Transnational Blogospheres: Virtual Politics, Death, and Lurking in France and the U.S.

by

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Duke University

Date: 10 April 2009

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
Romance Studies in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

What are the meanings of “here” and “there” in a digital age? This dissertation explores how blogs reveal new meanings of being “here” in a political space, how blogs reveal new meanings of being (or not being) “here” in a textually-mediated universe, and how blogs reveal new ways of being seen to be “here” when most internet users are just looking and log on and off without saying a word. Beginning with a reflection on the possibilities of democracy in a world where the interface is drawn to the forefront, I argue that the internet presents a new (and imperfect) way for citizens to operate the machinery of government. Next, I consider the consequences of this interface being available to people regardless of their geographic locations or national origins. I argue that citizenship in a digital moment is more closely bound to participation than it is to blood or territory and construct a notion of virtual transnational citizenship.

Such a notion of transnational citizenship does not signal the end of place and the irrelevance of presence and absence. Instead, it reveals that these concepts must be rethought and refigured. Bloggers flicker between absence and presence: in the blogosphere, every post may be a blogger’s last, but there may just be another one waiting for us if we’ll click reload. With this ambiguity in mind, I outline a digital ethics of reading that is attentive to both of these possibilities. Finally, I turn to the vast majority of blog users: the “lurkers” who read silently but do not write. I untangle reading, writing, and inscription in order to produce an understanding of how reading
works in the blogosphere and argue that the lurker is not so much the reader who does not write as the reader who has not yet written.

By tracing the meanings of “here” and “there” through the blogosphere, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of what it means to be--politically and metaphysically--in the age of the internet.
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The other members of my dissertation committee, David Bell, Ken Rogerson, and Kate Hayles, have each contributed critiques, ideas, and encouragement along the way. Their thoughtful questions and challenges have given shape to the arguments and fed the curiosities that drove this project. Readers who are familiar with their work will see traces of their interests in my bibliography and a pale imitation of their intellect in my writing.
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My interest in theories of everyday life--and in critical theory in general--was sparked at the 2005 Dartmouth Summer Institute in French Cultural Studies. The other graduate student and faculty participants contributed to a fascinating three weeks of
seminars and discussions. The institute’s director, Larry Kritzman of Dartmouth College, has been a mentor and a friend ever since.

Tom Conley offered helpful bibliographic direction on the history of cartography while my colleague Micah True introduced me to scholarship on travel writing.

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While I was working, I often bragged that my archive was virtual and I could conduct research anywhere. But, truth be told, I read and wrote nearly every page in a library. Posthuman, postdigital, postpaper—pshaw! I still feel most at home in the stacks. I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude and utmost respect to the hardworking librarians and staff members of Duke University’s Perkins Library System; the University of North Carolina’s Davis Library; Princeton University’s Firestone, Marquand, and Architecture Libraries; the Biblioteques General and de la Rambla of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra; the Biblioteques de Filosofía, Geografía i Història, de Lletres, and de Biblioteconomia of the Universitat de Barcelona; the Biblioteques d’Humanitats, de Ciències Socials, and de Comunicació of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona; the Biblioteca de l’Escola Tècnica Superior d’Arquitectura de Barcelona; the Biblioteca de l’Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya; the Biblioteca de Catalunya; and the Bibliothèque publique d’information. These institutions and the people who keep them running are monuments to knowledge. It is only because there are so many devoted curators of books and ideas
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Heather Mallory has been present at many important moments in my graduate education. She was one of the first people I met as a prospective student. When I was in the lowest of intellectual spirits and was struggling with not wanting to write a dissertation about “French Literature,” she simply told me not to write a dissertation about “French Literature.” This project was born hours later. Since the beginning, she has been a mentor, a colleague, and a friend.

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Nearly every good idea in what follows can be traced to one or more of the people named above; all of the infelicities, inaccuracies, and inelegant passages are mine alone.
Introduction

One of the first pieces of blog scholarship that I read in researching this dissertation scolded those who sought to “make some generalization about blogs, all blogs, every blog.” The blog form, Tyler Curtain argued, is too broad and too nimble to be encompassed in any one statement. It is difficult to imagine a heading that would subsume all blogs, a catchall description of the blogosphere that would brook no dissent, allow no exceptions. Even to attempt to list the categories that might organize blogs is ultimately a doomed endeavor. Like books, people, emotions, flowers, or customs, the range of characteristics is wide and the possibility of overlap and contradiction is so great as to frustrate any coherent explanation of blogs. Curtain asked rhetorically: “Is there something that could be said about every blog? Where would one start?”

Indeed, where can we ever start? To impose a starting point on the blogosphere is to attribute some sort of coherence to it and to undermine the only meaning that it has. Blogs come to us in a trickle, a leaky textual faucet--no! an uncountable number of leaky textual faucets, all hovering over a bottomless ocean of words that extends past the vanishing point in all directions. As we dive into the archive and follow link after link, we find a past that trails off, seemingly far beyond the decade or so that blogs have existed and perhaps even into the time before the internet. There is no point of origin: we can only get lost in the jumble of web sites and forgotten links. Resurfacing, more posts have been deposited, but we cannot see them all, and by the time we stop to count them, there are still more, dropping one at a time. Curtain suggested that anxiety was the
emotion most popularly associated with blogging. I can’t help but be somewhat awed and perhaps a bit frightened by the incoherent endlessness of it all.

This dissertation is about blogs, but it is not about all blogs, every blog. I have restricted my topic to political blogs in France and the U.S., but not because it is about politics as such. Furthermore it is not about all political blogs in France and the U.S.; instead, it is about a handful of them. They are chosen not because they are representative of their peers, nor because they embody or typify the subject position of political blogger, but because by reading these bloggers’ work and tracing their stories, I have been able to sketch the outlines of some of the changes that blogs--and the internet more broadly conceived--signal for our being human. Ultimately, it is about how blogs reveal new meanings of being “here” in a political space, how blogs reveal new meanings of being (or not being) “here” in a textually-mediated universe, and how blogs reveal new ways of being seen to be “here” when most internet users are just looking and log on and off without saying a word. These topics do not by any means exhaust either the question of hereness or the question of blogginess, but they do provide places from which we can begin to think about what it means to live in a world where there is a blogosphere, as fraught with uncertainty and imprecision as those beginnings may be.

Such troubled searches for beginnings are woven into this dissertation, both in terms of the themes it pursues and the genetic trajectory of its evolution. Each of the four chapters that follow is concerned explicitly or implicitly with a question of beginnings, a related question of endings, or both. These are literary, philosophical, and theoretical questions but it was not my initial intention to pursue this line of inquiry. This
dissertation was first conceived as a comparison of political blogs in France and the U.S., an assessment of how the adoption of new information and communication technologies have changed political participation in my home culture and the culture that has been the object of my graduate studies. As the project grew and the lines of inquiry meandered, the questions mutated and I found that asking about the effects of blogging on political participation demanded first a reflection on what participation might mean and a reconsideration of what politics consisted in. As the blogosphere is a space primarily mediated through the textual acts of reading and writing, I began to think about political participation in those terms as well. At the heart of this project is the question of how we can think about political communities in a world where this virtual, textual space exists.

Because I am thinking about the blogosphere in terms of its textual valences, this dissertation is about literature in a digital moment. But it is not about what is commonly referred to as digital literature.¹ It is about how we live online, but it is not about the end of offline life.² It is about online places, but it is not about the internet as the end of places. It is about how virtual spaces create new kinds of social relationships, but it is not

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¹ There is no shortage of scholarship on various forms of literary production that take computers and/or computer networks as their medium. N Katherine Hayles’s work has explored how electronic literature describes, reflects, provokes, and results from new configurations of subjectivity and embodiment (How We Became: Writing: My: Electronic). Espen J. Aarseth theorized cybertexts as distinct from other forms of literature in that their readers’ decisions not only led to ambiguous interpretations but to changes in the texts themselves. For Aarseth, electronic literature, in the form of hypertexts, adventure games, and the multi-user dungeons that are in some senses the precursors to blogs, are as much played or operated as they are read. Recently, critics have turned to video games and explored the frontierland between games and literature (Bogost Unit; Bogost Persuasive; Galloway Gaming; Wark).

² In Bowling Alone, a wide-ranging and widely-read study of changing social patterns in post-war America, Robert Putnam predicted that “computer-mediated communication will turn out to complement, not replace, face-to-face communities” (179). Robert Kraut and his colleagues conducted a series of psychological studies to determine whether internet use made people lonely (Kraut, Kiesler et al.; Kraut, Patterson et al.; Kraut, Steinfeld et al.).
about how the internet robs us of our social world. It is about the everyday act of logging on, which is intimately related to the literary acts of reading and writing as well as the inscriptions that are left behind even when we mean to move without leaving a trace. While it shies away from sweeping claims about how the internet changes everything completely, this dissertation does constitute a sustained engagement with the question of how the internet changes some things partially.

Underlying this entire project is a conviction that the texts that make up the internet are literary objects, written by authors and read by readers. To claim these texts for literary studies is both to claim them as literature and to make a claim about what literary scholars should study. In making these claims, I am joining a long procession of literary critics who have pushed the boundaries of their fields outward, such as those who have studied “trashy” novels (Radway), maps (Conley), and advertisements (Wicke). Just as relationships can be forged between cultural studies, cartography, and media studies (not to mention the history of the book, graphic design, and consumer psychology) on the one hand and the study of literature on the other, so, too, can literary studies take a central place in the suite of disciplinary formations that make up digital humanities. This could profitably be called interdisciplinarity on a book jacket, but such a term supposes that any of these disciplines were ever stable in the first place. Instead, I would say that the way I am practicing in the digital humanities is by inserting myself in

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3 In a 2004 speech, a former U.S. Assistant Attorney General traced the use of the phrase “end of geography” with reference the internet back to a 1995 paper given by a legal scholar at a symposium in Vienna (Pate; Bates). This notion, that the internet renders space meaningless, and its corollary, that this shift erodes the quality of interpersonal relationships, were the subject of a volume edited by two Canadian philosophers entitled Community in the Digital Age (Feenberg and Barney).
a field of practitioners who hail from and appeal to a variety of methodologies and intellectual traditions in forming questions about the links between computers and humanity and developing responses to them.⁴

There is another way that questions of disciplinarity sit at the center of this dissertation. The bloggers on whom I focus all operate in transnational spaces, moving among national configurations and reconfiguring national identities. In instances like that of Armando Lloréns-Sar who is a Florida-born Cuban-American living in Puerto Rico, this transnationalism operates in the background and is a focus neither of the bloggers’ writings nor my project. Elsewhere, these questions are foregrounded, such as when I look at French bloggers who participate in American virtual political spaces or translate the American blogosphere for a French readership. In these ways, the project resonates within the discourses of English Literature, American Studies, French Studies, and Comparative Literature.

Where the project reads English-language texts written by non-native speakers, it is perhaps flirting with the subfield of English that has become known as Global English. Scholars in Global English have sought to determine what happens to a language when it

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⁴ In a forthcoming book, N. Katherine Hayles traces the history of the digital humanities and explores the tensions within the field (“How We Think”). My definition bears a strong resemblance to strains of digital humanities that are heavily influenced by cultural studies and is somewhat at odds with other schools of thought that stress methodological reliance on computers in the conduct and presentation of scholarship. Although she is right to point out that these distinctions have consequences in terms of access to funding streams and university resources, I am (perhaps naïvely) of the opinion that pluralism is beneficial for all practitioners. Although this work generally makes little or no use of citation analysis or visualization programs, these methodologies are complementary to the sort of work I do here as they can reveal more clearly the patterns and modes of textual production and consumption in play (and I hope that my work and work like mine can be viewed as complementary to that of more technology-centric scholars in its ability to peel back the screens of reading, writing, and politics that mediate the human-computer and human-human interfaces).
is rapidly and incompletely adopted, how this adoption affects social formations, and the consequences it carries for other languages in its path. They have developed a lexicon, including terms such as “Global English” itself and “English as a Lingua Franca,” an echo of “English as a Second Language.” This lexicon is frequently invoked in journals such as *World Englishes* and *English Today*, which are dedicated in whole or in part to examining the consequences of the spread and mutation of English as elements of American cultural, economic, military, and discursive power permeate a globalized economy. Simultaneously, these texts are the province of French Studies, as they are symptoms of the increased penetration of English competency in younger generations of French citizens. Rather than attempt to pigeonhole my subjects or my project into one field or another, I would rather savor the range of labels that are each not quite appropriate and leave open the question of where it might best be classified.

To begin addressing this challenge, I decided to meet bloggers in person. In April 2007, I spent two months in Paris in the weeks before, during, and after the presidential election that would send Nicolas Sarkozy to the Palais de l’Élysée. I held twelve interviews with eleven bloggers and two regular blog readers, attended two installments of the République des blogs, and joined a picnic of literary bloggers on a Sunday afternoon. Very few of these conversations are represented here. Some of them have helped to shed light on small details or fill in holes in stories that have emerged during

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5 In a recent survey of 200 French workers distributed across the private and public sector and low, medium, and high socio-economic groups, Marc Deneire found that “about 15 percent of the French population is ‘functional’ in English” and that, based on a review of help wanted ads, nearly half of all private sector jobs and some 10 percent of public sector jobs call for at least some proficiency in English (183, 85-86).
the writing process. Others have helped to flesh out a character a bit. But, for the most part, I have found it more interesting to focus on the written blog texts. This is because reading these texts against and alongside pertinent theoretical and philosophical texts has proven more useful in attempting to tease out the consequences of life and writing in the blogosphere. Although there are some instances where I have found it worthwhile to include some biographical information in the chapters that follow, I did not set out to write biographies of bloggers. In the end, I decided that to rely too heavily on my interviewees was to fall prey to the intentional fallacy that has dogged literary critics for the better part of a century. Still, the interviews were an essential component of the research process in that they acted as a check on the theoretical excursions that the research led me on and served as a frequent reminder that my subjects had lives, hopes, and fears that extended beyond the screen.

One of the bloggers I met in Paris was Laurent Guerby. A brief description of our first encounter will help demonstrate the value and limitations of supplementing textual research with interviews and conversations. On 22 April 2007, I went to a special election night edition of the République des blogs, a soirée for bloggers and blog readers at a central Paris restaurant. Bloggers filled the room and had set up shop by a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on a wide sidewalk. Extension cords snaked across the floor and the tables were covered with laptop computers. Friends improvised conversations while televisions carried coverage of the vote. Nicolas Vanbremeersch, the organizer of the République, was seated at the middle of a long table while a camera crew studied him closely. Meanwhile, newspaper writers interviewed attendees and
photographers searched for the magic angle that would frame a bunch of 30-somethings staring at computers in a visually compelling composition.

Apart from the frenzy, a solitary figure caught my eye. Stationed near the door was a heavyset man with dark, curly hair. In his ear was a transistor radio tuned to France Info; in his hand was a palmtop computer connected via radio waves to the internet. This was Laurent Guerby. He was liveblogging the French election in a diary at the European Tribune, an English-language pan-European collective blog devoted to leftist politics whose server was physically located in the U.S. (Guillet). His presence was fractured and confused. Guerby was simultaneously in France and beyond her borders, in the physical space of the République des blogs and in the virtual universe of the blogosphere, writing and reading and playing a new role in the political process all at once.

Guerby, whose work informs the dissertation’s first chapter, became a synecdoche for the project. In my cinematic imagination, the room is darker, and Guerby is silhouetted in the doorway, his outline pulsating with theoretical energy. As I wrote, he came back to me again and again as an illustration of the theoretical possibilities and new practices that blogging revealed. He was performing a literary act, interfacing with democracy, scoffing at the Franco-American border, reshaping citizenship, redefining boundaries, confusing presence and absence, and lurking at the République. In this single figure, I saw the entire project made flesh.

My narrative desire to transform this remembered image of Guerby into an icon points to one of the great challenges I have faced in writing this dissertation: resisting the
urge to reduce any of the bloggers I am writing about to a figure or a characteristic. As I was researching and writing, I wanted to find a way to read that would not have the effect of robbing bloggers of their humanity. I needed a methodology that would open the possibility of respecting the full range of ambiguities that make a blogger not merely a blogger, but also a person. Bloggers like Guerby do not exist only in theory.

Perhaps this is what lies at the bottom of Curtain’s anxiety. If bloggers do not exist only in theory, then how can we write theoretically about them? The response I have offered here is to take Curtain’s warning seriously. The problem with starting a story about the blogosphere is that it threatens to determine a trajectory that does not coincide with reality. For more than three years, I have lurked in the blogosphere. Now, I have tried to write about blogs and bloggers in a way that does not foreclose their futures, that opens them up rather than sealing them off, and that represents their indeterminacy not by simplifying them, but by attempting to describe what makes them indescribable.

In the chapters that follow, I engage with the problematic meanings of transparency and obstacles, disappearance and return in the context of virtual political practice. The trajectory begins with the introduction of the term “interfacial democracy” as a way to speculate how the increased cultural prominence of the computer interfaces changes the ways we think about the category of the political. From this foundation, I step into the thickets of transnational citizenship. If democracy can be envisioned as an interface, and if the interface of the moment is the networked computer, then geographic
proximity and national identity are reconfigured as well: new rules defining the political mechanism mean new rules for defining political operators. At the heart of this notion of virtual political community is an inescapable absence. The transnational citizen is always absent from the political “here” since that “here” is always shifting. Finally, I look at the transnational citizen’s other: the lurker who chooses not to participate. The dissertation follows an arc from the strategies and functioning of digital politics through some of the ramifications of practicing virtual politics and, ultimately, the consequences and politics of not doing so.

The first chapter, “Interfacial Democracy: Laurent Guerby and the Pursuit of Political Transparency,” projects the logic of the interface, a persistent focus of new media scholarship, onto the screen of democracy. By conceiving of political representatives and state agencies as interfaces that can be operated by citizens, I bracket the theoretical debates over direct and representative democracy and describe a mode of political participation that extends beyond periodic elections without descending into the thickets of direct citizen involvement in each and every decision. In a sense, interfacial democracy’s effect is to move past the political cycle that begins and ends at the voting booth and replace it with a greater engagement of citizens with government. To illustrate, I turn to Guerby, the man in the doorway at the République des blogs who attempts to use the blogosphere as a control panel for politics. Guerby dreams of a transparent politics where citizens would have complete access to all the inner workings of the state, a short metaphorical leap from the ideal notion of a perfect interface. But
like any interface, the democracy he imagines is only partially achievable and his work reveals not only the possibilities but also the limitations of interfacial democracy.

Guerby’s story and the notion of interfacial democracy both reveal ways that the practices of democracy change in a world with networked computers. New ways of learning about the activities that a government undertakes on behalf of its citizens are accompanied by new ways that the people might impose their will on their representatives. But the internet presents another wrinkle: its credentialing mechanisms are not identical to those of democracy in the nation-state. Interfacial democracy models a new regime of political participation but we also need to reckon with the question of who participates. In the second chapter, “Stories about Citizens and Borders in a Digital Universe,” I think about what we can make of the category of citizenship in a world where political participation is mediated by a network that sprawls across oceans, continents, and culture. Here, I read Étienne Balibar’s work on European transnational citizenship into virtual space. Balibar’s notion of citizenship does not erase preexisting identities, but it does imagine a politics that is bounded less by territory and blood than it is by engagement. Writing against nationalism in its many guises, Balibar imagines a citizenship that is claimed by individuals, not one that is bestowed by the state. I look to two French bloggers for examples. The work of both Jérôme Guillet and Phersu bounds across the Franco-American border. Although neither of them is eligible to vote in the U.S., they throw the meanings of “here” and “there” into question by either translating the conversations of the U.S. blogosphere into French or playing an active role in America’s digital agora.
But a funny thing happened on the way to the virtual forum. I followed Phersu to the end of the road: after several attempts, he quit blogging due to what I can describe only as a fear of narrative. As I understand it, the end of Phersu’s blog is intimately related to the impossibility of fully crossing the border. His struggle to translate U.S. politics into French was frustrated by his unwillingness to freeze America in narrative. Even as Phersu hopped the fence (first brazenly, then gingerly), it is the border that ultimately has the last laugh, overwhelming Phersu and leading him to flee the blogosphere altogether. Writing about his long goodbye, I realized that the issues of political participation and virtual communities were inscribed in broader questions of writing and reading. Suddenly, a project that had been trending toward the social sciences pulled me back firmly into the world of literary humanities. What, I wondered, could it mean to stop blogging? If the questions of transnational blogging and virtual citizenship dance around the ideas of “here” and “there,” how does Phersu’s departure play into received notions of presence and absence?

These are among the issues that I take up in the third chapter, “Virtually Dead: Assassinations, Suicides, and the Meanings of Blogospheric Absence,” which marks the shift in this project away from politics as such and toward broader questions about how we experience the virtual. “Virtually Dead” explores the tension between absence and presence in the blogosphere. This tension is created by the absence that marks every blog post, which is the trace left by an author who is no longer there, and the impending presence of every blogger who could return at any moment. I tease out the ambiguities of presence and absence that give meaning to our virtual lives and afterlives by tracing the
dramatic trajectory of Armando, an American blogger who quite publicly announced he would never blog again, returned, disappeared, and then took an assumed name before quitting a third time. Drawing upon the reflections of Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-Luc Nancy on the death of the other, I argue that this confused play of being there and not being there imposes an ethical demand on readers, namely that we must read in a fashion that both accepts the finality of each blog post as if it were a blogger’s last and remains open to the very real possibility that there will be another message if we’ll just wait a few moments longer.

Constructing presence and absence in this way binds them to the act of writing: a departed blogger’s textual corpus becomes his corpse. But what about the act of reading? How are readers’ presence and absence manifested in virtual space? The final chapter, “The Lurkers: Unseen Footprints in the Blogosphere,” chases the shadows of the vast majority of blog users who slip in silently, poke around for a few seconds or a few hours, and then leave without having written a word. These lurkers are not invisible. Rather, they are often unwatched, unperceived, and unnoticed, except in their aggregate numbers, which drive website advertising revenues. For every click there is a corresponding tick in the virtual ledger, an entry in the server logs that might be preserved indefinitely. Even if they do not write, lurkers do leave inscriptions. My goal here is to untangle reading, writing, and inscription in order to produce an understanding of how reading works in the blogosphere. To get there, I consider the web browser and the RSS Aggregator, two technologies of virtual reading, in light of Marc Augé’s vision of supermodernity, a generic world where one website blends into the next just as one reader becomes
indistinguishable from another. Looking closer, this sleek supermodern surface has cracks, and the lurker is not so much the reader who does not write as the reader who has not yet written.

The journey I took while writing this dissertation (from literature to politics and back) is the journey of the blogosphere. Even if there is no way to start talking about the blogosphere, even if there is nothing we can say that applies to all blogs, every blog, what I have begun to unpack in the chapters that follow are the links between our virtual political lives and the textual acts of reading and writing that mediate our everyday online existence.
I. Interfacial Democracy: Laurent Guerby
and the Pursuit of Political Transparency

Interfaces are generally studied with either an inward-directed glance, peering into the depths of the machine, or with an eye to usability, pragmatically focused on ease of use. As scholars seek to make sense of how humans interact with computers, understanding the interface becomes a central concern. But what if we pulled back, thinking not only of the pathways from human to machine, but also of how the very notion of an interface affects a culture where interfaces attract so much attention? How do the developments of practices mediated specifically by computer interfaces map back onto extra-virtual culture? In a digital moment, what would it mean to talk about a political interface?

The concept of interfacial democracy is rooted in two parallel ideas. First, it relies on a theory of the interface that is derived from the digital humanities but is not solely linked to the category of new media. In a sense, all new media scholarship is concerned with the interface, the mediating layer that is the plane of contact between and interpenetration of the human and the machine. In this chapter, I explore how the types of interface that are specific to networked computers lend their logics to political practice.

Second, interfacial democracy is a way of thinking about democracy in a digital age. While much has been written about how the internet can lead to some kind of utopian direct or participatory democracy and about how people who get political information from the internet are more or less likely to vote, I am using interfacial democracy as a descriptor for a new (but not necessarily wholly new) configuration of
citizens, representatives, and states. Interfacial democracy takes seriously the language of the “mechanics” of government, but positions citizens in a more prominent role in its functioning than in the representative models of the previous century. Here, elected officials, civil servants, and bureaucratic agencies are interfaces that can be operated by citizens.

To flesh out the theoretical reflections on interfaces and democracy, I will look at the work of Laurent Guerby, a French blogger who imagines the network as a space where citizens can demand transparency and accountability of their governments. Beneath the idealistic rhetoric, he sketches what I am calling interfacial democracy. But Guerby’s work also reveals some of the limitations of this political model, limitations that are bound up in the inherent non-transparency of the blogosphere and the impossibility of a fully invisible interface.

**A Journey through the Interface**

From the beginning, my encounter with Guerby was entangled in the interface. My journey to the République des blogs, the blogger soirée where I saw him liveblogging the French elections, was a tour of the alleyways and dead ends of virtual space. By taking a moment to recount this trip, some of the interface’s shortcomings emerge and we begin to see how it can hide as well as reveal.

The election-night République was held at the Pavillon Baltard, a brasserie on rue Coquillière in central Paris. Coquillière is a short street in the shadow of the Forum des Halles, the massive shopping mall that sits on the site of Paris’s former wholesale market.
I turned to GoogleMaps to get directions. The result? A green dot hovering near a street labeled Coquillière but without any arrow indicating where on the street the restaurant was located or at which intersection it could be found. Instead, a brief, clinical notation floated above central Paris: “Le positionnement sur la carte est approximatif.”

This output reveals both the necessary incompleteness of the database, which always underlies our virtual experiences, and the problematic of the interface, which resists yielding completely to the will of human operators. While earlier maps represented the city as multicolored lines and shapes on paper, GoogleMaps locates physical space and the built environment in a dynamic, ever-changeable database. To Google, a city is a set of related points and vectors, each with a range of variable attributes. Virtual Paris is little more than data to be manipulated and assembled indifferently on the screen as a schematic or superimposed on a satellite image.

GoogleMaps is different from its paperbound compatriots because it presents the map as a special kind of cultural text: an interface. The internet-based map not only presents the graphical representation of the urban space through a different material support (screen instead of paper), it also conceives of the map as the product of a different type of textual interaction. Paper maps feature fixed scaling, a fixed spatial purview, and the vestiges of a fixed temporal frame of reference that inhibit it from communicating new construction and demolished streets. Google presents a map as the product of a request for specific information (a particular location or itinerary) and then

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1 In similar situations, the U.S. version of the site declares: “Placement on map is approximate.”
invites the user to adjust the resultant image. The virtual map does not only represent, it responds and permits manipulation.

This is the appeal of computer-based mapping utilities like GoogleMaps: their ability to prepare customized maps based on user input, pulling data algorithmically from the database and presenting it on demand. Reflecting on the advent of computerized maps, Christian Jacob wrote: “On peut, grâce aux logiciels [. . .], créer un nouvel espace de visibilité et d’intelligibilité inconcevable avec les moyens graphiques conventionnels” (Empire 78). However, as the case of the Pavillon Baltard shows, this new intelligibility is not necessarily an increased or clearer one. Places that may have appeared fixed in one cartographic configuration suddenly float about, seemingly unable to find a solid anchor in virtual space. The interface, a necessary but necessarily imperfect mediating layer between user and data, encroaches on a clear view; on election night, it erected a barricade between the Pavillon Baltard and me. Though it pretends to transparent intelligibility, the interface reveals itself as a translucent apparatus. When the database lacked the necessary information and the algorithm was unable to compute a precise route, GoogleMaps threw a dot on the screen, and pointed me in the general direction of my destination.

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2 This invitation is what Mark Poster has called the “underdetermination” of the virtual text, a concept that I shall explore in greater depth in Chapters 3 and 4.

3 “By virtue of software [. . .] it is even possible [. . .] to create a new space of visibility and intelligibility that would be inconceivable through conventional graphic means” (Sovereign 51).

4 Here, I echo Vincent Mosco’s argument that the internet does not signal an end of geography, but rather brings about a “transformation of space” (40-41). It is not that physical position ceases to matter, but that it matters in a different fashion than it may have in cultures that were not electronically mediated.
The “space of visibility” that Jacob imagines is not a space of 20/20 vision. Computer maps do not recreate the world so much as they remediate it and impose a different interface upon it. Programmers have experimented with different sorts of interfaces to link users to mapping databases. Beyond the visual interface of a website like GoogleMaps or Mapquest, Tellme, a startup that was purchased by Microsoft in 2007, uses voice recognition software to deliver driving directions over the phone. Rather than the visual interface of the screen, Tellme uses audio menus and is designed for the user who calls from a mobile telephone. But here, too, users wrestle with the interface, navigating simplified voice prompts in the hopes that the database will help them navigate the streets. The case of Tellme exposes another aspect of the interface: that interfaces are layered. To paint only a partial portrait of a seemingly simple interaction the Tellme user interfaces with a cell phone, which then interfaces with a mobile network, which then interfaces with regional and national telecommunications networks, which then interfaces with Tellme’s voice recognition software, which then interfaces with the software’s menu structure, which then interfaces with the mapping application, which then interfaces with a back-end database. Each of these steps involves internal interfaces. Furthermore, there are dozens of additional interface points that we might imagine along the datapath, including multiple relay points in phone and data networks and the variously constructed linguistic interfaces coupling the user’s desires to

\[^5\] Users can access the service by calling (800) 555-TELL from within the U.S. Weather reports, sports scores, news headlines, stock quotes, and a range of other information are also available.
the spoken words that drive the entire procedure. Such nested interfaces⁶ are not the exception but the norm.

Cultural Interfaces

In the digital humanities, the interface is usually theorized as the surface aspect of a digital machine, the part of the device that presents itself to the user and which the user manipulates: the interface is the control panel. Interfaces receive input from and offer feedback to users as visual, audio, and haptic stimuli targeted at the senses of sight, hearing, and touch.⁷ The most common interfaces include monitors, keyboards, and mice, but the concept is extended inwards and applied to the graphical elements, voice cues, menu structures, and decision trees that organize the virtual experience. This notion of interfaces derives directly from the mechanico-industrial interfaces that predate the computer age. Just as an automobile’s accelerator translates movements of the human foot into variations in fuel flow to an internal-combustion engine, so, too, does a keyboard translate movements of human fingers and hands (not to mention the occasionally frustrated forehead) into variations in data flows across the landscape of logic gates and software code.

In The Language of New Media, Lev Manovich sets about constructing a theory of the interface for a digital age. “[B]y organizing data in particular ways,” he writes, “the interface provides distinct models of the world” (Language 65). This is an essential

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⁶ Similarly, at the start of his foundational text, Understanding Media, Marshall McLuhan writes: “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” (8).

⁷ I am indebted to David Parisi for introducing me to the concept of the haptic interface.
observation: that an interface provides a vision for how the world functions. Manovich’s interface can become a formalized algorithmic representation of the processes of ideologies, technologies, societies, and cultures. On the screen, Manovich sees reflected a vision of the world, a universe encoded in pixels and functionality that operates in accordance with established pre-virtual practices.

As useful as this is, I would go one step further. Interfaces can not only reflect the world into which they are placed—such as Microsoft’s office-themed graphical user interface or Apple’s iTunes media player that draws on the visual vocabulary of the VCR and CD player (cf. Manovich Language 89)—they can also leak back into the world, structuring experiences that do not take place wholly within the computer. As it becomes ingrained in human experience, the logic of the computer interface can be mapped back onto non-computer operations. My corollary to Manovich’s interface theory is in part motivated by a desire to correct what I perceive to be a totalizing rhetoric of technological optimism in his work, which interprets the “new” in new media as implying a replacement rather than an addition. Where Manovich sees “new” media, I see “newer” media, cultural forms that complement, coexist with, and reconfigure “older” cultural forms.

For example, when Manovich writes about the ubiquity of the screen, his focus is decidedly narrow: “[W]e clearly live in the society of the screen.” Perhaps this is so, but by restricting his analysis to the screen, Manovich does not pay attention to the broader world from which it emerges and in which it is implanted. “Screens,” he continues, “are everywhere—the screens of airline agents, data-entry clerks, and pilots; the screens of
ATM machines [sic], supermarket checkouts, automobile dashboards, and, of course, the screens of computers” (Language 114-15). While it is true that they are found in an ever-increasing number of places, screens are not “everywhere.” There is a screen in the cockpit, but the pilot is still there, too.

The point is not to deny that screens have become a prominent interface. Instead, I wish to press for a reading of the screen that accounts for the many places it is found, the many places where it is not, and the many places where it hovers around the edges. By widening the field of vision, the screen becomes not an object onto which images are projected, but part of a larger landscape where meanings flow in, out, and through media apparatuses. Manovich’s argument loses the nuance of what happens when screens mediate components of our lives: it ignores the portions that resist the screenic regime and the effects that the reign of the screen has on the holdouts. Rather than think about what happens in some mythical world where everything is mediated through the screen, it is more productive to think about what happens to a world where screens participate in the mediation of some, many, or even most experiences—but not all of them, and never entirely so.

At the heart of Manovich’s theory of the interface are what he calls “cultural interfaces,” “the ways in which computers present and allow us to interact with cultural data” (Language 70). The term is a useful one because it offers us a way to talk about the different forms and meanings of computer interfaces. But I think that it suffers from two major shortcomings. First, in Manovich’s definition, there is an implicit assumption that there are some data that are cultural and others that are not. All data are cultural. There
is no data that is not embodied and imbued with cultural meanings. From this it follows that all interfaces are cultural interfaces. The second shortcoming is that his notion of the cultural interface is too computer-centric. The interface is not a new media-specific concept, even if there are new media-specific manifestations of interfaces that yield to new media-specific analyses. To conceive of the interface--and especially the cultural interface--in this way is to ghettoize virtual space, to relegate it to a secondary, derivative status. Another model of virtual space configures it as a cultural space alongside the physical, the psychic, the spiritual, and the other dimensions through which life might be experienced and narrated.

We must think not only of the airline agent’s screen (an interface between the agent and the reservations database), but also of the agent himself (an interface between the traveler and the airline), not only of the telephone that connects us to our friends (an interface that transmits voices across distances), but also of our friends’ voices (interfaces that connect and embody thoughts through and in language). New media neither inaugurate an age of interfaces nor replace all existing interfaces with newfangled ones. But they do reconfigure their meanings, possibilities, and limitations.

We cannot simply say that the cultural interface delivers content to users and imitates culture in its form and leave it at that. There is ample evidence that the interface assumes and adapts the vocabularies and grammars of non-digital spaces and objects--desktops, tape recorders--in the construction of a world apart. Yes, Manovich documents the ways computer and network interfaces can channel extra-virtual subject matter through the machine. But what I am describing by the term interfacial democracy--and
what Guerby, the French blogger, strives for—is the reverse: recasting non-virtual processes in the mold of virtual models.

**Democracy**

Before mating the interface with democracy, it will be useful to survey some of the meanings that have inhered to democracy and consider how the interface might, for lack of a better term, interface with those meanings. The concept of democracy has a long and complex intellectual history. My goal here is neither to make any groundbreaking contribution to political theory nor to put forth a neat and clean solution to its paradoxes. Instead, a brief sketch of the major positions in recent debates over representative and direct forms of government will help to develop a context in which we might understand how blogospheric political activity fits into existing structures.

In *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, his biopic of democratic theory, Canadian political philosopher Crawford Brough Macpherson emplots modern democracy’s development as a struggle between two competing visions of self-government. Macpherson pits those who understand democracy as a protector of property rights and guarantor of the free market against those who imagine a democracy that ensures “that all its members are equally free to realize their capabilities” (1). Anchoring liberalism, a commitment to economic liberty, at one end of a spectrum and

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8 Macpherson embodies liberalism first in Jeremy Bentham and the Utilitarians (23-43, esp. 25-27) and later in interwar thinkers like Joseph Schumpeter, who encoded elections as market-like competitions (77-92, esp. 78).

9 In Macpherson’s book, this strand of thought is personified first by John Stuart Mill (44-76), who refused to “[accept] existing capitalist society without reservation” and saw democracy as a tool to improve it (50), and later by postwar Marxists and the generation of 1968 (93-115, esp. 93-94, 98).
equality at the other, Macpherson paints liberal democracy as an ongoing negotiation between unfettered individual freedom in an unfettered free market and socially guaranteed rights and opportunities. Although he suggests that he has chosen to write about successive models of democracy so as not to fall victim to “the risk of myopia” or to impute “that liberal democracy, now that we have attained it [. . .], is fixed in its present mould” (7), Macpherson writes that “we have now reached a technological level of productivity which makes possible a good life for everybody without relying on capitalist incentives” (22). So, while he refrains from declaring that democracy has a goal or that, to use Francis Fukuyama’s famous formulation, there is an “End of History,” he certainly does suggest a certain directionality to democracy, one that points toward a morally-charged politics and contains some elements of what he terms “participatory democracy.” Macpherson’s narrative tracks democracy’s ongoing effort to tame its liberal roots.

Following Macpherson, and admitting a debt to him (Levine 179), Andrew Levine pursues this position but pushes further than his intellectual forebear, effectively calling for democracy to throw economic liberalism overboard. Levine exposes what he characterizes as an inherent tension in liberal democracy: “[T]he joining of liberalism and democracy into a single political theory [. . .] is deeply problematic and very likely unattainable, and [. . .] liberal democracy’s characteristic ‘solution’ to the problem is
won, as it were, at the democratic component’s expense” (91). In Levine’s estimation, representative government is a ruse to separate civil society from politics in order to protect the social sphere and ensure that individuals are free to pursue their happiness without interference. For liberal democracy, Levine writes, the goal “is to minimize citizens’ participation in the governmental process. To do so is to contain political life, as it should be contained, to the barest minimum. So far as possible [. . .], individuals should be left free to pursue their private ends” (144). The force of Levine’s argument is that containing and limiting the political in this way is to ignore the stake of every citizen in the exercise of self-government, to assert that the only liberty that matters is economic liberty, and to insinuate that the only rights that matter are property rights.

The conflict between liberalism and democracy, Levine argues, is ultimately irresolvable. Their shotgun wedding has been ill-fated from the start since they cannot help but operate at cross-purposes: economic liberalism protecting citizens not only from the tyranny of the state but the intrusion of politics, social democracy insisting on sustained, direct citizen involvement in government and the protection of citizens from the market. “How,” Levine asks rhetorically, “can democrats justify representative government or, indeed, anything less than direct democratic control” (140)?

The counter-critique is often that non-representative forms of democracy demand too much participation of citizens and are doomed to collapse. This logic can at times devolve into syllogistic statements of the form “participation is bad because participation

10 Similarly, when Jacques Rancière considered Macpherson’s work, he wrote: “En soi démocratie et individualisme iraient dans des sens opposés” (Aux bords 56) (“If left to themselves, democracy and individualism would go in opposite directions” [On the Shores 39]).
is bad,"\(^{11}\) but some of its proponents step back and offer a moderated response that sees a space for both direct participation and representation, refusing any one totalizing form of democracy. Paul Hirst’s formulation, though imperfect, hints at such an arrangement:

If direct democracy is to be taken seriously today, it can only be in a different sense as a means of management within a bigger system of government which is not itself directly democratic. Direct democracy should not be despised. Where appropriate as a level of administration, it tends to be cheap, efficient and it gives those members interested enough to be active in it great confidence which stems from a good training in basic administrative-political skills. But it can never be a doctrine appropriate to the main forms of modern politics. (23)

Inviting participation may well be a laudable aim, but in Hirst’s hands, this invitation is issued only when it is “cheap,” undermining any philosophical or moral argument for direct democracy in favor of the logic of capitalism’s efficiencies. Hirst shows his hand by suggesting that it only functions as a subordinate component of a larger representative structure and by suggesting that one of the great benefits of including elements of direct democracy in a political system is, in blunt terms, to make activists who care to be involved in self-government feel good about themselves. By casting carefully metered doses of direct democracy as palliative treatments for over-motivated citizens, Hirst exposes what we might call a transparency effect (Barthes “Effet”; “Reality”). When participatory elements are introduced into democracy in order to simulate direct democracy, in order to make citizens feel like they have taken part in decision-making without actually ceding any decision-making authority to them, the effect is a transparency that is as illusive as the literary details that signify only their own existence

\(^{11}\) Indeed, Levine evaluates such claims under the cheeky heading “Some Simple but False Justifications of Representative Government” (140).
and the supposed realness of the scene they adorn. Democratic sessions like the ones Hirst celebrates do not denote transparency so much as they signify it at a semiotic remove.

Interfacial democracy does not eradicate the transparency effect. It is an add-on, an extension, a piece of political software that presents a certain way of potentially modifying the inner workings of the mechanism. It neither promises success nor offers a solution to the problem of democracy. My argument is that we can imagine a form of political practice that is grafted onto (rather than a practice that replaces) existing democratic forms. In an information age, citizens can operate the machinery of government through the interfaces of office holders, bureaucrats, and agencies. In effect, I want to bracket the disputes between the economic liberals and the followers of Mills who insist on social equality in democracy. Hirst wrote: “Representative government can only be supplemented, not supplanted” (6). I want to suggest that, since representative government has never existed in any pure form, we might add a corollary to his declaration, substituting “direct democracy” for “representative government,” and proceed from there to think about the new supplements that have been taking form online.

The Pursuit of Political Transparency

Without affixing any particular label on it, Laurent Guerby practices interfacial democracy. The questions of transparency and interface lie at the heart of his blogging. He engages the first question explicitly, devoting most of his virtual energies to
uncovering economic data and urging governments to level with citizens. The question of the interface is confronted implicitly, but it is directly related to the notion of transparency. Guerby is in pursuit of the ultimate interface, the interface that abolishes and erases itself, the interface that becomes wholly invisible, leaving only the user and some kind of raw data (whatever that might mean). In what follows, I read through some of Guerby’s blogospheric writings looking for these two themes and attempt to tease out the meanings of transparency and the interface in blogospheric space.

Writing about transparency in the first substantial post on his blog, Guerby bemoaned the tendency of French government agencies to restrict access to their archives, which are theoretically part of the public record: “Encore une fois en France, une base de donnée[s] est constituée par l’administration […] et le public n’a pas l’accès complet à cette base.” In this particular case, the information in question concerned administrative decisions in the French courts, but Guerby issues a blanket accusation against French bureaucracies for creating resources marked by “un accès de totalement restreint [à] fortement restreint, bien loin d’une élévation dans le domaine public” (“Statut”). Behind Guerby’s disdain is an implicit desire that user-friendly, comprehensive databases of all the state’s activities be furnished so that citizens can track which actions the state takes on their behalf.

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12 “Once more in France, the administration has launched a database […] and the public does not have complete access to this database.” Wherever possible, I have used published translations of French texts and indicated the source parenthetically. Nevertheless, for some texts, including many blogs and interviews with bloggers in France, there are no established English versions. Wherever there is no indication given, the translations are mine.

13 “access somewhere between mostly and completely restricted, quite far from any elevation into the public domain.”
Underlying this desire is a call for a particular type of governmental transparency. The transparency that Guerby imagines is specific to a media regime structured by networked computers. His transparency is not provided passively by the state. Instead, Guerby’s transparency is claimed by citizens in two distinct senses. First, Guerby suggests a struggle where the transparency for which he appeals must be pursued, won, and defended by citizens. He contributes to this effort through his blogging, by exposing shortcomings in French democracy. More interesting is that Guerby’s transparency implies an active type of seeing: he wants the data not only to be available but also to be searchable and manipulable. He elaborated this point when we met for an interview:

[Q]u’est-ce qui est derrière mon idée de transparence? C’est qu’il y a plus de gens qui vont s’impliquer [. . .]. Donc aller à la mairie pour voir qu’est-ce qui se passe vraiment, combien ça coûtait, quelles étaient les délibérations du conseil municipal, et cetera. C’est quelque chose qui est possible. Ce n’est pas quelque chose que les gens font parce qu’il y a un coût matériel. Pas financier, mais bon. Il faut prendre une journée, il faut des machins. Il y a quelques personnes qui le font en France, pas mal de retraités qui ont le temps, et il y a quelques personnes qui ne sont pas retraités qui le font quand même, mais c’est marginal, parce que c’est onéreux finalement. Et pour moi, on peut dire, voilà, un jour [. . .] je vais avoir accès aux documents qui donnent toutes les informations brutes sur les sujets sans me déplacer de chez moi, c’est quelque chose qui va inciter les gens à réagir. Inciter les gens à juger, améliorer--sans doute améliorer leurs capacités de juger les politiques. Donc pour moi, ça crée une bonne possibilité qui n’est pas exploitée. (24 April 2007)

14 “[W]hat’s behind my idea of transparency? It’s that more people will become involved [. . .]. Go down to city hall to see what’s really going on, how much it cost, what were the discussions in the city council, et cetera. This is possible, but it’s not something that people do because there is a material cost. Not a financial cost, but still. You’ve got to spend a whole day; you have to do this, that, and the other thing. There are some people in France who do this, a fair number of retirees who have the time, and there are some people who are not retired who do it anyhow, but that’s marginal, because, ultimately, it’s a pain in the neck. And for me, you could say, look, one day [. . .] I’ll have access to the documents that give all the raw data on the subject without leaving my house. That’s something that will incite people to react. Incite people to judge, to improve—without a doubt to improve their ability to judge politicians. So, for me, that creates a good possibility that is not exploited.”
Guerby couches his appeal in the terms of lowered barriers of access. In his estimation, network technology allows information to be posted quickly, easily, and inexpensively. Where an earlier media configuration demanded that interested citizens go to city hall during business hours, fill out forms, and sit through meetings, Guerby’s future brings what he calls the “raw data” to the screen on demand.

Guerby’s insistence that the state must be transparent shares some resonances with Paul Virilio’s theory of the visible as the site of power. However, Virilio sings in a much darker key: he focuses on phenomena such as the sensation of constant surveillance created by security cameras and cable news (Bombe 23); the shift from spatial continuity to visual continuity as the method by which states control the circulation of people, materials, money, and information (Vitesse 23; Bombe 23); and the habits of modern warfare, where what can be seen can be dominated (Guerre esp. 15ff). For Guerby, vision is the weapon of citizens against a state and politicians “qui aiment bien garder leurs petits secrets” (24 April 2007). The citizen and the philosopher are performing variations on a single theme: the power of surveillance can inhere to both the state and the people, depending on who succeeds in mastering its technologies.

The key to Guerby’s thinking is that there should not only be transparency, but citizens should be able to do something with the information they pry free from the state. Guerby wants not only visibility, he also wants citizens to “get involved.” His doctrine of transparency is also a doctrine of political participation.

15 “who like to keep their little secrets.”
Participation

The question of how communications technologies affect politics, and specifically how they might contribute to the taming of democracy’s liberal roots and expansion of citizen participation, dates back to a moment long before the internet entered middle-class households or consciousnesses in France or the U.S. In the late 1970s, Macpherson wrote:

No doubt something could be done with two-way television to draw more people into more active political discussion. And no doubt it is technically feasible to put in every living room—or, to cover the whole population, beside every bed—a computer console with Yes/No buttons, or buttons for Agree/Disagree/Don’t Know, or for Strongly Approve/Mildly Approve/Don’t Care/Mildly Disapprove/Strongly Disapprove, or for preferential multiple choices. (95)

Such a scheme is the direct-democratic version of what has in France been called “sondomanie” (qtd. in Rosanvallon 343). 16 Iain McLean drew the inevitable comparison to Orwell’s telescreens (assuring his readers that this technology would work in the reverse direction and they “need have no nightmares on that score” [“Mechanisms” 136]). 17 This sort of device has never passed the experimental phase, but this does not mean that politics have not seeped into the present-day manifestation of the “two-way television.” Instead, it means that they have taken a different form.

Interfacial democracy is a relative of representative, direct, and participatory democracy. It draws on each of these traditions and presents itself not as an heir or successor to one or another form of government, but as an addition. It is neither wholly

16 “pollmania.”
17 McLean has also theorized the mechanisms by which new media technologies might impact democratic government. His analysis leads him to create direct, if somewhat clunky, democratic mechanisms (Democracy).
new nor wholly old, but a recycled, repurposed, and resignified sort of democratic practice. At its heart are digitized reconsiderations of the meanings of two key terms in democratic discourses: participation and representation.

The question of political participation in the internet has in recent years provoked great interest among political scientists. While much interesting empirical and theoretical research has been undertaken, I believe that the results have been hamstrung by an anachronistic understanding of political participation that privileges the state apparatus as the unshakable hub of political processes (see, for example, Bimber and Davis; Chadwick).

Typical of the discourse in political science is Bruce Bimber’s heavy focus on voter participation (“Internet” 140). One large-scale empirical study that he conducted was centered on “five political acts: voting; displaying a campaign button, sticker, or yard sign; attending a meeting, rally, speech, or dinner in support of a candidate; working on a campaign in some other way; and donating money to a candidate, party or group” (Information 221). Simply by asking questions about political participation and framing participation as something that might extend beyond a quadrennial trip to the voting booth, political scientists like Bimber are aligning themselves with democratic theorists who see citizen involvement as a social good and, by extension, who see the political sphere as something not to be confined and made subservient to economic freedom. Still, although he concedes that “new forms of ‘lifestyle’ politics, political consumerism, and other novel ways of being ‘political’ may be displacing the traditional political actions that scholars have measured” (Information 24), the questions Bimber poses and the
conclusions he reaches betray a general disinclination to consider that the dimensions of
political participation might themselves be in flux.

While such an understanding of political participation is common among political
scientists (see, for example, Tolbert and McNeal), it is not universal. When Brian S.
Krueger and Samuel J. Best discuss “Internet political participation,” they ask if survey
respondents “used the Internet to try to persuade another person about your view on a
local, national, or international issue” or “worked together with others in an Internet
community to try to deal with a local issue or problem” (189-90). Finally, a team of
researchers from California universities seem to challenge Bimber’s notion of political
participation, writing about “another type of engagement” that would include
“engage[ment] in political discussion[s] on the Internet” (Weber, Loumakis and Bergman
28, 31, 32). Still, these examples are motivated by research questions rooted in fixed--
and potentially dated--structures such as the nation-state: so far, political science has
looked to see how politics play on the internet, not how the internet affects the
possibilities of politics.

What the blogosphere and interfacial democracy suggest is that there are modes of
political participation that are motivated and catalyzed by the decentralized nature of the
internet. Participation in the political process does not necessarily require engagement
with a party, a candidate, an association, or even a formal interest group. Though not a
direct democratic form like Macpherson’s two-way television, the internet presents itself
as a conduit through which information can be disseminated to and by citizens and
through which citizens can express opinions and collaborate with one another in
coalitions of various levels of permanence or stability. Again, it is not a resolution to the liberal/democratic dispute, only a new way of negotiating it. The blogosphere (and the internet at large) represents a change in media regimes, which Bimber describes as “periods of stable relationships among information, organizations, and democratic structure” (Information 18). While we might quibble with the possibility of “stable relationships,” the concept does offer a useful shorthand to describe the possibilities of communication at a particular moment in time given a specific assemblage of information, cultural practices, and governmental technologies. The media regime of the blogosphere is one where the act of logging on and talking to other citizens can constitute an act of political participation, with or without the imprimatur of any established organization.

**Programming Politics**

Guerby has a day job. Having studied computer science at university, he designs databases for a financial institution in the business district behind Paris’s Garnier opera house. It is not surprising, then, that he wants not only to increase transparency and induce political participation, but also to leave the terms of that participation open. Beyond a right to see what a government does on its citizens’ behalf, Guerby is also claiming the right of citizens to conduct their own calculations on whatever information comes to light, much the way he engineers databases to perform calculations for his employer. In 2006 and 2007, he looked at figures published by France’s Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques and by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to
argue that what he calls the “raw data” used by the agencies to determine inflation figures should be made public. Guerby declared that the official figures were unreliable at best and manipulative at worst. He also believed that they were applied too broadly across geographic space and generalized across populations without paying heed to the different needs of different age groups and social classes. In both countries, government workers check grocery prices periodically in order to track the cost of basic consumer goods. In a conversation in the comments thread at the blog of a French-born Columbia University economist, Guerby was told that the details about which stores and which prices were surveyed were not made public in order to prevent price fixing (Salanié). Feeling that he was being dismissed by “les experts [. . .] qui savent tout” (Guerby “Inflation”),18 Guerby contacted the B.L.S. directly. He found that its agents announce their visits, that “le magasin est donc parfaitement au courant, et coopère d’ailleurs sérieusement” (“Inflation”),19 and that the bureau has an agreement with the stores preventing it from publishing raw data. Guerby’s view of the issue is best summarized in a comment he left at the blog of a French supermarket executive: “Utilisez les moyens d’aujourd’hui,” Guerby implored him. “[P]ubliez vos données brutes, laissez la blogosphère en débattre et à chacun de se trouver son inflation et son pouvoir d’achat” (“Response to ‘Pouvoir’”).20

Although Guerby has taken on what appears to be a small-bore issue, the implications are worth exploring. In suggesting that metrics of inflation have little

18 “know-it-all [. . .] experts.” Guerby’s retort: “La routine quoi” (“The usual”).
19 “the store is thus perfectly aware and is quite cooperative.”
20 “Use today’s methods, publish your raw data, let the blogosphere debate and everyone can determine his own inflation rate and buying power.”
significance on a statewide, regional, or even municipal scale and asserting that every person will have a specific set of needs and constrictions determining access to the marketplace, Guerby argues that it is only with reference to individual, contextualized citizens that any information can be truly meaningful. Perhaps inspired by the GoogleMaps interface, Guerby wants to drill down to ground level. His blog betrays an unquenchable thirst for data, and a desire to forsake the forest for the trees.

Guerby’s work on inflation figures looks in at the state, but his claim also extends outward to the mechanisms that give government its form. By explicitly questioning the usefulness of abstract, geographically clumped representations of inflation, Guerby implicitly questions the usefulness of geographically delimited democratic representational schemes and suggests a renegotiation of the relationship between citizens and representatives. Interfacial democracy offers an indirect response to what Pierre Rosanvallon has described as an inherent paradox in representation:

Dès son origine, la définition du régime moderne est marquée par une double indétermination, concernant tant le mode d’incarnation que les conditions de mise en forme du pouvoir démocratique. Dans les deux cas, c’est autour de la question de la représentation, dans ses deux acceptions de mandat et de figuration, que se nouent les difficultés. C’est en elle que se révèle de la façon la plus tangible l’écart entre le caractère évident et irrésistible des principes démocratiques et l’aspect problématique de leur mise en œuvre. Se manifeste ainsi, au point de départ, une tension entre la définition philosophique de la démocratie et les conditions de son institutionnalisaton. (10-11)21

21 “From the beginning, the definition of the modern regime is marked by a double indeterminacy, having as much to do with democratic power’s mode of incarnation as with its conditions of realization. In both cases, the difficulties are bound up with the question of representation, in both its senses of mandate and figuration. It is through this question that the most tangible gap between the clear and irresistible character of democratic principles and the problematic aspect of their effectuation is revealed. Furthermore, a tension between the philosophical definition of democracy and the conditions of its institutionalization emerges from this starting point.”
In Rosanvallon’s hands, representation splits into two competing notions: the representative as an agent of a group of citizens in a certain geographic district\(^{22}\) and the representative as the incarnation of those citizens’ wills, desires, and characteristics. This division animates countless dinner-table conversations about whether officials are obligated to legislate according to their own consciences or in step with the people who elected them. This is the dispute between mandate and figuration: are elected representatives sent to act on behalf of their electors or to incarnate them? Interfacial democracy sidesteps this dilemma. Rather than privileging one meaning of representation and effacing the other, interfacial democracy allows the tension to persist while imagining a third possibility: that elected representatives function not as citizen’s agents or doubles, but as their interfaces. The motor of interfacial democracy is a notion of the elected official and the civil servant as political interfaces, mediating layers between citizen and state. By learning to manipulate this interface, individually and collectively, citizens can learn to operate the machinery of government. And when the interface falters or underperforms, the election mechanism, if properly functioning, presents possible replacements.

**Suspicion**

Similarly, in arguing against the use of electronic voting machines, Guerby fixed on the iconic image of the clear urn into which French voters deposit their ballots. This practice illustrates Guerby’s vision for democracy and his stalwart opposition to any

\(^{22}\) Or, in proportional representation systems, those citizens of a certain partisan or ideological persuasion.
effort to obscure the mechanics of the state. What offended Guerby most about replacing the urns with computers was that he believed the voting process was compromised when citizens were denied the right to see the accumulated ballots: “Le lien mis en œuvre lors du vote papier n’est en rien symbolique: il est le fondement de la légitimité du résultat du vote” (“Conseil revient”, emphasis in original).23

The transparency of the urn is but one piece of the transparent electoral apparatus onto which Guerby latches. After our interview, which was held between the two rounds of the 2007 presidential election, Guerby spoke at length about the mechanics of casting and counting votes in France. He continually returned to the theme of transparency during this discussion, describing the urns; the official in each circonscription who pronounces votes legitimate (“A voté!” cries the official as they are cast); and the vote counting process, where citizens sit in groups of four inspecting sealed ballots, opening them, recording the votes, and double-checking each one. Guerby told me that before heading to the République des blogs where he would liveblog the results, he participated in this process at his local polling station.

Guerby is asserting a right to doubt the authority of the state in any matters of governance where citizens are not able to verify that procedures were conducted properly. “La ‘suspicion,’” he writes elsewhere, “est le fondement du code électoral, et elle est légitime” (“Conseil préconise”).24

23 “The link that is created by paper ballots is not just symbolic: it is the basis for the legitimacy of the electoral result” (emphasis in original).
24 “‘Suspicion’ is the basis of the electoral code, and it is legitimate!”
This suspicion drives Guerby’s notion of transparency. It is only citizens’ suspicion that leads them to call for transparency from the state. And even if the state were to furnish information without prompting, Guerby demands more: that citizens be able not only to see what is going on under the hood, but also that they be able to run their own calculations, make their own evaluations, and reach their own conclusions based on that information. Suspicion is at the root of Guerby’s transparency, and, he insists, it is the legitimating force of democracy itself. But Jacques Rancière’s ruminations on suspicion and democracy offer a somewhat different perspective:

La routine indéfinie de la démystification impose toujours une manière de penser--et de pratiquer--la démocratie sur le mode du soupçon, comme s’il fallait lui faire avouer toujours qu’elle n’est pas ce qu’elle prétend être, que ceux qui la pratiquent sont perpétuellement dans l’illusion sur ce qu’ils font. (Aux bords 62)²⁵

Rancière’s ideal conception of democracy reads like the end of suspicion. Here lies the paradox of transparency. Because transparency must always be demanded, it must also always be verified: transparency itself is not transparent.

The Imperfect Interface

If suspicion is at once the root and the undoing of democracy, then democracy itself is forever unattainable, echoing Jacques Derrida’s democracy to come, evoking the various poststructuralist formulations of community as inoperative or unavowable,²⁶ and

²⁵ “The indeterminate ritual of demystification continues to impose a way of thinking (and practising) democracy on the basis of suspicion, as if it always had to be made to confess that it is not what it claims to be, and that those who practise it are perpetually deluded about what they are doing” (On the Shores 44).
²⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy’s Communauté désœuvrée (The Inoperative Community) and Maurice Blanchot’s Communauté inavouable (The Unavowable Community) will be central to later parts of this dissertation.
underscoring Alexander Galloway’s characterization of the interface as unworkable.

Galloway writes that

the more a [. . .] device erases the traces of its own functioning (in actually delivering the thing represented beyond), the more it succeeds in its functional mandate; yet this very achievement undercuts the ultimate goal: the more intuitive a device becomes, it risks falling out of media altogether, becoming as naturalized as air or as common as dirt. To succeed, then, is at best self-deception and at worst self-annihilation. (“Unworkable”)

A window (Galloway’s example of a basic transparent device) never fully erases itself. Even if it manages to be so perfectly crafted and so perfectly clean as to become truly invisible, it still muffles sound, stops wind, and resists cold. Even the slightest imperfection--a spot, a ripple--blocks or deforms the view. And the user who attempts to touch the object on the far side of a window is promptly reminded of its presence.

Indeed, were a window to become a perfect interface, “actually delivering the thing represented beyond,” it would cease to be a window: it would be invisible and immaterial, blocking no light, vibrations, or rainfall. In this sense, the Platonic ideal of an interface is the interface that is not an interface. In lived reality, an interface must always filter, translate, and mediate; it must never succeed fully and it must always be perceptible.

The political interface is similarly imperfect. It is never entirely transparent, neither in the outbound direction (bringing information to citizens) nor in the inbound direction (representing the will of the electorate). Guerby’s dream of a fully transparent politics, like Derrida’s democracy to come, is always off on the horizon, never quite within reach. Like Galloway’s window, were interfacial democracy to function fully, it
would erase itself; but since this is impossible, we only delude ourselves in thinking that it might come to pass.

Indeed, if interfacial democracy worked, it would not be necessary in the first place. The fully transparent, “inoperative” political interface would be a democracy so direct that not even the mythical Athenians would recognize it: there would be no mechanism, no officials, no meetings, no elections, no bureaucracy—nothing but the unmediated will of the amalgamated citizenry, instantly instantiated without discussion, deliberation, or state apparatus. The mediating layers of elections, laws, officials, bureaus, and agencies are only necessary because democracy is unworkable. Indeed, if democracy itself is only an interface, so, too, are the state, the citizen, the bodies of citizens, their minds, their languages—an interfacial *mise en abyme*. But upon looking closer, a bottomless pit is not quite the right metaphor. The interfaces are not only nested; they are also intertwined, overlapped, and mixed up. Although bloggers like Guerby use the internet as an interface through which they attempt to operate the political system, we might also see elected officials using voters as interfaces through which they might perpetuate their own power by reelection, capitalists using workers as interfaces to transform materials that they control into profits, unions operating politicians in order to achieve benefits for their members. In each of these cases, the interface is simply a way of talking about the manipulations, not a solution to the many conflicts and processes that comprise them. When we peer into this *mise en abyme*, we never see the bottom. But this is not because there is no bottom (though by definition there is none). It is because our field of vision is clouded by the tangled mesh of never quite transparent interfaces, an
unyielding web of interfaces, each of them allowing some of “the thing represented beyond,” but each of them filtering, mediating, blocking, and masking. To speak of transparency, of complete and uncompromising transparency, is to theorize and idealize; to speak of interfaces and democratic practices is to traffic in degrees of translucence.

Interfacial democracy does not solve the dilemmas of politics, but it puts a name on practices like Guerby’s that seek not to replace the representative mode, but to engage it in a new way. By imagining representatives as neither embodiments of an electorate nor agents who act on behalf of a district, Guerby refashions them as controls to be manipulated. Even if he has not yet succeeded in his quest to have raw inflation figures reported in either France or the U.S. (or in bringing all judicial proceedings and administrative expenditures into the public eye), he does provide an example of how the blogosphere not only can be part of the democratic interface but also a model for it. By transferring the logics of digital interfaces and computer programming into the political sphere, Guerby has demonstrated how political participation can extend beyond elections when citizens search for ways to operate their governments. And as a broken window is replaced with a new one, elections are not an occasional chance to fire an employee who underperformed during the term of his contract but an opportunity to install a new interface in the eternally renewed and repeatedly dashed hopes that that the political machine might be more smoothly operated.
II. Stories about Citizens and Borders in a Digital Universe

Through their online activity, political bloggers reorganize spaces and the relationships that bind people to them. This chapter looks at two bloggers of French descent who practice politics in ways that challenge the borders of a pre-virtual era. They blur the lines between French and American political spaces, and demand that we rewrite the narratives of space, movement, and position that explain our existence. Their online work pushes us to rethink how, where, and with whom one can act politically. In a digital universe where physical location and national identity can only partially determine which political spaces we might call home, these transnational bloggers destabilize the concepts of France, the U.S., and their attendant identities and politics. What can it mean to be an American? To be French? Must one exclude the other?

First, I will explore the ambiguous political life of Jérôme Guillet. He lives and works in Paris but is a prominent voice in the U.S. political blogosphere, writing primarily at left-wing mainstay Daily Kos and his own European Tribune group blog. Guillet’s brand of border-hopping resets the terms of citizenship in an era of digitally mediated political communities in a manner reminiscent of political philosopher Étienne Balibar’s notion of European citizenship. After examining new wrinkles in the geopolitical map, I look to a blogger who translates U.S. politics and culture into French. Phersu, whom I know only by his screen-name, straddles the Franco-American border and acts as a hinge between the two cultures. Where Guillet pushes France into the great beyond, Phersu pulls the outside into France. But Phersu’s reflective and introspective brand of writing also helps shed light on the broader implications of transnational
political activity. Phersu’s blog is a sustained engagement with the problem of narrating nationality and foreignness. Where Guillet highlights the blind spot in the nation-state model of citizenship, Phersu pushes us to ask: if location still matters, but matters in a qualitatively different way, how do we craft stories about citizens and national subjects?

The questions of citizenship and borders are ultimately narrative questions. They derive from meta-narratives of belonging and identity that are rooted in particular notions of beginnings and endings. Taking a cue from Edward Said’s work, I ask how we might think about beginnings and endings, virtual and otherwise, in a networked age. Taken together, Guillet and Phersu help illustrate the permeable nature of political and cultural borders in the blogosphere, destabilize the meanings of citizenship and national identity, and reveal a geography that shies away from coordinates and hews to the stories we tell about virtual and physical spaces.

**Virtually Incongruent Territories and Nations**

Jérôme Guillet is an energy banker who lives in Paris and a transnational blogger. He founded a site called the European Tribune, a pan-European blog with deep ties to the U.S. blogosphere. The European Tribune is a twice-removed cousin of Daily Kos, the massive collective blog site dedicated to promoting the U.S. Democratic Party and pushing its politics to the left. The Daily Kos website, founded in 2002 by a former Republican, features a set of regular contributors who provide readers with a steady stream of news, political analysis, party strategizing, and ranting. But what sets Daily Kos apart from other blogs is a 2003 decision to reconceptualize the site as a space where
any internet user could open an account and write a blog entry (kos “MT”). The system allows readers to evaluate diaries and promotes the best rated among them to prominent spaces on the webpage, just alongside the work of the officially designated contributors. This arrangement erodes the line between readers and writers, leaders and followers, allowing users to assume any, all, or none of these positions.

In March 2005, BooMan23, a Daily Kos member from Philadelphia, branched out on his own, launching a new site called Booman Tribune using similar software. Although it, too, was focused on U.S. politics, what distinguished it from its blogospheric forebear was a set of features designed to encourage international readership and contributions from non-Americans (BooMan), betraying a vision of a blogosphere where political participation crosses and refugifies borders. Shortly after launching, BooMan issued a special invitation to Daily Kos members from beyond the U.S. to come join the site (BooMan23). Within days of the Booman Tribune’s launch, a number of regular Daily Kos diarists, inspired by the global perspective of the nascent blog, began discussing the possibility of another website that would be international both in membership and scope (Jerome a Paris “European”; Welshman). Three months later, with help from BooMan and his team of programmers, the European Tribune debuted.

Guillet’s sustained involvement in the U.S. blogosphere has earned him attention on both sides of the Atlantic. He was a featured panelist at the 2006 and 2007 Yearly Kos conventions, meetings attended by some 1,500 left-wing bloggers and blog readers in Las Vegas and Chicago that were organized by members of the Daily Kos site. Guillet spoke about energy issues and online activism, and he was the subject of an article in Le
Monde, where one American blogger was quoted suggesting that Guillet be made an honorary U.S. citizen (Lesne 20). Indeed, Guillet occupies a fluid terrain where France, Europe, the U.S., physical space, and virtual space all mingle and bleed into one another.

When Guillet and I spoke, he addressed the question of geography with an answer worthy of political theorist Étienne Balibar: “Je suis français, mais je suis aussi un membre régulier des sites. Donc, je me considère comme les deux. Je sais que je ne suis pas américain, donc j’essaie de faire un minimum d’attention à ce que je dis” (Guillet).¹

Although the idea of nation certainly does not disappear in the blogosphere, its exclusive, or even primary, role in constructing a political community is put into question. It is not that the nation cannot act as the basis of a state, but rather that new possibilities are opened for alternative or multiple organizing principles that had either been relegated to secondary status or not even imagined in earlier historical moments.

The prospect that nationality could be one marker among several undermines the stability of the nation-state, which relies on a totalizing notion of national community. As the blogosphere opens political spaces to subjects with a wide variety of national identities, the terms of membership in political communities have been reset, and the ways that we can speak of belonging and participating must be reconsidered in order to account for these changes.

Guillet’s writing is permeated by an acute awareness of his status and he makes no effort to conceal his nationality from his interlocutors. At all the sites he frequents, he

¹ “I am French, but I’m also a regular member of the sites. So, I consider myself to be both. I know that I am not an American, so I try to pay a certain amount of attention to what I say.”
signs his work “Jerome a Paris”: the diacritical marks are lost to the limitations of the database but his presence in France (and his absence from the U.S.) is on prominent display in each and every one of his blogospheric utterances. “J’aurais pu ne jamais dire que j’étais français et faire comme si j’étais un expatrié,” he told me, “ce que beaucoup de gens auraient pu croire ou croyaient. Je participe de nature transparente avec les billets, ces informations-là données à tout le monde, les gens tiennent compte de mon point de vue comme ils veulent” (Guillet).2 Despite this forthcomingness, Guillet’s point of view has from time to time generated strong reactions among his American counterparts, most notably when he criticized a U.S. politician’s foreign policy proposals and when he questioned Daily Kos members’ commitment to left-wing ideology. These incidents accentuate the problematics of location, nationality, and citizenship in the blogosphere.

In a pair of spring 2007 diaries, Guillet blogged about a speech and a magazine article by Barack Obama where the senator and future president discussed his views on U.S. diplomacy and the use of military force. Guillet, who has said that his entry to the blogosphere was catalyzed by the Iraq War that began in 2003 (Guillet; Jerome a Paris “Energize two”), took issue with what he perceived as a neoconservative undercurrent in Obama’s foreign policy positions. Obama sees “the world only as a source of threats for America,” Guillet wrote (Jerome a Paris “Neocons”). A month later, he elaborated his critique further. For Obama, he wrote, “[f]oreign policy is not about sharing a common

2 “I could have never said that I was French and made as if I were an expatriate, which many people would have believed or did believe. I write my blog posts in a transparent fashion; this information is made available to everyone. People can take my point of view however they want.”
planet with others [. . .] it’s only about threats and dangers. Foreigners are, at best, a
nuisance, and otherwise a danger” (Jerome a Paris “I’m sorry”). In light of Guillet’s own
ambiguous status in the U.S. blogosphere, it is difficult not to read at least a dash of self-
referential humor in this last observation. Guillet seemed to suggest that he, as a
foreigner, could be perceived as a nuisance or danger to Daily Kos, an alien presence that
could not be fully incorporated into a U.S. political space. Although most of the 1,000-
odd responses the diary received were focused on rebutting his argument, a substantial
minority of posts did betray this type of sentiment, questioning the seemliness of
Guillet’s entering the fray in the first place. While some claimed that he quoted Obama
selectively (Clare; EZ writer; IrishCatholicDemocrat; kingsbridge77), others suggested
more or less gently that Guillet would do better to concentrate on France’s own legacy of
military aggression.3

The reaction to a blog entry the previous autumn was even stronger. Guillet
wrote that he was “permanently amazed” that his policy proposals for increasing energy
conservation and confronting global warming were met with “hostile comments [. . .]
which sound just like anything you’d hear from rightwing commenters in Europe”
(Jerome a Paris “Is”). What amounted to a case of divergent perspectives provoked a
fiery response from some readers who saw Guillet’s intervention as a distraction from the
Senate and House campaigns that were just then reaching their peak. Nearly 1,300

3 The requisite invocations of amphibians and capitulating primates were thrown and rebutted. In one such
thread, typical of the sort of name-calling and insult trading into which online conversations can devolve, one commenter wrote, “i’m not letting the frenchies and their neo-colonial greedy exploits in west africa off the hook if he’s going to be engaging in twistology on this blog” (pmb), to which another replied, “I see. So you kinda have a French thing” (Junior Bug).
replies were registered and a handful of Daily Kos members saw fit to write their own diaries with more extended responses. One such post, RickD wrote: “Um, there’s an election in ten days. Come back afterwards and we can discuss just how much the United States differs from Europe. For the time being, keep in mind that visiting an American site and berating people for being too right wing just isn’t going to accomplish anything.”

In each of these cases, the root of the conflict lies in competing notions of how--and if--a political community can be imagined in a digital age. Put another way, the disputes reveal divergent narratives of how--and by whom--politics ought to be practiced. In the confused geography of the blogosphere, the question of national identity resurfaces to confront states that band together into multinational unions and political actors like Guillet who dash from one political space to another with such regularity and ease as to render borders almost (but never entirely) meaningless. The result is a seeming cacophony of incongruent political spaces that mix nation, language, and ideology and upset notions of who can belong to a political community and who, as RickD insinuated of Guillet, can only be a visitor.

RickD’s comment betrayed an undercurrent of unexamined nationalism, manifested in a claim about the necessary qualifications for participation in a political community. What is at stake here is the place of nationalism and national identity in politics. Bloggers like Guillet challenge the stability of ideologies that make tightly-defined national belonging a precondition for political participation. Nationalism and the category of the nation have been treated exhaustively by twentieth-century social theorists who have sought to understand how the nation-state emerged in pre-industrial
and industrial configurations. These theories are generally premised on a set of technological horizons that gave shape to the second half of the previous millennium. As those horizons move, allowing people like Guillet to move across borders, so, too, must we rethink the nation, politics, and the linkages between them. The writings of Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson were especially important for the last generation of thought on the nation. By looking briefly to their work, we can gain a clearer understanding of the background against which virtual transnational citizenship takes shape.

Gellner describes nationalism as “a political principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent” (1). For Gellner, the national unit is created by the imposition of “standardized, homogeneous, centrally sustained high cultures” that allow for the creation of industrial economic orders (55). Blogs do not so much pose a new problem for this concept of nationalism as accentuate a weakness in its totalizing logic. Gellner himself is quick to acknowledge that it is all but impossible to form a nation that would be precisely coterminous with a geographic territory. Likewise, the advent of the blogosphere underscores the impossibility of creating a nationally pure political space. In a time when borders were more easily patrolled and people, objects, and ideas were vested with lesser degrees of mobility, the state could perhaps have been unified under the sign of the nation. Earlier information regimes and more limited means of movement acted as buffers that enabled shortcomings of the nationalist ideal to be

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4 For a discussion of the concept of mobility in light of changing modes of transport and communication, see Vincent Kaufman’s Re-thinking Mobility.
surmounted, if only in part and temporarily. In restricting the possibilities of politics to a closely delimited national space and geographic territory, the nation-state found an effective strategy for survival. The development of virtual political spaces in a post-industrial world erodes the nation’s power as a primary organizing principle. Guillet cannot truly visit an “American” blog because the border that might contain it and mark it as “American” is porous, jagged, and shifty. Jerome a Paris is always there, an already native member of the blogosphere, even if Guillet was somehow born French. If Guillet is a visitor, then the same applies to all blogospheric readers and writers, including RickD.

However, the nation is not dead; it is simply relocated in the imaginary. Even as his actions belie a commitment to a transnational politics and his writings frequently promote the continuing integration of Europe, Guillet insists that the nation “est un élément d’identité qui existe toujours en Europe. Même si on se considère européens, on est aussi citoyens de différents pays” (Guillet). For Guillet, the condition of being European is neither inherited at birth nor granted by the state. Instead, one “considers” oneself European. Following Balibar, we might say that Europeanness is assumed, created collectively by those who claim it individually. Similarly, the European Tribune website has no residency requirement. All internet users who wish to read, write, provoke, or respond are able to do so: whoever imagines herself a part of the Tribune’s

5 “is an element of identity that still exists in Europe. Even if we consider ourselves Europeans, we are also citizens of different countries.”
6 It should be unsurprising that Guillet blogged in support of the European Constitution, which was rejected by French voters in a 29 May 2005 referendum.
political community can participate.\(^7\) In Guillet’s mind, Europe is a concept open to those who would will it; by his design, the *European Tribune* is a space that belongs to and is created by those who would visit it.

This sentiment echoes the Anderson’s work. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson’s central premise is that the nation is a man-made concept which exists only in the imagination of its members, a “cultural artefact” (4). What is particular about the nation, as opposed to earlier modes of organization such as tribes or villages, is that it demands that the community be constructed by groups of people who could not possibly all know one another. The central issue for Anderson is simultaneity. In Anderson’s estimation, religious communities relied on an understanding of simultaneity where a divine being saw all of history at once (23-24). Nations were made possible by a notion of simultaneity whereby countless people were able to perceive that they might have effects on each other’s lives (24-25). At root, simultaneity is a narrative concept, the stuff of novelistic passages that begin, “Meanwhile...,” or filmic split-screen sequences. It is no coincidence that Anderson links the rise of the novel and the newspaper, a pair of literary and communications technologies that exploited the possibilities of simultaneity, to the emergence of the nation-state, the ideology of nationalism, and the very concept of nation itself. Not only did these textual forms allow people to imagine themselves as part of a broad community, but they also testified to a host of technologies (the printing press, [print link], [link], [link], [link], [link]).

\(^7\) Guillet notes that even if the architecture of the blogosphere leaves it theoretically open to all users, there are social factors that determine who logs in to the *European Tribune*: “C’est quelqu’un qui a un ordinateur, qui parle anglais, qui s’intéresse à la politique. Ça détermine déjà des groupes” (Guillet) (“It’s someone who has a computer, who speaks English, who is interested in politics. That already determines groups”).
reliable postal services, paperwork schemes) that made possible the administration of a vast political entity.

In the era of digital media, simultaneity exceeds the frame of the nation. Our actions continue to affect the lives of people we don’t know, but now they can reach far beyond the geographies of states, ethnicities, and religions. Sitting at his office computer on any given day in Paris, Guillet can develop financing for a wind farm (Jerome a Paris “Energize two”; “Energize Daily”) while simultaneously writing about populism in British and U.S. politics (“Who?”) or pondering the global consequences of Chinese cement manufacturing (“China”). His professional work links French capital with energy projects “around the world” (“Energize two”) while his blogging reaches across Europe and deep into the U.S. In both cases, Guillet’s actions reinforce Anderson’s notion of simultaneity even as they shatter his conception of a “solid community moving steadily down (or up) history” (26). Transnational blogging opens the door for a wide range of imagined (if, as Jean-Luc Nancy might remind us, not necessarily “real”) communities, but it explodes the possibility of coherent ones.

It is in this spirit that Étienne Balibar seeks to counter the assumption that all communities must “se défin[r] [. . .] par l’opposition d’un ‘intérieur’ et d’un ‘extérieur’” (Nous 112). If the traditional nation-state functioned by clearly distinguishing citizens from foreigners “en termes de droits et d’obligations sur un territoire donné” (Balibar Droit 47), then the fading contrast between insiders and outsiders both on the internet

8 “[be] defined [. . .] by the opposition of an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’” (We 66).
9 “in terms of rights and obligations in a given space” (Politics 108).
and in a globalized world, combined with a growing instability of the term “territory,”
demands a new form of political organization. As globalization and technological
advancement erode the categories that allow for clearly delineated definitions and
assessments of who is or is not a member of a political or national community, Balibar
argues, a new concept of community becomes necessary. The dilemma, he writes, is that

ou bien l’émergence d’une communauté particulière qui “rassemble” une
multiplicité d’individus ou de groupes sous un dénominateur commun ou par le
rapport que tous entretiennent aux mêmes institutions doit exclure de son unité à
un titre ou à un autre tous ceux qui n’y “participent” pas comme membres de
plein droit, ou bien la multiplicité, les différences, voire le conflit, demeurent
irréductibles; on se trouve alors devant le paradoxe d’une communauté qui ne
distinguerait pas nettement l’extérieur de l’intérieur, ou l’unité de la division.
Mais cette logique, précisément, n’est qu’une logique, fondée sur le schéme
formel du tout ou rien (ou l’appartenance, ou la non-appartenance). (Nous 114,
emphasis in original)¹⁰

As the possibility of a universal common denominator capable of subsuming an entire
community recedes, the notion of a strictly delimited community based on clear codes of
inclusion and exclusion falters. Balibar’s dilemma is finding a way to describe
community when the regime of all or nothing begins to falter but when it is not yet (and
may in fact never be) fully eradicated. This unsettledness is what lies at the heart of this
long, tortuous sentence: what to make of a totalizing logic whose vestiges remain even as
its power is less than total. The political community Balibar describes is one that exists
in between different modes of inclusion and exclusion, coming at a moment (in his

¹⁰ “either the emergence of a particular community that ‘gathers’ a multiplicity of individuals or groups
under a common denominator or by the relation they all maintain with a given set of institutions must
exclude from its unity for one reason or another all those who do not ‘participate’ as full-fledged members,
or else multiplicity, differences, even conflict remain irreducible, placing before us the paradox of a
community that could not clearly distinguish the inside from the outside or unity from division. But this
logic, precisely, is only a logic, founded on the formal schema of all or nothing (either belonging, or else
nonbelonging)” (We 67, emphasis in original).
project: a moment of European integration and the disintegration of French identity; in this project: a moment of transnational virtual politics) when communities of difference begin to emerge from the wreckage of the logics of nationalism.

Invoking Nancy, Balibar writes that what matters most is the flourishing of a plurality of voices, not the isolation of those voices or their reduction under some sign of sameness. Nationalism, exclusionary logics of citizenship, and the nation-state itself all fail to account entirely for the social and political realities of globalization and the internet. Furthermore, by moving beyond dialectical thought, by attempting to break out of the either/or construction not through synthesis but by savoring the ambiguity of differences, Balibar is suggesting a dynamic, fluid notion of community and citizenship.

When the logic of “all or nothing” loses its primacy, it is necessary to conceive of political communities that exist without fundamental reference to the state, transcend borders, and can incorporate multiple identities. This is a rejection of the universalism that has been central to the rhetoric of French republicanism since the end of the ancien régime and a recalibration of the notion of membership. In a community imagined in terms of difference, it is impossible to make any coherent statements about what types of people or which groups are included and which are excluded.

11 Balibar describes “universalités fictives” (Droit 85) (“fictitious universalisms”) in a maneuver recalling Nancy’s notion of myth, which “n’est pas autre chose que la pensée d’une fiction fondateuse, ou d’une fondation par la fiction” (Désœuvrée 133-34, emphasis in original) (“is in effect nothing other than the thought of a founding fiction, or a foundation by fiction” [Inoperative 53, emphasis in original]).
Rewriting Citizenship in a Networked Society

How do the changing logics of inclusion and exclusion take shape in blogs like the European Tribune? At the most basic level, membership in online political communities is determined by the practices of reading and writing; by the most formal of definitions, membership consists in creating an account, an option generally available for free to any computer user with an email address. Just as Balibar writes that “la confrontation pratique avec les différentes modalités de l’exclusion [. . .] constitue toujours le moment fondateur de la citoyenneté” (Nous 125), it is when digitally unbound compatriots engage one another, in spite of and in celebration of their differences, that transnational citizenship is born. This sort of citizenship is constituted in the first instance on the basis of relations among citizens, not on the basis of the relationship of the individual to the state. As Guillet and all the other readers and writers at the European Tribune engage one another in dialogue, they form part of a multitude of citizens, articulating a political identity that is rooted in their exchanges with one another and premised on the matrix of variously assigned and imagined identities that they each have accumulated.

When Guillet addressed the role offline identities played online, he first struck an optimistic, almost utopian tone: “Quand [les gens] sont en ligne, on ne sait pas s’ils sont hommes ou femmes, on ne sait pas forcément leur nationalité, on sait pas s’ils sont jeunes ou vieux ou noirs ou blancs ou handicapés ou autres [. . .]. Ils sont perçus pour ce qu’ils

12 “it is always the practical confrontation with the different modalities of exclusion [. . .] that constitutes the founding moment of citizenship [. . .].” (We 76).
écrivent, pour ce qu’ils sont et non pas par ce à quoi ils ressemblent [. . .]. Ça brouille un peu les cartes.” But, perhaps remembering his own complicated relationship to virtual nationality, Guillet quickly added an important nuance: “Mais je ne suis pas sûr que la citoyenneté soit le plus brouillé comme élément.”¹³ The blogosphere reshuffles the deck. But the cards themselves remain unchanged even as the connections that link them to one another and to the players in the game of online politics mutate.

Guillet and Balibar help illuminate a citizenship based on relationships and relationships founded on the practices of reading and writing, recalling Nancy’s positioning of the literary act as the basis for relations among people. “L’écrivain le plus solitaire n’écrit que pour l’autre,” Nancy declares, establishing writing as an exposition of the self to the other. It is through this movement of opening up that true being becomes possible for Nancy. He adds parenthetically: “Celui qui écrit pour le même, pour lui-même ou pour l’anonyme de la foule indistincte, n’est pas un écrivain” (Désœuvrée 165).¹⁴ Writing, then, is not merely the inscription of letters and words on some material support, but the remnant of an attempt at communication. For Nancy, writing presupposes neither paper nor screen, but a relationship with and a gesture toward the other. Transnational bloggers, by writing and reading the writings of others, by commenting and rewriting collectively, imagine a political community in cyberspace that responds to Nancy’s notions of writing, exposition, and being-in-common. And as it

¹³ “When [people] are online, you don’t know if they’re men or women, you don’t really know their nationality, you don’t know if they’re young or old or black or white or handicapped or whatever [. . .]. They are seen for what they write, for what they are and not based on what they look like [. . .]. That reshuffles the deck a little. But I’m not certain that citizenship is the most reshuffled element.”
¹⁴ “The most solitary of writers writes only for the other. (Anyone who writes for the same, for himself, or for the anonymity of the crowd is not a writer)” (Inoperative 66).
creates and recreates a new type of citizenship, this act of imagination becomes a political act in and of itself.

The word community is frequently used in the blogosphere, particularly in sites marked as American spaces, to describe groups organized around particular ideologies, parties, or identities. But these markers are imagined in much the same fashion as Anderson’s nations and their coherence collapses. The borders that are constructed around these deliberate online communities are as fluid and porous as the national borders over which bloggers like Guillet spill. Nancy maintains that “la communauté ne peut pas relever du domaine de l’œuvre. On ne la produit pas, on en fait l’expérience (ou son expérience nous fait) comme expérience de la finitude. La communauté comme œuvre, ou la communauté par les œuvres supposerait que l’être commun, comme tel, soit objectivable et productible” (Désœuvrée 78, emphasis in original). Like Nancy’s community, a transnational citizenship premised on relations among citizens cannot be built. Rather, it is through the literary acts of reading and writing, the political practices of collectively claiming and reclaiming rights, and a particular experience of being that is possible only through engagement with others that a transnational and virtual citizenship emerges. By telling stories to and with one another, about themselves and about one another, bloggers continually redraw the map of the world they inhabit and reestablish their transnational credentials. Transnational citizenship emerges hand in hand with a narrative political geography.

15 “community cannot arise from the domain of work. One does not produce it, one experiences or is constituted by it as the experience of finitude. Community understood as a work or through its works would presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible” (Inoperative 31, emphasis in original).
But we must also consider to whom this transnational citizenship should be accorded. After all, it is not only bloggers and Europeans whose everyday lives are inflected by accelerating communications technologies, tightening networks of global capital, and mutating borders. More than the fact of being plugged into the internet, it is the very existence of the network that pushes us all toward a political community based not on nation, centered not on state, but comprised of the connections that we each experience with one another, online and off.

**Flickering Geographies and Nonlinear Travel**

Of course, none of this is to say that we either can or ought to throw away our maps and passports and await the utopia of an a-national, a-geographic society. Place and identity do not cease to matter, they simply matter differently, and it is the exploration of this difference that I have taken as my project here. How can we understand Guillet to be practicing some sort of transnational citizenship without thinking about their national identities? There would be little extraordinary about their blogospheric travels if they weren’t in some fashion exploiting extant geographic and political tensions that are freshly exposed by the internet. Even as it is true that they destabilize the meanings of “French,” “European,” and “U.S.” politics, blending and resignifying these terms and concepts, it is precisely because they are in some sense French, because they identify themselves and are identified by others as French, that Guillet and the very idea of transnational blogging are interesting.
By untethering citizenship from territory and embedding it in discursive practices, by pushing us to rethink what borders mean and how they function, bloggers ask us to think about space in a radically different way. The practices of transnational citizenship reveal not only a new story about nations and states, but also the outlines of a new way of thinking about space and moving through it. If Gellner’s marriage of the national unit and the geographic territory is annulled by the practices of transnational citizens, this does not mean that space and terrain are devoid of meaning. Rather, the possibilities of politics are remapped by technologies that give fresh meanings to physical position. It is less that virtual space opens up wormholes rendering previously distant places suddenly proximate to one another than that the spaces we experience in our everyday, virtual lives exceed the very concept of the map. The blogosphere demonstrates that the Cartesian spaces of here and there are necessary, but insufficient, for understanding the full meanings of distances: the notion of a point fails to account completely for our positions in the world. In this digital geography, virtual subjects flicker as they occupy positions throughout the network and around the globe. All the while, bloggers really and truly are right there, typing in their living rooms and offices and then, standing up, they step away from their computers, pause before the mirror, perhaps noticing they are a bit heavier or thinner than they were last year, and return to a world they had never truly left, where the parameters of gender, class, race, and friendships cannot be shrouded behind a stream of pixilated text, a world where it does, in fact, mean something to be French or American, no matter how confused those meanings have become in the network. But our aim ought not to be to resolve this uncertain blur, to establish a precise, unique location for each
person who enters the blogosphere. Instead of avoiding the ambiguity, it is perhaps more productive to think poetically and consider what this de- and re-territorialized sense of space might mean, in and of itself.

To explore this terrain, it will be useful to introduce another blogger who tested the limits of French and U.S. politics and who, through a self-conscious and conflicted relationship with writing and space, helps tell a story about virtual space, location, and movement. Phersu was the pseudonym\(^{16}\) of a Paris high school philosophy teacher who positioned himself as a bridge from French cultural space to U.S. politics. Although it would be both unfair and inaccurate to say that he is not an engaged French citizen, his blogging constituted a sustained, self-conscious, and, I will argue, unfinished excursion into the left-wing American political blogosphere. Like Jerome a Paris, Phersu’s writing betrayed a keen interest in U.S. politics. But where Guillet writes in English and often at sites marked as American, Phersu blogged in French and with a culturally French readership in mind.

My understanding of Phersu’s blogging has as much to do with what he read as with what he wrote. He claims never to have read *Madame Bovary* ("Humiliation"), told

\(^{16}\) Even though we met in person for an interview, Phersu did not share his offline identity with me and I have made no effort to learn it. Phersu told me that the name comes from an Etruscan word meaning “masked.” In our interview, Phersu hinted that he also kept other blogs where he would feel at liberty to talk about his life in greater detail: “Quand je voulais parler de moi, je n’ai pu le mettre dans Phersu. Lui était public” (4 May 2007) (“When I wanted to speak about myself, I couldn’t put it in Phersu. He was public”). In order to preserve his anonymity, Phersu did not tell me where to find these blogs. Such an arrangement seems to push pseudonymity to a limit. Phersu didn’t merely have a pen name: he used it selectively, and may have had more than one. It is possible that his different avatars were read by some of the same people, unbeknownst to them. We might call what Phersu describes “polynymity,” a selective, and context-specific, pseudonymity that allows him to preserve a non-virtual anonymity and keep his multiple online manifestations separate in the eyes of others.
me that he “[n]e conna[it] pas bien la blogosphère francophone” (4 May 2007),\(^\text{17}\) and declared: “Je n’écris pas sur la politique française parce que cela demanderait de réfléchir, ce qui est un peu hors de propos ici, alors que la politique étrangère permet des manichéismes plus amusants” (“Constat”).\(^\text{18}\) The blog’s archive contradicts Phersu’s tongue-in-cheek modesty, revealing an extensive and nuanced familiarity with U.S. culture, U.S. politics, and above all the U.S. blogosphere. A substantial portion of his work consisted of citations of, translations of, and commentary on American political culture as filtered through blog sites including, but by no means limited to, Talking Points Memo, Daily Kos, and Political Animal. He was even something of a court-watcher, writing about decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court, hazarding a prediction about who would succeed William Rehnquist (“L’âge”), and revising it upon the retirement of Sandra Day O’Connor (“5 contre 4”). Phersu also made forays into the conservative media, introducing his readers to the National Review and displaying a deep knowledge of American pop culture by comparing Katherine Jean Lopez and John Derbyshire, two of the Review’s star writers, to Statler and Waldorf, the two white-haired marionettes who comfortably heckled the other characters from the balcony on Jim Henson’s Muppet Show (“Corner”).\(^\text{19}\) Phersu was not exclusively interested in American (or what he at times referred to more broadly as Anglo-Saxon) culture and politics. But, even at moments where he blogged about foreign cultures besides the U.K. and the U.S., he was

\(^{17}\) “[d]oesn’t know the Francophone blogosphere well.”
\(^{18}\) “I don’t write about French politics because that would demand reflection, which is a bit out of place here. Foreign politics allows for more amusing Manichaeisms.”
\(^{19}\) Elsewhere, Phersu would write about an “obsession” with the theme song from the U.S. television program Cheers, although he remembered it as dating from the 1970s (it was broadcast from 1982 until 1993) (“Là”).
often reading and writing about information that filtered to him through the English-
language media. For example, when he wrote about West Africa, he was reading a book
by an American anthropologist that had been published by Oxford University Press
(“Légendes”).

Remember the response to Jerome a Paris’s Obama post: upset that Guillet was
distracting U.S. voters from more important issues, RickD told Guillet to “keep in mind
that [he was] visiting an American site.” Even if RickD’s complaint was at least partially
unfounded, Phersu didn’t need reminding. His blog read like a travelogue, a report from
the field. As with Guillet, Phersu challenged the borders of political entities such as
France and the U.S. But where Guillet pushed outward, participating actively and
deliberately in politics elsewhere, Phersu pulled the outside in, stubbornly reinforcing the
border even as he crossed it:

Mon truc, c’était plus que de rivaliser, juste d’indiquer le genre de choses dont on
parlait là-bas: traduire. C’était juste une fonction de médiation, de passage et pas
du tout une fonction de compétition. C’est pas refaire la même chose, c’est juste
pointer dans cette direction. (4 May 2007)²⁰

Through this gesture of pointing, Phersu created a sense of motion that saturated his blog,
a trajectory that originated in France, traveled to the U.S. blogosphere, and returned to
deliver an account to a French audience. By writing about things “là-bas,” he mapped an
opposition between here and there, suggesting a point of origin and a line leading away
from it. Furthermore, he carefully described a distance (perhaps a critical distance) from

²⁰ “My thing, it wasn’t so much to enter the fray as really just to note the sort of things that were being
talked about over there: to translate. It was just a matter of mediation, of passage, and not at all a matter of
competition. It’s not to do the same thing over again, just to point in that direction.”
his subject matter: even as he demonstrated an intimate acquaintance with U.S. politics and culture, he strove to keep himself separate, to insist that he lived somehow outside of that world and visited it as an observer, a tourist. Phersu rewrote the border, smudged it, reinstated it in a different form, and endowed it with a different set of powers: this border was not there to keep him out of the U.S. but to ensure that he did not lose his sense of Frenchness, regardless of his virtual movements. Even as he invented a new sort of literary travel, a virtual passage from one culture to another, and back, he insisted on the border’s continuing existence: it was because of this blurry border that he was able to travel anywhere at all.

In the introduction to his book on the idea of travel in the writings of early modern French writers, Georges Van Den Abbeele outlines a theoretical framework for thinking about the voyage as a critical category. Van Den Abbeele, who shall serve here first as my guide and eventually as my foil, roots his theory in a subtle understanding of the home, which is at once the unchangeable point against which the voyage must be measured and the necessarily dynamic place that must change in order to validate the travel, what he calls “the radical noncoincidence of point of origin and point of return” (xix). The journey is conceived as a circle with the home occupying a privileged point and the traveler moving in a linear fashion.21 By his reading, any voyage can be thought

21 Normand Doiron observes a similar structure in seventeenth-century French travel literature: “Le parcours du voyageur classique est une dynamique faisant alterner le tour dans le monde et le nécessaire retour au point fixe du foyer—qu’il s’agisse, pour le voyageur, du monde s’opposant aux mensonges des livres ou, pour le philosophe, du monde sensible s’opposant à l’inverse à la vérité de l’esprit” (94) (“The classic itinerary of the voyager is a dynamic that alternates the world tour with the necessary return to the fixed point of the home—whether it be, for the voyager, the world opposed to the lies of books or, for the philosopher, the sensible world opposed to the truth of spirit, which is the reverse”).
about and described only as a narrative comprised of the itinerary followed, the transformation it visits upon the traveler, and the inevitable changes back home that are necessarily missed during the journey. To think a voyage is to emplot it and to go somewhere is to create a story about the trip.

Van Den Abbeele’s thought mingles the physics of travel with the poetics of travel writing, and he focuses on the image of displacement, the notion that writing about a journey is necessarily a displacement of the thing described, that “it is as much a translation as it is a relation” (xxi, emphasis in original). The force of this point rests on his tracing the etymological journey of the word “relation” from its Latin root (“latus, ‘borne or transported’” [xxi, emphasis in original]) and then substituting one prefix for another. More than simply reenacting movement, travel writing moves the voyage across the same cultural and linguistic borders that the traveler encountered during the journey.

Although he also clings to the idea of leaving home, James Clifford offers a slightly different definition: “‘Travel,’ as I use it, is an inclusive term embracing a range of more or less voluntarist practices of leaving ‘home’ to go to some ‘other’ place. The displacement takes place for the purpose of gain—material, spiritual, scientific. It involves obtaining knowledge and/or having an ‘experience’ (exciting, edifying, pleasurable, estranging, broadening)” (66). By placing “home” in quotation marks, Clifford acknowledges the degree to which this concept floats. This position was part of a broader argument that began in the 1980s with the Writing Culture movement about what anthropology consisted in. The practice of fieldwork (with its cycles of comings and goings) was placed in question as anthropologists reflected on the relationship between their discipline, the world at large, and the worlds they created through the writing and research process. Clifford’s notion of the field is somewhat troublesome, as it depends on the possibility of “cleared space of work [that] assumes that one can keep out distracting influences. A field, by definition, is not overgrown” (53). To the contrary, isn’t the field always quite overgrown and aren’t the distractions always a necessary part of the story? Even if the notion of a cleared field makes social studies more manageable, it also is a wholehearted embrace of what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls the “poetics of detachment” (18).

Dean MacCannell, whose work focuses more specifically on the questions raised by tourism, develops another theory of travel that revolves around the notion of cultural experience, which he defines as a type of commodity specific to late capitalist economies that do not hew to the value theory of labor. “The value of such things as programs, trips, courses, reports, articles, shows, conferences, parades, opinions, events, sights, spectacles, scenes and situations of modernity is not determined by the amount of labor required for their production. Their value is a function of the quality and quantity of the experience they promise” (23, emphasis in original). I find MacCannell’s theory a bit constraining as it depends upon a notion of culture that can be broken into discrete, consumable units.
This is precisely what Phersu told me he wanted to do: *traduire*, to translate, to mediate, to facilitate the passage of ideas from one milieu to another, to recuperate for himself and for his readers meanings that might otherwise remain beyond their reach. Through the conjoined acts of travel and translation, Phersu created a story about the U.S. using the American blogosphere as his primary text. And as he drew the border and brought his story across, he altered it, inflected it with his readings, changed himself, and affirmed his non-American identity: “Pour se sentir vraiment européen,” he wrote, “il faut quitter l’Europe” (“Europositionnement”).22 Here, Phersu took Van Den Abbeele’s linking of physical and narrative travel to heart: his daily departures passed not through an airport lounge but through a modem. But Phersu harbored no illusions that the travel stories he offered (to his readers and to himself) were able to capture the reality of lived experience in the English-speaking world. He betrayed an enviable self-consciousness of the effect his writing had on the subjects he treated, as in a moment when he reflected on his love of England: “Mais quand on aime, on n’aime pas la personne aimée, mais le simulacre qu’on s’en est fait. En l’occurrence, mon Angleterre fictive est une République travailliste où on déteste le sport, la chasse et les aristocraties, tout en ayant gardé quand même un snobisme universalisé à toutes les classes sociales” (“Anglophilie”).23 The England he loved existed only in the stories he told, but he remained acutely aware of the illusion he had crafted.

22 “To feel truly European, you have to leave Europe.”
23 “But when one loves, one does not love the loved person, but instead the simulacrum that one makes. In this case, my fictitious England is a workers’ Republic where people hate sports, hunting, and aristocracies, all the while maintaining a universalized snobbery across all social classes.”
In the end, Van Den Abbeele is hemmed in by a notion of movement that does not admit for the possibilities of multiple locations that the blogosphere invites, perhaps because he is writing about an age that substantially predates the internet. His work is ultimately constrained by an investment in the notion of an economy of space where a conservation of motion, a unity of place, and a coherence of subjectivity rule the day. His theory cannot withstand the weight of Guillet’s border hopping habits (functioning in the political spaces of Paris and Washington, sitting at his desk in La Défense while sparring or sympathizing with American liberals). Similarly, it cannot account for Phersu’s writing practices because when he entered the blogosphere, he was simultaneously at home and in transit. Van Den Abbeele’s image of the circular voyage is insufficient in virtual space, both because the notion of a circular route is not necessarily operative and because the traveler cannot be counted upon to occupy only one unique point. It is not only that, as Van Den Abbeele argues, “home” changes when we return from the expedition. If we can be in more than one place at a time, home has no singular identity: more than Van Den Abbeele’s “radical noncoincidence of point of origin and point of return,” there is a radical multiplicity of homes. Importantly, this is not to say that internauts are homeless, but rather that they enjoy a host of possible homes at any given moment. The blog one reads and the blog one writes; the website one chooses as a “homepage” in one’s web browser; one’s laptop computer, a virtuo-physical mobile home: the range of potential homes expands as the meaning of home flickers. An internet user’s home can be one, two, any, or none of these, rendering Van Den Abbeele’s circle an inadequate metaphor to describe virtual movement. Such a
multidimensional and unfixed view of space is the natural “home” for Guillet and Phersu. The uncertainty and ambiguity of the internet correspond to the confused identities and politics of its inhabitants. In the age of the internet (especially but not exclusively), space and subjectivities are splintered, but seamless, comprising a cohesive fabric of reality that we experience whole but can only describe or understand in parts.

All this said, Van Den Abbeele’s insistence on the narrative of travel offers an opening for thinking about movement and position in the blogosphere. If the always-narrated voyage depends on the dichotomy of here and there, then blogs throw everything into question: they don’t necessarily demolish these distinctions, but they complicate them and force us to reconsider how here and there can be thought, what they can signify, and how we can move through them. While the geographies of distance and proximity falter and recede, narrative geographies become even stronger than before.

The Narrative Trap and the End of the Blog

As aware as he was of his role as traveler and visitor, Phersu seemed to lament the effects of writing and long for a mode of cultural description that could circumvent language and bring him home to some pre-narrative state of nature: his blogospheric daydream eliminated not only the travel from travel, but also the writing from travel writing. When Phersu wrote about his relationship to and perception of space, he described a conflicted mental map pitting his narrative and geographic faculties against one another:

"Je n’ai aucune mémoire spatiale (j’ai notamment de gros problèmes sur l’orientation gauche-droite) mais j’ai une bonne mémoire narrative, ce qui fait que"
je ne peux retenir une information (abstraite ou sensorielle) qu’en la codant dans un récit. En revanche, j’ai du mal à retenir des modifications de détails de la même histoire et j’aurais tendance à trop les assimiler [. . .]. Je n’ai jamais eu l’impression que je me souvenais de récits comme d’itinéraires mais il semblerait bien que ce soit en fait le cas. (“Espace”)

The comment followed a description of a neuroscience experiment that showed that rats’ brains make sense of space using their visual cortices. Phersu attempted to draw an analogy to his own sense of space: where he had previously seen his tendency to understand geography as stories, he came to believe that “[l]a mémoire fonctionne vraiment comme une espèce d’espace’” (“Espace”), with points on a mental map linked to vision.

Hidden behind this shift in perspective, I see Phersu espousing a preference for spatial geographies over narrative ones. If he had trouble remembering new details, it is because the story, once written, is difficult to amend. These details not only blend

24 “I have no spatial memory (notably, I have great difficulty telling left from right) but I have a good narrative memory. This means that I can only retain information (be it abstract or sensory) by encoding it in a story. However, I have trouble keeping track of changing details in the same story and have a tendency to let them all blend together too much [. . .]. I never had the impression that I remembered stories as itineraries, but it certainly would seem that this is, in fact, the case.”

25 “memory truly functions as a species of ‘space.’” The French here evokes the title of a book by Georges Perec. In *Espèces d’espaces*, Perec drew a clear connection between the act of writing, the sense of vision, and the construction of space: “Avant, il n’y avait rien, ou presque rien; après, il n’y a pas grand-chose, quelques signes, mais qui suffisent pour qu’il y ait un haut et un bas, un commencement et une fin, une droite et une gauche, un recto et un verso” (*Espèces* 18) (“Before, there was nothing, or almost nothing; afterwards, there isn’t much, a few signs, but which are enough for there to be a top and a bottom, a beginning and an end, a right and a left, a recto and a verso” [*Species* 10]). For Perec, the mere act of making marks on a page spatializes it, defines orientation, and establishes narrative itself: now there is something, but before there was nothing (or, as he admits, almost nothing, and he will later ask “Comment penser le rien sans automatiquement mettre quelque chose autour de ce rien, ce qui en fait un trou [. . .]” [*Espèces* 48] (“How to think of nothing without automatically putting something round that nothing, so turning it into a hole [. . .]” [*Species* 33])). To demonstrate, he wrote: “L’espace commence ainsi, avec seulement des mots, des signes tracées sur la page blanche” (*Espèces* 21) (“This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page” [*Species* 13]). Here, Perec is not only explaining, he is demonstrating: the word “ainsi” can be read as referring to its own writing and thus the sentence of which it is part creates space, mapping out a geography of directions and distances upon the very page it sits.
together, they do so “too much,” as the irrational, narrative habit kicks in. The implication is that spatial memory is the superior variety: it is somehow more accurate, more closely linked to reality, and Phersu seemed somewhat relieved to learn that modern neuroscience might redeem his flawed, narrative memory.

Despite his professed best efforts to resist it, this narrative tendency appeared at other moments, as when Phersu reacted to a Seattle newspaper column entitled “Seattle Is Closer to Paris than to Texas” (Horsey) by writing, “ce n’est pas de la tectonique wegenerienne” (“Tectonique”). More clearly, the tension over narrative tension surfaced when he reflected on his desire to strip himself of his memories altogether:

Parmi mes névroses, j’ai un désir d’amnésie (limitée quand même). J’aimerais bien uploader ma conscience dans un disque dur dont je pourrais effacer régulièrement une partie des fichiers. J’aimerais bien me réveiller sans me souvenir de tout ce que j’ai répété 150 fois, comme si tout était frais et neuf, comme si je n’avais pas toutes ces crampes mentales.

C’est juste ce que Sartre appelait de la mauvaise foi, mais une mauvaise foi inversée. La mauvaise foi consiste à nier sa liberté en faisant comme si on subissait une contrainte objective. Ma propre inauthenticité consiste à nier la continuité objective de mon identité en espérant être complètement libéré de son individualité, complètement indéterminé. (“Taedium”)

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26 “this isn’t Wegener’s tectonics.” Alfred Wegener was a German scientist who contributed to the revival of the continental drift theory in the mid-twentieth century.

27 “Among my neuroses, I long for amnesia (limited, to be sure). I would like very much to upload my conscience to a hard disk so that I could regularly erase some of the files. I would like to wake up without remembering everything that I’ve repeated 150 times, as if everything were fresh and new, as if I didn’t have all these mental cramps.

“It’s just what Sartre called bad faith, but bad faith in reverse. Bad faith consists in negating one’s freedom by acting as if one were subjected to an objective constraint. My own inauthenticity consists in negating the objective continuity of my identity in hoping to be completely free of its individuality, completely undetermined.”

It is perhaps worth noting that Perec, the author of *Espèces d’espaces*, also wrote a memoir-like text entitled *W, ou le souvenir d’enfance*, which was, among other things, a meditation on the impossibility of forgetting.
At play here is a complex and simultaneous moving toward and away from narrative. Phersu’s professed desire for an amnesiac episode is motivated by a desire to lead an ahistorical life. What he describes would be more than an effacement of memory, an erasure of the beginnings that provide the narrative grist for his life. It would be a surgical excision of the very possibility of memory. To amputate the “objective continuity of [his] identity” is to live in a world without stories, to escape the overdetermination of history and lived experience, and to function without reference to narrative. Phersu recognizes the impossibility of this desire, and in drawing a link to the notion of bad faith he opens an escape hatch for himself: since he sees the potential to act in bad faith, and since he knows this sort of amnesia cannot be achieved, all he does is express a whim. A true act of bad faith would be to act as if this desire could be and was realized, which is precisely what Phersu is not doing. However, the fact that Phersu raises the question in the first place (even if only from an ironic, self-aware position) testifies to his ambivalence toward narrative as a mode of explanation.

Also implicit in Phersu’s desire to “upload” portions of his memory to a “hard drive” is a story about the computer that flies in the face of N. Katherine Hayles’s contention that data is always embodied and thus always burdened with the histories, movements, and memories of human (or posthuman) subjects (How We Became 83). It contradicts Mark Nunes’s contention that, in the context of the network, the cultural function of computing has shifted from its “capacity as a processor” to its status “as a communication medium and social environment” (xiv). And it conflates the concepts of memory and memories that Francisco Delich distinguished in remarking that computers
have the former but not the latter. Computers, Delich wrote, have “a perfect memory, which can be [. . .] partially or wholly replaced, intentionally or not, but nothing forgotten will come back, no memory will disturb the perfect order of the system” (69). Through this half-whimsical desire, Phersu rehearses a myth of computing that envisions meaningful digitized information as existing without reference to human operators, a myth that engineers the possibility of complete forgetting and imagines that the absence of a forgotten memory can be erased along with the memory itself. The forgetfulness of which Phersu dreams is embedded in a story of an electronically enabled annihilation of narrative itself.

Phersu suffered from what I would describe as a fear of narrative. Reacting to an American blogger’s post about the tendency to believe in things one knows are false (Ben A.), he again struck the theme of the narrative trap:

Je crois de manière complètement absurde que nous sommes dans une sorte de “roman.” Je crois donc souvent qu’il va y avoir une “conclusion,” une “moral” et que le sens va se révéler dans une sorte de scène finale de reconnaissance où les méchants seront soit punis soit réhabilités. C’est absolument débile mais je ne peux m’empêcher de colorer mes perceptions des événements avec ce genre de narrativité. (Phersu “Autoscepticisme”)

As absurd and distasteful as he thought this to be, Phersu found himself unable to escape from narrative, from the tyranny of beginnings and endings. In the context of a blog, this problem is especially confusing because beginnings and endings, even in their narrative

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28 Matthew G. Kirschenbaum has shown that computerized erasure itself is incomplete and never guaranteed. His ideas will be discussed at length in chapter 4.

29 “It’s completely absurd, but I believe that we are in some kind of a ‘novel.’ Therefore, I often think that there’s going to be a ‘conclusion,’ a ‘moral’ and that everything will become clear in some sort of final scene of recognition where the bad guys will either punished or rehabilitated. It’s entirely weak, but I can’t help but let my perceptions of events be colored by this sort of narrativity.”
manifestations, are never clearly delineated. A blog’s “main entrance,” to borrow from Edward Said’s notion of textual beginnings (3), is the last thing written. (More precisely, what appears at the top of the screen when the reader points his web browser to the blog’s front page is the beginning of the end: the first bit of the most recently published post.)

The chronological beginning, which might be read as the intentional start of the blog, is buried deep at the end of the archive. To read a blog “from the beginning” is deliberately and willfully to dig to the bottom of the pile and painstakingly read backwards.

On a number of occasions, Phersu sought to end his blog, to place at the top of the front page his desire to be done with the practice, to end his story about--and by extension, his voyage through--U.S. politics, to bring his journey to a close, and to make the return expedition to a mythical home: a place before narrative. His first attempt, in November 2005, was rooted in a sense of irrelevancy and exhaustion:

Un des problèmes de ce bloc-notes est qu’il se réduit à des plagiat, des images copyrightées et des amas de links, ce qui est un peu [. . .] comment dire poliment [. . .] ah, oui, nul. BTW, how do you spell ‘burnout’?30

Et il y a une asymétrie entre lecture et écriture, entre ce que je lis et la langue dans laquelle j’ose à peine rédiger, ce qui fait que je n’écris que sur des sujets qui n’intéresseraient que ceux qui n’ont aucune raison d’en lire des traductions en français. (“Récupération”)31

30 This sentence appears in English in Phersu’s original text. He had once written that his knowledge of English spellings was quite good because he encountered the language primarily in print: “La faute d’orthographe est un privilège d’indigène” (“Echantement”) (“Misspellings are a native’s privilege”).

31 One of the problems with this blog is that it reduces to plagiarisms, copyrighted images, and clumps of links, which is a bit [. . .] how can I say this politely [. . .] ah, yes, worthless. BTW [By the way], how do you spell ‘burnout’?

And there is an asymmetry between reading and writing, between what I read and the language in which I hardly dare to write, which means that I only write on subjects that interest those who have no reason to read about them in French translation.”
Phersu expresses a concern that I imagine plagues all writers at some time or another: that they have nothing of interest to say, that their readers will find their work lacking in merit. Furthermore, Phersu believes that he has written himself into a niche composed of readers who might just as easily consult the original: he believes they could read the English-language blogosphere in the wild, without the contamination of Phersu’s narrative interventions. This ending did not last long. Just two days later, he was passing along more news from the States (“God, I’m so weak,” he wrote in English, hinting at an addiction to both Anglo-Saxon culture and the act of writing about it [“Non”]) and it would not be long before he would again be posting on a daily basis.

The following February, he tried a second time: “Après 29 mois et 1858 notes c’est donc la fin de Phersu” (“Rupture”). This is perhaps a more straightforward sort of ending, sweeping the text up into a final summary, and a final pronouncement: a suicide note, a death certificate, a written instrument both marking and creating an official stopping point. This time, Phersu lasted substantially longer, but he was ultimately

32 Perhaps Phersu is also resisting what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes as the cultural fetishizing of the detail, the decontextualized and recontextualized physical and cultural artifact on display in museums, tourist destinations, and ethnographic texts (18). “We make fragments,” she writes (19), and then we encode them in situ (synchronically) or in context (diachronically) (19-23). The implication is that, by studying fragments, we artificially remove some elements of culture for study while ignoring others. But, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, it is only through the creation of such fragments that we can even begin to explain or understand the world.

33 Another possible diagnosis would be internet addiction, which has been the subject of interest among psychologists. In a brief article in The Lancet, Peter Mitchell reviews some of the research and the debates over whether internet addiction is a separate disorder from computer addiction or a symptom of other psychiatric ailments.

34 “After 29 months and 1,858 posts, that’s the end of Phersu.”

35 As Phersu is both the name of the blog and the name of the blogger, these two possibilities blend together.
drawn back into the game, invited to guest blog at a friend’s site for a week in July and
August 2006 and launching a new version of his own blog shortly thereafter.36

Ending the blog proved to be an elusive goal for Phersu. A lover of comic books,
he once wrote that the problem of that medium was that it had no ending; the series
always continued, there were always more episodes coming (“Mythes”). We could read
Phersu’s entire blog as a search for an ending, could say that that the problem of the
ending haunts the text from one edge to the other. This is not restricted to Phersu’s
repeated efforts to pull the plug but instead permeates each post thematically. In
attempting to translate--to displace, to find meaning in, to impose coherence upon--the
U.S. blogosphere, he finds himself unwillingly attempting to confine America to a story,
to create a beginning and an ending to politics, to draw the last cell in the final episode of
the comic book.

In the blogosphere, as in other literary pursuits, the problem of the ending is the
problem of the beginning. “Without at least the sense of a beginning,” Said wrote,
nothing can really be done, much less ended. This is as true for the literary critic
as it is for the philosopher, the scientist, or the novelist. And the more crowded
and confused a field appears, the more a beginning, fictional or not, seems

36 Phersu’s relaunched blog was housed on a different server since the software interface at the original
host, 20six.fr, had been modified in ways that Phersu did not approve of. Changes to the back-end database
had destroyed internal links (connections from one blog post to an earlier one) and rendered the search
function inoperative. Later, the second web hosting service that Phersu used also began to malfunction:
individual posts cannot be isolated onto pages with unique web addresses (all posts are grouped together by
month) and thus any text that Phersu had chosen to place in the extended entry (such that it would not
appear on the blog’s front page) is no longer accessible. Furthermore, readers’ comments to Phersu’s work
at this site have also been eaten by a chronic database error. Needless to say, these circumstances present
certain challenges to the researcher and serve as a reminder that the digital archive can be every bit as
fragile as the paper archive. These elements (internal links, extended entries, comments) are gone, but not
forgotten. The dead links remain dutifully at their posts, their absence duly marked: the blogosphere will
not yield to the sort of amnesia that Phersu imagined.
imperative. A beginning gives us a chance to do work that compensates us for the tumbling disorder of brute reality that will not settle down. (49-50)

I would add that the appeal of an ending is the illusion of being able to prevent the incoherence of reality from invading our writing, thinking, and imagining after we have begun them. But like any literary object, which escapes its author’s grip the moment it is read, a blog creeps back toward reality. The confused status of beginnings and endings in the blogosphere causes blogs to resemble reality in a formal manner even as they succumb to narrative in their content. If a blog’s point of entry is the top of the page, if the edge of the narrative is where beginning and ending collide, and if the first thing read is the last thing written, then reality functions the same way: we are always only entering our lives right now, only perceiving beginnings, endings, stories, histories, emotions, memories, and communities ex post facto. Politics, citizenship, and culture have no beginnings and no ends—and, like a blog, the point of entry is always the most recent moment.

Although I hesitate to say so definitively, Phersu finally stopped blogging just before our April 2007 interview. He did not even mention that he was quitting, perhaps because he had not yet realized it had happened. Unlike his previous attempts to put an end to the blog, there was no announcement, no attempt to bring the whole thing to a halt. It is almost as if he had resolved the narrative tension he had previously written about, overcome his delusion that we live in a “novel.” Rather than imposing a structure on his personal history, rather than writing the final chapter of his online autofiction, Phersu
simply lived it: here today, gone tomorrow. The last post (“Dessins”) is nothing if not unremarkable, amounting to little more than a pile of short, bullet-pointed paragraphs and links to blogs and news stories he had found interesting (Halle Berry’s web forum habit, Sarkozy’s refusal to choose between Reagan and Thatcher). We might even say that the ending of Phersu’s blog—and therefore its beginning—is neither intra- nor extra-diegetic, transcending Gérard Genette’s narratological categories (Figures III 65-267; Narrative). Instead, Phersu’s blog ends a-diegetically: it only ends in the unrepresentability of reality, the space where text and meaning do not yet (and can never) exist—or in the reading that I do here.

Almost offhandedly, at the very top of that final post, the beginning and ending of the blog, Phersu passes along a link that he had received via email to the GoogleMaps site offering driving directions from Paris to New York. The same website that was not quite able to deliver me to Laurent Guerby, the blogger in the shadows at the République des blogs, apparently had a sense of humor about the shortcomings of the automobiles and roads that are its raison d’être. This virtual itinerary was the one that Phersu had approximated when he blogged about U.S. politics. An imagined geography mapped onto the world of people, places, and things, it told a story of here and there, one where the “and” functions pluralistically. When beginning and ending collide, when the U.S. and France melt into one another, when citizenship begins to separate from the soil and

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37 Of course, it is possible that he has simply taken up residence in another corner of the blogosphere, writing under his own name or another pseudonym.
38 Nunes writes: “It would be rather ironic to maintain that networked technology makes geography irrelevant when discussing a [map and directions website], in which distances between physical sites make the online site necessary” (30). Or possible, I might add.
adhere to the practices of engaged political actors, the meanings of here and there are irrevocably changed. But “here” and “there” do not lose their specificity and they are not emptied of meaning: instead they exist in a universe where virtual subjects can occupy them both—or neither of them—simultaneously, a narrative notion of geography where we can be here, there, everywhere, and nowhere in varying combinations and all at the same time.

Paris to New York. “Swim across the Atlantic Ocean,” the directions read. In the blogosphere, you barely need to hold your breath.

39 As if to underline the instability of virtual geographies, neither the French nor the U.S. version of the GoogleMaps interface will compute this itinerary any longer: “We could not calculate driving directions.”
In the summer of 2006, one of the most widely read voices in the left-wing U.S. political blogosphere made an unexpected announcement. After nearly 5,000 blog entries and more than 60,000 comments at the Daily Kos web page, Armando wrote a short note on 7 June telling his readers that he would “likely be giving up blogging” (“Blogging”) after having been identified at the website of the National Review as Armando Lloréns-Sar, a litigation attorney based in Puerto Rico (Spruiell). “So, this is probably so long kossacks and bloggers,” he wrote. And, betraying a dash of melodrama, he finished: “I fade away” (Armando “Blogging”). His post was a variation on the “Good Bye Cruel World” diary, a blog genre that Daily Kos’s accompanying collectively-authored online encyclopedia explains is written when a user determines that the site “has become too (fill in the blank) or isn’t nearly (fill in the blank) enough for him or her to continue visiting” (“Gbcw”). This post seemed to cap a meteoric rise through the blogosphere’s ranks and provoked a wave of reflection on Armando’s work at the site and the void that he would leave behind.

But what makes Armando’s trajectory truly fascinating is the fact that it continues long past that summer afternoon. If a Good Bye Cruel World diary is a suicide note, then it bumps up against the same theoretical obstacle as its paper-bound forerunners: a suicide note does not perform death, it only announces it. Both are necessarily written by someone who is alive and both are subject to misfires. Armando did not quit blogging,
but his story constitutes a rich text that sheds light on the confused status of death and absence, life and presence in virtual spaces.

There are two elements in Armando’s sign-off that will help frame these issues. The first is probably obvious. In pinning “so long kossacks” at the bottom of a diary, Armando is making an implicit promise to his readers: he will not write again. To borrow a turn of phrase from Maurice Blanchot, Armando is promising in his terse, ostensibly final statement to Daily Kos that he will “absent himself.” Blanchot uses this construction in passing to describe the experience of another person’s death (Communauté 21; Unavowable 9). What Armando is doing is promising to absent himself literally—or, at least, to absent himself literally. In a world where all traces of existence are some form of writing or inscription, Armando is promising an absence of writing, a future without his voice, an end to his blogospheric archive, a virtual death. Armando is promising to become a character in the textual fabric of the internet who is absent in the sense that he will no longer have a present: he is promising to exist only in the past, a virtual being without a future.

The second key element in Armando’s farewell address is the word “probably.” It is as if Armando is hedging his bets and acknowledging that death in the blogosphere can be as fleeting, temporary, contingent, and amendable as life itself. Even at the instant of his so-called death, Armando is implicitly admitting that he can always come back. In a certain sense, by foreshadowing a potential future return, Armando undermines his promise never to write again and casts doubt on the very possibility of absenting himself. Armando is reveling in what Jacques Derrida has described as the peut-être, the perhaps,
the possibility of uncertainty at the heart of any theory of history that exceeds a predetermined or foreseeable course. Although I doubt he intended this sort of a reading, it is as if Armando were teasing his readers: “I am about to die [. . .] maybe.”

Linking these two elements, the “so long kossacks” and the “probably,” is a tension that inheres in every blogospheric utterance, a paradox that haunts every word in every post. Everything written in the blogosphere is infused with these twin ideas: there is always a farewell and always an until-next-time. Each time we read a blog entry, we are reading the past. Even the most recent entry is always already the last one. There is no guarantee that there will be more to come: Armando is always saying “so long kossacks.” But the form of the blog always leaves the door open. What brings us back is the possibility of more, the prospect of a next post and the hope that a blogger has continued writing, has continued living, even as this next post has itself become a last post. The blogosphere is rent by this theoretical split: it is a world that is at once filled with the digital corpses of last words and an eternally-renewed faith in a blog entry to come. It is a space that is a record of its own past, a world that is its own archive, all the while pointing unflaggingly to the future. What is absent is a present: for a world that is reputedly full of life and interaction, the blogosphere can be a remarkably empty space.

The tension between “so long” and “probably” pushes us to think not only about how we can read Armando, but also about how we can think of the possibility of reading him ethically. If we inhabit the blogosphere and the broader internet textually, if our comings and goings are manifested in acts of reading and writing, then we must strive to articulate an ethics of reading that reflects the complex forms of life and death that are
manifested online, an ethics that responds to the particular material demands of the internet and any virtual cultures that we may imagine existing there.

Mark Poster characterizes internet culture as underdetermined. He means that the internet creates active users who are implicated in the task of constructing virtual worlds: “Not only are [virtual] objects formed by distinct practices, discourses, and institutional frames [. . .], but they are also open to practice; they do not direct agents into clear paths; they solicit instead social construction and cultural creation” (What’s 17). Poster writes in the company of a half-century’s worth of theories of reading, but here the medium makes all the difference. Other thinkers, including Wolfgang Iser, Jane Tompkins, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault, focused on the role of the reader—as opposed to the author—in giving meaning to a text. Blurring the lines between readers and writers, Poster argues persuasively that internet users create meanings, which are then incorporated directly into the texts themselves. A media-specific ethical demand follows from this underdetermination: in the act of reading one another, in the act of picking up, responding, and contributing to the completion of the textual traces that make up this virtual world, the internet pushes us to respect the fullness of our interlocutors’ beings, to resist the urge to canonize them and end their stories. If the internet is underdetermined, it is also eternally unfinished. This means not only that it relies on users to complete its texts, but also that this act of completion can ultimately never be brought to a conclusion: the finishing of the internet must always remain incomplete. Not only do Armando’s “so long kossacks” and “probably” coexist, but they must coexist and our responsibility is to read them both at the same time, to admit both the possibility that Armando will never
return and the possibility that he will. The process of creation can always be continued and, despite his blogosuicide, Armando can always return to the blogosphere. To follow Jean-Luc Nancy’s lead, the internet demands that we resist the urge to make myths of completion. A digital ethics of reading would invite us to read others without finishing them, to take up their stories and respond in kind without enclosing them in the trap of narrative, to receive their final words without foreclosing the possibility of their return next week, next year, or right now, should we dare to reload the web page. Such an ethics would respect the tensions that stretch among life, death, presence, and absence; it would allow these tensions to ring out in their harmony and discord.

These tensions evoke the work of Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas, both of whom struggled with the dimensions of death, with the possibilities and impossibilities of experiencing it. They also lead us to Nancy, Blanchot’s interlocutor through the 1980s and 1990s, who wove the problem of death into a wider project aimed at rethinking the meanings of the self and the other, as well as the relationships between them. Levinas helps frame being as a responsibility to keep the other from death. Blanchot subtly rereads Levinas and backs up a few steps to focus on the moment of the other’s death as a crucial defining event in a human’s being. Nancy deconstructs the self/other divide but, in stopping short of a complete erasure of the distinctions among subjects, he imagines a community of partial differences that figures the other’s death as a challenge to everyone, not merely a defining moment for individuals. By retracing Armando’s story with Blanchot, Levinas, and Nancy in mind, the wrinkles of his lives and deaths begin to
reveal the fabric of virtual presence and absence as well as the layers of responsibility, being, and community in which they are wrapped.

**Death Games**

Before turning to Armando’s blogospheric itinerary, it is worth taking a moment to explore the figure of death on the internet a bit further in order to situate the weight of his story better. Blog entries are grafted onto a broader world wide web. Each one constitutes in its turn the uppermost story of a digital skyscraper pushing its predecessors down toward the ground and into an ever-deepening subbasement. On the virtual horizontal plane, each one blurs into the network of sites to which it is linked and the derivative comments that shoot out from its balconies in response or riposte. Digging deeper into the chronology, we may come upon a dead link, a bit of embedded code that leads nowhere: a remnant, a vestigial trace of some website or video file that once existed on some server, somewhere. But these dead links are only half-dead. They are in one sense entirely functional: our web browsers know precisely what to do with them and will always return some sort of result. This result will always be correct, will always adhere strictly to software protocols, even if we only see an error code, stored safely on our hard drives for moments like these to explain away the unexpected discontinuity in our internet experience. To the software, these links are as alive as any other: they provide a perfectly coherent set of instructions that can be followed to the letter. But when the user sees the result, it is little more than a void, a reminder of a virtual entity that can no longer be accessed. Indeed, the internet is littered with corpses and mortuaries, ghost
towns in the forms abandoned websites, the untended gardens of forgotten blogs, and the vacant lots left when hosting fees go unpaid. But our reading of the blogosphere is propelled by an eternally-renewed suspicion that if we come back next week, if we check again tomorrow, if we click reload right now, there will have been something new posted, another entry for us to read or misread, to respond to or to ignore.

Perhaps the most vivid illustrations of death in new media can be found in the related world of video games. The subfield of video game studies has proven in recent years to be among the most fertile ground in the digital humanities with studies that explore the narrative constructions of video games, the rhetorical strategies that they employ, the forms of textual logics they deploy, the paratextual apparatuses they engender, and the various economic and social power structures they impose. While there has as yet been no full-length critical evaluation of the meanings of death in video games, the theme has been treated alongside neighboring topics. Mia Consalvo’s *Cheating* explores the paratextual magazines and books that have emerged since the 1980s to help players maximize their video game experience. In a sense, hers is a book about finding ways to cheat video game death, to achieve virtual immortality. However the relationship is somewhat oblique, and Consalvo is focused more closely on the practices of game players, game makers, and the peripheral publishing industry that sprang up to feed off of the commercial video game frenzy than on any theoretical consideration of virtual death and cheating as such.

Others have touched on the theme in passing. In an essay describing the narrative mechanisms of video games, Alexander Galloway describes “gamic death,” the iconic
“game over” moment that arrives when a player sees his or her luck run out: “While somewhat determined by the performance of the operator, or lack thereof, death acts are levied fundamentally by the game itself, in response to the input and over the contestation of the operator. A death act is the moment when the controller stops accepting the user’s gameplay and turns off” (Gaming 28). Galloway paints the game over moment as an extradiegetic phenomenon that restores the gamic universe to its factory settings: when the player dies, the world quite literally ends.

But not all game environments conform to the strain of gamic death that Galloway describes. Internet-based simulated three-dimensional graphical universes like Second Life and The Sims Online blur the distinction between game and life in that they persist. Unlike earlier games that were confined to a single microprocessor, these networked worlds are populated by a theoretically unlimited number of players who construct their own avatars and the social space through which they circulate. The world is persistent in the sense that it does not shrivel up when one player disappears. As philosopher Peter Ludlow and journalist Mark Wallace explain, “Step away from the screen for a day or two and the online you rests on one of the game company’s servers until you’re ready to play again” (8). The absent player is stored in a state of suspended animation. Unable to communicate or do anything in the Second Life world, he is not quite alive; always on the verge of popping back onto the scene when the player returns, he is not quite dead. Meanwhile, life goes on: “[W]hen you log back into the world, that world has continued to develop--it’s not a fresh copy in which the elements have all been
reset to some initial state. In [massive multiplayer online games] the words ‘game over’ have no meaning, for the game you’re playing never ends” (9).

But even a world with an open-ended future can have mortal inhabitants. Ludlow and Wallace organize their book around a political assassination that one of them suffered in The Sims Online. Ludlow operated an avatar named Urizenus until the game’s owners, a software company called Electronic Arts, terminated his account on 10 December 2003. Urizenus’s crime was publishing the Herald, a newspaper (in the form of a blog) that covered the goings-on in Alphaville, the virtual place where The Sims Online were based. Ludlow and Wallace speculated that Urizenus was murdered because he and his team of virtual journalists exposed the underbelly of the online environment’s social universe, including an extensive network of text-based sex workers who provided services to huge swaths of The Sims Online’s inhabitants--including, they alleged, some of Electronic Arts’s employees (118-19, 45-48). Urizenus would later be resurrected in Second Life, a later entry to the multiplayer game marketplace, and Ludlow and Wallace’s book reads in many ways like an extended retaliation against Electronic Arts’s policies. Both through the continued publication of the Herald (expanded to cover other virtual environments), the release of the paper-based book, and Ludlow’s continued presence in Second Life, it is as though Urizenus was reaching out from beyond the grave to avenge his own death.

Like Armando’s announced blogospheric suicide, dying in the online gamesphere is a complicated and ambiguous undertaking, and it is not necessarily as everlasting as the term “death” might suggest. Armando wrote his Good Bye Cruel World note after
having his real identity exposed, perhaps analogous to the dying gasps of a victim in a partisan skirmish. Ludlow perceived the termination of his account as an act intended to silence whistleblowers. But what of Phersu, the pseudonymous blogger discussed in the last chapter who wrote in French about U.S. politics and culture before riding off into the blogospheric sunset? I corresponded with him nearly a year after his final post and can state with great certainty that he is alive and well and living in Paris. He told me that as the 2007 presidential campaign progressed, he had come to feel that his blog posts no longer brought anything original to the debates. In fact, although he did not share any details with me, he confessed that he has returned to the blogosphere: “Je suis revenu alors à un autre blog, complètement égotiste et presque dépolitisé.”¹ What of the authors of the endless columns of abandoned blogs that dot the landscape, what of the thousands of accounts at group blog sites like Daily Kos that go unused? In some sense, each of these stories is a story about death and absence, but how can we distinguish among them? Can we distinguish among them?

In his treatise on the possibilities and impossibilities of friendship, Jacques Derrida took an inventory of some of the various ways a death might come to pass, arguing that the conventions of legally distinguishing one sort of death from another dissolve in the ambiguities of friend and enemy:

> Est-on sûr de pouvoir distinguer entre la mort (dite naturelle) et la mise à mort, puis entre le meurtre tout court [. . .] et l’homicide [. . .], puis entre l’homicide et, ce serait tout autre chose, nous dit-on, le crime contre l’humanité, puis entre la guerre, le crime de guerre, qui serait tout autre chose, nous dit-on, et le crime contre l’humanité. Toutes ces distinctions sont indispensables—en droit—mais

¹ “I then started a completely self-centered and nearly apolitical blog.”
elles sont aussi de plus en plus impraticables, et cela ne peut pas, en fait et en droit, ne pas affecter la notion même de victime ou d’ennemi [. . .]. (Politiques 15)²

Each of these categories is nuanced by the identity of the deceased and, aside from what Derrida calls “natural” deaths, by the identities and motives of those who might be found guilty of causing the death. Following Derrida’s lead, we might suppose that while there is a different category for each and every case of virtual death (a different set of circumstances; a different set of explanations, culprits, and motivations; a different story), the categories melt into one another leaving only a world permeated by a dull absence.

But if we push Derrida further into the digital realm, we could also begin to focus on a different series of questions that bring to the surface the specific problematics of blogospheric and other virtual deaths. Derrida asks: what kinds of death? He enumerates the options only to cast doubt on the possibility of teasing them apart. We might ask: what time of death? How many months? How many days? How many seconds? Or even, how many deaths? If the dying blogger or player is able to resurrect him or herself, when and at what scene can we declare them to be dead? And after how many iterations of this sequence can we assign death’s final and definitive imprimatur?

Writing about another internet-based multiplayer game environment, Lisbeth Klastrup notes that “characters in gameworlds die repeatedly” and declares that death constitutes part of “everyday life in the world” (144). She breaks somewhat from

² “Are we sure we can distinguish between death (so-called natural death) and killing, then between murder tout court [. . .] and homicide [. . .], then between homicide and--we are told this would be an altogether different matter--the crime against humanity, then between war, the crime of war--which, we are told, would be something else again--and the crime against humanity. All these distinctions are indispensable--de jure--but they are also less and less applicable, and that cannot, de facto and de jure, fail to affect the very notion of the victim or the enemy” (Politiques x-xi).
Galloway’s assessment of death as always involuntary and documents ways that players might make use of the death function tactically (she describes an “infinite death loop” strategy) to achieve certain goals incrementally (156). Indeed, she suggests that what makes World of Warcraft a world is that its creators included a contingency for a player’s character’s death in the program. As with Armando’s suicide or Urizenus’s simulated assassination, death in a combat-themed video game is detached from biological death, can be experienced over and over, and is a condition from which the user can recover. The dead Warcraft player sees the colorful world fade to grayscale while she executes the appropriate maneuvers necessary to resurrect her character. However, Klastrup explains that the experience of death in the context of Warcraft is accompanied by what she calls a “death penalty”: “During this temporary removal from the world of the game, players cannot interact with anything or anybody in the world” (150).\(^3\) This penalty is what makes death death. Temporarily or permanently, voluntarily or otherwise, the dead person is excluded from the network of social interactions that constitutes the World of Warcraft—or the blogosphere. What the dead Warcraft player cannot do and what Armando promises not to do any longer are quite similar. In both cases, the dead do not respond to the world even as they may be able to see it in black and white or observe it as a silent visitor. They are like ghosts, the sort of ghosts that haunt the landscape, whose presence we feel but cannot quite perceive, and who cannot respond to us, or, more precisely, whose responses go always unheard.

\(^3\) Ludlow and Wallace explain a similar set of constraints on the dead in The Sims Online environment (55).
Response and Responsibility (Levinas)

When Armando promised not to blog anymore, he was promising both his own silence and, more importantly, his interlocutors’ deafness: not only would he no longer write, but they would no longer read him. Reading Emmanuel Levinas, Colin Davis writes: “Death puts an end to the other’s capacity to make me the addressee of its signifying acts [. . .]. Death [. . .] terminates the other’s ability to speak to me” (81-82). Davis is not imputing to death the end of speech, but the end of the listener’s ability to hear it. Étienne Feron, another reader of Levinas, writes that “celui qui meurt est celui qui ne répond plus” (46). In this sense, death marks the moment where the ability to respond is lost, the end of response-ability, the end of responsibility. Armando’s promised disappearance threatened his readers with just such a loss.

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4 “He who dies is he who no longer responds.”
5 To call death the end of responsibility is to extrapolate several steps from Levinas’s positioning of the ethical relationship at the heart of existence, a core tenet in his philosophical system. In his view, being itself is predicated on a metaphysical desire for otherness, which he contrasts with common desires for things like bread: “Les désirs que l’on peut satisfaire, ne ressemblent au désir métaphysique que dans les déceptions de la satisfaction ou dans l’exaspération de la non-satisfaction et du désir, qui constitue la volupté même. Le désir métaphysique a une autre intention—il désire l’au-delà de tout ce qui peut simplement le compléter” (Totalité 4) (“The desires one can satisfy resemble metaphysical desire only in the deceptions of satisfaction or in the exasperation of non-satisfaction and desire which constitutes voluptuousity itself. The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it” [Totality 34]). A metaphysical desire, a desire that transcends and envelops material and corporeal needs, serves as the motor for human existence. This metaphysical desire is ultimately insatiable, an unquenchable thirst for an encounter with an other who is, in his terms “d’une altérité qui n’est pas formelle, d’une altérité qui n’est pas un simple envers de l’identité, ni d’une altérité faite de résistance au Même” (Totalité 9) (“with an alterity that is not formal, is not the simple reverse of identity, and is not formed out of resistance to the same” [Totality 38]), an other so irreducibly other, an other without any reference to the Self that perceives its otherness, as to be utterly incomprehensible, immeasurable, and unapproachable. This encounter causes a “mise en question du Même” as it shatters the illusion of a coherent existence and provokes an ethical relation that Levinas famously argues lies at the base of all philosophy (Totalité 13; Totality 43). Levinas labels this absolute otherness the Infinite and writes that what sets apart the idea of the infinite from all other ideas is that it exceeds itself (Totalité 19; Totality 48).

In reflecting upon the infinite, we find that the idea exceeds the idea of the infinite—which is to say the very idea we are trying to think. Although this seems absurd at first blush, it lies at the heart of
For Levinas, all of our encounters with the other are mediated by what he calls the Face. It is through the Face that we are able to perceive the other’s response and it is here that we perceive the non-response that we experience as the other’s death. Importantly, Levinas’s Face is not necessarily a fleshy surface with two eyes and mouth, but “ce qu’il y a de plus nu en l’autre” (Calin). It is perhaps closer to some kind of human-human interface, an imperfect portal between two worlds that reveals and hides, that yields (or seems to yield) partially to manipulation and, in turn, itself acts as a manipulating device. Levinas’s Face is a hole in the world, offering a glimpse of the infinitely incomprehensible other that lies always beyond our grasp. All of our others (blogospheric, worldly, human, or otherwise) present us with a Face and an unshirkable, if unrequested, responsibility.

Because being is rooted in the mysterious interaction with the other and confirmed by the other’s response, Levinas constructs an ethics that is fundamentally bound by an irrevocable responsibility for the other’s well-being. To allow the other to die is to allow the annihilation of the infinite otherness that furnishes my own possibility of being. Levinas illustrates this most vividly in his discussion of murder, the ultimate

Levinas’s thinking. We can reflect upon the infinite, but Levinas argues that it is so utterly unfathomable, so beyond our capabilities of understanding, that all we can do is poke around its edges and think about how incomprehensible it is. The infinite—which is to say the Other—simply cannot be grasped. It is this ungraspability that makes it other in the first place and it is in confronting this ungraspability that we come to struggle with and perceive our own limitations and our own being. The infinite is that which we cannot think about. In a sense, though, does this not mean that the infinite other is the only thing that we can truly think about? In Levinas’s system, things that are thinkable are things that we can incorporate and absorb into our minds, things that we can comprehend and grasp. For Levinas, things that we can think about leave us nothing to ponder: they submit to the powers of our minds, even as we begin to think about them, they are potentially already thought in the past tense. The other—human, godly, or otherwise—is always beyond our powers of understanding, always a source of wonder for us.

“that which is the most naked in the other.”
subversion of being. “Tuer,” Levinas writes, “n’est pas dominer mais anéantir, renoncer absolument à la compréhension. Le meurtre exerce un pouvoir sur ce qui échappe au pouvoir” (Totalité 172).¹ Murder is the extreme form of the failure to ensure the other’s continued living and is an attack not only on the other but also on being itself. The other, whom Levinas referred to as “l’interlocuteur: celui à qui l’expression exprime, pour qui la célébration célèbre” (Humanisme 46),² is not simply the person whom we encounter but can never understand; he is the only justification of our being, the only thing that gives our actions--and ourselves--meaning.

Levinas extracts the biblical commandment not to murder from a logic centered on divine will and recasts it as the heart of being itself. As Richard A. Cohen observes, Levinas “means this not as an abstract and remote command, but as the concrete requirement, the command, to support the life, to alleviate the pain and suffering, and to forestall the dying of the other” (35). In the blogosphere, the Levinasian injunction manifests itself as an existential urge to ensure that others keep writing. Regardless of whether the blogging other is writing anything interesting, the Levinasian responsibility stands. The alternative is to allow the other to fade into silence. But if death marks the annihilation of the infinite other, if it is the end of the other’s ability to respond to us, then it is also the end of our obligation to the other: there can be no responsibility to a being who no longer is. But the paradox of Levinas’s thought is that the end of responsibility is not the beginning of freedom. Instead it is the end of being, and that is why Levinas’s

¹ “To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises power over what escapes power” (Totality 198).
² “interlocutor: the one to whom expression expresses, for whom celebration celebrates” (Humanism 30).
philosophy imposes an ethical imperative to ensure the continued being of the other person.

If the absence of writing is virtual death, if it abruptly removes the possibility of responsibility for the other, then it is no surprise that Armando’s announcement provoked a wave of reaction resembling nothing so much as mourning. The diary received 1,113 responses over the course of a week. It was among the most heavily-commented diaries in the history of the Daily Kos site up to that point. Some of the discussion revolved around the details of the National Review piece that exposed Armando’s identity. There were promises to avenge his outing, general denunciations of conservatives, and echoes of Armando’s descriptions of “people of ill will” who “have no decency or limits” (“Blogging”). In other corners of the comments threads, there were those who noted that Armando’s identity could easily have been discovered by anyone with curiosity, a web browser pointed to the Google search site, and a little patience. One discussant walked through a scenario that began with information given by Armando himself in his blog posts and comments at Daily Kos: “In short, Armando’s identity was put ‘out’ there by Armando himself [. . .]. He may not have widely advertised his actual name on this site, but he also wasn’t going to any trouble to keep it a secret” (Zircon). Armando admitted that he “was not truly cloaked” (“I was not”) and had even elaborated this point some six months earlier: “I am a semi-anonymous blogger, as anyone with the obsession, bad faith or simple curiosity can discover who I am” (“Personal”).

While a handful of readers celebrated the departure of a persistent nemesis (“Good riddance,” wrote yellowdoggie), most of the responses lamented Armando’s
imminent disappearance. One commenter bemoaned the fact that “one of our most delightfully irascible posters [...] is hanging up the keyboard” (musing85). Most of those who stopped in simply wished him well as he prepared to shuffle off the virtual coil. More than thirty composed variations on “good luck” while coffeeinamrica appealed to Armando’s Latino heritage: “Bueno swerte [sic].” Implicit in all of these messages, short as many of them were, was a sense that Armando was lost, that the absence he foreshadowed in saying goodbye constituted some kind of irreparable breach in the community: “Your distinctive voice is irreplaceable” (4jkb4ia).

Another strand of responses touched on the supernatural. Pastordan, Daily Kos’s resident clergyman who has since gone on to launch a related blog site dedicated to staking out a political space for religious progressives, stopped in to offer a final prayer: “Armando, I’m so sorry to [hear] this. I hope in all earnestness that when God closes this particular door, he/she/it will open a window for you.” Beyond the well-wishers who had sent Armando off, these commenters conjured up images of what might happen to bloggers after they disappear. Their language was couched in the terms of a community of death, which Robert Bernasconi has called “the idea [...] according to which one’s death might be sublated in a future community for the sake of which one sacrifices oneself” (8). We might also call this a forward-oriented nostalgia, a shared delusion that, after death, there is a place where we will all be reunited, that after Armando stops blogging, he is shuttled away to some mythical place that we, too, will approach when we stop blogging or stop reading. As one respondent put it: “For once in my life I will believe in an afterlife” (Far left coast). Still others hoped that the distinctions between
virtual life and virtual death would not be so stark and held open the possibility that Armando’s departure would not be definitive: “I hope the Ghost of Armando will ‘haunt’ this blog from time to time” (Darksyde888).

This sort of sentiment resonated with those commenters who saw Armando’s outing as a threat to all bloggers who sought to conceal their offline identities and careers. There were numerous references to “brownshirts” and an undercurrent of fear that Armando’s would be only the first outing of many, or at the very least that the motive behind the National Review piece was to intimidate anonymous and pseudonymous bloggers. “[O]nce they see they’ve ‘succeeded’ with Armando,” wrote Black Max, “they’ll do it twice as hard to someone else.” Perhaps even more direct was the final comment left on the diary, a full seven days after Armando’s initial announcement: “See you in your next life soon. One day they’ll get me too” (Shockwave). Barely hidden behind Armando’s outing and suicide, these bloggers see the fragility of their own virtual lives; in the absence that he leaves behind, they see that if his voice has been silenced, their own being is threatened. But more than this, Armando’s impending departure stirred his readers by reminding them of his importance as an interlocutor and, consciously or otherwise, of the damage that they would sustain when he disappeared.

What are being expressed here are the complex emotions and realizations that accompany the threat of the other’s disappearance. Simon Critchley writes that the encounter with the other provokes the “trauma of the il y a” (Very Little 11). Critchley proposes that the presence of the other confirms our deepest fear: that there is something out there. As a corollary, I would suggest that the death of the other confirms our other deepest fear: that
there is nothing out there. Armando’s suicide note gave his readers a moment to contemplate both of these possibilities in a blogospheric context. As he promised to vanish, his absence pushed his interlocutors to confront both the possibility that he was there in the first place, and that he would never come back, which is to say the possibility that the blogosphere is a vast, empty expanse.

Armando asked: “Who cares about someone who doesn’t write anymore” (“It”)? “We do,” replied a reader named Timothy J. In Timothy J’s succinct response, we see the clearest expression of the ethical charge that weighs on Armando’s readers. Who cares about Armando? Who takes care of him? Who gives care to him? Who is responsible to him? For him? “We” are. It is a responsibility that cannot ever be completely fulfilled: indeed, absent the possibility of actually meeting the responsibility, the true responsibility that inheres is the responsibility to remain responsible, to keep our internet interlocutors talking, to pursue the always ill-fated work of ensuring, for our own sake and for theirs, that Armando, Phersu, Urizenus, and all of our digital companions continue to write.

**Being Present for the Virtual Other (Blanchot)**

While Levinas gives us the lens through which we can begin to understand the responsibility that blogospheric readers have for the virtual interlocutors, Timothy J’s “We do” also points out a way of moving beyond Levinas’s ultimately doomed demand that we keep our others eternally alive. Rather than assuming that Timothy J’s comment is motivated by a pressing urge to see Armando continue writing, perhaps we could
simply take him at his word. He is not begging Armando not to go; he is not necessarily conforming to Levinas’s reading of the biblical commandment, the injunction not to allow one’s interlocutors to die. Instead, he is perhaps hearing Armando’s question in a Blanchotian register. Who cares about someone who will soon no longer have a blogospheric present? Blanchot writes: “Qu’est-ce qui donc me met le plus radicalement en cause? Non pas mon rapport à moi-même comme fini ou comme conscience d’être à la mort ou pour la mort, mais ma présence à autrui en tant que celui-ci s’absente en mourant” (Communauté 21). Here, Blanchot differentiates himself subtly from Levinas. Blanchot’s focus on the other’s death stems from what he refers to as the Principle of Incompleteness: “L’être cherche,” Blanchot writes, “non pas à être reconnu, mais à être contesté: il va, pour exister, vers l’autre qui le conteste et parfois le nie, afin qu’il ne commence d’être que dans cette privation qui le rend conscient (c’est là l’origine de sa conscience) de l’impossibilité d’être lui-même [. . .]” (Communauté 16). But where Levinas identified the encounter with the other as provoking an unshakable responsibility to keep the other alive lest one’s own being be thrown into question, Blanchot sees a gradient. He follows Levinas’s lead in attributing to the other the power to call the self into question, but he sees the ultimate moment of being, the thing that calls me into question most radically, as arriving at the other’s deathbed.

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9 “What, then, calls me into question most radically? Not my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence for another who absents himself by dying” (Unavowable 9).

10 “A being does not want to be recognized, it wants to be contested: in order to exist it goes towards the other, which contests and at times negates it, so as to start being only in that privation that makes it conscious (here lies the origin of its consciousness) of the impossibility of being itself [. . .]” (Unavowable 6).
Blanchot’s language is translucent, obscuring layers of meaning in what is already a seemingly complex sentence. What Blanchot hides and reveals, gives and withholds, makes present and absent, are the ways that the dying other and the undead self relate. Importantly, it is not the dead other who justifies my being but the dying other. Blanchot writes in a deliberately active voice: he speaks of the other who “absents himself,” not the other whom death takes. And this dying person does not quite justify being either; rather, his dying is what “calls me into question most radically.” For Blanchot, my being does not depend on the dying other; it is heightened by his dying. Furthermore, the dying person alone cannot generate this effect. I have a role to play as well: the Blanchotian formula is activated only when I am present for the dying other. More than being there as another person dies, it is a matter of being there for the other person who is dying, of remaining present for the person who is fading into absence, of taunting the absence of the other that death will bring. “Me maintenir présent,” Blanchot continues, “dans la proximité d’autrui qui s’éloigne définitivement en mourant, prendre sur moi la mort d’autrui comme la seule mort qui me concerne, voilà ce qui me met hors de moi et est la seule séparation qui puisse m’ouvrir, dans son impossibilité, à l’Ouvert d’une communauté” (Communauté 21). In the second half of the passage, Blanchot raises the stakes. Beyond being present for the dying other, I must remain present, I must remain

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11 “To remain present in the proximity of another who by dying distances [original translation: “removes”] himself definitively, to take upon myself another’s death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself; this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community” (Unavowable 9, translation modified). Pierre Joris’s translation of s’éloigner as “removes himself” strips the verb of its progressive quality. Removing oneself is a discrete action: removal establishes a clear-cut boundary between inclusion and exclusion. S’éloigner, s’é-loin-er, to distance oneself, to draw further away: this verb is imbued with a sense of motion, an element of process and continuity that is lost as it is rendered in the published translation.
near to the person who is dying. There are unspecified metrics of duration and nearness that must be satisfied. Moreover, the dying other “distances himself definitively,” a construction that clouds Blanchot’s original phrase. How distant before that distancing becomes definitive? How long must I remain present to this definitively distancing other in order that I should be called most radically into question? How present? How absent? Blanchot posed these unanswerable questions implicitly more than two decades before Armando asked, “Who cares about someone who doesn’t write anymore?” These questions lie at the heart of blogospheric life and death.

As he asks this question, Armando is not yet absent. He is narrating his coming departure, writing in the present about his death to come, learning the lines before he’s gotten the part. When Timothy J answers, “We do,” he is effectively rehearsing Blanchot’s argument. By writing, Timothy J is making himself present to Armando even as he is in the process of absenting himself, of progressively distancing himself from the blogosphere, of moving towards a moment when he would be definitively removed from it. But Timothy J’s response follows Blanchot even further. He does not tell Armando that he cared about someone who no longer wrote. Rather: “We do.” Timothy J writes that that there is a group of people who care about Armando’s fading away, a community of those for whom Armando’s death is the only one that concerns each of them, a community that begins to draw nearer as Armando begins to draw further away into absence. Timothy J’s “We” presages a community of people who perceive a coming community with the receding Armando. Importantly, both Armando’s death and the “We” are blurry, always off at the horizon.
Levinas writes that death is something that always hangs in the future, something that can never be experienced: “Si tu es là, la mort n’est pas là; si elle est là, tu n’es pas là” (qtd. in Dieu 28). Death signals the “temps de l’Autre” (Humanisme 42); as Critchley explains, “[d]ying [. . .] opens a relation with the future which is always ungraspable, impossible and enigmatic; that is to say, it opens the possibility of a future without me, a future which is not my future” (Very Little 75). Death therefore creates what Féron calls “un paradoxe pour la phénoménologie” (43). We cannot experience death because it only arrives after we no longer exist. We can only ever experience the perception of the death of the other, what Levinas calls “le sans-réponse” (Dieu 20). Death can only be known by the undead who receive no response from the dead person who is, in turn, unable to experience the death that has covered him.

But in the digital world, death’s finality is uncertain. Yes, the multi-player video game avatar who dies becomes invisible to other players. Yes, the blogger who disappears becomes absent to his interlocutors. No, there is no evidence of his continued virtual existence, only the archive he has left behind. But, with every blogospheric death, there is a question that refuses to be clearly answered. How absent must the blogger be? How long must he go without writing? Blogospheric death lacks any internal enforcement mechanism. The blogger who disappears can always reappear. Nothing

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12 “If you are there, then death is not there; if it is there, you are not there” (qtd. in God 19). Cohen elaborates: “[D]eath is never now, is always to come, always remains future, not because the human subject somehow projectively integrates what is coming [. . .], but quite the reverse because the human subject cannot catch up to, cannot embrace, cannot be-toward death which is always and ever future” (31).
13 “time of the Other” (Humanism 27).
14 “a phenomenological paradox.”
15 “the no-response” (God 11).
stops him from returning in a year, a month, or a minute. Indeed, even in suicide, Armando failed to die. Quickly confounding his promise to fade away, Armando participated heavily in the discussion following his farewell address. Including his question to Timothy J, he left no fewer than 23 comments, effectively lingering at his own funeral. As he clicked and typed his way through the thousand-odd comments that were attached to his announcement, he engaged both those who mourned him and those who would dance on his grave. These were the first of nearly 3,000 comments that would be recorded at Daily Kos that summer. What began as a suicide became a phased retirement. “Retired for me,” Armando wrote, “means not writing posts or diaries and bringing up the topics I want to write about. Try it sometime. Not fun” (“Retired”). Still, within three weeks of his farewell diary, he began to tease his readers that he would be returning as a full-fledged blogger in December 2006: “Time stills the roiled waters. Everything is cool” (“Time”). Armando’s disappearance was asymptotic: he never faded entirely from sight and hovered just at the limit of virtual death while that death lay always off in the future.

How long must we wait until we can pronounce a blogger dead? At what point can we say that a blogger has absented himself? These questions evade any easy answers. We might say that a blogger has never disappeared, that he has simply not yet returned, that he is always just about to write again. But there is another angle. Because each blog post--a Good Bye Cruel World diary or otherwise--sits at the top of page until it is supplanted by a newer entry, death and absence inhabit the blogosphere’s past just as much as they inhabit its future. Virtual death and absence overgrow the virtual terrain
that we survey. Like the rest of the internet, the blogosphere consists of virtual texts, documents in various formats left behind by our online interlocutors to be loaded into our web browsers and read by us as words, sounds, and sights. But these are traces, relics, artifacts, footprints whose owners are no longer there. The internet is a vast, always-just-updated archaeological site, an empty space with the debris of a thousand dead bloggers strewn about for us to peruse.

This is where the “goodbye kossacks” and the “probably” meet. The peculiar topography of the internet demands that both of these be wholly operative. There can be no online “goodbye” without an associated “probably.” Armando always floated in between these two moments. We were always reading his last words, even if they were not “goodbye,” and always awaiting his next words. He was always just dead and always about to be resurrected. Through the summer of 2006, he rehearsed this routine nearly every day. His suicide note gave way to comments, which were in turn followed by a resumption of blogging in August, authoring a series of posts about that year’s Connecticut Senate race, where Joe Lieberman was defeated by a primary challenger and subsequently decided to continue his campaign as an independent candidate. Armando wrote 16 diaries about Lieberman’s race beginning on 6 August. This was, he wrote, only a temporary break in what had become a hiatus.

The Life and Death (and Life and Death) of Armando

Suddenly, without warning, without a note, he was gone again. Armando’s final diary was dated 25 August, and constituted what had by then become an essentially
routine attack on Lieberman, claiming that the senator had aligned himself with the Bush Administration’s Middle East policy (“No”). The diary was posted shortly after 7 o’clock in the morning. After submitting it, Armando joined in the discussion in the attached comments thread and at other posts around the website and left the website at around noon that day. Early that evening, three bloggers hung notes off of his last comment asking him to contact them directly regarding an email that they had all received and which they believed had been circulated to many members of the Daily Kos site (RenaRF; The Other Steve; thereisnospoon). Lloréns, the man who blogged as Armando, has not chosen to respond to questions I have asked about this matter, and others that I have contacted have generally been reluctant to discuss it. One person who received the email and who asked not to be identified indicated that it linked to a website that contained information about Lloréns. The website was quickly removed and I have not been able to find any trace of it. The person with knowledge of the situation told me in September 2006 that its effect was to “defame and disparage” and characterized it as “ridiculous.” Regardless of the content or veracity of the website, its appearance correlates with Armando’s falling silent for nearly a week before reappearing for a flash on 31 August to leave a single three-word comment in a thread about Virginia Senate candidate Jim Webb’s son, a soldier who had just left for Iraq (Armando “Godspeed”).

16 Even the expansive internet archive has its limits and its lacunae. As far as I have been able to discover, all references to this site have long since been scrubbed from the Daily Kos database and, out of respect for Lloréns’s privacy, none of the people I have contacted have been willing to provide me with any details of the site’s address, author, or title. Even if there should exist a cached version of the site, I do not have enough information to search successfully for it.
The response this time was less concentrated and more confused. As September began, some site regulars noticed Armando’s absence and began to wonder aloud: “Dang! where is Armando?” asked one (annefrank). As his absence grew longer, his silence became increasingly deafening: “I am bewildered about Armando! He hasn’t posted since 8/25” (vcmvo2). That such a stretch of time could pass without word from Armando was unimaginable and all but unprecedented in the history of the site. The disappearance was a mystery to many, especially in light of his earlier attempt to give up blogging: “First he writes a [Good Bye Cruel World] diary and sticks around and then he vanishes without a peep” (Friend of the court).

But he had not vanished completely. As Daily Kos readers were asking where Armando was, Lloréns was quietly creating a new alter ego. Big Tent Democrat’s first blog entry at Daily Kos came on 14 September 2006. This was a pseudonym that Lloréns had used at TalkLeft, another left-leaning site, since July 2006, about a month after prematurely announcing his departure from Daily Kos. Lloréns posted there in a quieter, less confrontational tone, and for months did not engage in the comments threads (Big Tent Democrat “I dunno”). And during the three weeks that Armando returned to Daily Kos in August to blog about the Lieberman race, Big Tent Democrat disappeared from TalkLeft. Almost immediately after Armando’s late-August 2006 departure from Daily Kos, Big Tent Democrat reappeared at TalkLeft. Like Clark Kent and Superman, Armando and Big Tent Democrat were never in the same place at the same time.

For Lloréns, the Big Tent Democrat moniker represented an opportunity to begin again in the blogosphere. However, as Big Tent Democrat became a widely-read diarist,
several regulars caught onto his scent: they recognized Lloréns’s voice in the text and sensed a connection between Armando’s absence and Big Tent Democrat’s presence. The first cracks in the façade came less then a week after Big Tent Democrat’s first appearance at Daily Kos when one reader asked snidely: “How’s the weather in Puerto Rico” (DHinMI)? Miss Devore, who had been a regular sparring partner of Armando’s, was another site member who discovered Armando’s surreptitious return, and she was certainly the most persistent in her pursuit. Before the end of September, she had noted that Big Tent Democrat was “armando’s avatar” (“BTD”) and, shortly thereafter, she informed another user that Armando was “fancying hisself as big tent democrat” (“double”). As far as Miss Devore was concerned, Big Tent Democrat was transparently looking to be exposed and others were attributing to him a desire for anonymity that had no root in reality. “he’s [sic] dying to be outed,” Miss Devore wrote in early October, “and dying to blame anyone for outing him” (“look”). To Miss Devore, Big Tent Democrat’s disguise was thin. Behind the new name, she saw the same personality, the same character traits: “[E]ven when you pretend to be someone else, you’re still rabid Armando” (Miss Devore “And even”).

Ultimately, Big Tent Democrat confessed: “[Armando’s] history is mine. But most readers here don’t know that history, only my friends know, and they recognized me already” (“I’m Back”). On the day he came clean, there were some who claimed to have known all along. “I knew it was you last week sometime,” wrote A Gilas Girl. “Just something about you my friend, that’s recognizable, even in the ether.” Miss Devore was
characteristically more straightforward: “the first time I read Big Vent [sic] persistently
calling someone an idiot [. . .] well, it was too obvious” (“first”).

Like Armando, Big Tent Democrat would also have a truncated tenure at Daily Kos. Lloréns’s bombastic style fell increasingly out of favor with Markos Moulitsas
Zúniga, the site’s proprietor. Moulitsas eventually asked Big Tent Democrat via a private
e-mail “to be civil in the comments” (kos “BTD”). Lloréns believed that he was the target
of a vendetta and the victim of a double standard and, on 5 March 2007, Big Tent
Democrat wrote his final diary, announcing that he was “leaving the site due to
irreconcilable differences with the Management” (“We’ll”).

Less than a year after Armando first announced he would give up blogging, Big
Tent Democrat had penned a suicide note of his own. Again, there was a range of
reactions. This time, the sentiment of loss was tempered by what had been learned about
blogospheric death in the preceding months. It was as though the commenters recognized
the impermanence of the absence that Big Tent Democrat was promising. “You will
always be a part of this community, you know, whether you post or not,” wrote one.
“We will not stop making jokes about you, for you are legendary” (cosmic debris)!
“[You’re] a vital part of this community,” echoed another (shaharazade). Still others,
remembering Armando’s postmortem returns, leavened their salutes with doubt: “And
tho I fully expect your return, best to you, good sir” (Karmafish). In each of these cases,
Timothy J’s “We” is invoked. Who cares about someone who doesn’t write anymore?
“We do.”
Impossible Death, Impossible Community (Nancy)

These invocations allude to a different sort of “We,” a different reading of Timothy J’s comment. A reading of Timothy J through Blanchot shows Armando’s interlocutors taking his death upon themselves as if the act of being present for the dying other most vividly brought their beings into focus, as if it were the only death that concerned each of them. An alternative reading through Nancy--Blanchot’s interlocutor through the 1980s and 1990s--reveals a different vision of being, of community, and of death. Nancy’s thought sidesteps the binary of sameness and otherness and delves into the caverns of alikeness. Here, community is not quite composed of those who have something in common, nor is it precisely the encounter with difference, but the sort of being that results from partial likeness and partial difference, that plays on the blur between individuality and intersubjectivity.

In this optic, the death of the other does not concern me, it concerns us. By exploring the differences between Blanchot and Nancy and understanding the difference between a death that concerns us each and a death that concerns us all, we will be able to begin articulating an ethics of reading that responds to the media-specific demands of the internet, an ethics that responds to the unstable modalities of life and death that bubble up through the network.

At first blush, it can be difficult to perceive the differences between Nancy and Blanchot’s positions. From the first sentence, Blanchot’s Communauté inavouable is laudatory of Nancy’s Communauté désœuvrée, which triggered its composition: “A partir
Bernasconi argues that “[t]he crucial point of difference between Nancy and Blanchot is located at [the] point where, at first sight, they seem closest: in the course of their discussion of the death of the Other” (8). In contrast with Blanchot’s focus on the death of the other as a moment when the self’s being is called into question, Bernasconi reads Nancy as concerned with the effect of the other’s death on the impossible, but ontologically necessary, community that characterizes being. While Blanchot hews to the Levinasian line which holds that ethics precedes ontology and whereby “what places me outside myself is taking the other’s death upon myself as the only death that concerns me” (Bernasconi 9), Nancy understands death as something that concerns all of us because it issues a challenge not to succumb to any totalizing logic of community-in-death: “Si la communauté est révélée dans la mort d’autrui, c’est que la mort elle-même est la véritable communauté des je qui ne sont pas des moi. Ce n’est pas une communion qui fusionne les moi en un Moi ou en un Nous supérieur. C’est la communauté des

17 “In the wake of an important text by Jean-Luc Nancy [. . .]” (Unavowable 1).
La véritable communauté des êtres mortels, ou la mort en tant que communauté, c’est leur communion impossible” (Désœuvrée 42). The difference is that, for Blanchot, the other’s death concerns me while, for Nancy, the other’s death concerns everyone because of the mythical threat that it poses to the ever-inoperative community.

Christopher Watkin offers one of the most exciting recent contributions to the literature on Nancy’s thought because he helps show that Nancy is not simply writing against Levinas. Instead, Nancy finds a way around Levinas, opens an escape hatch to the regime of absolute alterity, and shows us how we might (to borrow a formula from Levinas himself) think being otherwise. Watkin sees Nancy proposing a form of being that is fundamentally plural, a “prior and unatomizable ‘we’” that does not reduce to constituent parts: “For Nancy neither the same nor the other is primary” (Watkin 52).

Bernasconi traces this difference back beyond Blanchot to Levinas, enumerating a series of instances where Blanchot sets up an opposition between Nancy and Levinas and consistently takes Levinas’s side (Bernasconi 8, 9, 10, 11). For Bernasconi, Nancy’s differences with Blanchot are, at root, differences with Levinas, and he introduces the key notion that Nancy is somehow writing against Levinas and challenging the primacy that his thought had achieved in contemporary French philosophy: “Nancy’s disagreement with Levinas extends to the question of the relative priority of the other and of the inoperative community.” Bernasconi reads Nancy as critiquing and attempting to supplant Levinas’s notion of an encounter with the absolute other: “From a Levinasian perspective, Nancy’s own ontological elucidation of the inoperative community, by rendering the face to face secondary, obliterates alterity” (12).

However useful Bernasconi’s essay may be for understanding the differences between Nancy and Blanchot, I believe that he overreaches in his conclusion. Ian James has accused a number of Nancy’s critics of “failing to engage fully with, or to properly read, Nancy’s writing, since each, perhaps, reads that writing through the lens of their own specific concerns” (335). Even if we might find Bernasconi innocent of the first charge, he is guilty of the second: as Christopher Watkin argues, Bernasconi “[persists] in reading Nancy in a Levinasian framework” (51), effectively condemning Nancy for not being the same as Levinas. Although Bernasconi is quite astute in spelling out Nancy’s opposition to Levinas’s notion of absolute alterity, he falls short in reducing Nancy’s alternative to some kind of absolute sameness—the complete and total obliteration of alterity that Bernasconi describes.

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18 “If community is revealed in the death of others it is because death itself is the true community of I’s that are not egos. It is not a communion that fuses the egos into an Ego or a higher We. It is the community of others. The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community, establishes their impossible communion” (Inoperative 15).

19 Bernasconi traces this difference back beyond Blanchot to Levinas, enumerating a series of instances where Blanchot sets up an opposition between Nancy and Levinas and consistently takes Levinas’s side (Bernasconi 8, 9, 10, 11). For Bernasconi, Nancy’s differences with Blanchot are, at root, differences with Levinas, and he introduces the key notion that Nancy is somehow writing against Levinas and challenging the primacy that his thought had achieved in contemporary French philosophy: “Nancy’s disagreement with Levinas extends to the question of the relative priority of the other and of the inoperative community.” Bernasconi reads Nancy as critiquing and attempting to supplant Levinas’s notion of an encounter with the absolute other: “From a Levinasian perspective, Nancy’s own ontological elucidation of the inoperative community, by rendering the face to face secondary, obliterates alterity” (12).
Nancy expresses this idea most succinctly in a bit of philosophical shorthand: “Ego sum = ego cum” (Être 31; Being 51).

Nancy is able to imagine a being that is rooted in togetherness. Rather than posing the question of whether a self and an absolute other might be able to have something in common, Nancy argues that we are in common. Rather than a self that might be called into question by the death of the other, Nancy understands a being that is always already a being-in-common: “It is because of this primacy of relation, rather than the primacy of the other, that Nancy does not share Levinas’s need [. . .] for an Altogether-Other to ground the ethical relation” (Watkin 52). For Watkin, critics like Bernasconi fall short when they “forget the difference between alikeness [. . .] and sameness” (61).

Nancy’s breakthrough is introducing the concept of alikeness. What is crucial here is that he escapes from Levinas’s logic by thinking an alternative to absolute otherness that is not absolute sameness. It is not a denial of the other’s otherness that characterizes Nancy’s thought, but a reconfiguration of this otherness. Nancy’s other is other in that he is somewhat like me and somewhat different.

By allowing for an otherness that does not insist upon a clean break between subjects, Nancy’s philosophy admits the sorts of confused subject positions that the internet reveals. When bloggers can simultaneously occupy American and French political spaces or flicker between presence and absence in the shadow of their own death notices, the neatly constructed atomistic Levinasian self that stands in stark opposition to an absolute other falters. “It is not,” Watkin writes, “the question of alterity that
preoccupies Nancy, but the question of plurality” (52-53). The relative order of ethics and ontology is of little importance: both are instantly implicated in a being that is premised on a ‘we,’ an elusive but unavoidable community where selves and others mingle, touch, and quite literally coexist.

In this sense, Timothy J’s “We do” can be understood as affirming this community and alluding to an ethical responsibility that binds all of Armando’s readers to him. The “We” that cares about Armando after he stops writing is the “We” that Nancy would charge with the responsibility of not creating a myth of Armando. The challenge that Nancy poses is not to think of the silent blogger as a loss to the community. Indeed, for Nancy, “ce qui, dans la communauté, est ‘perdu’--l’immanence et l’intimité d’une communion--est perdu en ce sens seulement qu’une telle ‘perte’ est constitutive de la ‘communauté’ elle-même” (Déseuvrée 35). For Nancy, it is Armando’s impending departure that simultaneously provokes Timothy J’s “We” and that imposes an ethical demand upon it.

**Reading Like There’s Always Tomorrow**

Indeed, the ethical demand and the “We” are not only simultaneously formed in Armando’s wake: they constitute one another around the void that he leaves. But in the internet, what makes Nancy’s community especially inoperative is that there is nothing at the center: if Armando’s death is so fleeting, and if it is around his absence that the

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20 “What this community has ‘lost’--the immanence and the intimacy of a communion--is lost only in the sense that such a ‘loss’ is constitutive of ‘community’ itself” (Inoperative 12).
impossible virtual community forms, then the “We” is a collective—but essential—delusion, organized around its own impossibility. The “We” cares about someone who no longer writes because “We” must be vigilant not to allow a “We” to form around it. This is the ethical demand of online reading: we must read our interlocutors in a way that respects the possibility of their never writing again without foreclosing the possibility that they could do so. Such an ethics would respond to the ambiguity of life and death in the blogosphere. As Armando’s stillborn suicide, resurrection, silent departure, reincarnation, and second disappearance make clear, the possibilities of being present and absent in the virtual textual space of the internet are mixed and unclear. Just as there is no guarantee that a blogger will ever write again, there is also no guarantee that his absence will continue. Ethical reading in the blogosphere is conscious of this ambiguity and resists the urge to canonize bloggers. It resists the temptation of the myth of the dead blogger and pushes us to read as if there is always tomorrow, to read as if there is always more to come, to respect the eternal unfinishedness of the internet and the possibility of uncertainty that is at the heart of all writing.

In an attempt to articulate an ethics of reading in the late 1980s, J. Hillis Miller spoke of an ethical moment, a moment where “a claim is made on the author writing the work, on the narrator telling the story within the fiction of the novel, on the characters within the story at decisive moments of their lives, and on the reader, teacher or critic responding to the work” (8). Miller’s notion of the ethical moment seems restricted to certain canonical reading situations. As Critchley notes, “Miller’s notion of ethics is explicitly and narrowly textual [. . .]; the paradigmatic concrete ethical situation is that of
a man or a woman reading a book in a literature class” (Ethics 47). I would agree with Critchley’s criticism that Miller excludes a vast range of everyday reading situations that also merit ethical analysis. But I would push the critique further. It seems that Miller is either dancing around or ignoring an essential ethical relationship presented by reading, namely the responsibility of the reader to the writer. Miller frames the readers’ responsibility in terms of responsibility to other readers, as a function of the reader’s social position as teacher, critic, or student. This may well be due to an investment in a philosophy of text where the author is, at best, an incidental concern. But in a universe where the death of the author must be rethought, where the presence and absence of writers and readers is every bit as much in question as any sort of meaning, we need to think about what sorts of ethical obligations obtain. Posing these questions anew in a digital context is not so much to attempt to overthrow or undermine the death of the author as it is to think the consequences of that death when it is figured less definitively in a virtual context.

In the 1970s, Harold Bloom explored similar territory. His conclusions were perhaps more relevant to virtual textuality. He urged his fellow scholarly readers to refuse the temptation of claiming critical authority over a text: “When you declare a contemporary work a permanent, classic achievement, you make it suffer an astonishing, apparent, immediate loss in meaning [. . .]. All canonizing of literary texts is a self-contradictory process, for by canonizing a text you are troping upon it, which means that you are misreading it” (Bloom 100). Bloom’s argument resonates in the blogosphere. It is difficult to imagine how we might create a blogospheric canon; such a canon would
require a sort of stable, finished corpus that is impossible in a medium that is always
subject to revision by multiple authors and whose texts reject completion by their very
form. While a book permits endless variations in reading, its text is relatively stable,
supported by genealogies of editions, versions, and copies. The eternally unfinished
nature of the internet renders blogs virtually uncanonizable.

Bloom’s essay was entitled “The Necessity of Misreading.” His argument against
fixed, canonized versions of texts is essentially a pluralistic approach to reading. It does
not necessarily equalize all possible readings, rendering all interpretations uniformly
acceptable or valid. Rather, Bloom adopts an agnostic posture on those questions,
leaving such determinations to later readers. Instead, what Bloom articulates is a theory
of reading that does not appeal to any singular, authoritative version of a text. Jonathan
Culler glosses Bloom’s argument by considering what meanings might be possible for
understanding and misunderstanding when misreading is necessary: “[T]he
transformation or modification of meaning that characterizes misunderstanding is also at
work in what we call understanding. If a text can be understood, it can in principle be
understood repeatedly, by different readers in different circumstances [. . .]
[U]nderstanding is a special case of misunderstanding” (176). This is to say that, if a
“proper” reading is impossible, then every understanding is in some sense a
misunderstanding, every reading a misreading. In the blogosphere, such a theory must be
updated to account for the specific, incomplete nature of internet texts. If every act of
virtual reading consists both in understanding and misunderstanding, then the ethical
demand that a text imposes on each reader is to refuse the temptation to imagine a
community of understanding that would obliterate difference. In a sense, then, by reading and misreading one another, by agreeing and disagreeing, and by occupying positions that are different but not fully different, other but not fully other, Blanchot and Nancy are acting not only as theoretical models to be parsed but ethical models to be admired. At the start of his essay exploring the split between Blanchot and Nancy, Bernasconi wrote: “It is this impression of Nancy’s comfortable community with Blanchot about community that I would like [. . .] to disturb” (7). But Bernasconi’s starting point misses the point: a comfortable community is a myth. Differences are not the end of community but its only possible beginning, even if that beginning is itself always only a myth. In attempting to tear the two philosophers apart, Bernasconi excludes the possibility of what Nancy would call the partage de voix, the sharing of voices that constitutes his conversation with Blanchot or Armando’s conversations with his readers. A digital ethics of reading demands that we read with an awareness that we must misunderstand the text, if only because it is incomplete, if only because, in the blogosphere, our interlocutors are never fully dead, never fully absent, never fully finished writing.

**Death after Life after Death**

Of course, every blogger must die. Even if it is true that Armando can always return to Daily Kos, that his most recent post is not necessarily his last, it is also true that there is another sort of blogger who will never write again. These are the bloggers who escape from the digital ambiguity of life and death, whose stories demonstrate the hole in
the theory, the bloggers whose material and mortal limitations exceed any theory that might strive to explain their lives. These are the bloggers who have, for lack of a better term, actually died.

Steve Gilliard passed away in a New York City hospital on 2 June 2007. Gilliard was not an old man when he died, but he had become a legend in the left-wing blogosphere, starting in the comments sections at Daily Kos in 2002 and eventually launching his own site, The News Blog, which generated enough income to support him. He was eulogized online and a “few dozen” bloggers traveled to Harlem to attend the funeral (Bai). “I’d known Steve five years—just about my entire blogging existence,” wrote Moulitsas, the Daily Kos proprietor who had chosen Gilliard as his first guest blogger in the website’s early days. “I don’t know of a blogging life without him. He has been a friend, a confidant, a sounding board, a reality check, a loyal ally, a mentor. He was family” (kos “Steve”). Lloréns lavished similar, if less flowery, praise upon Gilliard: “Telling the truth was what Steve was about. Always” (Big Tent Democrat “Steve”). In the weeks leading up to the first anniversary of Gilliard’s death, Daily Kos member sardonyx published a series of diaries that attempted to index Gilliard’s entire body of work at the webpage (“Steve 1”; “Steve 2”; “Steve 3”; “Steve 4”; “Steve 5”; “Steve 6”). Gilliard’s colleagues at The News Blog continued operating the site, not as a memorial, but “because if we didn’t, Steve would totally kick our asses” (Hubris Sonic et al.). One page at the site serves as a guide to the primary source texts written by Gilliard that are dispersed throughout the internet (Wendel). Gilliard was lauded, iconized, remembered, collected, cataloged—in short, canonized.
But like any canonization effort, the possibility of incompleteness hangs over the Gilliard archive. While there will never be a next blog post, the broad, decentralized landscape of the internet all but guarantees that there is some piece of textual output that Gilliard generated that escapes his catalogers. Beyond this material shortcoming, no archive, no matter how complete, can ever guarantee a complete, authorized, and unshakable reading. Even in death, Gilliard can still be—must still be—misread and misunderstood.

How is Gilliard’s death different from Armando’s suicide? How can we read his passing differently? Even as the internet blurs the distinctions between these events, there is an unavoidable, qualitative difference that we must confront when thinking about Gilliard. While Armando and the innumerable other bloggers who simply have not yet posted their next entry oscillate between presence and absence, Gilliard’s archive is permanently and irrevocably closed: he is the video game player who can no longer hit reset. Armando’s deaths were mythical: they were necessarily misunderstood by his interlocutors who imagined a durability and fixity that the internet could not support. But, even if his story is mythologized in remembrances like Moulitsas’s and Lloréns’s, Gilliard’s death is the death that escapes myth, the death that escapes the ambiguity of the blogosphere.

With a death like Gilliard’s, there is no “so long” and there is no “probably.” Once his final post is transformed by his extratextual death into truly last words, the possibility of his saying goodbye is foreshortened and the opportunity for him to renege
on any promised absence is eliminated, leaving us only to wonder who might care about someone who doesn’t write anymore.
IV. The Lurkers: Unseen Footprints in the Blogosphere

The blogosphere is haunted by a great silent majority, a horde of lurkers who linger behind every screen. Statistically speaking, users who do not write account for the overwhelming majority of blog visits. Despite the open architecture of the blog form and the low barriers of entry to starting a blog, writing a diary at a group site, or leaving a comment on a blog entry written by someone else, the ratio of users who write to those who simply pass through without saying anything is quite low. If bloggers like Armando Lloréns-Sar and Steve Gilliard push us to think about presence and absence from the perspective of the blogger, the lurkers present a similar set of questions from the much more prevalent perspective of the blog reader. Although the rhetoric of some new media theorists has bordered on the utopian and articulated a democratic vision of the internet as a great equalizer that breaks down the distinctions between readers and writers, the most common way to experience the blogosphere is as a silent visitor.

In the third edition of Hypertext, an extensive, if wide-eyed, study of computer-mediated literary subjectivity, George Landow writes of “very active readers (or readers as writers)” (8) and proclaims that “the figure of the hypertext author approaches, even if it does not merge with, that of the reader; the functions of reader and writer become more deeply intertwined with each other than ever before” (125). While he does not follow this melding writer-reader figure off the theoretical cliff, couching his claims in terms of messy intertwinements and not-quite-fulfilled mergers, Landow places a goalpost off on the virtual horizon. Even if the collapse of the author/reader distinction is not where we are now, it is inexorably where we are heading:
A full hypertext system, unlike a book and unlike some of the first approximations of hypertext available--HyperCard™, Guide™, and the current World Wide Web (except for blogs)--offers the reader and writer the same environment. Therefore, by opening the text-processing program, or editor, as it is known, you can take notes, or you can write against my interpretation, against my text. (6)

The only thing that prevents hypertexts such as web documents from realizing the dream of integrated reader/writer circuits is that no “full hypertext system” has yet been developed. Once this technological feat is accomplished and computer users are no longer burdened by partial hypertext systems, the transformation will be complete.

Indeed, Landow points parenthetically to a solution, singling out blogs as “the first widely available means on the Web of allowing the active reader-writer” (78) that he had identified as the true promise of hypertext. Landow relates the process of leaving a comment on his son’s blog, arguing that the medium constitutes a “new type of discursive prose in digital form that makes us rethink a genre that originally arose when writing took the form of physical marks on physical surfaces” (77-78). By freeing writing from its materiality, Landow seems to argue, full-featured hypertext systems transform all readers into writers.

Mark Poster is not quite as sanguine as Landow at the prospect of the collapsed reader and writer function. Where Landow describes a utopia that digital media might someday achieve, Poster looks to the effects of digital writing on the construction of the author and the reader:

Digital writing in many of its forms separates the author from the text, as does print, but also mobilizes the text so that the reader transforms it, not simply in his or her mind or in his or her marginalia, but in the text itself so that it may be redistributed as another text. (What’s 68)
Poster’s understanding of digital readers is similar to Landow’s in that he focuses on the possibilities of reader manipulations of the text and places these possibilities at the heart of his theory of digital reading. However, Poster does not attempt to elide the reader into the author; he is content to describe a reader who does not become the author of a text but contributes to its transformation, a configuration that implicitly insists upon the retention of some notion of an author/reader distinction. This is part and parcel of Poster’s concept of underdetermination, whereby digital texts “solicit social construction” by their very form (What’s 17). However, I would add one more layer of complexity to this schematic. The notion of virtual reading must not only account for the radical transformations that digital media make possible. It must also account for the very real and very common tendency of internet users to ignore these possibilities. Effectively, the underdetermination of the internet is itself underdetermined: not all readers are authors and not every text is always unfinished. In light of this double underdetermination, the question is where to turn if we want to think about lurkers.

The place to start is the reader/writer dyad that Landow dreams of collapsing. Landow’s sin lies in overreaching: what he portrays as the essence of new media, as the internet’s horizon, the destination toward which some overarching virtual project is oriented, is really its limit of possibility. While new media do push us to rethink the relationships of readers and writers to texts, and while they do encourage us to consider what readers and writers might have in common, what Landow suggests is a totalizing

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1 My position is closer to that of Lev Manovich than those of Poster and Landow. Manovich writes that contemporary “trends [towards user-generated content and from the internet as a publishing medium to the internet as a communication medium] do not mean that every user has become a producer” (“Practice” 320).
myth of the internet that turns a blind eye to actual practices. These practices point to a continuing division of literary labor between the reading and writing functions.

A more fruitful strategy than attempting to dissolve the differences between reading and writing might be investigating the material processes of inscription\(^2\) that make the internet function. By inscription, I mean the marks that are the byproduct and trace of all acts of virtual reading and writing. Distinguishing virtual writing from virtual inscriptions is not a simple task, but as a preliminary effort, I would propose that writing involves acts of literary production in a (human or computer) language that are meant in the first instance to be read while inscriptions are second-order marks that are the result of some other act. Writing is tied to an intent to communicate (with another, with others, with one’s self) while inscriptions are the nearly irrepressible byproducts of any and all virtual movement.

In virtual space, the act of reading is always connected to some act of inscription. This chapter follows these inscriptions in order to make sense of lurking in particular and virtual reading in general. An understanding of blog reading necessitates an understanding of the interfaces that make reading possible. A variety of interfaces can be

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\(^2\) N. Katherine Hayles writes extensively about inscription, positioning it as the companion to incorporation and then relating the pair to a distinction she creates between the body and embodiment. “[I]nscription,” she writes, “is normalized and abstract, in the sense that it is usually considered as a system of signs operating independently of any particular manifestation.” On the other hand, incorporation “cannot be separated from its embodied medium” (How We Became 198). Her goal is to explore the differences between the abstract and the specific, using the first term in each of her dyads to refer to a normalized concept and the second to talk about specific instantiations. This work is part of a compelling broader argument about the irrepressible materiality of information and the intellectual history of 20th-century efforts to disembody information.

I am using the term inscription in a decidedly different way and for a different set of purposes. Here, I am using it to define the marks left by all virtual activity and set it off from writing. In my usage, inscriptions are not abstract, but as I shall argue (in following Matthew Kirschenbaum), the specific traces left by specific, embodied users who execute specific actions.
imagined. A site could email blog posts to those who sign up for a subscription. Or, as Andrew Krucoff attempted with his “amazing paper weblog,” posts could be printed on paper and mailed periodically to readers (Spiers). I will consider the two most common methods of reading blogs and other web content: web browsers and RSS Aggregators.

The web browser is perhaps the most familiar piece of software in contemporary computing, carrying a wide variety of textual, visual, audio, commercial, and interactive content among users, consumers, providers, clients, and servers. If only by convention, html web browsers have become the default method for reading--and, more recently, for writing--internet texts. Indeed, other non-html versions of internet texts are labeled as “alternate” in the language of the web. The RSS Aggregator presents one of these alternate routes to blog content. Aggregators bring posts to users’ computers as soon as they are published and without any incremental work. But the Aggregator presents blogs in a particular manner, editing and condensing the posts like an automatic, constant Reader’s Digest. Read together and against one another, the browser and the Aggregator allow a glimpse of the marks that are left behind when lurkers tiptoe through the blogosphere.

Counting the Lurkers (or, The “Other” 98 Percent)

At Jérôme Guillet’s European Tribune, a user account is required to post a diary or leave a comment: any user may read the Tribune’s archive but no one may write without becoming a member. Accounts are free and there is no requirement aside from an email address to which an initial password can be sent. Each account is given a
sequentially-assigned unique numerical identifier upon which the back-end database relies to organize the site. As of late 2008, about 3,700 user numbers had been handed out, meaning that there were no more than about 3,700 users who had ever been empowered to write at the site. However, the actual number of users who have used the writing privileges associated with membership is likely quite a bit lower: many of the identification numbers lead to empty user records and searches reveal that many members have neither posted any comments nor written any diaries. Still, in its first three years of existence, there were more than two million visits to the site (“European: Site”).

**Daily Kos**, the blog where Armando Lloréns-Sar launched his blogging career, has a resident statistician whose screen name is jotter. Nearly every morning, he posts a diary reviewing the previous day’s activity at the website. His entries have become a genre unto themselves, following a strict format, complete with tables and figures that can be compared from one day to the next. Jotter welcomes the most recently enrolled member of the site by screen name; indicates the number of new members over the last 24 hours, records the number of diaries written, the number of users who wrote diaries, the subset of these diaries that was recommended by at least one other member, the total number of readers who recommended at least one diary, the total number of viewers, and the total number of commenters. From this data, jotter computes which diaries were the most significant as a function of the number of comments and recommendations they attracted from other site members. Furthermore, he generates a figure that he labels

3 The third-party web site that tracks usage at European Tribune defines a visit as “a series of page views by one person with no more than 30 minutes in between page views” (“What?”).
“lurkers,” the number of users who log in on a given day, read at least one diary, but do not write a diary of their own, recommend any diaries, or leave any comments (“logged”). To choose a day at random, on Wednesday 22 August 2007, jotter reported that Daily Kos registered its 136,360th member and saw 339 users post 339 diaries. The database also recorded at least one diary recommendation from each of 2,817 readers and at least one comment from each of 2,477 users. On that day, jotter reported that 3,825 site members were “active,” meaning that they had written a diary, left a comment, or recommended a diary. Meanwhile, 3,662 registered users lurked, logging in and poking through the stack of diaries without saying a word (“High”).

Jotter’s work is limited to Daily Kos’s user-generated diaries, effectively ignoring the highly trafficked front-page posts written by the officially sanctioned bloggers listed on the site’s masthead and the hundreds of comments their stories regularly generate. He also restricts his calculations to the membership rolls of the Daily Kos website. By placing jotter’s numbers alongside broader Daily Kos traffic patterns, we see vast swaths of lurkers emerge, a landscape even starker than the one revealed by the European Tribune. In a weekly summary for 15-21 November 2008, jotter recorded 13,609 active users and 9,119 lurkers (“Week’s”). Over that same period, Sitemeter recorded more

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4 Jotter’s definition of “lurker” is a bit different from the one I am using here. He’s specifically referring to registered Daily Kos users who visit silently in a 24-hour period. I am thinking more broadly about the practices of cruising the internet without writing. Blair Nonnecke has been studying lurking since the mid-1990s. In a paper co-written with Jenny Preece, he documents use of the term dating back into the 1990s (111). He cites research published in 1996 that described lurking as a free-riding problem (Kollock and Smith 116), harkening back to Mancur Olson’s work on collective action. Nonnecke, Preece, and the scholars to whom they referred did not coin the term “lurker”: its origins are lost in the sticky social spaces of the web.

5 Jotter says he does not count recommendations of comments. That “would entail another order of magnitude in data set size, so I don’t go there” (“I”).
than 8 million visits to the website. Even if jotter were to include the several thousand comments on the front page each day, it is difficult to see how he would account for all of these visits.

This imbalance between readers and writers occurs with great regularity in the blogosphere. Phersu’s first blog site, hosted by 20six.fr, received nearly 150,000 visits (“Phersu: Site”) but there were not nearly that many commenters.6 Laurent Guerby, the silhouetted figure at the République des blogs, welcomed 9,354 unique visitors to his blog in 2007 (“Summary”), even though he wrote a mere 32 entries (taking off the months of July and December in their entirety) and received a grand total of 228 comments. Those commenters represent, at most, two percent of Guerby’s audience.7 The other 98 percent of Guerby’s visitors left without even saying hello, brazenly defying Landow’s description of a growing confusion of reading and writing in virtual spaces.

Making sense of that 98 percent is no easy task. By definition, they are the users who blend into the scenery: if they left breadcrumbs for us to follow, they would no longer be lurkers. To pursue those who do not write at all is to attempt to read what is not written, or, at the very least, to attempt to read what is inscribed by those who do not intend to write anything at all. When I asked bloggers about their readership, some of their responses hinted at this problem. “Je n’en sais rien,” Guillet told me. “Je ne sais

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6 Although the site was abandoned in 2006 for a new hosting service (which was itself given up for lost a year and a half later), the counter continues tracking hits, including my trip to the site looking for the tiny link that would reveal the total to me.

7 Similarly, Lev Manovich reports that “only between 0.5 percent and 1.5 percent of users of the most popular social media sites (Flickr, YouTube, Wikipedia) contributed their own content. Others remained consumers of the content produced by this 0.5-1.5 percent” (“Practice” 320).
vraiment pas qui lit.” What Guillet is expressing is the impossibility of knowing anything about the people he writes for. Another French blogger drew a somewhat more nuanced picture of his readership. The pseudonymous koz told me: “Les gens qui me lisent, je ne les connais que par ce qu’ils disent sur mon blog,” he told me. “Et d’ailleurs, je ne connais que ceux qui s’expriment. Je ne connais que ceux qui commentent.” The idea here is that readers can be known to an author only when they begin to write, only when they begin to become Landow’s very active readers. However, there is a subtle difference between Guillet and koz’s responses that reveals another aspect of the difficulties that lurkers create. In discussing their readerships, Guillet and koz chose different verbs: savoir and connaître. Students of French and other romance languages have long tripped over the distinctions between the two words because they both correspond approximately to the English verb to know. The distinction is that savoir is used to describe factual knowledge whereas connaître refers to a familiarity or an acquaintance with a person or a place. Guillet’s “je n’en sais rien” expresses a complete ignorance of any of the characteristics that his readers might possess while koz’s “je ne connais que ceux qui commentent” reveals that he only considers himself to be familiar with visitors to his site when that person has written something there in a comment. Guillet is encountering the impossibility of profiling his readers’ traits; koz is describing a limitation of his ability to become acquainted with particular interlocutors while

8 “I don’t know anything about them [. . .]. I really don’t know who reads.”
9 “The people who read me, I only know them by what they say on my blog. Moreover, I only know those who say anything. I only know those who comment.”
simultaneously acknowledging the wider crowd, the masses who do not comment and who cannot be known to him.

In the U.S. blogosphere, there are strenuous efforts to know blog readers in Guillet’s savoir sense. However, these efforts are not driven by any culture- or language-specific inclination to know readers that is absent in the French space. This curiosity is motivated by profit and is manifested in the form of marketing research. The 8 million weekly visitors to the Daily Kos website represent a massive target for advertisers, and revenues from ads on political blogs with American audiences have offset hosting fees, provided supplemental income to some bloggers, financed the hiring of full- and part-time programmers and writers, and allowed the most successful of bloggers to turn their hobby into a profession.¹⁰ A company specializing in placing advertisements on blogs sells space on specific sites with which it contracts and groups sites with similar readerships together in order to maximize a particular ad’s exposure among a target demographic. In December 2008, a one-week run of a display advertisement on a set of 104 conservative blogs sold for over $10,000 and the company estimated that nearly 6 million people would see it. An identical purchase on a collection of 152 left-leaning blogs fetched more than $37,000 for a projected 27 million impressions (“Hives”).

Driving these prices are site traffic statistics and demographic data collected through an annual blog reader survey. In attempting to coax readers to complete the survey, one blogger explained that “more ads means more money, more money means

¹⁰ The French blog market is simply too small to support bloggers’ livelihood in this way. Indeed the vast majority of the French political blogs I have encountered carry no advertising at all. Although it is not easy to make a living blogging in the U.S. market, it is possible, and a small number of people have found success doing so. None of the French bloggers with whom I spoke blog full-time.
more content for your blogging pleasure here” and that advertising revenue “keeps the lights on and gets us money to go and produce stuff” (Bink). The 2007 survey revealed a host of data about the readership at Daily Kos: 27.5 percent were between 18 and 34 years old (traditionally a highly-coveted demographic group) (“Readership: Age”), 79.7 percent had completed college (“Readership: Education”), and 20.7 percent had shopped at Wal-Mart in the month before taking the survey (“Readership: Wal-Mart”).

Of course, the data that are collected in reader surveys do not allow bloggers or anyone else to know any particular reader. The surveys are regarded as valuable because some portion of readers (including those who lurk, those who comment, and those who blog) will respond to questions with the understanding that the information they surrender will only be considered as one profile among many others that allows a blog site to solicit advertising from businesses that wish to reach a certain type of prospective consumer or voter. The relevant French verb here is Guillet’s savoir, not koz’s connaître: the surveys offer demographic information about readers in the aggregate.11 The other component in setting advertising rates, traffic volume, similarly expresses a panoramic statistical snapshot of the masses who frequent the sites without revealing anything at all about the millions of individual lurkers who traipse through the blogosphere. However, the traffic figures rest on--and are limited by--the websites’ servers’ ability to count the number of times pages are requested and, equally important, to keep track of the number of unique

11 Of course, as the surveys rely on a self-reporting mechanism, their accuracy is limited by the degree to which respondents provide honest and complete information.
visitors who come knocking. This is a crack in the mask, the tiniest opening in the wall that has so far protected the lurkers.

**Routers and Routes: Following Lurkers**

When a lurker visits a blog, he or she participates in a precisely orchestrated electronic choreography. By entering a blog site’s address into a web browser (by typing it into the address bar, clicking on a link, or selecting a bookmark), the user instructs the software to send a request for a hypertext file toward the server where it is stored. The request is processed by the distributed network of the internet, skating along the path of least resistance, winding from one internet node to the next, inching incrementally closer to its intended destination. At each stop, the request’s itinerary is determined by a router, a computer whose function is to pass packets of information through the network. In *Protocol*, Alexander Galloway details the system that transports the request from one place to another, never limiting itself to the most direct route when a less congested detour is available: “None of the computers in the chain of hops knows definitively where the desired destination lies. But they do know in which general direction the destination is [. . .]. [N]o single node knows definitively where a destination is, merely that it is ‘over there’” (*Protocol* 45). Upon arriving at the host server, the request is evaluated and, if possible fulfilled. The host sends the requested document back to the user through the same process.

As the lurker browses the blog and clicks around the site, reading a post here, a comment there, following a link to another blog or a video file, this dance is repeated.
the end of the session, the lurker has not written a word: no diary has been posted, no comment has been left behind, and a statistician like jotter would have no record of the visit. However, at each router that handled the requests and at each host server that responded by sending a document (text, audio, video) back to the lurker, a distinct possibility exists that a mark was left behind. Any of these remote computers may maintain a log, a file that notes the receipt of the request and the action taken. The log is a rigorously structured record that can be written in a variety of different formats. Each of the formats organizes the same basic information, including four pieces of data that are especially relevant when considering lurkers.

Technical websites offer programmers and site administrators examples of log files. One such site offers a sample entry in the Apache/NCSA Common Log Format:

```
216.67.1.91 - leon [01/Jul/2002:12:11:52 +0000] "GET /index.html HTTP/1.1"
200 431
```

and then provides a key that explains the significance of each piece of the log entry:

- **host rfc931 username date:time request statuscode bytes** (Nihuo Software)

The log key defines a set of seven fields which the server populates each time a request is processed. In the event that there is no value to insert in a field for a given record, this log format demands that an en-dash be inserted to indicate this absence. (In this example, there is no value corresponding to the “rfc931” parameter.) Here, the first value (“host”) refers to the IP address of the computer making the request. An IP address is a unique numerical identifier that is assigned to each computer connected to the internet. In this instance, the address from which the request that has been logged originated is 216.67.1.91. The fourth field (“date:time”) marks the moment when the request was
received. This request was logged at 12:11:52 Greenwich Mean Time (not long after 5 o’clock in the afternoon on the East coast of the U.S.) on 1 July 2002. The third bit of data that is interesting to us here is described in the “request” field. In this example, the host has been asked to retrieve a document called “/index.html” and send a copy to the IP address logged at the beginning of the entry. Finally, the penultimate field in this log entry (“statuscode”) records the outcome of this request. Here, the code “200” indicates that the request was fulfilled and “/index.html” was sent to IP address 216.67.1.91.

Every move a lurker makes could be recorded in server and router logs, mapping document requests back to IP addresses. Internet service providers also maintain logs that track which of their customers (or students or employees) was assigned a given IP address at a given moment. Each of these logs is saved (for a moment or for a lifetime) to a hard drive. As Matthew Kirschenbaum argues, whenever data is saved, whenever it is written to disk, there is a material inscription. This contradicts Landow’s assertion that blogging and hypertexts are divorced from any “physical marks” on “physical surfaces” (78), an attitude that Kirschenbaum describes as “screen essentialism” (27). While Landow dreams of an ephemeral virtual universe where digital words appear from nowhere and disappear forever when the browser window is closed, Kirschenbaum

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12 This action is the result of the “GET” command. The other piece of information in this chunk, “HTTP/1.1” refers to the protocol to which the “/index.html” document conforms.
13 The 200 code is almost never seen by users as our browsers instead display the requested page. However, nearly every web surfer has at one time or another encountered code 404, the code that reports a “file not found” error. Galloway writes that the protocol governing the internet insists “404 errors are to be avoided at all costs” in order to ensure a “pleasurable, fluid experience for the user” (Protocol 65, 64).
14 The other fields in this log file are not of great import here. An entry in the “rfc931” field identifies the client software that issued the request. The host server populates the “username” field when there is a nickname assigned to the user making the request by the site. The last field, “bytes,” specifies the size of the document requested.
describes a computerized world where every word is “indisputably an inscription” (29), a
“physical mark” on a “physical surface” that testifies to the act of writing. Kirschenbaum
explores the field of computer forensics to argue that once a mark is made, it cannot be
unmade. It might be obscured, erased, hidden, or overwritten, but the materiality of the
trace and the historical fact of its having been made cannot ever be fully eliminated:

While digital evidence can be instantly deleted it can often be just as easily
recovered; while digital evidence can be copied perfectly (what we like to call a
simulacrum), it can also be copied imperfectly, and in fact care must be taken lest
it be copied incompletely; while digital evidence can be tampered with, it can also
be stabilized and encrypted; while digital evidence can be faked, it can also be
signed and algorithmically authenticated. (45)

A hard drive is physically altered when data is “written” to it and “there are at least
experimental techniques for recovering data from RAM semiconductor memory” (50),
the chips that are supposedly erased each time the power is switched off. Under
Kirschenbaum’s gaze, a blogger’s every sentence is not only written somewhere in a
tangible, almost palpable sense, but it can be recuperated if erased like the impression of
a word on the next page of a notebook. Although Kirschenbaum’s work focuses on acts
of writing, there is always the threat that the lurker’s movements and acts of reading,
documented in server logs, can also be reconstructed. In the crosshairs of the database,
the silent majority roars like a crowd.

However, just as it is difficult to perceive a single voice in a mass of people,
finding a lurker is a formidable challenge. The marks blog readers leave behind are
seeable but they are not necessarily seen. The possibility of reading these records, of
accessing these databases is severely limited. Poster observes: “Information in databases
[. . .] are not equally available to all, as the somewhat utopian proponents of this
technology contend, but redound preponderantly to the benefit of the economic ruling class” (Second 78). Retracing a lurker’s footprints can require an enormous amount of time and money, but it also requires access privileges that are governed by a set of protocols every bit as strict as those that guided the request through the network in the first place. Kirschenbaum’s explorations of hard drive topographies relied on magnetic force microscopes that are able to see not only the individual ones and zeroes that make up all computer data but also the remnants of earlier ones and zeroes that had been erased or written over. To find out where a lurker has been skulking requires access to information, a privilege that is dictated by laws, expertise, and the unpredictable whim of the server’s technicians, owners, and managers. Moreover, to read logs that have been wiped clean requires access to money--those microscopes are not cheap.15

Footsteps in the Virtual City: Certeau and New Media

Ultimately, it is not important whether we follow lurkers, but that the possibility of following them exists. In the internet, readers are never invisible: there is no way a lurker can see without creating the possibility of being seen. There is no equivalent, except in delusion, to Michel de Certeau’s self-consciously delusional gaze from atop the World Trade Center. Peering down on New York from the since vaporized 110th floor, Certeau afforded himself the privilege of a mythical escape from the city’s grasp:

15 In 2007, a research center at UCLA purchased a set of four instruments that included atomic force and scanning probe microscope systems for $1.7 million (“California Nanosystems Institute Purchase $1.7m AFM/SPM System from Veeco”). Use of existing microscopes is generally subject to hourly fees, which are intended to be passed on to grant-making entities. Kirschenbaum notes that “a relatively modest ten kilobyte text file would require 24 hours of continuous imaging under optimal conditions” (64fn66). A server log for a highly-trafficked website can be substantially larger than this.
The fiction of knowledge is the myth of the lurker: that there is an elevated position, an “up there,” from which the lurker can look down entirely unnoticed. Certeau would liken the lurker to the dream of a massless seeing point, a disembodied solar Eye that apprehends without the fear of being apprehended, a pure being that can maneuver through the world without displacing air, an ethereal vessel that navigates waters without leaving a wake.

But lurkers do leave footprints, just like Certeau’s city dwellers, every internet user, and the ordinary man to whom Certeau dedicates his text (Invention 11; Practice 9).

Indeed, “[l]’histoire en commence au ras du sol, avec des pas” (Certeau Invention 147). Even if they are not necessarily authors, producers of texts, the material infrastructure of the internet makes them virtual pedestrians: they inhabit the digital city and their

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16 “When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive. To be only this seeing point, that is the fiction of knowledge [original translation: ‘The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more’]” (Practice 92, translation modified). Steven Rendall’s translation loses two important bits of nuance in this passage. First, the translation of “point voyant” as “viewpoint” eliminates an element of verbal agency that inheres in Certeau’s language: it is not simply a perspective that Certeau is describing but a weightless seeing entity. Second, by inserting the word “related,” Rendall blunts the force of Certeau’s original construction, which draws a direct link from the seeing point and the fiction of knowledge.

17 “[t]heir story begins on ground level, with footsteps” (Practice 97).
footsteps, the inscriptions they leave behind in server logs and traffic counters, hint at their stories, regardless of whether those stories should ever be deciphered and written.

Certeau’s work on city life constitutes a transposition and expansion of J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory from the linguistic realm into the spatial realm (Invention 148-51; Practice 97-99). Virtual pedestrian enunciations retrace that trajectory since all digital acts are fundamentally rooted in some language. Blog entries, comments, and email are all acts of writing, verbal interventions that can be read as performing appropriations of, actings-out of, and relations in language. The blog writer takes on the language in which she writes and makes it partly her own, the commenter textually acts out the use of the language, and the email writer positions himself in relation to the recipients to whom he addresses himself. There are other linguistic levels in play here, too. Any virtual process also implicates the programming languages and machine languages that make the software of the internet function. However, online speech acts do not represent a wholesale return to Austin, a retreat to the textual and an abandonment of the spatial because these linguistic acts also have other, non-linguistic ramifications. Like the Certalian walker who leaves footprints throughout the city, the virtual pedestrian’s movements sketch a non-linguistic digital narrative. By foregoing the distractions of writing, the lurker offers the clearest example of this spatio-digital poetics. While bloggers demand that we reckon with their words, we perceive lurkers as movement.

But this perception, like Certeau’s solar Eye, is itself only an illusion. The traces that lurkers leave behind, like so many footprints in the sand, offer only the barest
outlines of the story. What is missing is everything else that happens. Even if, as Lev
Manovich speculates, “it is only a matter of time before constant broadcasting of one’s
life becomes as common as email” (“Practice” 324-25), the possibility of recording
everything is no nearer to reality than it was during any previous media regime. The
archive of the internet may be a complete and totalizing record of everything that falls
under its gaze, but its gaze is necessarily incomplete. Certeau writes:

Les relevés de parcours perdent ce qui a été: l’acte même de passer. L’opération
d’aller, d’errer, ou de “relier les vitrines,” autrement dit l’activité des passants
est transposée en points qui composent sur le plan une ligne totalisante et
réversible. Ne s’en laisse donc appréhender qu’une relique, posée dans le non-
temps d’une surface de projection. Visible, elle a pour effet de rendre invisible
des procédures d’oubli. La trace est substituée à la pratique. Elle manifeste la
propriété (vorace) qu’a le système géographique de pouvoir métamorphoser l’agir
en lisibilité, mais elle y fait oublier une manière d’être au monde. (Invention 147-48)\(^\text{18}\)

At the heart of Certeau’s understanding of everyday life--the “walking, wandering, or
‘window shopping’” of the passer-by--is the notion of faire avec, the ways that usagers
do things with the world, what he describes as tactical acts of resistance to the strategies
of governments, employers, parents, and religions. Agents of surveillance might be able
to track where lurkers have been and reconstruct their itineraries, but they cannot capture
the act of passing by. Like diaries, photographs, and recollections, server log entries are
only incomplete relics of the everyday virtual lives of lurkers: they collect database

\(^{18}\) “Surveys of routes miss what was: the act of passing by. The operation of walking, wandering, or
‘window shopping,’ that is, the activity of passers-by, is transformed into points that draw a totalizing and
reversible line on the map. They allow us to grasp only a relic set in the nowhen of a surface of projection.
Itself visible, it has the effect of making invisible the operation that made it possible. These fixations
constitute procedures for forgetting. The trace left behind is substituted for the practice. It exhibits the
(voracious) property that the geographical system has of being able to transform action into legibility, but
in doing so it causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten” (Practice 97).
entries that record visits to a website but not the power outage, phone call, or heart attack that interrupted the reading. They are the security cameras above the storefront that see the window shoppers but cannot tell if they have turned to their companions to ridicule the items for sale, to praise them, or to ask to be reminded when the movie starts.

Certeau’s evocation of window shopping offers us a potent image: the experience of walking through the digital city, peering into the blogs and considering the texts they have on offer, is mediated through on-screen windows. The window is the standard interface through which 21st-century web-surfers look. Lurking just at the periphery of a blog, they might contemplate joining in the conversation. Similarly, in her study of 19th-century window-shopping, Rachel Bowlby suggests that the window shopper is the buyer who has not yet bought:

“Just looking”: the conventional apology for hesitation before a purchase in the shop expresses also the suspended moment of contemplation before the object for sale--the pause for reflection in which it is looked at in terms of how it would look on the looker. Consumer culture transforms the narcissistic mirror into a shop window, the glass which reflects an idealized image of the woman (or man) who stands before it, in the form of the model she could buy or become. Through the glass, the woman sees what she wants and what she wants to be. (32, emphasis in original)

There are certainly key differences between window-shopping and lurking. The window shopper is visible to everyone who walks past. She is visible to other shoppers, other users of the street, people looking down from the windows above. Except for those peering over her shoulder in her office, den, or local library, the blog lurker is visible only ex post facto, and then only by those who have access to the server logs. Moreover, Bowlby isn’t only talking about window-shoppers: she’s talking about shoppers themselves in their identity distinct from buyers. The shopper who tells the shopkeeper
or salesperson that he or she is “just looking” is already interacting with the salesperson, participating in a conversational protocol of pleasantries, information, salutations. The would-be buyer is engaged in the rehearsal of a social ritual. The lurker is, by definition, not doing these things: she is leaving mostly unread inscriptions on server logs but is not recognized in her individuality by the blogkeeper. The shopper’s “just looking” is characterized by Bowlby as an apology, a remnant, perhaps, of the era before entrée libre. But the lurker makes no such apology, and is, in fact, adhering to the ancien régime of “just looking” at a newspaper or a television set.

Equally important, there are different monetary relationships at play. The shopper’s hesitation is, at least in part, an economic calculation: she sees an item, contemplates it, reflects upon it (to follow Bowlby’s superimposition of mirrors upon windows), and then determines if the cost of obtaining it is outweighed by the benefits that it offers. While the acquisition of an item is always predicated on the surrender of cash, the analogous moment of hesitation on the part of the lurker is not necessarily one of economic reckoning. There is generally no marginal cost associated with making a comment or typing a blog post: the user has already paid a certain amount for some sort of internet access. There is an exchange of time (which can be and often is monetized) and perhaps a sacrificing of some modicum of privacy or emotion or information (none of which necessarily conform to zero-sum economies), but no money necessarily changes hands. Instead of cash, by the time the lurker has entered the blog, the moment of

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19 In the case of the lurker who is paying by the hour at an internet café, this economics of scarcity are perhaps more relevant.
hesitation has already been preceded by the surrender of cache: the potentially negligible bit of RAM that the user has allocated (intentionally or otherwise) to a particular blog site. And, following the user’s visit, this memory can be reclaimed--though, as Kirschenbaum might remind us, never entirely.

Still, despite these differences, there is a connection to be drawn. The lurker who contemplates a blog is the reader who lends the virtual text its double underdetermination. By peering into the blog but hesitating (for a moment, for a painstakingly long eternity), the lurker flirts with Landow’s utopian dream of an internet where the status of reader approaches that of writer. The blogospheric text awaits the reader’s intervention just as the item in the store window awaits the buyer’s purchase. The lurker looks at the window on her screen and, if only momentarily, she might see herself blogging in the mirror. But not all lurkers become writers, just as not all window shoppers become consumers. Some look through the window, imagine themselves in the skirt, atop the lawnmower, or as a contributor to the blog, and just move on.

As I have researched this dissertation, I, too, have been a lurker, eavesdropping as the digital breeze carried conversations through virtual windows. I read Jérôme Guillet’s work, flagging entries that provided insights into his cross-border political activism. I dug through the Daily Kos archive to reconstruct the disappearances and returns of Armando. Along the way, I left a lot of footprints. Even if I remained on the street and hesitated interminably, never choosing to become a blogospheric writer in my own right, as I was reaching into the database in search of stories, I was inscribing a story of my own, one that could be reconstructed from the marks I left behind, the remnants of my
blogospheric presence, the traces of my having-been-there. But this story was necessarily always incomplete, as incomplete a representation of my everyday existence as Guillet’s writings or Armando’s disappearance.

Lurkers bring to the fore of new media studies the secret that hides behind any form of representation. By their very existence, by the inherent tensions they evoke between reading and writing, between visibility and invisibility, between being seen and being seeable, and most especially by the stories that we might be able to reconstruct if we can somehow mine the database where their traces linger, lurkers point out the impossibility of Certeau’s solar Eye. Although the internet pretends to total recall and a totalizing--perhaps even totalitarian--gaze that swallows all, there is always something that is not captured, something for which the database cannot account, something that remains always on the other side of the window.

**Aggregators and Augé: Virtual Non-places**

Shop windows and blogs are also built environments, deliberately designed to capture a visitor’s eye and direct his or her attention to specific content. Shopping malls have landscape elements engineered to encourage spending (Goss) and a constant soundtrack that has been described as the ethnic music of capitalism (Sterne “Sounds” 45). Storefront window designers play on consumer desires and seek to draw in likely customers by presenting a dreamscape into which they might insert themselves by coming inside and making a purchase. Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromala’s book on webpage design relies on some of the same imagery as Bowlby’s work on shopping: their
title is Windows and Mirrors. “[T]he visual design of Web pages,” they write, “is not ‘window dressing’ for the content. The form and content of Web pages are inseparable” (24). If the form of a shop window and the environment of a shopping center are directed, at least in part, toward inducing visitors to spend money, what might we say about the form of a blog? If the designed shop is intended to produce a certain type of shopper (the type that spends money), what type of readers does the blog form seek to produce?

Perhaps the clearest way to illustrate the ideologies of reading that are embodied in blog sites is to look at another blog delivery mechanism and track the changes. Nearly all blogs can be read using an RSS Aggregator, a piece of software that seemingly rips posts from the web and drops them at the reader’s virtual doorstep like the morning paper. A user subscribes to an RSS feed from which the Aggregator retrieves blog posts. The feed is updated as new posts are written. Once the Aggregator finds a new entry, it downloads it and displays it. Users can theoretically subscribe to any number of RSS feeds and the Aggregator either combines all of the blog posts into a single list as they arrive or files them according to source, author, topic, or any other category that the user is able to define.

While it is possible to imagine an RSS feed without a corresponding website, of specific interest here are those that syndicate web content to users. Webpages that have

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20 RSS feeds are internet documents written in xml (extensible markup language). An xml document does not necessarily require an antecedent html document. In the case of a blog, both html and xml versions generally draw their content from a back-end database that is maintained on the host server. The page that a site visitor sees is constructed by inserting information from the database into the html template at the moment the request is processed.
RSS feeds will often include a little bit of code in the header, the section of the source code that contains meta-data about the page’s characteristics, alerting the browser that a feed is available. Here is a sample, drawn from TalkLeft, the blog that Armando Lloréns-Sar moved to following his departure from Daily Kos:

```html
<link rel="alternate" type="application/rss+xml" title="RSS" href="http://www.talkleft.com/index.xml" />
```

If properly equipped, the browser that loads the TalkLeft home page will detect this line in the header and offer the user the option of subscribing to the feed. Decoding this chunk of programming helps to uncover the ideology of reading that lurks behind slick web interfaces and the mash of blog entries that spill off the Aggregator’s screen. The less-than and greater-than symbols bracket off the entire package and tell the browser that the code between them should be read as one unit. The word “link” explains that the information here is intended to point to another document. The particle “rel=” announces that the next part of the code will explain the relationship between the document at hand and the one that is being referred to. Then, in quotation marks, the word “alternate” informs the browser that this link points to an alternate version of the page. The next chunk (“type="application/rss+xml"”), explains that the alternate version adheres to a different protocol and is to be read with a different application: rather than an html document that can be displayed as a web page, this alternate version is an xml document that can be read by an RSS Aggregator. The last two elements tell the browser that the title of the alternate version of the document is “RSS” and then gives the address where this document can be found.
The word that most draws my attention is “alternate.” Would an alternate version of a webpage be like the paperback version of a hardcover book, a reissue of a Glenn Miller LP on compact disc, or a digitized version of Montaigne’s Exemplaire de Bordeaux? In each of these cases, a text is recreated and reimagined in a new medium. It is reprinted on a new material support, but the alternate version is not identical: each new medium brings with it a new set of parameters. The alternate version of the blog imposes its own mode of reading that dictates what should be read, how it should be read, and in relation to which other texts it should be read.

What is alternate about an xml document is that it must be read with a different interface, an RSS Aggregator. When the user’s browser loads the Talk Left homepage and registers the presence of the code announcing the alternate xml version of the blog, an icon appears to inform the user that she can subscribe to the site’s RSS feed. Once she clicks, the Aggregator software begins fetching the site’s content at regularly scheduled intervals. The illusion is that the posts are broadcast to subscribers (much as a newspaper is placed on a subscriber’s doorstep each morning or a magazine is sent by mail once a week), but the actual mechanism involves the Aggregator sending a request through the network to the host server, which responds by returning the desired content back to the user’s computer. Server logs still keep track of the requests, but the footprints are of a different quality: rather than testifying to a web surfer’s hand clicking a mouse button, this request is the latest instantiation of a desire that the user registered (just now, 21

There are other ways of subscribing to a feed, but each method amounts to the same thing: registering the URL of the desired xml content with the Aggregator software.
yesterday, at some long-forgotten point in the past) by subscribing to the feed. What is truly recorded here is the Aggregator, the user’s software agent (what Bolter and Gromala liken to a “silent butler” [55]), doing the dirty work of remembering to collect the latest posts. But the Aggregator does not pull in the posts exactly as they appear on the blog site. Instead, it downloads an alternate version.

Karim, a French neuroscientist who lurks in the French blogosphere, explained the alternate experience of reading with an aggregator:

Ils n’ont pas les photos. Toutes les petites choses un peu autour des messages d’un blog, tu ne les as pas. Parce qu’on n’a que le message en fait [. . .]. Et sur Google Reader, c’est vraiment le message pur, il n’y a vraiment rien de plus que le message, quoi. C’est vraiment une forme de base, il n’y a pratiquement pas de mise en œuvre.22

Indeed, what most clearly characterizes blog reading via Aggregator is what is missing. Karim’s wife, Anne,23 works for a public opinion research company in Paris. She is also a lurker, but chooses not to use an aggregator precisely because of what the software takes away: “j’aime bien la mise en page pour regarder comment les gens [. . .] décorent leurs blogs” (Anne and Karim).24

Like any document, blogs are more than just text. There are graphical elements, design templates, typefaces, and color schemes, all arranged in a certain way by someone, somewhere, and at a certain moment in time. Links at Daily Kos are orange. Phersu’s archives sit on a metallic blue background. At some blogs, comments appear in

22 “They don’t have photos. All the little things dotted around the messages on a blog, you don’t have them. Because you’ve only got the message [. . .]. And on Google Reader, it’s really the pure message, there’s really nothing more than the message, you know? It’s really a basic form, there’s practically no design.”
23 Karim and Anne asked that I neither reveal their last names nor specify their places of employment.
24 “I really like the layout so you can see how people [. . .] decorate their blogs.”
a separate window that pops up at the reader’s command; at others, comments appear as they are written and are grouped into mini-conversations that trail off below the original post. Blog proprietors arrange columns and mastheads, create logos, place boxes around some elements or lines between others. The stream of entries constituting the main body of a blog site is supported by a robust paratextual apparatus that imbues each blog with its own local specificity, a set of visual characteristics and textual conventions, an identifiable and potentially distinct landscape.

The Aggregator amasses posts from blogs of a reader’s choosing and presents them in a single window, rendering them in a uniform color scheme, often stripping them of images, video, and sound, and separating them from any comments that may have been appended. Advertisements disappear; sometimes others appear in their place to the benefit of the company providing the Aggregator. As the distinctions between blogs fade away, as the software deprives each blog of its local flavor and mashes the entries of one blog into the entries of any other, the Aggregator becomes an Accumulator, an Agglomerator, and an Annihilator. Read this way, the aggregated blog fades into what Marc Augé described as the world of supermodernity,

[u]n monde où l’on naît en clinique et où l’on meurt à l’hôpital, où se multipliant, en des modalités luxueuses ou inhumaines, les points de transit et les occupations provisoires (les chaînes d’hôtels et les squats, les clubs de vacances, les camps de réfugiés, les bidonvilles promis à la casse ou à la pérennité pourrissante), où se développe un réseau serré de moyens de transport qui sont aussi des espaces habités, où l’habitué des grandes surfaces, des distributeurs automatiques et des cartes de crédit renoue avec les gestes de commerce ‘à la muette,’ un monde ainsi promis à l’individualité solitaire, au passage, au provisoire et à l’éphémère, propose à l’anthropologue comme aux autres un objet nouveau dont il convient de

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mesurer les dimensions inédites avant de se demander de quel regard il est justiciable. (Non-Lieux 100-01)²⁵

The Aggregator presents a virtual supermodernity, an alternate version of the blogosphere where all of the sites’ distinguishing characteristics are rubbed away. A right-wing French blog blends into a left-wing American blog; Big Tent Democrat, the moniker Armando Lloréns-Sar took up upon disappearing from the blogosphere and relocating to TalkLeft, is sandwiched between posts from Daily Kos, his former website; the latest celebrity sightings mingle with the latest political outrage. Blogs lose their identities (colors, graphics, designs), their relationality (comments), and their historical rootedness (the elements that testify to their having been composed in a particular time and virtual space).

The Aggregator is the creeping return of the generic, what Ed Folsom described as “endless rows of plain white or yellow packaging with black letters” while recalling his fear of a bookstore stocked with “identical plain yellow covers with stark black titles: Poetry, Stories, Drama, Essays, Novel” (1571, emphasis in original). When the Aggregator has done its work, what remains is not so much a collection of blogs but a digital stream entitled Blog. The resonances of the word blog itself reverberate all the more loudly when read through the aggregator. It evokes a blob of text endlessly spilling

²⁵ “[a] world where people are born in the clinic and die in the hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity); where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral, offers the anthropologist (and others) a new object, whose unprecedented dimensions might usefully be measured before we start wondering to what sort of gaze it might be amenable” (Non-Places 78).
down the screen; a blur that screams past us without our input; the undifferentiated hive mind of Star Trek’s Borg, overpowers us with sheer numbers and brutal uniformity: resistance is futile!

The Aggregator is an attempt to weed out the possibilities of resistance that the blog form presents, a subtle editing of the genre under the cloak of convenience. By removing the possibility of commenting, by eliminating comments altogether, and by transforming dense jungles of the blogosphere into neatly mowed patches of virtual suburbia indistinguishable from one another, the Aggregator strips the social from the internet (see figures 1 and 2). Rather than a medium that demands response, the aggregator reformats the internet as a broadcast medium: instead of Poster’s underdetermined text that invites the reader to participate in its construction, the Aggregator produces a constant barrage of supposedly fully-determined text.

Augé described a similar shift at the moment when high-speed rail travel came to France. The TGV not only moved passengers more quickly through the countryside, but also edited the territorial text that they scrolled through:

[L]e train, naguère, n’était pas si rapide qu’il empêchât le voyageur curieux de déchiffrer au passage le nom de la station--ce qu’interdit la trop grande vitesse des trains actuels, comme si certains textes étaient devenus, pour le passager d’aujourd’hui, obsolètes. (Augé 125)26

By reconfiguring the experience of train travel, the TGV introduces supermodernity to the railroad. Barreling down a set of tracks reserved exclusively for high-speed travel, 26 “Trains used to go slowly enough for the curious traveler to be able to read the names on passing stations, but this is made impossible by the excessive speed of today’s trains. It is as if certain texts had become obsolete for the contemporary passenger” (Non-Places 99).
the high-speed train becomes a non-place: the trip from London to Brussels blurs into the trip from Madrid to Barcelona or from Tokyo to Osaka. At 200 miles per hour, it’s hard to get much of a read on what’s outside. Jonathan Sterne has advanced a variation on this sort of argument in his work on compressed audio files that lop off data and sounds in order to save hard drive space and reduce download times. He convicts the formats of attempting “to figure out what you will not hear anyway and to get rid of the data for that part of the sound” (“mp3” 832). What you don’t know, the mp3 seems to say, can’t hurt you. Sterne argues that these compression schemes were spawned by a set of deliberate decisions made by the record companies and electronics manufacturers who sought easily transmissible file formats that they could sell to broadband customers. However, ease of transmissibility engendered ease of exchange and the resultant traffic in illicitly-traded music was a feature, not a bug. Music piracy was the all but inevitable consequence of a media format that supported an ideology of listening premised on portability and compatibility: “the technology itself is perfectly and lovingly shaped for the very purposes to which it is not supposed to be put” (“mp3” 828). As the high-speed train edits out small towns in the pursuit of metropolitan destinations, the mp3 edits out nuance in order to grease the wheels of commerce. In each case, the format of communication is part of a broader ideological tapestry with specific motivations and consequences.

The Aggregator, too, is designed to produce certain types of practices and experiences that are seemingly self-contradictory. It promises users a reading experience that is streamlined, cleaner, faster, and effortless (“the same internet minus the clutter” [“Bloglines”]); along the way, it takes the “inter-” out of the internet. Aggregated blogs
are meant to be read, not used. It is not an accident that RSS Aggregators are also called “news readers”: from the fait divers to supermodernity, news has long been a product to be consumed. While Landow overshoots in theorizing the virtual as the end of the non-writing reader, the Aggregator seeks to undo the openness of the browser and foreclose the very possibility of a reader who might choose to write.

“[C]omme les lieux anthropologiques créent du social organique,” Augé writes, “les non-lieux créent de la contractualité solitaire” (Non-Lieux 119).27 By blurring one blog into the next, by editing out the social, the Aggregator weaves a supermodern aloneness from the threads of a vast public medium. Although the vast majority of blog visitors are “just looking,” what they look at depends on how they come to the blogosphere. Those who travel by web browser see the blog as an anthropological place, complete with local charms and inconveniences, billboards crowding the virtual skyline, and the assembled crowd jostling in the comments. The lurker can glance in the window and take in the scene, perhaps pausing briefly to imagine herself participating, and then move on to her next stop. But the internet user who surrenders to the Aggregator abandons all of this potential interactive energy for the anesthesia of a frictionless reading experience, the virtual equivalent of the tourism posters in filmmaker Jacques Tati’s Playtime depicting the same boxy hotel labeled “Hawaii,” “Mexico,” or “Stockholm.”

27 “As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality” (Non-Places 94).
The Doubly Underdetermined Aggregator

The Aggregator’s attempts to short-circuit the internet can be overcome. Generally speaking, the titles of blog entries collected by the software are live links. Clicking once, the user can launch the blog’s web page in her browser where all the graphics, advertisements, and comments threads spring back to life. Suddenly, the circuit that the Aggregator had interrupted is restored. The user is once more leaving requests for specific pages in the server logs and contributing to website traffic statistics. Her demographically-valuable eyeballs are again being counted by advertisers. The Aggregator itself provides an escape hatch from supermodernity, a way back into the underdetermined world of the blogosphere.

Further complicating things, some of the most popular RSS Aggregators (including Google Reader and Bloglines), present themselves as websites. Users point their browsers to these sites, log in, and are treated to the latest blog postings. Whenever a lurker looks at these particular Aggregators, she is actually entering a web address into her browser, sending a request through the network, and receiving a page, which is then reconstructed on her screen. The Aggregator and the webpage converge, and the lurker’s footsteps, should they ever be followed, now lead directly to a virtual non-place. The lurker, who rejects the utopian promises of the internet, all the while affirms them, demonstrating the underdetermined underdetermination that characterizes a text so incomplete, that it may just be complete, a text whose readers may become its writers, but may just as well not do so. The Aggregator, the ultimate piece of lurking software, can
be superimposed onto this doubly underdetermined text: it is activated on command and the server logs and routers keep track of the requests that led to its appearance.

Adding a final twist, these web-based Aggregators can be turned outward. Google Reader invites users to make some or all of their feeds visible to friends, transforming the act of reading via software agent into an automated act of inscription. It is also possible to paste a snippet of code onto a personal web page that makes selected content visible to all those who come to visit (not incidentally, Google enables its users to create their own sites free of charge by pointing and clicking, no coding experience required). It is conceivable that a user of Google Reader could make all of her feeds visible and then create a web page with nothing on it other than content provided by the blogs to which she has subscribed.

The lurker, without ceasing to lurk, now watches from the sidelines as authorship is attributed to her for the text that the Aggregator produces on her behalf. Such a public airing of aggregated blogs represents a return to blogging’s roots. The first weblogs were little more than lists of items that a surfer had recently read: they were, quite literally, web logs, a record of places that the blog owner had visited on the web. One historian of the blogosphere identifies the introduction of user-friendly point-and-click blogging software in 1999 as the inflection point in blogging, a moment where “increasing numbers of weblogs eschewed [the] focus on the web-at-large in favor of a sort of short-form journal” (Blood).

The possibilities of creating aggregated web pages calls into question the distinction between inscription and writing. Is a prefabricated, dynamic website
showcasing aggregated content a kind of virtual art installation or is it more akin to a footprint in the digital city? The lurker who creates a public aggregator is expressing intent to communicate, but the content of the communication consists of the repeated inscriptions that result from acts of reading. Such lurking practices reveal the overlap between writing and inscribing, but it is not clear that they foretell a wholesale erosion of the reader/writer distinction. If anything, they offer new texts to be read, which means that they offer new opportunities for responses. Just as the lurker uncovers the doubly underdetermined nature of underdetermined virtual texts and the unshakable uncertainty that a blogospheric text is always awaiting completion, a text that results from her reading is there to be completed--or not completed--by other readers.

28 A number of digital artists have created works that include RSS content: Carlo Zanni’s Average Shoveler has a video-game like interface that allows the user to pilot a male human figure up and down a busy city block on a winter’s day, a play perhaps on Certeau’s footsteps in the city. Some passers-by will stop and a comic-book speech-bubble will appear with text drawn from an RSS feed. “Really,” the user’s character responds. The user can also push the space bar to shovel snow, which morphs into images pulled from recent news as it flies through the air. Like snowflakes, no two images are the same, and like an RSS Aggregator, the user never knows when a pedestrian will stop with news to share.
Figure 1: Screenshot of Google Reader web page displaying “Palin on the Wasilla Church Arson,” an aggregated blog entry. Note the singles ad inserted beneath the post (“Google Reader”).
Figure 2: Screenshot of “Palin on the Wasilla Church Arson” blog entry in its original form at the Little Green Footballs website. Note the site logo at top; columnar layout; links to “Top 10,” “Bottom,” and “Recent Comments” and other site features on the left; advertisements to the right (no singles ads to be seen); the “US NEWS” tag just under the headline; and embedded video content at the bottom of the post. Beneath the video (not visible in this screenshot) are nearly 400 comments (maddogg).
Conclusion

Democracy has a dirty little secret. It is overrun by lurkers, a mob of citizens who choose not to operate the interface, leaving no record in the democratic apparatus of their will, not participating in Guerby’s transparency crusade, not pushing their representative’s buttons. Like the blogospheric lurkers who read without writing, they hang around the set (sometimes watching, sometimes ignoring) but don’t audition. They leave traces in the electronic databases of credit card companies, government agencies, schools, and employers. But these are only democratic footprints, ticks on a census sheet, abstract marks that record a citizen’s having been there and discard all other data. What makes lurking important to democracy is not only the lacunae in the record of the administrative state, but also the fact that it exists at all. The decision to lurk is the necessary companion to the decision to participate: together, lurking and participating constitute the fundamental choice of democracy.

Peeling the edges back a bit further, we see that lurking--democratic, blogospheric, or otherwise--is only half of the story. What I called political participation in Chapter 1 could also be described as the state of being present to the democratic interface. If the blogosphere points to a broader meaning of political participation that is not limited to acts such as voting and attending a political rally, and if participation becomes synonymous with presence, then it also is important to think about the ambiguous play of presence and absence in virtual space. Armando’s suicide notes revealed a tendentious sort of absence, one that was always interruptible, always
amendable, always flickering between here and not here. What this suggests is that lurking is never a permanent condition, but one that switches on and off. Just as Armando could always (and did) return from the dead, so, too, can lurkers always begin to write or become present to the democratic interface.

Indeed, we can never be fully or always present, never fully or always lurking, never fully or always engaged. There is a constant back-and-forth, a constant shuttling. Not even the most active and persistent blogger or political activist is always there. Instead, there is an endless navigation of the passage from writing to lurking, from participation to non-participation. While Derrida alluded to a democracy to come, what the blogosphere helps us see is that politics in a virtual moment is the negotiation of using and not using the interface. Politics is the play among representative, direct, and bureaucratic modes of democracy and even the alternation between democracy and its absence. There is no democracy to come. We are already there, but the “there” is defined by its shiftiness and its instability. This is what is at stake in the blogosphere: the possibilities and limitations of citizenship, democracy, politics, and participation.

Still, I am haunted by Tyler Curtain’s warning that blogs refuse to submit to neat headings and evade all our efforts to identify a starting point. As Phersu, Armando, and Steve Gilliard showed, the challenge of uncertain beginnings is coupled to the impossible task of ending. As I began this dissertation by wondering how to start, it seems fitting that I finish uncertain of how to end. Phersu’s solution was simply to refuse any solution, to stop in media res, and to leave open the possibility that there would be more. Writing
a conclusion to a project presents the opportunity to take stock of the work that has been completed. It is also imbued with a pragmatic and forward-looking function.

In my early brainstorming, I considered additions on gender and race, but this would have only repeated, with slight variations, valuable work done by scholars like Lisa Nakamura. Another possibility was to work on social cleavages and digital identity, but scholars like Mark Poster have already produced wide-ranging and important work in this area.

The link that I have begun articulating here between virtual politics and the literary is a basic addition to the humanities. Interfacial democracy only makes sense in the internet because it is a matter of writing a new politics and it can only be practiced by those who are now present, now absent to the apparatus. The nuances of transnational citizenship and the peculiarities of reading and writing are not in conflict: they are part of the same problematic. If I am serious about imagining a virtually-mediated citizenship of practice that refigures borders, then I will need to attend to the new modalities of presence and absence, lurking and living. Similarly, the idea of an ethical space where we negotiate the meanings of community by reading our flickering interlocutors only gains importance and significance by thinking it in the context of the political universe in which such an unthinkable community is implanted.

Interfacial democracy was a late conceptual addition to this dissertation, but it holds great promise as part of the kernel of a future manuscript. Part of the long-term work that would need to be done includes making this concept more robust, placing it in conversation with the literature on interfaces (which traces back to early philosophical
disagreements about the sensorium), engaging more seriously with the many traditions of
democratic theory, and connecting my work to writings on networks and power structures
by critics like Manuel Castells, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Friedrich Kittler, and
Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker.

Next, the idea of transnational citizenship could be just as essential, but under a
different guise. I have taken cues from Balibar in writing about transnational citizenship,
but perhaps I have made an error in terminology. While the adjective “transnational”
performs the work of questioning the complete power of the nation-state to police
political borders, it does not fully account for the virtual dimension of what I hope to
describe. The companion concept to interfacial democracy is perhaps something closer
to hypertextual citizenship, a citizenship that jumps from place to place, links
promiscuously and nonexclusively, and is above all textual. By connecting the citizens
who practice interfacial democracy explicitly to textual production I am able to focus not
only on their border crossings but also on the practices of textual politics in virtual space.
In this light, citizenship is not only unbound—at least partially—from territory and blood
(my focus here) but also bound tightly to the acts of reading and writing. While I have
given great attention to this question in the sections on absence and lurking, this is the
crucial connection that ties the two halves of this project together.

Once interfacial democracy and hypertextual citizenship have been linked
together, the work I have done on written absence and lurking readers begins to make
more sense: these are not ancillary concerns but the central problems at the heart of the
textually-mediated politics that I claim acts as the motor of virtual culture, society, and
life. Hypertextual citizens are always partially absent and partially present to the interface, blinking on and off between political engagement and democratic lurking. Importantly, this would be a sort of textual politics that would be at once totalizing and not. Totalizing because, as I have discussed here in “Virtually Dead,” the only evidence we can sense that our interlocutors¹ exist are the textual traces they leave. Not totalizing because, as I have discussed here in “The Lurkers,” there is always something that escapes from the spaces between, around, and even within those traces. This is a politics with a record, but one that is as slippery as the citizens who write it. There is an archival dimension to the politics I hope to describe, a persistent and preserved record that contains both data and lacunae. An examination of this archive is the major new component that I would add to this project.

In “Virtually Dead,” I traced the consequences of the peculiar forms that presence and absence take in the blogosphere, noting that a post is always both the last one written and the precursor to the next one, which may be just about to appear. It is in the barely perceptible space between past and future that we experience the blogospheric present. To live in a virtual age is to live a new relationship with the archive. The blogosphere is not just an archive of things that have happened; it is an archive where things happen. In political terms, this archive is not simply the record of the political acts of reading and writing that hypertextual citizens have effected in attempting to manipulate the

¹ We might use the French term concitoyens. This word is often rendered in English as “citizens” or “fellow citizens” but we might also choose the more direct “co-citizens” because it echoes Nancy’s thought on coexistence as the only existence, being-with as the only being, the unatomizable We. If hypertextual democracy is to be embedded in the logic of the network, citizenship must be connected to the concept of the links among citizens: there is no citizenship that is not co-citizenship.
democratic interface: it is where virtual politics takes place. As the blogosphere voraciously consumes its future, users skate across the surface, every keystroke instantly filed away. We never quite fall into that bottomless data pit, but never quite escape from it either.

What sort of existence emerges from an internet culture that configures past, present, and future in this way? How can scholars study such a world? To address these questions, we might look not only to the blogosphere’s own attempts to read itself and think about its past, its culture, its traditions, but also to the work of Jacques Derrida on textuality and archives (Mali), the emergent literature on virtual ethnography, history’s linguistic turn, and François Hartog’s notion of “historicity.” A new set of temporal relationships emerges as we begin to understand the consequences of constructing and inhabiting a digital universe. These relationships help provide a theoretical framework for understanding what gets preserved and what gets left out of a world that threatens to absorb everything into a database.

The blogospheric archive is, quite literally, in the middle of everything: a flickering and empty present between past and future, a textual buffer between citizens, a space between here and there, and a vast, nonlinear social text with neither beginning nor ending. And fittingly so. The blogosphere defies beginnings and defies endings, but it does not defy middles. It is, after all, a medium, a thing that comes between. As I write the story of this dissertation, it is about spanning a growing chasm between politics and literature. In a perfect future (a manuscript to come?), I will have found a way to close
this gap, to reconcile politics and text, and to articulate the textual nature of online politics.
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Biography

Scott Kushner was born 1 December 1978 in Pittsburgh, Penn., and was raised in Manchester, N.H. He earned a B.A. from the College of Letters at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., in May 2001. In August 2003, he enrolled in the Ph.D. Program in French Literature at Duke University in Durham, N.C., and was awarded the M.A. in December 2005. His graduate work was supported by departmental awards, instructorships in Duke’s French Language Program, a 2007 Summer Research Fellowship, and a 2007-08 Katherine Stern Dissertation Year Fellowship.