and apples.
Nevertheless, there is a strong predilection for agency to be conceived as distinctively and exclusively human. Part of it could be ascribed to what Ahearn (2001) describes as the “agentive turn” in anthropological discourse. She notes how interest in the concept of agency arose out of the social movements and political conditions, mostly in the US and in Europe, from the 1960s until the early 1990s: “As a result of witnessing and participating in actions aimed at transforming society, then, many academics have begun to investigate how practices can either reproduce or transform the very structures that shape them” (Ahearn 2001, p. 110). The emergence of this concern for “practice, praxis, action, interaction, activity, experience, performance” is necessarily linked to the importance of the “agent, actor, person, self, individual, subject” as the “doer of all that doing” (Ortner 1984, p. 144). In addition, Ahearn (2001, p. 110) situates the elevation of the human agent within “postmodern and poststructuralist critiques” that challenged “impersonal master narratives that leave no room for tensions, contradictions, or oppositional actions on the part of individuals and collectivities”. I have laid out this historical and ideological background to contextualize why the concept of agency has tended to be focused on human agency. While other scholars have criticized agency’s “narrow anthropocentric perspective” (Knappett & Malafouris 2008, p. x), the fact that the importance given to human agency was contingent on geographical and historical circumstances suggests that changing temporal, spatial, social, and cultural contexts can also displace agency from its anthropocentric preoccupation. In reframing the agency-structure debate, Bourdieu (1977, 2000), Giddens (1979, 1984), and Ortner (2006) emphasize how agency, in general, is mediated and negotiated. Despite the anthropocentric assumption, this particular insight seems to open the door for other modes and expressions of agency. In other words,
context essentially produces the quality of agency as well as the kind of agent that exercises it.

If the focus on human agency was contingent on historical and cultural factors, consider how today’s techno-social context could likewise reshape our understanding of agency. Mary Chayko (2014, p. 976) describes the technosocial life as one lived in “societies rich in digital (i.e., computerized) communication technology [with plentiful] opportunities to share information, identify interpersonal commonalities, get to know others, and interact, and form social connections”. Though it might now seem pointless to speculate on a hypothetical past, I find worth in imagining what the pertinent questions regarding agency would be, if the academics to whom Ahearn referred, were immersed in today’s technosocial life? To put it in another way, given the affordances of agency in a digitally connected world and without the ethical imperative that motivated the evaluation of the role of the human agent, would agency still be predominantly theorized from an anthropocentric perspective? These questions might not be a purely speculative exercise after all, since we are living right in the midst of a world that is increasingly techno-social.

The world of interconnected individuals, whose personal access to digital technology allows them to reach out conveniently and instantaneously to as many people in as many places, has altered how social movements and upheavals are being organized and carried out. In his discussion of the Global Now, Arjun Appadurai (1996, p. 7) describes how electronic media and its consumption “provokes” agency on a globalized scale. For instance, Eltantawy & Wiest (2011)
demonstrates the role of social media platforms in generating the momentum and mobilizing the collective protest that supported the successful Egyptian revolution of 2011 against the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. This historical event shows how digital technology enhances the role and the power of the agent. In such a context, reclaiming human agency seems less of an issue than examining how agency has come to attain such an effect. The efficaciousness of technologically mediated agency decentralizes agency from being solely focused on the human individual and branches into a consideration of technology as an “arena for dynamic social interaction” (Dobres & Hoffman 1994, p. 226). This social arena is not merely conceptual; it is material as well. In exploring the social agency of technology, Dobres (1995, p. 27) stresses that technology consists of the “dialectic of social relations of production and things produced, and the intersection of social dynamics and material realities”. The interpenetration of human agency and materiality, in technology, seems to echo the mutually constitutive relationship of agency and structure in the discourses of the habitus (Bourdieu 1977) and the duality of structure (Giddens 1979). In a techno-social milieu, digital technology and agency mutually complement each other’s capacity to be phenomenally significant and effective. We can see how this leads to a consideration not only of human agency but also of the technology that makes this kind of human agency possible.

Let me clarify: I do not intend to discard or devalue human agency in favor of non-human and material agency, nor am I keen on reinstating agency as the exclusive property of the human individual. Rather, in showing the range of possible conceptions of agency which are not necessarily located in living, human beings, I
am advocating for the creation of a space in which to situate the kind of agency that can be discerned from the social presence of the dead on Facebook. I argue in this thesis that posthumous agency on Facebook presents an effective agency that is non-living, non-intentional, non-corporeal, non-individual, technologically mediated, and socially negotiated. In advancing this claim, I intend to wean agency from being pinned down to a particular entity, whether human, non-human, or material.

Agency is commonly assumed to be distinctive of human beings. It is often described as the capacity to act and to reflect on the act. Together, these two capacities are taken to be what makes agency human. While anyone or anything, for that matter, can act or do something, it would be difficult to assume that non-humans and things possess the same ability to reflect, which, properly speaking, refers to intentionality. Alessandro Duranti (2000, p. 134) defines intentionality as “the property of human consciousness of being directed toward or being about something”. Intentionality is always consciousness about or of something. Human agency is rooted in a consciousness that displays an array of cognitive faculties, of which intentionality is only one of its features. This theme has influenced a strand of thinking about agency along psychological lines. For Albert Bandura (2006, pp. 164-165), the capacity to carry out an intention, along with forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness, are core properties of human agency. These properties form the complex of consciousness. An awareness of doing something and a consciousness that what I am doing is having an effect contribute to a “sense of agency” (Gallagher 2007, p. 347). This overwhelming psychological tendency to ensconce agency within intentionality and consciousness (see Gustafson 1986;
Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Bandura 2006) tends to be restrictive, precluding explorations of other modes of agency that are not anthropocentric.

The implications of circumscribing agency to intentional action comes to the fore when we apply this criterion to a dead person. Agency seems to assume a number of things regarding personhood. Firstly, it presupposes a living, human being. If I am dead, in the physical sense, my entire body ceases to function. I cannot talk. I cannot listen. I cannot write. I cannot do anything at all. Initiating an action is physically impossible. I cannot be an agent, in the sense of one who acts, since I cannot be the originator nor the performer of a physical act. However, does being dead necessarily mean that I cannot be seen as acting or doing? We have argued in the first chapter how persons retain social presence and influence beyond death. Surely, agency has been ascribed to the dead as much as it has been ascribed to the living. Secondly, agency presumes an embodied, individual consciousness. If I am dead, I cease to be conscious of myself and the world. Since my consciousness or mind is a part of my brain’s cognitive function, when the brain ceases to function along with other vital bodily organs, I completely lose my twin capacities for action and reflection. In other words, I cannot be an agent because the consequences of being physically dead extinguishes my capacity for intentional action. All of these assumptions might seem fair and unquestionable from a certain cultural perspective. But what we take for granted as sensible will seem tenuous once we evaluate them from another cultural viewpoint. For example, could the notion of an agent with an individually, embodied consciousness make sense to a Melanesian individual (Strathern 1988)? Would the idea of the brain as the seat of consciousness and personhood sit well with the Japanese notion of personhood?
(Lock 2002)? The point being made here only affirms how agency, following Ahearn’s earlier definition, is socioculturally mediated. Critically suspending our underlying assumptions about death, personhood, and consciousness create a space for considering posthumous agency. 

Most of the scholarly literature that discusses the agency of the dead focuses on the agency of the corpse, or the bodily remains of the dead. Huntington and Metcalf (1979, p. 211) observe that the corpse's power lies in its "evocation and association": "At the sight of a corpse, emotions surge through the individual chaotically: fear, rage, curiosity, sympathy, even joy, for he or she is dead and you are not." The dead evoke a strong affective response from the living because of their corporeal presence. We, the living, are moved by the dead as we “relate to the texture, sensation and the very aesthetics of the dead body” (Sorensen 2009, p. 130). Scholars suggest that the emotive appeal of the dead is derived from their materiality rather than from the ontological fact of death itself. In her book, The Political Lives of Dead Bodies, Verdery (1999) addresses the importance of materiality by analyzing the properties of the corpse. She argues that dead bodies are potent political symbols because as material objects they “can be moved around, displayed, and strategically located in specific places”; they are “making [the] past immediately present”; and “their corporeality makes them important means of localizing a claim” (Verdery 1999, pp. 27-28). The presence of the dead body is an immediate, urgent, and concrete fact that cannot be ignored or dismissed. Its materiality stakes a claim on the social space of the living. Another property of the dead body is its "ambiguity, multivocality, or polysemy" (Verdery 1999, p. 28). The corporeality of the dead evokes many different meanings from different people in different
contexts. Unlike other material objects, the materiality of dead bodies is seen to embody the pre-deceased. Williams (2004, p. 266) affirms that “the physicality and materiality of the dead body and its associated artefacts, structures and places can be seen as extensions of the deceased’s personhood, actively affecting the remembrance of the deceased by the living and structuring future social action.”

Williams (2004, p. 265) raises and addresses the important question of whether this potency of the dead could be construed as a form of agency:

How might we consider the dead as having agency when, by definition, they cannot seemingly act or think on their own behalf? The key lies in the frequently observed evidence that, for many cultures, the social, symbolic and mnemonic significance of the dead body does not end with the extinguishing of vital signs.

The dead simply do not remain dead; they remain socially, symbolically, and mnemonically significant. They live on through the distributed instances of their personhood; the dead continue to interact through their physical and material remains. Hence, “the corporeal presence of the dead provides an agency to affect the experience and actions of mourners and evoke memories of the past, rather than serving as a static and passive set of substances manipulated and disposed of by mourners to serve their sociopolitical agenda” (Williams 2004, p. 265). Scholars have asserted this, for instance, in the influence that the dead have over their own mortuary and funerary rituals. For example, the figure of the dead ruler continues to exert influence in the manner of his burial (Huntington & Metcalf 1979) and in Williams’ own research, the remains of the dead become “agents in their own transformation and reconstitution” during cremation and post-cremation rites (Williams 2004, p. 265). The dead body’s agency even becomes more manifest and
complex as the dead participate in the larger society. Verdery (1999) confirms this in the political agency exercised by dead political figures. The potential of dead bodies to exercise greater agency is suggested in the motivation of Tibetans to self-immolate, knowing that burnt corpses are perceived to be politically powerful than living protesters (Makley 2015). Similarly, the exhumed remains of the civilian victims during the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship exercise greater political agency posthumously compared to when they were alive (Rubin 2015).

Studies on the agency of the dead have generally expounded on how the physicality and materiality of the dead exert agency over the living. The issue of how the dead acquire agency has been pursued by other scholars who, in explaining the acquisition of such agency, deploy Alfred Gell’s theory of the agency of art objects. In his book, Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory, Gell (1998, p. 5) argues that “persons or ‘social agents’ are, in certain contexts, substituted for by art objects.” His extension of social agency to inanimate objects follows from his definition of agency:

Agency is attributable to those persons (and things...) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events. An agent is one who 'causes events to happen' in their vicinity. As a result of this exercise of agency, certain events transpire (not necessarily the specific events which were 'intended' by the agent) (Gell 1998, p. 16)

Scholars have been recently applying Gell’s theory of agency in arguing that dead bodies have agency (Harper 2010; Tung 2014). Previously, the theory has been employed to argue that material objects of the dead such as their clothing are “attributed powerful, even disturbing agency” (Hallam & Hockey 2001, p. 114).
Also, it has been adopted to explain how the cremated ashes of the dead have exerted agency in “their own transformation and reconstitution” (Williams 2004, p. 284).

While Gell’s theory has argued for the agency of inanimate objects in general, its application in death studies has been limited to and dependent on the actual corpse or the material extensions of the person as inanimate objects possessing social agency. It raises the question of whether Gell’s theory can still be applicable when the corporeal remains of the person—corpse, ashes, bones—are not physically present. A key towards establishing the foundations for partly answering this problem can be gleaned from Hallam et al. (1999) who argue that the body is not necessary to the persistence of self-identity or social presence beyond physical death. This is something I intend to discuss in greater detail in the next chapter.

Recent research has gone into exploring the notion of how the dead can exercise agency online. Stokes (2011b, p. 378) argues that online social networks provide the technologies for “extended phenomenality” where the dead can continue their “agential and phenomenal reach”, though in a thinner yet significant way. In defining “extended phenomenality” as the “phenomenal sense in which, for us if not for the dead themselves, their moral identity extends beyond the boundaries of their biological lives”, Stokes (2011b, p. 369) also implies posthumous personhood for the dead. Since they are perceived phenomenally as retaining personhood even in death, it follows that they retain agency as well. Meese et al. (2015) examine three different ways that digital media can extend personhood
after death. In suggesting that different online platforms can blur the distinctions between the living and the dead by reconstituting the pre-deceased into the deceased through digital technologies that simulate the pre-deceased person, Meese et al. (2015) offer affordances of posthumous agency that may be said to truly extend, through digital algorithms, the agency of the living. As Meese et al. (2015, p. 418) point out, “the affordances of online platforms now contribute to a technosocial context where the boundary between the living and the dead becomes increasingly indistinguishable, and at particular points, even inconsequential”.

Despite the possibilities offered by online digital technology, scholars themselves generally take a measured stance in terms of granting the online dead full agency (Harper 2010; Tung 2014). For instance, while Stokes (2011b) has shown that the dead can possess some agential faculties, Stokes (2011a) further argues how our recollection of the dead as concrete, specific, and distinct individuals confers on them the actuality and otherness that allows them to claim and make moral demands on us. Despite the loss of reciprocity, there is a phenomenal sense of how their identity and presence persists even beyond their biological life. The dependence of the dead on the recollection of the living recognizes that though they can continue to exist, in multiple senses of the term, they live on in a radically diminished way. This diminishment challenges the quality of agency exerted by the dead. Nevertheless, as I will argue, the sociality of social network sites such as Facebook compensates for this diminishment by mediating the agency of the dead throughout the social network of the dead.
Particularly in the next chapter, this thesis contributes to the growing literature of the agency of the dead in exploring the possibility of how the online dead, in the absence of their corporeal and physical remains, can acquire and exert agency. I do not intend, however, to pin agency on the dead as an entity, but I argue that posthumous agency on Facebook is socially distributed (Wertsch et al. 1996) and technologically mediated (Dobres & Hoffman 1994).

There is no need to summon the dead because they are already embedded in everyday life. Walter (2015) argues that the dead are afforded possibilities of presence in society through the availability of communication technologies. The dead can be present when people talk and write about them. The dead maintain their presence through letters that they have written, books that they have authored, artworks that they have created, and in music that they have composed. Photographs provide a visual reminder of the deceased. With the availability of video and audio recording devices, the dead are further imbued with a phenomenal and animated presence. In tracing the development of communication technologies, Walter (2015) shows how technology has assisted the dead in constructing new social groups “from the oral construction of family, to the megalithic construction of fiefdoms, to the written construction of world religions and nations, to the photographic and phonographic construction of celebrity-based neo-tribalism, to the digital reconstruction of family and friendship relationships” (pp. 228-229). From here, it is possible to draw out the implications of technology on the presence of the dead. Firstly, the technologies that are used in communicating to each other become a viable medium through which the dead extend and maintain their social presence post-mortem. Secondly, the increasing
sophistication of technologies have made this presence durable and vivid. Thirdly, this technologically mediated presence enables the dead to have an impact on society.

The dead, however, cannot directly use technology. It is the living who use technology to ensure that the dead remain part of their lives. Klass et al. (1996) coined the term “continuing bonds” to refer to the meaningful relationships that the living can have with the dead. The theory of continuing bonds has been employed by many scholars in explaining how the dead are brought back into the social world of the living. There is a growing literature on how continuing bonds have been applied to explain online mourning and memorializing in the internet. While early research has focused on the strategies that the living adopt in order to maintain their relationship with the dead, the findings also implied how the dead become present through these online practices. For example, De Vries and Rutherford (2004, p. 23) suggest that one of the prominent themes in web memorials—the deceased “watching over” the living—“imply a continuing and active relationship with the dead.” In another study, Nager and De Vries (2004, p. 54) confirm how bereaved daughters’ web memorials exhibit a similar sense of being watched over by their deceased mothers.

Recent literature has shown that continuing bonds with the dead has intensified through social network sites. Brubaker and Vertesi (2010) argue that interacting with the dead on social network sites can be seen as another technospiritual practice (the use of technology to express religious beliefs about the dead). Echoing the earlier findings of De Vries and Rutherford (2004) and Nager
and De Vries (2004), Brubaker and Vertesi (2010, p. 2) confirm that this commitment to continue one’s relationship with the dead assumes that the dead continue to participate in and watch the affairs of the living. Similarly, the findings of show that the living use social network sites to maintain a continuing bond with the dead. The language of mourners when posting to Facebook profiles manifest a lower non-immediacy index (which measures psychological distancing) suggesting that online mourners are not psychologically distancing themselves from the deceased (Getty et al. 2011, p. 999).

In general, digital technologies such as the internet are reconfiguring how we interact with the dead (Reflsund Christensen & Gotved 2014; Dilmaç 2016). Walter et al. (2012, p. 275) shows that social network sites “bring dying and grieving out of both the private and public realms and into the everyday life of social networks beyond the immediate family, and provide an audience for once private communications with the dead”. Further, Walter (2014, p. 11) suggests that online mourning has seen a return to what he terms as the “pre-industrial mourning”, that was marked by a communal, shared experience of grief. Moreover, Nansen et al. (2014, p. 113) argues that instead of letting the dead “rest and repose”, digital technology is creating an “increasingly restless posthumous presence”. The dead are brought back to life, re-animated through lively forms of media.

Studies affirm the peculiarity of social networking sites as a medium for making the dead present in the social lives of the living. In the article, Beyond the Grave: Facebook as a Site for the Expansion of Death and Mourning, Brubaker et al. (2013) discuss the distinctiveness of Facebook as a medium that affects death and
mournig by enabling three expansions: temporal, spatial, and social. Temporal expansion increases breadth and immediacy of interactions which allow for the interweaving of death into everyday life. Spatial expansion removes geographical barriers that increase participation in and allows grieving from multiple locations. Social expansion disseminates information across previously separate social groups. These expansions provide a new temporal, spatial, and social space for the living to interact with the dead. Moreover, social networking sites enables users to “articulate and make visible their social networks” (boyd & Ellison 2007, p. 211). Articulating (in the sense of linking) and visualizing (by graphically representing and showing) a person’s social network illustrate how social networking sites, as a technology, can provide the infrastructure to visibly and publicly connect the dead to their social networks, and render them as visible, public presences in other people’s social networks. Bell et al. (2015) affirm that a social networks site such as Facebook “enables the deceased to be an ongoing active presence in the lives of the bereaved” by encouraging multiple practices of remembering the deceased. Facebook fosters a unique way of communicating and maintaining relationships with the dead (Degroot 2012) and creates a “novel, ritualized, and public space for maintaining these continued bonds” (Irwin 2015, p. 143).

To explain the kind of presence that the dead have on a virtual medium like Facebook, I turn to the concept of "telepresence" (Lombard & Markaridian Selverian 2008), which is “the perceptual illusion of nonmediation” (Lombard & Ditton 1997). This definition applies to any medium. According to Lombard and Ditton (1997, sec. 2 par. 1):
The illusion of nonmediation can occur in two distinct ways: (a) the medium can appear to be invisible or transparent and function as would a large open window, with the medium user and the medium content (objects and entities) sharing the same physical environment; and (b) the medium can appear to be transformed into something other than a medium, a social entity.

The concept of telepresence seems to be crucial in explaining how interactions with the dead on social network sites can evoke their presence even though one is only interacting, from a certain perspective, with residues or remnants of the pre-deceased.

The dead are undeniably establishing a growing and active presence on the internet, especially in social network sites like Facebook. Their active presence must be telling us something about some kind of agency that needs to be further examined and explained.
CHAPTER THREE: Posthumous Agency and the Corpse

The dead have an effect. The ambivalence that they evoke in the living (Palgi & Abramovitch 1984, p. 386) means that the dead cannot simply be ignored. Malinowski ([1925] 1948) describes how our “love of the dead and loathing of the corpse, passionate attachment to the personality still lingering about the body and a shattering fear of the gruesome thing that has been left over” express complicated and contradictory attitudes. While Malinowski does not explicitly distinguish between the dead person and its corpse, his description seems to imply that we respond positively to the personhood of the dead just as we react negatively to the dead body. But in practice, do we clearly distinguish between the dead person and the corpse? Do we respond accordingly to what we might perceive as differences in the corporeality of the dead and the personhood of the dead? I believe that no matter how we answer these questions; whether we consider them as person or corpse; whether they are treated positively or negatively, or both; the dead undoubtedly affect us.

The ambivalent reactions that the dead arouse in the living appear to stem from the fact that we cannot dissociate the person we know from the corpse. The corpse in front of us is not just an inanimate, insensate object; it—rather, he or she—reminds us of the dead person. The corpse, however, is more than just a sign pointing to the deceased. Thomas Laqueur (2015) recounts the story of the Greek philosopher Diogenes, also known as the Cynic, who made an odd appeal—that his dead body be thrown and fed to animals. Diogenes wondered why anyone, including himself, would have to worry about what happens to his corpse since he
would not be feeling anything anymore by then. Laqueur agrees with Diogenes’ logic, but he disputes the conclusion that the dead body is inconsequential:

[T]he dead body matters, everywhere and across time, as well as in particular times and particular places. It matters in disparate religious and ideological circumstance; it matters even in the absence of any particular belief about a soul or about how long it might linger around its former body or about what might become of it after death; it matters across all sorts of beliefs about an afterlife or a God. It matters in the absence of such beliefs. It matters because the living need the dead far more than the dead need the living. It matters because the dead make social worlds. It matters because we cannot bear to live at the borders of our mortality (Laqueur 2015, p. 1).

If the corpse is more than what it is, then what else is there to it? Is it a human subject or is it a material object? The archaeologist Carl Knappett (2005, p. 12) provides a basic, but useful criterion: human subjects are animate, while objects are not. The dead body cannot be a proper human subject since, without the vitality of life, it cannot possess the intentionality that is said to characterize human subjectivity. But then, inanimate as it is, it also resists being categorized as a mere object or thing, as Laqueur has stressed earlier. The dead body heightens this ambiguity because the dead seems to oblige the living to attend to its physical remains. Indeed, there must be something more to the corpse.

Instead of resolving the ontological status of the corpse, Laqueur (2015, p. 5) emphasizes that, throughout history, evidence shows that “We care about, care for, feel with a dead body, although we know that instantly or very soon after what we call biological death it notices nothing, cares for nothing, feels nothing”. The contradiction behind our treatment of the corpse is confounding. If the corpse is unconscious, unsympathetic, and insensate, then Diogenes is right in saying that it deserves no special treatment. Are we then being absurd in how we feel compelled
to tend to the dead body? Laqueur (2011, p. 800) claims that our affection for the corpse arises out of “primal sensibilities” that uncomfortably coax us into feeling that “There seems to be something wrong under almost any conceivable set of beliefs about not caring for it”. While he does not sufficiently expound on how these instinctive moralities came about, he nonetheless concludes that the import of the dead body lies in how it is “constitutive of a person existing in our individual and . . . historical consciousness” (Laqueur 2015, p. 54). The corpse matters because its matter belongs to that of a human being. Prior (1989, p. 20) assesses that the dead body is “first and foremost a site of personhood”. The corpse does not only symbolize death in the abstract, rather it is treated as the corporeality of an actual person to whom we are, in one way or another, related.

The effectiveness of the dead is embodied by the corpse. The corpse physically and materially constitutes the person that once was, is, and will be. The dead body becomes potent through what it evokes and what is associated with it (Huntington & Metcalf 1979, p. 211). Apart from indexing the dead, the corpse denotes the reality of death that has befallen this person just as it likewise reflects the possibility which awaits our own personhood. Viscerally and cognitively, the corpse arrests and binds our attention to the deceased. In addition, the intensity of the corpse’s effect could be found in its capacity to mediate and establish copresence, which is understood as a way of “feeling the presence of people and places involving all of the five senses” (Baldassar 2008, p. 52). The spatial, temporal, and material nature of the corpse lend copresence to the dead. Paradoxically, the corpse makes the dead copresent, despite the absence of vital signs indicating a living, corporeal presence.
Apprehending the dead's copresence through the mediation of the dead body imbues the corpse with greater potency. The corpse becomes a potent agent when it is seen to represent, preserve, and extend the agency of the deceased. In addition, the materiality of the corpse, even while exhibiting traces of physical decay and corruption, establishes the dead's copresence even when the physical resemblance to the deceased person could hardly be established anymore. As long as there is the tiniest shred of evidence that a material substance is derived from the actual corpse, it will be regarded as embodying and expressing the personhood and agency of the dead. According to Gell (1998), this cognitive process, of making a causal inference that the agency things exhibit could be traced to the intentions of a human agent, is called an “abduction of agency”. This concept, which initially gained currency in explaining the agency of art objects (Gell 1998; Van Eck 2010), has also proved useful in demonstrating how an entire corpse or its dismembered body parts could earn and express agency (Harper 2010; Tung 2014).

While the corpse is argued to be an agent, its agency is not intrinsic, as discussed above. Rather, it derives its agency, or shall we say, its agency is abducted, from an agent who was once living. In other words, to be clear about it, posthumous agency seems viable when one construes the agency of the dead as abducted from the agency of the pre-deceased agent. Returning once again to a more or less

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14 Gell (1998) uses the term, art object, as a theoretical tool. For him, “The art object is whatever is inserted into the ‘slot’ provided for art objects in the system of terms and relations envisaged in the theory” (p.7). Gell’s definition of an art object, which he insists is unnecessary, is a reaction to a semiotic/semantic theory of art in anthropology. In particular, he positions his argument against Howard Morphy’s (1994) proposition that art objects are “sign vehicles, conveying meaning, or they are objects made in order to provoke a culturally aesthetic response, or both of these made simultaneously” (Gell 1998, p. 5).
conventional definition of an agent as “one who has the capacity to initiate causal events in his/her vicinity, which cannot be ascribed to the current state of the physical cosmos, but only to a special category of mental states; that is, intentions” (Gell 1998, p. 19), Gell (1998, p. 36) distinguishes primary agents from secondary agent; primary agents are “entities endowed with the capacity to initiate actions/events through will or intention”, while secondary agents are “entities not endowed with will or intention by themselves but essential to the formation, appearance, or manifestation of intentional actions”. Following Gell (1998) and Harper (2010), corpses are better understood as secondary agents, in the sense that they are conduits of the primary, intentional agency of human beings. Being a secondary agent, however, does not mean that corpses are not “real” agents; they are said to act, not of their own accord, but by channeling the agency of the dead.

Though it is often described as wooden and stiff, the corpse is malleable, exhibiting its pliability in engendering different meanings in different contexts. For instance, it has been described as a “representation of death and the hereafter” (Prior 1989, p. 21), a repository of a culture’s fear and anxiety (Emerick 2000, p. 48), an accomplice (Williams 2004), an effective agent (Hockey et al. 2010), a political actor (Verdery 1999; Young & Light 2013), a secular relic (Tarlow 2016), a magical amulet (Matteoni 2016), and a celebrity (Foltyn 2016). By listing some of the various meanings of the corpse, we are highlighting what the corpse does, which is a way of saying that these situations allow us to detect its agency. The possibilities of the corpse, that is, the other effects that it can cause, further affirms its agency. As Harper (2010, p. 311) argues, “By acknowledging that the dead body is not a uniform entity but one that can hold a multiplicity of meanings and therefore be
different things, we move towards the concept of the dead body as a social agent”. So far, we have seen how corpses become agents by mediating the agency of the dead. We have also briefly reviewed some of the ways and milieus in which the corpse displays agency.

I further build on these insights by emphasizing that what complements and augments posthumous agency is Verdery’s (1999) argument that it is the corpse’s materiality that makes it potent. Corpses have certain characteristics that they share with material objects: they “can be moved around, displayed, and strategically located in specific places”; they make “[the] past immediately present”; and “their corporeality makes them important means of localizing a claim” (Verdery 1999, pp. 27-28). The materiality of the dead body offers stability, which grounds the dead in the physical and temporal world. At the same time, this materiality contributes to the dead body’s mobility, which allows it to be deployed for various purposes in physical and symbolic terms. The duality of the corpse—as stable and mobile—allows it to stake a physical and sensuous claim on the social space of the living, while allowing the living to make a similar claim on the dead. There is an immediacy, urgency, and concreteness to the corpse that makes it unlikely to be ignored or dismissed, thus amplifying the dead’s potent agency.

Moreover, another property which relates to the malleability, mobility, and potency of the dead body is its "ambiguity, multivocality, or polysemy" (Verdery 1999, p. 28). Corpses generate multiple meanings because they are, first and foremost, bodies of real people who have lived and embodied the complicated reality of human existence. An additional reason for the ambiguity of corpses is
because bodies are like sheets that are constantly being written on. This is not to say that we come into existence as a clean slate. Meaning, for instance, is culturally and socially inscribed into our bodies. Iris Marion Young’s (2005) essay, *Throwing Like a Girl*, illustrates how the naturalness and unnaturalness of our bodily movements are due to socializing and gendering practices. In other words, whether they are living bodies or lifeless corpses, there is nothing natural about our bodies. Corpses signify many things because just like the human agents that they once were, they retain the complexity of social relations in their corporeal state. They are ambiguous because what we do to dead bodies and what dead bodies can do are ultimately mediated by socio-cultural constructions and conventions. Furthermore, the symbolic potency of corpses is aided by the fact that they are now mute; therefore, “words can be put into their mouth—often quite ambiguous words—or their own actual words can be ambiguated by quoting them out of context” (Verdery 1999, p. 29).

In this chapter, I have explored the theme of posthumous agency as the agency of the corpse. I have shown that the corpse is a unique, concrete entity, which is neither a subject nor an object, but mediates agency through its manifold effects and possibilities. I have also shown that the corpse matters a significantly in evoking posthumous agency because its matter embodies the personhood of the deceased. I further showed that the materiality of the corpse creates copresence for the dead, which in turn, generates a phenomenal sense of agency for the corpse. While I have shown how the corpse’s agency is abducted from the primary agency of the pre-deceased, I have argued that the peculiar characteristics of the corpse’s materiality augment and intensify the agency of the dead.
CHAPTER FOUR: Posthumous Agency and the Objects of the Dead

There is another way of construing posthumous agency. Our interactions with the dead are mediated by material culture (Hallam & Hockey 2001). Since material culture mediates death, then virtually any object can be an agent for the dead. Things that display agency fall along a range of “dedicated” or “emergent” objects. Dedicated objects are created for the specific purpose of memorializing the dead, while emergent objects are those that have been initially intended for various purposes but have become mnemonically potent because of social contexts and relations where it has come to be associated with the deceased (Hallam & Hockey 2001, p. 50). The ubiquity of material culture can be observed in how death practices and rituals across cultures utilize objects and places. There are dedicated memory objects that we immediately associate with death, such as coffins, urns, and tombstones. They can also be places (Gibson 2011) that have been usually marked and reserved for the dead: cemeteries, graves, mausoleums, and morgues. Local mourning customs and practices are identified with the use of certain things: wearing black or white clothing, lighting candles to remember the dead, and decorating with white lilies during funerals. Aside from the usual material culture that we readily associate with death, there are also emergent memory objects that do not immediately register as death-related. We often overlook paintings, sculptures, books, and musical compositions as having to do with the material culture of death. But they are related, once you consider that many of these thinkers and artists who have contributed to our intellectual, artistic and cultural patrimony are long deceased. My iTunes playlist, for example, contains a list of dead singers—I am often unaware that I am listening to a dead person (except now, of course!) whenever Karen Carpenter sings “Close to You”, and yet, decades after her death,
her voice moves me in so many ways. The dead seem to be everywhere, continuing to shape the world we live in.

The technologies we use to communicate—written notes, diaries, photographs, voice recordings, videos, emails, social media accounts—do not only allow us to ‘speak’ to the dead, but in materializing and representing the dead, these technologies allow the dead to ‘speak’ to us. But the dead do not only ‘speak’, Walter (2015) reports how the dead express their agency by organizing new social groups throughout history with the help of that epoch’s means of communication. Of course, the dead cannot literally speak or write; but whenever we talk about the dead, or read what the dead have written when they were still alive, they extend their influence beyond their lifetime. As discussed in the previous chapter, the internet has become the current arena for the dead’s social presence. As a material culture, the internet constantly shifts along the continuum of dedicated and emergent memorial objects. While it was invented to connect computers in a network, the ubiquity of the internet has allowed the creation of dedicated memory objects such as virtual cemeteries and web memorials (Roberts & Vidal 2000; Roberts 2004a, 2004b, 2006); however, its wide range of applicability also makes it an emerging memory object. Social network sites, for example, were meant to connect people who have established an online profile, but with user deaths, these sites have provided affordances for the dead to remain socially alive and active (Bailey et al. 2014; Bell et al. 2015).

Material objects exhibit a unique capacity to move and affect us especially when they are associated with the deceased whom we personally know. These
objects, places, and spaces—their personal belongings, towns they once visited, and rooms that they once lived in— evoke not only the memories but also the presence of the dead. While material culture could be romanticized as the positive mediation of the dead's presence, the reality of how material objects mediate the dead is complicated. Judith Simpson examines the ambivalence that emergent memory objects, such as the dead’s clothing, generate in the living:

The dual nature of this power is noted: if it is the presence of the dead that is evoked, this can be comforting, healing; if it is the manner of their death, or the fact of their absence that is underlined, it is deeply distressing (Simpson 2014, p. 253).

Further, Hallam and Hockey (2001, p. 114) argues that social contexts can confer a “powerful, often disturbing agency” on ordinary, everyday things. Drawing on Carol Mara’s (1998) account of how she handled and dealt with her son’s clothing after the road accident which claimed his life, Hallam and Hockey (2001, p. 115) argues that the clothing’s emotive potency was due to the fact that since the clothes were the last “point of material contact” with the body of Mara’s son, they also became for her a “memory material” as well as a “material extension” of her son’s personhood. Furthermore, Hallam and Hockey (2001, p. 115) notes the ambivalent effect of the son’s clothing on Mara; that while the clothing evoked the presence of her son, it also reminded her of the painful details of the accident through marks and tears in her son’s clothing. Despite the unpleasant memory that it roused in her, Hallam and Hockey (2001, p. 115) interprets Mara’s inability to throw away her son’s clothing as evidence of its “emotional power” and “terrible potency”.
Material objects, regardless of where they fall along the range of dedicated and emergent memory objects, exhibit posthumous agency through an abduction of the deceased’s agency, in the same manner that corpses have been demonstrated to possess social agency (Harper 2010). This abduction happens within certain social settings and personal associations, which makes the agency of these things “relational and context-dependent” (Gell 1998, p. 22). Gell distinguishes the terms agent (that which “causes events to happen”) and patient (“the object which is causally affected by the agent’s action”) to establish this relationality: “for any agent, there is a patient, and conversely, for any patient, there is an agent” (Gell 1998, p. 22). He continues that “in any given transaction in which agency is manifested, there is a ‘patient’ who or which is another ‘potential’ agent, capable of acting as an agent or being a locus of agency” (Gell 1998, p. 22). The abduction of agency in the social relationship between agent and patient plays out through the interaction of four terms, which Gell identifies and defines as follows:

Indexes: material entities which motivate abductive inferences, cognitive interpretations, etc.;

Artists (or other 'originators'): to whom are ascribed, by abduction, causal responsibility for the existence and characteristics of the index;

Recipients: those in relation to whom, by abduction, indexes are considered to exert agency, or who exert agency via the index;

Prototypes: entities held, by abduction, to be represented in the index, often by virtue of visual resemblance, but not necessarily (Gell 1998, p. 27).

These terms, which can be assigned either in an agent or patient position, give rise to 16 elementary, binary expressions.\textsuperscript{15} Entities are situated in this network

\textsuperscript{15} See Appendix 2 for a complete list of binary expressions. Gell uses a kind of notation to represent these social relations resulting in a quasi-equation that (Davis 2007) delightfully calls a “gellogram”. I intend to use the same term from this point on, with as much delight.
of social relations called an *art nexus*.\(^\text{16}\) Since, in principle, an index can refer to any material entity that can be abducted, we follow Harper (2010) in her appropriation of Gell’s (1998) theory to argue for the agency of the corpse, and further build on it, by substituting another material entity in place of the corpse. I turn to reexamine how the clothing of Mara’s dead son acquires agency by replicating the same gellogram\(^\text{17}\) and tabular format that Harper (2010, p. 314) has employed, and appropriately filling in the references to the art nexus terms with pertinent details from Mara’s account:

\[
[[\text{Prototype-A}] \rightarrow \text{Artist-A}] \rightarrow \text{Index-A}] \longrightarrow \text{Recipient-P} \quad ^\text{18}
\]

\(^{16}\) Since Gell works towards an anthropological theory of art, it obviously makes sense to refer to “art objects” as situated in an “art nexus”. Though as I have noted in an earlier footnote, following Gell, we can replace the slot of the “art object” with any other object. I retain the term “art nexus” as a tribute to Gell’s contribution to the formulation of this theory. See Appendix 1 for a visual table of the art nexus (Gell 1998, p. 29).

\(^{17}\) See note 3 above.

\(^{18}\) Gell (1998, pp. 51-52) details the meaning of this gellogram:

This expression refers to a nexus of agent/patient relationships such that the recipient is the ‘patient’ and the agent acting on him is the index. This is the relationship between a (secondary) agent (the index) and a ‘primary’ patient, in this instance, the recipient. I adopt the graphic convention of always indicating the relationship between the index-agent and the ‘primary’ patient in a relation by the use of a long arrow ‘\(\longrightarrow\)’ as opposed to the short arrow ‘\(\rightarrow\)’ indicating subordinate agent/patient relations. Because of the centrality of the index, it is always immediately to the left (or occasionally to the right) of the long arrow. Agents are always placed to the left of patients; the terminations ‘\(\text{-A}\)’ and ‘\(\text{-P}\)’ are really redundant because any term to the left of another is always interpreted as an ‘agent’ with respect to it; however, I retain the ‘\(\text{-A}\)’ and ‘\(\text{-P}\)’ suffixes because they make the resulting formulae more readily intelligible, or at least, I hope they do.

[...] The index is an agent with respect to the recipient by virtue of the fact that the recipient abducts the agency of the artist from it. The index is an agent (with respect to the recipient) but it is simultaneously a patient, with respect to the agency of the artist, which it mediates. This ‘indirect’ relationship between the recipient as patient and the artist as agent is expressed in our formula via the brackets. The term ‘index’ includes within itself another term, ‘artist’; thus, ‘[Index]’ expands to become ‘[[Artist Index]]’. Adding ‘\(\text{-A}\)’ and ‘\(\text{-P}\)’ suffixes, and the agency arrow indicating the artist is an agent with respect to the index, this becomes: [[Artist-A] \(\rightarrow\) Index-A] \longrightarrow \text{Recipient-P}.

Finally, in the above formula, the prototype also makes an appearance as an agent with respect to the artist, the index, and the recipient. This can only occur when the abduction is made that
Replacing the terms with the references, and considering that the agency of the Artist was not abducted in this specific scenario (and therefore, must be taken out), we would now have this gellogram:

\[
[\text{Son-A} \rightarrow \text{Clothing-A}] \rightarrow \text{Mara-P}
\]

where Mara, as patient, abducts the primary agency of his dead son through the clothing itself. The problem, however, in this expression of abduction is that we are approaching it from a different context, that is, we are the ones making an inference that this could be probably be how Mara was abducting in that scenario. Invoking Gell’s principle that abduction of agency is always contextual and relational, we are overlooking a crucial aspect of this formulation that this formula makes sense to us, as observers, but not necessarily to the Mara as the recipient herself. But the very fact that abduction is contextual and relational, we can therefore explore other scenarios to account for the likeliest kind of posthumous agency that Mara herself might have detected.

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19 This reference to this term is deliberately left blank. Unlike in Harper’s (Harper 2010, p. 314) example of the groomed corpse, where the mortician is placed as the artist responsible for the preparing the corpse, the artist responsible for the clothing is insignificant. While it could be argued that the clothing (as index) that the son (as prototype) wore could also be attributed to the agency of a tailor (as artist), it seems unnecessary in this particular case because in this particular context, and Mara (as recipient) only abducted the personhood and agency of her son (as prototype) in the clothing (as index).
One likely scenario to explain why the clothing seemed to manifest an ambivalent, but powerful agency, is to reconstruct the gellogram with the term that was taken out earlier, ‘[Artist]’, to denote that there is another relation that could be abducted as being responsible for the index. To further signify that this new relation is now being abducted by the recipient as the primary agent responsible for the index that represent the prototype, the term ‘[Artist]’ has to be moved to the leftmost part of the gellogram as shown in the notation below:


Having reconstructed the gellogram, we then fill in the template by replacing the terms with their references, and inserting either ‘[Driver]’ or ‘[Car]’ for the term ‘[Artist]’ to indicate that, given the context of the accident, they are now being abducted by the recipient as the primary agent responsible for the index:


From these expressions, we can see that when the agency of either the Driver or the Car is being abducted by Mara through the clothing, the impulse to throw the clothes away becomes understandable. If the clothing reminds Mara more of the deeds of the Driver and Car as primarily causing the death of his son, then index becomes very disturbing indeed. Mara (as recipient) would find the agency of her son (as prototype), abducted through the clothing (as index), to be overshadowed by the malicious and more potent agency of either the car or driver (as artists) who have also been abducted as the primary cause of the appearance or characteristics
of the clothing (as index). We could thus only imagine how pained and torn Mara must have felt to see the marks on his son’s clothing.

Since abductions are contextual and relational, there could be many possible and complex permutations in how a human recipient can abduct agency from an index. This could explain why the objects of the dead could be powerful in the sense that objects can have many social relations that can be abducted from them. Furthermore, this clarifies why we can also experience a great ambivalence in terms of the objects that we associate with the dead. The pre-deceased person may not be the only and primary social relation that can be abducted from an index. Having said this, it now becomes understandable why Mara found it difficult to throw away his son’s clothing despite the unpleasantness that it evoked. We can thus see that the posthumous agency of the dead through material things can be highly evocative and ambivalent. While the materiality of objects, places, and spaces allows the dead to exercise their social agency, materiality also means that other agents can also exercise their social agency in relation to things, thus creating ambivalences in how posthumous agency is being perceived.

To sum, I have discussed the importance of material culture to our relationship with death and the dead. I have shown how materiality mediates the presence and agency of the dead; media technology affords them with a platform to preserve and circulate their agency. I have argued in this chapter that the objects of the dead become agents through an abduction of the pre-deceased’s agency, which is always contextual and relational. I have shown the implications of this contextuality and relationality in terms of how objects of the dead can be potent,
complex, and ambivalent agents through their interactions with other agents and
with human patients who can make infinite abductions of agency. In addition, this
section has demonstrated how Gell’s art nexus helps understand how objects of the
dead can evoke posthumous agency.
CHAPTER FIVE: Posthumous Agency and Continuing Bonds

Finally, I turn to explore the theme of posthumous agency through the experience of the bereaved. Margaret Stroebe and her colleagues (2008, pp. 4-5) define bereavement as “the objective situation of having lost someone significant through death”, clarifying that someone significant refers to “personal losses experienced across the lifespan: the deaths of parents, siblings, partners, friends, and…one’s own child”. For the bereaved, the dead are not nameless and faceless; they are the beloved dead. The dead person is not a total stranger but a loved one. This personal connection implies the existence of emotional and affective ties between the dead and the bereaved. That is why when a loved one dies, the bereaved experience grief, which is defined as the “primarily emotional (affective) reaction to the loss of a loved one…[which] incorporates diverse psychological (cognitive, social-behavioral) and physical (psychological-somatic) manifestations” (Stroebe et al. 2008, p. 5). The findings of a comparative study of grief in 78 cultures suggested that many people in almost all the cultures that were being documented had difficulties dealing with death; with the Balinese as the only exception (Rosenblatt et al. 1976). Recent research, however, disproves the earlier conclusion made regarding the Balinese; just because they were good at concealing their grief did not mean that they did not find death difficult along with everyone else (Wikan 1990). Despite this fact suggesting the seeming universality of grief, Rosenblatt (2001) cautions against approaches that seek grief universals since these tend to be premised on essentialist views that undermine the social construction of grief. Instead, Rosenblatt (2008) argues that a more profitable approach would be to consider how expressions and understandings of grief vary significantly across cultures.
Approaching grief from a social constructionist perspective (Rosenblatt 2001; Neimeyer et al. 2014) provides a critique of the dominant Western view that stigmatizes ‘abnormal’ expressions of grief. The variations in how and how long people grieve may be conditioned by mourning practices. While grief and mourning has been used interchangeably by some scholars, Stroebe et al. (2008) believes that there is a difference. Unlike the individual experience of loss implied by grief, mourning refers to “the public display of grief, the social expressions or acts expressive of grief as shaped by the (often religious) beliefs and practices of a given society or cultural group” (Stroebe et al. 2008, p. 5). Strong proponents, however, of the view that grief that exceeds a certain amount of time has to be diagnosed as a mental disorder Prigerson et al. (2008) have successfully argued for the inclusion of prolonged grief disorder (PGD)—defined as the “intense, prolonged symptoms of grief coupled with some form of functional impairment beyond 6 months post-loss” (Maciejewski et al. 2016, p. 266)—in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (2015); thus, enshrining the medicalization and pathologization of grief that does not fit within this prescribed norm.

In contrast to the view that grief needs to be resolved by disengaging from the dead within a certain amount of time, the theory of continuing bonds (Klass et al. 1996; Klass 2001, 2006, 2014) demonstrates that cross-cultural data show that the bereaved tend to maintain a continuing attachment to their deceased loved ones. Rather than trying to detach from the dead, Klass et al. (1996, p. 22) argue that “resolution of grief involves continuing bonds that survivors maintain with the
deceased and . . . these continuing bonds can be a healthy part of the survivor’s ongoing life”. Klass (2001) further offer evidence that continuing bonds are implied in cultural practices involving an embodied sense of the dead’s presence, conversing with the dead, following the dead as moral guides, and recounting a personal narrative of the dead.

Recent research, however, has questioned the efficacy of continuing bonds theory in terms of resolving grief (Field et al. 2005; Boelen et al. 2006; Field 2006; Schut et al. 2006; Field 2008). While scholars of grief and bereavement generally question the therapeutic claims of continuing bonds, what remains indisputable is the growing evidence that people engage in continuing bonds with the deceased. Whether this practice suggests adaptive or maladaptive behavior is beyond the concern of the argument that I am making. The strong evidence of the sociality behind continuing bonds underlies the concern of this anthropological inquiry. Continuing bonds with the dead clearly acknowledges the agency of the bereaved. But what does it mean for the dead?

Continuing bonds demonstrate that “survivors hold the deceased in loving memory for long periods, often forever, and that maintaining an inner representation of the deceased is normal rather than abnormal” (Klass et al. 1996, p. 349). While the notion of continuing bonds gives the impression that the bereaved are the only ones acting on the passive dead, research affirming how the bereaved practice continuing bonds argues otherwise. An investigation into the inner representations of the dead among university students reveals that the deceased play an active and significant role in the lives of the living (Marwit & Klass
The dead express their agency in being role models (“Mother is my role model. I still draw upon her wisdom and learn vicariously many things, and make decisions the way she would.”), providing guidance in certain situations (“I always think about her when I’m trying to make a decision on some big event in my life. I think ‘What would she do?’”), orienting others in their life values (“Thinking about him [mentally handicapped brother] makes me more appreciative that I am alive. It has made me and my family more caring towards all underprivileged people.”), and by simply being part of a person’s life (“Now my dad is someone we enjoy reminiscing about. He is still missed by the entire family. We wonder what he would be like 12 years older and what he would be doing.”) (Marwit & Klass 1996, pp. 300-301).

From these examples, and in relation to the general themes of continuing bonds (Klass 2001), we could see how the dead, even without their physical or material presence, exhibit agency as moral guides for the living. While this manner of continuing bonds might seem to loosen agency from being always embodied, the reality is that the dead’s presence is still being mediated and embodied by the living through their practices of commemorating the dead. I will later explain the relationship of embodiment and remembering the dead in greater detail. It must be noted, however, that the dead are not always positive, encouraging, and helpful agents; Klass (2014) recently brings up continuing bonds with ‘hostile dead’ who also exercise their malevolent agency on the living. The hostile dead might even be perceived as exercising an even greater sense of agency to the extent that “some deceased persons are denied agency altogether, deliberately annihilated, or just forgotten” (Straight 2006, p. 108) by the living who fear them. We often think that the power inherent in agency needs a body in order to be more potent, but as the
hostile dead has shown, they can be even more powerful without a body, so much so that, they must be deliberately resisted and denied.

Sensing the deceased’s presence is another expression of continuing bonds. The peculiar thing about this manner of continuing bonds is that it could be construed, from a certain perspective, as hallucinatory. Yet research suggests that sensing the presence of the dead is common and widespread, despite the skepticism of some. For example, upon interviewing a sample of 293 bereaved spouses, Rees (1971) reported that almost half of the respondents talked of sensing the presence of their deceased spouses. Though he concludes that this experience appears to be common and normal to widowhood, in referring to these episodes as ‘hallucinations’ and ‘illusions’, Rees’ (1971) terminology betrays the incredulity of a Western biomedical paradigm towards this phenomenon. Nevertheless, succeeding research have reported similar findings of people sensing the presence of the dead.

The sense of the deceased’s presence varies; Bennett and Bennett (2000, p. 140) describes that “At its weakest it is a feeling that one is somehow being watched; at its strongest it is a full-blown sensory experience—olfactory, auditory, visual, and occasionally tactile”. The privileging of ‘materialist’ over ‘supernaturalist’ discourses in certain cultures engender ambivalences in how people might interpret and acknowledge this felt experience (Bennett & Bennett 2000). On the other hand, local beliefs and customs that are rooted in cosmologies that accommodate supernatural entities assist not only in normalizing but in fostering this experience (Hsu et al. 2003). Though our bodily perception of the world is inflected by culture, the occurrence of sensing the dead’s presence is widespread:
Across cultures, there is a sense that for many people death does not end relationship with the deceased; rather, the deceased continues as a presence in various senses of the word in a person's consciousness and perhaps even in what the person experiences as reality (Rosenblatt 2003, p. 857).

The difficulty with the notion of sensing the presence of the dead seems to be the absence of a physical corpse or material object associated with the dead. Taking it from the perspective of Gell’s theory, how can we abduct agency if there is no material index to motivate such an abduction? This question makes sense when we consider once more how material culture mediates our dealings with the dead (Hallam & Hockey 2001). The main objection in arguing continuing bonds as posthumous agency is that, in continuing bonds, the dead seem to be contingent mental representations whose existence depends on the psychological disposition or belief systems of the bereaved. It follows that if the dead and their influence are all made up in the mind of those who survive them, then the dead cannot be agents at all since what they are and what they are purported to intend are merely figments of one’s imagination. I disagree with the idea that the agency of the dead is imaginary; I agree, instead, with Hallam et al. (1999, p. 121) that this objection is still coming from the assumption that agency can only manifested by social beings who are capable of “individual, intentional, and embodied action”. The widespread and cross-cultural phenomenon of people sensing the dead’s presence must not be invalidated as a kind of mass delusion.

So, how could we account for this experience without being dismissive and condescending? I propose to address this concern by revisiting embodiment. Csordas (1993, p. 135) argues that embodiment is our “mode of presence and engagement in the world”. This means many things, but I will expound on four
implications of embodiment. First, as a mode of presence, our bodies establish our presence in the world. The world knows that ‘I am’ because of my body. I know that ‘I am’ and that ‘I am in this world’ because of my body. In fact, I only come to know all these because of my body, which leads us to the second point. Awareness is always embodied, meaning that I come to know that ‘I am’ through my body just as I come to know the world through my body. Third, this awareness of self and the world comes with the awareness that I am in the world with other bodies. That there are others like me but are not me is a key insight of embodied presence. Fourth, I relate to others and to the world through my body. Embodiment is not only a mode of being and knowing, it is also a mode of acting. While being embodied allows me to act in the world and engage others, it also allows me to be acted upon by others and by the world. Being embodied facilitates and marks social relations.

The phenomenon of sensing the dead’s presence suggests how social relations are embodied. Relations are not abstract concepts; they are felt and embodied experiences. It is not surprising that the majority of the respondents who report sensing the dead’s presence are widows or widowers. Our relationships to our marital and romantic partners could be one of the most powerfully evocative bonds that we can experience in our lifetime. But, apparently, it is so robust that it can extend beyond one’s lifetime. The stronger the bonds that I have with another person, the more bodily aware I will be of that person. That person will also have a greater bodily effect on me. The effect will be so great that even if the person is absent or dead, my body remains attuned to that person’s presence. We often speak of how persons leave their mark on us, but there are those persons whose mark
remains deeply felt. A useful way of thinking about this is to place this phenomenon as one of our “somatic modes of attention”, which Csordas (1993, p. 135) defines as the “culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others”:

To attend to a bodily sensation is not to attend to the body as an isolated object, but to attend to the body’s situation in the world. The sensation engages something in the world because the body is “always already in the world.” Attention to a bodily sensation can thus become a mode of attending to the intersubjective milieu that give rise to that sensation. Thus, one is paying attention with one’s body (Csordas 1993, p. 135).

Sensing the dead may be viewed as an extended somatic mode of attention that puts us literally in touch with those whom we have been in touch with during their lifetime. While this might seem like a supernatural occurrence, sensing the presence of the dead uncovers how human existence is rooted in how embodiment ties our intersubjectivity to our intercorporeality (Csordas 2008).

Positing that the “self is always embodied as well as always social”, McCarthy and Prokhovnik (2013) introduces the term ‘embodied relationality’, which implies that since embodiment is our mode of being in the world, we cannot but relate to and experience one another through our bodies:

Embodied relationality thus allows us to consider a close, enfleshed, relationship as generating an ‘us’ that helps to shape the ‘me’ and the ‘you’. The ‘me’ and the ‘you’ as well as the ‘us’ are expressed and constructed differently through diverse cultural and personal resources, and vary greatly in how the boundaries between these terms are understood. While ‘you’ and ‘I’ potentially have multiple identities, the ‘us’ is a field of intensity between ‘me’ and ‘you’, expressed in an embodied orientation which includes but is not reducible to an affective attunement. ‘My’ sense of my own bodily integrity coexists with my strong sense of embodied relationality expressed in ‘us’. With the death of a loved one, the biological body of ‘you’ is buried or cremated, while the material presence of ‘you’ is not wholly erased but remains in
significant ways. But also, and crucially, the ‘us’ remains as an embodied relationality, held with ‘me’ in many embodied forms; the ‘us’ is written into ‘my’ body, and continues to have material presence after death (McCarthy & Prokhovnik 2013, p. 32).

Embodied relationality lends credence to the reported experience where the dead can be sensed in and through our own bodies. I am not claiming anything new in saying that sensing the dead’s presence highlights the fact that we can only know through our bodies. Following the philosopher Gabriel Marcel’s (1950) phenomenological discourse on the body, since I do not only ‘have’ a body in the sense of having something that I possess, but that I ‘am’ my body in the sense that I am an embodied consciousness, the world that I know becomes intelligible only through my embodiment. In other words, our ways of knowing and relating will always be couched in bodily terms.

Our continuing relationship with the dead affirms that the deceased are not only imaginary entities that we tenuously hold in our minds, but that we maintain bonds with them because they are embodied in us. Therefore, rather than referring to how the dead can live on through us, it makes more sense to speak of how the dead live on in us. Being in relation to another suggests that our bodies/selves are not entirely ‘mine’ nor ‘yours’ anymore but they become ‘ours’ in the sense that ‘mine’ and ‘yours’ embody ‘ours’ in social relations that go beyond death. This leads us to an inevitable conclusion regarding how posthumous agency can be conceived even without the corpse of the dead, or without the mediation of things. But before that, we differentiate between corporeality and embodiment, where the former implies the body as a social actant, while the latter implies the body as a medium of social agency:
The body as social actant refers to the unmediated materiality of the body and its material actions and reactions that are socially realized without recourse to concepts of agency or intent. The body as a social agent, by contrast refers to its materiality being as inseparable element in the expression of personal and social identity (Gilleard & Higgs 2015, p. 17).

Corporeality contextualizes our embodiment, which means that our social possibilities and limitations, our agency as humans, are contingent on the facticity of the body. I can act in certain ways because of the body. But I can also not act in certain ways because of the body. The body as corporeality is central to embodiment; without a body, I am nobody. Continuing bonds, however, allows the deceased, who are bereft of their own corporeality, to be embodied in another corporeality, and, through this embodiment, to act in the world and express their agency. Since the corporeality of the living is not a solitary but a social entity, it follows that this corporeality is inevitably an embodied relationality as well. Thus, we can see how sensing the presence of the dead is an embodied experience of the deceased’s agency in the world. The deceased, embodied in and through the corporeality of the living, concretizes their presence and agency in the world. Therefore, since the bereaved becomes the visible index of the dead’s agency, Gell’s theory is still applicable to continuing bonds.

As we have hinted at in our discussion of continuing bonds so far, there are two difficulties in seeing how continuing bonds can be an expression of posthumous agency. The first difficulty is that continuing bonds appear to manifest a unidirectional agency that originates from the living and is directed towards the dead. With this impression, the dead merely becomes passive ‘patients’, bereft of agency, whose social existence and relevance depend entirely on whether the dead
will remember them. However, this would be a misrepresentation because death, as we have argued in the first chapter, is social at its core. Moreover, there is evidence, as the bereaved acknowledge, that the dead continue to be actively involved and significantly influencing the lives of those who survive them (Marwit & Klass 1996). Therefore, the dead are not only passive, but they seem to be committed and involved agents, engaging in an ongoing interactive relationship with the living (Klass et al. 1996, p. 349; Normand et al. 1996).

Continuing bonds, like all social relations, demonstrate how posthumous agency is situated within a web of living and deceased who are interacting with each other. While some theorizations of agency might give the impression that the world is like a still pond waiting for a pebble to be dropped in it in order to create a ripple that spreads throughout the surface, a phenomenology of posthumous agency, in this case, through the experiential accounts of how the living construe the effect of the dead on their lives, would wean us away from a mechanical view, which appears to be more concerned in locating the origins of this agency, and move towards an experiential account of how agency that construes how agency is a lived experience felt, understood, and inferred by agents-in-a-world-with-other-agents.

The second difficulty with continuing bonds deal with criticisms of how its practices evoke “hallucinatory”, “illusory”, and “supernatural” discourses. I have taken the track of arguing posthumous agency as the agency of the pre-deceased abducted by the living mediated through the corporeality and the materiality of the dead. From this perspective, certain expressions of continuing bonds through interactions with ghosts and spirits, or physically sensing the dead’s presence would
seem to lie beyond the scope of the approach that I have taken so far; presuming again after Hallam and Hockey (2001), that our relationship to the dead is materially mediated. What seems significant about continuing bonds as an interactive inner representation of the deceased is the implication that the dead can be still be evocative agents even without their actual corporeal presence, affirming what Hallam et al. (1999) contend about the body as unnecessary to personhood and social presence beyond physical death.

However, as I have explained earlier in this section, the dead are not, in a manner of speaking, without bodies. They may be dis-embodied from their own bodies, but they are embodied in others. Embodied relationality provides a way of understanding how the dead could be embodied in the corporeality of the living. This embodiment, which allows the dead to act in the world, does not suggest a kind of supernatural possession by the dead. Instead, the dead act in us and through us because, even without their bodies, our relationships are inevitably inscribed in our bodies. In continuing bonds, the agency of the dead, though disembodied from the deceased's actual corporeality, is relationally embodied and realized in and through the corporeality of the living.

A final point about continuing bonds suggest that posthumous agency is socially and culturally mediated. The dead and the living form a symbiotic relationship. Posthumous agency, as we have outlined in this chapter, is situated in a network of embodied relations. We have seen how a robust sociality generates greater agency for the dead. Bonds formed in significant relationships do not die along with the dead of the significant other. Rather, these relationships continue to
be socially mediated in interactions with the dead. The widespread evidence of continuing bonds and the variations in how the dead are being perceived suggest that the social presence and the agency of the dead are culturally mediated. As we have argued in the first chapter, the social construction of death lends to different practices of how the dead are re-integrated into society. For example, in a comparative study of continuing bonds in Japan and in North America, Klass (2001) found that while both cultures manifest continuing bonds, the centrality and sophistication of death rituals and practices determine the extent of the influence of the dead in the larger society. The practices in which the dead are re-integrated into society modulate the agency that they wield in the social sphere of the living. Nevertheless, as social relations and culture are mediated by material culture, social and cultural inflections of continuing bonds remain expressed in tangible and embodied ways.

In this chapter, I have explored the theme of posthumous agency through the theory of continuing bonds. I have argued that, though continuing bonds might assert the unidirectional agency of the bereaved, it affirms the agency of the dead by highlighting their influence in motivating the bereaved to maintain their bonds with the deceased. I have addressed two major doubts that arise from certain practices of continuing bonds in order to highlight that continuing bonds is a deeply embodied and corporeal agency of the dead. I have also shown that continuing bonds benefit the dead in establishing a robust sociality that provides them with the context to become co-agents of their continuing posthumous social presence. I have further argued that the continuing interest of the bereaved suggests that the agency of the dead encourages this interest. Moreover, I have also shown that
posthumous agency is socially and culturally mediated as evidenced by the widespread but culturally diverse ways that people maintain their bonds with the dead. Finally, I have argued that Gell’s theory is still relevant in theorizing the agency of the dead in continuing bonds.
CHAPTER SIX: Posthumous Agency on Facebook

Coda: What then is Posthumous Agency?

In this thesis, I have relied on Gell’s art nexus as a theoretical tool for making sense of how the inanimate—which is, really, what the dead are, after all—become social agents. I have appropriated this theory in arguing for posthumous agency because phenomenological accounts of the dead’s presence resemble what Gell (1998, p. 13) calls as “art-like situations”, that is, instances when a “material ‘index’ (the visible, physical, ‘thing’) permits a particular cognitive operation . . . the abduction of agency”. In other words, while we may refer to the dead in a general sense, more often than not, the dead for us, are our beloved dead who have impressed themselves on us in embodied and concrete ways. Our dead have names, faces, bodies, and histories. They are not abstract, imaginary entities. They are real persons whom we sense behind our experience with our dead. I have argued earlier that the dead, or rather, our experiences of the dead, are mediated by material culture. We use things to commemorate those who have passed away; it is also through things that we are reminded of them when we seem to have forgotten. I have also addressed that even in certain situation that seem to lack a corporeal presence or material mediation, the dead are not entirely disembodied; rather, they are in fact embodied in the corporeality of the bereaved, relying on the strength and embodiment of their social relations to mediate and extend their agency beyond death.

There are two main points that can be drawn from our thematic treatment of posthumous agency. Firstly, posthumous agency refers to the secondary agency
of the ‘index’ motivating the ‘recipient’ to abduct the primary agency of the ‘prototype’, modified by the presence or absence of an ‘artist’. In lay terms, posthumous agency is the agency of the pre-deceased abducted by those who survive them from any of the following indices: the corpse; objects, places, and spaces of the dead; and from the bereaved or mourners themselves. Secondly, the themes of posthumous agency demonstrate the centrality of the concept of mediation in detecting and expressing agency. The agency of the dead reflects Ahearn’s (2001, p. 112) definition of agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act”, which, applied to this case, is detected and inferred from the mediation of the corpse, the material objects of the dead, and in continuing bonds with the dead. The mediation of culture, expressed through corporeality, materiality, and sociality, provide our heuristic lens in further examining the agency of the dead on Facebook. It could be argued that the emphasis on mediation shifts attention away from what ought to be the focus of agency, that is, on the nature of the agency itself. Since agency itself is a contested concept, as I have discussed in Chapter Two, I purposely veered from resolving what agency is, rather I side once again with Gell in saying:

For the anthropologist, the problem of ‘agency’ is not a matter of prescribing the most rational or defensible notion of agency, in that the anthropologist’s task is to describe forms of thought which could not stand up to much philosophical scrutiny but which are none the less, socially and cognitively practicable.

For the anthropologist ‘folk’ notions of agency, extracted from everyday practices and discursive forms, are of concern, not ‘philosophically defensible’ notions of agency. . . . I am going to take seriously notions about agency which even philosophers would probably not want to defend. . . . I do so, because, in practice, people do attribute intentions and awareness to objects like cars and image of the gods. The idea of agency is a culturally prescribed framework for thinking about causation, when what happens is (in some vague sense) supposed to be intended in advance by some person-agent or thing-
agent. Whenever an event is believed to happen because of an ‘intention’ lodged in the person or thing which initiates the causal sequence, that is an instance of agency (Gell 1998, pp. 16-17).

I have argued in the previous chapters how corporeality, materiality, and sociality mediate posthumous agency. I now address three questions to determine whether the dead on Facebook can be posthumous agents as well. Firstly, is there a ‘body’ on Facebook? Secondly, is Facebook a thing? Thirdly, does Facebook exhibit sociality?

Is there a ‘body’ on Facebook?

There are no physical bodies nor actual corpses on Facebook. There might be photos of bodies and corpses, but they do not exhibit the tangible physicality of human bodies. Williams (2004, p. 265) restates that the “corporeal presence of the dead provides an agency to affect the experience and actions of mourners”. If posthumous agency is expressed through the corporeality of the dead, how can the Facebook dead express agency if there are no physical corpses? While there are no actual corpses on Facebook, the absence of a physical body is substituted by a ‘virtual body’, which is how persons are embodied in virtual space (Boellstorff 2011). The virtual bodies of Facebook users are “distinctively tied to their corporeality” (Stokes 2011b, p. 365). Virtual bodies are thus referents of actual bodies.

Facebook is one of many social network sites (SNS)\textsuperscript{20}. As with all SNS, when you sign up for Facebook, you are first asked to create a profile. Your profile

\textsuperscript{20} SNS are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a
becomes your basic online identity. It establishes your presence on Facebook. Users grow and cultivate their profile by adding more personal information about themselves. Giddens (1991) argues that the self in modernity is a ‘reflexive project’. Facebook profiles give evidence to the self as a reflexive project. This can be seen in how users groom their profile by deciding on what status updates to write, what photos and videos to display, what movies or songs to ‘like’, which friends to add, and so on. In building this corpus of information, profiles begin to embody the user on Facebook. Shilling (2003) argues that the increasing tendency in modernity to associate the self with the body has also resulted in the body becoming a project. On Facebook, grooming the profile is not only a project of the self but it also becomes a virtual body project. Thus, one’s profile on Facebook could be viewed as a virtually embodied self.

Is Facebook a ‘thing’?

It could be argued that Facebook is not a ‘thing’ because it is not a physical object. It feels, however, like a thing. For example, we can ‘see’ it and ‘interact’ with it; we can ‘use’ it to connect with friends, change our profile picture, or delete photos that we might have impulsively posted online. Joohan Kim (2001, p. 89) introduces the term ‘digital beings’ to refer to “all kinds of digitized information—that is, a series of bi-nary digits or bits—that can be ultimately perceived by the human body”. Digital beings, however, are ambiguous: they are things, such as in their durability; but they are also non-things since they are not bound by time and connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison 2007, p. 211).

21 Durability is a characteristic which permits us to repeatedly interact with things (Kim 2001, p. 91).
space (Kim 2001). To resolve this paradox, Kim (2001) proposes that digital beings should be situated somewhere between material and mental entities. Facebook profiles seem akin to digital beings. It might not seem obvious at first but our Facebook profiles are actually not just found on Facebook itself, but our information is stored somewhere in physical storage devices, distributed through wires and Wi-Fi, and accessed through computers or mobile devices by different people walking or sitting in different places at possibly simultaneous times. As digital beings, our Facebook profiles are “hybridized or spread across various dwellings, some physical and material, some digital and semiotic” (Graham et al. 2013, p. 134). Facebook, then, is not less of a thing but more than just a thing.

**Does Facebook exhibit sociality?**

The fact that Facebook is a social network site seems enough to answer this question. But I think the more pertinent concern here is whether Facebook as a virtual space has created a new and totally different online sociality. It is commonly assumed that digital technology is a catalyst for change, for better or for worse. Facebook News reports and anecdotal accounts abound regarding how Facebook has altered the way we once related to each other. But this conclusion seems rather hasty. Miller and Slater’s (2000) ethnographic study of Internet use in Trinidad shows how offline and online life are intertwined:

The notion of cyberspace as a place apart from offline life would lead us to expect to observe a process in which participants are abstracted and distanced from local and embodied social relations. . .We found utterly the opposite. Trinidadians. . .invest much energy in trying to make online life as Trinidadian as they can make it, to see the internet as a place to perform Trini-ness (Miller & Slater 2000, p. 7).
This finding affirms Dobres and Hoffman (1994) argument that “technology is an arena for dynamic social interactions”. Sociality shapes technology. In another study of how people have adopted to the use of landline telephones in America, Fischer (1992, p. 260) argues that “basic social patterns are not easily altered by new technologies—they are resilient even to widespread innovations”, rather new technologies “resulted in a reinforcement, a deepening, a widening, of existing lifestyles more than in any new departure” (p. 263).

This becomes evident in how the sociality that underlies death shapes how online technologies are being used. In his PhD thesis examining Vietnamese online memorials, Anthony Heathcote (2015) argues that online practices suggest a continuity of offline practices of honoring and remembering the dead. Research into online grieving practices in web memorials and SNS have prominently featured and affirmed continuing bonds with the deceased. The massive evidence of posthumous sociality attests that online technology does not give rise to totally new forms of sociality; rather it only reaffirms how people socially interact. As Miller (2011, p. 217) observes, “the single most important attribute of Facebook is not what is new about it, but the degree to which it seems to help us to return to the kind of involvement in social networks that we believe we have lost”.

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Posthumous Agency and the Facebook Profile

Having shown that the same themes of posthumous agency are found in Facebook, I now build on these themes to explore how the scenario of active and public profiles of the dead on Facebook can express posthumous agency.

I have referred to posthumous agency as the secondary agency of the ‘index’ motivating the ‘recipient’ to abduct the primary agency of the ‘prototype’, modified by presence or absence of an ‘artist’. While the agency of the index is only secondary, the index plays a central role:

[U]nless there is an index, there can be no abductions of agency, and since the topic of this theoretical enterprise is precisely the abduction of agency from indexes, the index has to be present for analysis to proceed. One can construct formulae which lack the artist, or the recipient, or the prototype, but not ones which lack the index (Gell 1998, p. 36).

Posthumous agency on Facebook would be theoretically impossible without an index. That is why we had settle the question of whether there is body on Facebook or whether Facebook could be considered a thing. Even if only one of those questions was positively resolved, we would still be able to come up with an index that would make Gell’s theory applicable. The other question pertaining to sociality determines whether there are social relations that could make an abduction of agency from the index. On Facebook, the active profile serves as the [Index]. This profile represents the [Prototype], or the image of the pre-deceased user represented by the profile. The self-image of the user [Prototype] influences the

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23 I use the word pre-deceased to denote that the agency that is abducted from the index is properly derived from the primary agency of a human agent. In the context where the abduction of agency is being made from the profile, the pre-deceased is of course deceased. In a manner of speaking, when the dead is said to be exercising agency, it is actually the residual, primary agency of the pre-deceased.
[Artist] or the pre-deceased user creating the profile. The other users interacting with the profile will be the [Recipient].

Following this, I interpret posthumous agency on Facebook as the agency of the pre-deceased abducted by other users through the existing profile created by the deceased, where:


Brubaker and Vertesi (2010, p. 2) observe that messages left on the “wall” of the dead user’s profile “commonly end with an assertion that the user, was, in fact there, participating, or watching”. Kasket (2012, p. 65) verifies this in her own research where 77% of messages written for the dead on Facebook directly addressed the dead using a “second-person address (i.e. ‘you’)”. Facebook as a SNS seems to encourage an even greater abduction of agency and presence because in an earlier study of web memorials by Roberts (2004b) only 30% addressed the dead directly. These evidences suggest that other users generally abduct the pre-deceased in the profile. We thus modify the gellogram accordingly to reflect how prototype and the artist are conflated as agents of the Facebook profile:

We have seen how the dead’s Facebook profile is essential to mediating the posthumous agency of the dead. Taking a philosophical approach, Patrick Stokes (2011a) argues that our recollection of the dead as concrete, specific, and distinct individuals confers on them the actuality and otherness that allows them to claim

24 The ‘Wall’ is now obsolete on Facebook. This has been replaced by the ‘Timeline’.
and make moral demands on us. Seen in this light, the corporeality and materiality of the profile provide the concreteness, specificity, and distinctiveness for the dead on Facebook to exercise agency on their social network. Furthermore, the potency of the dead on Facebook is further augmented by SNS which “represent a technology for articulating, expressing, and expanding the agential and phenomenal reach of our anchored, socially recognized, intersubjective identity” (Stokes 2011b, p. 378).

Looking at posthumous agency through the Facebook profile of the dead presumes that the profile is a kind of virtual corpse (Tucker 2014). Although I was initially inclined, following Tucker, to treat the profile as a virtual corpse, and similarly conclude that posthumous agency is inferred from the materiality of the profile, this understanding of posthumous agency on Facebook seems to stem from an old, profile-centric understanding of SNS. I argue that Ellison and boyd’s (2013) definition 2.0 of SNS recasts agency from being abducted through the profile as a user-generated page, to an agency which is more dependent on the social network of other users, and on the system-generated context that contribute to the evolving identity of the profile as well as its enlivened presence in the newsfeeds/personal space of other users. Unlike a corpse, the profile of the dead tends to evolve. It becomes animated because profiles nowadays, based on the most recent definition of SNS, are a shared creation:

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25 SNS 2.0 definition: A social network site is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system provided data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site. (Ellison & boyd 2013, p. 158)
Today’s profiles are not simply self-descriptive, static text, but rather a
dynamic combination of content provided by the user (such as status
updates), activity reports (such as groups they’ve joined), content
provided by others (such as virtual gifts that are displayed on the profile
or “tagged” photographs uploaded by others), and/or system provided
content (such as a subset of one’s Friend network and activities on
third-party sites.) (Ellison & boyd 2013, p. 155).

After death, the profile becomes more dependent on others and on system-
generated content. Research on identity construction on SNS suggests, that on
Facebook, “selves are constituted through interaction with others” (Livingstone
2008, p. 407). The dead, it seems, do not remain as a static presence on Facebook.
The fact that there is a certain dynamism to their profile would also bestow them
with a dynamic agency in their network. Moreover, the robust sociality online
evidenced by the widespread practice of continuing bonds in SNS assures the
constant evocation of the dead’s agency on Facebook. In addition, Bell et al. (2015)
argue that Facebook’s platform encourages multiple practices of commemorating
the dead, which in turn, allows the dead to remain actively involved in the lives of
those who survive them. That the profile of the dead can change depending on
interactions in its social network would enliven the profile, and therefore, evoke an
animated agency as well. Kember and Zylinska (2012, p. xvii) argue that this
vitality—“the possibility of the emergence of forms always new, or its potentiality
to generate unprecedented connections and unexpected events”—characterize
media such as Facebook.

The implications of sociality on Facebook seems to distribute posthumous
agency throughout the social network of the dead. The sociality of the social
network enlivens and generates more agency for the dead. Recent iterations of SNS
emphasize its nature as a “networked communication platform” (Ellison & boyd
2013, p. 158) means that it becomes easier to connect and share content with everybody. “Streams of user generated content provided by their connections” (Ellison & Boyd 2013, p. 158) activate the profiles of the dead enabling them to become more visible in their social network. Continuing bonds assure activity from the deceased’s connections; as other users generate activity, the dead’s profile appears more frequently in the news feed of the people through the deceased’s social network, thus creating even more possibilities for them to exert agency by evoking further interactions from the living. A person writing a message on the Timeline of the dead sends a ripple effect throughout the social network, increasing the probability of the dead evoking another interaction from another node in his network. What this means is that as long as the dead is on Facebook, the sociality of the social network in which the dead is embedded guarantees his enduring presence and agency.

Posthumous agency on Facebook tend to be evocative and vivid because new technologies afford “telepresence after death” (Lombard & Markardian Selverian 2008). This kind of presence refers to the “perceptual illusion of nonmediation”, which occurs in two ways when:

(a)The medium can appear to be invisible or transparent and function as would a large open window, with the medium user and the medium content (objects and entities) sharing the same physical environment; and (b) the medium can appear to be transformed into something other than a medium, a social entity (Lombard & Ditton 1997, sec. 2, par. 1).

To visualize how telepresence affects posthumous agency on Facebook, we recall the gellogram below, which we have formulated to denote posthumous agency on Facebook:

\[ \text{pre-deceased-A} \rightarrow \text{profile-A} \rightarrow \rightarrow \text{other users-P} \]
If you think about it, this notation of agency on Facebook does not differ from how living agents would be exercising their agency on Facebook. Brubaker (2015, p. 210) explains in his PhD thesis that “Technologically, the post-mortem account is no different than the pre-mortem account”. On Facebook, telepresence makes the profile transparent to both users such that the medium seems to put them directly in touch with each other. In the case of the deceased’s profile, telepresence further makes sense of the evidence revealing how other users continue to address the dead in the second person. The seeming invisibility or transparency of the medium implies that, the more technology simulates the reality of presence by appealing to as many senses as possible, the greater the perceptual illusion it creates, thus contributing to a greater sense of copresence. Posthumous agency on Facebook is potent because the mere presence of profiles of the dead serve as windows allows us to glimpse into the agent themselves. This transparency echoes Miller’s (Miller 1987) argument for the “humility of things”:

> [O]bjects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, we often precisely because we do not “see” them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are conscious of their capacity to do so (Miller 2005, p. 5).

Posthumous agency on Facebook relies on the humility of Facebook to encourage sociality through communication and interaction. In addition, deprived of the agency that has centered on the evocative and sensorial materiality of the corpse—the rigor mortis, the decaying body, the foul odor—the dead on Facebook continue to exhibit agency because the “absence” of this heavy sensory register snatches our attention away from the dead’s profile—the material technology of
SNS. On one level, the humility of Facebook hides the fact that our interactions with the dead are mediated and shaped by this technology. On another level, the humility of Facebook hides the concrete registers of death. In doing so, this technology makes us think that we are still interacting with the deceased whose actual corporeality, in fact, has long been missing from Facebook. Part of the difficulty, or the confusion, that we have in dealing with the dead on SNS is that while we do recognize them to be dead, they don’t appear to be dead. There is no corpse that serves as a sensory reminder of their deceased state. Their remains are not sequestered or hidden away from everyday view. Instead, they remain “alive”—as though they were merely suspended in the virtual space as do all of the users on Facebook. The blurring of physical, spatial, and temporal boundaries characterizes a user’s presence on Facebook, regardless of whether one is still alive or dead. The fact that Facebook as a technology does not venture into algorithms to determine one’s mortal status is an indication of how, for this particular technology, concretely (virtually) mirrors the ambivalence that characterize our attitudes towards death. The transparency, humility, and ambivalence of this medium enable the potent agency of the dead.
In explaining this topic to people who are curious as to why I research dead people on Facebook, I ask them if they have ever wondered why the dead still get tagged in photos and posts, receive occasional greetings, and appear every now and then on their news feed just like the living. I tell them that this is not just a “glitch in the Matrix.” Trying to make sense of these social interactions with the dead on Facebook has led me to consider why the dead, instead of being left out of the loop, remain socially active. Implicit in that involvement, of course, is the question of whether the dead have anything to do with that social presence at all. Could they be exercising posthumous agency, and, if so, how?

Common sense might immediately dismiss this question as nonsense: how can the dead act if they are dead? In reviewing the anthropological literature on death, I have shown that the dead do not become totally extinct; rather, they are reintegrated and recirculated in society. Contrary to the assumption that “Death closes all,” I have argued that the sociality indicative and constitutive of death reconstitutes the dead’s social existence, which further bestows on the dead the stature to wield influence over the living. Moreover, even though death engenders ambivalent attitudes and shifting discourses, I argue that this ambivalence works to the dead’s advantage because it implies that the dead would have to be a social fact.

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26 A popular line from the sci-fi movie, The Matrix (1999), uttered by one of its main characters, Trinity: “A déjà vu is usually a glitch in the Matrix. It happens when they change something.”

27 A line from Tennyson’s poem, “Ulysses”.
that society must deal with and cannot ignore. Thus, the social presence and influence of the dead among the living needs to be carefully considered.

Just as sociality constitutes death, death also constitutes sociality. Investigating this facet of death entails reconsidering what agency means. If the dead can generate social life, then what does that say about an agency that is often taken to be distinctive of human beings. Human agency presupposes a living, embodied, conscious, and intentional being. Clearly, the dead do not fulfill all these criteria. But, as I have discussed, agency is contested by different articulations that fall along a continuum that runs from agency as exclusively human on one end, towards a non-human and non-living agency on the other end. I have shown that since the interest in human agency has been historically and socially contingent, understanding how agency arises from a techno-social context could also evoke other forms and articulations of agency. Since current definitions of human agency that focus on the individual, on embodied consciousness, and on intentional action reflect certain cultural assumptions about personhood, evidence of other cultural models of personhood might deem conventional presuppositions of human agency inapplicable. Rather than being moot, I argue that the slipperiness of the concept of agency offers possibilities of recasting agency, even extending it to the dead.

I have examined how agency can be attributed to the dead in three ways: through the corpse, the material culture of the dead, and the practice of continuing bonds. Building on the work of Sheila Harper (2010) on the agency of dead bodies, I have also applied Alfred Gell’s (1998) theory of the art nexus to analyze further the agency of the dead through material culture and continuing bonds. I argue that
what these three instances of posthumous agency have in common is the mediation of an index—manifested in the corporeal, material, and social presence of the dead—which motivates a relational and contextual abduction of agency.

In evaluating the Facebook profile of the dead through the heuristics of corporeality, materiality, and sociality, I have found Gell’s theory applicable to the dead on Facebook. I have argued, however, that while the Facebook profile of the dead is not a physical corpse nor a material thing, its status as a virtual body and a digital being creates affordances that resemble the strengths and augment the limitations of physical corpses and material things in invoking agency for the dead. I have also shown that being embedded on a SNS such as Facebook guarantees an enduring posthumous presence and agency that is mediated, sustained, and distributed throughout the social network. Lastly, I have shown that Facebook profiles manifest a potent sense of agency because of the seeming transparency of digital communication technologies in evoking telepresence.

When I first sought to investigate posthumous agency on Facebook, I thought that I would only conclude with a concept of agency that contradicts a commonly held notion of human agency as life. But as I have realized upon concluding this thesis, posthumous agency seems to reveal how agency might straddle fuzzy boundaries—that instead of just the living, it can be exhibited by the dead; that instead of being pinned on an individual, it can be distributed across one’s social network; that instead of being exclusively human, it can be shared and augmented by technology—giving further evidence of why agency has been such a contested issue for anthropology and the social sciences.
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Table 1. The Art Nexus (Gell 1998, p. 29)

**APPENDIX A: GELL’S ART NEXUS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGENT</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Prototype</th>
<th>Recipient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Artist as source of creative act</td>
<td>Material inherently dictates to artist the form it assumes</td>
<td>Prototype controls artist’s action, appearance of prototype imitated by artist. Realistic art.</td>
<td>Recipient cause of artist’s action (as patron)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>Material stuff shaped by artist’s agency and intention</td>
<td>Index as cause of itself: ‘self-made’</td>
<td>Prototype dictates the form taken by index</td>
<td>Recipient the cause of the origination and form taken by the index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient</td>
<td>Appearance of prototype dictated by artist. Imaginative art</td>
<td>Image or actions of prototype controlled by means of index, a locus of power over prototype</td>
<td>Prototype as cause of index</td>
<td>Recipient has power over the prototype. Vot sorcery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prototype</td>
<td>Recipient’s response dictated by artist’s skill, vot, magical powers, etc. Recipient captivated,</td>
<td>Index source of power over recipient. Recipient as ‘spectator’ submits to index.</td>
<td>Prototype has power over the recipient. Image of prototype used to control actions of recipient. Idolatry.</td>
<td>Recipient as patron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recipient as spectator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: BINARY EXPRESSIONS

Expressions with Index as Agent

Index-A --------> Artist-P
The index is the material thing which motivates abductions of an art-related kind. . . . in certain instances, it is an agency in the material of the index, which is held to control the artist, who is a patient with respect to this transaction (Gell 1998, pp. 28-29).

Index-A --------> Recipient-P
This is the elementary formula for 'passive spectatorship', which is of course not at all difficult to conceptualize or exemplify. Whoever allows his or her attention to be attracted to an index, and submits to its power, appeal, or fascination, is a patient, responding to the agency inherent in the index. This agency may be physical, spiritual, political, etc. as well as 'aesthetic'. (Gell 1998, p. 31)

Index-A --------> Prototype-P
Here the index behaves as an agent with respect to its prototype. A familiar example of this is provided by Wilde's short story *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*, in which the ageing undergone by the picture in the attic causes the prototype to retain his youthful good looks indefinitely. . . . Another type of instance . . . is in sorcery, where the injury done to a representation of the victim causes injury to the victim . . . (Gell 1998, p. 32)

Expressions with Index as Patient

Artist-A --------> Index-P
This is the elementary formula for artistic agency. The index usually motivates the abduction of the agency of the person who made it. The index is, in these instances, a congealed 'trace' of the artist's creative performance. (Gell 1998, p. 33)

Recipient-A --------> Index-P
This is the elementary formula for 'patronage' and/or 'the spectator as agent'. In so far as a recipient can abduct his/her own agency from an index, this formula is satisfied. One does not have to lift a finger in order to feel that one has 'made' something. (Gell 1998, p. 33)

Prototype-A --------> Index-P
The agency of the prototype can frequently be abducted from the index. There are obvious ways in which 'prototypes' can have agency attributed to them. In our own art system this kind of agency is everywhere manifest, since it is essential to the notion of 'realistic representation'. (Gell 1998, p. 35)
Illegitimate Expressions

**Artist-A --------> Prototype-P**
This is the general formula for 'imaginary' images made by artists. From our point of view, an index is an instance of 'imaginary' image-making, when its appearance is held to have been dictated by the artist and to be an index of his agency as an imaginer of the appearances of things. (Gell 1998, pp. 38-39)

**Prototype-A --------> Artist-P**
The formula for 'realist' image-making. Here, the appearance of the prototype dictates what the artist does. . . . The prototype, as social agent, in this case, impresses his/her/its appearance on the index, via the mediating agency of the artist, who is a 'patient' with respect to the prototype while remaining an 'agent' with respect to the index. (Gell 1998, p. 39)

**Artist-A --------> Recipient-P**
This formula expresses the power of the artist as a social agent over the recipient as a social patient. Many works of art inspire wonder, awe, fear, and other powerful emotions in the spectator. (Gell 1998, p. 39)

**Recipient-A --------> Artist-P**
The formula for the 'artist as artisan', that is, a hired hand who does the recipient's bidding. (Gell 1998, p. 39)

**Prototype-A --------> Recipient-P**
One might call this the 'idol' formula. Here the agency abducted from the index, by the patient-recipient, is that of the prototype, who, besides causing the index to assume a certain appearance, exercises social agency vis-a-vis the recipient. (Gell 1998, p. 40)

**Recipient-A --------> Prototype-P**
This is the 'volt sorcery' formula. Volt sorcery is the practice of inflicting harm on the prototype of an index by inflicting harm on the index; for example, sticking pins into a wax image of the prototype. (Gell 1998, p. 40)

Expressions Showing Self-Reciprocal Agency

**Index-A --------> Index-P**
An index can be seen as the 'cause' of itself. (Gell 1998, p. 41)

**Artist-A --------> Artist-P**
Every artist is a patient with respect to the agency s/he exercises, indeed, artistic agency cannot proceed otherwise. (Gell 1998, p. 42)

**Recipient-A --------> Recipient-P**
The category of 'recipients' splits into agents and patients in a very salient fashion, so much so that one might be tempted to deny that it was really a single category at all. The differentiation that I have in mind is that between 'passive spectators' (the
general art public) and 'patrons'-those who actually commission artists to produce works of art, and whose agency, as patrons, is consequently indexed in the works of art they have caused to come into existence. (Gell 1998, p. 47)

Prototype-A --------> Prototype-P
The prototype of an index can be a patient with respect to the index which, by representing him or her, incorporates his or her agency. (Gell 1998, p. 48)