Tamara Kneese, **Death Glitch: How Techno-Solutionism Fails Us in This Life and Beyond**, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023, 272 pp., $35.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Kate Maddalena
University of Toronto Mississauga

Marked by a brand-new flagship journal, *Platforms & Society*, from SAGE Journals in April 2024, the field of platform studies has come into its own around the emerging problems of platforms as infrastructures that are redefining social space. Tamara Kneese's ***Death Glitch: How Techno-Solutionism Fails Us in This Life and Beyond*** is a careful consideration of how human mortality causes problems for inherently inhumane platforms. In the digital world, death is a glitch that "takes platforms by surprise" (p. 32) and reveals those platforms' commitments to extractive productivity and not, as they often purport, to human sociality and meaning. "Technological solutions," writes Kneese, "are incommensurable with the sacred rituals attached to communicative traces" that make death a meaningful human experience (p. 47). Kneese's examples of that incommensurability, described in detail throughout the book, are rich with methodological and theoretical implications for cultural studies, historical studies, media studies, and social sciences interested in (post-)online life.
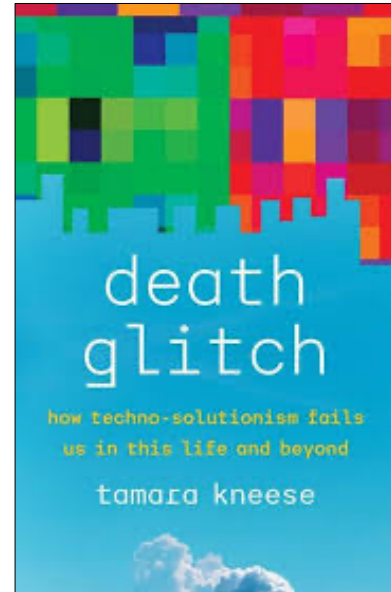
Chapter 1 of *Death Glitch* establishes platforms as memorial spaces and describes how platforms constantly make cringe-worthy mistakes around individual deaths because they are oriented to profit. Chapter 2 transitions into a set of ethnographies that explore the real, living labor that is required to maintain digital memorial spaces. Kneese interprets these practices as a form of care work that intersects with physical caregiving labor. The "digital afterlife" of Derek K. Miller, for example, an illness blogger who died in 2011 and whose work defines a genre but exists/existed on aging and changing platforms like Flickr and Blogger, is maintained by his widow, Airdrie. The material accounting of Airdrie's commitment to Derek's legacy raises compelling questions about life and the living's relationship to and responsibility to death, the dying, and the dead, especially in the relatively new ephemerality of our online existences.

After chapters 1 and 2 establish a pattern for the problem, chapters 3 and 4 detail two examples of conditional cascade that begin as technological solutions to the death glitch. Chapter 3 discusses the practice of digital estate planning as a solution for user death and a new source of revenue for an old kind of business—preparing legally, logistically, and materially to maintain and/or manage a loved one's digital traces. The chapter's implications resonate with those of chapter 2, with a reframing question: What can be inherited in an online context? Chapter 4 takes a very different tack and examines religious and quasireligious futurist orientations to smart technologies like Google Home and asks what happens when a device lives beyond the person it surveilled and datafied, and subsequently what happens when it breaks down. The chapter's details—a meeting of wealthy investors interested in digital immortality and a Mormon-

owned hyperdesigned smart home that meets one user's needs—are ethnographic, nonfiction versions of William Gibson and J. G. Ballard sci-fi stories, respectively. The chapter reminds us that, for better or for worse, all of us are living in someone's imagined future.

One of *Death Glitch*'s most valuable takeaways is a methodological one. The book's case studies come from Kneese's careful, multiyear projects in Web ethnography and network anthropology—analysis of online lives evidenced by text and digital artifacts as well as face-to-face interviews and tracings of embodied sociality entangled with the online archive. Kneese's emergent method of breakdown, an attention to the ways tools cease to function and/or cause friction, challenges the distinction between history and ethnography. "Human death," she observes, "is not a proper metric for setting boundaries between historical and ethnographic research methods" (p. 38). The fuzzy space in between the two, though not a new space for scholars in either field, is at the center rather than the edges of Kneese's breakdowns.

The strength of Kneese's method comes in large part from her theoretical commitments. She thinks with feminist technology studies, feminist media studies, and political economy, and the set of relations she reveals is a stark picture of the politics of the platform. "If . . . capital is dead labor," she asks, "then what is undead information? It is possible to extract further value from labor that is itself already expired" (p. 30). Kneese's interrogations of labor are directly related to time. She asks feminist and Marxist-informed questions about time to construct a concept of platform temporality that allows us to see platform-enabled posthumous and posthuman relations. Platform temporality also challenges longer timescales that have been, until now, important to human experience—geological and ancestral time—both of which are differently related to capital and neglected or transformed by the platform.

Thanks to its well-based critique, this book is broadly useful across a range of disciplines and could be put in productive conversation with a number of other readings on a course syllabus or in a research program. I will offer four different examples here. First, *Death Glitch* can offer an academic and empirical voice in artistic discourse that asks questions about the meaning of an archive on personal and public registers. I am thinking specifically about the work of artists like Hazel Meyer (2024), whose work interrogates inheritance in the context of a personal material archive and the media that afford a famous person's afterlife. Second, Kneese's focus on the care and maintenance of a digital afterlife to balance a digital life begs the question of what happens to the (after)lives of folks who have been intentionally not online? Rianka Singh's (2020) work on resistance to platform activism pertains, here—the implications for posthumous power are fascinating. Do online afterlives amass more power than digitally invisible ones? Do lives of quiet resistance get amplified after death? Third, Christa Teston's (2024) forthcoming book, *Doing Dignity*, could add a conceptual layer to the glitch as a problem for the ethics of dignity in death. Fourth and finally, Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer's (2021) consideration of Indigenous practices of Sorry Business on social media could compliment *Death Glitch* with layers of non-Western meaning in another situated cultural context, while Carlson's considerations of the online afterlife could benefit from Kneese's Marxist and market-oriented critical lenses.

What *Death Glitch* lacks is not a shortcoming or weakness, per say, but is rather the product of a disciplinary limitation and a testament to the importance of Kneese's provocation for others' work. Kneese's detailed cases leave me wanting acknowledgement of the existential and even spiritual questions that

warrant the book's excellent arguments. Kneese opens with the acknowledgment that "death is a social and collective experience" (p. 4) and proves that that experience is being transformed by online ways of being, but never broaches the question about what death actually is or even what it means. Similarly, terms like "hallowed," "sacred spaces," "memorialization," "ghosts," and "ritual" are all used without being theorized. Death here is a problem, a social experience, a business opportunity, and an arbitrary line between history and ethnography—but not a clear concept. Maybe death is impossible to conceptualize and only possible to contextualize. But this is, of course, the whole point; Kneese's defense is that the book is critical descriptive ethnography. Each of the terms I list above may be a question for a philosopher to address in future work. I mean to say that *Death Glitch* is a book that should be taken up in philosophy and religious studies as well as by more obvious audiences in media studies, media history, and anthropology.

References

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