There has been much celebratory rhetoric around the political uses and benefits of social media technologies in the aftermath of the June 2009 post-election protests in Iran. Social networking sites have been seen as central to publicizing and circulating, for a global audience, the political crisis that unfolded in Iran that summer. At the height of the Iranian protests—and the height of the Western coverage of those protests, which dominated North American media from June 13 until the death of Michael Jackson on June 25th—the mood online and in the media appeared to be exultant, rejoicing in the power of new social media to facilitate global solidarity in a heretofore unprecedented way.

In an oft-cited blog, Andrew Sullivan from the Atlantic enthused about the power of twitter as a revolutionary tool for the Iranian opposition: “You cannot stop people any longer. You cannot control them any longer. They can bypass your established media; they can broadcast to one another; they can organize as never before” (“Revolution”). In an interview on the use of Twitter in Iran, Clay Shirky, another new media enthusiast and critic exclaimed: “This is it. The big one. This is the first revolution that has been catapulted onto a global stage and transformed by social media” (Anderson).

Sullivan and Shirky’s hyperbolic view of the power of Twitter and new media to effect change—and even bring about revolution—was echoed in numerous online sources during and after the protests. There was undoubtedly an electric charge to the circulation of news about the June protests, and this charge was conveyed largely at the level of affect. Television news stations made repeated reference to the unmediated emotional content of the data coming out from cellphones, YouTube uploads, and tweets. Viewers were continuously cautioned to prepare themselves for the emotionally raw footage that they might find disturbing.
Particularly in the aftermath of the June 2009 Iranian presidential elections, the affectively charged spaces of Facebook, FriendFeed, Flickr, and Twitter can be understood through Lauren Berlant’s formulation of an intimate public sphere as “a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging” (*Female* viii). The circulation online of the images of the events of June 2009 provides an example of what Teresa Brennan has termed “the transmission of affect,” which she describes as a physiological phenomenon, referring to the general sense of being affected by the atmosphere, or by a particular mood in a room (1). In this case, the general sentiment of great excitement, of political possibility, of vicarious danger was transmitted to users of Facebook, Twitter, and FriendFeed. Indeed, a significant part of the appeal of social media technologies has to do with these affectively charged online spaces. In her work on blogs, Jodi Dean observes that social media “produce and circulate affect as a binding technique. . . . Every little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in” (21).

Online forums thus generate powerful affective responses that are produced and reproduced through their circulation, creating a sense of global connection. In *The Times Online*, Sullivan writes:

> it was impossible not to feel connected to the people on the streets, especially the younger generation, with their blogs and tweets and Facebook messages—all instantly familiar to westerners in a way that would have been unthinkable a decade or so ago. This new medium ripped the veil off “the other” and we began to see them as ourselves. (“Twitter,” my emphasis).

Sidestepping for the moment the hackneyed expression of the veil being torn away, Sullivan’s enthusiasm is an example of how affect is transmitted through social media. On Twitter’s affective appeal, Clay Shirky writes:

> as a medium gets faster, it gets more emotional. We feel faster than we think. But Twitter is also just a much more personal medium. Reading personal messages from individuals on the ground prompts a whole other sense of involvement. We’re seeing everyone desperate to do something to show solidarity like wear green—and suddenly the community figures out that it can actually offer secure web proxies, or persuade Twitter to delay an engineering upgrade—we can help keep the medium open. (Anderson)

Shirky’s emphasis here on the relationship between emotion and speed bears some thinking about. Much of the celebratory language around social media has to do with its speed, its conflation of immediacy and intimacy, its ability to make us connect emotionally with one another. Shirky’s celebration of speed
and emotion, however, does not translate into a recognition of the implications of the absence of critical thinking, supporting Brennan’s claim that affect is “thoughtless,” as it works at the level of physiology (116). Indeed, Shirky seems to suggest that what keeps revolutionary momentum going is the circulation of emotion, raising the question of whether critical thinking, too slow and plodding a process, might be ineffectual in a revolutionary moment.

But what does it mean to celebrate a medium that makes us feel faster than we think? What are the implications of participating in a medium that encourages us to place emotion before carefully considered thought? I pose this question knowing full well that I run the risk of being perceived as re-inscribing the privileging of reason over emotion, the very binary that affect theory seeks to dismantle. That is not my intention, but my discomfort with the celebration of “feeling faster than thinking” remains.

The argument in favor of foregrounding emotion over reason seems to suggest that emotion spurs global action. At the same time, critics of Facebook and other forms of online activism have argued that the medium encourages what blogger Lauren Dugan calls “armchair anthropology”:

It was a phenomenon from over a century ago: the earliest Western academics who studied other cultures used second or third-hand research . . . to write authoritatively about a people they knew next to nothing about . . . This armchair anthropology might have a new reincarnation now that we are all connected by Facebook and other social media. When someone from one country joins a Facebook group that supports a particular leader or political party/ideology in another country, are they really all that informed about the issue?

While we can argue that online activism encourages us to care about the Other, Chris Csikszentmihályi’s useful term “click through activism” addresses the problem of merely clicking on a cause and moving on (Hesse), raising the question of what it really means to be politically active online.

Those who believe in the political effectiveness of social media argue that these online forms of communication are most effective as tools that nudge you in a more productive direction. In an interview with CBC news, Greg Elmer argues that the value of online activism is that it spurs offline activism (Jay). But what kind of effective offline activism can Facebook, FriendFeed, or Twitter users in the West stage? In the summer of 2009, Iranians in the diaspora staged numerous peaceful demonstrations of support for Iranian protestors; these were certainly valuable gatherings, as they signalled to Iranians inside the country that the world was behind them, that they had international support. For diasporic Iranians, the demonstrations also served to counter the feeling of exilic disconnect, forging a connection (real or imagined) with Iranian protestors. Although offline activism in the diaspora
served as an important emotional bonding experience for diasporic Iranians, what further implications were there for Iranians inside the country who participated in those emotional and political conversations through social media? Alex Burns and Ben Eltham conclude that the use of Twitter ultimately worked against the protestors:

> those who believe Twitter and other social network technologies will enable ordinary people to seize power from repressive regimes should consider the fate of Iran’s protestors, some of whom paid for their enthusiastic adoption of Twitter with their lives.3

Burns and Eltham’s rather dark and depressing conclusion requires us to think about how our affective engagement with the protests facilitates collective activism and a sense of global solidarity while running the risk of harming the very people we mean to support. Might there be a conflict between what can be an obsessively individualistic medium that publicizes every thought and action of its users and the kind of covery and secrecy that revolutionary practice and subversion require? Perhaps the compulsion for self-disclosure that marks social networking sites is fundamentally incompatible with its use in totalitarian states, even by those in opposition.

Despite the problems I have listed, I am not claiming that new forms of social media are wholly bad or counterproductive. In many ways, the diasporic community (myself included) benefited greatly from social media technologies during the emotionally tumultuous summer of 2009. As diasporic subjects, we were deeply affected by the events, and by their coverage, and the intimate public sphere of Facebook provided an important space for diasporic subjects desperate to connect with each other, and to unite in our shared grief and pain as we bore witness to the crisis unfolding in Iran. This affective space was also marked by the sense of loss and longing that marks the diasporic or exilic condition.

This intimate public sphere elicited intense responses to the street protests in Iran: for diasporic Iranians, their compulsive posting and circulating of information on the political unrest reopened the wounds of exilic life, and ignited powerful expressions of longing to be part of the movement on the streets of Iran. Although fans of Facebook and Twitter celebrate these social networking sites as enabling global intimacy and activism, we should also recognize these forms of social media as part of our contemporary culture’s at times narcissistic compulsion to self-disclose.4 This public display of emotional intensities manifested itself through a kind of competition at the level of authenticity through the disclosure of autobiographical experience: alongside postings of the latest update of the street protests, diasporic subjects would share their memories of Iran, positioning themselves as authentic insiders.
As they posted news of daily events in Iran, diasporic Iranians commented on their own relationship to the country, their memories of the 1979 revolution (if they were old enough to remember), and their nostalgic remembrances of prerevolutionary Iran. If they were too young to have memories of pre or postrevolutionary Iran, they authenticated themselves through the mobilization of what Marianne Hirsch has called “postmemory,” by invoking their parents’ traumatic memories of 1979. Facebook’s performative dimension thus made it a forum in which an Iranian cultural authenticity was claimed and contested. This claim to Iranian authenticity was further intensified by access to information: those who had the fastest access to information positioned themselves as more authentic native subjects, more closely affiliated with Iran, and more deeply affected by the unfolding of historical events there.

Probably the most affecting image that surfaced from the protests is the death of the twenty-six year old Neda Soltan, shot and killed on the streets of Tehran on June 20, 2009. The last moments of her life were captured by a cell phone video camera, and after the gruesome footage was posted on YouTube, it immediately became one of the site’s most watched videos. Cable news stations played the footage of Neda’s death on a loop, always with the caveat that what we were about to watch (again and then again) was extremely disturbing. There have been conflicting statements about the level of political activism in which she was engaged. Some reports describe her as uninvolved in politics, suggesting that she was merely an innocent bystander who stepped out of a car momentarily to observe the crowd that was blocking traffic and preventing her from reaching home—at which point she was killed by sniper fire. Other reports suggest that she had started becoming interested in her political and civil rights and had become a fairly regular presence in the postelection demonstrations. Whatever her political stripes, Neda has now attained the iconic status of a hero-martyr of the postelection protests.

I am interested in exploring two points in relation to Neda. First is the politics of compassion and its relationship to the category of the recognizable human subject. Second, I am interested in thinking about the ways in which remembrance and commemoration can be mobilized productively so that Neda, who has come to stand in for all Iranian women, can be imagined as existing beyond the category of what Erin Rand calls “the mourned subject.” Rand coined this term to describe the subject position through which gay men came to be read and recognized as acceptable subjects during the early years of the AIDS crisis (656). I am borrowing her category of the mourned subject here as a way of thinking through the implications of Neda’s sudden iconic status as freedom fighter in death. What I am especially interested in is how to balance the politically cathartic and politically interventionary move to memorialize, to remember (Neda in this instance), and the unscrupulous
appropriation of the remembered’s name and identity. The main question here is how and in what ways has the narrative of Neda’s death become a shared autobiographical narrative about the suffering of all Iranians—and particularly of exilic/diasporic Iranians?

At numerous rallies around the world protesting the postelection crackdown on Iranian civilians, Iranians in the diaspora chanted: “We are all Neda.” Those of us in the West or in the Iranian diaspora watching violence erupt in Iran felt pain and compassion for the demonstrators in the streets, but as Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant among others have eloquently argued, compassionate feelings can reveal an inequitable relationship between the compassionate subject and the object of compassion. In Berlant’s words, “compassion is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is over there” (“Introduction” 4). The relationship between the compassionate body and the suffering body is thus an unequal and hierarchical one—even more so when the object of compassion is no longer living. Neda’s death is indeed a tragedy, but we need to recognize the potential problems in wielding the footage of her death as a political tool while we prey on people’s emotional responses to the protests in Iran and simultaneously idealize and romanticize images of a young woman’s dead body.

On the one hand, we could argue that what we are doing when we post and repost YouTube videos of Neda’s death or of street protests is demonstrating our solidarity with Iranian protestors. But as we highlight their plight, and in the case of the Iranian diaspora even claim their struggle as ours, we further mark a difference between our lives here and their lives there. As we foreground their suffering, “the pain of others becomes ‘ours,’ an appropriation that transforms and perhaps even neutralizes their pain into our sadness. . . . [W]e feel sad about their suffering, an ‘aboutness’ that ensures that they remain the object of ‘our feeling’” (Ahmed 21, her emphasis).

I was myself deeply affected by the events of June 2009, and by the shocking and graphic visuality of Neda’s death. It is precisely because of the heightened emotional responses most of us had to Neda’s tragic death that I am interested in exploring its political resonances. The outpouring of emotion expressed by people around the world who responded to the death of Neda illustrates the ways in which affect is transmitted. In this case, the feelings of horror, grief, and compassion for Neda’s death were transmitted through social media networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, and eventually through traditional news media outlets. The circulation of images of Neda’s (veiled and unveiled) body, and the repeated and spectacularized postings of the video of her grisly death, create a highly problematic relationship between the spectator as compassionate subject and the actor as the object of compassion. The endless looping of the video of Neda’s death on social networking
sites and on news media has made a spectacle of her death, invoking representations of the idealized and romanticized gendered corpse.

There has been a deep fascination with capturing, claiming, and then circulating Neda’s image. In the emotionally tumultuous moments after the world bore witness to her death, a photograph of another woman with a similar name, Neda Soltani, began circulating through social media networking sites. This photograph was picked up by CNN and other major news networks, and they too began circulating this photograph of another (very much alive) Neda as the woman whom the world had embraced as their own innocent victim. This young woman, Neda Soltani, sent out desperate pleas to news media and social media asking people to remove her picture from their blogs, websites, and videos, but her photo continued to circulate—in fact, many used her image as their Facebook avatars in a collapsing of their identity with hers, and her photo remains online in some places as the face of resistance and the Green Movement. Fearful for her life, she eventually fled to Germany, where she currently lives in exile.5
Eventually an accurate photograph of Neda wearing the hijab emerged and was circulated on the internet, followed immediately by other flattering photographs of her without the veil. Paula Slater, a US sculptor moved by the death of Neda, dedicated a sculpture of her to the Iranian people. Slater called this sculpture *Angel of Iran*, and presented it to the diasporic Iranian community in San Francisco. While they thanked her for her work and her sentiment, Iranian-Americans requested that she make yet another sculpture of Neda—this time of her unveiled. It was named *Angel of Freedom*.

**ABOVE LEFT:** One of the first photographs to surface of the “real” Neda Agha-Soltan. **ABOVE RIGHT:** This unveiled photograph of Neda circulated widely on social media sites, consolidating her image as representative of young women everywhere (mainstream news sources attributed these and similar images to Caspian Makan, Neda’s boyfriend).

**BELOW:** Paula Slater’s *Angel of Iran* (left) and *Angel of Freedom* (right)—as requested by the diasporic Iranian community in the US (images © and reproduced by permission of the artist).
Neda’s image—as unveiled, as modern—is reclaimed by the diaspora as standing in for all Iranian women, and her perceived struggle as the *plight* of all Iranian women. Thus Neda’s image (preferably the unveiled version) has been claimed by diasporic Iranian subjects as how they see themselves and how they want to be seen by the West. A popular Facebook avatar at that time was of Neda’s bloodied face set against a green background. Further, many diasporic Iranians added Neda as their middle name on their Facebook profiles, sandwiching her identity into their own.

Many websites are dedicated to a claiming of Neda, including “weareallneda.com” and “we are Neda,” where people post comments and mourn her death. A short YouTube video, “I am Neda,” is deeply affective in its use of melancholic music playing against the compelling images of young people holding up signs demanding “democracy,” “freedom,” “respect,” and then finally, “I am Neda.” The video concludes with these words: “Neda was the face of the faceless, We are the voice of the voiceless.” This video (which is by no means unique among similar videos, websites, and images) runs the risk of flattening Neda into a surface that can be applied equally over its posters and viewers and over the protestors on the streets of Iran, thus transforming her life (and death) into a narrative about the (diasporic) self. Similarly, numerous Facebook pages are devoted to Neda’s memory, such as “We love Neda rainbow,” “We are Neda,” “I am Neda,” and so on.

This image became a popular Facebook avatar in Summer 2009 (London, June 26, 2009; AP/Lefteris Pitarakis).
The many narratives about her death often revolve around her “modern looks.” As The Bulletin’s James G. Wiles posted on July 13, 2009:

Like nothing in recent memory, we’ve been transfixed by the video images of Ne-da’s murder. After a modern, connected, 27 year life (school; college; boyfriend; interest in music and singing; and visits to Turkey), she was shot in the heart by some woman-hating, pimply loser in the Ayatollah’s militia who’s probably never had a date in his life. Hell awaits him.

The emotion here is strong—even vicious. Indeed, the majority of the articles, interviews, and posts about Neda mention her youth, her beauty, and her desire to be free. In these narratives two things happen simultaneously: a romanticization and idealization of Neda’s youthful attractiveness, and a morbid fascination with the video of her death. Another example of this intense interest in aestheticizing her corpse is Tim O’Brien’s unsettling painting “Eyes,” which shows Neda’s lifeless face with her eyes wide open. What is of note here is how Neda has been claimed in uncritical ways as a martyr for freedom by the opposition movement in Iran and by supporters of the Green Movement in the West. At the same time, the Iranian state, only too aware of the revolutionary potential of martyrdom in an Iranian cultural context,6 made significant efforts first to contain her image as martyr and then to claim it. Recognizing the politically explosive possibilities of Neda-as-martyr, the Iranian state demanded that her family remove the black banners signaling mourning from outside their home. The government further prohibited the family from holding a funeral for their daughter, fearing that a large crowd gathered at her gravesite might trigger more anti-government protests. Later, the Martyr Foundation of the Islamic Republic approached Neda’s family, offering her official martyrdom status, rendering the family eligible for a regular pension and other benefits in exchange for the state’s claiming of her as their own martyr. The family rejected the offer.

What is at stake in the competition between the so-called Green Movement and its Western supporters, on the one hand, and the Islamic Republic on the other, to claim Neda as their own martyr is a commitment to a particular vision of the political future of Iran. Judith Butler’s work on the framing of subjects as recognizably human is particularly important for thinking through the implications of these competing claims to Neda as hero-martyr. It also allows us to think through feelings of compassion and grief for the mourned subject, requiring us to consider “the question of the representability of life itself: what allows a life to become visible in its precariousness and its need for shelter, and what is it that keeps us from seeing or understanding certain lives in this way?” (Butler 51). We thus need to ask ourselves difficult
questions about the structures of recognition that enable us to engage with the spectacle of Neda’s death with such emotional intensity.

One place to turn would be to a consideration of the possibilities of Facebook as an intimate public sphere that creates feelings of belonging and community through the circulation of “texts and things that express those people’s particular core interests and desires” (Berlant, Female 5). Certainly, the circulation of news about the death of Neda, a young woman rendered recognizable in the West through her desire to live unfettered by the constraints of the Islamic Republic, worked to create an intimate public sphere online. In her blog “Supervalent Thought,” Berlant notes how Facebook allows users “to inhabit the social as a place of play, of having a light impact, of being ordinary, of being acknowledged. . . . It’s a place where clicking is a sign that someone has paid attention and where dropping a line can build toward making a life. You know someone has imagined you today, checked in. You’re not an isolate” (“Faceless”). In Berlant’s formulation, the action of “clicking” is a form of social acknowledgment, a participation in the circulation of a common text, and the consolidation of a (temporary) community.

Despite the potentially enabling aspects of social media as an “intimate public” that encourages a space of community and sharing, we need to reflect further on how Facebook translates from the social to the political, and how its performative nature, and the causes we join and claims that we make through it (for example, joining groups such as “I am Neda” or “Cyber Resistance to Brutality in Iran”), turn the particular cause we are embracing or the compassion we are feeling into evidence of our political and human rights credentials.7 The issue here is that postings about state brutality or about Neda’s death exist alongside pictures of what the Facebook user made for dinner that evening. In both instances, the post becomes about the post-er. They both become part of a Facebook profile. Neda and last night’s dinner both become commodities, the consumption of which serves to define the Facebook user.

I think it is not too farfetched to claim that the diasporic Iranian community—and indeed the world—really claimed Neda only after seeing the famous unveiled photograph of her, along with those of her on vacation in Turkey with her boyfriend. Before that, when the graphic and violent video of her death was broadcast, people reacted in horror and with compassion towards the sight of a young woman gunned down in the street. But the universal claiming of her as a martyr for a “Free Iran,” and the universalized identification with her, only became possible after she became recognizable as someone like “us.” It was only through this moment of recognition that the claim “I am Neda” could taken up by all. As unpleasant as the thought may be, our claiming and remembrance of Neda may have turned her tragic story into a statement about “us”—and our own progressive, compassionate politics.
NOTES

AUTHOR’S NOTE: I have presented different versions of this paper in several venues, and have benefited in particular from the thoughtful and critical insights of participants at two conferences in Toronto—Disent: The Politics and Poetics of Women’s Resistance (May 2010); and Veiled Constellations: The Veil, Critical Theory, Politics and Contemporary Society (June 2010)—as well as the 2010 IABA conference. I am grateful for the many insightful comments I have received from students and colleagues, particularly Sarah Henstra, Colin Mooers, Stuart J. Murray, and Andrew O’Malley. I continue to be inspired by Gillian Whitlock’s work on testimonial and refugee narratives and her insights into compassion. Margaretta Jolly’s thoughtful and constructive engagement with this piece has been immensely helpful to me during the revision process. My thanks to Anna Lisa Candido and Meghan Somerville for their meticulous research assistance. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1. The term “Twitter Revolution” was bandied about with much optimism and excitement in the early days of the protests. The potential of Iran’s 2009 protests to spearhead the
first revolution of its kind was hailed by cyber media enthusiasts, including and perhaps most notably by Andrew Sullivan of The Atlantic’s The Daily Dish Blog. The January 2011 overthrows of the Tunisian and Egyptian governments have seen the resurrection of the term “twitter revolution” by what Evgeny Morozov calls “cyber enthusiasts.”

2. The alacrity with which media reports of the Iranian protests were eclipsed by the coverage of Jackson’s death serves as an illustration of the capricious nature of news and social media.

3. Evgeny Morozov makes this very point in his recent book The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom: “The Iranian police began hunting the Internet for photos and videos that showed faces of the protestors—numerous, thanks to the ubiquity of social media—to publish them on Iranian news media websites and ask the public for help in identifying the individuals” (10).

4. At this point, I think my own self-disclosure is necessary: I was completely emotionally caught up in the June 2009 events through the very same social media sites I am discussing in this paper. Like most diasporic Iranians, I found myself wholly affected by the immediacy of the media, posting and reposting the latest reports and YouTube videos on the Iranian protests. In short, I spent most of that summer in an online world, feeling at once exhilarated by what felt like the immediacy of political events, and also despondent because of the simultaneous feeling of great distance and difference between us (in the diaspora) and them (on the ground in Iran).

5. The Iranian government seized on this opportunity of mistaken identity by pressuring Neda Soltani to issue a statement that she was alive and that no death had occurred. As the political atmosphere in Iran became increasingly vexed, Soltani, fearing for her and her family’s security, sought political asylum in Germany.

6. The martyrdom of Imam Hussain in Karbala, Iraq in 680 AD holds a powerful place in Iranian cultural and religious contexts, and was used effectively during the 1978 revolutionary protests to portray the religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini in a fight for justice against the Shah, who was cast in the role of the tyrannical caliph Yazid.

7. Another disturbing point to consider here is how we can reconcile the politics (and performance) of human rights activism with the willful jeopardizing of the life of another innocent person—Neda Soltani—who was ultimately forced into exile because her desperate pleas to news media and social media sources were ignored.

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