

# Field Notes

## Staying after Class

Memory and Materiality beyond Heaven's Gate

Report on the New Religious Movements Group  
Methods Meeting, 21 November 2014

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**ABSTRACT:** In March 1997, Marshall Herff Applewhite (Do) and thirty-eight of his students made headlines when they exited their human bodies in a home in Rancho Santa Fe in San Diego County, California. While the class (as they called their group) is gone, the legacy of Heaven's Gate remains on the Heaven's Gate website preserved by Mark and Sarah King. These two former members shared their experiences in the class at the New Religious Movements Group Methods Meeting on 21 November 2014 in San Diego at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting. Their presentation and participation in a question-and-answer session provided insight into the complex, ambiguous legacy of Heaven's Gate: a group that strove for existence beyond the materiality of human bodies now survives on Earth in material form, disseminated by human persons dedicated to preserving the teachings of Do, and his mentor Ti (Bonnie Lu Nettles) in a dynamic, ephemeral space—the internet.

**KEYWORDS:** Heaven's Gate, Marshall Herff Applewhite, Bonnie Lu Nettles, Mark and Sarah King

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**B**onnie Lu Nettles (1927–1985) and Marshall Herff Applewhite (1931–1997) were known by many names throughout their lives: Bo and Peep, Ti and Do, the UFO Two. Their class of students had many names as well, but the world remembers them as Heaven’s Gate.

The teachings of Nettles and Applewhite blended Christian and New Age theologies with science fiction, an interest in UFOs, and conspiracy theories.<sup>1</sup> Their students practiced asceticism, celibacy, and communalism. By 1996 they believed that imminently the Earth would be recycled, purified, and renewed.<sup>2</sup> In order to ascend to The Evolutionary Level Above Human (TELAH), thirty-nine members of Heaven’s Gate left their human bodies behind.<sup>3</sup> Before doing so, they recorded exit videos explaining that they must leave and why they wanted to go.<sup>4</sup> On 22–23 March 1997, in conjunction with the closest approach of the Hale-Bopp comet to Earth, the class members graduated, ritually ending their lives in a rented multimillion dollar home in Rancho Santa Fe, California.<sup>5</sup>

Their identical black pants and shirts, their “Heaven’s Gate Away Team” patches, their black Nike sneakers with white swooshes, and purple shrouds left a mark on America’s religious imaginary, reflected in a number of pop culture parodies.<sup>6</sup> While the class is gone, the legacy of Heaven’s Gate remains, preserved by Mark and Sarah King on HeavensGate.com nearly two decades later.<sup>7</sup> The memory of Heaven’s Gate materializes in what the class left behind—instructions and 3.5-inch floppy disks sent via Federal Express to the Kings shortly before the exit, the Heaven’s Gate website containing the group’s anthology and videotaped messages, which are also sold through the website. This group, whose members strove to escape their human materiality, rely on the survival of the Kings’ human bodies to preserve their lessons on Earth. These lessons are a necessarily static archive preserved through an infinitely dynamic space: the internet.

## REMEMBERING THE CLASS

The Kings shared their experiences as former members of the class in the Methods Meeting of the New Religious Movements Group at the American Academy of Religion’s 2014 national meeting in San Diego. Benjamin E. Zeller of Lake Forest College presided over the panel; George D. Chryssides of the University of Birmingham, and Robert William Balch of the University of Montana contributed scholarly reflections.

Zeller opened the session by providing context: Sarah and Mark King joined the class in September 1975, after a public meeting in Waldport, Oregon, which drew national attention to the group because of the number of people who abandoned their jobs and families to follow The Two. The Kings studied with other class members until September 1987, after

which they kept in close contact with the group. They served as a clearinghouse, distributing information and media that the class wanted disseminated publicly. In March 1997, the class made their exit, and the Kings received the collection of 3.5-inch diskettes containing the final information members wanted to preserve on the Heaven's Gate website. Sarah and Mark continue to maintain the website and respond to all email inquiries according to procedures left for them by the group.

Balch explained that he had been studying Heaven's Gate in 1975, during the group's infancy, and remained with the group for six or seven weeks, traveling with new recruits to various campsites. After leaving the movement, he began interviewing ex-members, following nationwide news coverage about people who had "seemingly disappear[ed]" returning to their families. The group dropped out of media focus by mid-1976. Balch pursued ex-member interviews from 1976 until 1983 when all of his connections went cold. With the exception of brief contact with nine proselytizing members in 1994, Balch's research did not concentrate on the group until after the exit in 1997. He used his sabbatical year in 1997-98 to interview ex-members, parents, and other relatives of members, and is still working on this project. Balch's original interest in the group was to learn why people joined, why they committed their lives to the movement, and why they left. Presently he is especially interested in the evolution of the group's belief system and social structure, and the role the leaders played in creating them. Balch explained, "as one of my ex-member informants said, if you really want to understand Heaven's Gate, you need to get inside the heads of Ti and Do, the founders."

Chryssides described his experiences teaching a module on "so-called suicide cults," which began with his telling students that he is the messiah and had a mass suicide planned for the following day at noon. When he asked students to join him, no one volunteered. Chryssides said he was unsurprised by this; any "normal" person would refuse this request. "So what is it that enables a group to make the transition from being perfectly normal people, which I've every reason to believe the Heaven's Gate group were, to get to the situation where everyone commits mass suicide?" The Heaven's Gate case, unlike Jonestown in 1978 and arguably the Solar Temple in 1994, was undoubtedly suicide, Chryssides said, suggesting that the field of suicidology might help scholars better understand the class members' exit. Because mass suicides happen so rarely, existent data is insufficient to generalize about their causes. He proposed that research on suicide pacts might shed some light on motives, dismissing the presence or absence of a charismatic leader as a factor since charisma is negotiated between the leader(s) and the group. Chryssides noted that members of new religious movements who engage in collective suicide might experience genuine difficulties with disengagement, unable to imagine life outside the group. He further observed that mass suicide groups tend to be isolated, which he argued

was true of Heaven's Gate as a closed community in a remote location with minimal contact with the outside world. He posited that someone who ends their own life must be convinced that suicide is better, and wondered whether Do engaged in rational persuasion. Chrissydes concluded that if a person believed in an Evolutionary Level Above Human, and that death were required to reach it, then "death would be a logical, desirable activity . . . quite sensible; it was the rational choice given what [the class] believed."

Zeller first encountered Do through Usenet posts in the mid-1990s, in newsgroups (like those on Star Trek) to which Do contributed. When Zeller learned about the exit of the class in March 1997 he was struck by the media's "immediate attempt to dismiss these people as either idiots or insane or in some way un-human," because Heaven's Gate members "were part of a very long trajectory, thousands of years long, of looking for salvation, on and off the planet." The most common mainstream response to the Heaven's Gate exit was dismissal; he noted that Ted Turner responded to the group suicide by saying it was a "good way to get rid of a few nuts."<sup>8</sup> Zeller argued that scholars should approach the exit and the group as worth of study. His goal in his book, *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion* (2014), is "to take seriously why forty or so seemingly intelligent, rational, everyday people would make what certainly seemed to me to be a rational choice from their perspective to leave this planet." He explained that the process of writing his book was slow, because he wanted to get both the story and his explanation of the events right. Zeller expressed his gratitude to the Kings, noting that it was their idea to meet with scholars and researchers at the American Academy of Religion meeting in San Diego.

Sarah King began by explaining why members called their group "the class."

It is really the most appropriate word for the group as—just like anybody would go to a class to learn French, or to learn another language, or to learn about another culture, and as you're learning that, you do the requirements, you do the homework, you do the studies of the class, and no one considers . . . that you are forsaking anything for your desire to learn something new. The class was the perfect name for that.

Mark agreed with Balch that understanding the minds of Ti and Do was a worthy goal, laughingly telling Balch, "You would probably be the greatest person on the planet right now . . . that would be the highest goal that anybody could achieve, from my perspective." Mark corrected Chrissydes' use of the term "suicide," explaining:

Even though the terminology of suicide was used for how they ended the life of their body, suicide was really just the exit from this level after most of them had accomplished over twenty years of studying how to attain

a higher level. So in their mind, the shedding of the human body was really not suicide, but it was a . . . step to the Next Level.

Mark confirmed that he and Sarah were in the class for twelve years. He insisted that while they were active members, there was never any discussion of exiting in the way the class eventually did. He was not present for those discussions, but discredited the idea that Do had been a charismatic leader who convinced his followers to end their lives.

Sarah also corrected Chryssides; Heaven's Gate was not really a closed community, as half of the members had regular jobs. They were isolated only for the final year in Rancho Santa Fe; members had lived in many different communities over the years. Many worked at creating websites or did graphic design; most had consistent contact with people outside the group. Sarah herself worked a 40-hour-a-week job during her twelve years with Heaven's Gate. The internet also facilitated a great deal of contact with non-members, she said, though some members chose not to stay in touch with their families. People were free to leave and return to the group at will. She explained:

This was a belief system that was really not based on fear, or . . . a recruitment process. It was more that the members of the class, and Ti and Do, wanted to get the information that they had out to people, and if anybody chose within their own self that the information spoke to them . . . they might see about taking the class. But Ti and Do didn't necessarily always offer the class to everyone who was interested in it.

Mark likewise insisted that the class was "a very open thing," and that Ti and Do turned away a number of people they felt were not ready to receive the information. Sarah clarified, "If you didn't have the prerequisites to take the class that they were going to be offering, then you wouldn't be able to function in the class." Both Mark and Sarah expressed their eagerness to correct media misrepresentations of the group and its leaders.

The Kings do not recruit new members, because there is presently no class to join. Mark stressed, "The group left in '97." They have been maintaining the Heaven's Gate website since the exit of the class members, and respond to between ten and twelve emails a day. Though some of the inquiries are from trolls—"There are a lot of trolls out there," Mark observed<sup>9</sup>—many emails profess a genuine interest in the group's teachings. He is very upfront, he said, telling inquirers that "there's nothing for this generation. There's nothing, probably, for centuries."

The Kings note that all the information left by the class will eventually be available to everyone. Indeed, most of the information transmitted by Ti and Do is already available through the website maintained by the Kings. They indicated that the remaining audiotapes will be released once privacy concerns relating to living ex-members are no longer an

issue. In the meantime, they have communicated with many people considering suicide, according to Mark, telling them “not to fall into the trap of thinking that suicide is going to bring them into heaven, hell, or the Next Level, because it won’t. It’ll just bring them back into reincarnation; they’ll just drop back into another human body; and they’ll start another life and repeat the same lesson steps again, and hopefully they’ll be able to pass the next time.” Mark expressed the hope that the website has helped, and will continue to help, many people.

In response to an audience member’s question, Mark confirmed that Heaven’s Gate, as the passage to The Evolutionary Level Above Human, is currently closed and that the Kings do not know when it will open again. “Next Level time is not like our time,” he explained. “The time that is set up in the human kingdom is not like the time in outer space; they just don’t match.” Next Level individuals care for this planet but do not interfere and are fully aware of events happening on Earth. “They have the Prime Directive,” Mark laughed.<sup>10</sup> These caretakers will eventually return, he insisted, as they have before. Sarah noted that those interested in the teachings have access to all publicly available class materials on the website, since the Kings have only altered the site to add videotaped exit statements they received after the exit. The website’s information “could always open new doors to study,” Sarah opined.

Another audience member observed that the Kings still seemed dedicated to the teachings, which the Kings confirmed. Why, then, had they chosen to leave the group? Mark explained, “You strive to be a better individual. You fall short of that. You keep moving forward as much as you can and you fall short. At a certain point in time, you find that maybe you are simply not keeping up with the class.” He decided to withdraw from the class, knowing that other members had left the group and returned. Sarah left with him, and together they decided not to return to the class. They stayed in touch with the group, moving forward with them, Mark maintained, but did not rejoin. Sarah noted that they were invited to come back, but did not know what the exit plans were.

Heaven’s Gate members had been discussing exit options since late 1994 and early 1995; some students left at this point. Sarah stated that the Kings are often asked whether they would have been able to exit with the rest of the group. She explained, “Obviously, since we didn’t complete the class . . . we weren’t ready for, you know, the graduation.” She continued that the Kings understood what the class went through, and that members had progressed beyond the Kings’ level.

I don’t want this to sound . . . crazy or anything like that, but you could tell when you were with them that . . . their vibrations were on a much higher level than we had achieved when we left them, so they . . . had grown further than . . . we had, so I don’t know that we would have been able to do that. Obviously we didn’t.

Mark said that leaving the class had obviously been an extremely difficult decision for them.

Sarah recounted what it was like to receive all the materials from the class in the mail after the exit. “I think my whole body went into shock,” she said. She and Mark had loved the class members. “Mark and I both still have, I guess, the humanness level of attachment to them [so] that [it is] almost like losing a whole segment of your whole entire family.” Sarah described the Kings’ response to the exit, particularly to watching the exit videos, as being “a very human response.” She explained, “We understood the joy that they were expressing, but for us it was still—we had a very, like, shocked response to their exit.”

Another audience member asked “to what extent personal agency [had been] articulated through use of new technologies.” Mark explained that the group embraced new technologies, and that if they were still on this (earthly) level, they would be fully integrated with social media. Sarah disagreed, noting that class members were often concerned with privacy. Access to technology was not censored, however, to the best of Sarah’s knowledge. Mark clarified that censorship would not have been necessary. “To do something separate from the group would be deceitful to themselves, deceitful to us,” so while members would use individual email accounts, they would conduct their online relationships “within the confines of what would be respectful and acceptable to the group.”

Group cohesion was extremely important to the class, Sarah insisted. If a student was interested in a certain topic, they would discuss with the group whether the class should explore that topic on the internet. Mark explained that procedures were deeply important to members. “There was a mindset within the group to do everything in accordance with procedures. We’ll be direct about that.” Mark stated, “The procedures were determined by Ti and Do, and the collective understanding in the group.” All members discussed any action or decision with Ti and Do, and then with the rest of the class.

Mark identified Ti and Do, and the class members broadly, as the source of the Kings’ ongoing procedures. There is no communication between levels of existence or consciousness, so Mark and Sarah rely on the information they were left by the class. Sarah noted that the Kings do not follow all the procedures they learned, as some were “certain lesson steps for a certain time period” and no longer apply.

Mark compared class procedures to surgical procedures; they are “specific, detailed, and you want to get it accurate, because someone’s life can be on the line.” Class members used mundane experiences as tools to teach precision. They would approach something as commonplace as making breakfast “like a lab experiment, an assignment.” Heaven’s Gate vernacular reflected this approach.

Everything we did in the class we took as like lab experiments. We even called the kitchen . . . the nutri-lab, like nutritional lab, and making experiments that would be healthier for the human body. . . . The laundry room was called the fiber-lab. So everything was done in a way with precision . . . using the mundane experiences of life as a training ground for when you get to the Next Level. . . . Everything was done with the precision that you might have to have in the Next Level.

Sarah confirmed that this level of intentionality was intended “not to be brainwashed into someone else’s thinking, but so that you would be in control of your entire thinking . . . so you would be able to do it at your highest level possible.” At its root, Mark explained, this level of intention allowed members to control the “wild stallion” that is the human brain—to control the flesh and brain through what they call the mind. Mark said, “Some people call it spirit, life-force . . . the mind is separate from the thought patterns of the brain.”

Ti and Do taught the Kings to “tame [the] brain,” to overcome past experiences and historical genetic patterns. “Once you even acknowledge that you have a mind inside you, that is stronger and more powerful than anything the vehicle, the habits of the vehicle,<sup>11</sup> can control . . . that is a very powerful tool to have,” Sarah insisted, “knowing you can be the one in control of your own destiny, your own body, of the body’s choices.” Mark explained that the extent of this control is why he maintains that the Heaven’s Gate’s belief system is as credible as any religion or belief system, “because it works.”

The class maintained a celibate lifestyle, striving for an embodied Next Level existence without gender. The Kings explained that control of the flesh and its desires was a key component of life in the class. They mentioned that ten male members underwent voluntary surgical castration in order to curb sexual desires. Mark noted that Do was uncomfortable with this solution, preferring to emphasize mental discipline. Male members petitioned Do over a period of years to allow orchiectomies. As Mark explained, “In controlling the wild horse that is your flesh and blood, the brain . . . many individuals have discipline to handle it, to control it, to keep it in check. Some individuals had trouble with it, and their desire to discipline it was so strong that they did think that the controlling, of chemically doing something like that, would make a difference.” To this end, one member underwent castration in 1992; nine more—including Do himself—followed suit in 1996.

Mark and Sarah also described how they initially came to join the group as a result of the public meeting in Waldport, Oregon. They saw a poster with a UFO, which Sarah suspects was designed to draw an audience that was not specifically religious. Class members did not usually consider themselves religious, but were interested in “what’s beyond, or where we came from,” Sarah said.

The Kings continue to make information from the class available on the website, and have not altered it. “Personally, we feel that they were so superior in being able to present something and that they were very careful in what they presented, that we wouldn’t think that we would be able to do anything better than what they do,” Sarah insisted.

Mark confirmed that because they believe in reincarnation, they will continue to make the information available to future generations. People interested in the information will be drawn to it again in a future lifetime when another Older Member returns to this level. If someone had not previously encountered these teachings, Sarah said, that person would likely not be in the future class or leave with the Older Member. “Most of us who were in the class had pretty clear feelings that we had been exposed . . . to the information before. . . . I mean, it was like the minute you heard the information . . . you said, oh my gosh, this is what speaks to me. This is what I know to be true. And where do I know that from?” Both Mark and Sarah emphasized that the information, not the vehicles of Ti and Do, was the central component of Heaven’s Gate.

Mark further insisted that from the beginning, the public had focused too much on Do. Sarah agreed: “It wasn’t the vehicles of Ti or Do, it was the information that they brought. It wouldn’t have mattered if they were charismatic or non-charismatic . . . it was the information that they brought.” Mark also emphasized that Ti “ran the show,” and Do deferred to her judgment.<sup>12</sup> Sarah noted that Do constantly checked with Ti to ensure that his behavior and his teachings “would be pleasing to her; that’s all he would care about, was that he would be growing or doing things that were right . . . to his Older Member.” Sarah also observed, “It was on purpose that [Do’s] Older Member came in the vehicle of a female, to break down some barriers.”

Ultimately, Ti and Do both credited the Next Level for any information they transmitted. While their vehicles were considered unimportant, Sarah maintained, “It would be hard for me to imagine someone being in the presence of Ti and not really realizing that you are in the presence of someone, some being, greater than anything you have ever experienced before. . . . She was absolutely the most beautiful, loving being that you could ever be in the presence of.” Mark agreed, emphasizing that Ti and Do were not harsh or hard leaders. “If you want to know what’s inside Ti and Do’s mind?” Mark asked, and then answered, “Great compassion. Compassion that flows like a river.”<sup>13</sup>

The Kings said a number of interests drew members to the group. Some were “UFO-driven,” some were interested in reincarnation, some were drawn to the scriptural elements, but “over time, those paths all merged.” Sarah recounted her Jewish upbringing on Long Island, her first encounters with the New Testament, and her readings about Paramahansa Yogananda<sup>14</sup> and other religions. Mark was raised Catholic but found Roman Catholicism “wasn’t answering [his] questions.” Like Sarah, he

also studied Indian-influenced religious teachings, but was never interested in the paranormal or extraterrestrial elements of Heaven's Gate theology. Sarah reiterated that class members came from many social locations, but most were not "overly religious."

When asked again about the exit, Mark explained that the class members discussed leaving their earthly vehicles in two possible ways while the Kings were with the group: either by violence at the hands of "outside forces," or leaving "physically . . . in a spacecraft." Mark said that they assumed they would leave by spacecraft in 1975 or 1976. As for the exit in 1997, he said, "To us, this wasn't a human suicide. To humans it was a human suicide. *Semantics*. We're just talking semantics here. This is the way we feel. This was a deliberately chosen demonstration to the world. They knew that we wouldn't be here talking about the subject tonight if that hadn't occurred. Period."

According to Mark, Do had determined there would not be an assault against the class by law enforcement agents as there had been against the Branch Davidian community outside Waco, Texas, and was increasingly aware of being responsible for forty people who were "showing signs of vehicular breakdown." Do's own health did not influence the decision to exit, Mark insisted. The students were aging, and they wanted to leave on their own terms. The students requested their exit with Do over a period of years, Mark insisted. Class members made a logical decision to leave their aging bodies, and to draw attention to Ti and Do's teachings in a very public way. "They knew it was an active demonstration that would bring attention to their information," Mark said. "And they were right. They were shockingly right. It worked." An audience member asked the Kings how they knew that the students had asked Do for a group exit; Mark stated that the class audiotapes they received contained evidence to this effect. This material has not yet been made available on the website.

Though the Hale-Bopp comet influenced the group's decision about the timing of the exit, Mark maintained that the Next Level does not base itself on the movement of comets and celestial bodies; it is not "comet-driven." Easter, spring, and the comet all influenced the timing, but Sarah insisted that ultimately the exit was the "culmination of over twenty years of growing in a certain direction." There had been other comets, other circumstances, over the past two decades. Mark also dismissed media reports that the group thought there was a spacecraft following the comet: "They had dismissed that; that was all just trash."

Mark likewise dismissed the idea that Do was in any way mentally or physically compromised when he first met Ti. Sarah explained that when they met,

Ti and Do were both really awakening to what their mission was. . . . This wasn't something they had expected to do in their life, to awaken to

a belief system or anything like that. And as the pieces started coming together . . . when they met, they had a recognition of each other even though they didn't know each other before. They were awakening to what they would be doing. It was all new to them.

Ti and Do underwent drastic changes after meeting one another, but Sarah said they explained this was an awakening to their purpose and a "positive recognition" of contact in previous lives.

This "positive recognition" is an experience of having encountered Heaven's Gate teachings in past lives. When a person encounters information about the Next Level and responds to it positively, they are "tagged" by The Evolutionary Level Above Human to encounter the teachings again. In this way, people will be prepared to receive the information in future lives, when an Older Member returns and Heaven's Gate has reopened. Sarah and Mark both emphasized that people must freely choose to learn, that Ti and Do's teachings cannot be forced on anyone. Even if the Earth is "spaded over," destroyed and recycled, as Do warned it would be, Mark believes that individuals "will be replanted into new bodies, new civilizations, new movement forward," and that such a cataclysm will present new opportunities to learn.<sup>15</sup>

An audience member asked about the binder and the Federal Express box placed on the table in front of them. Mark explained that this was a catalog of the documents they had received from the class. The couple received a number of Federal Express boxes full of materials and instructions about how to handle the group's affairs after the exit. Sarah noted that many people had challenged the Kings' right to disseminate the teachings and to handle the exited class members' affairs; the binder contained instructions on how to respond to emails, to collect members' cars and trucks, to access their post office box, to process their Internal Revenue Service refund checks, and to care for the audiotapes. The Kings also hold power of attorney for all group members, given in the event that a member's attempt to exit was unsuccessful and their body was still alive. San Diego County officials seized the group's assets after the exit; the Kings sued successfully for the intellectual property of the group. They also reached out to class members' relatives, and began their decades-long curation of Heaven's Gate's online legacy.

Mark and Sarah confirmed that they had no knowledge of the exit before it happened. Sarah said she believes this was for the Kings' protection, so that they would not be held legally liable for not having alerted authorities about the group's plan. They spoke to class members on the Friday before their deaths. When Sarah asked them if there was anything the Kings could do for the class, she was told, "You'll be doing it," as she laughingly recalled.

When asked about major misconceptions about Heaven's Gate, Mark mentioned that accounts often overlook Ti and Do's sense of humor. The "Heaven's Gate Away Team" patches on their black shirts were "to

lighten up” the solemn occasion, as were their Nike sneakers (Nike has the slogan, “Just Do It”). The \$5.75 in their pockets was not, Mark insisted, an “interplanetary toll,” but a reference to the group’s collective history. Sarah agreed. “They knew we’d be the only ones who got a chuckle out of that.” Mark explained that in the group’s early days, the class lived in a number of states that had vagrancy laws allowing law enforcement officers to arrest individuals for having no money in their pockets. To avoid arrest, members leaving the craft (the group’s rented home) would take their car keys, their identification, five dollars to prove solvency, and three quarters to call home. “Because remember, in 1997, they had [pay]phones!” Mark laughed. “Their humor was beautiful. It was infectious,” he continued. “But it was hard for someone from the outside to see or understand it.”

Mark also showed the audience a sample of the fabric the group used to make their purple shrouds. This was not, Mark insisted, a point of humor. The shroud was a solemn symbol of the commitment of the class members. “The individual had just willingly, voluntarily given their life, to take their vehicle’s life, to actually leave the planet. This was placed over their heads, this material right here,” he explained. They dressed in similar outfits for their exit. “That uniformity,” he explained, “was to show solidarity, to show the unique sameness . . . the unique similarity of all the members of the group.” The class handled their exit meticulously, forwarding members’ identification cards, Social Security numbers, passports, and drivers’ licenses to the Kings to help identify their bodies.

The Kings ended the session by discussing Ti’s death and the role of former class member Rio DiAngelo (Richard Ford). Ti’s cancer diagnosis in 1983 led her to encourage the group to explore a diet-centered health regimen, including juicing, macrobiotics, and fruitarianism, trying to find the healthiest way to sustain the body. Despite their efforts, Ti succumbed to liver cancer in June 1985. Mark suggested that Ti “pushed very hard, and . . . my own feeling is that she basically burned her body out, just drove it as fast and as hard as she could.” Rio DiAngelo is an ex-member who had left the group a few weeks before the exit. After receiving notification of the exit in a Federal Express package, DiAngelo went to the Rancho Santa Fe house and found the class members’ bodies. He acted as the media spokesperson after the news broke.<sup>16</sup> According to the Kings, he is still trying to get his script about the group’s teachings made into a movie.<sup>17</sup> The Kings closed by expressing their hope that they had cleared up some misconceptions about the class to which they have dedicated their lives.

## CONCLUSION

This session of the New Religious Movements Group Methods Meeting at the 1994 American Academy of Religion annual meeting

in San Diego, and the Kings' contributions in particular, highlight the ambiguous relationship of Heaven's Gate's memory to its own materiality. Mark and Sarah King preserve the floppy disks, videotapes, audiotapes, and personal identification documents that class members left behind after exiting their human vehicles. Moreover, the Kings themselves materialize the memory of the class, transmitting the information disseminated by Ti and Do for future generations. This information—the lasting legacy of Heaven's Gate—is a necessarily static archive that paradoxically is transmitted through the kinetic and ephemeral space of the internet, but is ultimately reliant on material remnants of the class—the 3.5-inch floppy diskettes and videotapes that arrived on the Kings' doorstep on 26 March 1997.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Zeller, *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Do, "Planet About to Be Recycled—Your Only Chance to Survive—Leave with Us," 5 October 1996, Heaven's Gate, <http://www.heavensgate.com/misc/vt100596.htm>, accessed 30 January 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Zeller, *Heaven's Gate*, 1; and Do, "Planet About to Be Recycled."

<sup>4</sup> Glnody, "Earth Exit Statement," 19 March 1997, Heaven's Gate, <http://www.heavensgate.com/misc/exitgln.htm>, accessed 30 January 2017; see also "Earth Exit Statements by Students," Heaven's Gate, <http://www.heavensgate.com/misc/exit.htm>, accessed 30 January 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Zeller, *Heaven's Gate*, 2, 178.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *The Simpsons'* "The Joy of Sect" (1998); *Family Guy's* "Chitty Chitty Death Bang" (1999); *South Park's* "Two Guys Naked in a Hot Tub" (1999); and *Key and Peele's* UFO skit in "East/West Bowl 2" (2013).

<sup>7</sup> The group's continuing web presence gained national attention in September 2014, when a Gizmodo article about the site trended online. See Ashley Feinberg, "The Online Legacy of a Suicide Cult and the Webmasters Who Stayed Behind," 17 September 2014, Gizmodo, <http://gizmodo.com/the-online-legacy-of-a-suicide-cult-and-the-webmasters-1617403237>, accessed 30 January 2017.

<sup>8</sup> "Ted Turner Says Cult Mass Suicide Eliminated 'Nuts,'" Associated Press, 30 March 1997.

<sup>9</sup> In internet parlance, a troll is a deliberately provocative user seeking to elicit an emotional response from an interlocutor.

<sup>10</sup> Used in four of the five Star Trek-based series, the Prime Directive prohibits Star Fleet members from making contact with previously undiscovered races until said races have reached a specific level of technological advancement. Janet D. Stemwedel, "The Philosophy of Star Trek: Is the Prime Directive Ethical?" *Forbes*, 20 August 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/janetstemwedel/2015/08/20/>

the-philosophy-of-star-trek-is-the-prime-directive-ethical/#8febd73642bd, accessed 30 January 2017.

<sup>11</sup> “Vehicle,” in Heaven’s Gate parlance, refers to the human body. See Zeller, *Heaven’s Gate*, 118.

<sup>12</sup> For members of the class, Do was the return of Jesus Christ, and Ti was his Father/Older Member. See Hugh B. Urban, “The Devil at Heaven’s Gate: Rethinking the Study of Religion in the Age of Cyber-Space,” *Nova Religio* 3, no. 2 (April 2000): 284; and Zeller, *Heaven’s Gate*, 96–97, 123–24.

<sup>13</sup> Possibly an allusion to Isaiah 66:12, which most translations render as referring to “peace flow[ing] like a river.”

<sup>14</sup> Paramahansa Yogananda’s Self-Realization Fellowship was among the Indian-influenced new religious movements from which Heaven’s Gate drew membership in the 1970s. See Zeller, *Heaven’s Gate*, 130; as well as Paramhansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> See Do, “Planet about to Be Recycled.”

<sup>16</sup> Rio DiAngelo, “Rio’s Statement,” *LA Weekly*, 21 March 1997, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/rios-statement-2147949>, accessed 30 January 2017.

<sup>17</sup> In his autobiography of living with the group, DiAngelo describes co-authoring a film script with Ollody about Next Level wisdom and the students’ practices while he was a member of the class known as Neody. Rio DiAngelo, *Beyond Human Mind: The Soul Evolution of Heaven’s Gate* (Beverly Hills, CA: Rio DiAngelo, 2007), 58–59, 83, 102.