PARENTAL GRIEF AND PHOTOGRAPHIC REMEMBRANCE

SHARING DEATH ONLINE

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Humans face and deal with death and loss through media and technologies at hand. In contemporary culture, online media is perhaps the most important arena for the (re-) interpretations, (re-)mediations and performances of traditions, practices and beliefs related to death and dying. While some of these traditions are indeed new and digitally born, others are revitalisations of older death-related practices.

Sharing Death Online is a new book series with the ambition to embrace the fact that death is both a basic human condition that humans share socially and an event in human life that calls people to be intimate and to share their human experiences, both in relation to death and to other basic life conditions such as family, love, loneliness, health, friends, etc. Death is crisis, endpoint, turning point, however, at the same time a source of experimentation, creativity and transgression.

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PARENTAL GRIEF AND PHOTOGRAPHIC REMEMBRANCE

A Historical Account of Undying Love

BY

FELICITY T. C. HAMER

Concordia University, Montreal

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Auntie Gail

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Felicity T. C. Hamer is a PhD candidate in the Communication Studies Program at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Perplexed by her own emotional response to photographs, she ventures to understand the complex ways in which photographic portraits extend our relationships beyond physical death. Within this context, Hamer examines the therapeutic potential of photography associated with death rituals and of Victorian-era Spirit Photography in particular. In a recent article, based on her MA Art History thesis, she challenges the dominant narrative of spirit photography's development: "Helen F. Stuart and Hannah Frances Green: the original spirit photographer", *History of Photography*, 42, no. 2 (2018): 146–167. Her research focusses on memory and imagination through photography; bereavement and photography; emotional engagement with photographs; paranormal, supernatural, magical and miraculous imagery; and intersections of religion and photography.

PREFACE

This has not been easy to write about. As someone who is deeply affected by photographic portraits, bereavement through photography is a particularly meaningful and at times painful topic to explore. As a mother, delving into the mementoes and testimony of parents who have lost children has been especially hard to bear. But perhaps, it is precisely this intense discomfort that makes the topic so meaningful. Though photographs of children abound on social media, bereaved parents might feel pressure to withdraw from oversharing on these platforms. Social media continues to remind them of their children and of their loss – everything does – but the bulk of their experience tends to be expressed within semi-private groups or sites devoted to the collective sharing of such losses. Facebook groups such as 'May We All Heal', 'Yes it is me with the dead boy' (ja det er mig med den døde dreng), 'Grieving Mothers', 'Child Loss Survivors', 'My Child did Exist', 'Child Loss and Grief Support', or various loss-specific groups moderated by *The Compassionate Friends* or Legacy.com are just a few of the spaces wherein individuals are free to push beyond the limits of more 'public' social media spaces. In the company of others who identify with their losses, the bereaved grapple with questions such as: What must be done with all that was imagined for their lost children? And, are they still parents?

Everyone must lose their parents. And the chronological correctness of these devastating losses renders this grief somehow more palatable to those who might offer comfort. Whereas the loss of a child was once a fairly widely felt experience – in North America – smaller family sizes and greater medical care have vastly lessened the incidence of childhood death. The death of a child feels disordered and especially tragic.[1] An inability to find adequate words of consolation can provoke profound discomfort and even avoidance of the bereaved. As a result, the bereaved are silenced and become isolated.[2] Whether shared with others or kept as personal mementoes, photographic portraits offer an opportunity for parents to express their love and willingness to remember. This volume explores such heartfelt expressions of remembrance through photography, making space for this unknowable, unimaginable sadness.

Grief is not contagious and yet a recently widowed friend shared with me that she sensed people avoiding her – certainly avoiding addressing her loss. At a time when she most needed support and to communicate her experience, she was isolated. Increasingly, semi-private social media groups enable the bereaved to experiment with intimacy, countering expectations of silence that dominated the second half of the twentieth century. Creative incorporations of photography within these spaces – even contested attempts – demonstrate a revival and renegotiation of historic practices.[3] Recurrent tendencies and their evolution within new media offer an opportunity to observe the complex relationships grief can prompt some individuals to form with the portraits of absent loved ones.

Photographic portraits of those who have passed have the potential to become valuable sites of remembrance. Memories are both fabricated and supported by these images; and the imaginative activity triggered by these visual traces helps

slow down and thereby soften the abrupt separation of the bereaved from the departed. Extending relationships beyond physical death, photographs suggest prolonged access to the departed via memory. As those who die young often leave little to no visual evidence, parents have conceived multiple creative means of procuring, enhancing and producing photographic mementoes. The loss of a child provokes a unique problem – the bereaved have had little time with the deceased and therefore struggle with the loss of all that *might have* been. All that was imagined in the anticipation of their child's future must also be grieved and creatively redirected. How does one effectively mourn a love that was never allowed to be fully realised? When so little imagery or lived experience exists to inform and sustain memories of the deceased, how might the role of the imagination be altered?

I am certain only of two things – the grief associated with loss needs to be expressed and photography offers an immensely impactful means of doing so. This book brings together multiple expressions of love and longing, each photographic portrait warmly embellished by a doting parent endeavouring to commemorate and prolong connection to the departed.[4] My interest in these images is rooted in my own love, my fear and desire to listen. A closer consideration of the behaviour of grieving through photography and the resulting images may foster greater empathy as well as new, more effective applications of the medium towards the care of those struggling with the loss of a child.

NOTES

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3. Morcate, M. and R. Pardo, "Illness, death and grief: the daily experience of viewing and sharing digital Images," in *Digital Photography and Everyday Life*, Eds. E. G. Cruz and A. Lehmuskallio (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016): 70–85; J. D. Bolter and R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

4. This book contributes to a growing body of literature tending to photography and bereavement. Some notable titles include: J. Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); J. Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005); A. Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014); S. B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twelvetrees, 1990); S. B. Burns and E. A. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty II: Grief, Bereavement and the Family in Memorial Photography, American & European Traditions* (Burns Collection Ltd, 2002); M. Morcate and R. Pardo, "Illness, death and grief: the daily experience of viewing and sharing digital Images, in *Digital Photography and Everyday Life*, (Abingdon:

Routledge, 2016): 94–109; J. Cadwallader, "Spirit photography and the Victorian culture of mourning", *Modern Language Studies*, 37, no. 2 (2008): 8–31; C. Blood and J. Cacciatore, "Parental grief and memento mori photography: narrative, meaning, culture, and context", *Death Studies*, 38, no. 4 (2014): 224–233.doi:10.1080/07481187.2013.788584.

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Felicity Tsering Chödron Hamer
Montreal, August 2019

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Fig. 1. Unknown. *Little Rosie*, n.d. Jack and Beverly Wilgus Collection.

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INTRODUCTION: SOMETHING TO REMEMBER THEM BY

Once a public spectacle of sorts, bereavement has become a more private affair in Western societies. The Victorian griever had occasion to communicate loss through their very attire. This status as well as their stage within the bereavement process were indicated through subtle variations in colour or via symbolic accessories. Prescribed through volumes akin to etiquette books, the mourner's complex script was taxing but perhaps brought a degree of structure to a chaotic moment.[1] Drawing attention to and indicating sorrow to the outside world, this dress-code conveyed information and may also have incited understanding and sympathy in others.

Life expectancy is higher in contemporary society, fewer women die in childbirth, fewer children die in infancy. Death is no longer understood as part of everyday life. Death has become anti-life – seemingly contagious. The modern griever passes as any other in most of their physical day-to-day interactions, but on social networking sites they tend to adhere to certain expectations, wearing their loss in a way that harkens outmoded bereavement etiquette. A degree of discomfort in the reception of these expressions persists and yet failure to acknowledge loss on these platforms can be equally troubling. I propose a few potential reasons for this, each rooted in personal observation but supported by current research in

the areas of bereavement and online culture.[2] My first point relates to expectations. Despite the known curation of social media presences, users often develop a sense of *knowing* one another intimately. Part of the appeal of these social media spaces is the assumption that others want to know about us and what we are up to. By extension, users may feel that acquaintances not only *want* but *deserve* updates with regards to significant life events. Loved ones help make us who we are and death announcements/tributes assert our continued connection to these individuals. This and the 'memorialising' of Facebook pages indicate that loss has occurred but also safeguard against the appearance of life where it is no longer – posing the deceased as dead, lest they be mistaken otherwise.[3] On social networking sites, it seems as though any life indicated must also be declared as ended – even if known only to others by way of a cherished 'baby bump' or ultrasound photo.

My second point relates to proximity and how this affects the delivery and reception of news of loss. Proximity – intimacy – is complicated in online interactions. Social networking sites enable individuals to communicate with and remain connected to others at any distance. And yet, as they are physically removed from the individuals who receive news of their loss, the bereaved are spared their initial reactions and any potential awkwardness. In turn, those who might offer support are afforded some time to develop more thoughtful responses, should they choose. Detached and perhaps emboldened by their remove from the 'messiness' of the other's feelings, they need not dwell too much on their sorrow. Unfortunately, this remove also deprives the bereaved of much physical support or opportunity to get into the 'messiness' of their feelings. In place of receiving support from those with whom they tended to interact with on a daily basis – physically and

virtually – the bereaved often seek out semi-private, grief-specific social networking groups where they can share a great deal more than might feel acceptable elsewhere. But even in these closed spaces, what is deemed appropriate for sharing is frequently contested.[4] Unsurprising, most conflicts are connected to differing conceptions of the afterlife or to photographic representations of the deceased. These spaces of collective grieving offer the bereaved an opportunity to openly speak of their grief – of loss and *absence* – to receptive and reciprocating forums. The *presence* of the deceased is a trickier topic. That is, there is less willingness to accommodate conflicting choices with regards to how the body of loved ones is viewed or imagined postmortem.

Most contemporary North Americans and Western Europeans are not accustomed to viewing death up close. Not only because they are personally touched by it with less frequency, but also as it tends to occur out of sight – in hospitals.[5] In the eighteenth century, people were more likely to be born and to die in the home, and women were the primary caretakers. Birthing and caring for children, women also tended to the sick and dying – even washing and preparing the bodies of the dead. Emphasis was placed on the value of a 'good death', and deathbed accounts were often penned for family who could not be there. Describing last moments, these testimonies brought comfort to those who could not be present at the time of passing.[6] Postmortem photography came to replace this practice, delivering news of loss as well as producing a memento of the deceased.[7]

In the earlier days of photography, there were few if any photographs procured during most individuals' lives. Given the scant opportunity to procure a photographic likeness of those who had died very young, postmortem photography was often the only option.[8] For this reason – and as few households were not touched by the loss of a child or young

Fig. 2. Unknownmaker. *Helen Maria Spalding*, 1849, Daguerreotype. Jack and Beverly Wilgus Collection.

person – most nineteenth-century postmortem photography depicts children (Figs. 2–8, 28).[9] Depicted primarily as though sleeping, these photographs convey a sense of calm and the promise of new beginnings. Showing the body carefully laid out, often encircled by flowers – these photographs helped counter morbid thoughts of finality and of decay, echoing the sentiment 'Rest in Peace' adorning most tombstones.[10]

Victorian postmortem photographs have piqued the interest of collectors for their sad poignancy. Some of the postmortem photographs that circulate online in discussion groups and auction sites depict the deceased as though engaged in various activities. For the most part however, these are not in fact postmortem photographs. Mislabelled by sellers – be they misinformed or deceitful – there is no end to the proliferation of false assumptions and professionals endeavouring to debunk these falsehoods.[11] Supposed tell-tale signs are misleading. For example, the appearance of white eyes – the seeming absence of an iris – can be attributed to the emulsion's oversensitivity to and subsequent overexposure of cyan hues. At the other end of the spectrum, red hues tend to be

Fig. 3. Simenhoff, Lancaster, PA. *Deceased Child in Coffin*, Cabinet Card. Jack and Beverly Wilgus Collection.

harder to expose (hence the continued use of dim red lighting when printing black and white photographs). Darkened hands do not necessarily indicate the pooling of blood or blackened limbs. They are more likely underexposed hands,

Fig. 4. Unknown. *Deceased Baby in Coffin*, Ambrotype. Jack and Beverly Wilgus Collection.

reddened on account of sunburn or the like.[12] Eye retouching was seldom undertaken as a means of reviving the dead, rather this technique compensated for the overexposure of pale blue eyes or for the blur of blinking captured by still somewhat lengthy exposure times.[13] These were not minutes long as is often reported, and incidentally, even a portrait taken at a fifteenth of a second risks picking up this involuntary

Fig. 5. Unknown. *Deceased Child Encircled by Flowers*. Jack and Beverly Wilgus Collection.

movement. To help compensate for the deficiency of early photographic technology, heads were often propped up with posing stands to help keep a sitter still. However, about as flimsy as a microphone stand, these would be insufficient support for the weight of a fully leaning or limp body. As a

Fig. 6. Unknownmaker, American. *[Postmortem Portrait of a Black Child]*, About 1855, Daguerreotype. 6.8 × 5.6 cm (2 11/16 × 2 3/16 Inch), 84.XT.1582.7. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

general rule, if they appear as though they may be alive, they more than likely are.[14] If an individual appeared in a group photo lounged in a bed or chaise longue, it can be safely assumed that they are very ill and perhaps near death. But a baby that poses with siblings, drooping in the chair, may simply be an unproppable baby (hence the many hidden mother photographs wherein the mother holds her baby up for the portrait while she remains hidden beneath a dark cloth).[15] Appearing in group photos, the deceased would more often than not appear shown in a casket. In those rarer instances wherein the deceased are shown propped up in a seated position, it is typical to indicate that they have passed by the objects that surround them.[16]

Some suggest that postmortem photographs displaying the deceased sleeping or engaged in some activity can be understood as attempts at denying death – funerary photographs displaying the deceased in caskets surrounded by flowers as work towards the acceptance of loss.[17] A literal reading of these photographs may well lead to these conclusions.