Chapter 15

Last Rites: Mourning Identities (?)

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'Because of her we could grieve and then go on ... She kept Jack's memory alive.'¹ So eulogized by Senator Edward Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis was buried alongside her first husband, President John F. Kennedy, in Arlington National Cemetery, itself a monument, now re-defined and marked by another monument – the memorializing body of Jackie Kennedy. Though she had constantly re-negotiated her own identity following her husband's death, Jackie remained the widow of Jack. As the horrific events of 22 November 1963 played out, Jackie instantaneously assumed an even larger role – she became a replacement Jack;² but that designation, not just a consequence but also a national and cultural demand, and the realization of what had set this character transformation into motion, only materialized with the media's glimpse of her blood-stained body, simultaneously marked and marking (Fig. 15.1). In an often-cited photograph of JFK's casket being loaded into the back of a military hearse, Jackie reaches for the door, no longer pretty-as-a-picture in pale pink but now *the* picture, her legs smeared with blood, her suit stained red. Perhaps more unseemly (and rarely seen), the same photograph was deliberately re-touched by the *Boston Herald American* to show a cleaned-up Jackie, her legs white-washed, her suit inexplicably immaculate (Fig. 15.2). With this alteration to the (photographic) shot heard 'round the world,' the body politic took on a whole new meaning, and Jackie, a whole new identity.

How and why do women's bodies become monumentalized, and how do such memorial sites shape national and cultural identities? According to Pierre Nora, in his provocative essay, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,' 'the

¹ *The New York Times*, 24 May 1994, A16.

² On the iconicity of Jackie Kennedy, Wayne Koestenbaum, *Jackie Under My Skin: Interpreting an Icon* (New York: Plume, 1996), 271, offers the following meditation: 'One of Jackie's original and primary functions was as national (or international) fetish: because JFK was killed, a populace needed Jackie to stand in for his absence ... to look at pretty Jackie was, indirectly, to look at murdered Jack, or to feel, in one's heart, a sensation that a replacement was occurring: Jackie was standing in for Jack, Jackie's silence was standing in for the muteness of Jack's corpse.'

most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de mémoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting ... *lieux de mémoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.³ Indeed, the manipulation and multiplicity of Jackie, as a site of memory, whose primary role, according to her brother-in-law, was to keep 'Jack's memory alive,' was not limited just to print and photojournalism. Andy Warhol silk-screened Jackie's visage, alternately appeasing and anguished, in *16 Jackies* (Fig. 15.3), a declaration of what she had become: a universal emblem and idol. American culture's commodification of Jackie picked up where Andy Warhol's critical acceptance of her iconicity left off. Thirty years later, a piece of her went on sale, again; at Sotheby's in New York, available to the highest bidder was 'her link with history.'⁴

What, precisely, is that link? How do we situate Jackie within history? Conversely, how has history situated Jackie? More importantly, who are the agents of that history, and what does it mean that it is being written through or upon the memorable bodies of widows? Nora distinguishes between history and memory as follows:

Memory is life ... It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer ... History is perpetually suspicious of memory.⁵

My concluding remarks, indeed a reconstruction, a closer look at the iconicity of widowhood, are also suspicious – not only of memory but also of (art) history. What I see as the precariousness of identity in both the widow's image and, subsequently, our own has gone largely unnoticed, further complicating our relationship to the memories and histories contained and retained within them. What is needed now is a critical re-assessment of the particular, often ambiguous, status of widowhood and the ways in which it has been and continues to be represented and re-presented.

Even beyond the mutations and permutations of Jackie, an installation view of Cindy Sherman's *History Portraits*, as exhibited at Metro Pictures in New York in January 1990 (Fig. 15.4), calls attention to the many facets and fictions inherent in the production, presentation and reception of images, both postmodern and early modern, tying the present discourse back to the subject of this collection. The juxtaposition of what might be *La Vecchia* by Giorgione by Sherman (*Untitled #222*) against the *Portrait of Savonarola* by Fra Bartolomeo by Sherman (*Untitled #219*) establishes a dialogue of sorts, even though each turns and looks

³ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,' *Representations* 26 (1989): 19.

⁴ *The Estate of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis: April 23-26, 1996* (New York: Sotheby's, 1996), 13.

⁵ Nora, 8-9.

away from the ambiguous other. What they do have in common are mourning identities: the former, a reference to the tired, aged woman, whose body, with the sagging of time, stands for death itself; the latter, simultaneously concealed and revealed with black costume, a semblance of the Florentine prior, who, ironically, sanctioned the autonomy and visibility of widowed women. Who is it? Which is it? Represented or re-presented? Redone or undone? To be sure, artifice and slippage permeate these images;⁶ and yet, I would suggest that Sherman's postmodern representations in New York are no different than those of Jackie Kennedy in Washington, D.C., or, as the essays in this collection reveal, of the early modern Umiliana dei Cerchi, Klara Augusta, Caterina Sforza, Marie de Médicis, Maria Theresia, Agnese da Mosto Venier, Margaret of Austria, Bess of Hardwick, Catalina de la Fuente, Maria Salviati or Elizabeth of Austria, in Florence, Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, Paris, Schönbrunn, Venice, Brou, Derbyshire, Toledo, Rome or Vienna. Like Sherman with her precariously attached props, none was a stranger to performance or masquerade; none underestimated her uncanny position 'between memory and history.'

We might here consider the multivalence of the body politic and visual culture, from the tabloid snapshots of the self-conscious, fashion-plate widow, Jackie, to the strategically staged press releases of newly elected widows, such as Congresswoman Mary Bono, to the front page coverage of the 9-11 Widows' and Victims' Families Association, a vocal and powerful presence known simply as 'the widows,' even though its membership includes women who are not widows but choose to be identified as such. In particular, organized by personal and collective trauma, these political bodies necessarily call attention to the sociopolitical photographs and video of Iranian-born artist, Shirin Neshat, whose poignant combinations of text and image unveil a provocative view of Islam and offer up 'a discourse that puts certain myths and realities to the test, claiming that they are far more complex than most of us have imagined.'⁷ *Rebellious Silence* of 1994, from the *Women of Allah* series, sends a critical message (Fig. 15.5): this image, though by its very nature mute, is anything but a titular demonstration. Calligraphically inscribed and clad in the enveloping *chador*, which simultaneously veils and unveils her, and marks and erases her, she stares out defiantly, announcing her critical consciousness by replacing the forefinger of the universal silencing gesture with the phallic barrel of a shotgun. But it is precisely the mutations of this and similar not-so-silent images that are so suggestive of the endless manifestation and manipulation of the body politic.

⁶ See Arthur Danto, 'Past Masters and Post Moderns: Cindy Sherman's *History Portraits*,' in Cindy Sherman, *History Portraits* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 13, who opines: 'Sherman has done something startling and strange, draining the old masters and their subjects at once of a certain power, by showing the artifice, the convention, the transparent fakeness of the worlds they believed were solid and unshakable and real – reducing them to conventions one can slip in and out of without believing them the final truth of being.'

⁷ *Shirin Neshat* (Vienna: Kunsthalle and London: Serpentine Gallery, 2000), 13.

Another image by Neshat, a 1999 video still from *Rapture* (Fig. 15.6), read against the popular advertising campaign for Louis Boston, the New England retailer of fine taste, which dictates, 'in case you hadn't noticed, suits are back' (Fig. 15.7), serves for us as a transition from the fashioning of politics to the politics of fashion. We might reconsider the adage, 'clothes make the man,' and ask, further, what do they make the woman? To be sure, the Taliban-imposed *burkha* marks, in an extreme fashion, a loss of identity, but so, too, can the classic Brooks Brothers suit insofar as this Western symbol of corporate power and prosperity, once believed to be infallible, proved otherwise; with the collapse of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, a neighboring branch of the Brooks Brothers chain was transformed into a temporary morgue, stock-piling in its aisles bodies that only earlier that morning had been dressed for success in the very merchandise that would later serve as body bags (Fig. 15.8).

Returning to the juxtaposition of video and print media, these two well-orchestrated images of scattered bodies in black call to mind Charles Baudelaire, who, in 'The Salon of 1846,' famously opined of the black frock-coat, 'is it not the inevitable uniform of our suffering age, carrying on its very shoulders, black and narrow, the mark of perpetual mourning?'⁸ Could men wear black prematurely to ensure their own remembrance? Were they all already mourning their own inevitable death? How, then, is black, the color of death and of perpetual mourning, further manipulated in men's dress? It has been suggested that black has been adopted by men to represent not what they lack or have lost but what they have; it signifies 'the privileges claimed by grief.'⁹ But can black dress not just as easily be appropriated and manipulated by women? It is precisely this suggested slippage – the ripped seam – that invites us to read fashion as costume.

A few years ago, the British bad-girl fashion magazine, appropriately entitled *Frank*, featured a group of melancholic models, veiled, hooded and draped in black, introduced by the caption, 'Just because he's still breathing doesn't mean you have to dress like he is' (Fig. 15.9).¹⁰ Widowhood meets *haute couture*. Case in point: the Italian fashion design team, Dolce and Gabbana, when not dressing (the secular) Madonna, find their inspiration in 'the Sicilian widow [who] is omnipresent in each and every one of [their] collections' (Fig. 15.10);¹¹ here, substituting the catwalk for the funeral procession and lingerie for lamentation, supermodel Cindy Crawford successfully plays/sells the merry widow. Indeed, these mourning identities, from Britain to Italy, are hardly what they seem/seem, reminding us that fashion is nothing more than fiction, and that

⁸ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1846,' in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1972), 105.

⁹ John Harvey, *Men in Black* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 51.

¹⁰ *Frank*, November 1997, 98-109. Photographs by Satoshi Saikusa; fashion editor Sarajane Hoare.

¹¹ Quoted in 'Fashions of the Times,' *The New York Times Magazine*, Part 2, Fall 2001, 152.

widowhood – by definition an irreparable detachment – is always already part disconnect and part performance.

If widowhood can be understood on these terms, is it not also unavoidably spectacle? Scarlett O'Hara, the contradictory main character of the problematic Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Gone with the Wind*, defiantly responds to the imposition of her new social status: "And God only knows," thought Scarlett ... widows might as well be dead ... Marriage was bad enough, but to be widowed – oh, then life was over forever! ... If only she were not a widow. If only she were Scarlett O'Hara again.'¹² Mourning her mourning identity, Scarlett disdainfully dons her widow's weeds (Fig. 15.11), barely concealing her emotional masquerade until, finally, she transgresses all social boundaries to make a spectacle of herself in the arms of the notorious Rhett Butler. As Drew Gilpin Faust keenly points out, 'because Scarlett must acquire the attributes of femininity in the way she might put on a costume or disguise, her character underscores their arbitrariness and artificiality.'¹³ To be sure, we soon learn that Scarlett can shed her widow's weeds quite quickly, taking on a multitude of roles, required or otherwise. But one thing about her character does not change – her inability to recognize that it is precisely at the expense of other non-negotiable identities that so much of her capability to perform depends. Still, Scarlett's performances raise a provocative question: can we draw a line between mourning ritual and mourning masquerade? Moreover, whose or which identity is mourned?

Finally, is identity ever mourned or is it just continually manipulated and made-over? Calpurnia Addams, a war widow (un)covered by *The New York Times Magazine*, not only transcends traditional boundaries of widowhood, but she transgresses even marginal allocations altogether insofar as she is 'without a clear portfolio in the black-and-white realm of the sexes.'¹⁴ The legally and genitally male Addams, a preoperative transsexual, is the activist-widow of private first class Barry Winchell, who was killed for being gay even though some, including the man who now acts as his widow, say he was not. The sexually, socially and politically problematic body of this widow, a poster boy for the opponents of the ambiguous 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy, forces us to confront mourning identities and, ironically, to ask, what becomes a widow most? One thing is clear: whether trans-gendered or transgressing, cross-cultural or cross-dressing, early modern or postmodern, the widow – monumentalized and politicized – occupies a very precarious site 'between memory and history.'

¹² Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (New York: Macmillan, 1936; First Avon Books printing, 1973), 136, 190.

¹³ Drew Gilpin Faust, 'Clutching the chains that bind: Margaret Mitchell and *Gone with the Wind*,' *Southern Cultures* (Center for the Study of the South, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) 5/1 (1999): 6-20, citation at 8.

¹⁴ David France, *The New York Times Magazine*, 28 May 2000, 26.

Figure 15.1 Jackie Kennedy with hearse, 22 November 1963. © Bettmann/CORBIS

Figure 15.2 Jackie Kennedy with hearse [re-touched by the *Boston Herald American*]. © Bettmann/CORBIS

Figure 15.3 Andy Warhol, *16 Jackies*, acrylic, enamel on canvas, 1964. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Art Center Acquisition Fund, 1968. © 2003 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/ARS, New York

Figure 15.4 Anonymous, installation view of Cindy Sherman's *History Portraits*, January 1990, Metro Pictures, New York. Courtesy of Monika Sprüth Galerie, Cologne

Figure 15.5 Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, 1994, RC print and ink, 46 5/8 x 31 1/8 inches. © 1994 Shirin Neshat. Photo taken by Cynthia Preston. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone

Figure 15.6 Shirin Neshat, *Rapture*, 1999, production still. © 1999 Shirin Neshat. Photo taken by Larry Barns. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone

Figure 15.7 Elliott Erwitt, *England, Brighton 1956* [used in advertisement for Louis Boston with caption, 'In case you hadn't noticed, suits are back']. Reproduced by permission of Magnum Photos, New York

Figure 15.8 Carolina Salguero, Brooks Brothers shirts in display after World Trade Center attack, New York, 11 September 2001. Carolina Salguero-Sipa Press

widow dressing

Just because he's still breathing doesn't mean you have to dress like he is

Figure 15.9 Satoshi Saikusa, 'Widow Dressing' [printed with the caption, 'Just because he's still breathing doesn't mean you have to dress like he is'], *Frank* (November 1997). Reproduced by permission of Seed, Paris

Figure 15.10 Cindy Crawford at [Dolce and Gabbana] fashion show. © Vittoriano Rastelli/CORBIS

Figure 15.11 Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*.
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