CHAPTER
FOUR

witnessing absence

FIRST ABSENCE: THE EXECUTION OF JAMES FOLEY

On August 19, 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) uploaded a video titled "A Message to America" that depicted the beheading of the kidnapped journalist James Foley. Despite being swiftly pulled by YouTube, the video and gruesome stills from it circulated on social media, news sites, web forums, and shock galleries. Shot in crisp high definition, the video was slickly produced and professionally edited. Deviating from the grainy footage and awkward staging of executions filmed in Afghanistan or Iraq in the years after 9/11, it had a consciously contemporary aesthetic. After a long message addressed to President Obama, Foley appears on his knees, dressed in orange. Behind him is a black-clad and masked executioner, around them blasted desert and stark sky. The beheading itself lasts only ten seconds; yet the moment of death is not shown. It occurs off-camera, disappeared in the digital cut. A knife saws, but there is no blood. There is only the body, the head. The cuts shown are staged, experts say. Death itself is absent, but radically so—despite not occurring on camera, it is everywhere in evidence.

Reflecting on the recurrent moment of the cut in photography, Kember and Zylinska ask what might it mean to *cut well*, to cut in a way that entails a vital, creative ethics.[1] But what might it mean to cut poorly, to cut the clumsy cut? For the digital cut to cut out the cutting of the body? In this gruesome portrait of death without the moment of dying, there is an absence within an absence—yet one that has a presence in the digital contagion of traumatic affect. Perhaps the killing was botched, the blow of the sword too weak or at the wrong angle.

Or perhaps the cut was too bloody, too grotesque. After all, the video's purpose was not only to incite shock, but also to recruit—to catch the disaffected, the angry, the alienated and offer purpose through blood and violence.[2] This is a video that aims to traumatize, but also to speak to and through trauma. As such, it is perhaps best understood as an image of digital war that exemplifies, as Andrew Hoskins and Shona Illingworth write, "a shift in the trauma of civilians from a memory of the past to a perpetual anticipation of the threat of the future, subjecting increasing numbers of people to unending physical and psychological incarceration in a traumatizing present."[3] To watch such a thing must be brutally visceral—but I don't know, I haven't seen it. Like the deferred moment of death itself, I held back from an active participation in its affective economy and have encountered it only in stills and secondhand accounts, mediations of a mediation. Yet my resistance to seeing the video does not prevent its forcefulness from making its mark: there is an urgent affectivity in its absence, even now.

Despite its wide circulation, the beheading of James Foley—and later of Steven Sotloff and others—produced a radical absence. Its absence resided in the anxiety it engenders, the anxiety of potentially encountering the visual force of war's violence. An errant click, the wrong news article, a social media post that slips through the controls instituted by Twitter or Facebook—to encounter these videos would be so easily done, a simple digital stumble or the caprice of an algorithm. Crowding virtuals of affect, accumulating potentials on the verge of becoming actual: an affective-traumatic atmosphere. Brutal violence had infected the everyday of the digital. Who could say how or where it had proliferated? The mythology of digital permanence, the notion that whatever words or images of ourselves find their way on online stay there, resonated with the video's disappearance. It was always potentially appearing, even when it never arrived. Already testimonial texts that bear witness to political murder, such videos circulate in search of co-witnesses, dependent on news values, browsing habits, and algorithmic recommenders.

Fragmented terrains of media seemed suddenly not simply a problem for trust and accountability, but a risk to bodily integrity.

Once, broadcast networks might simply have colluded to conceal the video, but its indefinite circulation encouraged hosting on the websites of establishment media. If it was out there, it should be here, or so the thinking went. In the early 2000s, before social media as we know it and with the digital ecology far less developed and vibrant, watching the video of another execution—the journalist Daniel Pearl—had required sustained pursuit through web forums and the glitchy predecessors to YouTube. Not so for James Foley. Even with the object absent, secreted from viewing, its traumatic affect still leaked, oozed, and pooled.[4] Even in absence, these videos accumulated affective force, so that not watching did not prevent encounter: what was encountered was their looming lack of presence. Carriers of an affective contagion, more than a stand-in or symbol of the possible disturbances engendered by the digital, the videos are traumatically affecting even without being seen. Like the body of the terrorist after 9/11, their passing-by reshaped the surfaces of fearful bodies.[5] Here was terror, potentially: the lone wolf video, stalking the algorithmic hinterlands of platform capitalism. Distant war on the verge of becoming intimate, of demanding witness.

Weeks after, Sydney and Brisbane woke to media blasting stories of dawn raids capturing suspected terrorists, footage of police storming houses, and breathless excitement from politicians and pundits. Random public beheadings were planned, the prime minister of the day quickly claimed, backed by anonymous leaks from the Australian Federal Police and displays of a seized sword.[6] What happened in the desert was in our midst, or so it seemed. In the iconography of the sword and the references to beheading, the raids resonated with the circulating videos, with mediated violence always on the verge of encounter. They amplified fear, made manifest in bodily sensation the possibility that distant violence could appear on any screens, anytime. It didn't matter, here in Australia, that the sword was revealed to be plastic, that its owner was Shiite and thus anathema to ISIS.[7] The very connectedness of the contemporary world, the ever-presence of the digital, sharpened into an affective threat: violent mediation made manifest in the digital quotidian. To have this infiltrate the human sensorium, to have been confronted with radical absence in the digital's capacity to transmit violent and traumatic affect, was to shift one's affective relation to the digital itself. It was to risk being forced into a witnessing relation, one latent within the nonhuman infrastructures of the digital systems yet invisible until it was too late.

It is not only the beheading of a kidnapped journalist. Disappearances keep appearing in the digital sphere: an airplane vanishes into the sky; friends learn someone has died when Facebook "memorializes" their page; sacred sites are destroyed by a mining giant in search of iron ore. Each event is different in its particularity but shares an affective architecture: it is a manifestation of absence that is nonetheless vitally present. This radical absence throws those who encounter it into a witnessing relation with the felt force of disappearance. Radical absence occurs when this force surrounds something that cannot but fail to appear, yet in its nonappearance entangles the human with nonhuman infrastructures of mediation and circulation. Such absences are not exceptional, but rather part and parcel of the digitality that constantly and constitutively entangles everyday life. While encounters with radical absence are not rare, coming into contact with their mediated traces and resonances can possess an unexpected intensity. Encounters with radical absence constitute both a witnessing of absence and the absence of witnessing: a paradox that is made manifest and material through the inescapable presence of nonhuman agencies and infrastructures. Radical absence becomes possible through the constitutive affectivity of digital mediations. As Richard Grusin writes, "The affective elements of our interactions with everyday media technologies work both socially and politically."[8] Radical absence arises not from disconnection but from an abundance of connection, not from a failure to witness but from the unceasing potential of witnessing to take place and the repeated demand that we do so. It circulates unpredictably and is experienced variably, yet once encountered it demands witnessing. It is a forceful if fleeting veering of experience into disjunctive and disruptive terrain. Radical absence is radical because of its intensity, not because of any definitive rupture with prior forms of media and processes of mediation. It makes perceptible the disjunctive pluriversality of cultural and political life.

As with the other chapters, this one oscillates along two trajectories: the witnessing of absence and the absence of witnessing. It argues that radical absence is crucial to witnessing what is not there, or fails to materialize, or is destroyed, or has died: a necessarily nonhuman witnessing. What does it mean for witnessing to understand traumatic mediations as bound up with the absent presence of data infrastructures? In worlds of increasingly fluid and uncertain distinctions between the human and the nonhuman, radical absences occur with remarkable potency. Traumatically affecting, if not traumatizing, they have the capacity to produce intensely felt disjunctures. Such

intensive disjunctures pull us into a witnessing relation, but this witnessing doesn't simply happen *through* media. Radical absence entails both the event of absence itself and the eventful process of its violent mediation. Radical absence and its witnessing are thus inseparable from nonhuman processes of signal flow, datafication, and algorithmic selection, but also the material infrastructures of data centers and optical fiber cables. Radical absence fragments time and segments space, distributing and dispersing the experiences of both human and nonhuman entities.

Radical absence depends in the most fundamental sense on the sheer physicality of those infrastructures, even as it obscures their presence behind the screen interfaces of social media and search engine platforms. Such infrastructures coproduce witnessing radical absence at the ontoepistemological level: no matter how human its subject matter, witnessing radical absence depends upon and veers inevitably into the nonhuman. Radical absence entails machinic affects, but its dependence on such infrastructures means that it is also bound up with ecological trauma. Understanding the witnessing of radical absence thus requires attending to this infrastructural layer of absent presence and considering how disappeared infrastructures might be made to (re) appear within the nonhuman witnessing of all-too-human actions and events. Radical absence troubles relations between the sensing and sense-making that defines aesthetics, producing a disjunctive intensity rather than an anesthetic numbing. It is a formation of machinic affect that galvanizes violent mediation at the level of experience itself: a flashing up of traumatic rupture at the interface of the human and the non in the infrastructures of digital life. Like the art and activism that have percolated through this book so far, nonhuman entanglements offer some potential for radical absence to open spaces, however minor, however fragile, for reparative politics—to find something of the transformative in encounters with loss. To encounter radical absence is to be thrown into a witnessing relation, but one that refuses fixity, that loses its own substance: a witnessing inseparable from the machinic affect of digital life, in all its nonhuman excess, patterning, and sensory dysphoria.

SECOND ABSENCE: MH370

Less than an hour after take-off on March 8, 2014, somewhere over the South China Sea, Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 made its last contact with air traffic control at 1:21 a.m. local time. Flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing was meant to take less than six hours, but the Boeing 777 was only seen again

in fleeting electronic fragments—a handful of blips on military radar, six satellite "handshakes"—and even then only after the fact, data dredged from various regional monitoring stations.[9] As hours lengthened into days, the disappearance became charged with an unsettling intensity. MH370 came to be oddly, inescapably present in its absence. Broadcast media filled with breaking news segments, expert panels, and frenzied banners; programming was interrupted and redirected, folding into the online buzz of anxiety, speculation, and hope. On social media, the real-time digital flow made possible a cofeeling of this absence, an attention to its emergence and coalescence within the stream of enmeshed communications. Emerging too was grief for the 239 missing passengers and crew, grief for their relatives and friends who gave faces to loss, marking the absence of loved ones on their skin. Participatory platforms from Twitter to Facebook to Reddit enabled people across the globe to track and even participate in the search, an affective engagement in which countless microencounters modulated and amplified the experience of the plane's absence. Checking in on events and finding no revelation or resolution was not a lonely task, but rather one assembled of new encounters with continued disappearance, with the very failure of finding the plane. Theories abounded. The pilot was a terrorist, his home-flight simulator an object of suspicion. Passengers were hijackers, a pair of Russians briefly became a locus of interest. Amateur sleuths set to work; maps proliferated. Islands were pored over for the space to land and hide a plane, disused runways were cataloged, fuel capacities and headwinds were calculated to define the limits of where the flight might be.[10] More theories: it had been shot down after straying into US war games with Thailand, or by China, or because it came too close to a secret American base in Diego Garcia. Dark matter leaking from within the planet had produced an unseeable, untraceable vortex.[11]

Investments in such speculation ranged from the occasional to the obsessive, a desperate desire to give narrative to the disappeared plane. No doubt for many it burst across their digital worlds and slipped away, leaving only faint traces. Yet to encounter the plane's disappearance was to be affected by an absence that was so profoundly present that it became radical. The more it persisted, the more the search widened, and the more theories grew—the more its absence could be felt intensely. The world became less known, technology failed to measure up to the faith we invest in it. Oceans were revealed as vast realms about which humans know little, tides and currents without accurate models, topographies without maps. The limitations of our capacity to search and rescue became starkly evident, the smallness of the human confronted with the scale and force of the seas.[12] Skies were suddenly less

tracked and watched than we had imagined. Despite the seeming ubiquity of atmospheric, terrestrial, and aquatic remote sensing, what Gabrys names "*program earth*" could still produce catastrophic errors.[13] When Malaysian authorities declared the plane lost in the Indian Ocean on March 24, more than two weeks after the disappearance, no wreckage had been found. Those satellite handshakes and radar blips had led to mathematical equations theorizing the zone of the plane's crash, some 1.8 million square miles of ocean.[14] Because its wreckage was never found, the accumulation of calculation declared the absence of plane and people to be final. Even eighteen months later, when a flaperon from the plane's wing was found on Réunion Island in the Indian Ocean, no one could say for sure that the plane had simply fallen into sea or from where the wreckage might have traveled. Undiscovered, MH370's black box flight recorder held onto its secrets. Autonomous drone operations failed to find wreckage, producing instead a happenstance cartographic archive derived from the data of sonar sensors.[15]

GPS tracking, satellites, radars, transponders: our experience of the contemporary world is of endless interconnection. Smartphones know where we have been and how often, electronic tags chart the movement of our cars across cities, transport cards log our daily travels. Hollywood has taught us that the technological eye is all-seeing, that even the act of stepping off the grid is itself marked and known. Expansive computation harnessed to remote-sensing apparatuses promised what Paul Edwards calls the *closed world* of Cold War computation.[16] Yet this apparatus was calibrated to the concerns of capital, climate, and empire, to the monitoring of missile launches, border zones, glacial erosions, coastal reef temperatures, agriculture fertility, and mining. To encounter such a disappearance within and through the digital—in Facebook posts and Twitter hashtags, snippets of YouTube video and subreddits—was to encounter a strange rupture. A fissure in the seeming solidity of the technoscientific world. A plane had vanished: How could this be in an age of transponders and satellites and ubiquitous connectivity? How could something so familiar and material simply vanish? Where were the witnesses? Through ceaseless connection with the shared experience of a disappeared object witnessing itself became ever more nonhuman: it was as if something inescapably actual had slipped back into the virtual, as if the concrete had dissolved into the affective. There was a kind of trauma in this—not so great, of course, as that felt by the families of the missing, but an affective trauma, a trauma produced by a breakdown in the certainties of the contemporary world. This breakdown ripples into the mediated environments that Paddy Scannell calls the "invisible care structure

that gives the conditions of things we can trust in the world and a world we can take for granted."[17] A plane simply disappearing ruptures that trust; the mediated circulation of its absence threatens just such a rupturing in the trust that defines our phenomenological relations to media.

This is traumatic affect, digitally mediated, a prepersonal yet corporeal contact with radical disjuncture. This traumatic affect is not static, and as much about the future as the past. It might not direct our actions as such, but its infiltration of our sensorium cannot quite be undone. To encounter MH370 digitally was to do so in diffuse pulsings, in micromoments of mediation: the disappearance of a plane and its passengers held in the palm of the hand, engaged with the fingertips. An absence so radical—so fundamental yet urgent, so distinct from the everyday—that it demanded witnessing, even as all that remained to be witnessed was a space in the world where a plane once flew. As submersible drones whirred through oceans, new worlds unfurled to human knowing but the remnants of the plane remained lost. Its last witnessing was an elemental one: the deep blue media of the sea itself.[18]

TRAUMATIC AFFECT

Media are far more than surfaces on which trauma is inscribed. As Amit Pinchevski argues, we can think of the "the traumatic as something that is made manifest through media technological rendering," rather than something that is simply represented in media.[19] If radical absence begins with the failure of the eyewitness to witness, an epistemological failure to translate the registering of an event into knowable form, its continued existence as a forceful absence on the plane of experience depends on more-than-human processes of mediation. Mediation and trauma both share an uncertain relationship between past and present, between presence and absence, and between proximity and distance. As such, "media constitute the material conditions for trauma to appear as something that cannot be fully approached and yet somehow must be."[20]At the level of process, technical media contain within their own constitution the paradoxes that make trauma overwhelming: media are always entangled with experience, yet also insist on their separateness. "Media matter," writes Cubitt, "both in the sense of giving material specificity to our descriptions of such abstract concepts as society and environment, and in the sense of the active verb: mediation comes into being as matter, its mattering constitutes the knowable, experienceable world, making possible all sensing and being sensed, knowing and being known."[21]

Digital media are also decidedly material, requiring huge amounts of water, space, and electricity to run and with catastrophic impacts on environments and the animals and plants that inhabit them. While the other chapters in this book oscillated in their proximity to the human, here I attend to quotidian human life to examine its enmeshment with nonhuman systems at the visceral, recompositional level of trauma. Here, violent mediations, machinic affects, and ecological traumas cohere on everyday experiences of what Lauren Berlant calls "crisis ordinariness," or "traumas of the social that are lived through collectively and that transform the sensorium to a heightened perceptiveness about the unfolding of the historical."[22]

In mediated encounters with crisis ordinariness, the factual and the fictional can be blurred in complex and unpredictable ways, jumbling together the urgent and the trivial, the enduring and the ephemeral, the intense and the diffuse. Digital media can itself be unanchoring, displacing priorities, destabilizing shared knowledges, and amplifying conspiracy and paranoia.[23] How is one to cope with the media witnessing of 9/11, the ur-trauma of the screen, first on television screen but then repeated across other media? Or, more contemporaneously, images and video of police killings and beatings of Black and First Nations people, or of funeral pyres in India as COVID-19, vaccine apartheid, and government ineptitude took life after life? These and countless other mediations make up what Mark Seltzer calls "wound culture," the "collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound."[24] This fascination is a complex one, caught up in movements of pulling away as much as turning toward, repulsion as much as attraction. Conceiving of trauma as affective also entails a more fluid, interdependent understanding of the social and the individual, and the dynamic role of mediation in their relations. Taken together, these movements open more nuanced and variable ways to understand what encounters with radical absence might mean at the level of meaning-making and of political possibility.

Traumatic affect, as I have argued with Meera Atkinson, describes the "the mode, substance and dynamics of relation through which trauma is experienced, transmitted, conveyed, and represented."[25] Rather than a concept that produces taxonomies and distinctions, that includes or excludes varying experiences and representations, traumatic affect is conceptually open and fluid. It recognizes that encounters with trauma can be traumatically *affecting* without being *traumatizing* in quite the same way that psychoanalysis or clinical psychological imply. In other words, all trauma is affective but not all experiences of traumatic affect produce trauma. Such traumatic affects are not only—or not solely—the affects constitutive of traumatic events, but

also affects experienced in encounters with trauma. Affect, after all, is neither dependent upon nor delimited to the human. As such, the intensity of traumatic affect varies along a dynamic continuum, rather than occurring in some static form, and its relational intensities are bound up with nonhuman technics and milieus.

Thinking of mediated trauma in terms of its nonhuman relationality opens onto new possibilities. As Pinchevski notes, "Media (re)produce the traumatic by effecting its ungraspability affectively, by imparting impact in excess of content, sensation in excess of sense."[26] An encounter with violent mediation might itself be traumatic or traumatically affective, such as in the designation of a racial category by Facebook's advertising algorithms or the unexpected encounter with footage of death or pain in a TikTok feed. Mediated encounters can also be intensely immediate: mediation is precisely what renders them intensive. Traumatic affects can impart, at varying intensities, the force of trauma without inscribing meaning. Traumatic affect can be understood as one of the qualitative dynamics of crisis ordinariness. Thus, while this chapter pursues traumatic affect within encounters with radical absence on social media, its intensive relations of rupture and disjuncture form part of what Andrew Murphie calls "a complex storm of feeling, of aspects of world feeling each other in intense, unexpected and constantly mutating ways."[27] Witnessing radical absence, then, does not apply exclusively to social or even digital media, but rather might be extended into the crises of war, ecology, and data that have occupied this book so far.

While normative conceptions of trauma, like those of witnessing, tend to insist on its exclusivity to the human, understanding trauma and affect in vitalist terms means opening space for the felt force of potential as it shapes relations. Virtuality always precedes and exceeds the human because it is never contained within the experience of any individual; it is always in and of worlds, in relation, in media, and in the making. Recall that for Massumi, affect is the shifting entanglements of "the virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual" in the unfolding of encounters.[28] Massumi's virtual does not refer to the false or unreal, but rather to the crowding potentials of all experience: those things that are-about-to-be or might-just-have-been that are inextricable from the actual. Virtuality insists that nonhuman milieus, technics, animals, and ecologies always co-constitute the human as potential and as a taking shape and becoming with world(s). Thinking trauma in terms of affect thus enables a way of understanding its dynamics as fluid, moving, changeable, multitudinous, and even contagious, while not relinquishing its injurious and harmful ruptures of experience.[29] As David Lapoujade writes,

parsing William James, "Discontinuity always appears against the ground of continuity," such that even as experience fractures it remains held together as one-and-many by relations of nonrelation.[30] Conceived as always more than one and always more-than-human, traumatic affect invites nonhuman witnessing in response. In doing so, it offers a more generative mode for understanding relations across the diffuse circulation of crises of war, data, and ecology in the capitalist quotidian of social media, search engines, and news sites. Witnessing radical absence is both a response to the traumatic affects of digital disappearance and an address to the absent presence of nonhuman infrastructures.

THIRD ABSENCE: DIGITAL DEATH

In mid-2012, Jessa Moore logged onto Facebook and learned that her friend Anthony Dowdell had killed himself. She and others began to post memories and photos, to tag him at restaurants or bars. "Facebook became our memorial," she said. "We could leave messages for him and each other." Facebook became a site of shared mourning, but also a way to keep memories alive—even as it continually reminded Jessa of her friend's absence from her life.[31] Almost a decade later, Jessa's experience is far from unique as I and many others can attest, but her story, told in a widely read article in the *Huffington Post*, marks an early incursion into media discourse of death on Facebook and its weird affects. Estimates suggest that upward of thirty million Facebook profiles have outlived the people who created them, with around eight thousand users passing away every day. In 2019, Carl J. Öhman and David Watson published a statistical projection of the accumulation of profiles from deceased users, using country and age data scraped from the Facebook API in conjunction with country mortality rates. Their findings suggest that up to 4.9 billion dead users could populate Facebook by 2100, leading the researchers to call for a new, scalable, and sustainable model for preserving the data of the deceased.[32] Already, a microindustry has emerged to manage digital estates, wrapping up accounts, tracing assets, and passing on data.[33] On Facebook, friends or family access accounts and make them inactive, or provide a death certificate to Facebook to have their account officially "Memorialized," transforming their profile into a commemoration to which existing Facebook friends can post but remains otherwise unchanged.[34]

Others are simply left in place, digital presences that bear no clear marker of absent life, as if the user has simply stepped away from the computer. Yet

unlike the cluttered desk or sink piled with dirty dishes, such a profile remains open to further engagement. Like Jessa tagging her friend Anthony at a bar he would have liked, or leaving messages on his wall, these pages have a strange digital afterlife. This capacity to tag is particularly potent. As Paul Frosh argues, tagging on social media "reveals itself as an existentially significant technique for mediating the attachments of the body and the self in the face of possible unravelling and disintegration."[35] Tagging the dead marks an insistence on retaining a certain presence in the world produced by digital media, but it also points to the tenuous hold that the practice of tagging has on the deep relational work of maintaining attachments. Yet stranger still and far less visible than tagging and memorializing are the archival remainders of dead profiles, living on in Facebook's inaccessible and undisclosed data centers. Facebook's archive is not ephemeral but material, as Mél Hogan shows, constituted by "the electricity that powers the machines, and a virtual ethersphere that produces bigger records than the lived realities it records, as a politic of preservation that is, on the one hand, successfully inhabited and, on the other hand, dangerously reconfigured and protected as such."[36] Death on Facebook as both event and archive, as enduring public profile and invisible data cluster, is not apolitical but bound up with the politics of data centers and big data aggregation, and with the practices of attention, engagement, consumption, and preservation that shape digital sociality and selfhood.

Memorialized profiles manifest decreasing attention, a flurry of sorrowful posts that fades with time, sparking at moments of remembrance or past joy. Those left untended intrude unwittingly: an algorithm suggests you get in touch with a deceased friend, a reminder appears for their birthday, you are tagged in a photo with them. A brief foray onto Google reveals the complex multiplicity of experiences of digital death, from memorial pages for beloved pets to services that send letters from the afterlife to start-ups promising the first stage of a transhumanist transcendence of death through a postlife digital existence. On social media, death often intrudes unexpectedly, encountered in unfitting places: clicking on the profile of an acquaintance not seen for years, checking notifications on a bus on the way to work, wondering why your daughter hasn't called home from college. Individual stories present differing relations. Jessa Moore visits her friend's page each day to leave him messages; a widow wrestles with whether to leave her partner's page active. Death in the digital sphere is collaborative and delocalized, constituted by friends and family, by the algorithms of the encoded world. It repeats the intersubjectivity of digital identity, its formation not only through interpersonal connections but also via the technics and constraints of digital platforms

themselves. "It's more for us than for him," said Jessa. Witnessing absence on Facebook is a relational practice, a means of forging communities of care around shared knowing and grieving, but one funneled through the extractive data regime of the social media platform.

Social media make visible and grant a kind of permanency to otherwise transitory relations: schoolmates, old work colleagues, fellow backpackers, or partygoers. Once, their deaths would have filtered into our lives sparingly, or not at all. Social media relations don't fade in quite the same way; even when someone might have disappeared from your newsfeed, an event of some magnitude or the foibles of the algorithm might push them to the fore, shunting aside the absence afforded by space and time. When testimonies to lost lives appear, they do so in the same flattened aesthetic as every other item. A friend pours grief for a dead parent into the status box, hits post, and their words appear alongside political rants, sports highlights, requests for advice on buying a new barbeque. Unless the link is broken, Facebook keeps connections active; more, it calls its users into action. Connect with Anushka, wish Peter a happy birthday, like the photo Siobhan just shared of her newborn child. To be thrown into shock or grief is no small thing, to encounter in a digital presence a radical absence of life can produce a bodily response of visceral intensity. Life is absent, yet also jarringly, movingly, or even thankfully present: its absence is radical in the sense that its traces are inescapable. Photographs, posts, comments, likes, events, check-ins, games—so much more cohesive, contained, and accessible than the material and ephemeral remnants of the predigital.

On Facebook, the dead are radically absent in part because engagements with them are so visible: mourning is not only public, but enduring.[37] Responding to death becomes a kind of public testimony: remembrances and condolences are not fleeting or offered in private, but within the performative space of the social network. Eliding geography and producing intimacy across distance, such grieving entails a kind of flattening of experience within the bland corporate aesthetic and ethos of the platform. Facebook becomes a constraining medium, giving a form to grief that limits or even denies something of experience, a more intensified form of the delimiting of affect that occurs in the writing of trauma.[38] All griefs are rendered equal, or near enough, and this can be traumatically affecting. Lines between rubbernecking and mourning are increasingly blurred, such that expressing grief in public can be undercut by the doubt of others. To lose a partner, a close friend, a son or sister, and then have countless others lay claim to them can reproduce loss as much as testify to life. Traumatic affect in digital death can be fleeting,

a passing encounter with disappeared life. Or it can be unexpectedly intense, an encounter with loss that throws one's own life out of kilter, the actuality of death intersecting its virtual counterpart. An affectivity of absence produced within and by the ever-pressing potential of the digital, made material through nonhuman infrastructures of data collection, storage, processing, and distribution. Witnessing death as radical absence is all too human, yet this digital mediation ensures that it is inseparable from nonhuman technics, algorithms, data, and affects.

RADICAL ABSENCE (REDUX)

Screen-based media are only one slice of the pervasive digital mediation of contemporary life, but their ubiquity means everything from homes and shopping malls to buses and elevators has been infiltrated by the datalogical. To move through such spaces is to have our attention demanded and diverted, with digitized movement and sound calling us into a more temporal relation to the visual and aural than the static imagery of the past allowed. This demand for attention is also a bodily experience, from the adrenal surge that redirects the body in gaming to the haptic signals of smartwatches. Augmented and virtual reality hold the promise of interrupting our relation to the visual field, layering data over what we see or replacing our immediate surrounds entirely. Fantasies of neural link implants hint at a future of screen-body fusion. Even now, interpersonal interactions slip between online and off, or take place simultaneously in both domains.[39] Smartphones and their ilk have become what Bernard Stiegler calls "mnemotechnologies," doing the work of thinking, remembering, and processing our knowledge of the world.[40] What had been stable categories of causation no longer hold as relations between objects, humans, and different media become increasingly fluid and relative.[41]

Even if there are antecedents for the transformative effects of digital networks in the long human history of mediations, such as the telegraph's collapsing of distance or cinema's production of new modes of time, there can be little doubt that recent decades have seen an accelerated evolution in the imbrication of media technologies and human life. Nonhuman technics and the human sensorium are increasingly enfolded; affects flow between the corporeal and machinic, intensities surging across surfaces and substrates, modulating and shaping. In the words of Nigel Thrift, "There is no stable 'human' experience because the human sensorium is constantly being re-invented as the body continually adds parts to itself; therefore, how and what is

experienced as experience is itself variable."[42] This cyborg tendency is not new, but it is accelerating and expanding. Drones and smartphones, for instance, are far from the only emergent forms of machinic perception. Sensors creep into running shoes and sidewalks, grocery aisles, and the skin of diabetics. Machine vision enables autonomous systems to power cars, surgical robots, and the logistics of ports. Learning algorithms analyze public health data and execute trades at scales, speeds, and frequencies far beyond human cognitive capacities. Chatbots generate text from the statistical analysis of patterns in data trawled from the internet. More than simply shifting how experience is composed, the ever-presence of these technovital mediations changes the ground of experience itself for the human and for nonhuman entities of all kinds. Media technologies, argues Marie-Luise Angerer, play an "active role in promoting a comprehensive relationality by setting and correlating the rhythms of large and small units and inward and outward sensations."[43] Sensations are not only produced bodily, but through the folded together mediations that make for a new fluidity of experience itself. As Brian Massumi and Erin Manning write, "The field of experience can be best described as relational-qualitative."[44] This is not to say that the human experience of the contemporary world is without grounding, that what was solid has melted into the networked ether, but rather that the ground truths of experience are more and more entangled in the systems and processes that produce the conditions of crisis in which so much life is lived.

Radical absences are made possible by this folding together of experience and digital mediation. They are themselves not rigid phenomena: videos circulate and then fade from view, flight paths are traced then slip away, posts in remembrance grow infrequent. Space and time bend and flex in odd ways. This combination of spatiality, temporality, and contingency matters. Mary Ann Doane writes of these phenomena in the context of the cinematic image, in which "chance and contingency have been assigned an important ideological role, supporting the fascination with the apparently alternative temporalities offered by the cinema."[45] Yet what occurs in the digital mediations of disappearance described here shows how the digital enables different experiences: chance, contingency, spatiality, and temporality are always and inescapably constitutive of encounters with radical absence. There is a tension in this between their intensity in the encounter and its durability over time and across space. Traumatic affects shaped by radical absence can be modulated, amplified, diminished, deferred, interrupted, and truncated in their passage across and between bodies. Radical absences are events rather than stand-alone phenomena, manifestations of encounter that are co-composed,

emergently assembled. Experiences of radical absence are neither singular nor collective as such, but rather transindividual, "the collectivity at the heart of all individuations, before and beyond any spectating into individuals."[46]

Yet this emergence of the event—the potential encounter with the beheading video, the pervasive presence of a disappeared plane, the still-living of death on Facebook—is not solely dependent on the human. Technologies matter, processes matter, mediations matter—they matter in the doubled sense of carrying important information and making material. In this sense, radical absence performs an indexical function: it is the trace of the disappeared. Yet the indexicality of radical absence does more than point as close as can be to that which is not there: what makes these absences radical is the affectivity of encounter that materializes in lived experience that which is indexed in the digital. Radical absence collapses the seemingly limitless nature of media into its finitude, evoking the limits of what media can capture. Radical absence reminds us of the vitality of digital media, that its materiality does not reside solely in binary code but in how those codes work upon bodies and in the data centers, cables, transmitters, and repeaters that make their operation possible. Indeed, it is in this conjunction of (non)human(s) and media(tion) that particular encounters with digital disappearance become radical. More than agency as such, but a process of assemblage: "The directed intensity of a compositional movement that alters the field of experience."[47] Within encounters with radical absence, these compositional formations move most intensively in the tension between what is not and what almost might be, in the swarming of potential that withholds certain actuals. In short, radical absences are never static—closer to presences, yet not quite, possessed of a force that is exactly not presence.

Nor are they solely traumatic in their affectivity: much more than trauma circulates in the absences described here. Love, grief, fear, despair, alienation, and other affective formations are often at work. Histories, states, and moods of bodies matter too. To have a fear of flying and encounter a rising tide of MH370 posts and comments in your social media stream gives a particular angle or tenor to that encounter. Massumi calls this differential attunement: "bodies in encounter are both completely absorbed in the felt transition, but they are differently absorbed, coming at it asymmetrically, from different angles, living a different complexion of affecting-being affected, transitioning through the encounter to different outcomes."[48] This differential attunement means that the ways in which traumatic affect affects will vary: radical absences are not radical in quite the same way in every encounter that (re) constitutes them. Yet what they share is this traumatic affectivity—it is the

qualitative relation that defines the encounter. Not traumatization as such, but a disjunctive, rupturing affectivity, in which affect's presignifying quality limits the capacity of the event to become meaningful. It is this felt-feeling of a refusal to cohere into sense-making that makes the potential encounter with beheading videos a force of disruption that is experienced bodily.

Radical absences do not call the body into them, but rather call the body alongside them, to encounter what has disappeared in the force of its absence: an all-too-human witnessing thrown into the domain of nonhuman technics. Entanglement without overlapping, a shared composition that produces a kind of synchrony that is not sameness. "Entanglements," Rey Chow reminds us, are "the linkages and enmeshments that keep things apart; the voidings and uncoverings that hold things together."[49] By calling attention to the disjunctive ways in which we are entangled with disappearances that manifest in the digital sphere, radical absence is an injunction to the necessity of nonhuman witnessing, of witnessing that exceeds the human, occurring not in the event itself but in the affectivity of its aftermath and in the material traces of its datafied afterlives. The strange time of digital media matters here, with its tension between liveness and belatedness, proximity and distance, and the vagaries of algorithmic determinations of significance that pluck events out of the past to bring them to attention. The time of witnessing in digital media—especially on social networks or in the preferences of Google's PageRank ordering—is subject to nonhuman contingencies, associations, circulations, and relations. Machinic affects compose clusters of relation that pull certain things to the fore, and then allow them to recede or dissolve. Witnessing radical absence has no present as such, not even in the moment of James Foley's death, or the plane's disappearance, or the memorialization of a Facebook page, or the aftermath of the violent expansion of a mine.

Radical absence thus constitutes a structure of relation to the disjunctive crises of the affective present, the present as it is affectively formed as something that can be made sensible despite its discontinuities. It is a form of attachment, a way in which subjectivities relate to contexts in modes ranging from the aesthetic to the political to the occasional. Radical absence is an attachment to that which has disappeared yet remains affectively present, digitally manifested, preserved in infrastructure. While traumatic affect—not to mention circulations of grief, fear, disgust, and outrage—animates its disjunctive force, such affect is not the thing itself. Traumatic affect is not necessarily contagious, but rather a form of relation conducive to affective conflagration: it is an affective structure formed within what Berlant calls "a crisis culture borrowing trauma's genres to describe what isn't exceptional at all in

the continuous production and breakdown of life."[50] This structure is one of flows and vectors rather than scaffolds or walls. Radical absence stretches the boundaries of the subject, reconstituting selfhood within digital worldings shaped by the traumatic affects of intimately distant disappearances. It percolates through infrastructure, which Berlant calls "the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure."[51] Witnessing absence is thus bound up with the witnessing of invisible infrastructures, or what "binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself."[52] The digital makes this intimate distance possible by enabling a collapse of space that simultaneously calls attention to its own occurrence: in the digital, we can touch the distant but always do so in an intensely mediated way.

If the digital continually extends and reworks subjectivity, as Thrift and others argue, then traumatic affect is increasingly folded into our digital becomings. Such traumatic affects are the vehicle for sensorial manifestations of radical absence, for the ways in which it is felt bodily. "The body doesn't just absorb pulses or discrete stimulations"; writes Massumi, "it infolds contexts, it infolds volitions and cognitions that are nothing if not situated."[53] Rather than an enfolding that envelopes the body, this infolding alters bodily states, including the angle at which the body senses events. Sensation "is the immanent limit at which perception is eclipsed by a sheerness of experience, as yet un-extended into analytically ordered, predictably reproducible, possible action."[54] Within the digital's ever-present pulsings and infoldings, radical absence holds its affectivity in this indeterminate zone between perception and sensation. This sensorial experience of radical absence gives it a visceral actuality, renders it more than a discrete media object. As affective structures, radical absences do something. They enact a relation of nonhuman witnessing to the terrain of national security, or to faith in technology, or to how one grieves, or to Country wounded by resource extractivism. Such nonhuman witnessing is more than material because it is always relational, always in the process of forging registrations, connections, and attachments when it seems that relationality itself is under assault, even by the most violent of ecological traumas.

FOURTH ABSENCE: SACRED SITES

On May 24, 2020, the mining giant Rio Tinto detonated two rock shelters in the Juukan Gorge in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, destroying sites sacred to the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura (PKKP) peoples that

provided evidence of more than forty-six thousand years of continuous occupation.[55] Charges had been laid for the extension of the Brockman 4 iron ore mine days before, but the Traditional Owners of the land were not notified despite formal consultations extending back to 2014. As media reports and outrage spread among First Nations people and settlers on social media, the irreparable damage became inescapable: the absent sacred sites became sharply, affectively present. Material witnesses to the enduring habitation of the land were lost: plaited hair four thousand years old, genetically linked to the present Traditional Owners, and bone and stone tools dating back more than twenty-eight thousand years, the oldest-known bone technologies in Australia. Worse still was the incalculable loss of sites sacred to the PKKP, places alive with ancestral spirits and an enduring vitality that has no equivalent in Western epistemologies. Testifying to this profound and visceral loss of living Country to the Standing Committee on Northern Australia's inquiry conducted in the wake of the blast, Traditional Owner Burchell Hayes told the committee:

> The Juukan Gorge is known to be a place where the spirits of our relatives who have passed away, even recently, have come to rest. It is a place that the very, very old people still occupy. Purlykuti has been specifically referred to by the old people as a place of pardu, which refers to the special language only spoken during ceremonies in the Pilbara. Our elders state that it is certain that the spirits are very disturbed, and their living relatives are also upset at this. This is why Juukan Gorge is important. It is in the ancient blood of our people and contains their DNA. It houses history and the spirits of ancestors and it anchors the people to this country.[56]

Their absence would remain unbearably present, even as the cascading aftermath of the blasts brought a rare moment of scrutiny and accountability for extractive capitalism and its legal and political foundations.

Enabling the destruction were two proximate agents of what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls "the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty": the incompetence and negligence of Rio Tinto and the gross disparities of Western Australia's Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972, under which the destruction of the sites had been approved in 2013.[57] On the Rio Tinto side, the systematic sidelining of heritage reports and Traditional Owner concerns became evident, facilitated—or so it was claimed—by the geographic distance of the company's executives in London from its mining activities in Australia. This absence of communication protocols and heritage management practices combined with an institutionalized disdain for traditional

ownership, exhibited by the company's sustained and systematic approach in seeking approval for the destruction of thousands of sacred sites over decades of mining in the Pilbara. Like its competitors BHP, Fortescue Metals Group, China Shenhua, Roy Hill, and others, Rio Tinto had made ruthless use of the Heritage Act to push through new mines and expansions with little regard for the Traditional Owners. Under the Heritage Act, the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Committee is not required to consult with Traditional Owners, nor can its decisions be appealed. Even speaking publicly can threaten compensation for Aboriginal corporations through draconian gag clauses that enshrine stark inequities into the administrative process itself. Widely recognized as unfair and outdated, reform efforts for the Heritage Act had stalled. But the furor over what Yawuru man and federal senator Pat Dodson described as Rio Tinto's "incremental genocide" brought to mainstream attention the enduring coloniality of Australia's extractive capitalism and its supportive legal bedrock. Present in the radical absence of the sacred sites was settler colonialism as eliminationist structure.[58] The destruction of culture operated here as a way of breaking traditional bonds with Country, an expression of the shifting logics of racialization in response to political activism that stresses the significance of land to First Nations. The shared investment of settler government and corporation in the continuation of extractive industries in the face of First Nations resistance and global heating both depends upon and reproduces settler sovereignty. A mining giant founded in settler Australia but now headquartered in London (and subjects of the British Crown in either locale) had destroyed sites of sacred importance in the name of profit and with the imprimatur of law that explicitly and deliberately marginalizes and gags Aboriginal people. Here was the convergence of settler colonialism, extractive capitalism, and neoliberal corporate structures, suddenly all too present against the radical absence of the Juukan Gorge sites.

Even more rare than the visibility of infrastructures too often hidden in plain sight was the push to hold Rio Tinto to account from within the political establishment. Under the weight of public scrutiny and a formal inquiry by Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia, three executives and the chair of the board resigned, and the company committed to a range of remedial actions, internal reforms, and changes in its engagement with Traditional Owners—yet this might be read as the new normal of doing business in extractive industries rather than meaningful punishments. As with the rare prosecutions that follow police violence, the company's actions hardly constitute justice. Nor do they do anything to undo the underlying structure of resource income dependency for Traditional

Owners, profit maximization by multinational miners or even the specifically problematic Heritage Act, let alone the legal edifice stacked in favor of extractive fossil capitalism. The system endures, the sacred sites remain intensely, profoundly absent. After a brief hiatus, more continue to be blasted with shocking regularity. Indeed, the sites had borne witness already, examined for significance within an archaeological framework of knowledge legible to Rio Tinto and to the legal system of Western Australia. Rendered into evidence of enduring presence by scientific dating techniques, the sites were already testifying—material witnesses within an epistemic mode legible and contestable to the state. This material testimony was in turn accompanied by the witnessing of the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura peoples in their years-long engagements about the significance of the sites. But all this witnessing found no purchase within the system until it was too late. The destruction of such sacred sites both enacts and legitimates the settler state, as resource extraction depends upon the continued denial and devastation of Country.

Throughout the first year of the coronavirus pandemic, the destruction of the sites at Juukan Gorge continued to reverberate. BHP paused the planned destruction of forty sites, but decided after a review of its permissions to permanently halt the destruction of just ten. Reports of Rio Tinto's negligence continued to mount. The Parliamentary Inquiry held sessions, took submissions, and eventually traveled to meet with PKKP Traditional Owners. In its final report released in October 2021, the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia delivered a scathing indictment of the legal architectures that facilitated the destruction at Juukan Gorge and many other places across the nation. It called for significant change, ranging from the codesign with First Nations of new national heritage legislation to addressing inequities in the negotiating positions of Traditional Owners with mining corporations and government. With its passionate evocation of First Nations culture—along with harsh words for Rio Tinto and the Western Australian government and heritage laws—the report made for startling reading: a rare recognition of the brutal violence of resource extraction and the facilitating legal regime of property rights and heritage laws that makes ecological trauma the normal condition in settler Australia.

Whether meaningful change will take place is difficult to say. By their own admission, members of the committee were deeply affected by their time on Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura Country and by their experiences with Elders and other community members. The social media presence of the inquiry itself was a background hum, occasionally punctuating the surface but never sparking back to the intensity of its first days, even when the

final inquiry report was released to a brief flurry of media attention. For the peoples of the Pilbara, the wound remains achingly painful. Radical absence is often like this: it bursts and fades for many, remains intense for some. It is tempting to conclude that radical absence can be the necessary precondition for political accountability, but the nonhuman witnessing at work here was more complex than mere digital disappearance. Witnessing at Juukan Gorge occurred through geological vitality, a vitality that was itself all too absent from the digital mediation of the destruction. Witnessing absence at Juukan Gorge—and in the past, present, and future of the deliberate destruction of First Nations heritage—means attending not only to the radical force of the lost sacred sites but also to the presence of an entrenched interconnection of more-than-human institutions and infrastructures of law, capital, and settler-colonial control.

WITNESSING ABSENCE

"All attachments are optimistic," writes Berlant, and radical absence is itself a form of attachment, for all the grief and death to which it attends: a witnessing relation with what has disappeared, an attachment to what is no longer present that enables positive change.[59] A witnessing of absence in the absence of witnesses: such an attachment can be animated by traumatic affect yet still spark a reparative movement—even if small, tentative, and threatened by the very affectivity of the disappearances from which it might emerge.[60] While far from a panacea and by no means a politics in itself, nonhuman witnessing nevertheless widens the aperture from the human subject to assemblages of human and nonhuman entities. Witnessing radical absence is only possible due to the sheer materialities of networked infrastructures, the algorithms and network protocols that enable the flow of machinic affect. Witnessing radical absence means attending to those infrastructures, and to the ecologies they disrupt, the wars they enliven, the extractive industries they streamline. Witnessing absence in this way makes possible a different kind of response to systemic oppression than the voice of the testifying subject, or even the assembled evidentiary force of Schuppli's material witnesses. Witnessing absence asks that we hold onto the possibility of witnessing in nonnormative ways, working outside the frame of courts and public contestation. If we accept Berlant's proposition that all attachments contain some element of optimism, then an intensive attachment to absence might well contain within it new forms and dynamics of relation that contain new

possibilities for becoming otherwise, for turning radical absence into reparative care.

At the heart of what distinguishes radical absence from other structures of relation to the affective present is its disjunctive mode of attachment. This disjuncture does not negate others or community, or not necessarily so. By calling disappearance into relation, radical absence affords the space for disjunction to produce change, to enact something new. For violent mediation to shift toward repair. "Without disjunction there would be no cut, no cleaving, no inflection, no minor gesture," writes Manning.[61] Without such cuts, the field of experience remains static. What Manning points to here is "the gestural force that opens experience to its potential variation," such that "its rhythms are not controlled by a preexisting structure, but open to flux."[62] Attending with an altered angle of approach to the wider field of fear within which execution videos circulate, or to the faith that we place in technology to protect our human fragility, or to the collectivity of loss enacted in digital memorials, or to the laws of the settler state, might be small acts but they are not insignificant. However minor, these gestures contribute to composing something else from what is going on around us. "Affect matters in a world that is always promising and threatening to amount to something," writes Kathleen Stewart. "Fractally complex, there is no telling what will come of it or where it will take persons attuned."[63] Traumatic affects that coalesce within encounters with radical absence can be an opening onto the reparative, but not because they afford the opportunity for treatment in any clinical sense. Arising from the digital, they bring to visceral life how mediation entangles experiences in unpredictable ways that vary in intensity and form as they flow and ebb in time.

Across these and other radical absences, such shifts might be small, even tentative, but it is the minor gestures of the everyday that constitute the first glimmerings of a political otherwise. It is a politics without the requirement for institutional engagement or party affiliation, for spatial or temporal contiguity. Rather, it is a politics that finds in radical absence a means to move beyond atomization and isolation, yet not insist on proximity as the foundation for collective feeling and action. Radical absence need not engender a collapse into a traumatic void, some ruptured space of digital loss. Rather, witnessing radical absence in all its more-than-human complexity might give the slow work of reparation and care an urgency they can otherwise lack. It might alter the trajectory with which one approaches the public feelings that circulate online and off. It might make corporeally real the imbrication of digital media and mediations into evermore crevices of human life and death.

Small movements, but not trivial ones. Finding in the potential for hurt, for negative inflection, for encounter with traumatic affect, that reside in such encounters with the violent mediations of digital disappearance some small space for renewed life. Working through the entrapments, dispossessions, and disempowerments of algorithmic enclosure requires grappling with the macroscale of digital capitalism, data colonialism, and platform politics, but that struggle can begin with a witnessing relation. Nonhuman witnessing tugs the human into altered relations with the infrastructural milieus that make up the material and affective present. Witnessing radical absence pulls to prominence continuums of experience: from presence to loss, life to death, and hope to fear—however faint and fleeting they might be. How, then, might the politics of nonhuman witnessing be theorized? It is that question to which the coda of this book is addressed.