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Vital Ties: Digitally-Mediated Intimacies between the Living and the Dead

by

Molly Hales

DISSERTATION

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Medical Anthropology

in the

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of the

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by

Molly Hales

Dedication

To my father, Peter Bacon Hales, who was the inspiration for this project in many ways. He was a historian of American culture who was particularly interested in the role that certain forms of media have played in shaping cultural ideas and ideals. He also read every single one of my papers until his death in 2014, and his encouragement still rings in my ears.

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about data and the dead. Clare Cameron read and commented on each chapter of this dissertation as I wrote it, and her commentary greatly strengthened this work.

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Vital Ties: Digitally-Mediated Intimacies between the Living and the Dead

Molly Hales

Abstract

This dissertation explores relationships between the living and the dead that are mediated by digital technologies including online memorials, social media accounts, smartphone apps, and virtual reality platforms. As digital media make possible new forms of presence, I ask what the implications are for how grief is experienced, whether and how relationships continue after death, the form that these relationships take, and the ways that they are structured by particular media. I consider what the implications of these emergent relationships are for both models of grief and for theories of mediation.

This ethnography is based on over a year and a half of fieldwork in San Francisco, Chicago, and online. I restricted my fieldsite to the English-speaking world, and my interlocutors were in Britain and Australia as well as the United States. Through interviews and participant-observation, I explored their digital practices and the impact of these practices on their experiences of grief and connection with the dead. The dissertation uses a case-study approach, with each chapter exploring a different digital media through one relationship that takes place on that media.

My findings demonstrate that relationships with the dead not only persist, but can also deepen after death. I argue that the intimacy engendered by these relationships, as well as the forms of reciprocity that they entail, confound contemporary models of normal grief—including those that embrace “continuing bonds” with the dead. The relationships that I describe are often melancholic, organized around the many absences that death introduces. They are also in some

way sustaining for both the living and the dead, producing and reproducing them in relation to each other. I use the concept of *animation* to unpack the particular form of mediation involved. Animation draws attention to forms of presence that do not rely on a one-to-one correspondence between the figure and its iteration, but are rather enriched by the variability, multiplicity, and sometimes even the sparseness with which they are “drawn.” It also invites us to consider how the dead might be animating digital technologies, breathing life into the media through which they encounter their loved ones.

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Introduction

It was a hot and muggy July afternoon in Chicago, and Lois and I were stretched out in her living room trying to catch the faint breeze from the open windows. The sound of children playing in the park across the street drifted in, punctuating our conversation. Lois didn't seem to hear; she was lost in thought, gazing absentmindedly at her laptop screen. She had moved from the armchair to sit next to me so that I could see her brother's Facebook page as we spoke. The loveseat was small, and our bodies were pressed together, our thighs absorbing the warmth coming off of the laptop. In the electric heat of the afternoon, the room felt charged.

At first, Lois had been careful to contextualize each of the messages, photos, and videos that filled his page. "Carol Jane Levy. I didn't know who that was, because I didn't recognize the last name. But her mom and my mom were best friends, they lived right next door to us." After a few minutes, Lois fell silent, held in sway by the page. A small smile played at the corner of her mouth, and yet her eyebrows were drawn together as though in pain, a deep line cutting through the space between them. As she continued scrolling through the posts and replies, her voice grew soft, so soft that I had to lean even closer to hear her.

The amount of material that had been put up in the six months since Frank's death was staggering, displaying images and stories from every point in his life. Each one had garnered dozens of responses from others in his network, and as Lois clicked on the links to display them she opened up long strings of replies and counter-replies. These responses had become the fodder for new stories, each person adding to or embellishing what had come before. I could see Lois drawing closer and closer to her brother with each passing moment, pulled in by the words and memories of the network that held Frank at its center. And yet most of the posts were about

his absence, cries of pain and loss that stretched the possibilities of what the medium could communicate.

“I cant believe i wont see u again i will miss you always heartbroken i loved you Franky i cant believe this just cant...”

This particular post was accompanied by several photographs of Frank from decades before. In the months that I had spent haunting his page, I had gotten to know the burly, barrel-chested, graying Frank of recent years, and I almost didn't recognize the slim and smooth-faced youth in the photos. I leaned closer to look, trying to take in every detail of his face, to find the similarities to the middle-aged man I had grown to know so well. Lois leaned in too, sighing as she gazed at the photo of Frank holding up a freshly-caught trout, and for a moment our heads almost touched.

This ethnography explores the intimate relationships between the living and the dead that have developed around digital technologies including online memorials, social media accounts, smartphone apps, and virtual reality platforms. It is about the distinctive forms that these intimacies take and the way that such forms are shaped by particular media and the practices that have built up around them. These digital practices often demand the participation of others. As such, they engender specific collectivities that both animate, and are animated by, the dead.

It is also about the way that these relationships speak back to certain contemporary models of normal grief, particularly those that predominate in American texts guiding grief counselors. These models relegate the dead to the past and assume that the dead are available to the desires and manipulations of the living. The intimate mediations that I explore open up the possibility that relations with the dead might not only persist, but strengthen after death, driven

not only by the words and actions of the living but by the surprising appearances and transformations of the dead. Such intimacies are built on the interplay between memory and forgetting, presence and absence, pleasure and melancholy. The digital technologies that mediate these intimacies create an opening into which the dead are invited, finding their voice in the relations that sustain them—and which they, too, sustain.

Writing with the dead

One of the primary aims of this work is to take the dead seriously as ethnographic subjects. This involves acknowledging the ongoing social lives of the dead, including their continued significance to the living. It also involves acknowledging the continued significance of the living for the dead.

I follow scholars such as Marilyn Strathern (1988) and Judith Butler (2000; 2004; 2011[1993]) in seeing relationality as the foundation of subjectivity, and I believe that this relational subjectivity can include the dead. This is not the same as arguing that the dead are available for communication and communion in the same ways that they were before death. Instead, it is about recognizing that relations with the dead can persist, where *relation* describes a social and affective connection that involves a certain “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2011, quoted in Strathern 2014). By maintaining these relations, both the living and the dead are made and re-made.

In *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler argues that grief offers an opportunity to recognize this relationality, highlighting the ways in which people are given over to others and reliant on those others. She writes,

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an “I” exists independently over here and then simply loses a “you” over there, especially if the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am (Butler 2004:22).

As Butler points out, the relations formed with others are constitutive; they comprise the self.

Butler herself suggests that these formative relations do not endure beyond a person’s death. The passage above continues,

If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who ‘am’ I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what we do. On one level, I think I have lost ‘you’ only to discover that ‘I’ have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost ‘in’ you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as the tie by which those terms are differentiated and related (Butler 2004:22).

Butler suggests here that death disrupts the self. The relationality by which each person is composed by means of the other goes missing, causing the bereaved to “become inscrutable” to themselves.

I believe there is a way to take up Butler’s notion of relational selves as constituted *and* undone by their relations without presuming that death brings an inevitable and permanent end to

those relations. I begin from Butler's own recognition that selves are constantly undone by their relations with others, just as selves are constantly being constituted by their ever-changing relations. Perhaps death's interruption merely provides an opportunity for relations to transform, as they are always already in the habit of doing. Indeed, Butler seems to provide the foundation for this interpretation later in the same essay. Questioning the grief narratives that describe "having" and "losing" a relationship, Butler writes,

What grief displays, in contrast, is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. I might try to tell a story here about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very "I" who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling; the very "I" is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must.

Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something.

This seems so clearly the case with grief, but it can be so only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. One may want to, or manage to for a while, but despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel (Butler 2004:22-23).

Grief involves a kind of undoing by which one's sense of self is unraveled. But so, too, does desire. Relationships among the living can be threatened, creating turmoil for those involved. Yet these relationships can also find ways to endure each person's undoing.

Death can throw relationships into question, and it is not a foregone conclusion that they will survive. Yet the people that I write about here have found ways to maintain their relationships by allowing them to take a new form, coalescing around a set of practices built on digital mediations. In maintaining these mutually-constitutive relationships, both the living and the dead are carried forth, kept alive by each other.

I align myself with a growing literature that attends to the efficacy of the dead in the contemporary English-speaking world, including their participation in practices of labor (Derrida 1994; Stanyek and Piekut 2010), care (Stevenson 2014), kinship (Sharp 2006), politics (Feldman 1991; Robben 2005[2000]; Verdery 1999), and social life (Gordon 1997). I share these authors' recognition that the dead participate in crafting the stories of which they are a part. In most of this writing, the dead take the form of either the corpse or the specter, and it is the persistent bodily or quasi-bodily presence of the dead that demonstrates their continued relevance. While I engage both figures in this work, I also seek out the less obvious bodies of the dead, including the web pages and apps that the loved ones of the deceased continue to haunt.

Much of the recent scholarly work on the place of death in contemporary politics does not engage with the continuing lives of the dead. Responding to Michel Foucault's writing on sovereignty and biopolitics, scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2003) and Giorgio Agamben (1998) have explored a politics of killing. Despite the significance of death to this literature, the dead themselves are notably absent. In particular, the literature on bare life productively blurs the distinction between the living and the dead, but it also reproduces the notion that the dead are

asocial. Bare life is described as a living death, a complete exclusion from social worlds. To name it as such is to presume that the dead have no sociality.

In attempting to write with the dead rather than merely about the dead, I am engaging in a different kind of politics, one whose aim involves underscoring the ongoing significance of the dead. I do so by making *relationships* my object of study. I ask how relationships between the living and the dead are sustained, the forms that they take, the practices that nourish them, and the mediations that they rely on. In so doing, I hope to allow the voices of the dead as well as the living to emerge through the relationships through which they are constituted.

In exploring relations with the digital dead, I'm also attempting to bridge the gap between anthropological understandings of the rich social lives of the dead in other times and places and the presumed dearth of social meaning around death in the anthropologists' own social world. Anthropologists were among the first scholars to take seriously the social lives of the dead. Robust literatures examine cycles of gift exchange with the dead (Kan 2005[1996]; Klima 2002; Langford 2013; Leavitt 1995; Strathern 1981); ancestor worship (Straus 2005[1978]; Turner 1967; Watson 1982); spirit possession (Dernbach 2005; Stoller 1995; Tsintjilonis 2007); and the management of potentially-threatening ghostly presences (Harris 1982; Middleton 1982; Ochoa 2010; Stasch 2009). Despite the large body of work on relations with the dead, ethnographies in North America, Europe, or non-Aboriginal Australia are notably scarce. Furthermore, the existing scholarship often contrasts the rich death practices of other times and places to their perceived absence here and now. For example, in Aries's (2005[1977]) well-known history of European death practices, the author suggests that in the contemporary era, death has been privatized, medicalized, and robbed of its prior meaning and value. Literatures on the end of life in the United States and Western Europe offer abundant insights into shifting understandings of

death and dying (Lock 2001; Kaufman 2005). Yet these writings end once biological death has taken place, leaving questions of relations *with* the dead unanswered.

In this ethnography, I'm turning the anthropological lens on a contemporary, globally-connected, technologically-savvy population of mourners. My research participants used digital technologies to forge and maintain relationships with dead loved ones, acknowledging their ongoing presence in their lives. Exploring their digital practices pushes against the tendency to see relations with the dead as rooted in the traditions of others. The ways that my research participants engaged with digital technologies pushed the boundaries of the media. Their innovations opened up new possibilities for ongoing relations with dead loved ones, while building on longstanding practices such as speaking to the dead at the gravesite.

Intimacy and kinship

What I explore in this ethnography is not just relationships between the living and the dead, but *intimate* relationships. In foregrounding intimacy, I'm drawing from Berlant's (2000) efforts to make intimacy the inclusive term for forms of attachment that are not necessarily tethered to heteronormative frameworks, while at the same time troubling the public/private dichotomy that undergirds these frameworks. My understanding of intimacy is also based on the sense of vulnerability that is introduced by attachments that run deep enough that they form the self, and thus—as Butler points out—that their loss can throw the self into question.

Berlant's writing on intimacy seeks to “engage and disable a prevalent U.S. discourse on the proper relation between public and private, spaces traditionally associated with the gendered division of labor” (Berlant 2000:3). Her aspirations are shared by queer theory scholars such as Tim Dean (2009) and Nayan Shah (2011), who explore forms of intimacy that take shape

through transient encounters in public places. The intimacies that I describe do not take place between strangers, but they are often situated in online spaces that have been construed as “public.” This has led many to point towards a shift of relations with the dead “from the private to the public sphere” (Irwin 2015:123). Yet the “public sphere” that Habermas described was organized around a specific media—mass-produced print media, particularly newspapers. The different forms of digital media that open up relations with the dead raise questions about the kinds of “publics” that participate.

The collectives that participate in my research participants’ digital relationships with the dead are varied, ranging from the kind of imagined public of anonymous readers that Habermas described in the 18th century, to a single person whose labor of love brings the dead to life in virtual reality form. These collectivities differently animate the relationships that they support and sustain. By attending to these specific modes of participation, I complicate the claim that this is private grief in a public space, while at the same time exploring the ways that intimate relationships can depend on the participation of others. I am also troubling the popular distinction between individual, emotional “grief” and collective, ritual practices of memorialization.

Many of the intimacies that I explore began as bonds between living family members. Yet with the death of one of these members, relatedness itself was thrown into question. In his landmark study *American Kinship* (1968), anthropologist David Schneider noted that when he inquired about his ethnographic subjects’ deceased relatives, they were often at a loss as to whether they were still part of the family. Part of what I am charting is the ways in which digital technologies are being used to create and maintain relatedness in the wake of a death, when kinship bonds are challenged.

This ethnography is thus in conversation with research that considers the ways that technology impacts kinship, potentially changing what it means to be related to another person (Carsten 2004, 2007; Edwards et al. 1999; Franklin and McKinnon 2002; Inhorn and Birenbaum-Carmeli 2008; Roberts 2012; Strathern 1992; Weston 1991). Scholars from within Science and Technology Studies (STS) as well as anthropology have turned to assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), egg donation, and surrogacy to explore the implications of new medical technologies on relatedness. Marilyn Strathern (1992) suggests that kinship itself might be put into question by the distinctions between social and biological parentage introduced by assisted reproductive technologies. With egg donation and surrogacy, a child may have multiple “biological” parents in addition to the “social” parents who raise them, “introducing a whole range of quasi-, semi-, or pseudobiological forms of parenting” (Inhorn and Birenbaum-Carmeli 2008:182). Others have shown how assisted reproductive technologies can reinforce existing understandings of kinship as mediated by biogenetic ties. Kath Weston (1991) points out that infertile or same-sex couples can now pursue alternate means of producing “legitimate” offspring, as do some of the lesbian couples in her ethnography. Assisted reproduction can also forge fictive kinship relations among participants. Elizabeth Roberts (2012) points out that practices such as egg donation have created kin-like female alliances between egg donors and recipients, as well as strengthened relations between existing kin such as sisters who participate in egg donation.

My research intersects with and extends these findings, showing how families are re-formed by new digital technologies rather than new medical technologies. I also explore how existing understandings of kinship and relation shape the way that these technologies are understood and used to maintain relationships with the dead. For example, in the final chapter I

describe how a virtual reality project constructed a particular kind of relatedness between Mike and his late father. When Mike's friend Alex was developing the prototype for the project, he built the virtual body of Mike's father in such a way as to emphasize the similarities in their appearance. He attributed these similarities to the fact that they were "of the same genetics" at the same time that he produced them by manipulating the shape of the father's body and the features of his face to match those of his son.

Looking at kinship as well as intimacy may seem to ignore the very intervention that studies of intimacy seek to make. After all, Berlant's project is about exploring attachments that do *not* adhere to the heteronormative standards of kinship. Thinking kinship and intimacy together seeks to undo the givenness of kinship by showing how it must be constantly produced by the contrast with its constitutive outside (Butler 2011[1993]). And reciprocally, forms of intimacy that are seen as falling outside of kinship structures are still defined in relation to those same structures. When Mike and Alex call each other brothers, they are asserting the significance of their unconventional relationship. But they are doing so by appealing to the taken-for-granted intimacy that is purportedly built into kinship, and thereby bolstering its claims. Although intimacy is the primary analytic through which I make sense of the relationships that I explore, looking at kinship alongside intimacy allows me to attend to the ways that each informs and produces the other.

Living and Dead

The risk of framing this project around relationships between the living and the dead is that doing so will contribute to the tendency to see these two categories as the contrasting halves of a stable binary. Anthropologists have shown how the boundaries between the living and the

dead can blur, giving rise to a liminal state that undermines the distinction between them (Catedra 2005[1992]; Farman 2013; Hertz 2005[1907]; Kaufman and Morgan 2005; Lock 2005[1997]; Straus 2005[1978]). In much of what I describe, the animacy of the dead throws deadness into question (Stanyek and Piekut 2010). Yet I retain these categories not only for the sake of clarity, but also as an analytic for understanding the relationship between them.

The distinction between the living and the dead is both established and constantly undone by the digital practices that I examine. Take, for example, the practice of posting messages to the dead on Facebook. Beth used Nancy's Facebook page to spend time with her, finding ways to not only speak, but also listen to Nancy. Yet she also emphasized that doing so was very different than spending time with her other friends on Facebook. She would never visit another person's profile page or peruse her News Feed after spending time with Nancy on her page, nor would she go there on her phone while she was out and about, even if she found herself missing Nancy. She navigated to it only when she was at home, alone, and in the appropriate frame of mind. Through these practices, she established a distinction between Nancy and her other Facebook friends. Yet Beth also told me that she didn't want Nancy's page to be "memorialized," a feature that Facebook introduced to clearly distinguish between the profiles of the living and those of the dead.¹ She struggled to find the words as she explained the distinction. "The fact that it's not memorialized, the way that... I don't really want them to do that, even though I see it as a site that *is* a memorial site. But I... Yeah, there's this... I think I have a strong feeling that I want it to still be... Not because it's a way of hanging onto her or something, but it's just a way that she still *is*." Memorializing Nancy's page would imply that her deadness is essential and stable, undermining the ways that Nancy "still *is*" on her page. In contrast, Beth's

¹ Memorializing a page adds the word "Remembering" before the person's name and freezes aspects of the profile, among other changes.

Facebook practices establish her deadness as a shifting and relational state that she herself participates in creating.

The way that my research participants engage with the dead using digital technologies entails a coming together, but one that produces and upholds the distinctiveness of each. The dead are intimately known but also persistently strange, similar to what Nadia Seremetakis (1991) describes in her ethnography of late-20th century Greek mourners. She conveys the relation of strangeness between mourners and their dead loved ones using the Greek concept of *xenetia*, explaining,

Travel, journey, passage to a foreign land, and exile are central metaphors of death in rural Greece. They are perceived as *xenetia*, which encompasses the condition of estrangement, the outside, the movement from the inside to the outside, as well as contact and exchange between foreign domains, objects and agents” (Seremetakis 1991:85, emphasis in original).

Later in the text, Seremetakis uses *xenetia* to describe relations between the living and the dead, described as “the estranged other.” She writes,

The estranged other becomes the foreign part of the self. *Xenetia* is formed by detached parts of the self. These externalized parts, the exiled artifacts of interiority and ‘collective flesh,’ demarcate this world from the other, this place from the place of estrangement, and in turn make *xenetia* an unending interiority (Seremetakis 1991:216).

The dead person who is internalized becomes a part of the self, but in the form of *xenetia*. The deceased is therefore persistently “estranged,” an estrangement that seems to move between the estrangement of self from self and the estrangement of self from other. Estrangement here does not take the form of expulsion, but rather of incorporation, where *xenetia* denotes an “unending

interiority.” Thus the movement that begins with the detachment of a part or parts of the self ends with an incorporation that draws alterity *within* the self while preserving its fundamental otherness.

The intimate estrangement of the internalized other allows the digital dead to exceed the boundaries of the self. Their estrangement also produces both self and other, living and dead in relation to each other, making intimate strangeness the form that their relation to each other takes. The way that my research participants engage with the dead using digital technologies entails a coming together, but one that produces and upholds the distinctiveness of each.

A Genealogy of Grief theory

Exploring the ways that relations with the dead can be ongoing brings my project into conversation with contemporary psychological models of grief, which I engage throughout the dissertation. In the last thirty years, dominant psychological models of grief have transformed from seeing persistent attachments to the deceased as pathological to embracing so-called “continuing bonds” with the dead. These changes have paralleled the rise of digital memorialization practices aimed at maintaining relationships with the deceased. While these models of grief affirm the enduring temporality of such mediated relationships, I found that the relationships themselves were constantly exceeding what these models proposed and predicted.

My engagements with a certain body of work addressing normal and “complicated” grief emerged from a series of conversations that I had with grief professionals early in the course of my research. Most of these conversations were with bereavement counselors and coordinators at hospice centers, although I also spoke with hospital chaplains as well as those who had been certified in specific (and often trademarked) methods of grief recovery. Together, these grief

specialists represent a relatively recent site of pastoral care, and one that seems to be expanding. To participate in Medicare programs, hospice centers are today required to have “an organized program for the provision of bereavement services furnished under the supervision of a qualified professional with experience or education in grief or loss counseling,” and they must make these services “available to the family and other individuals in the bereavement plan of care up to 1 year following the death of the patient” (NHPCO 2010). The hospice bereavement coordinators that I spoke with were responsible for differentiating between those who were experiencing normal patterns of grief and those whose grief had become “complicated,” in order to refer the latter to more intensive and long-term therapy with a mental health professional. They drew from a handful of texts to guide their decision, foremost of which was Worden’s *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (2009).

Delving more deeply into Worden’s handbook and its sources pointed me towards a genealogy of psychological and psychoanalytic writing on grief that stretched back to Freud’s early work on loss. These texts formed the background to my subsequent research into digitally-mediated relations with the dead, relations that I found to exceeded the parameters of normal grief as outlined by these texts. At various points in the dissertation, I draw out the intersections and divergences between these psychological models of grief and the relationships with the dead that I describe. I thus treat these psychological models as I would any work of anthropological or philosophical writing, taking seriously their potential to theorize relations with the dead while attending to their limitations in adequately accounting for the range of practices that I found. Yet in exploring their limitations, I simultaneously suggest the potential inadequacy of these models as the foundation for a form of treatment that is both widely available and widely utilized, particularly in the United States.

In his famous essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud distinguishes the normal process of mourning from the pathological state of melancholia. Freud argues that mourning is a beneficial form of work that begins with the recognition of loss. He writes, “Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object” (Freud 1917:244). The demand to withdraw attachment meets with psychic opposition, which can lead to a “hallucinatory wishful psychosis” in which “the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged” (Freud 1957[1917]:244-245). The work of mourning consists in moving from this wishful psychosis to an acceptance that the beloved is unrecoverable. To accomplish this, “Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it” (Freud 1957[1917]:245). Mourning thus involves an emotionally charged process of revisiting one’s relationship to the lost other in order to detach from that other. While this “hyper-cathexis” is painful, Freud contends that it is ultimately beneficial in that it allows the mourner to free herself from her attachments to the dead. Freud concludes, “when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (Freud 1957[1917]:245; c.f. Briggs 2014).

Whereas mourning involves the necessary pain of detaching from a lost beloved, melancholia is a prolonged state of abjection that results from the refusal of detachment. Like mourning, melancholia often begins with the loss of a loved object (Freud 1957[1917]:245). Rather than withdrawing attachment, the melancholic person displaces their attachment from the lost object onto their own ego (Freud 1957[1917]:249). According to Freud, this represents a regression to a primary form of narcissistic attachment, characterized by the subject’s identification with the object of their desire. Identification stimulates the desire to incorporate the

object into the self, literally or metaphorically devouring it (Freud 1957[1917]:249-250). Freud argues that the melancholic person's internalization of the other gives rise to the pervasive self-loathing that distinguishes melancholia from mourning, reflecting the melancholic person's aggression towards the beloved (Freud 1957[1917]:246). He writes, "if the love for the object—a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up—takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction when it suffers" (Freud 1957[1917]:251). The repercussions of this internalization may be severe. According to Freud, the habitation of the psyche by the other allows the psyche to be treated like an object, drawing hostility and aggression that may escalate into suicide (Freud 1957[1917]:252). For Freud, then, the death of a loved one threatens the integrity of the self. The mourner must detach from the deceased or risk losing themselves to pathological melancholia.

The early 1960s saw a renewed interest in the study of grief and mourning among psychologists and psychoanalysts. John Bowlby was among the first of these to develop a theory of grief, which he based on his previous work on attachment in early childhood. Bowlby proposed that young children who were separated from their mothers underwent a psychological process that could be used to understand mourning in adults. He identified four phases to this process, which concluded with the child redirecting attachment towards another person. Unlike Freud, however, Bowlby asserted that even children in the third phase of mourning continued to live as though the lost object (in this case, the mother) were still present or retrievable (Bowlby 1961).

In Bowlby's later work, he suggested that adults similarly maintain attachments to the deceased. He wrote, "In many cases, it seems, the dead spouse is experienced as a companion

who accompanies the bereaved everywhere” (Bowlby 1980:98). Furthermore, Bowlby saw these attachments as enduring. Citing a research study on widows and widowers, he wrote,

Although a sense of the continuing presence of the dead person may take a few weeks to become firmly established, they found it tends thereafter to persist at its original intensity, instead of waning slowly as most of the other components of the early phases of mourning do (Bowlby 1980:96-97).

Complicating some of his own early arguments regarding the necessity of detachment, Bowlby concluded, “[I]t seems likely that for many widows and widowers it is precisely because they are willing for their feelings of attachment to the dead spouse to persist that their sense of identity is preserved and they become able to reorganize their lives along lines they find meaningful” (Bowlby 1980:98).

Bowlby’s suggestion that the bereaved undergo a psychological process that unfolds in distinct stages was taken up and elaborated by several others in the ensuing decades. Colin Murray Parkes expanded Bowlby’s four stages into a five-stage model of grief (Maciejewski et al 2007). The first stage was described as shock and numbness, followed by yearning and searching, then despair and disorganization, and finally reorganization and recovery (Williams 2013b). Bowlby and Parkes’s model was the inspiration for psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ famous 5-stage model through which terminally ill patients reach awareness and acceptance of their impending deaths, originally outlined in a series of lectures at Harvard (Maciejewski et al 2007). Although originally used to describe the experience of the chronically ill, Kubler-Ross’s five stages gained widespread currency as a model of grief among grief experts, medical professions, and the general public. A recent article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* noted,

The stage theory of grief became well-known and accepted, and has been generalized to a wide variety of losses...A 1997 survey conducted by Downe-Wamboldt and Tamlyn documented the heavy reliance of medical education on the Kubler-Ross model of grief. The National Cancer Institute currently maintains a Web site on loss, grief, and bereavement that describes the phases of grief (Maciejewski et al 2007:716).

Today, Kubler-Ross's stage theory of grief remains paradigmatic, and defines many English-speaking people's understandings and expectations of grief.

Among grief researchers and counselors, the stages of grief model drew criticism for suggesting that the bereaved proceed through an orderly sequence of emotions and behaviors. Influenced by psychologist J. William Worden's handbook *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, many began embracing a model that replaced the stages of grief with the tasks of mourning. These tasks could be tackled sequentially or concurrently, and grief experts could assist the bereaved in their accomplishment.

Like those that came before, Worden's tasks of grief framed mourning as a temporary aberration. In the first edition of the book, published in 1982, detachment from the deceased was the clear endpoint of the tasks of mourning. He described the fourth and final tasks of grieving as "withdrawing emotional energy from the deceased and reinvesting it in another relationship," echoing the language that Freud had used a hundred and fifty years earlier. Indeed, in a later edition, Worden quotes Freud as saying, "Mourning has quite a precise psychical task to perform: its function is to detach the survivor's hopes and memories from the dead" (Worden 2009:50). In subsequent editions of the book, Worden revised the final task of mourning to reflect the discipline's increasing acceptance of ongoing relationships with the deceased. The second and third editions defined the fourth task as "to emotionally relocate the deceased and

move on with life” (Williams 2013a). Worden later explained that the phrase “emotionally relocate” was meant to suggest that mourners must “find a place for the deceased that will enable the mourner to be connected with the deceased (Worden 2009:50). This revision replaced Freud’s notion of detachment with the idea that persistent connection was a normal and even necessary aspect of mourning. Yet Worden qualified this persistent connection with the assertion that the mourner must “move on.” In the fourth edition of the book published in 2009, Worden again rewrote his fourth task to read: “to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life” (Worden 2009:50). This revision further affirmed the value of enduring bonds with the dead and replaced the injunction to “move on” with the softer language of “embarking on a new life.”

In 1996, a collaborative volume by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman set forth the notion of *continuing bonds* as an alternative paradigm for understanding normal grief reactions. Whereas grief theories from Freud to Bowlby to Worden presumed that grief has a definite endpoint and involves some degree of detachment from the deceased, the continuing bonds theory emphasized that relationships with the deceased could be maintained indefinitely. In their introduction, the authors write, “We think that the net effect of all these contributions is to show that the resolution of grief involves a continued bond that the survivor maintains with the deceased. We hope that this book demonstrates the rich possibilities of what we see as healthy, enduring bonds with the dead” (Klass et al 1996:3).

Although the continuing bonds theory of grief is gaining purchase, it remains somewhat controversial in the grief literature. Klass himself published a later article pointing out that the notion of continuing bonds was meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, it was not meant to be a claim as to the effectiveness or appropriateness of maintaining relationships

with the dead, but was rather an observation about its prevalence (Klass 2006). The original volume cautions, “As we develop a model of grief that includes continuing interactions with the dead, we need to be open to both the positive and negative consequences of this activity” (Klass et al 1996:72).

Furthermore, while Worden’s fourth task encourages persistent attachments, he hedges on fully endorsing them. The most recent edition states that the final task of mourning is, “to find an enduring connection with the deceased *in the midst of embarking on a new life*” (Worden 2009:50, emphasis add). These final words act as a qualifier to the recommendation to continue to connect with the deceased, suggesting that it is only appropriate to do so if these bonds do not interfere with moving on. The lingering influence of Freud’s notion of detachment is further evident in Worden’s descriptions of how people might fail at this fourth task of grief. These failures never involve the inability to establish continued bonds with the dead. Instead, they describe the failure to adequately move forward, completing the grieving process by shifting emotional attention elsewhere. Worden writes,

It is difficult to find a phrase that adequately defines the noncompletion of task IV, but I think the best description would perhaps be *not living*. One’s life has stopped with the death and has not resumed. The fourth task is hindered when one holds on to the past attachment in a way that precludes them from forming new ones...

One teenage girl had an extremely difficult time adjusting to the death of her father. Two years later, as she began to move through the issues of task IV, she wrote a note to her mother from college that articulated what many people come to realize when they are grappling with emotional withdrawal and reinvestment: “There are other people

to be loved,” she wrote, “and it doesn’t mean that I love Dad any less” (Worden 2009:52).

In Worden’s example, the teenaged girl’s success is evidenced by her readiness to love others. Although he revised the original language of detachment in his description of task four, here he explicitly names the girl’s process as “emotional withdrawal and reinvestment.”

The digital relationships that I describe are often interpreted as evidence of “continuing bonds” with the dead (Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Church 2013; de Vries and Rutherford 2004; Irwin 2015; Roberts 2004; Walter et al. 2011-2012). Interpreting them in this way brings with it the subtle constraints and limitations that contemporary grief theory retains from its long history of prioritizing detachment from the deceased. Namely, contemporary grief theory forecloses the possibility that the dead might participate in the kinds of relationships that it ostensibly supports. I recognize the dead as full participants in their digitally-mediated relationships with the living, giving them room to exceed even my own expectations. Although I contend that relations between the living the dead can be both substantive and ongoing, I do not mean to suggest that digital technologies can heal loss or trump death. Instead, I join Lisa Stevenson (2014) and Angela Garcia (2010) in questioning the presumption that melancholia is necessarily damaging. The relationships that I describe are often melancholic, organized around the many absences that death introduces. They are also in some way sustaining for both the living and the dead, producing and reproducing them in relation to each other.

Mediations

As models of grief have changed over the past fifty years, so have theories of mediation, including mediated relations between the living and the dead. Animation has recently emerged

from these changing theories of mediation as a way to account for new media worlds and the relationships that they engender. Although the existing writing on animation is nascent, it sits at the nexus of multiple conversations around digital media, from virtual worlds and embodiments (Boellstorff 2008, 2012; Nardi 2010; Taylor 1999, 2002) to social media (Gershon 2010; Miller 2011; Miller et al 2016) to mobile technologies (Horst and Miller 2006; Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2005). Animation has the potential to deepen anthropological engagements with diverse digital media by highlighting what these media make possible: forms of presence that do not rely on a one-to-one correspondence between the figure and its iteration, but are rather enriched by the variability, multiplicity, and sometimes even the sparseness with which they are “drawn.” I argue that animation theory can also contribute to anthropological engagements with the dead, who are brought to life today not only by material objects such as gravesites and altars but also by digital media that vivify the dead in the distinctive ways that animation theory describes.

Why has animation surfaced at this particular moment as an analytic of mediation? In an essay that opened the doors to a flurry of subsequent work, Teri Silvio (2010) points out that it’s partly due to the rise of certain forms of contemporary media, including the proliferation of cartoon characters, the growing consumption of *anime* and *manga*, and the increasing use of virtual avatars (online embodiments).² She contrasts this current media moment with one that had its roots in the 1950s through the 1970s, when performance studies emerged as a discipline and performance began to take hold as a structuring trope for mediated relations. During that time, the increasing ubiquity of television and its remediation of theater raised a host of issues that were condensed in the analytic of performance—namely, “the use of space, interactive

² Silvio argues that animation has also become significant as a result of changing conditions of capital, and notably “the rise of the so-called creative or content industries in North America, Europe, and Asia” (2010:422). In what follows, economic conditions are backgrounded.

communication, the materiality of the actor's body, the visible gap between actor and role, scriptedness versus improvisation, social reproduction versus social transformation" (Silvio 2010:424).³ Silvio suggests that animation has similarly emerged from a distinctive media moment dominated by a constellation of character-based media. These media raise a different set of issues than those of television and theater, including "the uncanny 'illusion of life' that makes these characters appealing...their particular blend of materiality and imagination, and...their diffuse agency" (Silvio 2010:423). Thus, just as a particular set of emergent media in the 1970s gave rise to performance as a paradigm of mediation, a particular set of emergent (digital) media is today giving rise to animation as a competing paradigm.

Silvio's insight into the link between theories of mediation and specific forms of media is well taken. However, her contrast with performance and its emphasis on dialogic communication has meant that much of the subsequent work on animation has been dominated by studies of semiotics, from Goffman's participant frameworks (Manning and Gershon 2013) to Parmentier's semiotic mediations (Nozawa 2013). Rather than following Silvio in theorizing animation through a contrast with performance, I would instead contrast animation with Rosalyn Morris's (2000) notion of *mediumship*. In her ethnography *In the Place of Origins* (2000), Morris deftly links a form of mediation to the social and historical conditions that arose around a particular set of media— photography and spirit possession. Her work is thus instructive in thinking about the links between animation and the contemporary media moment out of which it arises, helping to explain animation's recent emergence as a compelling analytic of mediation. To illustrate the intertwining between mediumship and photography, Morris recounts an incident in which she was asked by a spirit to identify the subject of a photograph that had been taken during a

³ Remediation is "the representation of one medium in another" (Bolter and Grusin 1999:45).

possession. She makes a guess based on what she believes to be the most likely scenario, failing to take into account the subject's distinctive costume. She writes,

It might seem, on the surface of things, that the spirit who demands that a viewer recognize spirits in the photograph is warning her away from an overinvestment in appearances. What appears to be the medium is, in fact, the spirit...But in this case, the risk of photography is not that one will be seduced by mere appearances and thus remain ignorant of the truer picture. Instead, it is that one will immediately distrust appearances and, in the effort to see beyond them, err. The power of the photograph, which is also the power of mediumship in the age of photography, is that it assumes the truth of appearances. And it assumes them because photography has generated the conditions in which truth will be understood as the conformity between one's image and one's origin, or rather, the image of one's original form—imagined as the anticipation of one's future recall *as* image (Morris 2000:190).

Morris suggests that the dissemination of photography ushered in an era of mass mediation in northern Thailand in which truth takes a particular form—as appearance, and particularly the appearance of the body in the photographic image. This configuration is taken up and amplified by practices of spirit mediumship, which rely on the truth of the image as evidence of the self whose image is formed on the surface of the body.

Mediumship is also a fruitful counterpoint because it illuminates aspects of animation that are not foregrounded in the contrast with performance—in particular, the way that animation evokes its subject without fully elaborating it. Morris suggests that photography in northern Thailand relies on visual depictions in which the accuracy and specificity of the image gives testament to the truth of what is revealed. In contrast, the digital media that my ethnographic

subjects use invoke the dead in ways that are deliberately partial and variable. In the first chapter, I describe how the online memorial that Corey has built for her beloved Marty seems almost bare, the generic template modified with only a few photographs and messages. Yet this digital space fosters their ongoing intimacy to a degree that is not matched by the other media through which Corey and Marty encounter each other, including the exhaustive archive of their conversations that Corey maintains both on her hard drive and in a bound and printed book. In each of the cases that I explore, what is left out by the medium is as necessary to the maintenance of an intimate relationship as what is included. This unexpected configuration is captured in the analytic of animation and its theorizations, more so than other theorizations of mediation such as Morris's mediumship. As Silvio points out, "one of the key characteristics of many animated characters is incompleteness" (2010:431). A figure that is suggested by a few deft pen strokes can be more evocative than one who has been drawn in great detail.

Animation can also account for the distinctive ways that the dead are made present within digital media and the practices that have developed around them. Contemporary conversations around the continued impact of the dead often center on the ghost or spirit, a figure who is generally able to appear at will and express their desires (Derrida 1994; Good 2012; Gordon 1997; Langford 2013; Mueggler 2001; Stanyek and Piekut 2010; Stevenson 2014). These forms of articulation and embodiment are largely missing from the digitally-mediated relations with the deceased that I explore. Instead, digitally-mediated relations more closely resemble forms of spirit mediumship, requiring the living to not only register the presence of the deceased but to participate in their presencing. The dead are manifest as an intimate part of the self as well as a presence on the screen, traversing and complicating the very boundaries between inside and outside, self and other. Yet the living are not channeling the dead the way a spirit medium would

do, but are rather filling in the outlines made by digital media. If the sparsely-drawn sketch is more evocative than the detailed portrait, it is because it invites a different relationship with its viewer, one in which the viewer is given greater responsibility for manifesting the figure in question.

That the dead are differently re-presented in the move from mediumship to animation is unsurprising. As historian Jeffrey Sconce (2000) argues, each new electronic medium has introduced a distinctive cultural link to the paranormal. Sconce's careful history is an admonition against the inclination to see digitally-mediated relations with the dead as historically unprecedented. Yet like the psychologists whose models of grief are outlined above, Sconce's account presumes that these paranormal associations are the projections of the living. In his discussion of American Spiritualism and its link to the invention of the telegraph, he writes, "I believe such an analysis of this founding spiritual technology will demonstrate that our own era's fascination with the discorporative and emancipating possibilities of the looming virtual age is in many ways simply an echo of this strange electronic logic, a collective fantasy of telepresence that allowed a nation to believe more than 150 years ago that a little girl could talk to the dead over an invisible wire" (Sconce 2000:28). Sconce thus dismisses contemporary associations between digital media and paranormal presence, comparing them to historic practices that he paints as outlandish.

Although I draw attention to the ways in which the living must participate in the re-presenting of the dead on digital media, I do not agree that this makes the dead into the projections of the living. Instead, I build on the work of anthropologists such as Todd Ramón Ochoa (2010), who take seriously the presence of the dead in these encounters. Such work also moves away from the kinds of semiotic analyses that have dominated recent work on animation,

suggesting other kinds of forces at play. Describing the experience of one of his ethnographic subjects, Isidra, Ochoa writes,

With *influence* as the standard of existence, there was no doubt in Isidra's mind that the dead existed, sometimes with more force than the living themselves. Such a mode of engaging the dead wasn't simply a function of Isidra's imaginary or a simple exercise in memory but also a will to listen to and relate viscerally and personally to the voices and images emerging always from the immediacy of our inner experience. These voices and scenes, sometimes visages, sometimes vague feelings, are lodged within us and within our relationships to objects and situations in the world, and in moments of special clarity they are felt and heard (Ochoa 2010:49).

For the Palo practitioners that he describes, relationships with the dead are mediated not only by external objects and situations but also by experiences of connection that arise from within. In this way, they parallel the experiences of my ethnographic subjects, for whom digital media can help activate an inner connection as well as providing an external home for their relationships with the deceased.

Ochoa's analysis of Palo relations with the dead has another important resonance with my own. He suggests that while the dead can exert their influence forcefully, to fully engage with them requires a certain *askesis*, including the cultivation of forms of attention (Foucault 2005(2001), 2010[2008]). Similarly, among those I spoke with who found a persistent connection to a dead loved one on social media, connecting was never a matter of opening up Facebook during a moment or two of downtime while waiting for the train. Instead, people described being seated in a particular location within their home, prepared for their digital activities to assume a certain gravity. The medium of Facebook allowed the dead to erupt into

their lives in ways that were surprising and sometimes unexpected, as I explore more fully in the fourth chapter. Yet it also required the bereaved to develop a set of practices that involved a “will to listen,” to borrow Ochoa’s words.

Turning to the work of Morris and Ochoa gives animation a different inflection than we find in much of much of the current writing on animation. I introduced Morris’s mediumship as a contrast to animation, elaborating the distinctions between the two forms. But I also turn to Morris and Ochoa as models for my own analytic approach. Morris in particular looks in depth at the media practices in one historical moment, exploring the unexpected resonances between photography and Thai spirit mediumship. She elaborates the way that mass-mediated photographs and the visual and ontological regime that they introduce offer a means through which the past is brought forth. Morris reminds us that history, like memory, unfolds not as an orderly sequence of past events but as a series of ruptures and reappearances. In both Morris’s media moment and the one that my interlocutors find themselves in, modern technologies offer a reflection on loss. Ochoa adds an emphasis on the sensory and affective experience of encounters with the dead. His detailed elaboration of the particular practices that Palo media engender provide insights into the relations with the dead that take shape around these media. Together, Morris and Ochoa introduce considerations of history, form, and practice, bringing my analysis of mediation into conversation with contemporary anthropologies of relations with the dead that explore the contribution of particular media.

Animating relationships with the dead

Recent theorizations of animation offer intriguing possibilities for recognizing and attending to the sociality of a range of entities— including, perhaps, the dead. These literatures

explore the linkages between animator, animated, and medium, showing how objects and figures can be brought to life by the collective efforts of animators, as well as by the media through which they materialize. They also open up a gap between animator, animated, and medium, showing how a character can come to life in ways that exceed the grasp of those who might otherwise be seen as creating or controlling them. In so doing, they suggest that a certain distributed agency might be attributed to animated objects and figures, allowing them to enter into relations with others.

Such insights are productive in thinking through relations with the dead that are mediated by digital technologies. In his ethnography of Japanese characters, Shusuke Nozawa writes,

If anthropology...can illuminate or at least recognize special and important roles played by fairies, ghosts, gods, angels, the dead, and other fantastic and liminal actants (including liminal objects like dolls and feces as well as liminal humans such as novices in a rite of passage and spirit mediums in a *séance*), then it might as well do the same with characters (Nozawa 2013).

I propose that the reverse is similarly productive: If treating characters like the dead draws attention to the “special and important roles” that they play in urban Japan, then treating the dead like characters illuminates the ways that they are increasingly animated in and through specific digital media in the U.S.

The turn to animation provides an avenue for exploring the ongoing existence of the dead, one that does justice to the richness of their digitally-mediated relationships. Characters have often been thought of in parallel ways, as imagined figures rooted in the fantasies of others. The recent work on animation pushes back against these commonsense interpretations, exploring how characters become more than the deliberate products of their creators and consumers.

Although existing work on animation includes non-digital figures such as Japanese *anime* and *manga* characters (Nozawa 2013, 2016) and Taiwanese puppets (Silvio 2006, 2010), it is particularly fruitful for conceptualizing digital mediations in which objects or figures depend on algorithms as well as humans to be brought to life. As Paul Manning and Ilana Gershon point out, digital figures such as avatars come into being through the affordances of the media but are not reducible to those parameters, instead reaching towards an interdependent existence (Manning and Gershon 2013).

In her article “Animation: The new performance?”, anthropologist Teri Silvio draws together three disciplinary approaches to animation: the arts, anthropology, and psychology. In the arts, animation is understood as a medium—specifically, a genre of film or video that is often opposed to “live action” movies and television, and might include a variety of techniques from 2D paper cut-outs to 3D computer-generated animation. Next, Silvio draws from anthropologies of religion to introduce a concept of “cultural animation” that shifts attention to forms of personhood outside of the embodied human self. She writes, “Where the Ur-cultural performance was religious ritual, the Ur-cultural animation is the investment of icons, effigies, talismans, and natural objects with divine power, what Victoria Nelson refers to as “practices of ‘en-souling’ matter” (2001:30)” (2010:426). Finally, Silvio considers the position of animation in psychology, rooting it in object-relations theory. She writes, “If Butler’s reading of Lacan posits performance as the introjection of the environment into the self, a psychic theory of animation focuses on the projection of the self into the environment” (Silvio 2010:426). These disparate approaches to animation share a sense that certain objects or figures that are not generally considered living are nonetheless both affective and effective; they elicit and perhaps experience strong feelings, and they produce real effects in the world. These qualities are closely tied to both the specific media

through which they materialize and to the relationships with and among those who contribute to their animation (see also Manning and Gershon 2013).

Building on Silvio's work, Shunsuke Nozawa (2016) suggests that forms of reciprocal animation might exist between characters and animators. In his analysis of Japanese voice actors who voice popular characters, he writes,

[O]ur commonsensical idea that actors give voices to characters merits reconsideration.

Not that it is incorrect. Obviously, it is humans who do the speaking. Rather, I suggest an alternative idea, which, while maybe absurd, will help us better understand the relation between voice and spirit. The idea may be summed up by Bruno Latour's commentary on ventriloquism: "we, the human subjects, are the *dummies* towards which other entities are projecting their real voices *as if* they were coming *from us*" (Nozawa 2016:174).

In Nozawa's configuration, the character animates the voice actor as much as the voice actor animates the character (see also Manning 2017).

Following Nozawa, I propose attending to the ambiguities between the conscious attempt to enact, embody, or voice a character and the sense of being overcome by that character. In my own ethnographic material, the dead are animated by diverse digital technologies that mediate their ongoing relations with others. At the same time, these mediations invite us to consider the ways that the dead might be animating digital technologies, breathing life into the algorithms, apps, social media pages, and avatars through which they encounter their loved ones. And if the dead are animating the technologies that their loved ones are interacting with, then who is to say who is animating whom here? I suggest that the dead likewise animate the living through their digital encounters.

In what follows, I use animation to describe the way that digital media bring the dead to life by endowing them with certain abilities such as the ability to speak and listen, to see and be seen, and to move and touch. In so doing, I draw from animation theory's insights into the gaps that remain between these algorithmic effects and the lives that animated figures come to inhabit, including the ways that they become meaningful for others. But I also use animation to describe the way that people come to life in and through their relations with others, relations that may themselves be made possible by digital media. By bringing these two notions of animation together, we can better understand the intimate and fraught relationships between the living and the dead mediated by digital technologies.

Methodology

I'm delineating my ethnographic subjects around a particular *form*— the practice of using digital technologies to foster a relationship between the living and the dead, one that might allow for persistent and deepening connections. The digital technologies that I consider participate in this form, shaping the way that relations between the living and the dead unfold. For example, in the first chapter I show how an online memorial provides a home for the relationship between two women, one living and one dead. While allowing them to spend time together again, the way that they are able to do so is in part dictated by the features that the online memorial offers: posting text-based messages, uploading links to songs, and viewing digital photographs. It is also in part dictated by what the platform does not offer, including a way to incorporate their shared interest in Hinduism.

One of the difficulties of defining my fieldsite in this way is deciding where the edges are, what to include and what to exclude. I have let the practices themselves be my guide in this.

The final chapter considers virtual reality because Mike and Alex are using it to create an experience of connection between Mike and his late father, not because there is something inherent about virtual reality itself that merits inclusion in a study of digital technology. There are also multiple digital technologies that I don't explicitly consider but that can and do produce ways of relating to the dead, including video games, MMOG (massive multiplayer online games), and established apps like Snapchat. My purpose was not to create a comprehensive database of all of the digital technologies that might be used to foster relationships between the living and the dead, but to illustrate in some depth how just a few of them are doing so.

Although I delineated my fieldsite on the basis of form, I found that the people that I spoke with were by and large part of a shared social field and a common institutional matrix. Almost all were white, middle or upper-middle class, had college degrees, and were between the ages of twenty and sixty-five. This distribution may reflect inequities in access to digital technologies and the training and education to be able to creatively repurpose them. For example, the virtual reality experience described in the last chapter required a substantial monetary investment in the required hardware, and Alex relied on his years of specialized education to develop the prototype. Although the increasingly widespread access to mobile smart phones have begun to shift the demographics of internet use towards lower-income users, access to digital technology remains divisive (McGrane 2013).⁴ The demographics of my research participants are partly a reflection of my own social network, which I drew from heavily in finding people who would be willing to delve deeply into their experiences of loss and connection. One of the consequences of this approach is that some forms of online memorialization are absent here. In

⁴ In light of the ways in which my research participants use these technologies, their vastly unequal distribution raises questions about whether and how such inequalities persist after death (Butler 2004).

particular, the deaths of young people of color at the hands of police, military, and gang violence have spurred translocal practices of online memorialization that often involve posting graphic photos or videos of the dead. Political sentiment is notably absent in the forms of memorialization that I engage with here, suggesting different contexts of privilege and purpose in which deaths can be read as private and individual.

I have also delineated my fieldsite by restricting it to the English-speaking world. My research participants were connected to one another through their shared participation in online spaces in which people who spoke the same language and had access to the right technology could enjoy a shared sociality, one that could at times incorporate the dead. The boundaries of this technologically-mediated, English-speaking world are porous. Although Corey lives in Britain, her friend Marty lived in Argentina. Marty's English proficiency and her love of the late British pop star George Harrison led her to frequent the mostly-British fan forum that brought her and Corey together. I included Marty in my research even though she did not live in the Anglo-American world, because her online presence meant that she participated in it.

I want to be clear that by looking at how relationships take place by way of these digital technologies, I am not claiming that relationships between the living and the dead didn't exist before, or that those that are taking shape around platforms such as Facebook pages are fundamentally different than those that take shape around offline sites such as gravesites and altars. A gravesite is a medium around which particular kinds of relationships can form. The distinctiveness of the digital practices that I describe remains an open question, and one that I explore through the specific contours of each of the relationships that I study.

Framing my fieldsite around digital technologies allows me to look across platforms to recognize the overlaps between the relationships that are opened up, as well as the distinctions

between what is facilitated and foregrounded by each technology. For example, concluding by looking at a virtual reality experience reuniting Mike with his dead father turns our attention to the body of the dead in a way that is not immediately suggested by my research participants' engagements with online memorials, Facebook pages, or apps. Yet exploring this virtual body also invites us to reconsider the ways in which material and digital bodies are implicated in practices such as posting on the Facebook page of a dead loved one, which involves multiple forms of proximity between the living and the dead.

I came across my interlocutors through friends and acquaintances, some hearing of my work and contacting me eager to participate, others who I contacted knowing they used digital media to interact with dead loved ones. In an effort to seek out different engagements, I created a website that described the project and included information about how to participate (Figure 1). I also posted a description of my research and a link to the website on multiple public forums related to grief and grieving. I spoke with everyone who was willing, and these conversations helped shape my understanding of the scope of available technologies and the ways that they were entering into people's experiences of loss. I chose a handful of interlocutors to closely follow based on the depth of their ongoing relationships to the deceased and the diversity of their experiences with digital media. We had many conversations over the next two years, exploring their experiences with online memorialization as well as with grief and grief treatment more broadly. Some of my research participants I never met in person due to the geographic distance between us. Our conversations were mediated by the online video calling platforms Skype and Google Hangouts, and subject to their occasional unreliability. As the video feed froze and the audio cut in and out, I was continually reminded of the limitations introduced by digital media, as well as the possibilities that they opened up for our continued conversations.

Exploring Online Mourning

What does it mean to mourn in the digital age?

ABOUT PARTICIPATION MOURNERS GRIEF EXPERTS COMPANIES RESEARCH QUESTIONS MORE INFO
ABOUT THE RESEARCHER CONTACT SIGN UP

About the project



What does it mean to mourn at a time when social media profiles, online memorials, and digital archives leave persistent traces of the dead online?

This project explores people's experiences using digital platforms as they mourn. We are particularly interested in how people are using technology to maintain continuing bonds with loved ones who have passed away. We are hopeful that this research will improve understandings of contemporary grief, as well as contributing to anthropological inquiries into mourning rituals and the impact of technology on relationships. We look forward to sharing these results with you at the conclusion of the research.

Please visit the [participation](#) page to learn more about contributing YOUR story, or [sign up](#) to schedule an initial interview.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the home page for the research project website

As my relationships with my interlocutors deepened, I felt my relationships with their dead loved ones deepen as well. My long conversations with Lois about grief seemed to violate some unspoken taboo, and in so doing they opened up a space of intimacy between us. In time I began to feel that this intimacy extended to her late brother Frank. Even though I had never met him I found myself lingering on his Facebook page, flipping through the same blurry selfies and re-reading the same bad puns he'd posted years before. I learned who his friends were and how

they had met him. I read about the crazy antics that he'd gotten up to in his youth. I listened to the eulogies that Lois and her siblings had read at his funeral, and I wept at their loss—now, in some strange way, a loss for me as well.

I was also aware of the degree to which I was participating in these relationships between the living and the dead. My frequent check-ins were one way in which the presence of the dead was maintained in the lives of my interlocutors. Our conversations often drew them back to the media through which their relationships were maintained, spurring new engagements with the media and with the dead. More than once I was inscribed into these media, as when Lois posted on Facebook about our discussion of Frank's profile page as a shrine of sorts, or when Erin logged our interviews on her app.

Many of my interlocutors told me that they found it difficult to bring the deceased up in conversations with others; they were concerned that they would be judged for continuing to be hung up on their grief, or that they would seem macabre. They embraced the opportunity to tell stories, share photographs, and visit and revisit the digital media through which they maintained intimacies with their loved ones. Yet the mood could flip from joy to sorrow without warning, pleasure giving way to pain and then back to pleasure in the space of a few minutes.

When I told friends, colleagues, and acquaintances about my project, almost everyone responded with the story of a Facebook friend who had died. In the beginning of my fieldwork, many seemed surprised and unsettled that others were continuing to post on their profile pages. Two years later, most seemed to consider this an ordinary aspect of social media. Yet even then, I often faced the question, "So are these new technologies helping people, or are they just prolonging their grief?" I was asked this not only by people who had never suffered a significant loss, but occasionally by those who were themselves grieving. It was a difficult question to

answer, since it already sought to assess digital media according to the extent to which they could assist people in moving on from the loss that they had suffered. Thus, although I critique the recent psychological literature on grief, I do so with the awareness that those who theorize “continuing bonds” with the dead are making an ethical intervention into the normative notion that severing ties with the dead is both expected and necessary.

Chapter by chapter

I begin the first chapter with the story of Corey and Marty, whose persistent and intimate relationship is made possible by the online memorial that Corey created after Marty’s death. I argue that their relationship affirms the presence of continuing bonds while challenging presumptions about what those bonds consist of. While many contemporary American psychological models of grief suggest that the bereaved internalize the deceased in the form of a mental representation, I assert that this does not adequately capture Corey’s simultaneous desire to create an online public space for Marty and to incorporate Marty into herself. I introduce the psychoanalytic concept of extimacy to suggest that the relationship that the online memorial makes possible is that of the extimate other, the kernel of radical otherness within the self. I not only interpret Marty as Corey’s other, I also propose that Corey is *Marty’s* other, recognizing the reciprocity engendered by their extimate relationship. This reciprocity between the living and the dead is something that prevailing grief theory models cannot acknowledge.

The second chapter considers the role of memory in online memorialization. I tell the story of Erin, who built a smartphone app to record the memories of her mother or “mom sightings” that arose during her day-to-day life. I argue that Erin’s app forges the relationship that it simultaneously records, providing a way for her to register and attend to her mother’s

ongoing presence. I then consider what Erin's "mom sightings" tell us about the relationship between memory and continuing bonds with the deceased. In contemporary grief theory, the dead are often configured as passive objects of a loved one's intentional remembrances. For Erin, memory is not a deliberate attempt to access past events that are preserved in the mind, but a series of eruptions of the past into the present that feel again and again surprising. I argue that Erin uses the app to continually refashion her memories, creating an opening that allows her relationship with her mother to be dynamic—an experience that I term re-remembering. Erin's use of her app to refashion memory challenges not only contemporary perspectives on grief, but prevailing assumptions about the function of digital technology as a tool for preserving an authentic recording of the past.

The third and fourth chapters turn to what is perhaps the best-known site for digital relationships with the dead: social media. In the third chapter, I explore the relationship between Frank and his sister Lois, who was consumed by his Facebook page in the year following his death. As Lois haunted his page she came to know him better than she had in life, learning to listen as well as to speak to him. Their intimacy was made possible by the active participation of Frank's online social network, whose frequent posts, responses, and reactions animated his page. I demonstrate that these posts invoke his absence by repeatedly expressing shared loss and longing, paradoxically bringing Frank to presence as an absence. By engaging with his page, Lois was able to draw near to Frank, orbiting his absence the way that some celestial bodies can orbit a black hole. I conclude by considering how the structure of the Facebook page itself facilitates their deepening intimacy. The sheer quantity of messages, recollections, photographs, and videos on his page introduced an element of surprise into Lois's relationship to Frank.

Perusing his page, Lois let herself be encountered by him in ways that she couldn't fully anticipate.

In the fourth chapter I foreground the mediations involved in relationships with the digital dead, taking Facebook as a case study in the ways that these relationships both shape, and are shaped by, the policies to which they are subject. In recent years, Facebook's policies towards dead users have changed from banishing the dead to including and incorporating them in the social network, following recent trends in grief theory. Yet their memorialization policy also attempts to reduce the ambiguities and mitigate the element of surprise that the platform has the potential to introduce into relationships with the dead. Such policies also mask the profitability of the dead, ensuring that they remain spatially and symbolically separated from the volatilities of the market. These policies affect not only the treatment of the dead, but also practices of care among the living. At the end of the chapter, I turn to the experiences of Sam's extended family, which created a Facebook memorial group after his untimely death. I demonstrate how they provide emotional support to one another within the memorial group in ways that are particular to the medium. For example, Sam's sister Sarah feels drawn to the group's page not only to nourish her memory of him, but also to check up on her father and offer what solace she can in the form of Likes, Loves, and comments on his anguished posts.

The fifth and final chapter explores Elysian Fields, a virtual reality experience reuniting one of the creators with his dead father, George. In our conversations, Mike repeatedly referred to the avatar as "my dad," suggesting that the virtual body alone was sufficient to conjure the presence of his father. I explore the status of George's virtual body by drawing from Kantorowicz and Agamben's writing on the effigies of the dead in medieval Europe and ancient Rome. I set this literature alongside contemporary writing on the avatar, which recognizes its

ambiguous status as both an extension of the user and a distinctive person in its own right. I suggest that like the effigy, George's avatar is a double that can substitute for him without displacing him or obscuring his death. This virtual body is animated not only by the digital codes that Alex writes for him, but also by Alex and Mike's willingness to recognize him as a person, just as the sovereign effigies are brought to life by the social recognition of their subjects. Yet like Kantorowicz's medieval effigies, George's virtual body underscores his death at the same time that it animates him, leading Mike towards an introspective experience of memory and connection that is routed through the virtual body of his dead father.

1. Virtual homes for relationships with the dead:

Corey and Marty's online memorial

Introduction

The online memorial that Corey created for Marty is simple and sparse. Using the platform *Forever Remembered*, Corey selected a plain white background that is adorned in one corner with a white pillar candle surrounded by bright orange poppies. The home page features a photograph of Marty, smiling broadly before a mountain landscape, hair falling in soft curls to her shoulders. Below her photo a series of messages flash by, messages that Corey has written to Marty in the ten years since her death and posted to the memorial in the four years since she created it. They are brief and intimate. *Six years on I remember with a smile rather than sadness. You never leave my thoughts, my dear. I love you always.*

In one of our conversations, Corey told me, "I don't really believe that she reads it, but it's very important to me that it is there, because it feels like a continuation of the relationship." A few minutes later, she described to me what it felt like to visit the online memorial:

There's nostalgia, but there's also the same kind of happiness I felt when we used to talk. It's all about that, really. It's all about seeking that out again. And it seems like a really good way of being able to do that, at least for me. To have that space that I have created, that I have somewhere to go. And so that if I chose, I can share it with people who might not otherwise get a really good sense of who, and what, Marty was and *is* to me.

The online memorial is a place of connection as well as remembrance. It's also a public space, one that others can access if they know the URL or can stumble across if they're searching for

traces of Marty online. It's a way for others to find out not only who Marty was, but who she *is*. Corey visits the memorial regularly to stay in touch with Marty. As she explained, "It's a way of making sure that that connection stays strong."

A recent body of work explores the place of the dead in digital media (Arnold et al. 2018; Bollmer 2013; Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Church 2013; Howarth 2000; Irwin 2015; Kneese 2016; Meese et al. 2015; Roberts 2004). Among their most important findings is that media such as online memorials have opened up new ways for the deceased to persist beyond biological death, allowing relationships with the dead to be ongoing. In one of the earliest studies of Web memorialization, Pamela Roberts (2004) found that a significant number of Web memorials had been created 20 or more years after the person's death. She points out that many of the memorials were addressed to the dead, and notes that most contained Guestbooks where visitors continued to post messages to the deceased. She writes, "Guestbooks provide the opportunity to update and revise the relationship, an important part of the ongoing negotiation with the dead" (Roberts 2004:60). Based on her analyses, Roberts concludes, "Web memorials provide a socially acceptable way to mark continuing bonds with the dead and to share those feelings with others" (Roberts 2004:71). Roberts' conclusions are best understood within the changing field of grief theory. While fifty years ago grief experts emphasized that it was necessary for the bereaved to detach from their deceased loved ones, a recent interest in maintaining continuing bonds with the dead has challenged that model of detachment. The authors of the 2018 volume *Death and Digital Media* situate these developments in within a larger shift in the way that death

and memorialization are experienced in the West, towards a greater integration of the dead into the flow of everyday life (Arnold et al. 2018:149).⁵

Roberts' findings raise important questions about online memorialization. If these practices foster persistent relationships between the living and the dead, then what form do such relationships take? And how might online memorialization speak back to contemporary grief theory, illuminating some of the ways that people's relationships exceed what is proposed by these theories? Her findings also raise questions about the mediations involved in these online relations. How does online memorialization compare to the memorialization practices that people engage with offline? How does the specific digital medium help structure relations between the living and the dead?

In what follows, I draw from the idea of *home* to explore the significance of the online memorial to the relationship that Corey and Marty have maintained. Freud's writing on the home captures the sense of intimate otherness that their relationship manifests. Struggling to define the German term *unheimlich* (roughly translated as "uncanny"), Freud sets about defining its opposite, *heimlich* (roughly translated as "homelike"). Freud begins by defining *heimlich* as "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly, etc." (Freud 1997[1919]:196). As he elaborates on the multiple definitions of *heimlich*, Freud finds that the notion of "homelike" develops into the idea of something that is concealed from strangers, so that it also comes to designate, "something hidden and dangerous" (Freud 1997[1919]:201). He concludes, "Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of

⁵ Arnolds and his colleagues also note that the treatment of the corpse is following a similar trend. Rather than being disposed of in sequestered spaces, the dead are increasingly dispersed into "environments inhabited by the living" (Rumble et al. 2014:244, cited in Arnold et al. 2018:148).

ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*” (Freud 1997[1919]:201). What is eerily strange is at once familiar and ‘homelike,’ just as the home is understood to contain something threatening and radically other.

Freud’s notion of *heimlich* resonates with the particular relationship that the online memorial opens up between Corey and Marty. It captures the paradoxical sense of intimate otherness that they enjoy, a double movement of internalization and externalization that grief theory does not capture. At the end of the chapter, I suggest that this double movement is best understood through the psychoanalytic concept of extimacy, which designates the kernel of radical otherness within the self.

To draw out the distinctiveness of the online memorial, I contrast it with three other online and offline homes for Marty and for her relationship with Corey. The first of these is the fan forum where they first met, which continued to be a site of ongoing connection before it was taken down five years after Marty’s death. The second is the altar that Corey keeps in her bedroom, which introduces forms of domesticity that contrast with the home of the online memorial. The last is Marty’s gravesite, which emphasizes to Corey the aspects of their relationship that have ended rather than those that endure. Although each of places holds affective meaning for Corey, the extimacy engendered by the online memorial introduces forms of reciprocity into their ongoing relationship. As such, it offers a counterpoint to contemporary grief theory’s configuration of the relationships between the living and the dead.

Homes for the dead in grief theory

From their origins in Freud's early writing, the roots of contemporary psychological models of grief theory have demonstrated a persistent preoccupation with the location of the dead. This preoccupation has centered on the question of whether relationships with the dead ought to be located within or outside of the self. Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" introduced the idea that the internalization of the deceased is a pathological process that distinguishes melancholia from ordinary mourning. He saw this internalization as a form of narcissistic attachment, and one that might ultimately lead to the escalation of psychic suffering to the point of suicide. He based his injunction to withdraw attachment from the deceased on the dangers of internalizing the dead loved one.

John Bowlby broke with Freud by affirming the existence of persistent attachments to the dead in his later work on grief. He distinguished between those that were healthy and those that were pathological based on their location. In healthy mourning, the bereaved, "locate the dead person somewhere appropriate, for example in the grave or in his favorite chair" (Bowlby 1980:161). Pathological or "chronic" mourning involved the "mislocation" of the dead, including their mislocation within the self. Bowlby argued that this type of mislocation could lead to isolation and self-reproach, or to somatic symptoms that often mimicked the deceased person's final illness (Bowlby 1980:166-168). He therefore joined Freud in the belief that the internalization of the deceased loved one is pathological and ultimately damaging to the psyche of the mourner. According to Bowlby, the dead are more appropriately located outside the self, in the grave or the chair.

Psychologist and grief researcher J. William Worden likewise evinced a concern about the proper location of the dead. The second and third editions of *Grief Counseling and Grief*

Therapy defined the fourth task of grief as an emotional “relocation” of the deceased. Although the most recent edition further amends this task to finding an “enduring connection” to the dead, the language of location and relocation persists throughout the text. In his description of the fourth task of grief, for example, Worden wrote, “The counselor’s task then becomes not to help the bereaved give up their relationship with the deceased, but to help them find an appropriate place for the dead in their emotional lives—a place that will enable them to go on living effectively in the world” (Worden 2009:51). He added that one of the principles of effective grief counseling is to “facilitate the emotional relocation of the deceased” (Worden 2009:99).

Later in the text, Worden revealed what he thought an appropriate location for the dead might be:

A healthy adaptation to this new reality is for the mourner to internalize the deceased into him- or herself and his or her schema of life so that psychological proximity substitutes for the physical proximity. The bereaved can be emotionally sustained by the mental representation of the deceased, with less need for the physical presence no longer available (Worden 2009:67).

Worden diverged from both Freud and Bowlby by suggesting that internalizing the lost loved one was an appropriate and “healthy” way to maintain attachments. For Worden, then, maintaining a connection to the deceased is made possible by a process of relocation that brings the dead from outside to inside the self. This notion seems to have gained purchase among grief professionals. Worden’s work was first brought to my attention by a bereavement counselor who described his final task of mourning as “internalizing the dead person.”

Worden suggests that the bereaved might internalize the deceased in order to maintain an ongoing connection, but his suggestion is tied to his desire to see the bereaved move on and form

new relationships with the living. For example, at one point he writes, “Mourning is finished when a person can reinvest his or her emotions into life and in the living” (Worden 2009:77). Here, Worden reveals both his belief that mourning has a definitive endpoint as well as his presumption that the bereaved will shift their attachments to those who are still alive.

Worden’s understanding of relations between the living and the dead becomes clearer in the context of the rest of the text. The very first task of mourning is “To accept the reality of the loss.” Worden elaborates, “The first task of grieving is to come full face with the reality that the person is dead, that the person is gone and will not return. Part of the acceptance of this reality is coming to believe that reunion is impossible, at least in this life” (Worden 2009:39). Worden outlines some of the ways that the bereaved evade this task, including “denying that death is irreversible” and becoming involved in “religious spiritualism” (Worden 2009:41). In passages such as these, it is clear that Worden does not consider the dead to be capable of engaging in substantive relationships with the living. Internalizing the dead as a mental representation is the only appropriate form that a relationship might take when only one person is really there.

Relating to others through mental representations does not inherently suggest a thinning of the relationship. Drawing from the lifelong work of psychologist Jean Piaget, John Bowlby himself proposed that people’s relationships to others are mediated by mental representations, and that developing these mental representations is a necessary part of normal child development that allows the child to maintain attachments to others (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980). Such interpretations are a refiguring of Freud’s own work on object relations, including the ability of the infant to introject representations of caregivers into the unconscious (Bowby 1973:204-205). Worden invokes this history when he refers to the deceased as a “mental representation,” but in his descriptions the term loses its nuance. Worden suggests that people form mental

representations of the dead through intentional acts of remembrance, acts which are amenable to guidance and manipulation by the psychologist or grief counselor. To attempt to forge another kind of bond with the dead would violate the first task of grief, revealing that the mourner has not emotionally accepted that the deceased no longer exists, that they “are gone and will not return.” Thus in Worden’s account, relationships between the living and their “mental representation” of the deceased are really relationships of the living to themselves.

Worden’s model of appropriate relations with the dead does not adequately convey the depth and richness of Corey and Marty’s ongoing relationship. In her descriptions of their relationship, Corey suggested that Marty remained dynamic and surprising. She was not just the passive object of Corey’s occasional reminiscences, but instead participated in the relationship that was sustaining for both of them. Furthermore, her relationship with Marty did not reflect the straightforward internalization that Worden’s model would predict, instead manifesting a simultaneous desire to bring her deeper into herself *and* to situate her in what she described as the “public” space of the online memorial.

To make sense of Marty and Corey’s relationship, a different strain of psychoanalysis becomes relevant. Although Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” pathologized the internalization of the deceased, his larger corpus has given rise to a body of psychoanalytic theory that complicates straightforward distinctions between self and other. In particular, the psychoanalytic notion of extimacy offers an alternative way of understanding online relations between the living and the dead. By putting a certain gloss on Lacan’s ‘Other,’ the kernel of strangeness at the center of the subject, I want to suggest that Corey’s relationship with Marty is not a relationship of Corey to herself, but to another. More specifically, to an other—*her* ‘other.’ And by extension, I want to suggest that Marty’s relationship to Corey is likewise a relationship

to her other, a relationship that Corey sustains through her willingness to become herself ‘other.’ She does so, in part, by way of the online memorial.

Corey and Marty’s story

I was introduced to Corey through a family friend, who had gotten to know her on an online group for ukelele players. He sent her an email describing my research, and Corey quickly responded that she was “deeply passionate” about “grieving and the Internet” and would be happy to connect and share her perspective. We set up a time to meet over Skype, since Corey lives in Britain. All of our subsequent conversations took place over Skype, although we also exchanged emails to set up meetings and share materials such as photographs of her bedroom altar, poems that she had written about Marty, and links to her blog posts on grieving for an online friend. We also became Facebook friends, and I occasionally Liked one of her posts when it showed up in my News Feed, or chatted with her on the Facebook app.⁶

At twenty-four years old, Corey was one of the youngest people who I spoke with about loss, yet she often seemed far older. She had a slow, measured style of speech, and considered her responses carefully before answering. Although she spoke with emotion, she never seemed overcome by it. In our conversations I found myself choosing my words more deliberately than usual, eager to live up to the example of this self-possessed young woman.

Corey explained that when she was 14, she began communicating extensively with a 39-year-old Argentinean woman named Marty. The two met on an online fan forum for George Harrison and quickly bonded over their shared devotion to the late musician. A decade later,

⁶ The News Feed is the first page that Facebook users see after they log in. It displays recent posts made by members of the user’s network. Clicking a thumbs-up button at the bottom of a post allows users to “like” it. For more on this mediated communication, see chapter three.

Corey still recalled their first exchange with obvious pleasure. On George Harrison's birthday, some members of the fan forum offered him a virtual Banoffee pie. Marty was unfamiliar with the British dessert and asked what "Banoffee" meant. Corey warmly remembered, "My first five words to Marty were, "Banana and toffee, I think."'" She told me, "I still, whenever I see Banoffee pie on the menu in a restaurant, I will have a kind of little laugh to myself, because that was how it all began."

Soon the two of them were talking every night, often for hours at a time. When I asked Corey what their conversations were like, she said, "We talked about anything and everything. And we had some really quite serious conversations, but some very, very funny conversations as well, that are the ones that I kind of find myself hanging onto." She explained,

We talked a lot about music. She was starting to get back into playing guitar, which was something that I was thankfully able to help her with. She told me about her family, she told me about her spiritual beliefs. And we had lengthy conversations about Hinduism and Hindu holy texts and the Yogananda and things of that nature. There wasn't much that we *didn't* talk about...

After a while she started sharing photographs of herself, her family. Some quite intimate aspects of her life. I considered myself a friend, but I became a confidante to a degree.

Corey and Marty's relationship took place entirely online. Most of their conversations were on MSN messenger, an online instant messaging service. They also communicated publicly on the George Harrison fan forum. Yet the fact that their relationship took place online didn't free Corey and Marty from the kinds of obligations entailed by close relationships. Corey

described taking great pains to make sure that she lived up to their mutual expectation of daily conversations.

It was a high priority for me that I was free to chat to her. It was important to me that if, for whatever reason, I was going to be able to speak for a few days, I would make sure that she knew exactly what I was up to and how long I would be unable to speak etcetera. In much the same way as she didn't want me to worry about her, I didn't want her to worry about me.

During the time that Corey and Marty were in regular communication, Marty was being treated for breast cancer. Corey was aware of Marty's illness, although the two rarely discussed it. As Marty grew increasingly ill, members of the George Harrison fan forum community organized two different prayer vigils for her. Shortly before her death, one of the forum members requested that everyone play the George Harrison song "My Sweet Lord" at the same time. It was an offering of spiritual support for Marty that also provided a means of collective grieving for the forum members, and Corey was both moved and comforted by the vigil. The two continued to communicate regularly until Marty was no longer able. A year after their first exchange about Banoffee pie, Marty died of metastatic breast cancer.

Corey experienced a tremendous sense of loss after Marty's death. Although today she has an active social life that includes close online friendships, she told me that she continues to feel that, "That friendship was, and remains, unlike anything I had ever had in my life before, and really quite unlike anything I've ever had in my life since." Five years after Marty's death, Corey created her online memorial, which she described to me as, "a place for me to go and be with her for a few minutes."

As a place where Corey and Marty can be together, the online memorial pushes against Worden's notion that relationships with the dead must be relocated inside of the self. It is also situated alongside several other homes that serve as sites for their persistent encounters, both online and off. Juxtaposing the online memorial with the fan forum where they met, the altar that Corey has built in her bedroom, and Marty's gravesite, I tease out the distinctions between these different online and offline homes for their relationship in order to reveal the particularity of the relationship that the online memorial makes possible.

The fan forum

In the years following Marty's death, Corey continued to frequent the George Harrison fan forum, especially when she was particularly missing Marty. Being part of the online community where they had gotten to know each other and staying in communication with their mutual friends helped Corey feel that they were still connected. She told me that after Marty died, "I continued to post there because I felt as though it made sense, and I felt as though as long as I was a member of that community I would never feel cut off from her."

Five years after Marty's death, the fan forum was suddenly taken down. Corey was anguished at the unexpected loss of the site, which left her feeling cut off from the community of people who had known Marty and shared in her grief over Marty's death. It also left her bereft of the place where the two of them had met and communicated. Corey told me, "suddenly that place where I'd shared so much, and the messages that we'd shared, *everything* was just suddenly gone."

The disappearance of the fan forum threw Corey's relationship with Marty newly into question. She explained,

It was like a significant part of it had been erased, even though there's no way it could ever *be* erased. It was like a significant part of it had suddenly just gone, and it was never, ever coming back. I mean, I actually emailed one of the administrators on the former forum, and the message bounced. I obviously never got anything back, but I was *desperate*. It was a real wrench. It was like you say, like losing her all over again.

Corey's words suggest that the fan forum was the site of their persistent relationship, kept alive by the online community that knew them. She nourished this relationship by continuing to post to Marty's forum thread, keeping her updated about her own life as well as about the topics that had interested them.

Interestingly, what Corey was most upset about losing when the forum was taken down was not the posts that they had exchanged while Marty was alive, but those that had taken place after her death. She explained, "although I knew, and I know, that the personal conversations that we had [on MSN messenger] were so much more important, there were things that I posted to her thread after she passed away that really, really meant a lot to me that I would have liked to have." Corey emphasized the significance of their private dyadic relationship, pointing towards their "personal conversations" as the most important legacy of their relationship. Yet the depth of her grief at the loss of the fan forum also points towards the part that their shared community had played in sustaining that relationship. Participating in this shared community drew them closer, both while Marty was alive and after her death.

Corey pointed to the loss of the fan forum as one of her primary motivations for creating the online memorial. Like the forum, the online memorial became the site of a reciprocal exchange with Marty, one that moved between online and offline spaces. Several of the posts on the online memorial refer to recent "visits," suggesting that Corey reciprocates Marty's periodic

visitations by stopping by her online memorial. She also told me that she goes to the memorial “whenever there’s some interesting new release from the Harrison estate that I know we would have spent hours talking about.” She explained, “I feel like I’m enjoying them for both of us, but I still need to share them. Share them, in a sense, with her.” The online memorial gave her a place to commune with Marty, connecting over their shared interests.

Yet the online memorial did not mitigate the pain that Corey felt over Marty’s death. When I asked her what kind of mood she was in when navigated to the memorial, she responded, “I visit it most often when I really get that sense of, “I wish we could have one more conversation”... So that’s why I visit the site and kind of mentally at least, tell her about these things that are going on.” While she described longing for an exchange that was no longer possible, she also described visiting the memorial as a kind of conversation with Marty, a way to “tell her about the things that are going on.” Marty’s death became the grounds for a new kind of online connection. As Corey concluded, “It’s a continuous and evolving relationship.”

Corey’s decision to create the online memorial didn’t just arise from her need to have a site for interactions. She needed it to be a particular kind of place: online, and open to the public. The fan forum had enlivened their relationship, and the knowledge that their conversations were situated within this shared community had helped sustain it after Marty’s death. After the fan forum was taken down, Corey needed a way to reproduce a version of this sustaining collective presence. To understand the particular way that others online played a part in the relationship that was made possible by the online memorial, it’s helpful to first turn to another site through which Corey continued to connect with Marty: her altar.

The altar

In addition to the online memorial, Corey built a physical place of remembrance for Marty in her bedroom, part of a more “general spiritual place” that she refers to as an altar. After our first conversation, Corey emailed me a photograph that she had taken of the altar. The photo shows a diverse collection of items arranged on the top of a dresser covered in deep blue fabric. At the center there’s a framed photograph of Marty, in front of which is a placard that has Marty’s name on it, with a white swan in the background. There’s also a small sign the size of a bumper sticker that reads “Protegido por Ángeles,” protected by angels in Marty’s native language. The altar also includes photographs and icons from several world religions, as well as a couple of small white votive candles.

In one of our last conversations, Corey reflected on the degree to which her relationship with Marty had given her a new understanding of life and death, including the possibility that death didn’t have to be the end. She told me that this thought was part of what sustained her on the “more difficult days,” like the anniversary of their first conversation and the anniversary of Marty’s death. She explained,

The anniversaries and things are really where the altar space that I have set up comes into play. Because I will spend time there during those days. I’ll buy some flowers, put them next to her picture, and have a little...um...[sighs] Well, I’ll use the word “chat,” but you know what I mean. It’s kind of one-sided, but not. I keep that space clear and present during the other times, because it doesn’t necessarily go away during the ordinary days.

But there are days where it’s more pronounced, more difficult.

Corey suggested that at the altar, she was able to experience something approximating a conversation with Marty. She used the word “chat” to describe it, replicating the language that

she used to describe the text-based exchanges that they had online while Marty was alive. Her words suggest that she experienced these exchanges as somewhat reciprocal, “kind of one-sided, but not.” The altar offered both a site of connection and a means of connecting to Marty.

There are many resemblances between the online memorial and the altar. Aesthetically, both feature the same photograph of Marty, and both are decorated with white candles.

According to Casey’s words above, both are sites of an ongoing reciprocal exchange. Yet the altar is located in a very private, domestic space. This particular home for their relationship is literally inside of Corey’s house, in a corner of her bedroom.

From her home on the altar, Marty is an occasional participant in the domestic life of Corey and her family. Corey recounted,

When the three or four hour Martin Scorsese George Harrison biopic came out in 2011, I sat down to watch it when it was broadcast on TV with my family, and I actually, on the table, with my cup of tea, I actually set up the picture of Marty that I have on my altar! So that she would in some ways enjoy it as well.

Nestled next to a cup of tea in Corey’s living room, Marty partakes in this scene of domestic bliss. In its location, its availability to others, and its uses, the altar is quintessentially domestic.

In contrast, the online memorial is in many ways a public space. *Forever Remembered* gives users the option of limiting the accessibility of their memorials by making them private. Private memorials can only be viewed by the person who created them and those who are invited using *Forever Remembered*’s online invitation service. Corey chose to make her online memorial public, meaning that it’s visible to anyone online. The memorial can be found by searching for Marty’s name on the *Forever Remembered* home page, or by doing a Google

search of her name along with certain biographical information such as the year of her birth and death.

Although other people can see the online memorial, they can't see or participate in Corey's visits, which is when she experiences her greatest sense of connection to Marty. Others can read the posts that Corey has put up, but not the many posts that she has decided not to publish. As Corey explained, "nine times out of ten" she doesn't end up putting up the posts that she has written to Marty, because she ends up feeling like she doesn't need to make her thoughts and feelings explicit in order for Marty to hear them.

The way that Corey engages with the online memorial further complicates any straightforward notion of the memorial as a public space. Like the vast majority of the people that I spoke with, Corey accesses the online memorial on a private computer in her own home. Much has been made of the fact that sites of online memorialization are available anytime and anywhere. For this reason, websites such as online memorials are often contrasted with physical sites of memorialization such as gravesites and roadside memorials, which are visited less frequently, often on special occasions (Arnold et al 2018). For example, in her survey of the data on Web memorialization practices, Roberts writes that, "The majority of respondents (76%) had a physical memorial to visit, but Web memorials, which can be visited quickly, at any time and from any location, were visited much more frequently than physical monuments to the dead" (Roberts 2004:62). In their recent volume on death and digital media, Arnold and his colleagues make a similar point. They write, "My screen is in a particular place at any given time, but a web-based memorial is of course online, and is thus every place and no place. The site comes to me, no travel is required to visit the site, and visitation may thus be casual or spontaneous rather than ceremonial and planned" (Arnold et al 2018:45). This contrast doesn't hold for Corey, who

instead suggested that she visits the online memorial on special dates, and with a sense of ceremony. She explained, “Because day-to-day, when I want to I can just look at that photograph and remember, but on the anniversaries I tend to feel like I want to do something a little bit more. That has a little more resonance out in the world.”

Corey also underscored that she visited the online memorial when she really needed “a place to go.” In calling it a place to go, Corey suggested that the online memorial is “outside” in a way that the altar is not. Although both the altar and the computer are in Corey’s home, the online memorial puts her relationship with Marty “out in the world,” as she put it. The fact that the online memorial is housed on a larger platform together with tributes to many other dead loved ones, as well as the fact that it is accessible to others, contributed to Corey’s sense that the online memorial is situated within a wider world, in contrast to the altar that is cloistered in her bedroom.

Corey herself had conflicting feelings about the accessibility of the online memorial. On the one hand, she told me that the site was “just for me,” and that “nobody else who knew her knows about that.” She chose not to share the link with any of their mutual friends, although she stayed in touch with several after the collapse of the fan forum. Although Corey didn’t share the online memorial with her friends, the fact that it was publicly visible was part of its appeal. She explained,

There is a real kind of nostalgia value to it, because now, obviously, it’s all memory. And of course, memory is stoked by sharing. But instead of sharing with a select few people who would just shake their heads and look at me strangely, I decided to find a way to share this person with a wider world.

Corey seemed conscious of the oddness of their relationship, marked by a 24-year age difference and yet demonstrating an intimacy that is often denied to both online and same-sex relationships. She wanted to invite others to participate in their relationship in order to stoke the memories that allowed their connection to persist, yet she didn't want these others to include the people that she and Marty knew, who might not understand their intimacy. Instead, she put her trust in an online public of anonymous—but presumably sympathetic—strangers.

In her early analysis of web memorials, Roberts (2004) argued that much of their value came from their ability to create a community among the bereaved. It's significant, then, that Corey's online memorial is not a site of community in any straightforward sense. It is not a place where people who knew Marty gather to remember her and to share their grief. It's also not a place where strangers provide support and affirmation to Corey. It's possible for visitors to leave a note or to light a virtual candle after visiting the memorial, a phenomenon that Roberts witnessed frequently in her study (Roberts 2004). Marty's memorial shows none of these traces of having been engaged with by others, nor did Corey express any interest in receiving such acknowledgements. Instead, the online memorial holds a special significance for Corey because of her sense that it's situated in "a wider world," accessible to unknown others who are imagined rather than engaged with. Unlike the altar, the online memorial invites others into the relationship between Corey and Marty, breathing life into it in a different way than the fan forum or the altar.

Comparing the memorial with the altar also reveals some of the ways that their online relationship is structured by the possibilities and limitations of the platform. Corey's altar is overtly religious and includes an amalgamation of objects from several world religions, including a small figurine of St. Francis and a framed photograph of Paramahansa Yagananda,

the Indian guru who is widely credited with bringing yoga to the West. In contrast, the online memorial doesn't have any obvious religious symbols. With its white candles and blue skies, the imagery suggests a certain generic spiritualism. The altar and the online memorial thus differently reflect Corey's interfaith belief system. In the altar a variety of religions are crowded together. In the online memorial, religious differences seem to have been transcended in a favor of a spirituality that nonetheless draws heavily from Christian traditions.

The differences between the altar and the online memorial may in part be due to the *Forever Remembered* website itself. Although there are over a hundred backgrounds to choose from, none are overtly religious, apart from a couple that feature stylized angels and cherubs. Many of the backgrounds feature flowers, candles, and blue skies, which both evoke and obscure their religious origins. For example, *Forever Remembered* calls the white pillar candle that Corey chose for her memorial a "Remembrance Candle." Although there are online memorial platforms that are explicitly religious, sites such as ChristianMemorials.com don't invite the kind of religious intermixing that Corey embraces. Although *Forever Remembered* and other online memorial websites open up possibilities for ongoing connections with dead loved ones, for Corey it has also shaped their site of connection in ways that may limit the kinds of veneration that are possible.

The gravesite

A rich body of anthropological work explores the material mediators of relations with the dead such as bones, corpses, ceremonial gifts, and gravestones. As early as 1907, Robert Hertz (2005[1907]) famously described the double burial through which the dissolution of the corpse marks a transition in the status of the deceased. The "first death" or physiological death begins a

period of dangerous liminality in which the person in question is neither fully dead nor fully alive. The completion of death, or the “second death,” is effected through a series of rites performed by the living, which are mediated by the exhumed bones of the dead. Hertz suggests that the period of liminality that is built into this type of funeral ritual allows the bereaved to adjust to the reality of death’s permanent and absolute nature, which is accepted upon the completion of the rites (Hertz 2005[1907]:210).

Many subsequent ethnographies have reiterated Hertz’s claim that the corpse mediates the severance of ties to the dead (Danforth 2005[1982]; Harris 2005[1982]; Suzuki 2005[2000]). Beth Conklin argues that for the Wari, traditional rituals of mortuary cannibalism brought about a necessary emotional detachment from the dead (Conklin 2005[1995]:249). Yet she also notes, “Cannibalism initiated and facilitated the construction of a new relationship between the living and the dead by evoking images of the dead person’s regeneration in animal form” (Conklin 2005[1995]:251). Thus Conklin emphasizes the rupture in relations that ritual cannibalism brings about at the same time as she points out that cannibalism evokes the possibility of continued relations between the living and the dead. Radcliffe-Brown’s 1922 ethnography *The Andaman Islanders* furthers Conklin’s insights, suggesting that the bones of the deceased mediate a simultaneous termination and renewal of relations (Radcliffe-Brown 2005[1922]). He writes,

When the period of mourning for a dead person is over and the bones are recovered the modification in the relations between the dead and the living, which begins at death, and is, as we shall see, carried out by the mourning customs and ceremonies, is finally accomplished. The dead person is now entirely cut off from the world of the living, save that his bones are to be treasured as relics and amulets. The weeping over the bones must be taken, I think, as a rite of aggregation whereby the bones as representatives of the dead

person (all that is left of him) are received back into the society henceforth to fill a special place in the social life. It really constitutes a renewal of social relations with the dead person...By the rite the affection that was once felt towards the dead person is revived and is now directed to the skeletal relics of the man or woman that once was their object (Radcliffe-Brown 2005[1922]:154).

Exhumed bones mediate the ritual separation of the living from the dead, yet they also mediate “a renewal of social relations with the dead person,” who is accepted back into society in a new form. Radcliffe-Brown thus suggests that funeral rituals mark the transformation of relations with the dead, rather than their ultimate termination.

Anthropological work on gift exchange suggests that gifts can likewise mediate ongoing relations with the dead (Kan 2005[1996]; Klima 2002; Langford 2013; Leavitt 1995; Strathern 1981, 1982; Watson 1982). As Strathern (1981) points out, social identities may depend on the webs of debt and obligation in which each person is ensnared. In such cases, giving and receiving gifts on the dead person’s behalf conjures and perpetuates the deceased’s social presence. These analyses of gift exchange begin to move away from the funeral rituals and death rites that mark the immediate post-death period, considering how gifts can mediate relations that extend indefinitely (Klima 2002; Strathern 1982; Watson 1982). For instance, among the Cantonese that Watson describes, the gifts offered to the dead during the funeral ritual are but the first transactions in an ongoing exchange in which the veneration of the living is rewarded with the benevolent protection of the ancestor (Watson 1982:156).

Some of the recent anthropological work on gravesites suggests that they might likewise mediate persistent relationships with the dead. Seremetakis (1991) notes that bereaved Greek women sometimes care for gravestones in ways that mirror the care that they once provided to

the deceased. She describes the gravestone as “the substitute, double, and house of the corpse” and explains that women might sleep beside the grave or cover it with blankets to protect it from bad weather (1991:186). She argues that in such cases, “the issue is not final separation from the dead, but maintaining contact between beings who have residual, social relations based on shared substance and exchange and now happen to inhabit separate domains” (1991:179). Similarly, in their study of cemeteries usage in the United Kingdom, Francis, Kellaheer, and Neophytu find that gravestones can be important sites of continued connection. They note that, “Once the stone marks the location of the body with precision, it may take on the persona, the ‘presence,’ of the departed” (2005:123). By continuing to visit, tend to, and speak with the dead at their graves, “Many actively resisted the push of the outside world to ‘move on’” (2005:3).

Drawing from these interpretations of graveside practices, the popular and academic literature frequently compares online memorialization to visiting a gravesite. Numerous popular articles have heralded the rise of both explicit and de facto online memorials by calling them “virtual cemeteries.” A *Newsweek* article glosses both social media pages of the deceased and online memorials as “cyber graveyards,” querying whether these online sites will one day replace physical gravesites (Chayka 2014). A Huffington Post article similarly announces “Death on Facebook Now Common as ‘Dead Profiles’ Create a Vast Virtual Cemetery” (Kaleem 2012). The implication is that visiting an online memorial or Facebook page is a replacement for visiting a gravesite.

Much of the academic literature draws a similar parallel between online memorials and physical gravesites. For example, Pamela Robert’s oft-cited analysis of online memorialization practices refers to online memorials as “virtual cemeteries” (2004). Similarly, in the essay “Digital Gravescapes,” Scott Church finds the antecedents to digital memorials on Facebook in

the messages carved on gravestones in ancient Greece. He traces the history of Western “gravescaping” from these ancient Greek messages through the *memento mori* displays of the early modern Europe, to the *garden romance* displays of the 18th and 19th centuries and finally to the messages left on the Facebook pages of the deceased in the 21st century (Church 2013).⁷

Resisting the tendency to regard online memorials as equivalent to gravesites, the authors of *Death and Digital Media* (2018) draw out the many distinctions between the two. They note that the messages posted to online memorials are far more extensive and intimate than the inscriptions left on gravestones, while also being more public than the words spoken at a gravesite. They also argue that gravestone inscriptions tend to position the deceased according to social institutions such as family, religion, and ethnicity, while the inscriptions left on online memorials are “more informal and intersubjective” (Arnold et al. 2018:49). The authors conclude by suggesting that gravesites and online memorials differently formulate the posthumous identity of the dead. Whereas gravesites emphasize the social position of the deceased, online memorials are more focused on the relational personhood of both the deceased and those who mourn for them.

Arnold and his colleagues further suggest that gravestones and online memorials have different temporal orientations. They argue that the stones that constitute graves stand for a “material intransience in defiance of the transience of life” (Arnold et al. 2018:34-35). In contrast, online memorials are themselves transient, marked not only by the ephemerality of online platforms but also by the more fundamental volatility of “electronic signals” and

⁷ There is some evidence for the claim that online memorials have their roots in attempts to recreate the cemetery in cyberspace. The San Francisco-based digital library *Internet Archive* names the website *The Worldwide Cemetery* as the oldest online memorial site. The original 1995 website included a link to photos of renowned cemeteries in the United States and Western Europe. Today, the homepage features a large-format image of a landscaped cemetery, and many of the tributes include a photograph of the physical grave of the deceased.

“flickering signifiers” (2018:35). The authors argue that this transience can give rise to a different form of permanence. Because it must be constantly updated, “the digital memorial has a working life that is theoretically infinite,” unlike the stone that will eventually erode (2018:36). In contrast, my own findings suggest that users themselves rarely recognize the potential transience of online memorials, and instead tend to see the internet as a permanent repository. For instance, one young woman I spoke with articulated her desire to post photographs of her recently deceased grandfather on several online platforms as a way to ensure that these images would be available indefinitely.

While *Death and Digital Media* points towards many important differences between the materiality of gravesites and online memorials, it leaves aside questions regarding the meaning and significance of these media for the people who use them. In practice, Corey’s use of the online memorial bears many similarities to what Seremetakis, Francis, Kellaheer, and Neophytu describe for gravesites. She visits the memorial when she wants to spend time with Marty, and she tends to it by periodically refreshing the webpage with new updates and messages. Thus, like the gravestone, the online memorial functions as a site of continued care that is loosely linked to Marty’s lingering presence. Yet there’s also a fundamental distinction between the two that is not captured by Arnold et al.’s analysis. Whereas Corey understood Marty’s gravesite to contain her physical body, she suggested that the online memorial contained their *relationship*.

Corey initially implied that the gravesite and the online memorial were somewhat interchangeable. When I asked her to elaborate on how the online memorial helped her feel closer to Marty, she replied, “I suppose in some ways, it’s a substitute, for me, for being able to actually visit her physical memorial space.” This initial assessment supports popular and academic interpretations of online memorials as stand-ins for graves in what is claimed to be an

increasingly geographically dispersed and globally connected world. For example, in the introduction to their content analysis of online memorials, de Vries and Rutherford write, “[G]iven the geographic mobility of the North American population, the bereft are often separated by expansive distances that are frequently expensive to navigate making the visiting of remains difficult. Cremation and the scattering of ashes may mean that there is no physical place to grieve” (de Vries and Rutherford 2004:7). The authors attribute these changes to the rise of online memorials, suggesting that they replace the traditional need for a gravesite.

Although Corey initially described the memorial as a “substitute,” Marty’s gravesite carried its own particular significance for her. Several years after Marty’s death, Corey found a YouTube video that someone had posted showing himself walking through a cemetery in Buenos Aires, which she recognized as the very cemetery where Marty was buried. She got in touch with the man who had posted the video and asked if it would be possible for him to visit Marty’s grave on her behalf. As she described his response, her voice welled up with emotion. “The guy not only went and visited her, but took his camera, videoed the whole trip, and took flowers, for me!”

Corey was deeply moved by watching the video of Marty’s gravesite. She mused,

The experience of seeing her physical resting place, although from a great distance and from behind a computer screen, brought a sense of closure that I really didn’t expect. It’s something I’d always said that I wanted to one day do. One day I will go, and I will visit the place where she lived, and I will visit the place where she rests. Never mind the fact that they are 24 hours apart, 24 hours’ drive apart. But obviously now I don’t feel the *need* to do that, because I’ve had that experience...

In that moment of first seeing her resting place, it became... Please don't misunderstand me here, but it became *real*, as opposed to just... For a long time, well for a while anyway, up until the point when I deleted her contact from MSN messenger (even though I actually kept the program on my computer until Microsoft bought Skype!) it had felt kind of like she wasn't really gone, she was just offline. And so seeing, actually seeing her physical resting place, was a way of my sort of saying, "Okay, it is actually true. This is the state of things now."

And [sighs] it was actually strangely comforting to be able to see it. I didn't need to wonder anymore. Part of the problem is that I have a very vivid imagination, so I needed to see it. I really needed to have some sense of where her physical being rested in order to let myself have that information. And [sighs] file it away with the rest of it, I suppose.

Corey noted that she did not visit Marty's gravesite, but only saw it through the YouTube video. Thus Marty's "physical resting place" was also a digital space of sorts, one that was closely connected to a geographic location and a material entity but that was also mediated by digital technology. Although Corey's physical body was never in proximity to Marty's material remains, seeing it on the YouTube video was satisfying to her. She told me that she had wanted to travel to Argentina to visit Marty's gravesite, but that after seeing the video, "Obviously, now I don't feel the *need* to do that."

Corey's comment that visiting the gravesite "brought a sense of closure" was situated within her extensive discussion of their ongoing connection. She wasn't saying that seeing Marty's gravesite brought closure to their relationship. Rather, it put to rest any lingering sense that she might still be alive, which for Corey meant being periodically available to chat online

about “anything and everything.” To the extent that she and Marty have a “continuing and evolving relationship” today, it’s a relationship that begins with a deep emotional understanding that Marty is dead. Corey’s statement that this realization brought “comfort” suggests that she didn’t want to feel like Marty was “just offline.” Instead, she wanted to feel like Marty was online in a different way than she had been before. Corey’s online memorial thus provided a way for her to connect with Marty without negating her death or ignoring how it has changed their relationship.

When I visited the memorial, it was clear to me that it wasn’t meant to convey the essence of who Marty was. The sections of the website that are meant to allow users to fill in details about their deceased loved one are notably blank. There are no stories about her life, no descriptions of her personality, no life events in her Timeline, and only the single photograph of her that is featured on the homepage. It was evident in my conversations with Corey that she knew a great deal about Marty’s life, more than enough to fill in these sections of the memorial in detail. She also had many more photos of Marty, some of which meant a great deal to her. Yet the only story that she chose to include on the memorial was the story of their first meeting. Instead, the vast majority of the content featured on the site comes from the posts that Corey has made after Marty’s death, which include updates on her life, holiday greetings, links to songs and YouTube videos, and expressions of continued love and devotion. Corey explained, “The content on that site kind of mirrors the way that I was in touch with Marty in life. Because we shared the things that meant something to us, the songs and the ups and downs of our lives.” Rather than encompassing Marty herself, the site “mirrors” their relationship, reflecting the things that they “shared.”

Corey told me many times that visiting the online memorial intensified her sense of connection to Marty. However, it didn't invoke her bodily presence the way that her gravesite did. She described a "Marty energy" that was concentrated on the online memorial. When I asked her to tell me more, she described a recent offline encounter where this Marty energy had taken a more tangible form. Corey gave an embarrassed laugh as she began recounting the episode, but as she went on she became increasingly adamant, her tone conveying a sense of awe.

I was actually in the middle of a swimming lesson, and I was doing something that my teacher had asked me to do, and I was getting so far into the task and repeatedly getting to a point where I scared myself. And I was standing a little way away from the lane rope. There would have been space for one of those foam floats to pass, but there wouldn't have been enough space for a human being to pass.

So I was doing my thing, and I suddenly got the sense that if I moved any further to my right, I was going to knock into somebody. I turned, and there was nobody there. I continued to do what I was doing, and I felt this presence move to be behind me. And then I continued to do what I was doing, and the presence, as I got closer and closer to doing what I was supposed to be doing, the presence kept moving back. The only way I can describe it is, it was like the experience of learning to ride a bike, where whoever's helping you just steps back a bit, and then back a bit, and then back a bit. It was a very, very feminine energy as well. And I observed it, and I thought to myself, I thought, "Thank you," and the presence left.

Corey concluded the story with the assertion, "I firmly believe that that was her."

In the description above, Marty appeared as an encouraging presence that could be felt but not seen. Although she was not fully embodied, it was *as if* she has a body; Corey sensed that if she moved in the wrong direction, she would bump into her. She could feel Marty moving around her, taking up space in the lane. There was none of this in Corey's visits to the online memorial. Although she sensed Marty's "energy," this energy wasn't localized to any specific point in space. Her presence also didn't invoke a bodily response from Corey the way that her presence in the pool gave Corey the sensation of being on the verge of touching her. Here again, it seems that the online memorial connects Corey to their relationship rather than bringing Marty herself to presence.

Later, Corey made a slip of the tongue that further brought home the distinction between the gravesite and the online memorial. Corey was describing to me the difficulty that she'd had finding an online memorial platform that would be appropriate for someone who wasn't an immediately family member. She explained that she wanted to find a site that would facilitate "memorializing friendships," then caught her mistake and corrected herself with a laugh: "*friends*, not friendships!" Corey's slip of the tongue was telling. Together with the content of the online memorial, it suggested that she experienced the memorial as a home for their relationship, as well as the location where her friend was to be found.

In sum, the online memorial is not a substitute for the gravesite, because they do very different work for Corey. Seeing Marty's gravesite brought Corey a sense of closure, bringing an understanding that the two of them would never again be able to communicate as they did before her death. This sense of closure stemmed from the fact that Corey understood Marty's gravesite to be a place that contained Marty as a physical entity. In contrast, Corey constructed the online memorial as a home for their relationship, which persists to this day. The online memorial

therefore offers Corey an ongoing connection and a place where she and Marty can continue to be together.

Twenty years ago, conventional grief theory and treatment would have said that such a prolonged and persistent mourning process was aberrant, even pathological. Today, grief treatment is increasingly encouraging the creation of continuing bonds with the dead. Yet the theories that undergird best practice among grief counselors and mental health professionals may continue to set subtle limits on the possibilities for ongoing relationships with the dead. Reading Worden's many cautions about the need to "embark on a new life," it is unclear whether Corey's repeated visits to the online memorial ten years after Marty's death would meet Worden's standards for appropriate "adaptive" mourning. Proscriptions such as these imply that the deceased will become gradually less important to the mourner, their relationship settling into a lingering fondness rather than an abiding love. Viewing Marty's online memorial, it's clear that the relationship that she and Corey have sustained remains deeply intimate.

My first visit

I'd never met Marty when I navigated to her online memorial for the first time, using the URL that Corey had eagerly shared with me. Yet it felt strangely familiar. After a moment, I realized that it was because I'd already visited several other memorials that were housed on the same site, a UK-based platform called *Forever Remembered*. *Forever Remembered* allows people to create free tributes for their loved ones by providing a basic template with which users can upload photographs, messages, and stories. Most of the tributes seemed to come from Britain, where Corey herself was from. Almost all of the ones that I came across were in English.

Although the backgrounds varied, the identical format created a strong resemblance between the memorial pages.

My attention was immediately caught by the photograph that took up much of the home page. The woman in the photograph was, frankly, beautiful, and I found it difficult to look away. Her hair was dark and wild, soft curls falling to her shoulders. Her teeth were impossibly white. She was standing in front of mountain landscape with her head slightly tilted, as though she had been caught by the camera mid-gesture. Below the photo, a series of posts faded into and out of view. They were all from Corey, and spanned several years. “Thinking of you today, my love <3” “Te quiero por siempre.” I felt like a voyeur as I read the messages flashing by.

At the bottom of the page was a collection of icons meant to lead visitors through various standardized activities: Read stories. Visit the gallery. View the timeline. Contact Corey. Contribute. Light a candle. I started exploring the site, working my way through the links at the top of the page. I found that most of them were dead ends, containing little or no content. Corey had not, for example, created a Timeline, although *Forever Remembered* had auto-filled the date of Marty’s birth as the first and only “event” in her life. Corey had included only one Lifestory, entitled “The beginning of an unconventional friendship.” It was the story of the first time that she and Marty met, when Corey attempted to explain to her what banoffee pie was. There was also only one photo in the Gallery, the same one that was featured on the home page. It was entitled “Marty in 1997,” which would mean that the photo was taken 8 years before Corey met her.

The Gallery had a place for Thoughts in addition to Photos. It was the only page with a significant amount of content, aside from the home page. I recognized the Thoughts as the same

ones that were fading in and out on the home screen. They were arranged in reverse chronological order, with the date and author listed below.

- *'Little things that will change you forever*

May appear from way out of the blue...'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqWkBk2ixs8>

Such is our friendship. Te quiero por siempre, querida amiga.

-Sent by Corey on 03/28/2018

- *I felt you were around last night. I hope there will come a day when 'Here Comes The Sun' doesn't cause that intense gut-wrenching sensation. The band played 'Heading for the Light', and I came closer than I would've liked to crying.*

'My shoes are wearing out from walking down the same highway

I don't see nothing new but I feel a lot of change

And I get the strangest feeling, as I'm heading for the light...'

I know you're with me...but I need you now, in this trying time.

Blessed be, beautiful friend.

-Sent by Corey on 11/26/2017

- *Ten years since our last conversation...you're on my mind today, dear. I miss you so much.*

-Sent by Corey on 01/23/2017

- *¡Feliz Navidad, querida amiga! I enjoyed your 'visit' today, during the Christmas meal. Nobody else would have noticed, but the joke in the cracker brought back lovely memories...'Corey, what's a spade?'*

-Sent by Corey on 12/25/2016

- *Much love to you, dear, on Lord Sri Krishna's appearance day. Thank you for 'visiting' today. ♥*

-Sent by Corey on 08/25/2016

- *Remembering you with love today as the article I wrote singing your praises is released to the world. Te quiero por siempre, amiga.*

-Sent by Corey on 02/26/2015

- *Thinking of you today, my love. ♥ They released a new video of George for his birthday. I know you'd love it. Hard to believe it's been 9 years since we met.*

-Sent by Corey on 02/25/2015

- *As I remember George today, I also remember the love you showed that day you allowed me into your life, and changed mine forever. Strange to think it's been eight years since we met. I miss our chats, I miss your wisdom, but I cherish the impact you had, and have, on my life. God bless you, my dear friend.*

-Sent by Corey on 02/25/2014

- *Six years on I remember with a smile rather than sadness. You never leave my thoughts, my dear. I love you always.*

-Sent by Corey on 04/08/2013

All of the posts were addressed directly to Marty, yet she was never named. She was always my love, my dear, my friend. I was utterly absorbed by the posts, but also vaguely uneasy. I felt as though I was trespassing on something deeply private, sacred even. Maybe it was the icon of the white candle in the background that left me feeling unsettled.

- *You're the reason for all this, my dear. God bless you, now and always.*

-Sent by Corey on 04/06/2013

I flipped through the pages of the tribute once again, but that's all there was. I didn't feel that I knew her. I was left wanting more.

The way that Marty comes to life on her online memorial is not fully captured in the existing work on animation. In this work, the quality of being animated is often associated with movement and speech. In the introduction to his essays on animation, film studies scholar and animation theorist Alan Cholodenko writes, “[T]wo major definitions bedevil animation: endowing with *life*...and endowing with *movement*...Animation thus poses the very question of life itself, movement itself and their relation” (Cholodenko 1991:15). Cholodenko thus highlights the association between animation and motion, going on to explore the relationship between them. Thomas Lamarre affirms this association, briefly defining animation as “moving images” in the prolog to *The Anime Machine* (2009:ix). Meanwhile, Nozawa argues that Japanese voice

actors are “animating characters’ bodies in narratives and events” by speaking on their behalf (Nozawa 2016:170). To do so, these voice actors must enact multiple forms of “effacement,” deliberately obscuring their own labor in order to suggest that the characters themselves are speaking. Manning and Gershon configure the relationship between animation and speech somewhat differently, drawing from Goffman’s work on participant frameworks to suggest that the animated figure is the “talking machine” who articulates another’s ideas (Manning and Gershon 2013:110-113). Here again, the capacity for speech seems to be what distinguishes the animated figure from the inert object.

Yet linking animacy with speech and movement is problematic, as Mel Chen (2012) points out. Chen argues that the work of politics often involves aligning racial, gendered, sexualized, and disabled bodies along a hierarchical continuum of liveness. Movement, speech, and reason all indicate higher degrees of animacy, correlated with increased value. Chen writes,

What seems almost certainly operative in both these cases is a reference cline (a graded linear scale) resembling a ‘great chain of being,’ an ordered hierarchy from inanimate object to plant to nonhuman animal to human, by which subject properties are differentially distributed (with humans possessing maximal and optimal subjectivity at the top). When humans are blended with objects along this cline, they are effectively ‘dehumanized,’ and simultaneously de-subjectified and objectified (Chen 2012:40).

Chen points out that prevailing understandings of animacy don’t just have implications for characters, but for other kinds of bodies who do not move and speak in recognizable ways. These bodies may likewise rely on material and digital mediations to act in the world and to relate to others.

The online memorial that Corey has made for Marty doesn't animate her by endowing her with the ability to move and speak. As we have seen, her bodily presence doesn't come through the page, even though Corey occasionally experiences it in her everyday life. Instead, the memorial animates Marty by enlivening her relationship with Corey. In this framing, the dead are animated not because of their ability to locomote, but because the relationships that they engage in are dynamic, becoming deeper and more expansive over time. The online memorial provides a home for their relationship, one that intensifies the bond between them.

A home for their relationship

Alongside the shift in grief theory from emphasizing detachment to embracing continuing bonds with the dead, there has been a parallel shift in thinking about the form that these continuing bonds ought to take. Whereas Freud pathologized the internalization of the dead loved one, grief experts today see this internalization as a necessary part of maintaining attachments to the deceased. As we have seen, the psyche of the bereaved is seen as the appropriate location for the deceased loved one, and mourning is a process that brings the dead person from outside to inside the self.

For Corey and Marty, the situation seems more complicated. Rather than straightforwardly internalizing Marty, Corey's online activities both draw Marty in and push her out. On the one hand, when describing her motivations for creating the online memorial, Corey stressed that she needed to have a *place*, not just an activity or an object that would bring back memories of Marty. She explained, "The online memorial was my way of saying, "I still need a place to go, to be able to remember."'" She repeated this sentiment several times in our

conversations, stressing that the online memorial “fills a space, then, in that part of me that still says you need somewhere to go to remember her.”

Corey’s preoccupation with place and space in the online memorial gestures towards a desire to locate Marty outside of herself. She affirmed this when she told me, “I just needed somewhere to go, somewhere that wasn’t...Somewhere that wasn’t within the confines of my mind. Externalizing is a big thing for me.” Corey suggested that retaining Marty as a memory or a mental representation was unsatisfying, leaving her feeling trapped. She needed to discover and rediscover Marty “out in the world” as she phrased it, which is what the online memorial allowed her to do. However, her use of the word “externalization” also suggested that her relationship with Marty already resided within. Note, then, that building the online memorial seems to do the opposite of what Worden proposes. Corey did not internalize Marty in the wake of her death. In this case, her relocation took the form of an expulsion.

Yet Corey didn’t want to relocate Marty very far. In addition to underlining her desire to find a place to go to remember Marty, Corey also offered some clues about the kind of place that would be appropriate. She explained,

I think in creating the online memorial, I was trying to create something that felt the way visiting her specific forum thread on the message board used to feel. It was a sense...It wasn’t necessarily like going and knocking on someone’s door. It was very much a sense that whatever else was going on on the forum was a million miles away as soon as I clicked on that link. I was in what felt to me like a place of real peace, serenity, and inspiration. And I guess in creating the online memorial, I was trying to re-create that sense of that space.

Marty's forum thread was home-like, deeply familiar and comforting. When she died, her home lived on and continued to offer Corey a place where she could access the emotional experience of conversing with Marty. When that home also died, Corey had to "re-create that sense of the space" by crafting the online memorial, a new home for their relationship. Reflecting on the significance of her online memorial, Corey explained,

It's like visiting a place in the same way that visiting her specific forum thread was like visiting a place. Somewhere separate from the hustle and bustle of the other areas of the forum and also of the Internet in general, specifically obviously referring to the memorial there.

Here again, Corey's description of the memorial as set against the "hustle and bustle" outside of it evoked images of domesticity set against the Internet public.

Corey's descriptions also convey an ambiguity about whether the online memorial is Marty's home or her own. At times she suggested that the memorial was a home that she built for Marty. Her description of the online memorial as a surrogate for the forum thread positioned the memorial as Marty's home, the place where Marty could always be found. When she compared visiting the forum thread (and, by extension, the online memorial) to knocking on someone's door, she similarly suggested that it was someone else's home. But she also described the feelings of peace and serenity that she associates with visiting the forum thread and online memorial, suggesting that she herself felt at home there. The ambiguity that inhered in Corey's descriptions of home blurred the distinction between interior and exterior, as well as between herself and Marty.

In what I've outlined so far, Corey suggested that Marty resided in the online memorial, and building the online memorial was a way for Corey to draw her relationship with Marty out of

herself. At other times, she suggested that Corey persisted within, and that her online activities were a way to draw Marty deeper *within* herself. Corey often brought up her own desire to manifest qualities that Marty had admired or encouraged in her. This often bled into the desire to manifest Marty herself. For example, she told me, “I think the best version of me that ever existed was the version of me that I was with her. And that’s what I try and retain or revive on a daily basis.” Corey communicated a seemingly straightforward desire to manifest the qualities that Marty admired. Yet she added that, “There are moments when I get a little overwhelmed with the person who knew me so much better than I seemed to know myself.” Here is where the distinction between Corey and Marty begins to blur. Corey communicated her sense that she would become more fully herself by becoming more fully the person that Marty perceived her to be. Yet she also described being “overwhelmed,” and what she was overwhelmed by was nothing less than Marty herself. It was as if in the process of becoming more fully herself, she became increasingly submerged in Marty.

Corey also suggested at times that she was becoming Marty. She explained that when she visited the online memorial she was able to sense “the quality of what I call “Marty-ness” that I sort of try and cultivate. Because one of my mini-missions is to engender that Marty-ness in my own life, so that I can be, to other people, the kind of person she was to me.” Here again, there’s a blurring between the “outside” that is the online memorial and the “inside” that is Corey’s own self. Corey visited the online memorial to experience “Marty-ness,” suggesting that the online memorial contained the essence of Marty. Yet she herself was the one who manifested Marty-ness. Visiting the online memorial was therefore simultaneously a way for her to assume the Marty-ness that the memorial ostensibly contained.

Corey also suggested that Marty resided within herself when she described speaking Spanish, something that she learned to do after Marty's death. She told me that she had found it particularly easy to learn the language and suggested that Marty was helping her. She explained, "Even now, I still have moments where I'm speaking Spanish and need to use a word that I don't consciously know that I know, and yet five seconds later it will be on the tip of my tongue. And yet, as the song goes, she never spoke Spanish to me!" She later recounted a recent incidence in which this had happened:

The last one was, I was talking about a pendant that I'd misplaced to a Mexican friend, and he said in Spanish, "Where was it?" And I knew that I needed to say, "jewelry box," but I'd never come across the Spanish for "jewelry box." And yet I sat at the keyboard and just typed it straight off! Checked it on Google translate, and it was there! [laughs with delight]. And I have no recollection of ever coming across the word before!

Corey did not say that her hands were guided on the keyboard, or anything that would suggest some sort of ghostly presence acting on her from the outside. Instead, the knowledge she needed welled up from within. Here again, Marty was a presence within herself.

What are we to make of these seemingly contradictory descriptions of Marty's location and of the relationship that it makes possible? Grief theory would tell us that appropriate mourning would involve internalizing Marty and establishing a relationship to the mental representation that Corey has retained. Corey herself suggested that this was part of her motivation for visiting the online memorial, where she is able to feel a lingering Marty-ness inside of her. Yet this Marty-ness does not take the form of a mental representation of the type that Worden describes; instead, it is a version of Corey herself. Meanwhile, visiting the online memorial is also a way for her to externalize Marty, moving her from within herself to a new

home online. Yet this very process of externalization seems to draw Marty further within, situating her in a domestic space that may be Corey's "home" as well.

At this point we seem to have reached the limits of what grief theory can tell us about online relationships between the living and the dead. Although the move towards embracing continuing bonds with the deceased underscores the significance of Corey and Marty's ten-year bond, grief theory's preoccupation with the appropriateness of internalizing the deceased cannot capture the complex interchange between Corey and Marty. Instead, I turn now to psychoanalysis to shed light on the seeming paradox involved in Corey's online memorialization efforts. Specifically, the Lacanian concept of *extimacy* helps unravel the knot of Corey and Marty's relationship by showing how the intimate other draws the self outward while simultaneously embedding itself within.

The extimacy between Corey and Marty

The term "extimacy" was first introduced by Jacques Lacan (1997[1986]) in his seventh seminar, when he describes it as "the central place, the intimate exteriority or "extimacy," that is the Thing" (Lacan 1997[1986]:139). Extimacy is a translation of the neologism *extimité*, based on the French *intimité*. In French, *intimité* designates both "intimacy" and the innermost part, for example the *intimité* of one's thoughts or one's being (Miller 1994, translator's note). Jacques-Alain Miller explains that Lacan uses extimacy to describe how, "The most interior—this is how the dictionary defines "intimate" (*l'intime*)—has, in the analytic experience, a quality of exteriority" (Miller 1994:76). This surprising configuration is illustrated by Saint Augustine's conception of God as "more interior than my innermost being" (quoted in Miller 1994:77).

In the course of the seventh seminar, Lacan enigmatically describes the Thing as the “excluded interior,” the “subject’s inside” that becomes the “first outside,” the “first exteriority around which the subject orients his way,” the “first landmark that “returns always to the same place” (Pavón-Cuéllar 2014). Pavón-Cuéllar explains,

The Thing becomes our first outside because it has been excluded from our inside.

Indeed, its exclusion is what creates our exteriority. We may see, then, that in the Lacanian perspective, all things considered, the extimacy of the Thing is—temporally speaking—at the origin of the subject’s exteriority and—spatially speaking—at the fixed centre of the subject’s life (Pavón-Cuéllar 2014:662).

According to Pavón-Cuéllar, the very distinction between inside and outside was created by an exclusion in which the subject cast out a part of himself. This excluded thing defines what is external to the subject, yet it continues to reside within—the Other within the self.

The distinction between the subject and the Other might seem to suggest two discreet beings in a dyadic relation to each other. Similarly, the claim that extimacy founds the distinction between inside and outside might seem to reify these relational terms. In fact, the concept of extimacy blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other. As Miller points out, “this expression ‘extimacy’ is necessary in order to escape the common ravings about a psychism supposedly located in a bipartitioning between interior and exterior”—and, I would add, between self and other (Miller 1994:75). Extimacy posits that what is furthest from the self is also the very core of the self, and that what is deepest and most internal to the self is also outside of the self.

The radical possibilities of extimacy are captured in Corey and Marty’s relationship, as it is mediated by the online memorial. Musing over her reasons for visiting the online memorial,

Corey explained, “It’s sort of up to me to enjoy these things as fully as I can, in her stead. So that’s why I visit the site and kind of mentally at least, tell her about these things that are going on.” At first, Corey spoke as though her relationship to Marty were internal. She suggested that she herself housed Marty, and so by enjoying the things that Marty would have enjoyed she was able to offer her some enjoyment as well. I relate this to Corey’s earlier assertion that visiting the online memorial was part of a larger effort to “carry that internalized Marty-ness through my own life.” In her very next sentence, Corey spoke as though Marty resided in the online memorial. She said that visiting the memorial was a way to talk to Marty, to “tell her about these things that are going on.” Here Marty is positioned outside of Corey, in the online memorial.

Understanding Corey and Marty’s relationship as a relationship of extimacy might allow us to understand these seemingly-contradictory positionings without fully reconciling them. The self coheres around the kernel of strangeness within. And this other within the self, through its very otherness, always leads the self outward. In this case, Corey finds herself in Marty; her visits with Marty allow her to understand who she really is. Visiting the online memorial is a way of externalizing her relationship with Marty, but it also reflects back on her, showing the truth of herself the way that only Marty can do. Corey comes away from the online memorial confident in her ability to become more fully herself by becoming more fully Marty, and in this way the external home that is the online memorial leads her back to the innermost part of herself where Marty resides. In speaking about their relationship, she retrospectively shaped it around the extimacy that they now enjoy. She told me, “My friendship with Marty was the only friendship I’ve ever had where every conversation felt like coming home. It felt like a return to myself.”

In describing the extimacy between Marty and Corey, I am writing against some of the dominant interpretations of extimacy. In his essay *Extimité*, Jacques-Alain Miller is clear that the big-O Other found within the self is an abstraction, though its effects are real. He compares the Other to the bomb whose purported presence caused him to have to evacuate his classroom; although there was no bomb, this did not prevent it from disrupting his lecture (Miller 1994:81).

However, Lacan's later descriptions of the relationship between the subject and the Other are enigmatic enough to leave open the possibility that extimacy might describe a relationship to another person. To consider this possibility, let's turn from Lacan's seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* to his later seminar entitled *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. In his essay "From Love to the Libido," (1981[1973]), Lacan states that the divisive effects of language create a situation in which the subject realizes himself more in the Other. This paradox of self-realization presents the opportunity for a certain mutuality:

The effects of language are always mixed with the fact, which is the basis of the analytic experience, that the subject is subject only from being subjected to the field of the Other, the subject proceeds from his synchronic subjection in the field of the Other. That is why he must get out, get himself out, and in the getting-himself-out, in the end, he will know that the real Other has, just as much as himself, to get himself out, to pull himself free. It is here that the need for good faith becomes imperative, a good faith based on the certainty that the same implication of difficulty in relation to the ways of desire is also in the Other (Lacan 1981[1973]:188).

Elsewhere in his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, the Other seems to be a structural configuration, at once an externalization of everything that is lacking in the subject and the mythical representative of the signifying structure that brings the subject into being. In the

above passage, Lacan seems to be moving between this mythical Other and the other in the sense of another person. He begins by reiterating that the effect of language is to impose a structure of intelligibility that brings forth the subject. This structure of intelligibility precedes the subject; it belongs to the Other who subjectifies. The violence of this calling-forth is suggested by the subject's need to "get himself out." Lacan then gestures towards the other as another person, who he refers to as "the real Other." This "real Other" is likewise compelled to "pull himself free." He suggests that the recognition of oneself as being subjected to violence (the violence of signification) allows one to recognize "the real Other" as similarly positioned. This shared vulnerability has the potential to ground a good faith between the subject and the other, as Lacan points out.

Lacan's description of the "real Other" not only opens up the possibility of seeing the extimate Other as another person, it also suggests a certain reciprocity between the subject and the Other. Miller quotes Lacan as stating, "there is no Other of the Other," denying the potential for a reciprocal relationship between them (Miller 1994:78). Lacan himself suggests the same in the lecture in which he introduces the term *extimité* (Lacan 1986:139-154). He illustrates the extimate relation through the ideal of courtly love that developed in France and Germany in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Courtly love idealized a feminine object that was both inaccessible and depersonalized, "emptied of all real substance" (Lacan 1997[1986]:149). These descriptions emphasize the abstract quality of the Other, whose very emptiness structures the desire that moves the subject in the direction of the Other.

I am departing from Lacan in proposing a mutuality between the subject and the other who are brought together in a relationship of extimacy. Taking Lacan as a starting point, I suggest that we might find that the intimacy between Corey and Marty involves a double

movement through which the other is internalized at the same time that a kernel of the self is placed within the other—and that the other may reciprocally participate in this double movement, placing themselves in you. This interiority means that the other retains a sense of immediacy, but it is also made possible by forms of mediation—in this case, the online memorial where Corey and Marty come together. Up to now we have been thinking about Marty as Corey’s other, understanding Marty to be the strangeness within Corey that draws her out of herself and brings her to the home of the online memorial.

Breaking with Lacan in this way allows us to likewise understand Corey to be *Marty’s* other.

To begin to think about how we might understand the living as other to the dead, I turn now to the writing of Slavoj Žižek. In his essay “The supposed subjects of ideology” (1997), Žižek critiques the argument that new technology is superior because it’s more interactive, allowing people to enter into a dialogic relationship with the screen and thus to take on a more active role in the “spectacle” of entertainment and politics. He points out that the reverse is also true: technological objects can also take over the “passive reaction of satisfaction (or mourning or laughter), so that it is the object itself which ‘enjoys the show’ instead of me” (Žižek 1997:47). He uses the example of canned laughter on a sitcom. The laughter of others makes the show seem funnier. It gives a sense of satisfaction to the viewer, even though the viewer has not actually laughed.

Žižek’s interpretation puts a different light on Corey’s previous comment, “It’s sort of up to me to enjoy these things as fully as I can, in her stead.” In essence, Corey is offering herself up as a substitute for Marty. Žižek underscores, “Crucial here is the reflective reversal of ‘the Other does it for me, instead of me, in the place of me’ into ‘I myself am doing it through the Other’” (Žižek 1997:52). In other words, it is not that the sitcom audience enjoys the show

instead of the viewer, but that the viewer is able to enjoy the show in and through the audience. Returning to Corey's description of visiting the online memorial, the former statement ("the other does it for me") would suggest that Corey is taking the place of Marty, enjoying the latest George Harrison releases because Marty cannot. The later statement ("I myself am doing it through the other") means that *Marty* is in fact enjoying the releases through Corey. When Corey enjoys the newest releases as Marty, she makes herself into the other through which Marty is able to take her enjoyment. In this configuration, it is Corey who is the other-within-the-self. I would argue that both are happening simultaneously in Corey's visits to the online memorial. Corey discovers Marty as the other within her self, and at the same time she becomes Marty's other.

This brings us back to contemporary grief theory. Although Worden advises the bereaved to internalize the deceased, he uses it as a technique for moving on. Internalization is a way to appropriately relocate the dead to the realm of memory and emotion. The dead then take the form of a "mental representation," an imagined configuration that has been concocted by the bereaved person herself.

The psychoanalytic figure of the other within offers a more radical version of internalization, in which the essential strangeness of that other is retained. Žižek draws this point out in the following passage, in which he explores the implications of Lacan's notion of "constitutive decenterment":

[I]ts point is not that my subjective experience is regulated by objective unconscious mechanisms which are 'decentred' with regard to my self-experience and as such beyond my control (a point asserted by every materialist), but rather something much more unsettling—I am deprived even of my most intimate 'subjective' experience, the way

things ‘really seem to me,’ that of the fundamental fantasy which constitutes and guarantees the kernel of my being, since I can never consciously experience it and assume it (Zizek 1997:55).

Zizek argues that it is not enough to say that the subject has the experience of being outside of his own understanding and control, regulated by an unconscious that feels somehow “other.” To make this claim would be to say that the other within is really the self, the way that Worden presumes is the case for the deceased loved one. Zizek’s assertion is that the subject’s innermost being, his “most intimate ‘subjective’ experience,” is radically exterior. The subject does not find himself within himself, but something other.

And reciprocally, what is found within the other is the self. Zizek argues that the subject’s relation to the other involves a relation of substitution that extends to “every one of the subject’s innermost feelings and attitudes, including crying and laughing” (Zizek 1997:44). Since the self can manifest as the other, the other is able to experience one’s own feelings. Zizek writes,

Crucial here is the reflective reversal of ‘the Other does it for me, instead of me, in the place of me,’ into ‘I myself am doing it through the Other.’ This reversal renders the minimal condition of subjectivity; that is to say, the attitude which constitutes subjectivity is not ‘I am the active autonomous agent who is doing it’ but ‘when another is doing it for me, I myself am doing it through it’...[T]his shift is a shift from the Other enjoying it instead of me, in my place, to myself enjoying it through the Other (Zizek 1997:52)

In other words, when the other laughs, cries, and mourns, it is the self who is experiencing catharsis. While in the previous passage Zizek stated that the self is deprived of its innermost

experiences by the structure of subjectivity, here Žižek makes clear that those experiences are not wholly absent, but are instead made available in and through the other.

Although I am breaking with Lacan in proposing that extimacy might describe a relationship of mutuality, I do not wish to abandon his observation that extimacy brings with it a degree of aversion or even antagonism towards the other within the self. It is not a coincidence that Miller chooses to illustrate extimacy with the example of the bomb and of racism. Both introduce a threat to the self that creates a corresponding repugnance towards the other. It is a relationship in which pleasure and horror intermingle, each feeding the other in their excess. This antagonism towards the other contributes to the intensity of the relationship, moving it from the realm of pleasurable reminiscences to one in which the very relationship that sustains the self also threatens to subsume it. Recall Corey's statement, "There are moments when I get a little overwhelmed with the person who knew me so much better than I seemed to know myself." Here, Corey signaled not only that the truest version of herself could be found within Marty, but also that the intimacy that this recognition engendered was almost too much to bear. In saying that Marty was overwhelming, she pointed towards the excess that inhered in their relationship, an excess that made it both desirable and distressing.

Extimacy does more than unravel the paradox at the heart of Corey and Marty's story. It reveals the contours of their ongoing relationship, showing how each is brought to life through their relationship to the other. This is a perspective that contemporary grief theory cannot sustain. By suggesting that the dead who are internalized take the form of a mental representation, grief theory denies the radical alterity of the dead other within the self. It also forecloses the possibility of a substantive, reciprocal relationship that might persist after death.

Conclusion

It is significant that Corey created the online memorial more than five years after Marty's death. Today, such ongoing memorialization efforts are increasingly finding a place within the literature on so-called normal grief. Yet these same literatures threaten to reduce the dead to a mental representation, denying the substantive nature of these relationships. The psychoanalytic concept of extimacy offers an alternative way of understanding relationships between the living and the dead as they take place in and through digital technologies such as online memorials. The psychoanalytic other within the self cannot be reduced to a mere projection of the unconscious. The term designates the essential strangeness of the other that resides within, who remains always apart from the self, even as it is a part of the self. Breaking with Lacan and Miller, I propose that extimacy might also allow us to envision an ongoing and mutual reciprocity between the living and the dead. If the dead is to be found within the bereaved, then the bereaved person might likewise be found within the dead.

I would like to raise one further point here, which is that extimacy need not be specific to relationships between the living and the dead. Worden presumes that internalizing the deceased loved one is an adaptation that must be made in the event of someone's death. Since they are no longer physically present, they can only be experienced mentally and emotionally. In contrast, extimacy describes a structure of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Internalization is not just something that one might do with the deceased, but a necessary foundation of all intimate relations. In this way, death no longer becomes the dividing line that ultimately decides what is possible and impossible in a relationship. Instead, it invites a transformation that both the living and the dead undergo in the process of establishing a continued bond.

2. An intersubjective cartography of memory:

Erin and Patricia's app

Introduction

Shortly after her mother's unexpected death, Erin set out to track and record each of the times that she was confronted with a memory of her mother. She used a form that she created on her smartphone, which she referred to as her "app." She envisioned the app as a way to track the progression of her own grief. Instead, she explained, "I realized I wasn't tracking my grief, because it really wasn't necessarily, it wasn't about that. It was sort of like tracking my *mom*. And I would say it was like tracking a ghost of my mom. It was seeing where she popped up in the world." The app became a way for Erin to chart her mother's persistent presence by recording each time her mother made an appearance in her life. To reflect this understanding of her tracking activities, she termed her entries "mom sightings."

Much of contemporary grief theory points to memory as the site of ongoing relations with the dead. Recalling cherished memories of time spent together is understood to be the foundation of attachments in the present. But what is memory according to grief theory? How is memory mobilized in practices of digital memorialization? And what part does digital technology play in people like Erin's experiences of the memories of their dead loved ones?

In this chapter, I explore memory in digital memorialization through the unfolding story of Erin and her mother, Patricia. The smart phone app that Erin created forges a relationship to her mother through memory. Yet memory here is not a deliberate attempt to access past events that are preserved in the mind, but a series of eruptions of the past into the present that feel again

and again surprising. Furthermore, I argue that Erin uses the app to continually refashion her memories, creating an opening that allows her relationship with her mother to be dynamic—an experience that I term re-remembering. Erin’s use of her app to refashion memory challenges not only contemporary perspectives on grief, but prevailing assumptions about the function of digital technology as a tool for preserving an authentic recording of the past.

Memory in grief theory

[T]he life of the dead consists in the recollection cherished of them by the living.

-Marcus Tullius Cicero (Cicero 2010:93)

It’s a cliché that the dead live on in memories, dating back at least as far as this famous quote by Cicero. This truism finds its way into much of the contemporary grief literature, where relationships with the dead are often glossed as relationships to an inner representation comprised of memories of the deceased. Much of grief theory recognizes that memory is dynamic, and that memories of the dead may be revised or even created after the person’s death. Yet the relationships that these memories make possible are conceived of as entirely one-sided, turning the dead into passive objects of a loved one’s intentional remembrances.

Early psychoanalytic writing on grief saw reminiscing as a way to facilitate gradual detachment from the deceased. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud famously wrote that during the mourning process, “Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercatheted, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it” (Freud 1957[1917]:245). Much of contemporary grief reproduces

the notion that remembering is a tool for achieving detachment. In *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, Worden writes that, “Reminiscing is one way to gradually divest the emotional energy tied up with the deceased” (Worden 2009:99). He suggests that grief counselors encourage their patients to remember their loved ones, which “can help them realize that although the lost person can never be replaced, it is all right to fill the void with a new relationship” (Worden 2009:99). Worden’s words suggest that the deceased person is permanently absent, leaving a “void” where the relationship used to be. Remembering shared experiences allows the bereaved to grasp that the deceased is located in the past, a realization that frees them up to find a new relationship that can take the place of the old.

Although Worden has inherited Freud’s suggestion that remembering facilitates detachment from the dead, he has not inherited Freud’s nuanced understanding of memory itself. The word reminiscing, with its connotations of pleasurable leisure, is notable. Worden presents remembering as an intentional activity, one that the bereaved person might elect to undertake at their convenience. Rather than seeing memory as the grounds for a continuing relationship with another person in which one might expect to be surprised or pushed off the expected course, “reminiscing” places the relationship with the reminisced under the direction of the one who remembers.

This understanding of memory as an intentional act facilitating detachment persists in some of the research and writing belonging to the more recent continuing bonds theory of grief. In a chapter of the edited volume *Continuing Bonds* entitled “Children’s Changing Relationships with the Deceased,” the authors describe children’s memories of their deceased parents in much the same language as Worden uses above:

Death robs us of a present and future with our loved one, but it has no firm grip on the past. Therefore, memories are probably the most precious gifts that survivors are left with. They are the most prominent and accessible links the bereaved have to the deceased. They need not be created, only revived. By reminiscing, children are demonstrating their beginning acceptance of the loss. Talking about the deceased and thinking about him or her in the past makes the death real. It brings forth the reality that the past is all that there is left of a father or mother (Normand et al 1996:109).

This passage demonstrates the way that memory is construed in much of the literature on continuing bonds with the deceased. Reminiscing is one of the primary ways that the bereaved maintain a relationship with the deceased, but at the same time it helps the bereaved move forward, diminishing the significance of the relationship by rooting it in a past that is understood to be over and done with. Memory itself is something that exists pre-formed, available to be revisited but in a way that acknowledges the insurmountable gap between the dead who exist in the past and the living who exist in the present.

Not all of contemporary grief theory shares this understanding of memory as an accurate depiction of past events. In another essay in the same edited volume, authors Silverman and Nickman argue that children develop new memories of their parents after their deaths, a process that they describe as “learning to remember” (Silverman and Nickman 1996:74). Yet this, too, is a highly elective approach to memory, in which the bereaved are likewise believed to control memory’s dynamism. Miriam and Sidney Moss build on this notion of “learning to remember” in their chapter on spousal bereavement. They write,

Within the context of letting go, there is holding on to the tie with the deceased. Memory provides the major link between the widowed person and the deceased spouse. Memory

holds together past and present and gives continuity to human life. Nostalgia and sentimentality about the past heighten the impact of recollections. Waller (1951) suggested that by combining and reworking selective memories, we maintain an image of the deceased and of his or her life (Moss and Moss 1996:165).

Although the authors situate memory and connection to the dead within an overarching framework of “letting go,” they offer a different understanding of memory than in the previous essay. They suggest that memories are not preserved but crafted in an ongoing process that continues after a spouse’s death.

Still, the evolution of memory remains entirely within the control of the living. It involves “combining and reworking” the memories that the bereaved have been left with, creating a more pleasing and perhaps simpler “image” of the deceased that can then be carried forward. The re-working of memories is thus a way of creating a tie to an idealized image of the deceased influenced by “nostalgia and sentimentality,” an image that does not take much psychic or emotional energy to maintain. While the bereaved might maintain a continuing bond of sorts, their attachment to the complex, vital person they have lost has been deliberately severed.

Simon Shimson Rubin is perhaps the most prolific and well-known psychologist to theorize the relationship between memory and ongoing relations with the dead. In the early 1980s, Rubin developed what he termed the Two-Track Model of Bereavement. The model sought to integrate two previous approaches: what he termed the “psychodynamic model,” which focused on the inner experience of loss and gradual detachment from the deceased, and the “personality-change model,” which focused on the external behaviors of the bereaved and their ability to function (Rubin 1981, 1999). According to Rubin, mourning proceeds

simultaneously along each of these two “tracks,” resulting in both internal and external changes in response to a death.

While emphasizing the significance of each track, Rubin suggested that psychodynamic changes were the primary driver of bereavement. He posited that the bereaved person’s relationship must transform after the death of their loved one before eventually stabilizing into an internal relationship based on memory (Rubin 1996). In his essay “The Resolution of Bereavement” (1985) he writes,

While adjustment to loss implies normal affective and behavioral functioning, it is the nature of the *relationship* of the bereaved to the deceased that is the best determination of whether the mourning has been resolved. If the relationship to the deceased is positive and adaptive, resolution is a fitting term. Where this is not the case—in the presence or absence of disturbed functioning—resolution of bereavement has not been accomplished. The dynamic relationship of the bereaved to the memories and associations of the deceased determine resolution (Rubin 1985:231).

In the above passage, Rubin suggests that dynamism is not an inherent quality of memory, but a benchmark of successful mourning.

To illustrate his concept of resolution, Rubin provided two cases studies, one illustrating maladaptive bereavement and one illustrating an adaptive post-bereavement relationship (1985). The first case described a woman, J, whose teenaged son died in an accident nine years before the interview. Rubin wrote,

Utilizing indices of preoccupation with the deceased, the picture of a chronic and continuing mourning was evident. She made frequent visits to the cemetery and experienced a cyclical sensitivity to the day of the week on which her son had died. She

kept his clothes and things ready for him in the manner of mummification described by Gorer (1972). Her behavior appeared to reflect her wish to remain united with her son rather than to be reunited with him. Such patterns characterize the pattern of classic unresolved bereavement” (Rubin 1985:232).

In this passage, J’s bereavement is judged and found wanting based on the fact that her relationship with her son is too intimate and involved. Rubin noted that, “the relationship was vivid and alive,” suggesting that this was inappropriate and potentially damaging to J (Rubin 1985:232). He concluded, “Fundamentally, she has not renounced her son as a source of living gratification and has effectively denied accepting the reality of her bereavement” (Rubin 1985:233). The case study demonstrates that dynamic relationships with the dead are desirable, but only if they are based on memories of the past and not an ongoing attachment in the present.

Rubin contrasted J’s case with that of L, a young woman who lost her companion of more than three years, Bill. Although L felt that her relationship with Bill lived on, it did not participate in the rest of her life. Rubin pointed out approvingly that L had moved out of the apartment that she and Bill had shared and moved in with someone else, embarking on a new romantic relationship. He wrote,

She had no mementos of Bill in her current apartment but kept them in a special area in her parents’ home. In the first months after loss, she spent a great deal of time at her parents’ home with these keepsakes and wept a great deal. At the time of the interviews, she went but rarely. The mementos contained many of the things that Bill collected when they lived together. She felt the need to stress that the corner, and a place in her heart, would be Bill’s forever. She carried no pictures in her wallet. For her, Bill was identified with a corner at her parents’ home (Rubin 1985:233-234).

The distinction between adaptive and maladaptive grief relationships again comes down to the question of where the dead are kept. Rubin's assessment of L was in part based on the fact that she did not carry Bill with her. Instead, their relationship had been relegated to a corner of her parents' home, and presumably to a corner of her emotional and psychic life as well. In contrast, J's son was afforded a great deal of space in her home and in her life. She kept her son's clothes and possessions as well as visiting him frequently at his gravesite. In J's case, memory suffused her life, condensed into objects and places that remained close at hand and that grounded a living relationship. For L, memory was something to be occasionally visited, but that did not intrude on the rest of her life.

These two case studies illustrate both the possibilities and the limitations of Rubin's theory. On the one hand, he affirmed the value of enduring relationships with the dead that are based on a rich repository of memories. Yet Rubin remained rooted in the Freudian paradigm of detachment even while underscoring the significance of continuing bonds. He wrote, "The adaptive task of the bereavement response, fully accepting the reality of loss (Freud 1957[1917]; Volkan 1972), is adjudged technically complete when the psychologically intense relationship to the deceased is defused and the finality of the loss accepted" (Rubin 1985:232). In the model of grief that Rubin set forth, relationships with the dead are grounded in memories that are open to reconstruction, revision, and transformation. Yet when memories are maintained as a living presence, they become a hallmark sign of "unresolved bereavement." Furthermore, the relationship to memory that Rubin affirms once again makes memory into an active and deliberate process undertaken by the bereaved.

I want to take seriously the claim set forth by Rubin and his colleagues that memories can be the foundation for persistent and dynamic relationships with the dead. However, I leave open

the question of what memory consists of and where it can be located. While the essays described above emphasize that relations with the dead must remain in the past, Erin's experience points towards the myriad temporalities of memory, complicating straightforward distinctions between past, present, and future. While Rubin literally and metaphorically relegates the dead to a corner in another's house, Erin finds her mother again and again in the objects and places that she encounters in the world. She comes across her mother in unexpected moments when memories emerge unbidden rather than being available for occasional use.

Mom Sightings

My conversations with Erin began in San Francisco shortly after her mother, Patricia's, untimely death, when Erin was still trying to figure out whether and how it would be possible to maintain their relationship. Her app was an experiment in both recording and nourishing that relationship, mediated by the smartphone that she always kept close at hand. Like many of my ethnographic subjects, their relationship was full of ambiguities and ambivalences; indeed, Erin sometimes questioned whether it was possible to have a relationship with a dead person at all. Her app was promissory as much as it was satisfying in the moment; it suggested a way that, given the right dedication and diligence, she might perpetuate her mother's presence in the world.

Two months after Patricia's death, Erin and I met over pizzas to talk about how she was coping. She told me that she had begun recording her mom sightings on a form that she had created using the software program Google Documents and kept bookmarked on her phone. She pulled her phone out to show it to me, giving me a glimpse of numbers and check boxes and she swiftly scrolled down. I was intrigued, both by Erin's provocative description of her memories as

“mom sightings” and by the notion that one might capture and preserve these fleeting sightings with the right mix of technology and ingenuity (an interpretation of her practice that later proved to be misguided).

Several years and cross-country moves later, our conversations migrated onto Skype and Google Hangouts, with the occasional impromptu cell phone call. Erin upgraded to a new phone that no longer contained the link to her form, and for a long time she stopped logging her entries. She often expressed regret at having let the habit fade, and wondered aloud whether her relationship with her mother was likewise fading. Two years after her mother’s death, she began logging entries again, motivated in part by our ongoing conversations around loss and technology. The ebbs and flows of her mediated relationship with her mother run against the grain of popular understandings of grief, which presume a gradual detachment from the deceased. It also runs against the grain of more recent “continuing bonds” models of grief, where attachments to the dead gradually fade in significance before continuing indefinitely in an attenuated form. Instead, Erin’s relationship with her mother intensified, animated in part by my own ethnographic participation. It struck me that this disrupted temporality more closely mirrored relationships among the living, which likewise ebb and flow.

At my request, Erin emailed me several screenshots that together displayed her Google form in its entirety. It was a brief, black-and-white document, without any images or visual embellishments. The first prompt read “Mom Sighting” and was followed by a string of boxes that could be checked off: memory, sight, sound, place, topic, writing, reading, work, smell, activity, meditation, event. These checkboxes mixed several indicators, describing what Erin was doing when she encountered her mother (writing, reading, work, meditation), the sensation that had brought her mother to presence (sight, sound, smell), and what the mom sighting consisted

of (memory, activity, event). This was followed by a text box labeled “Comments,” which Erin told me that she used to type out a brief description of the mom sighting. Next was a drop-down menu where Erin could input her location. The next prompt read “Affect,” and was again followed by a long string of check boxes with labels such as lonely, energized, warmed, and frustrated. The last two prompts were titled “Mood” and “Happiness,” which were indicated on a six-point scale. At the bottom was a large blue “Submit” button, which uploaded the results onto a spreadsheet with all of her past entries.

At the time that she created the form, Erin was actively involved in the Quantified Self movement, a community of people who use self-tracking to pursue self-knowledge, often with the intention of optimizing a specific attribute such as fitness. She explained, “I was trying to fit into the Q[uantified] S[elf] community. Be a part of it, understand it, make friends. And I didn’t really have a thing that I tracked, until I was like, ‘Actually no, I’m going to track my grief.’” In keeping with the norms of Quantified Self, Erin incorporated some numerical indicators of grief into her app—namely, the mood and happiness scale. She imagined that using the app would allow her to track the progression of her grief over time, the way that other members of the Quantified Self community measured their heart rate, weight, or sleep quality. Instead, she was surprised to find that the app had become a conduit to her mother, deepening her experience of the memories that arose in the course of her day.

When I asked Erin to explain what exactly a mom sighting was, she had this to say:

It could be a situation, it could be a thing, an object. It could be a person. It could be a conversation. It could be the actual bringing up of my mom in a conversation, or it could just be a topic that launches me back into a memory, or to something, some form of her in the world that just reminds me of her or something that she did.... Things in the world or

conversations or whatever can make memories more present. But also not just memory.

That *is* that person!

According to Erin, the mom sighting was not the memory itself, but the place, object, person, or activity through which she came upon the memory. These were not incidental triggers, but the sites and sources of the persistent life of their relationship. As she put it, they *are* her mother.

Memory was the foundation of Erin's ongoing relationship with Patricia. Yet Erin's descriptions of her mom sightings suggested that her memories were located in the world rather than being contained inside of her head. She told me that she'd originally intended to take a photograph of each object involved in a mom sighting, creating a gallery of images that would map out her mother's continued presence in her world. She explained, "And a little bit of why I wanted to take photos was to capture the sightings. The physical sightings in the world. To animate the objects into life. To animate these things that had ghost-like qualities."

Erin's desire to capture these enchanted objects suggests a very different understanding of memory than we have seen in grief theory. Instead, they more closely align with Marcel Proust's own musings on memory. In the first book of his multivolume *Remembrance of Things Past*, he writes,

I feel that there is much to be said for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and thus effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognized them the spell is broken. Delivered by us, they have overcome death and return to share our life (Proust 1970[1928]:34).

By calling them “mom sightings,” Erin similarly frames memory as a kind of encounter, one that can occur by way of an unlikely object.

Interestingly, Proust suggests that such objects do not become enchanted through their associations with the living. In other words, it’s not that objects remind passers-by of people they have lost and therefore *seem* enchanted to them. Objects are infused with the souls of the dead regardless of whether their loved ones ever discover them. His interpretation suggests that the objects that Erin tracks on her app don’t just trigger her memories; they contain her mother, as memory. Erin herself seemed to affirm this. She told me that by using the app, “I wanted to take seriously the idea that my mom kind of lives in that weird water bottle over there.”

Proust’s musings on memory also suggest a particular structure of time. The passage above continues:

And so it is with our own past. It is a labor in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die (Proust 1970[1928]:34).

Proust’s descriptions suggest that a person’s own past is located in the future, still to be discovered, rendering it deeply uncertain. The past can only be experienced if one happens to stumble on it at some point in the future, which may or may not ever happen.

Following Proust, Erin’s app might be a way of locating her mom sightings not only in the present, but in the future. Recording each sighting in the Google form created an expectation that the sightings would be repeated. Yet this repetition had a contingent quality that made the

app dynamic and absorbing for Erin. More encounters were yet to come, but whether, when, and how these encounters might occur remained unknown and unknowable. Thus, using her app to both capture and animate the enchanted objects was a way for Erin to foster her mother's persistent presence in her future as well as in her present.

Yet the significance of the objects, places, and activities that Erin records in her app undermines easy distinctions between inside herself and out in the world, as well as between past, present, and future. Erin does not experience her memories as mental representations of the past, but neither does she fully experienced them as external objects in the present. Both her memories and her experiences of her mother cross-cut internal and external. To explore this further, let's consider how Erin talked about the places in which her mom sightings occurred. She explained,

I mean in some ways, a place will trigger an event, and there's a part of me that's like, "Oh I want to memorialize it, I want to plant a flag in my little app." I mean it's not a physical flag, in the world, but I want to plant a little flag that says, "My mom was here."

I mean I called them mom sightings! That's how I'd use it in this geographical way, like I was hunting. And I was seeing her in the world. And that felt really important.

By recording where each of her sightings took place, the app created a cartography of memory. Erin even told me that she'd been searching for a way to display her entries on a map, organized by location rather than chronology.

Erin was also careful to point out that this was an intersubjective cartography. She went on to say, "And so I wanted to plant little flags, for myself, but at the same time I also recognized, this is how *I'm* experiencing this space. It's not necessarily a property of the space on its own, it's a property of me in the space." Her entries described her relationship to various

places, experienced through her memories of her mother. But the entries also described her mother's relationship to these same places, experienced *through Erin*. When Erin said, "I want to plant a little flag that says, 'My mom was here,'" she was not describing places that her mother frequented while she was alive, but places where she encountered her mother after her death. Patricia had a relationship to these places by way of Erin's own encounters with them.

Furthermore, Erin clarified that the term "mom sightings" wasn't meant to suggest that she was encountering an independent entity. She explained,

And so when something got triggered in the environment that gave me a memory of her, it was a "mom sighting," but was it really *her*? It's my memory of her, it's how I relate to her. And so it's more of a reflection of my relationship, and...the interconnection between us.

The fact that Erin was recording her relationship to her mother did not necessarily mean that they weren't *mom sightings*. She explained,

And to me, with Quantified Self, I kept trying to inject a little criticism of how people collecting all this data about themselves, and all these experiences in their life, was sort of... They were attempting to shore up this idea of the sort of unique, atomistic individual, with all your unique data and characteristics. And I was trying to do a project that collected data that broke that down and explored my identity in relation to another person. And it wasn't even that, it was my identity in relation to the *memory* of another person!

By deliberately recording how her mother was invoked in relation to the people, places, and objects around her, Erin was seeking to explore Patricia's status as a relational being.

Erin's understanding of relationality suggested a certain reciprocity between herself and her mother. Exploring her ongoing intimacy with Patricia allowed her to see her mother as a relational being who persisted through her ties to the people, places, and objects in the world. At the same time, exploring her own ongoing intimacy with her mother-as-relational was also the way that Erin encountered *herself* as a relational being. As she noted above, the app didn't just allow Erin to record her mom sightings; she also "explored my identity in relation to another person." In other words, it's not just that Erin discovered that her mother existed in and through her ongoing ties to the living; she also discovered that she herself exists in and through her own ongoing ties to others, including the dead.

The relational quality of Erin's mom sightings complicated the intersubjective cartography of memory by drawing in her own psychic landscape. She explained,

To me, it's like, I kind of liked that by a sighting, they were inside me and outside me... I think it helps connect between and break down the division between the internal and external. If I see something and it evokes a memory or it evokes a thought and it's just in my head, although I know it's a thing in the world, it keeps it internal maybe and then later I log it. It sort of makes it more tangible or solidifies the connection. Or it sort of just lays down a little bread crumb of a trail. It's like drawing lines, connecting the dots. It is that act of recording that my little app shares with probably a lot of the technology you're thinking of. Maybe that's the act that sort of breaks down that externalization versus internalization. Or breaks down the internalization part. That makes it more of an act of participating with the world or having the dead participate, not just with your mind, but with the world.

Erin suggested that it was the very act of recording that broke down the distinction between inside and outside, allowing her memories—and her mother—to move from within her head into the world, and from within the world inside of herself. The app created a trail through which she could navigate the internal-external geography of memory, collecting and connecting the fragments of her mother and of herself.

Erin’s decision to create the app was influenced by the advice of her grief counselor, who suggested that she could continue to engage with her mother even after her death. At the time, Erin kept finding herself in situations where she wanted to talk to her mother about what was taking place. She explained:

Throughout the last several years I was on and off seeing this grief counselor. And whenever I would encounter these situations and bring them up to her and be really upset about it, *she* would encourage me, “Well why don’t you just ask your mom? Why don’t you just talk to her? Pretend she’s there.” Not pretend. She didn’t even want to say “pretend,” because she even wanted to make it more real than that. “Ask her. You can talk to her. What would she do?” And the app allowed me to do that. It was a way to sort of talk to the dead person.

Erin told me that she’d been skeptical about her grief counselor’s advice, finding it difficult to have a conversation with her mother unassisted. The app was an experiment in finding a different way to engage with her mother, one that nonetheless felt like “a way to sort of talk to the dead person.” She elaborated,

And I think from my therapist’s point of view, her perspective is that, “You instinctively know what your mother might say.” Or, “It’s inside you somehow!” Or, “You can have the conversation, it’s in you, because you’ve been exposed to her your whole life!” Or

you know, “You’ve had *your* lifetime to absorb: What would she do? What would she say?” And you can guess what they might do or what they might say, but you have to *ask*. You have to ask yourself. You have to pause, and you have to ask, and reflect, “What would she do in this moment?” And you might not be right, but why does that matter, I guess. So part of this logging experiment was just to see if that can be true.

The grief therapist located Patricia inside of her, in contrast to Erin’s own assessment that relationships with the dead “live in our heads, as well as with things, and then with other people.” Those “other people” included Erin herself. In the course of one of our conversations, Erin pulled up her spreadsheet and began going through her old entries. She described one of them as follows:

For example one day I was wearing her clothing, because I inherited a bunch of her clothing. So, at some point in June 2015 I guess I was wearing one of her shirts. Actually, this is kind of sweet. All I wrote was, “I’m wearing one of her shirts today. Starting to look like her. Even my jeans are mom-like. But as Jonathan says”—Jonathan’s a friend—“the dead grow up inside of you.”

Although in this entry Erin described discovering her mother within, it’s a very different experience than the one proposed by her grief therapist. The conversation that the grief therapist imagined Erin having with her mom was a kind of internal dialog, where Erin would pose questions and then consider how her mother would answer if she were still alive. The therapist suggested that Erin had absorbed enough of her mother’s words and advice from the past to *guess* how she might react to a situation in the present. Although she encouraged Erin to start a conversation with Patricia, she presumed that Erin herself would be furnishing both sides of the dialog. In the therapist’s framing, then, the dead loved one within is really one’s own self,

reflecting on memories that remain rooted in the past. In contrast, when Erin saw her mother in her own reflection as she tried on the sweater, she encountered someone entirely distinct from herself. She recognized that her mother was evolving in ways that could not be predicted. The dead grow up inside of us.

Animating the relationship

Erin sat curled up on the faded green couch in my living room, her narrow frame almost swallowed by its soft cushions. I was perched on the sofa next to her, my laptop open and my phone precariously balanced on the arm of the couch, recording our conversation. After a few minutes, Erin pulled her own laptop out of the bag next to her, looking for traces of the app—and her mother— on her hard drive. Patricia was a silent presence in the room, caught somewhere between our sweaty bodies, our overheated laptops, and Erin’s tears.

Erin struggled to remember where the idea for the app had originated, although I hadn’t asked her for its history. She reflected,

I was trying to document her active participation in my life. I was trying to document a living relationship, beyond someone’s death. Because I was feeling very adamant that I wanted to explore this idea that someone dies, and... Or it was more that I was trying to convince myself of it.

A lot of this was inspired by not just Q[uantified] S[elf], but I was seeing a therapist for the first time *ever*, and this therapist happened to be an expert in grief... And one thing that I learned from her, I try to learn from her—because I fight with her, she’ll tell me things and I’ll fight with her about it—was this idea that your relationship—and this is what she said, almost verbatim: “Your relationship to someone who you lose does

not *end* when they die.” And that might seem really obvious, but it’s not obvious. It’s not obvious at all!

I feel like the logging of her memory in my life, or the desire to log, even though it wasn’t necessarily as successful as I would have liked it to be, was me trying to convince myself of that truth. That, okay, my relationship doesn’t have to end. I can continue having conversations, if I... It was me desperately trying to have faith in my memory, by having the memory, logging it, exploring it deeper by writing about it, maybe for five or six or ten sentences, and then allowing it to shape me in some way. It was my way of having a continued conversation with someone who was dead, I guess.

Even when I didn’t necessarily have faith that it was true. I was trying to convince myself that it could be true.

Erin began by describing the app as a way of documenting her relationship with her mother. Yet she went on to describe the app as her way of trying to use her memories to open up a “continued conversation” with her, one that she hadn’t been sure would be possible before she began using the app. A few minutes further into our conversation, Erin mused, “It’s not even so much to memorialize, it’s like making her an active participant.” Although she had envisioned the app as a tool that would allow her to register her mother’s continued presence, it became a way to bring her mother to presence. Erin’s app thus played a vital role in her encounters with memory, fostering the very relationship that it simultaneously recorded.

To understand this relationship between recording and animation, let’s return to Erin’s explanation of why she wanted to photograph the objects through which she encountered her mother. Recall that she said,

And a little bit of why I wanted to take photos was to capture the sightings, the physical sightings in the world. To animate the objects into life. To animate these things that had ghost-like qualities. I mean that was part of the idea behind the pictures.

Erin first explained that the photographs were meant to “capture” her mom sightings, suggesting that the app would create an objective record of an encounter that had already occurred. Yet in the very next sentence, she said that the photographs would *animate* the objects, suggesting that the act of recording was what breathed life into them, infusing them with the lingering presence of her mother. This was one of several moments when Erin gestured towards the ways in which the app participated in the enchantments that it rendered.

Erin’s words contrast with Proust’s understanding of object-memories. Proust suggests that such encounters with the dead are an ever-present possibility that don’t depend on any deliberate action on the part of the living. Walking around, one might stumble on the tree that holds captive the soul of a dead loved one. In Erin’s quote above, the act of pausing to record these encounters is part of what allowed them to occur.

Erin’s understanding of the relationship between recording and re-presencing runs closer to the way that some recent anthropologists have conceived of animation. In their article “Animating Interaction” (2013), Paul Manning and Ilana Gershon expand on Teri Silvio’s (2010) suggestion that animation might provide an alternative to the trope of performance, emphasizing different aspects of mediated subjectivity and sociality. The authors return to Silvio’s earlier work with fans of the Taiwanese puppet television genre, *Pili*. They explain,

Silvio kept seeing slouchy teenagers slinking around a park at a *Pili* event, dressed in very stylized clothes. They would only try to hold themselves like their puppet character when engaged with a camera, they became their character only when photographed...In

her article “Informationalized affect: The body in Taiwanese digital-video puppetry and COSplay” (2006), Silvio argues that these cosplayers have started to view bodies as yet another medium in the range of media available to them when representing a character. Thus the body can be activated when it is surrounded by the right combination of media—when there is someone else with a camera or, as Silvio discusses, someone around to voice the characters... In a sense, when the cosplayer is dressed as a puppet, the body becomes metaphorically analogous to the puppet’s body, animated as a character by a combination of several people’s efforts” (Manning and Gershon 2013:117).

Silvio’s interpretation suggests that *Pili* cosplayers are mediums for the characters that they channel, and that these characters animate their bodies the way that a puppeteer animates a puppet. The cosplayers signal their readiness by donning their intricate costumes, but the costumes alone are not sufficient for animation to take place. Rather, the characters require “the right combination of media” to be brought to life—in this case, the recording device of the camera and the prerecorded lines of the *Pili* skits.

Erin’s descriptions of using her app gesture towards a parallel form of animation that is likewise dependent on the media through which it is recorded. She suggested that it was Patricia who animated the objects, places, and people that took part in her mom sightings, and these animations were part of what she was exploring by tracing their cartography. As she put it, “I wanted to take seriously the idea that my mom kind of lives in that weird water bottle over there.” Yet unlike Proust, Erin suggested that the presence of the app was required “to animate these objects to life.” Just as the costumed cosplayer’s bodies are insufficient to channel the dead, the objects in and of themselves contain only the possibility of being animated by Patricia. For this animation to take place, the right combination of media must be present—in this case,

the app through which Erin recorded her mom sightings. Capturing the objects using the app, then, allowed Erin to participate in their enchantment. These enchanted objects could then serve as conduits for her persistent relationship to her mother.

At the same time, Erin's use of the term "animate" departs from that of animation scholars such as Silvio and Nozawa. These authors define animation first and foremost as a character-based genre in which drawn figures predominate (Cholodenko 1991; Lamarre 2009; Nozawa 2013; Silvio 2010). When Erin said that she used the app, "to animate the objects into life," she gestured towards a related notion of *animism*, an ontology in which forms of personhood are attributed to specific objects, places, and entities (see for example Descola 1996). Using the language of animation allowed her to articulate her sense that seemingly mundane objects could at the same time be manifestations of a person, engendering strong affective attachments and responses. The water bottle wasn't animated because it had been endowed with the ability to move and speak, but because it contained the *anima* (air, breath, life, soul, mind) of her mother (Chen 2012:3).

Yet the anthropological concept of animism doesn't necessarily convey the forms of liveliness that the app engendered, as I soon learned. Intrigued by Erin's use of the term "animate," I prodded her about the significance of objects to her mom sightings. At the time I was steeped in the recent psychological writing on grief, with its preoccupation with the boundaries between inside and outside. I asked whether she felt that she encountered her mother through objects, or if these objects were activating a relationship that resided within her. Thrown by the starkness of the question, Erin gave an embarrassed laugh and responded, "I don't actually think that she exists inside that water bottle. I'm not an animist!" With this disclaimer, Erin distanced herself from the idea that the objects that participated in her mom sightings were

somehow equivalent to the person she had known and loved. Her use of the term “animate” instead allowed her to remain open to the many ways that her mother might be recognized, felt, and experienced by her.

Erin may have also been shying away from was the suggestion that any object could fully represent (or re-present) her mother. Her use of the app involves recording a hypothetically endless series of partial versions of Patricia, versions that were gone almost as soon as they appeared. These fleeting fragments provided a diverse and varying set of tethers to her mother, allowing their relationship to form and reform over time, as I explore later in the chapter. In this way, her use of the app again runs close to the theorizations of animation scholars, who point out that the sparseness of the character and its variable iterations can contribute to the affective attachments that form around them.

By exploring the ways that her mother continued to live on through their relationship, Erin was drawing forth yet another concept from the *anima* lexicon: animacy, which describes the “agency, awareness, mobility, and liveness” that can inhere in diverse entities (Chen 2012:2; see also Kohn 2013; Povinelli 2016). For Mel Chen (2012), the term “animacy” is a way to avoid reproducing the binary between life and nonlife, acknowledging not only the blurring of the boundary between them but also the ways that they merge, as in the case of the chemically-contaminated subject who is animated in part by the nonliving substances that persist within.⁸ Anthropologists such as Rosalyn Morris and Todd Ramón Ochoa explore the animacy of the

⁸ Povinelli (2016) is similarly concerned with troubling the Life/Nonlife binary, which she argues is the structuring trope of late liberal governance. In the process she critiques the notion of *animism*, suggesting that the designation “animist” can exoticize indigenous subjects and their relationships while at the same time perpetuating the binary between Life and Nonlife. I would extend her critique to point out that it can also obscure forms of enchantment that are widespread among non-indigenous subjects, including the techies whose relationships I explore.

dead by elaborating the contours of their engagements with the living. Erin's use of "animate" draws from aspects of each of these approaches. Like Chen, she blurs the boundaries between person, object, and technology, querying the potential animacy of each. In so doing, she contributes to animacy's troubling of the Life/Nonlife distinction, raising question about not only the persistent liveliness of the dead but also the liveliness of digital technologies through which the dead are brought to presence. Yet in the end, the animacy of her mother relies less on the liveliness of the water bottle than on the vitality of the ongoing relationship between her and Patricia.

Morris's ethnography is instructive not just as an example of an ethnography that deals with the animacy of the dead, but also for her exploration of mediation's relationship to structures of time, memory, and history. In Morris, history takes a particular form: as a backwards movement towards an origin that takes the form of an absence, marking a loss. She writes,

What strikes the observer who is willing to listen closely to the often clichéd stories of historical descent into the present is that, for every tale of origin, there is an encounter with the absence of origins. For every image of first appearances, there is a vacancy.

Invariably encrypted within the tales of commencement is the realization that the origin is not one, that there are only substitutions, displacements, and translations in their stead (Morris 2000:4).

Part of the reason that spirit mediumship and photography were so popular in northern Thailand at the time of writing is that they mimic this structure of history. In Morris's concept of mediation, the origin is displaced. It's the empty center, gestured towards but never reached. At the same time, both spirit mediumship and photography provide avenues for the past to erupt into

the present. Morris describes many moments when originary figures become more pressing, more demanding, more *present* than figures with less temporal distance—even while the appearance of those figures manifests an absence.

There are resonances of Morris's historical treatment of mediumship in Erin's use of her app. The medium similarly records an eruption of the past into the present. Through this eruption, the ultimate originary figure becomes present—the mother. But Patricia's presence also points towards absence, continually reminding Erin of her death. Erin titled her Google form "Leaning into Grief," suggesting that the act of recording and preserving her mother's appearances actually intensified her sense of loss.

I would suggest that the app's relation to absence goes beyond its relationship to death, gesturing towards absence as the structure of mediated relations. On the app, Patricia is manifest as a series of displacements and substitutions through which Erin circles her absence. These displacements and substitutions are tethers to her mother, allowing them to draw near each other. The app does not structure a singular attachment to a whole, authentic, and embodied person, but creates a multitude of tethers to partial versions, the "substitutions, displacements, and translations" of Patricia, to borrow Morris's words.

For Morris, this is not just the structure of individual relationships, but of history as it plays out in contemporary Thai spirit mediumship. Spirit mediumship and photography are each structured so that engaging with them involves encountering a historical loss. I want to suggest that the current mode of mediation—animation—might similarly involve a confrontation with the past as a series of displacements and substitutions, and that the structure of this encounter is historically specific, tied to the media forms that are being used and to the historical moment in which we find ourselves.

Erin's app is unique, but it is also emblematic of a particular media form in which digital technologies contribute to the (re-)presencing of the dead. This media form has emerged at a particular historical moment, one in which expanding access to digital technology is raising questions about the possibilities of connection. But it also gestures towards a certain relationship between memory and history. In her own reflections on her app, Erin troubled the notion that time unfolds in a linear and orderly progression, and that memory involves the deliberate act of looking back at key moments in the past. Instead, the past erupts unbidden into the present as her mother suddenly appears in the form of a water bottle. So, too, do older media forms haunt her app, which recalls forms of Spirit Mediumship that took place through the emergent technology of the telegraph, among others.

Erin's reflections on her own digital practice extend animation, overlaying it with the related concepts of animacy and animism. Her attempts to animate objects involved recognizing some partial version of her mother that brought the two of them into proximity. This recognition brought her mother to life, invigorating the relationship between them—and transforming them both in the process (Butler 2004).

Hospitality

The app introduced elements into Erin and Patricia's relationship that were unintended and somewhat unexpected. Erin had decided to use her smart phone to record her mom sightings because it felt easy and convenient. She explained, "When you have it in your phone, it's something you always carry with you. So it's just more seamlessly in the flow of your life." She designed the form so that she would be able to record her mom sightings with the click of a few buttons, filling it with check boxes and rating scales that could be filled out quickly. Yet when

she started using it, she discovered that its greatest value lay in giving her an opportunity to take time out of her day to reflect. She explained,

It was very effective because I had to pause. I mean I would literally have to pause for one to three minutes and type into my phone. And the act of writing something out, it jogs even more memories, or it has you reflect even further. So it wasn't just a mere recording. It had me go deeper with those mini experiences.

The app encouraged Erin to stop and take note of the ways in which her mother appeared in her life. By allowing herself to be interrupted, Erin invited her mother to participate more fully in her life.

Erin's willingness to open herself up to these moments of encounter resonates with Derrida's theories of hauntology. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida draws from Freud's notion of the uncanny to propose a certain ethics with respect to the dead, an ethics that can be summed up in the notion of *hospitality*. He writes,

To welcome, we were saying then, but even while apprehending, with anxiety and the desire to exclude the stranger, to invite the stranger without accepting him or her, domestic hospitality that welcomes without welcoming the stranger, but a stranger who is already found within (*dad Heimliche-Unheimliche*), more intimate with one than one is oneself, the absolute proximity of a stranger whose power is singular *and* anonymous (*es spukt*), an unnameable and neutral power, that is, undecidable, neither active nor passive, an an-identity that, *without doing anything*, invisibly occupies places belonging finally neither to us nor to it (Derrida 1994:216-217).

Derrida describes a relation of hospitality that is maintained alongside an anxiety about the alterity of the other. Yet the distinction between the self who welcomes and the other who is

welcomed is blurred. In the moment of welcome/exclusion, the other is found to already inhabit the most intimate of spaces, the interior of the self. The self that one feels in possession of suddenly becomes the home of another. One is dispossessed (Butler 2004). Or rather, the self becomes the possession of neither self nor other; both are equally dispossessed, occupying “places belonging finally neither to us nor to it,” as Derrida puts it. He thus describes an attitude of hospitality that is cultivated towards the dead within despite the recognition that the dead person is both radically other and potentially threatening to the self.

I want to suggest that Erin used the app to cultivate an attitude of hospitality towards her mother, inviting her in without excluding her otherness. The therapist suggested that Erin’s mother was already entirely known to her; Erin could come up with her responses just by thinking about what she would say. In contrast, Erin’s descriptions of encountering Patricia both in the world and within herself recognized that her mother was, to some extent, unknowable. She was capable of surprising Erin by suddenly appearing in the form of a tree or a sweater. Even when she dwelled within she continued to grow, becoming something different even after her death.

Derrida’s description of hospitality alerts us to the ambivalence that inheres in Erin’s hospitality. For Derrida, the threat that the dead stranger presents to the self creates apprehension and anxiety, generating a desire to exclude the one who is welcomed. In this, his descriptions run close to Lacan’s theorizations of extimacy, which likewise capture the antagonism that the extimate other engenders. Just as Corey at times found her relationship with Marty to be “overwhelming,” Erin suggested that her relationship with her mother could sometimes feel like too much. Despite her own best intentions, she was never able to sustain the practice of logging her mom sightings with the diligence that she desired, instead going through periods of weeks or

months in which she abandoned the project altogether. Although she often attributed this to her struggles with diligence, it seemed to me that she oscillated between her desire to invite her mother in and her desire to exclude her, and that this oscillation was reflected in her uneven logging practices. At times, her antagonism towards her relationship with her mother was more overt, and extended to the digital practices that sustained it. When I asked her about the experience of listening to her mother's voicemails, for example, Erin told me,

Sometimes it brings up a lot of anger. And I can't tell if that's just because, if it's just the anger of grief, or if it's the anger of the unjustness of it, or the anger of, I just got used to this person being gone, and now I'm hearing this voice, and it's just like... It exists in this liminal space of, well they're gone, but not really gone, because they left this physical trace.

Erin's anger was partly directed towards her mother's death, but it was also directed towards her mother's persistent presence in her life, a presence made possible by the digital recordings that her phone had captured and preserved.

Logging her mom sightings was one way that Erin extended hospitality to her mother despite the aversion that this intimacy engendered. At one point in our conversations, Erin pulled up an entry that she had logged while she was in the midst of a work project. Looking back on it, she told me that doing so "felt good in that way, as opposed to feeling like these thoughts are *intrusive*." While recognizing that this was a moment in which her mother had entered her thoughts uninvited, she suggested that the app opened her up to these "distractions." It helped her cultivate the ability to "honor that tangent," rather than using her mother's persistent "intrusiveness" as the grounds for excluding her.

As this discussion makes clear, the act of recording is not a straightforward one. Erin's app tracked her mom sightings, but it also played an active part in their relationship. By using the app, Erin cultivated an ethics of hospitality towards her dead mother, inviting her to participate in her life. Her mother's participation then became the grounds for her subsequent entries. In what follows, I delve deeper in the part that recording played in Erin and Patricia's, drawing out the distinction between the act of recording and the record itself. Although digital recordings are often presumed to be a way of preserving against the failures of human memory, Erin's story shows that this need not always be the case.

Fidelity

I asked Erin to go through some of her past entries with me during one of our conversations about her app. She had a difficult time finding the spreadsheet, and once she did it took her several more minutes to figure out how to load it. When it was finally displayed on her laptop, she grew quiet. She was absorbed, but didn't seem entirely at ease as she read her old entries. I watched a series of emotions flit across her face: sadness, worry, recognition, surprise. Eventually she confessed that she didn't think she'd ever actually gone through the spreadsheet before. I was taken aback; I had assumed that the retrospective dimension of logging would be part of its appeal. I pressed Erin on why she hadn't ever read through her old entries. She seemed at a loss. Eventually she attributed it to laziness, but it was hard to take her seriously given how much thought and time she had put into creating the app and logging the entries. Over and over again as she read through the spreadsheet, she repeated the same exclamation with a mixture of concern and delight: "Oh, I'd forgotten about this!"

Erin showed considerable ambivalence towards the record of memories that her app generated. On the one hand, she told me that she was inspired to create the app out of the fear that she might lose her memories of her mother. She explained,

And I am someone who has a terrible memory, too, so to me it felt just like it was this ongoing loss as well. I would almost experience it as if, “Well, I remember this now, but it’s going to be lost again later.” I don’t know how to describe it better, but just feelings of loss around loss, or grieving grief itself. And also not feeling like you can do anything about it, about the fact that this person’s impact on the world is just *gone*. I mean, that’s why we, that’s why humans make memorials, and that’s why we *have* memorials, and that’s why we do things to honor people in their name, is to sort of keep certain memories alive, or keep certain people alive in certain ways.

Anyway, I just felt that the more micro moments of remembering my mom just felt like I was making mini memorials in my memory around something. It felt proactive, if that makes sense. So, I don’t know, it just felt kind of good. That I was just sort of depositing a memory in like a little memory bank.

For Erin, the app was a way to protect herself from ongoing loss by using the smart phone and Google’s online storage system to shore up her own precious and fading memories.

Erin’s statements follow prevailing understandings of human memory, digital technology, and the relationship between them. In his book *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, professor of Internet governance and regulation Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger writes,

Since the beginning of time, for us humans, forgetting has been the norm and remembering the exception. Because of digital technology and global networks, however,

this balance has shifted. Today, with the help of widespread technology, forgetting has become the exception, and remembering the default...[B]ecause of digital technology, society's ability to forget has become suspended, replaced by perfect memory (Mayer-Schoenberger 2009:2-4).

According to Mayer-Schoenberger, human memories eventually disappear unless they are actively protected. He points out that throughout history, humans have preserved their memories by utilizing forms of "external memory" such as painting, script, photography, and most recently, digital recording and information storage (2009:16-49). He argues that digital technology is distinctive among these in that it allows for an almost unlimited amount of information to be stored and retrieved, creating a "perfect memory." Whereas the default of human memory is to forget, the default of digital technology is to remember, and to preserve those memories indefinitely. Some of the literature on online memorialization applies these claims, contrasting the "immortality" offered through digital technology to the inevitability that memories will "fade with time" (Irwin 2015:144).

In Erin's descriptions above, it seems that part of the appeal of using the app is to draw from the "perfect memory" of digital technology to protect her memories of her mother from their inevitable degradation. Yet elsewhere, Erin vehemently disagreed that the app was about preservation. She told me, "At the end of the day, it's not because I'm trying to capture something that was lost that will never be lost ever again, or to freeze some person in time. It's more like a celebration of the ephemerality of people." She suggested that she didn't want to capture the essence of her mother, but rather the experience of being overcome by a memory that is gone as quickly as it came.

Erin's seemingly-contradictory statements make sense if we distinguish between the act of recording and the record itself. Erin was not interested in trying to generate an infallible record of her own memories. Instead, she was drawn to the app because of what the act of recording made possible. As she explained,

So I went out with the intent of, "Oh I'm going to record. Record all these little bits." But the most interesting part wasn't recording some thing that I found in the world and collecting it and putting it in my bag. It was what the act of recording does, and how it allows you to go deeper into something.

The act of recording opened her up to memory, bringing her mother to presence by submerging her in the memories that came and went throughout the course of her day. The record that was generated in the process was almost incidental.

Looking more closely at what Erin was actually recording extends these insights. She reflected,

That's the thing, it's not so much, "Oh I captured them," or "I captured that experience." That's not really the point. It's that I'm capturing my reaction and my reflection on the experience. So that was a big, that was an important point for me in this whole thing. Especially being in the Q[uantified] S[elf] world, where everyone was sort of obsessed with capturing data so that they'd be able to capture life, and it was almost, it was almost this hunter mentality, of, "You lose so much information in our daily lives! And our devices can help *capture* that data for us!" And for me, yes this is some sort of information or data that I'm capturing, but it was really more like ephemeral reflection and states of mind that I was trying to capture. And it wasn't so much the thing that *triggered* the event. I was just more interested in memory.

And maybe it was a bit of a commentary on the Quantified Self world, or just the data obsessed digital-capturing world that was just...I don't know, it didn't seem like there was much thought put into the importance of memory and the *imperfection* of memory... And to me it was: No, I'm not trying to re-create some person who was lost or capture something that was completely lost. I really want to explore the beauty of memory.

Erin was not interested in creating a faithful record of her memories, but in recording the way that she herself *experienced* the memory.

To explore this distinction, let's consider a specific entry, the most recent one that Erin had logged when I last spoke to her. On the spreadsheet generated by Google Documents, the entry begins with the timestamp, which notes the date and time that the entry was logged. The next column is entitled "Mom Sighting" and contains a single word: "Reading." In the Comments box are several brief sentences: "Reading *Food Fight*. One of my mom's last voicemails to me was about GMOs. She would have loved Jenkins and her work." The next two columns list the place where Erin was ("café"), followed by a list of affects she was experiencing: "sad, nostalgic, warm." The last columns contain a mood scale and a happiness scale, respectively; she rated both her mood and her happiness at a 9 out of 10. She told me, "I was out and about. I was happy, I was feeling good."

Most of the information contained in this entry is ancillary to the memory itself: when it happened, where Erin was, and what she was doing at the time. Even the commentary in the text box doesn't linger over a specific memory of Patricia, instead offering a verbal snapshot of Erin at the moment that her memories arose. Furthermore, the memory that spurred her to log this mom sighting is not actually a memory of her mother, but of another digital recording of her

mother, a voicemail. As Erin told me in a separate conversation, she had several voicemails from her mother on her cell phone when Patricia died, and she listened to these voicemails many times shortly after her death. Reading about GMOs, she was reminded of this experience of listening that had occurred after her mother's death.

What becomes clear from reading this entry is that Erin was not looking to elaborate a faithful representation of past events. What is captured is the act of remembering. The objects, places, activities, and moods that partake in the act of remembering are significant because they form the context of the present moment, shaping her encounter with her mother. She didn't use digital technology to preserve her memories, but to record her own ephemeral experience of them.

Re-remembering the dead

Erin's use of the app goes beyond a disregard for the fidelity of her own memories. She used it to foster a particular relationship to memory that involved a continual refashioning of the moments that she and her mother had shared. By intensifying the iterative nature of memory, she allowed her mother to be different each time that she encountered her.

One of the most interesting things that Erin told me during our conversations was that she wanted to be able to use her app to log the same memory over and over again throughout the course of her life. She explained,

Say I log something about a song in 2014, and then fast forward 20 years later, I encounter that some thing in the world, and I have a memory about it. It might be different. It might be rosier! It might be more simple. Who knows? Who cares? I like that

aspect of memory. And maybe again that's just me being contrarian to the desire of the world to capture things as they were, and sort of freeze them in time.

Erin suggested that she wanted to allow her memories themselves to change over time, so that a single memory could be "simpler" or perhaps "rosier" in its subsequent iterations.

Erin could have used her app to try to preserve her memories, generating an extensive record of the moments that she and her mother had shared. In her ethnography of organ donors and recipients, Leslie Sharp (2006) describes how one father used digital technology for just this purpose. After his daughter's death, Paul began working on a detailed scrapbook of his daughter's short life. Fearing that his memories were fading, he created a flowchart of over fifteen hundred memories that he has since been painstakingly typing up on his computer, printing out, pairing with images, and organizing in chronological order. Sharp writes, "Paul's greatest fear is that one day he will reach the end of his list of memories, and the scrapbook project will come to a close" (Sharp 2006:143).

Paul's scrapbook project allowed him to keep his daughter alive through a ceaseless iteration of her life. Yet it was premised on a very different relationship to memory than Erin's app engendered, one in which the changes wrought by time compromise the integrity of memories of the dead. Although Paul's project was partly about the labor of creating the record, it was also about preserving his memories in a form that was as close to the original experience as possible. In contrast, Erin's practice was based on the notion that a memory of her mother from days after her death was no more authentic than a memory of that same moment decades later, even though those memories would necessarily be different. Her disinterest in going through her old entries seemed to me to point towards this distinction. Re-reading her old entries

might cement a certain version of each memory, fixing it in her mind. Instead, she wanted to be able to forget each iteration of memory in order to re-invent it anew every time that it arose.

Erin used the technological parameters of the app itself to intensify, rather than mitigate, the plasticity of memory. She noted that once she submitted an entry, “it went into the ether.” Although the entries were saved, they were no longer displayed anywhere on her phone. She didn’t have ready access to them, as illustrated by the difficulty that she had in finding the spreadsheet when I asked her if we could go over it. At one point, Erin told me that if she’d logged her memories in a notebook rather than in her app, she might have gone back through them more frequently. The app made it this form of retrospection feel onerous. Although she chalked this up to the way that the software itself functioned, Erin could easily have created a link to the spreadsheet on her phone, which would have been no more difficult than linking up the blank form had been. It’s not the technological parameters of the app that fostered her amnesia, but the way that Erin mobilized the possibilities and limitations of the technology to craft a particular relationship to memory. By downplaying the retrospective aspect of logging, Erin used the app to intensify the experience of connecting with her mother in the present. And at the same time, she took advantage of the separation built into the software between the form in which she recorded entries and the spreadsheet in which the entries were saved to distance herself from the record of her mom sightings. This distance allowed her memories of her past entries to fade and blur.

Erin suggested that she was cultivating the activity of re-remembering in order to deepen her relationship with her mother. She explained that part of what she was doing with her app was “celebrating the failures of memory.” She then corrected herself, “Memory isn’t *failing* when it becomes fuzzy. That *is* memory!” The looseness of memory meant that her own memories of her

mother could change over time, emerging and submerging, becoming clearer or more opaque. She continued, “If something is fuzzier, or if memories come and go, or it’s selective, you remember certain things and you can’t remember other things, you get to have a dynamic, ongoing relationship.” Because memories could and would change as she herself changed, the relationship to her mother that was manifest in these memories was able to change as well. Through her use of the app, Erin’s sense that her memories were fading went from being a source of loss to being the very precondition for a dynamic and ongoing relationship with her mother. In that re-remembering, she was able to constitute anew her relationship with her mother.

I would argue that Erin’s strategic lapses in memory do not reflect her desire to relinquish the past, nor do they reflect her desire to make the past serve the needs of the present. There are, as Garcia points out, different ways to live in relation to one’s past. Erin and Corey remain committed to tending to the past, dwelling in the space of memory in which the dead come alive. Yet they also remain committed to living out a relationship to the past in which it remains as full of possibility as the present, and as capable of containing their hopes and anticipations as the future. For Erin, recording her memories was a way of honoring the evolving significance and shifting content of memory. It was also a way of “living a moral life” through an experience of melancholy (Garcia 2010:110). Erin’s use of her app established an ethics towards the dead, built around the hospitality that she extended to her mother.

Erin’s use of the app invites a very different relationship to memory than what we find in 20th- and 21st-century grief theory. The psychological literature on grief affirms the value of reminiscing, in which the bereaved person actively chooses to call their dead loved one to mind. This approach to memory is demonstrated by Rubin’s paradigmatic figure of adaptive mourning,

the bereaved girlfriend he calls L. L had an active relationship to the memories of her late paramour, containing them and collecting them for affective use. In contrast, Rubin suggests that J— who demonstrates “maladaptive bereavement”— was the passive object of memory, experiencing a “cyclical sensitivity” to the memories of her son’s death. Like L, Erin actively collects her memories of her mother, tracking and logging them on her smartphone. Yet she does so in order to intensify the experience of memories erupting unbidden into her life. Although these eruptions are periodic, they are not fully in her control. Her dead mother continues to surprise her.

Erin uses her app to develop a dynamic relationship to her mother, one that is built on the iterative nature of memory. Each time that she remembers her mother she recalls something slightly different, allowing both her mother and their relationship to grow and change over time. Just as J was surrounded by the object memories of her dead son, Erin finds herself immersed in objects and places that contain the memories of her mother. Yet these objects and places are not concentrated in her home, but dispersed through the affective landscape that she traverses, demonstrating a cartography of grief that is distinctive to the relationship between Erin and Patricia.

Voicemails

Several months after we’d sat down together to go through some of her past entries, Erin gazed back at me from my laptop screen, frozen mid-sentence.

“Can you hear me?” I asked, hearing the uncanny echo of my own words come through the distorted audio.

Our video call had already been plagued by several technical glitches, beginning when Erin couldn't get Skype to work on her computer. When we finally connected on an alternative platform, the video feed lagged several seconds behind the audio, and we kept accidentally interrupting each other. Once or twice the audio cut out entirely.

After a moment, the video snapped back into focus. "Can you hear me?" Erin was saying, hunched over her computer screen with a look of concern on her face.

Once we'd resettled, Erin returned to ruminating on the digital materials that her mother had left behind. Foremost among these were the handful of voicemails that she had on her phone at the time of Patricia's death. I asked Erin how it felt to listen to those voicemails. She sighed deeply before answering.

Oh I don't know, it's just heart-wrenching. I think it just reaches to the depths of the problem, which is, [pause] "Holy fuck this person's not here. And they *were* here." I mean that's like, that's *it*, that's all grief is! This person is not and they were here. That's death and grief. And because it's so present, and such a physical manifestation of the person. Almost the same way that the clothing they left, but almost more so, you know? It feels more like it's haunted, and it feels more like a violation of that truth that we know. This person was here and is not here, yet I'm hearing their voice.

Sometimes it brings up a lot of anger. And I can't tell if that's just the anger of grief, or if it's the anger of the unjustness of it, or the anger of, "I just got used to this person being gone, and now I'm hearing this voice!" It exists in this liminal space of, well they're gone, but not really gone, because they left this physical trace. The frustration and anger of not being able to talk back to it. Because it's a voicemail on your phone that you're listening to. Obviously you can't talk back to a voicemail, but you can

easily press “Call back.” So I think that’s what makes it even more intense, because it’s like this person inside of your phone. Normally you could just reach back to someone on your phone, but you can’t when they’re dead in your phone.

For Erin, hearing the sound of her mother’s voice violated the “truth” that she was no longer physically present, creating a jarring cognitive dissonance. Yet there’s a more complicated interplay between presence and absence here than Erin’s words might initially suggest. While she was alive, the voicemails conjured her mother’s physical presence by relocating her to the phone itself, so that listening to them was like hearing “this person inside your phone.” This relocation made Erin feel that she could “reach back” to her mother, regardless of whether she actually did so by calling her back. The body of the phone took the place of her mother’s body, creating a sense of copresence.

After Patricia’s death, this sense of copresence was partially disrupted. Erin reported that listening to the voicemails only deepened her sense that, “Holy fuck, this person’s not here.” Her use of “not here” is complicated by the medium of voicemail, where the absence of the speaker is presumed. Thus what’s relevant is not that death disrupted the physical presence of her mother, but rather that it complicated her presence within the physical “body” of the phone. Erin suggested that her mother continued to reside inside of her phone, but now as a dead person and not a living one. Her phone was “haunted.”

This form of haunting was not altogether welcome. Erin admitted that when she switched to a new phone that didn’t have the voicemails from her mother already loaded onto it, she felt a sense of relief.

When I got my second phone and it didn’t have those voicemails, there was a part of me that felt like, “Oh, well maybe I have this clean slate.” I don’t have the weight of this

ghost in my machine, to use a cliché, or title of a Japanese movie. I felt like, “Oh, I don’t have the weight of it in this phone. Maybe this is me taking a step forward or something.”

But I also was happy to know that it existed somewhere, in some other archive.

The relief that Erin felt when her mother was no longer haunting her phone points towards the distinction between the voicemails and the app. She created the app out of a sense that, “there’s just little moments of your life that pop up where the person who’s gone, they’re almost haunting it.” The app was a way to record these hauntings, intensifying their impact. Yet the sensation that her mother was haunting her phone was unwelcome. Whereas the objects, people, and places that Erin recorded in her mom sightings became the living body of her mother, the phone where her voicemails lived on felt more like her corpse.

Erin was able to craft a dynamic relationship with her mother through a specific kind of recording, one that put her own shifting experiences of her mother and her memories at the center. Whereas recording her mom sightings opened up their relationship, Erin suggested that the voicemails foreclosed it, bringing a sense of devastation that was too much to bear. To unravel what made Erin’s experience of the voicemails so different from her experience of the app, I return now to Corey and Marty’s story. Like Erin, Corey was left with an archive of Marty’s speech after her death, in the form of word-for-word recordings of their online conversations that perfectly captured Marty’s “voice.”

Corey’s archive

Corey saved every word that she and Marty exchanged over MSN messenger. After Marty’s death, she compiled it into a single document, a complete archive of their personal

conversations. Yet she told me that she rarely, if ever, looks back at the archive. When I asked her what prevented her from doing so, she replied,

That thought, that that's it. There won't be any other opportunity for me to spend several, an hour or so online waiting for her to make five different attempts to send me a video of Paul Simon and George Harrison on Saturday Night Live [laughs]. There won't be another moment where she says, "Sorry, my daughter just opened the oven. We're making gingerbread." [laughs again] All these little things that won't happen anymore. That's the sadness of looking over those conversations. Because yes, there were some lovely, lovely moments, but there won't be any more of those in the same way.

I could hear the pleasure in Corey's voice as she recounted these conversations with Marty from years before: the silliness of Marty's persistent failure to get the technology to work in the way that she wanted, and the devotion to Corey that was evident in her repeated attempts to share the video. The surprise interruption of gingerbread, and the way it drew Corey into a domestic scene with Marty and her daughter. Sharing these memories didn't seem to bring the sadness that Corey described. Her stories brought Marty to life for me, and perhaps for Corey as well. She suggested that looking through the archive didn't offer the same pleasures; instead, it underscored what was over about their relationship: the verbal exchanges that could be preserved, but never repeated.

Corey contrasted the experience of looking over the archive with the experience of visiting the online memorial. She told me that when she looks over the archive,

There is an absolutely paralyzing sense of "There won't be any more" that I don't get when I visit the online memorial. The online memorial feels like a continuation of our relationship, whereas the record of our conversations feels more and more and more, as

time goes on, like a historical document. It's a historical document that I love very much, but it's not got that same ongoing sense.

Corey and Marty's conversations were arranged in chronological order, preceded by the date and time in which they took place. The archive thus invited an experience of time as linear, situating their relationship in the historic past. Reminiscing involved accessing information about something that could never be re-experienced, leaving little room for the kind of quiet being-with that the online memorial offered.

At another point in our conversations, Corey suggested that she herself was at one time an archive of her relationship with Marty. During the course of our conversations, it became increasingly evident that Corey has an exceptionally precise memory. She could recite the day, date, and time of significant conversations and meaningful events that took place between her and Marty, and she could recall her favorite exchanges verbatim. She told me that after Marty died, "There was a time when I knew exactly what we discussed and when. I became a walking encyclopedia of Marty! Which was kind of weird, so eventually I was kind of relieved when the sharpness sort of faded." Corey's exceptional memory gave her an encyclopedic knowledge of Marty and of the interactions that they'd had. Corey told me, "It's one of the downsides of having a memory like a steel trap!" Instead of bringing her solace, the very accuracy of her memory "trapped" and cut her.

Erin and Corey's experiences run counter to Derrida's theorizations of the archive. In his extended essay *Archive Fever* (1995), Derrida suggests that the archive might be one site of persistent life, potentially grounding an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead. Drawing from Freud, Derrida subtly blurs the distinction between the archive and the self. He first suggests that the psyche itself contains an archive in the form of memory (Derrida 1995:16-

18). He then suggests that the psyche not only *contains* an archive, but that the archive and the psyche are similarly structured. Both the psyche and the archive take part in a compulsory repetition even as they remain open to the future (Derrida 1995:51-52).

In addition to blurring the distinction between self and archive, Derrida explicitly compares the archive to the ghost. He writes,

A phantom speaks. What does this mean? In the first place or in a preliminary way, this means that without responding it disposes of a response, a bit like the answering machine whose voice outlives its moment of recording...Supposing, *concesso non dato*, that a living being ever responds in an absolutely living and infinitely well-adjusted manner, without the least automatism, without ever having an archival technique overflow the singularity of an event, we know in any case that a spectral response (thus informed by a *techne* and inscribed in an archive) is always possible (Derrida 1995:42).

Derrida suggests that the ‘response’ of the dead takes the form of a repetition of an incident that has been archived, like the message on an answering machine. He goes on to suggest that this mode of response is not necessarily unique to the dead. He reminds the reader that the living likewise fall back on certain habitual responses, drawing from an archive of patterned phrases. He concludes by reiterating that a ‘spectral response’ is one that has been “inscribed in an archive.” Taken together, the above passage claims that the dead speak in the way that an archive speaks, through a repetition that is nonetheless a genuine response.

As a ghostly pseudo-self, Derrida suggests that the archive can offer a form of recognition to those that engage with it. He argues that anyone who interprets the archive inscribes himself within it, so that the archive must constantly expand to accommodate each new interpretation (Derrida 1995:45). Thus in Derrida’s view archives are not static entities; like

people, they change with each encounter with another, recognizing the impact of these encounters.

Derrida's interpretation points towards what is missing from Erin and Corey's own archives—Erin's voicemails from her mother and Corey's collection of textual conversations with Marty. Their disappointment doesn't stem from their sense that these archives remain the same each time that they return to them. Indeed, their stability is part of their appeal for both Corey and Erin, who remain ambivalently attached to their archives. Instead, their disappointment stems from the sense that these archives cannot offer the kind of recognition that Derrida proposes. As records of a past relationship, they are not capable of expanding to incorporate the changes that time has brought, including the tremendous changes wrought by the deaths of Marty and Patricia. As a result, neither Erin nor Corey can find themselves within these archives, as the people that they are today, themselves transformed by their relationships with the dead. In other words, it is not just that Marty and Patricia do not change in these archives; it's that their relationships to Corey and Erin do not allow for the same kind of dynamism that is manifest in the app and online memorial.

For this reason, it is not the archive as Derrida imagines it that captures Corey's relationship to her archive of conversations with Marty, or Erin's to her voicemails. Instead, their archives more closely parallel the mythical Library of Babel that Jorge Luis Borges envisions in his famous short story (2007[1962]). Borges's library is "composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries," each of which is lined with bookcases (Borges 2007[1962]:51-52). Because the entire universe is comprised of books and no two of these books are identical, the library is hypothesized to contain every possible combination of letters. The anonymous 'librarian' who narrates the story reports,

When it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books, the first impression was one of extravagant happiness. All men felt themselves to be the masters of an intact and secret treasure. There was no personal or world problem whose elegant solution did not exist in some hexagon. The universe was justified, the universe suddenly usurped the unlimited dimensions of hope (Borges 2007[1962]:55).

This optimism was short-lived. While every conceivable piece of knowledge, meaning and truth must necessarily be contained *somewhere* in the library, the sheer number of books makes the search for meaning an insurmountable task. The librarians grew increasingly despondent, plagued by a sense of futility that they could not shake.

In my interpretation, the librarians' despondency is not entirely due to their sense that the meaning contained within the books is out of reach. Instead, they are plagued by the knowledge that the archive in which they are immersed has no way to register their presence or responding to their attempts to engage with it. Since the archive in Borges' short story already contains every possible combination of letters, it cannot expand further. The very exhaustiveness of the archive precludes the possibility of maintaining a relationship that grows and changes.

Corey's comment suggested that it was not just the content of the archive that gave her the "paralyzing sense of "There won't be any more."” Instead, there was something about the precision and completeness of the archive that disrupted the experience of ongoing connection to Marty. Although Corey's sharp memories eventually faded to a looser set of associations, the archive of their conversation did not allow for this kind of plasticity. As a precise record of the words that Corey and Marty exchanged that ended with Marty's death, there was no opportunity for it to transform. That is perhaps why Corey soon stopped revisiting the archive of conversations, and also why she found herself strangely relieved when the "sharpness" of

memory gave way to something softer. The experience of re-remembering that the online memorial fostered allowed their relationship to be different now than it was when Marty was alive, and different each time that Corey visited than it was the time before. When asked about the archive, Corey said that nowadays, “I know exactly what’s in there, but I don’t need to know what was in every conversation. It’s enough for me to know that I have that beautiful relationship.” Corey’s words echo Erin’s sentiments towards the record of mom sightings produced by her app. Like Corey, Erin didn’t feel the need to go back over her previous entries. Doing so might foreclose the possibility of re-remembering her mother, which was the means by which she fostered the dynamic nature of their relationship.

Many of the people I spoke with in the course of my research evinced an anxiety that they were forgetting their loved one. Indeed, the desire to preserve their own memories against the cumulative effects of time was often one of the main things that made people interested in using digital technologies to remember and connect with their loved ones. Yet the sadness and disappointment that both Corey and Erin felt when they browsed their archives suggests that the desire for a person, relationship, or even a memory to be preserved exactly as it was before death might not ultimately prove satisfying.

In contrast, Corey suggested that visiting the online memorial invited a dynamic exchange with Marty. When I asked her what she did while she was on the online memorial, she told me,

I just spend time there thinking about her, thinking about things that we shared, thinking about things that she taught me and what can I do with this, how can I make more of that person that she obviously saw something in. And I mean, I often have something set up in another tab that I’m going to post, but nine times out of ten I don’t, because I don’t really

feel the need to. It's a place for me to go, but it's a place for me to go and be with her for a few minutes.

The online memorial encouraged a form of quiet reflection in which Marty was invited to emerge. The exchange of typed words was supplanted by an internal experience of reciprocity. Corey didn't know what Marty would say, in a sense, when she went to "visit" her. This space of uncertainty was absent in her interactions with the archive. In the archive, Marty always said exactly the same thing that she had said the time before, just as Patricia repeated the same words and phrases each time Erin listened to her voicemails.

Conclusion

Erin's voicemails and Corey's archived conversations both captured the words of the dead. But because they were experienced as the preserved remnants of the past, the memories that they brought up weren't able to foster a dynamic relationship with their loved ones. Both the online memorial and the app allowed the dead to speak in a different way, not by parroting the words that were spoken when they were alive, but by allowing Erin and Corey to foster a certain receptivity to being addressed in the present. For Erin, those addresses took the form of encounters that arose unexpectedly in the course of her everyday life. For Corey, those addresses took the form of a wordless exchange that circulated between herself, Marty, and the computer screen. Visiting the online memorial, she was able to feel "the same kind of happiness I felt when we used to talk." Paradoxically, then, the dead found their voice not in the recordings of their voices, but in the recordings through which their persistent relationships to others were both documented and created. The memories that were fostered in the process opened out into the future, rather than being a window to the past.

Erin and Corey have developed a set of practices around digital technologies that allow them to listen as well as speak to their loved ones. Erin uses her app to cultivate an anticipatory silence into which her mother is invited. Patricia responds by appearing throughout the course of her day, conjured up in conversations with friends or discovered in the pages of a book about GMOs or stumbled over in the form of a water bottle or a tree. These mom sightings are memories of past events, but they are not replications of the past. The “fuzziness” of memory allows them to evolve, locating them in a shifting temporal landscape that draws together past, present, and future. It’s a fuzziness that may be precluded by the sharp accuracy of technologies like word-for-word voicemails from the dead, which preserve memories but do not necessarily foster them. Yet this foreclosure is not a necessary or a uniform feature of digital technologies. Erin’s experiences illustrate that digital recordings such as her app can also intensify the plasticity of memory, nourishing relationships that are vibrant and ongoing and which give the dead room to grow and change.

3. The empty hub:

Frank and Lois's Facebook page

Introduction

I met Lois less than three months after her brother's untimely death, when her grief was still fresh. In our first conversation, she poured out the story of her brother's disappearance, her efforts to locate him with the help of his Facebook network, and the eventual discovery of his body in the drug store parking lot. She was eager to explain how much of a role Facebook had played during the days between when her brother went missing and when he was discovered dead. As we spoke, however, our conversation quickly turned to the significance that his page had taken on *after* his death, a significance that seemed to be always catching her by surprise. She told me,

His Facebook page is still alive. People still post on it. I posted on it probably [pauses] I don't know, about a month ago? I got up early one morning and I just, I just *missed* him *so much*. So desperately. And I went right to Facebook and I just posted on his page. And it felt like I was in touch with him, you know?

The association between new technologies and paranormal presence is longstanding, stretching back at least as far as the invention of the telegraph and its link to American Spiritualist practices of channeling the dead (McGarry 2008; Sconce 2000). Yet the recent intersection of death and social media has produced a simultaneous fascination and anxiety, reflected in online news headlines such as "Death on Facebook Now Common as 'Dead Profiles'

Create Vast Virtual Cemetery” (Kaleem 2012) and “Would You Like to Be Uploaded to a Computer When You Die?” (Sung 2016). In an episode of the popular television show *Black Mirror*, a young woman, Martha, begins communicating with a text-based artificial intelligence based on her late boyfriend Ash’s social media posts. Increasingly absorbed by their interaction, she pays to have him embodied in the form of an android that looks, speaks, and feels like him. The episode focuses on Martha’s increasing discomfort and frustration with the synthetic Ash, culminating in her command to jump off a cliff. Although Ash is willing to do so, Martha is unable to follow through. The episode concludes with a vision of the future in which Martha keeps Ash locked in the attic, only allowing her daughter to visit her “father” on weekends and special occasions. This episode distills many of the core anxieties that emerge around digitally-mediated relations with the dead: that such technologies will prevent the bereaved from being able to “let go”; that social media presences are ultimately dissatisfying and inauthentic; that we are moving towards a moment when the divisions between living and dead, human and nonhuman, biological and technological are becoming blurred.

The recent scholarly work on relations with the dead on social media often reflects these popular optimisms and anxieties, suggesting that social media pages are sites of “posthumous personhood” where the dead live on in digital form (Meese et al. 2015; see also Bollmer 2013; Howarth 2000; Irwin 2015). The authors emphasize the continuities between content that was available to users’ friends while they were alive and the content that continues to be available after a user’s death, drawing attention to the aspects of the dead person that remain unchanged in these online spaces. For example, in her study of Facebook memorial pages, Melissa Irwin writes, “Perhaps finally achieving immortality, the dead now live among us in the virtual sphere, transcending both time and space, where they can virtually live forever in ethereal cyberspace”

(Irwin 2015:142). Irwin here attributes common assumptions about online content to the posthumous lives of the dead, including virtuality, immortality, and placelessness. Meanwhile, Meese and his colleagues suggest that the experience of connecting with the social media avatar of a dead friend is not substantially different than the experience of connecting with the avatar of a living friend. Citing the work of social media scholar Alexander Lambert, they argue that the dead are merely “objects of occasional interest” (Meese et al. 2015:417). They continue, “In short, like old high school friends or workmates, the dead become distant ties, and one can check in at key moments of their (past) life” (Meese et al. 2015:417).

Lois and Frank’s relationship challenges these interpretations on multiple levels. It is marked by a frequency of contact, an emotional investment, and a persistent preoccupation that is very different than the “occasional interest” that Meese and his colleagues describe. Furthermore, Lois and Frank’s Facebook relationship is not a holdover from the intimacy that they enjoyed in life. Lois clarified that it was only in the aftermath of Frank’s death that his page “became our space.”

As this example illustrates, a Facebook profile page can become something entirely different in death than it was in life, and it can also transform a relationship into something entirely different than it was in life. Although Frank’s page remained a site of connection where Lois could communicate with Frank, the connection was deeply melancholic, suffused with loss. The page embodied the gaps between what was longed for and what was possible, rather than obscuring them. These gaps are a constitutive part of the relationships to the dead that Facebook makes possible.

Meeting Lois and Frank

I arranged to meet Lois for the first time at her home, a beautiful old brick building with creaky hardwood floors and abundant sunlight. She met me at the door looking perfectly put together, as bright and immaculate and artfully arranged as her apartment. Her dimples gave her a youthful look but her eyes were tired, and there was a heaviness behind her cheerful expression. I guessed that she was in her mid-forties, but in the course of our conversations I discovered that she was considerably older. Her brother, seven years her junior, had been forty-nine when he died, making her fifty-six years old when we first met.

As soon as I walked in, Lois offered me something to drink, and mentioned that she had homemade iced tea. I quickly took her up on the offer, and she filled two mismatched pint glasses for us. After observing the obvious pleasure with which I sipped, she made sure that she had homemade iced tea ready at each of our subsequent meetings.

While I drank, Lois carefully arranged the dining room table for our interview. She placed a box of tissue between us, and with a dark chuckle told me that she wanted to be “prepared.” She also brought in her laptop and her phone and set them beside her so that she would be ready if we needed to look something up. As she bustled about, she struck me as every bit the high school teacher that she was, both caring and meticulous.

A few minutes into our conversation, I asked Lois how many Facebook friends Frank had. She immediately opened her laptop and pulled up his Facebook page, half-turning in her chair so that I could see it as well. I had been among the first Facebook users, having entered college the year that they began extending access to students outside of Harvard. The features and layout of his page were familiar to me in a way that Corey’s online memorial and Erin’s app were not, and it took some effort to see it with fresh eyes.

Frank's profile was set against a pale gray background framed by a dark blue toolbar, Facebook's signature color scheme. The page was arranged in two columns. On the left was a series of categories that link to featured content, including his photos and friends. On the right was the larger of the two columns, called the Timeline. It displayed posts from Frank, as well as posts that others had made to him. Visually, his page was dominated by a large photograph of his dog and cat lying side by side in the grass, which stretched from one side of the screen to the other along the top of his page. Inset within it was Frank's name and profile picture, which showed him reclining with his golden retriever nestled on top of him.

Looking at Frank's Facebook page, it wasn't evident that he was dead. Most of the content was the same as it had been when he was alive, from the "About" section that listed his hometown to the collection of photos that he'd uploaded. His Timeline also contained a trove of posts that he had authored, from silly memes to decades-old photographs to frustrated notes written in the middle of the night when he couldn't sleep. They displayed the ups and downs of his life on an almost daily basis, and dated back years.

I expected Lois to take me back to this vast archive of posts, or to navigate us through his profile so that I could see the photos he had taken and the descriptions of himself that he had written. Instead, she immediately began scrolling through the most recent messages left on his Timeline, messages that had been posted after his death. She pointed to the first one.

"That's from May 14th. I don't know her," she said with a laugh. She paused to read the post, then clicked on the Reactions button below to Love it.⁹ "But..." she began, trailing as she started to read the next post. "There were some nice responses..." Lois trailed off again. Her

⁹ In early 2016, Facebook replaced the Like button with Reactions, allowing users to choose from among several emojis with which to indicate their response to another person's post (Stinson 2016). At the time of writing, the Reactions that Facebook offered were Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, and Angry.

expression registered equal parts pleasure and pain as she scrolled eagerly through the posts. Although I was full of questions for her, I felt as though asking them would be an interruption of sorts, and I let the silence settle around us.

Sitting beside Lois that afternoon, I was struck by how absorbing and affecting these messages were for her. Although we were so close that our bodies were almost touching, I retreated into the background, partially excluded from this online community of people who loved him. Their comments and replies had Lois glued to his Facebook page. She lingered there, dwelling in a space of melancholy that kept her near her brother.

In what follows, I use the concept of *proximity* to explore the particular relationship that took shape between Lois and Frank on Facebook. I explore the materiality of Frank's Facebook page to suggest that the layout introduced forms of spatial proximity between them, while the organization and arrangement of his Timeline introduced forms of temporal proximity. I also explore the social proximities that his Facebook page ushered in, bringing Lois closer to Frank by allowing her to participate in his social world.

These different forms of proximity bring out the varying ways that Frank was animated in and through his Facebook profile. The messages posted by members of his network animated Frank by re-invigorating his relationships with others, perpetuating his sociality. The content and layout of his Facebook page animated him by conjuring his moving, speaking, and joking presence, which was preserved in the material that he himself had uploaded and in the videos that others had posted after his death. And finally, the organization of his page animated Frank by bringing out his variability and multiplicity, introducing an element of surprise into his relationship with Lois.

Frank's network played a vital role in each of these forms of animation, nourishing and enlivening his relationship with Lois. Their posts and responses continually re-activated his page, drawing her back time and time again. The care that Lois both offered and received from Frank's Facebook community invited her to linger on his page, deepening her relationship with Frank. I begin, then, by exploring Frank's Facebook network and the practices of care that took place within it.

The empty hub

After Frank's death, roughly twenty of his four hundred Facebook friends became very involved with his page, forming a core group who not only posted messages to him but also responded to the messages that others were posting. Lois became an active member of this network, regularly visiting his page to read each new post and to comment or react to it. When I asked her if Frank participated in these interactions, she reflected on the ways in which his loss held them all together. She mused,

"It's not just that he existed, it's that he *died*, too. So it's Frank's *death*. That's what's there [on his page]. I don't even know if it's Frank that's there. I mean it's *gotta* be. People who loved Frank tend to love animals, so there are affinities there, I think, that are certain. But I'm not sure if it's Frank that's in there, or Frank's death."

"Or dead Frank?" I ventured.

"Or dead Frank," Lois said, and then exhaled sharply. "I don't even know if I've *conceived* of that yet. What *is* dead Frank?"

Lois emphasized that this network was not just the remains of his Facebook friends, but something new that had formed out of their shared loss. She seemed to move between describing

his Facebook page and his network as she emphasized the significance of his death, pointing out the extent to which both were centered on the loss of Frank. In response to my provocation, she questioned whether and how Frank might live on in and through his Facebook page as the dead person that he had become.

I asked Lois if she liked reading the messages that members of his network posted, many of which expressed sadness and despair at his death. She quickly responded that she did, but then paused a moment to reconsider. She told me she wasn't sure if "like" was really the right word for what she felt. She explained,

"It was *simpatico*, right? What they were feeling was genuine loss, and we were sharing that. It was like a group hug. I mean, I felt like I had to read what they were posting. Not that I *had* to, but that it was..." She paused, struggling to find the words. "It's what you do when you're grieving together. You hear everyone's, you hear what people are saying. You honor their grief. And they were honoring mine, they were sharing mine. I mean it was really a *community* in a way that I never... It's not that I've never seen that on Facebook. I mean, you know, you post something, and like, on your birthday everybody's like, "Happy birthday!" And you're like, "That's nice." You know?" She laughed derisively. "But this was... it was a real expression of community."

Lois expressed her own sense of obligation to the other members of his network by noting that she felt driven to read each and every message that they posted. Doing so was a way to "honor their grief," just as they were honoring hers by hearing her words of loss and sharing them. Her response points towards the forms of mutual care that took shape on his page, where each person's experience of loss was heard and acknowledged.

Looking at Frank's page, it was clear that Lois and the other members of Frank's network made a deliberate effort to not only read but also to respond to one another's posts. Nearly every post was followed by at least one reply (termed "comments" on Facebook). Whereas the posts themselves addressed Frank directly, these replies almost invariably addressed the person who had posted and contained messages of commiseration and support. For example, shortly after Frank's death one of his Facebook friends, Lisa, had created and posted a short video featuring a slideshow of photographs taken from his Facebook page and set to one of his favorite songs. Lois had added a comment below the video that read, "Thank you, dear heart, for this. My little brother was a gentle soul. I miss him so very much." Lisa had replied, "It's my pleasure...Lois my dear...my thoughts and prayers are with you. If there is anything I can do please do not hesitate to ask, I'm here for each and every one of you...peace, love, and blessings...my heart aches for you and the beautiful family." Through these responses, Lois and Lisa participated in an exchange of comfort that emerged out of their shared sense of loss.

In addition to commenting on one another's posts, members of Frank's network responded with Likes and other "reactions." In the context of Frank's death, these reactions became a form of acknowledgement, a mode of ethical listening in which one user registered another's pain. For example, Frank's friend Pam posted on his page, "I can't believe I won't see you again I will miss you always heartbroken I loved you Frankie I can't believe this I just can't..." It's difficult to imagine what words could be offered in response to such an expression of loss. When words failed, Lois and the other members of Frank's network instead reacted with Likes, Loves, and Sad emojis to show that they had read her message and registered her pain.

Frank's network did more than instantiate practices of mutual care among the living. It also animated Frank through a complicated interplay between presence and absence. The

members of Frank's Facebook network pointed towards his absence through the messages that they left on his page, each of which centered on the lack created by his death:

Miss your smile Frankie

Miss you dearly my brother

Just thinking about you and missing you.

We are all together for Jessica's wedding and missing you, missing you, missing you.

These posts returned again and again to the sentiment of missing Frank, pointing towards a shared sense of longing for forms of presence that were no longer available. At the same time, each of these posts is addressed to Frank and thus in some way invokes his continued presence. By circumscribing the space where Frank had been, his network made absence into a point of continued connection to Frank.

The members of his network made Frank's absence into the foundation for their melancholic relationships, relationships that in turn helped bring Frank to presence for one another. One member who posts often, Harriet, wrote the following more than six months after his death:

Thinking about you a lot lately. The apples on the tree at the golf course are at your favorite stage, still tart, not quite sweet. Wish you were still here to go apple picking with me & your little princess. I will be taking her soon in your honor. And by the way...Now You See Me is out on dvd/bluray. How am I supposed to watch it without my favorite movie guy there? We watched the first one together at your place with Chinese food, of course (I still have the digital copy from the codes you never used). If I buy the new one & dinner, you'd better show up on the spot on the couch we have saved for you...even so, it won't be the same not cuddling & hearing you roar with laughter.

Harriet suggested that Frank was an ongoing presence in her life and in her home, telling him how often he'd been on her mind and insisting that he'd "better show up" to watch *Now You See Me*. Yet she also pointed towards his absence at several points in this post, expressing her wish that he were "still here" to go apple picking, and questioning how she would be able to watch the movie "without my favorite movie guy there." Even as she invited Frank to pull up a seat on her couch, she said that it "won't be the same" in the absence of the sound of his laughter and the feel of his body next to hers.

Lois herself invoked Frank's absent presence in a post that she made shortly after watching one of his DVDs. The post reads,

Frankie, I have some of your movies/dvds. You were such a movie lover and always gave me such good recommendations. The last time we talked- Valentine's Day- you recommended *The Martian*. I ended up watching it the night of Feb 27; hours after we learned you were gone. And you were right! It was a great movie!! I watched it with Donna, who flew to Chicago to help me through it all. And I drank too much bourbon.

But the point is that every time I watch one of your dvds you will be with me. This is my summer plan, to watch those dvds of yours that I think we both loved. That is why I brought them home with me. Part of my little shrine to you. So tonight, little brother, we start with *Harry Potter, the Sorcerer's Stone*, and *Chamber of Secrets*. I am on the second one now. It is not really cause for tears but here they come again anyway. It hurts that you are gone. I love you so.

Several of Frank's friends commented on Lois's post by recalling times that they, too, had spent long nights watching movies with Frank. One friend wrote, "I remember our all night marathon of the *hobbit* series. Do those next. He loved those too." Another commented, "I miss

watching movies all night with Frankie...lol well I always fell asleep on him...” These responses affirmed the sense that Lois and Frank were watching movies together by situating Lois’s movie marathon within their own histories of watching DVDs with Frank. In so doing, they subtly affirmed the continued relationship between Lois and Frank. Although Lois’s post and its subsequent replies asserted that their relationship continued, it also underscored Frank’s absence. Twice Lois stated that Frank was “gone.” She also described both her tears and her pain, illustrating the continued impact of his absence. The replies to this and other posts both affirmed Frank’s absence and made that absence a point of connection to Frank as well as to the person posting.

Through posts such as these, the members of Frank’s network made manifest their continued relationships to him. As these posts added up, their sedimentation caused his page to take on a particular structure. His relationships became the spoke on a wheel, radiating outward to each of the people in Frank’s network. The origin of these relations was the empty center left by Frank’s death, a hub that became visible as the negative space set against the dense web of relations all around it. It was this enduring relationship to absence that made Frank’s Facebook page a space of melancholy and illuminated the melancholic nature of Lois and Frank’s relationship.

Melancholic attachments

The burgeoning literature on memorialization practices on social media overwhelmingly interprets them as mourning practices (Brubaker et al. 2011; Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013; Church 2013; Irwin 2015; Lingel 2013). Much of this work draws from the psychological literature on “continuing bonds,” where attachments to the dead are internalized in the form of

memories that allow the bereaved to fondly recall time shared together in the past while “embarking on a new life” of which the dead are not an active part (Worden 2009:50). In contrast to these new understandings of mourning, melancholy can often designate a form of protracted grief that fails to resolve in what is seen to be an adequate amount of time. In calling Frank’s Facebook page a space of melancholy, I wish to return to Freud’s notion of melancholy as the state created by enduring attachments to the dead that are as vivid and as deeply felt as any attachments to the living.

Whereas Freud pathologized enduring attachments to the dead and the suffering that seemed to accompany them, anthropologists have recently explored the possibility that melancholy might ground an ethics of care that falls outside of biopolitical regimes of health. Writing on Inuit youth suicide in northern Canada, Lisa Stevenson suggests that the name of the deceased that is passed along to an infant functions as an image of the dead that is “borne along” (Stevenson 2014:123). The child who has been named in this way is not understood to be a replica of the person who has died, but to exist in relation to that person. *“Look at the way he follows his “husband” with his eyes. He’s just like Isaac. Or, He’s nothing like Isaac. Her eyebrows are so thick but her namesake’s were so thin. Her namesake always hated her eyebrows”* (Stevenson 2014:106). The dead are conjured through the repetition of the name, but their existence depends on their contrast to the bodily presence of the infant. Thus Stevenson suggests that although relationships persist after death, they are sustained in part by the longing for what is absent. This longing is voiced in the calling of the name that designates both what has been carried forth and what has been lost between its iterations.

Angela Garcia (2010) likewise resuscitates the productive possibilities of melancholy in her ethnography of heroin addicts in northern New Mexico. She writes,

Despite the advances made in the study of melancholia since Freud, there remains an implicit understanding that the melancholic subject is trapped in affect and incapable of sublimating the pain of past loss so that he may live meaningfully in the present. Even melancholia's contemporary interlocutors tend to agree that such sublimation can occur only through the process of narrativization—such as analysis or art—through which the past is resurrected but with the intent to vitalize the present (Ruti 2005; Silverman 2000). In this conception the past, though unearthed for its potentiality in the present, is simultaneously laid to rest. To tend to the past as such, to remain loyal to it without this presentist perspective, is to remain its prisoner and to live a life as a partially realized subject (Garcia 2010:109).

Garcia's commentary resonates with the grief literature on "continuing bonds" with the dead, which similarly proposes that the bereaved may hold onto these bonds in a way that simultaneously lays the dead to rest. The grief literature seems likewise haunted by the specter of the melancholic subject who cannot find a way to "live meaningfully in the present." Garcia refuses this "presentist perspective," arguing that,

[S]eeing and experiencing the world and the past as painful—and to not appropriate, forget, or sublimate this pain for other purposes—is likewise a way of living in the world. In other words, there is meaning in melancholia, meaning in wounds that haven't healed, perhaps may never heal (Garcia 2010: 111)

Garcia argues that melancholia can even ground a form of care. She recalls a time that she presented her research to a group of clinicians and social scientists, and one listener responded that they could not possibly mobilize the many forms of loss and dispossession that she had uncovered into a plan of care for heroin addicts. Her response is this:

While it may be true that *she* and even I cannot conceive of a plan of care that could incorporate all the history, all the losses, this is precisely what families try to do for one another every day. They conceive of ways to care for one another in a context where their very relations, and the very struggle to maintain the everyday, are at stake. Of course, they often fail, and tragically so. But they keep trying to the very end (Garcia 2010:2013).

Garcia recognizes that loss is at the center of practices of care within families, who incorporate these losses into their struggles to nourish melancholic relationships with the ones they love.

Following Stevenson and Garcia, I want to suggest that the practices of posting, commenting, and reacting that take shape on the social media pages of the dead are a form of care that is rooted in melancholy. But I want to add that the shared experience of melancholy is what opens up intimacies with the dead and not just care among the living.

Relations of care within such online communities do not blur the boundary between the living and the dead, but point towards the absence around which these relations turn. By making that absence visible and speakable, they allow for a form of intimacy to take shape that does not depend on the bodily presence or the active agency of the dead. As Lois pointed out, it was Frank's absence that brought the network together. By holding a shared space for him on Facebook without attempting to fill the space that he had occupied, they brought him to presence *as an absence*. They orbited around his absence the way that galaxies can orbit around a black hole, as our own galaxy does. As Lois was drawn into engaging with the community, she, too, was brought into orbit around her brother. The shared melancholy of Frank's Facebook community sustained her relationship to her brother, intensifying her connection to his absent presence.

Others have written about the forms of communal grieving that Facebook and other online spaces of memorialization make possible, pointing out these sites provide new opportunities for people to mourn together (Arnold et al. 2018; Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013; Carroll and Landry 2010; Graham et al. 2015; Irwin 2015; Kern, Forman, and Gil-Egui 2013; Marwick and Ellison 2012; Roberts 2004; Walter et al. 2011-2012). But for Lois, that community was primarily a conduit to Frank. By becoming closer to his network, her relationship with her brother deepened. And this, in turn, gave Lois an opportunity to speak to her brother in a different way.

Speaking to Frank

When I visited Lois a month later, summer had arrived with a vengeance. I was already sweating through my tank top by the time I made it up the stairs to her apartment. As she poured me a glass of her homemade iced tea, I asked if we could spend the afternoon going through Frank's Facebook page together. I had combed through it many times in the ensuing weeks, but I wanted to see it through Lois's eyes, to understand how she engaged with it and what it meant to her. We squeezed next to each other on the loveseat so that I could look over Lois's shoulder at her laptop, a position that only heightened the sense of intimacy engendered by our long conversation about death and loss.

Lois began idling through the posts on Frank's Timeline, again beginning with the most recent. At least a dozen new posts had been added since the last time I'd seen her, which she read aloud with obvious pleasure. She seemed eager to share it all with me, and paused often to explain who the people posting were, how they had known Frank, and whether she had met them

at the funeral. Every so often she came to a post that she hadn't noticed before and she always made sure to Love it.

When we came to her own post, her mood grew suddenly somber. I watched Lois's face cloud over with sadness as she read it.

I am missing you so terribly this morning, my baby brother. I love you so much and wish you were still here. I know you're safe and at peace, and you are watching over Heidi [his dog] and Lucy [his cat]. But it's not the same as getting your texts with pictures of them at 2am on a work night. I love you so much.

When she spoke at last, she sounded pained.

"For some reason that morning was tough. No particular trigger. I wasn't *on* Facebook when it hit me. It just hit me. And I went to Facebook, and I posted. To him."

I asked Lois what that morning had been like for her. She told me,

"I'd been up for about half an hour? And as I was getting ready it just, it hit me like a ton of bricks, and I just started crying. For missing *him*. It was that sort of, just sort of, break down in tears, unattributable to any particular thought or memory. I was very, very focused on just *missing* him."

She stumbled a bit, uncertain. "And it seemed like... And I was just *drawn* to Facebook. Because it feels like he's still there..."

I mean it seems to be partly because it's shared...I'm not just doing it on my own. I'm not just talking with him. It's not like praying, right? Or maybe it is, I don't know. Maybe it is a little bit like prayer."

In that moment of overwhelming loss and longing, Lois found herself drawn to his Facebook page. It offered her a way to speak to her brother, one that depended on the members of his network that continued to visit his page. As she put it, “I’m not just talking with him.”

Sensing the significance of Frank’s Facebook friends, I asked Lois at one point whether she posted on his page in order to connect with them as well. She responded without hesitation:

I did it to connect with *him*. Afterwards, when I saw all of these notifications, then the connection with everybody else kicked in, for me. It wasn’t... I guess if I had thought about it I probably would have guessed that there would have been some responses to it, but I didn’t really think about that when I posted it. It was really *just* to reach out to him. And to feel connected to him. And I think there are other ways to feel connected to him, like looking at his picture, looking at the whole bag of pictures, some of which I shared with you the last time. But I feel like if I have something to *say* to him, putting it out here is... I don’t know what makes it different. I don’t know if there are people, others who are seeing it, and sharing it, and maybe sort of magnifying it in a way? Making it louder? Or maybe going farther? Or maybe reaching him? I don’t know. I don’t think about it reaching him. I would like to think that it does.

Lois asserted that posting was a way of connecting to her brother and her brother alone, dismissing my suggestion that she was reaching out to his Facebook friends. Yet as she mused about why she was drawn to Facebook in particular when she wanted to connect with him, she came back to the presence of his network. She suggested that the friends who saw, responded to, and shared her messages to her brother were magnifying her words, perhaps allowing them to reach Frank in a way that would not have been possible otherwise.

Rather than seeing a contradiction in her words, I would like to suggest that they encapsulate a particular structure of relations with the dead that social media makes possible. Facebook is a medium through which the bereaved can communicate with the deceased, maintaining a relationship that feels like theirs alone. *And* this intimate relationship is routed through a community of Facebook friends who read, react, reply, and share those posts. Lois summed this up by saying, “That’s my direct line to him. And they’re part of it.”

Lois compared posting on his page to speaking with her late mother, explaining, “I wear my mom’s wedding band. That’s how I talk to her. I rub it, and I talk with her. It’s sort of similar, except that there are other eyes and ears here. There are witnesses to it. And people who will echo my sentiments, who are still grieving and still missing him.” Facebook was the medium through which Lois communicated with her brother, just as the wedding band was the medium through which she communicated with her mother. What made Frank’s Facebook page different was the fact that “there are other eyes and ears”—the members of his Facebook community who shared in their communions.

This is also what set his page apart from a gravesite, another common place mourners might speak to a deceased loved one. She told me that when she visited his page,

It makes me feel like he’s, there’s still a part of him that’s here. It’s sort of like a gravestone, in a way. He doesn’t have a gravestone. We cremated him, and then we scattered his ashes...So this is kind of his headstone, for me. And I like it! I like it more than a regular headstone, which doesn’t *do* anything. This is kind of a live, interactive thing, where I can reach out to other people, at this headstone. Where, if it were in a cemetery, we’re not all going to gather in the cemetery. So it’s more of a living organism.

Like Corey, Lois initially suggested that his page was a substitute for his gravesite, since his ashes were scattered and there was no marker for his body. Yet she also drew some important distinctions between a visiting a gravesite and visiting her brother's Facebook page. Whereas she envisioned visiting the cemetery as a solitary experience, his page felt like a gathering place for those who still mourned him. The presence of these other mourners invigorated his page, making it a "living organism" rather than an inert stone.

When I pushed Lois to consider what got left out of the experience of posting on his page, she laughed and quipped, "Well obviously a response!" But then she grew quiet as she mulled over the question. After a moment she replied,

I guess I have to say that I find it satisfying, in that I don't come away necessarily unsatisfied or feeling like something was missing, or that it was just sort of partially fulfilled some impulse to speak with him or to say something to him. So I feel like it's, I feel like it is very satisfying! In a way that just, say, looking at his picture and going, "Oh, Frankie" [with an exaggerated sigh], isn't.

I asked Lois if looking at his picture brought a sense of longing that posting on his Facebook page did not, as her sigh seemed to suggest. She disagreed, saying,

I think there's a longing in the experience when I post, too. I mean there certainly was that morning when I just, that morning I just felt...I just...I just missed him *so terribly*. But giving voice to it, putting it into words that don't just stay with me I think is what contributes to it being something of a... I mean, as satisfying as a prayer of longing can be. It's like a little closure. It provides the closure to that moment of grief and longing.

Because I think... I think there is that communal part of it. Probably once or twice a day, I will say, "Oh, Frankie" for something, whether I'm here looking at his picture or someplace else.... "Oh, Frankie. Where are you?" It's like a sigh, I think. Whereas this is more like an articulated sigh. It *is* more like a prayer, in a way. A way to reach out to him. And while I know, I'm fairly sure that he doesn't see it, or hear it, or feel it, because he's beyond all that, there's this illusion that he does. Because other people do? Maybe that's what it is? So it brings comfort. It makes it easier to move on to the rest of my day or my evening, or whatever comes afterwards, because it's out there. I put it out there.

Lois asserted that posting on Frank's page satisfied her desire to speak to him, resisting my provocation to consider what was lacking in the exchange. Yet she also called each of her posts a "prayer of longing," suggesting that they invoked what she missed and not just what she still held onto after her brother's death. Posting was a way to articulate her longing and partly alleviated her distress. But more important than putting her pain into words was "putting it into words that don't just stay with me." Even in the moments when she feared that Frank could no longer hear her, the community was ready to step in on his behalf. She was able to "reach out" to her brother by placing her articulated longing in the place where her relationship with Frank was kept alive by the members of his network.

The participation of others made communicating with her brother an almost sacred experience. Once again, Lois questioned whether posting on his page was "like a prayer." This led her to reflect on the experience of praying within a congregation, where the participation of others is a way of "magnifying" the communication. She then told me, "I *do* feel that. I *do* go to church. Not in a couple weeks. And yeah, there is that sense that when everybody is focusing their energies and thoughts on the same thing and helping you do that, as a community, or as a

support. Yeah, it does feel like it's stronger. More audible in a way, maybe. That there's more psychic energy in it." Lois suggested that her posts are prayers that Frank's Facebook friends hear and echo, intensifying the impact of her messages. She thus construed his page as a hallowed site of ongoing intimacies that are routed through the Facebook network.

This was not the first time that Lois had gestured toward the sacredness of Frank's Facebook page. The first time that I spoke with her, she referred to it in passing as a shrine. Although I didn't follow up on it at the time, she later posted about it on his page:

Thought a lot about you today, baby brother. I miss you. And I had the chance to talk about you, too, about what it was like when you were here, about those terrible days when we didn't know where you were, and what it's like without you now. And what this FB page means to me. What your friends, some now my friends, mean to me. This is your little shrine. I love you.

When I asked her about the post, Lois told me,

A shrine is a place where you collect memories, good memories. And it's a place where you go to talk, or to commune. Commune is a better word. To commune with the person that the shrine is for. And I think that's what his Facebook page is. I think that's what it's becoming. Not just for me. And I think when I articulated that, in that post: "This is your little shrine", I mean again I was saying that to him, but I wasn't entirely unaware that I was offering that, in a way, I guess, to everybody else. We see those little roadside shrines where somebody has gone off the edge of a cliff or something. People add to them.

Lois's post was a message to her brother describing the significance of his page, but it was also an invitation to his Facebook friends. By calling his page a shrine, she was suggesting to his

friends that they might similarly use it as a site of communion and remembrance. Just as roadside shrines become objects that gather and weave together the material left by an array of participants, Lois hoped that the people in Frank's network would continue to add to his page, posting messages, photos, videos, and memories of Frank (Santino 2006, Garcia 2010).

Lois continued,

At the old Greek Orthodox churches throughout Greece, churches that are mainly not even active anymore in terms of having masses, these old ladies still come in and they will hang these votives. And it could be like a leg, or an eye, or whatever's ailing them, that they have a prayer for. And they'll hang it near an icon, and light a candle. So there's this sort of prayer or hope for some sort of reciprocity.

I hadn't really thought about it until just now, but I'm wondering if there *is* any sort of sense of reciprocity in this, or a need for it, or a desire for it. And maybe that's where the audience, or the community comes in, where there's *always* some response when somebody posts on his page. And I'm wondering if that's sort of the reciprocity that makes it feel like it's a living shrine.

Like the defunct Greek Orthodox churches that no longer hold masses, Frank's Facebook page was no longer active in the way that it had been when Frank was posting status updates and responding to messages firsthand. Yet Lois suggested that his page, too, had an afterlife as the site of a reciprocal exchange between the living and the dead. Pondering whether his page might likewise offer an experience of reciprocity, Lois suggested that it did so through the participation of others. She first referred to these participants as an audience, echoing critiques of social media that emphasize its performativity. She then corrected herself, calling them a community. She noted that there was a core group of Frank's Facebook friends who would reliably respond to

each other's posts, even when those posts were addressed to Frank. She suggested that these responses introduced a sense of reciprocity between the living and the dead, where the comments of the Facebook community could stand in for Frank's own replies. By inscribing their own continued relationships with Frank onto his page, his network animated him, perpetuating his social life. This form of animation offered Lois an ongoing connection to her brother.

Lois's meditation on the sacredness of Frank's Facebook page suggests that it is not the site of a one-way conversation. Although Lois used her brother's page as a way to speak to him, she was also drawn to it because it offered her a way to *listen* to Frank. The importance of listening to the dead is a crucial aspect of the ongoing relations that his Facebook page sustained, and one that is overlooked in recent theorizations of memorialization on social media.

Listening to Frank

When Frank was alive, Lois was often exhausted by their long phone calls, during which he would describe his many physical ailments, sources of pain, and health problems in detail. She learned to tune him out, waiting for the request for financial or emotional assistance that would conclude his tirades. Eventually she switched to having most of their interactions over text messages or the Chat feature on Facebook, avoiding the long and painful phone calls altogether.

After his death, Lois began learning things about Frank from his Facebook Friends that took her by surprise. She told me, "One friend said, "Frank told me about his heart disease." And I was like, "Wait a minute, his heart disease?!"" She reflected,

We'd kind of stopped listening to him a long time ago. And I told that to my [other] brother, and he agreed. My brother [Frank] had a lot of ailments...He was in constant pain. And angry!...And so after a while we stopped saying, "Hey Frank, how *are*

you?” Because then three hours later, he would get up to the present day. So we did, we stopped listening.

So all of this was really eye-opening to me. These were parts of his life that we just didn't know about. We didn't know how good of a friend he was to all these people. My younger sister said, on that Friday [while he was still missing] she said, “If we get a second chance, I'm going to be more a part of his life,” and we didn't get a second chance. Because she was surprised at all these things that I was learning on Facebook, too. I mean people, friends who had serious issues from time to time, or even mild issues, he was always there for them. Yeah, it was eye-opening, and it was heartbreaking, and it was shaming to learn what a great guy he was to these people. It didn't *surprise* me, but it just, it shamed me that we weren't more a part of his life...

I was also very proud of him. For somebody who felt worthless a lot of the time, he made a lot of people's lives better. And every animal he encountered. I mean, oh my gosh, pictures of like, baby squirrels he saved! And all the cats, and the dogs, and you name it. Birds. Yeah. He made the world a better place, and that's...I didn't know that until people started sharing a lot of these stories with me.

Hearing about it from his Friends, Lois was able to register his suffering in a way that she hadn't when he was alive. She was also able to recognize his triumphs. She had come to see his as a victim who was perpetually in need of assistance, but his Facebook Friends exchanged stories about the times that he had come to *their* assistance, lending a hand in times of need and providing a steady presence during moments of emotional turmoil. These stories were “eye-opening” for Lois, giving her a glimpse of her brother as the helpful and supportive person that he was to many of the people in his life. Perhaps for the first time, she was proud of him.

Hearing the stories and memories that his Facebook friends shared, Lois developed a deeper knowledge of her brother. She told me,

The things that I learned about him informed by eulogy. But it also gave me the opportunity to share things with his friends that they probably didn't know...I mean when he was eight years old, he tried to hitchhike on Maine turnpike. And my *mom* drove past him! She was like, "Eeeeeee!" [imitating the squeak of wheels on pavement as she gestures to indicate a sudden U-turn] "Get in the car!" So there were things I was able to share with them that they didn't know, and things that I knew because of what they could share with me, that I could then sort of...It gave me a better picture. It allowed me to honor my brother in a way that was fitting, and honored all of these people that were part of his life, that I didn't really know about. So it was really good. I mean I think it was [sighs], for me and my siblings, it was what...We think it was fitting, and what we needed. But from everything that everybody else told me, too, and talked about afterwards, is that it felt right for them, too. It was a fitting farewell to him. I mean I was able to talk about help he had given to some of his friends, and that he was a faithful friend... And I didn't even *know* about those friends a week and a half before that.

Lois gave one of only three eulogies at her brother's funeral because she was judged to be one of the people who knew him best. Yet she based much of her eulogy on the things that she had learned about Frank on Facebook after he died. When she described the eulogy, she situated it in the back-and-forth that she and his Facebook community had been engaging in on his page since his death. Her childhood stories offered his Facebook friends a better understanding of her brother, just as their stories had done for her.

Getting to know his Facebook Friends changed her opinion of Frank in other ways as well. She told me, “I had assumed that a number of his Facebook friends would be kind of the people that he ran with. He ran with some rough people since he was a kid. But most of them are people that he’d known since high school. People that grew up in our neighborhood, that lived across the street from us.” After his death, she became close to several of Frank’s dearest friends, forming relationships with them that helped her see how much love Frank had enjoyed and how much love he had offered in return. She explained,

I had no idea. Like I said, I think a little bit like my younger sister, who just assumed that all of his Facebook Friends were like him, and they weren’t. They were people who had tried to help him, over the years. People who he had helped, over the years. I mean they’re professionals, they’re from every walk of life...And he was *loved*. He was *absolutely loved*...He was very well known, and loved. And still is! And people still post on his Facebook page: “Aww, I just found this old footage of Frankie playing with Heidi, and I really miss him, and...” So it’s still very much, I think, a part of the process.

Lois stared into the distance and spoke quietly, as though to herself. Her tone was plaintive but insistent. As she continued, I had the increasing sense that I was a bystander in a conversation that was taking place between Lois and Frank. She mused,

I guess what surprised me was the quality of the *people* in his life! Right? Because he would usually talk about the crappy people in his life. You know, the girlfriend who would show up at the end of the month, right before he picks up his disability check and his pain meds, and the next days she’s gone with his disability check and his pain meds. I would hear about *those*. Or you know, his buddy Crispy whose nickname was Crispy for a reason, right? [laughs] But all of these other people who had been, I mean, who were

fine upstanding people, I guess. That was a surprise to me. You know, I'm kind of ashamed that I thought that he couldn't have friends like that, or that he didn't have friends like that. But he never *talked* about those friends!

When she spoke these last words, Lois seemed to be asking Frank, "How was I supposed to know?" I felt implicated in a dialog that had opened up between Lois and Frank, a dialog I was in some way facilitating. That moment gave me a better understanding of how Frank's Facebook community fostered their relationship, because I felt that I might be doing something similar. My presence had opened up a line of communication between Lois and her brother, one in which they could continue to negotiate their evolving relationship.

Earlier, Lois recounted her sister's haunting words that if Frank were still alive she would make every effort to become more involved in his life. Although Lois concluded sadly that, "we didn't get a second chance," it seemed to me that in many ways Lois *had* gotten that opportunity. By spending time on his Facebook page reading and re-reading all of the stories and memories and tributes that his Friends were sharing, she was introduced to a different version of Frank than the one she had known. Although she had provided him with lots of financial and emotional support when he was alive, they'd had trouble engaging in a dialog. After his death she learned to listen to him. She listened to his pain, a pain that she and her siblings had long shut out. But she also listened to his pleasures, his triumphs, and his helpfulness, which she had overlooked. She learned to see him as his Friends had seen him, becoming a friend as well as a sibling to him. After his death, the touching words of his Facebook Friends allow Frank's voice to reach her ears, and she listened.

In sum, Lois and Frank were brought into social proximity by his Facebook network. The forms of care that his network enacted opened up a melancholic attachment between Frank and

Lois. The network acted as a conduit through which Lois could engage in a dialog with her brother, introducing forms of reciprocity that took place in and through his absence. In this way, his page brought Frank and Lois closer together by allowing them to participate in a shared social world.

Frank's Facebook profile introduced other forms of proximity as well, including the *spatial proximities* engendered by his page. In the following section, I contrast the materiality of Frank's Facebook page with the materiality of his DVD collection to explore the ways that they differently mediate an ongoing relationship between Frank and Lois. In contrast with Frank's DVDs collection, the layout of his Facebook page established a series of contiguities between Frank and Lois that brought the two of them closer together. This contrast also highlights what's missing from his Facebook page: a sense of tactile connection through which Lois and Frank could come into contact.

Spatial proximities

We started our first interview in Lois's dining room, but we didn't stay there for long. When Lois told me about the DVDs that she had brought home from Frank's apartment, she jumped up from the table and led me into her living room. The space was dominated by a large wooden cabinet that was painted the same bright turquoise as her sweater. Lois pulled open the doors of the cabinet to show me the DVDs nestled inside.

"These are mine on the top. And these shelves down here are all from Frank's collection." Her melancholy had lifted and her entire demeanor had changed. She reached down and gently ran her fingers along the spines. Then she began pulling them out one by one to show me.

“Have you seen this one?”

It looked like a campy zombie movie. When I told Lois that I’d never heard of it, she gave me a mock-scandalized expression.

“What?! Oh it’s so good! You have *got* to watch it!” She laughed uproariously as she set it back on the shelf and pulled out the next DVD.

I was taken aback by the sudden transformation that had come over Lois. She was elated, almost giddy as she stood before Frank’s DVD collection.

“He loved boxed sets. So Hunger Games, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter...” She touched each one as she named it, tenderly. She told me that her plan for the summer was to watch all of his movies one by one, as a kind of tribute to her brother the “cinophile.”

Lois fell silent, and after a moment I began to inch back towards the dining room. She remained rooted to the spot. I stood in the threshold, unsure what to do. After a moment I explained, “I’m heading back into the dining room because I left my recorder on in there...”

Lois snapped out of her reverie and started towards the door, reluctantly. The cabinet of DVDs seemed to be exerting a magnetic pull. Seeing her drag her feet, I offered to relocate, and she eagerly took me up on the offer.

The loveseat and armchair where we sat were arranged at an angle to each other, opening towards the turquoise cabinet of DVDs. This had the uncanny effect of making it feel like the three of us were all sitting together: Lois on the armchair, me on the loveseat, and Frank in the cabinet. A companionable triangle of old friends, drinking iced tea and chatting amiably on a summer afternoon.

Lois told me, “Sometimes, actually, what I do is— I haven’t even *watched* that many, partly because I just don’t have that much time right now—but I just, I open up the cabinet and I

just look at them.” Later, she added, “I like that they occupy a space in my home. It’s the space I’ve set aside for them. And by extension for Frank, I suppose.”

In the ensuing conversations, I thought a lot about what those DVDs might provide that Frank’s Facebook page did not. The reverse seemed clear to me: Unlike Frank’s DVD collection, his Facebook page offered her a connection to Frank’s network, whose continued involvement enlivened Lois’s relationship to her brother. What, then, did the DVD collection offer?

When I posed this question to Lois, she suggested that she experienced a tactile connection to Frank through the DVDs that she didn’t experience on his profile page. She again brought up the gravesite as a counterpoint. She told me that when it came to Frank’s DVD collection, “There’s something tangible there. That’s more than a headstone, because it’s something that was part of his world when he was alive. Headstones don’t have that. They’re just markers for where somebody’s *body* was,” she said dismissively.” She paused a moment before continuing. “And if there’s any sort of infusion of his spirit or personality, it’s going to be in something like that [the DVDs].” The tangibility of the DVDs set them apart from the Facebook page; however, it was the fact that Frank had touched them that distinguished them from the gravesite. Whereas the gravesite contained only a (dead) body, the contact that Frank had with the DVDs introduced the possibility that they might contain an “infusion of his spirit.” Lois’s interpretation of the DVDs resonates with Taussig’s (1993) writing on the magic of contact, in which an object or image can mediate the exchange of touch.

Lois drew an implicit distinction between the tactile connection entailed by the DVDs and the absence of contact on his Facebook page. This was not due to the “virtuality” of his page or to the supposed lack of bodily involvement in accessing and engaging with online material.

On the contrary, sitting next to her on that hot July afternoon, I was struck by the tactility involved in accessing his page. Lois's fingers never left the laptop, moving between the keyboard and the touchpad as she navigated us through space and time. As she did so, she touched nearly every element of his page. Her cursor came to rest on his photos, his status updates, and his videos. I was reminded of the way that she had gently touched each DVD as she took them out to show me.

Nor was the distinction between the DVDs and the Facebook page evidence of an abiding contrast between analog and digital material. The DVDs were themselves a form of stored digital content, and this content was important to Lois; watching the DVDs was one way that she connected with Frank. Yet the material form that the movies took was also significant; Lois seemed as attached to the cases and the discs as she was to the digital content itself. When I asked Lois if she would have felt differently about Frank's collection if the movies had been stored online or on a hard drive rather than on individual DVDs, she told me if his movies had all been saved on a hard drive, "I wouldn't have taken it. I wouldn't have. There is that visceral experience of seeing them and touching them." She thus drew a distinction between the tactile significance of the DVDs and the intangibility of their digital content.

The lack of tactile connection to Frank's page wasn't due to its virtuality, but to its materiality. In place of contact, it offered *contiguity*. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a relationship of contiguity implies that its participants are "next to or near" each other, "connected through an unbroken sequence." The content and layout of his Facebook profile allowed visitors to draw close to Frank, establishing a contiguity between them.

Until recently, profile pages were visually dominated by the profile picture, which was usually a headshot of the user. In 2011, Facebook introduced the cover photo, which now fills

the top of the page (Walker 2017). The long, narrow space allotted to the cover photo is difficult to fill with an ordinary snapshot, and most of the people in my network had chosen photographs of landscapes instead. The profile picture is now much smaller, dwarfed by the cover photo. This change seems to downplay the significance of the user's face and name, instead setting the scene of an encounter between owner and visitor by situating both within a shared location that the profile owner could select. Although Frank's cover photo was a snapshot of sorts, neither animal's face was fully displayed, as though Frank were trying to respect the norms of the genre. His golden retriever was cut off just above the nose, and his calico cat was turned away from the camera.

When I visited Frank's page, I was surrounded by images of Frank and his friends and loved ones. My visits were framed by the large cover photo of his dog and cat, which positioned me alongside of them in the grass. Frank looked down from the top of the page, a slight smile playing at his lips. Along the edges of the screen were photos of his friends, as well as a grid of photos that Frank himself had uploaded. One showed Frank as a young man, grinning arm-in-arm with two friends. The other two showed Frank at his drumset, a look of concentration on his face. To post messages in this space was to place them alongside of Frank. The most recent posts were situated directly beneath the cover photo and profile picture that he chose, abutting the info that he gave about himself, alongside thumbnails that showed the photographs that he had taken and posted. Each post stood in a relationship of contiguity to this digital material.

Even without posting, I was brought into spatial proximity to Frank each time that I visiting his page. At the top of the Timeline was an empty box that invited me to "Write something to Frank..." Alongside these words was my own profile photo, already auto-

populated into the comments box. I was inscribed within his page, my smiling face surrounded by his words and images.

It wasn't just the words and images that brought Lois and I into proximity to Frank. Visiting his profile page was a multisensory multimedia experience. The posts that others had made on his page included links to songs and videos, including videos of Frank himself. These posts were some of the most affecting for Lois, bringing a range of emotions from delight to despair. The times that I went through his page on my own, I tended to skip over these songs and videos because they took so long to watch and listen to. When I was with Lois, however, she played each one in its entirety. It was an opportunity to linger on his page, staying close to him.

At one point, Lois clicked on the link to a song that someone had posted, which opened a YouTube video of the song in a new tab. The video showed the ebb and flow of ocean waves. A string orchestra played soft, sustained chords beneath the cello melody. After a few seconds, a woman began to sing. The effect was soothing and slightly melancholic. After the first verse the tempo picked up, and I was swept up in the heavy sound. Lois and I sat in silence, listening to the first verse of the song.

You call me out upon the waters

The great unknown where feet may fail

And there I find you in the mystery

In oceans deep my faith will stand.

I began to get impatient, but Lois seemed hypnotized by the pulsing music and the waves crashing rhythmically on the shore. Eventually she pulled herself out of her reverie. "It made me bawl my friggin' eyes out," she told me, describing the first time she heard the song.

While the YouTube song offered Lois a moment of contemplation, the videos of Frank made her laugh with glee. They animated Frank by turning him from a static image into a talking, moving, and laughing presence. At one point, we came across a video that showed Frank on all fours beside his golden retriever, Heidi. He was crawling around in circles, shouting words of encouragement as Heidi chased him around the kitchen. As she got increasingly worked up, Frank began to laugh. It was loud and infectious, and I found myself smiling.

Lois grinned as she watched. “He did that with nieces and dogs!” she exclaimed. “Nieces, nephews, and dogs!” She laughed, her own throaty chuckle mixing with the sound of Frank’s belly laugh. “I love to hear his laugh,” she said. “He had a great laugh!”

Videos such as these were integral to Lois’s experience of his Facebook page. When I asked Lois what drew her to his profile, she told me, “It feels like he’s still there. The videos. I mean, I think that’s...I think that is...It’s where I can still hear his laugh. And his voice. See him crawl all over the floor with his dog.” With these words, Lois linked the experience of watching the videos posted on his page to her sense that Frank was “still there.”

Lois’s comment brings us back to the contradictory sense of absent presence that Frank’s Facebook page evoked, which was intensified by the materiality of his page. Apart from the messages on his Timeline, his page gave no indication of his death. Visiting his profile was analogous to stepping into a dead loved one’s bedroom, still preserved exactly as it had been on the day that they died. It conjured his presence, making it feel like he might post a new update at any moment. But it also brought his absence into sharp focus, outlining the space where Frank himself should be. The way that Frank manifests as an absence on his page is part of what makes the connection to his page one of contiguity rather than contact. It allowed Lois to draw near

Frank not as the bodily figure that he was while he was alive, but as the empty space that he had come to inhabit after his death.

At times I got the sense that the forms of contiguity offered by Frank's Facebook page were even more powerful than the sense of lingering touch offered by the material objects that he had owned and handled. At one point, Lois and I found ourselves sifting through the large collection of printed photographs that she had taken home from her brother's house. That night, I took the following fieldnote describing the experience:

She went over to a covered wooden desk that sat against the wall behind me and removed a gallon-sized Ziploc freezer bag full of photos. She dumped the contents of the bag onto the small table in front of us. Some were pictures of she and her siblings as children, faded with age and slightly dog-eared. Others were very recent, retaining their glossy sheen. The photographs fanned out, intermingling, in no discernable order. She picked up a pile and began going through them, describing some to me, simply gazing at others. Frank was pictured at every age, often with another family member, frequently a child or a dog. Most of them seemed to be from when he was younger, in his 30s and 40s, still trim and dark-haired. I liked the few that showed him as an older man, gone to seed a bit, with a big beard streaked with grey and laugh lines. He looked quite a bit like his sister in these pictures, although something stopped me from telling her so.

As Lois went through the photos she absentmindedly positioned them on the table, half-arranging them so that her favorites were propped up or left in sight. I picked some up to get a closer look, and together we handled them, handing them back and forth, touching the surface, arranging and rearranging them on the table in a way that

made sense only to us—and perhaps not even to us. Only to this moment that we shared, and that we shared with him.

After a while, Lois opened up her laptop and pulled up his Facebook page as though she couldn't help herself. She explained, "Sometimes he would dig up old pictures. He'd be up late at night, he couldn't sleep. He suffered from insomnia. And he would dig up old pictures, take pictures of them, and post them. So he'd find old pictures of us as kids, for instance." She pulled up a photo of four small children, pointing out herself, Frank, and two of their other siblings. I was pretty sure that I had just seen that photo amongst the printed photos that we had been looking through, but it seemed different now in ways I couldn't quite pinpoint.

Lois quickly became absorbed by his Facebook pictures. The printed photographs lay forgotten on the table before us as she flipped through the ones he had posted online. She was perusing them quickly, viewing them as thumbnails rather than clicking on any one photo to enlarge it. The printed photographs had elicited a strong sense of nostalgia, and Lois smiled with painful pleasure as we sifted through them. It was more difficult to characterize her mood as she began going through his Facebook photos. Melancholy had settled over her again, but she also seemed to have been transported, wrapped up in Frank's world, or a world that they shared. We sat in silence for several minutes, Lois occasionally mumbling something that seemed to be directed at the photographs as much as it was to me.

After a while, I ventured to ask how the experience of looking at the printed photos was different than looking at the Facebook photos. She mused,

I think it's what we all learned when we could start taking digital photos, is that you can take a lot of crappy photos, and they *all* get developed! So you can have a stack of blurry

photos, and then one really good one in the middle, whereas you only post the good one on Facebook!

Here again, the distinction between the printed photos and the Facebook photos didn't come down to a duality between analog and digital, material and virtual. As Lois pointed out, most of the printed photos that she had collected from his house were taken with a digital camera, and the relative ease of digital storage meant that Frank had taken vast numbers of pictures and had gotten many of them printed. This glut of printed images meant that his Facebook photos were in some ways *more* precious. Lois pointed out that he had culled through his vast collection of printed photos and chosen only the best, only his very favorites, to post on Facebook. These photos carried the imprint of his efforts, which she drew near as she flipped through them.

The DVDs and the printed photos both introduced forms of contact between Lois and Frank into which I was invited as well. Our bodies were implicated in a shared experience in which tactility gave way to pleasurable reminiscences about the things that he had done and the person that he had been while he was alive. His Facebook photos, like his page itself, brought Lois into a different kind of proximity to Frank, drawing her into a place where I could not initially follow. This displacement was partially about the spatial configuration of his page, where her messages to him were contiguous with the material that he had created and uploaded. It was simultaneously an emotional displacement into a space that the two of them shared, absorbed by the melancholy of their mutual attachment. As I grew closer to Frank in the time that Lois and I spent together and in the hours that I spent haunting his page, I became more able to follow Lois into this intimate space of connection wrought by the Facebook page.

Temporal proximities

In addition to social proximities and spatial proximities, the materiality of Frank's page introduced temporal proximities into their relationship. The way that his page was structured disrupted the linear temporality presumed by psychological theories of grief, opening up an alternative experience of time in which the two of them could be together.

The way that time is organized, understood, and experienced has ramifications for relations with the dead. As sociologist Glennys Howarth points out, the temporality that undergirds much of classic literature on grief may undermine ongoing relationships. Howarth writes,

Twentieth century Western frameworks or models of grief have tended towards the assumption that grief will be 'resolved' when survivors reach the point where they can emotionally detach themselves from the dead person (Bowlby, 1960, 1973, 1980; Parkes, 1986; Rando, 1992; Raphael, 1983; Worden, 1991). In so doing, they are not writing the deceased out of their lives but are instead allocating them a place within their own biography—at a point appropriate in time and space; in other words, as a memory. By definition, this place must be located in a past existence; a past from which the bereaved person will move on to a present, and forward to a future which does not include the deceased as an *active* participant (Howarth 2000:127, emphasis in original).

Howarth points out that the detachment from the dead proposed by grief theory involves a temporal as well as an emotional distancing. In this understanding of time, the past is only accessible through memory, itself framed as an internal reflection on what is no longer actively present.

Frank's Facebook profile page disrupted the temporality suggested by grief theory in multiple ways. In 2011, Facebook replaced the Wall with the Timeline. Although the name "Timeline" strongly suggests linear time, the organization of the Facebook Timeline invites a different relationship with time, one in which the living and the dead might more easily come together. It does so in two key ways: First, by fostering methods of communication in which a response is deferred. Second, by creating what I call temporal whirlpools and eddies in the experience of retrospection.

One of the primary ways of communicating on Facebook is posting on one's own or another person's Timeline. My conversations with bereaved Facebook users suggested that posting offers a sense of satisfaction that is immediate, even though the response is deferred. For example, one young woman, Anna, told me, "I know that at any moment in time, even if there's nobody that I want to call because it's the middle of the night and it's an obscene hour to be able to call someone and wake someone up, I can post on Facebook." Anna suggested that the mere act of posting helped her feel connected, even when she knew that she wouldn't get a reply until the next morning. For her it was analogous to picking up the phone and calling someone, even though there was no voice on the other end. Anna's explanation was echoed by many others, who similarly found that posting alleviated their feelings of isolation and loneliness. Posting carried the expectation that their words would be heard and responded to, and the anticipation of that response created a sense of satisfaction that was immediate.

This method of communication disrupts not just the spatial copresence of face-to-face communication, but also the temporal copresence of methods of communication such as phone calls (Miller 2012:158). As such, it reduces some of the barriers to communication with the dead (Brubaker 2015:46). The absence of an immediate response from a dead loved one might not feel

substantially different than the deferred response of Facebook friends who are not online at the moment. And because users have learned to anticipate a future response each time they post, posting a message to a dead loved one can carry the same sense of immediate satisfaction. To put it otherwise, the satisfaction of the response from the dead is to some degree already enjoyed during the act of posting. The sense of connection that Lois felt when she posted on her brother's page paralleled the sense of connection that Anna experienced when she posted about her grief in the middle of the night. In this context, Lois's reflection on her first time posting on Frank's page becomes more clear— "It felt like I was in touch with him, you know?"¹⁰

The materiality of the Facebook profile page also facilitates relations with the dead through the arrangement of material on the Timeline. Despite its name, the Timeline does not consistently arrange material in the order that it was posted, as the Facebook Wall used to do. The introduction of the Timeline was meant to shift the focus from the most recent posts to the most significant events in a user's life, events that are presumably recorded and preserved on their Facebook page (The Associated Press 2014). In order to emphasize the major events in a user's life, posts and replies are condensed in multiple ways, creating a disjointed temporality.

The impact of these re-arrangements was brought home to me as Lois and I sat side by side in front of Frank's Facebook page, perusing his Timeline. I asked a question about how she had let his network know that he was dead, and Lois began looking for the post that she had

¹⁰ As the Facebook platform evolves, the disruption of temporal copresence built into Facebook communication may be becoming less significant. Most of the people I spoke with had the Facebook application installed on their cell phones and received notifications when another person posted on their page, sent them a message, or reacted to a post that they had written. Many checked these responses as soon as they received a notification, so that they were reading these messages and reactions only moments after they had been posted. As Facebook exchanges increasingly happen in real time, the temporal deferrals introduced by the death of a user might make their absence more pronounced. Still, there is a precedent on Facebook for a type of communication in which response is deferred for an indefinite amount of time, and that precedent might help users feel connected to dead loved ones when they post.

written to notify them. Time ran in multiple directions on the page, stymieing her efforts to find it. The Timeline itself was arranged in reverse chronological order (newest first), but the comments made in response were arranged in chronological order (oldest first). Many people had also posted replies to these comments, which were often much more recent than the comments and posts that followed.

The Timeline's methods of condensing material made it even more difficult to piece together a chronology. Some of posts on Frank's Timeline had received dozens and dozens of comments, so that Lois had to click the "see more" link multiple times in order to read them all. Facebook had also condensed the posts that Frank's Friends had made on the day that he was discovered dead. The link to "view more comments" unfolded comments above those that were already visible, and were arranged in chronological order. In contrast, the link to "see more posts" unfolded comments below those that were already visible, and were arranged in *reverse* chronological order.

Lois and I quickly become disoriented as we moved up and down Frank's page, unfolding strings of comments and posts that moved in opposite directions through time, jumping back and skipping over key moments that were somehow hidden by the Facebook algorithms. After reading through dozens of comments spanning many months and leading us back into the present, it was jarring to find ourselves thrown backwards in time again when we scrolled up to read the next post and its string of replies. Added to this was the temporal jumble of the content itself. Many of the posts contained photographs or stories from Frank's life. Photos of Frank from childhood were posted alongside photos that had been taken weeks before his death. Tributes that described Frank as a gentle middle-aged man were posted alongside stories about his rowdy days as a rebellious high school student. The comments and replies to

these photos and stories swirled around multiple temporal trajectories, adding to the jumble of times on the Facebook page.

It wasn't just that the Timeline itself disrupted chronological time. My own sense of linear and ordered time was distorted during those hours that we spent in front of his page, and from what I could observe, Lois's sense of time was similarly warped. In a fieldnote composed later that day I wrote,

At first Lois seemed to be trying to go through everything on his Wall in full detail so that it was all visible to me. But as we continued, her efforts began to break down. Partly her efforts were overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of posts and replies and Likes that had filled his page in the five months since his disappearance. Partly they were thwarted by the technology itself, which intervened to break up the chronology and create these unpredictable whirlpools and eddies on the page. And partly they were subsumed by the push and pull of the content itself, which drew Lois in more and more, so that increasingly it seemed that she was clicking on things, or skipping over them, or Liking posts, or viewing photos and videos (or choosing not to) because it was what she wanted to do in the moment and not because she thought it would be best for my research.

At times Lois was drawn further and further into particular conversations, deeper and deeper into the Facebook page. At other times she skimmed along, skipping over certain posts altogether, or failing to go all the way through a series of replies to the very bottom to read the most recent ones. It felt as if the photos were the surface, the "landmarks" that allowed Lois to quickly decide whether to stop along the way. If she did stop, then below the surface of the photos were the comments, the replies and counter-

replies and counter-photos that pulled her deeper and deeper (or not). The photos became the opening of a wormhole that could lead us further and further in.

Sifting through this page, time seemed to speed up and slow down. Lois and I spent long stretches of time immersed in particular moments in Frank's life, and time stopped. Then Lois would propel us along his page so that I only caught glimpses of photos and messages, and I felt that we were hurtling through time as well as through the space of his Timeline. The multiple methods of spatial condensation and the disrupted and reversed chronologies created temporal "whirlpools and eddies" in which time swirled around us in unpredictable ways. Meanwhile, the posts themselves conjured Frank. He didn't assume a singular form, but materialized gradually as a kind of pentimento, layers of selves still visible beneath and between subsequent selves.

Much of what I have described is not specific to relations between the living and the dead, but I want to suggest that its implications for these relations is profound. By disrupting the linearity of time, engagements with the Facebook page of a dead loved one might allow the living and the dead to comingle in a shared time that is neither past nor present. In the room with Lois that day, I had the sense that the rules of time had loosened, and that loosening created an opening for us to be with Frank for a few hours (more).

Animating Frank

The size and structure of this collection of posts introduced an element of surprise into the experience of being on his page. The photos, videos, stories, and memories were all in a jumble, so that every aspect of Frank and every phase of his life could be encountered but not located. When Lois wanted to go back to one particular event on Facebook—the post where she had revealed his death to his network—she couldn't find it. But in the process of looking, she

came upon many other unexpected moments that they had shared, moments that members of his network were recalling in their own posts. She also came upon moments that she was able to share retroactively through these messages that they had left for him. His entire history was present, but in a jumble that created strange associations between different time periods, different versions of him. The jumble of this content took control of the experience out of Lois's hands. Perusing his page, she let herself be encountered by him in ways that she couldn't fully anticipate.

The sheer number of posts, comments, and replies contributed to the element of surprise. There was so much material available that Lois and I spent most of the afternoon just skimming the surface of it. The quantity as well as the arrangement made the data unruly, turning it into a tangle of possibilities. I had the sense that it would be different each time she returned to it, not just because people would continue posting on his page but also because different things would catch her eye each time. Different conversations would rise to the surface, different moments of his life and of their life together would be revealed.

In their analysis of death and social media, Arnold and his colleagues suggest that the multiple and varied representations of a person on social media can undermine relationships with the dead. Their argument is based on two case studies of high-profile deaths, each of which led to the creation of multiple social media pages dedicated to the deceased. The authors describe the contestations that emerged regarding the posthumous identity of the deceased across these pages, focusing on the problematic nature of their variability. In contrast, Lois's experience suggests that such variability can actually contribute to the strength of attachments. The way that Frank's Facebook page revealed only partial and variable versions of him was part of what allowed an intimate relationship between Frank and his sister Lois to emerge.

Here again, animation provides insights into both the materiality of Frank's page and the affects that it engendered in his sister. In their work on animation, Silvio and Nozawa have both underscored the way that multiplicity contributes to the vivacity of a character. Silvio writes,

In anime and manga, the characters may still be seen as auteur creations (think of Disney and Miyazaki), but fans, and many scholars, often see the sense that these characters have lives of their own as arising from their re-creation in numerous media and styles by hundreds, thousands of fans" (Silvio 2010:428).

Rather than compromising the authenticity of a character, these variable embodiments heighten others' connection to them.

Nozawa echoes a similar sentiment in his article on *seiyu*, Japanese voice actors. In an online radio show broadcast in 2009, two skilled *seiyu* discussed their appreciation for anime and manga characters. One of them recalls the pleasure of hearing the same character being voiced by different actors. Nozawa points out, "For her, these "variations" hardly destroy the integrity of the character and its "world"; rather, they enchant the world even more effectively" (Nozawa 2016:185).

For Silvio and Nozawa's ethnographic subjects, the iterations of a character contribute to its vivacity as well as its *ver*-acity, helping create the sense that there is something ineffable about the character that stands apart from the pen strokes or voiced lines through which it comes alive in any given instance. In a similar way, Frank's Facebook page allowed Lois to form attachments to many versions of her brother, versions that differed in their materiality (a video versus a textual message), as well as the elements or attributes of Frank that were brought forth.

This multiplicity was a source of pleasure that sustained both Frank and Lois, bringing them to life for each other.

Nozawa also points out that throughout these multiple and varying interactions, characters must maintain what he terms *character non-inconsistency* (Nozawa 2013). That is, they must remain recognizable as they move among different media. What does it take for a character to remain “in character”? Nozawa argues that character non-inconsistency takes the form of a database. Fans are attached to certain attributes that are specific to a given character, attributes that are “carefully typologized and classified” into a conceptual “database” that uniquely identifies them. He explains,

The take-away point of this database theory is that people are affectively attracted not necessarily or not always by narrative “world” as such but by character elements that are organized at the database level, what Azuma calls “grand non-narrative.” That is, characters live on beyond specific narratives as an ensemble of elements and a site of affective engagement (Nozawa 2013).

Extending Nozawa’s database theory suggests that the dead might likewise “live on” even “beyond specific narratives,” including the narrative of their lives. Perhaps, like characters, some dead might persist as a database of attributes that do not combine to form a singular whole, but rather aggregate to form an “ensemble of elements.” This ensemble can then become the site of ongoing attachments to others.

Indeed, Nozawa’s database resonates in multiple ways with Frank’s Facebook page. The posts on his Timeline didn’t seek to fully capture Frank or to narrate his life. Instead, they offered glimpses into elements of his personality and moments of his life. One post showed a photo of Frank at the park with his dog a few months before he died. The next told a story about

Frank sneaking out of his parents' house to go to a concert when he was fifteen years old. The next expressed only a longing for Frank. The format of these posts meant that Frank was revealed to Lois in fragments, an accumulation of shards that didn't cohere.

Yet these multiple, partial, and varied iterations of Frank were precisely what animated his relationship with Lois. Together, they formed a database around which their relationship could take shape. Through her own posts on Frank's page, Lois inscribed their encounters into this database, contributing to his animation. Throughout these iterations, there remains something distinctive that makes Frank instantly recognizable. Their iterative encounters make possible a singular relationship between Frank and Lois that is continually nourished by their ongoing interactions.

The multiple fragments of Frank that manifest on his page introduced a particular kind of intimacy between Lois and Frank. Analyzing one chapter from Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Žižek suggests that the fragment might open up possibilities for attachment that are precluded by the whole. He draws from a section of *The Guermantes Way* in which the narrator uses the telephone for the first time to talk to his grandmother:

And because that voice appeared to me to have altered in its proportions from the moment that it was a whole, and reached me in this way alone and without the accompaniment of her face and features, I discovered for the first time how sweet that voice was...It was sweet, but also how sad it was, first of all on account of its very sweetness, a sweetness drained almost—more than any but a few human voices can ever have been—of every element of resistance to others, of all selfishness; fragile by reason of its delicacy it seemed at every moment ready to break, to expire in a pure flow of tears; then, too, having it alone beside me, seen, without the mask of her face, I noticed for the

first time the sorrows that had scarred it in the course of a lifetime (Proust 1952, quoted in Zizek 2013:673).

Hearing his grandmother's voice divorced from her body for the first time, the narrator is overwhelmed, struck by the sweetness of the voice and invaded by the sense of sadness that it seems to carry. Zizek writes,

The lesson is precisely that the direct experience of the unity of a body, where the voice seems to fit its organic whole, involves a necessary mystification; in order to get to the truth, one has to tear this unity apart, to focus on one of its aspects in isolation, and then to allow this element to color our entire perception (Zizek 2013:676).

He suggests here that the fragment, a single element of a person divorced from their totality, is more truthful and illuminating than the whole of the person.

Zizek himself uses this passage to argue that hearing his grandmother's voice on the phone pulls the wool from the narrator's eyes. He is no longer able to maintain the mystification through which his grandmother becomes a holistic and beloved presence in his life, causing him to see her as "red-faced, heavy and common, sick" (Zizek 2013:674). Rather than focusing on this demystification, I want to shift attention to the overwhelming affect produced in the narrator by hearing his grandmother's voice. I would argue that the narrator's declaration that "I discovered for the first time how sweet that voice was" is a way of demonstrating that when he encounters his grandmother as a fragment rather than a whole and embodied person, he feels a sense of attachment that is unlike anything that he has experienced before.

By extension, I want to suggest that Lois experiences a distinctive kind of attachment to Frank through the fragments of him that reach her on his page. It's an attachment that comes from being able to recognize something in him that cuts to the heart of their relationship,

something that was masked by the totality of him but is revealed in the pieces. Reading a three-line story that describes a moment of his life 10 years ago shines a light on some small part of him that is magnified by its isolation from what normally surrounds it. And when these shards are taken together, their affective saturation cuts deep.

Conclusion

Lois spoke slowly, as though trying to make sense of her own words. “It was weird. Maybe because none of my other siblings were involved in this, it was really like it *was* my relationship with Frank, and Frank’s life. And I’m not sure if my other siblings had been involved in these Facebook communications, how that might have changed it, or not. But it was defining for me, in terms of *our* relationship.”

I wasn’t sure that I understood. I knew that Lois and Frank had used Facebook to stay in touch over the past few years. Was she saying that it had come to define their relationship while he was alive? Or was this something that had happened in the aftermath of his death?

Lois responded without hesitation. “In the aftermath. In the days leading up to it, and the aftermath, this became our space.”

“Yours and his?”

“Yeah. And his friends. They became *mine*...I feel like a kind of ownership about that. And maybe even territorial. He was gone, I couldn’t share it with him, but I shared it with his Friends, on his space. And it really, it felt *right*.”

While Frank was alive, Facebook was a medium of communication between two living bodies in different geographic locations. After his death, Facebook no longer facilitated their

relationship, but embodied it. As Lois put it, it *was* her relationship with Frank. In contrast to interpretations of the Facebook page as the persistent remnants of a living person, Lois's comments demonstrated that it was her relationship to Frank, and not Frank himself, that lived on through his page. Their relationship was animated by the contributions of his network that perpetuated his social life, through the content and layout of his page that invoked his absent presence, and through the organization of his Timeline that underscored his variability and multiplicity, introducing a peculiar kind of intimacy between them.

When Lois and Frank's relationship moved onto Facebook, it was shaped by more than the affects of his network and the structure of his page. It also became subject to the policies, procedures, and norms that govern the platform, many of which are set by Facebook staff. In the following chapter, I consider how the Facebook corporation has opened up relationships between the living and the dead, even as their policies shape both the possibilities and limitations of these relationships.

4. Governing relations with the dead on Facebook

Introduction

In this chapter, I foreground the mediations involved in intimate relationships with the dead made possible by digital technologies. Each of the media that I consider in this dissertation opens up possibilities for substantive and sustained relationships between the living and the dead. At the same time, each is governed by policies and procedures, as well as norms of use, which structure the very relationships that they open up. In what follows, I take Facebook as a case study in the ways that such relationships both shape, and are shaped by, the policies and politics to which they are subject.

In recent years, Facebook's policies towards dead users have changed from banishing the dead to including and incorporating them in the social network. Their memorialization policy fosters ongoing relationships with the dead, allowing and even encouraging friends and loved ones to continue visiting and posting on the profile pages of the deceased. These shifts in policy parallel historical shifts in grief theory, which increasingly endorses continuing bonds with the dead. Yet Facebook policies are also influenced by contemporary grief theory's tendency to inadvertently deny that such relationships can be substantive and reciprocal. To facilitate a more pleasant, less disruptive relationship with the dead, Facebook's memorialization policy attempts to reduce the ambiguities and mitigate the element of surprise that the platform has the potential to introduce into relationships with the dead. Such policies also mask the profitability of the dead, ensuring that they remain spatially and symbolically separated from the volatilities of the

market. At the end of the chapter, I consider the forms of care that such policies engender, care that circulates among the living as well as between the living and the dead.

Although I've singled out Facebook for further scrutiny, I don't mean to suggest that their politics are particularly notable. By delving into the shifting ways that one particular medium governs the relationships that they make possible—including the ways that the dead at times evade such governance—I hope to open up a critical engagement with the specific forms of mediation involved in relationships with the digital dead.

Remembering Frank Rossi

In one of our early interviews, I asked Lois whether she planned to memorialize her brother's Facebook page. She had never heard of the feature, and I briefly explained that it would restrict certain uses of his profile while continuing to allow his Facebook friends to post on his page. It would also replace his name with the words "Remembering Frank Rossi" at the top of his page. When I'd finished, Lois seemed stricken. There was more emotion on her face than I had ever seen before or since, a pain that constricted her features. After a moment or two she seemed to remember herself, and she looked over at me as though seeing me for the first time. With a quaver in her voice, she said quietly, "Wow, that kind of makes it real, doesn't it?" Hours later, she brought it up again out of the blue. "I'm not sure I would want to memorialize it. That would..." she paused, then continued, "make it less living."

In many ways, Lois's experience of loss fit with contemporary psychological models of "normal" grief. She was preoccupied with thoughts of her brother in the initial weeks and months after his death and was drawn to the places, objects, songs, and images that she associated with him, including his Facebook page. As the year wore on, she became gradually less engrossed by

thoughts of Frank. She went to his page less often, stopping by to visit when something reminded her of Frank or when she was notified that someone else had posted on his page, rather than finding herself driven to his page by the need to see and hear from him again. By the end of the year, some of her old aversion to Facebook had begun to creep in. She described feeling disgusted by the hostile political messages that were being volleyed back and forth on the platform, a sharp contrast to her glowing praise of Facebook in our earlier conversations.

Yet there were also ways that Lois's grief lay at the margins of what contemporary grief theory is prepared to embrace, particularly when it came to her relationship with Frank's profile page. The shift in contemporary grief theory towards "continuing bonds" with the dead comes with a serious stipulation: the bereaved must understand and emotionally grasp the reality of the loss and the unrecoverability of the deceased. But what does it mean to grasp the death of a loved one? In what ways are the dead unrecoverable to those who can continue to speak and listen to them in the online spaces where they dwell?

Visiting Frank's Facebook page did not make Lois feel like her brother was still alive. As we have seen, it was his absence that she encountered on his page, an absence that stemmed from his untimely death. Yet there was also something vital about the page that enlivened her interactions with her brother. Indeed, it was the vitality of their connection on Facebook that set it apart from the other ways that Lois has found to incorporate her brother into her life, such as displaying his DVDs and looking at photographs of him and by him. Throughout our conversations, she often described his page in ways that suggested a degree of persistent animation. In our very first meeting, she declared, "His Facebook page is still alive." At other points she described it as "a living organism" and "a living shrine." Even many months after his death, she said, "He does seem to live in our, through our Facebook posts." On Facebook, Lois

encountered her relationship with Frank as something vital, animated by the words and actions of his network and by the platform that not only supported, but incited them.

It is this vitality that Facebook threatens when it attempts to definitely and unambiguously distinguish the profile pages of the living from those of the dead. Lois's tentative decision not to memorialize her brother's page was a way of resisting that binary, acknowledging her brother's continued contribution to her experience of his Facebook page. As she put it, memorializing his page, "would make it less living." Lois's resistance to memorialization threatens to violate contemporary models of normal grief as well as violating Facebook's explicit policy towards dead user profiles, maintaining the ambiguity that is at the heart of her relationship to Frank's Facebook page. Still, Lois's refusal to memorialize Frank's profile doesn't necessarily mean that his page will linger on indefinitely. Since Facebook doesn't require any confirmation of the relationship to the deceased to honor a memorialization request, anyone could notify Facebook of Frank's death and cause his page to revert to a memorialized state.

Facebook's changing policies towards dead users

Facebook's first official policy towards dead users was to remove the profile pages of the deceased from the social network (Brubaker 2015). Following de facto protocols established by existing social media platforms and other self-administered online systems, Facebook deleted the accounts of users that it learned had died. This policy changed in the wake of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, when friends and family of the victims organized a letter-writing campaign and created a Facebook group to petition the company to leave up the profiles pages of the victims (Kneese 2016:93). Their advocacy brought a flurry of sympathetic media attention to the practice of posting on the profile pages of the deceased. Within weeks, Facebook had introduced the

memorialization feature, which allowed the deceased's existing Facebook friends to see photo albums and post messages, but removed many details from the profile page itself (Hortobagyi 2007).

Two years later, Facebook was rocked by another media scandal that drew renewed scrutiny to their policy towards dead users. In October of 2009, Facebook introduced a feature called Reconnect that prodded users to post messages to friends with whom they hadn't had much recent contact. In the "Suggestions" section of their News Feed, users would see the name of an inactive friend along with the message "Help make Facebook better for them. *Write on Their Wall*" (Brubaker 2015:66). This feature doubled as a way for Facebook to reengage inactive account holders; after users posted to them, Facebook could then send emails to these inactive account holders, prompting them to return to the site to read their new messages. Shortly after its release, social media sites, blogs, and newspaper articles filled with stories of users being prompted to reconnect with ex-lovers, spouses and, notably, dead friends and loved ones (Brubaker 2015:67). Since the tool was launched just days before Halloween, the names and photos of the dead were featured alongside those of living friends dressed up as ghosts, ghouls, and zombies, exacerbating the backlash against Reconnect (Kneese 2016:95).

Facebook responded to the criticism by removing Reconnect, but they also began to publicize their memorialization policy more deliberately. Although the policy had been in place since 2007, it had not been widely used. As a result, many dead user profiles had been neither removed nor memorialized. Facebook had no easy way of distinguishing the profile pages of the dead from those of the living, making it difficult for them to make deliberate choices about whether to include or exclude dead user profiles in features like Reconnect. After the Reconnect fiasco, Facebook publicized several company notes explaining how to memorialize a profile and

encouraging users to do so. The following Note from a Facebook employee was couched as a personal story of loss and remembrance that underscored Facebook's role as a site of collective memorialization:

About six weeks after we both started, my best friend was killed in a tragic bicycling accident. It was a big blow to me personally, but it also was difficult for everyone at Facebook. We were a small, tight-knit community, and any single tragedy had a great effect on all of us. I can recall a company-wide meeting a few days after his death, where I spoke about what my friend meant to me and what we had hoped to do together. As a company, we shared our grief, and for many people it was their first interaction with death. To this day, I still have strong emotions when I think about that gathering.

The question soon came up: What do we do about his Facebook profile? We had never really thought about this before in such a personal way. Obviously, we wanted to be able to model people's relationships on Facebook, but how do you deal with an interaction with someone who is no longer able to log on? When someone leaves us, they don't leave our memories or our social network. To reflect that reality, we created the idea of "memorialized" profiles as a place where people can save and share their memories of those who've passed.

We understand how difficult it can be for people to be reminded of those who are no longer with them, which is why it's important when someone passes away that their friends or family contact Facebook to request that a profile be memorialized. For instance, just last week, we introduced new types of Suggestions that appear on the right-hand side of the home page and remind people to take actions with friends who need help

on Facebook. By memorializing the account of someone who has passed away, people will no longer see that person appear in their Suggestions.

When an account is memorialized, we also set privacy so that only confirmed friends can see the profile or locate it in search. We try to protect the deceased's privacy by removing sensitive information such as contact information and status updates.

Memorializing an account also prevents anyone from logging into it in the future, while still enabling friends and family to leave posts on the profile Wall in remembrance.

If you have a friend or a family member whose profile should be memorialized, please contact us, so their memory can properly live on among their friends on Facebook.

As time passes, the sting of losing someone you care about also fades but it never goes away. I still visit my friend's memorialized profile to remember the good times we had and share them with our mutual friends (Chan 2009).

In this note, Facebook's public relations team mobilizes the continuing bonds theory of grief, affirming that the dead "don't leave our memories or our social network." It is also a didactic moment that conveys and enforces Facebook's emergent memorialization policy through the "sharing" of personal loss. From a place of personal grief, a single employee entreats Facebook's user base to provide information about users' deaths, information that will allow Facebook to prevent the dead from popping up in unexpected places such as the Reconnect suggestions.

In 2015, Facebook introduced another policy change, offering users the option of naming a Legacy Contact to manage their account after death. Once Facebook has been informed that the user has died, the profile is automatically memorialized and the designated legacy contact is given authorization to write a post that can be displayed at the top of the profile page, to respond to new friend requests, and to update the profile picture and cover photo. Users can also choose

to give their legacy contact permission to download an archive of the photos, posts, and profile information from their Facebook page (Kneese 2016:96). Notably, the Legacy Contact feature does not replace memorialization of dead user profiles, but rather allows these profiles to be selectively modified by a trusted Facebook contact.

Memorializing

Facebook's shift from deleting to memorializing user profiles parallels the shift in thinking about grief that began to take off in the late 1990s with the publication of Klass, Silverman, and Nickman's edited volume *Continuing Bonds*. Facebook's previous policy of deleting dead user profiles negated the relationships between the living and the dead, removing the dead from the network of connections that social media sites such as Facebook mobilize. Memorializing profiles rather than deleting them more closely aligns with Klass, Silverman, and Nickman's thesis that "the resolution of grief involves a continuing bond that the survivor maintains with the deceased" (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996:3). The policy change was overtly motivated by the actions of the Virginia Tech survivors, who asserted their continued attachment to the Facebook profile pages of their dead loved ones. Yet one might ask whether such a campaign would have taken off had there not been such a significant shift in thinking about what constitutes "normal" grief today. Aligning with current thinking on grief, Facebook's policies explicitly support ongoing relations with the dead on the platform.

By incorporating continuing bonds into their standard protocol for addressing death, Facebook policies contribute to the expectation that users will maintain these bonds with their deceased friends and loved ones. When Facebook introduced memorialized profiles in 2007, they were offering the bereaved an alternative to deletion. Today, it is much more difficult to delete

the profile page of a dead friend or loved one than it is to memorialize their page. For a profile to be memorialized, all that is required is for someone to submit a form that includes the name of the person who died and the date of their death. The form even allows the person submitting the request to “approximate” the date of death if they don’t know it. Anyone can request that an account be memorialized, although a disclaimer at the top of the request form states: “Keep in mind that memorialization is a big decision. If you’re not a family member or close friend of the person who passed away, we recommend reaching out to the person’s family before requesting memorialization” (Facebook Help Center n.d.-a). Facebook thus affirms the primacy of kinship relations while making it as easy as possible to memorialize a profile.

In contrast, requesting that a profile be deleted requires filling out a “special request form” (Facebook Help Center n.d.-c). The form states that, “We require verification that you are an immediate family member or executor for account removal or special requests.” An article in the Facebook Help Center about deleting an account further elaborates on the type of proof that is required to verify the relationship to the deceased:

The fastest way for us to process your request is for you to provide a scan or photo of your loved one’s death certificate. If you don’t have your loved one’s death certificate, you’ll need to provide proof of authority and proof that your loved one has passed away.

Submit one document to provide proof of authority:

- Power of attorney
- Birth certificate
- Last will and testament
- Estate letter

Submit one document to provide proof that your loved one has passed away:

- Obituary
- Memorial card

(Facebook Help Center n.d.-b)

The relative ease of memorializing a user profile and the comparable difficulty of deleting it points towards the ways in which Facebook policies foster relations with the dead, while also making those relationships increasingly obligatory. In their article “Beyond the Grave,” Brubaker and his colleagues point out, “Facebook users must actively choose to remove the dead from their list of friends” (Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013:158). They continue, “These decisions are far from cut-and-dried. Sean describes his struggle with the intentionality he associated with the action of removing his deceased mother from his instant messenger account, explaining that it “just felt sort of vicious” ” (Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013:158). Because memorialized profiles are retained in the network, Facebook users must take explicit action if they wish to sever ties with the deceased. In contrast, continuing their relationship on the social network is supported by memorialization, the technological solution to death on Facebook.

Emergent norms around Facebook use in the wake of a death often dovetail with expectations of continuing bonds embedded in Facebook’s memorialization policy. After Mark’s son Sam died, he was reluctant to post on Sam’s profile page. Unlike Lois, Mark didn’t feel that Sam was still available to him on his profile page, and posting seemed like a futile gesture that underscored the loss that he had suffered. He was also uncomfortably aware that posting would expose his grief to Sam’s larger social network, something that felt vaguely self-serving.

Nonetheless, he decided to post on Sam's profile page after seeing how many others were doing so. He explained, "Well gee, if I don't post something, how does it look?"

In their 2011 analysis of comments posted on the MySpace profiles of the deceased, Brubaker and Hayes found that posts that did not address the dead person directly were singled out for criticism. In one example, a young woman, Carrie, addressed the larger social network to share an event that reminded her of the deceased:

For those of you that didn't know. I am having a baby. The crazy thing is my due date is Jan 18th. It is one day after Brett's birthday. It just happens to be a boy and in pictures of my ultrasound he is laughing. Crazy huh. He will be a Brett #2. Obviously can never replace #1. Brett really wants to come back huh? (Brubaker and Hayes 2011:126)

Afterwards, another friend posted, "Yo Brett...when did this turn into Carrie's myspace page?" (Brubaker and Hayes 2011: 126). Carrie responded to the reprimand by apologizing for her original message. This exchange represents an instance in which one friend was protecting and preserving Brett's Facebook page as a space that continued to belong to him, allowing those in his network to remain connected with Brett as well as with each other. It also illustrates the sense of obligation that expectations of continuing bonds may introduce. As Facebook use in the wake of a death has become more commonplace, norms around its appropriate use have coalesced. Today, even those Facebook users who would prefer to direct their condolences to the family and friends of the deceased may find it difficult to do so in a context where the norms of posting messages directly to the dead are so well-established.

But if relations with the dead are supported and expected on Facebook, they are also subject to multiple forms of regulation that set limits on these relationships. Facebook's memorialization policy establishes the conditions under which the living and the dead may

encounter each other. A close analysis will demonstrate that it is built on assumptions about appropriate relations with the dead, assumptions that are often affirmed by users themselves. Memorialization fosters ongoing relationships while carefully segregating the living from the dead.

Segregating the living from the dead

How do Facebook's policies towards dead users govern relations between the living and the dead? What does memorializing a profile actually do? An article in the Facebook Help Center explains,

Memorialized accounts are a place for friends and family to gather and share memories after a person has passed away. Memorialized accounts have the following key features:

- The word **Remembering** will be shown next to the person's name on their profile
- Depending on the privacy settings of the account, friends can share memories on the memorialized Timeline
- Content the person shared (example: photos, posts) stays on Facebook and is visible to the audience it was shared with
- Memorialized profiles don't appear in public spaces such as in suggestions for People You May Know, ads or birthday reminders
- No one can log into a memorialized account
- Memorialized accounts that don't have a legacy contact can't be changed
- Pages with a sole admin whose account was memorialized will be removed from Facebook if we receive a valid request

(Facebook Help Center n.d.-b)

Memorialized accounts retain many of the features of non-memorialized accounts, features that encourage the living and the dead to remain in communication. Friends can continue to post messages on the profile page of the deceased, as Lois and the other members of Frank's network have continued to do on his page.¹¹ In this way, the memorialization policy supports ongoing relationships with the dead.

Yet other aspects of the memorialization policy inadvertently restrict the scope of possibilities available to these relationships. The most visible change that is introduced by memorializing a profile is the addition of the word "remembering" alongside the person's name. "Remembering" is proscriptive as well as descriptive; it lets visitors to the page know not only that the person is dead, but also tells them what the profile is now to be used for. When Lois posts a message of love and longing to her brother, is she really "remembering" him? For Lois and many of the other people I spoke with who treasured the profile pages of their dead loved ones, their engagements with the site were considerably more ambiguous than is captured by the word "remembering."

The explanation of memorialization provided by the Facebook Help Center reinforces the proscriptive nature of "remembering" by suggesting the kinds of posts that users are expected to make on the profile pages of the deceased. The entry explains that friends can "share memories," suggesting that posts will be retrospective. The desire to "share memories" suggests a connection that is rooted in the past, and in a recognition that the dead are no longer an active part of the present.

¹¹ The exception to this would be if the user had set up their profile page so that nobody else had permission to post on it while they were alive, since memorialized profiles retain the privacy settings that were in place at the time of death.

Interestingly, the addition of the word “remembering” was a recent change that Brubaker and his team introduced in conjunction with the rollout of the Legacy Contact feature. In their 2016 design paper, Jed Brubaker and Vanessa Callison-Burch explain that the addition was motivated by the need to more clearly differentiate the profile pages of the dead from those of the living. From the standpoint of the platform, this is one of the primary functions of memorialization, allowing product design teams to make deliberate decisions about whether the dead should be included in features like Reconnect.

When I spoke with Brubaker about his experiences developing the Legacy Contact, he stressed the importance of differentiating the living from the dead:

Well I can say that from the very beginning of when I’ve been doing this work, that was back in 2009, the thing that always fascinated both the social side and the technical side of me was: If you didn’t want the dead to appear, how would you accomplish that if you don’t know who’s dead? And so oftentimes these unexpected encounters are because, I mean they’re popping up organically, but what fascinated me initially was that there was not a technical solution! There was no way, if we wanted to write a database query, there was no way to exclude the dead if there’s not an “I’m dead” column. If there’s not an “I’m dead” button on the profiles then how could Facebook know? And frankly, when would you *hit* an “I’m dead” button?

Brubaker noted his own persistent absorption with the issue of distinguishing the living from the dead. He was clearly interested because of the difficulty of engineering a technical solution to death on a platform that is built around self-identification. But it also seemed as if the idea that the dead might persist unmarked, interspersed with the profile pages of living users, was both fascinating and disturbing to him.

In his design paper describing the addition of the word “Remembering,” Brubaker and his co-author suggest that it’s not just the platform that needs to know who’s alive and who is dead, but users themselves, who are threatened by the potential ambiguity posed by the unmarked profile pages of the dead. They write, “We knew from the research and from people’s feedback that it was important to reduce ambiguity around whether or not a person had passed away” (Brubaker and Callison-Burch 2016:8).

Here again, Facebook’s policy runs parallel to contemporary psychological theorizations of normal and abnormal grief. While continuing bonds with the dead are encouraged, these bonds are premised on the living accepting that their loved one is no longer available to them. Persistent attachments are rooted in memory, the invocation of shared moments of connection in the past, rather than in present attachments. In Worden’s *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, the first, essential task of mourning is “to come full face with the reality that the person is dead, that the person is gone and will not return. Part of the acceptance of this reality is coming to believe that reunion is impossible, at least in this life” (Worden 2009:39). This task of mourning persisted through each subsequent edition, even as the final task of mourning shifted from “withdrawing emotional energy from the deceased and reinvesting it in another relationship” to the injunction “to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life” (Worden 2009:50). The addition of the word “Remembering” in front of the dead user’s name is Facebook’s way of supporting this first task of mourning, deliberately and visibly delineating the profile pages of the dead.

Uncanny encounters

Facebook's memorialization policy also states, "Memorialized profiles don't appear in public spaces such as in suggestions for People You May Know, ads or birthday reminders." For Lois, this was one of the main difficulties posed by the policy. She suggested at several points that she was drawn to Facebook not only as a place where she could deliberately seek out Frank, but also as one of the few places where she might happen upon him. She explained,

So I know that my sisters and my nieces, they drive by places that are kind of landmarks all the time. So they have that sort of physical, those physical reminders there, all the time... When you're far away, you don't have those kind of geographic reminders, those landmarks. Marie's Donuts, my dad's favorite donut shop. Tony's, Frank's favorite restaurant. All of these things that you're going to on a daily basis or a weekly basis or whatever, whenever you go past them, remind you of this person, and turn your thoughts to them.

Lois suggested that her Facebook account contained landmarks that turned her thoughts to Frank and to their relationship, the way that Marie's Donuts acted as a landmark that turned her thoughts to her father each time she passed by it. Those Facebook landmarks might take many forms: notifications about his upcoming birthday, reminders of how long they'd been friends on Facebook, notifications that Frank had Liked something. These were the very features that would be removed if Lois were to memorialize his profile.

Ganaele Langlois's writing on social media suggests that these removals might be a way of governing relations with the dead on Facebook (Langlois 2012; see also Gehl 2013). In her article "Participatory Culture and the New Governance of Communication," Langlois argues that online participatory platforms such as Facebook govern not through a binary of possible/not

possible but through the regulation of degrees of visibility. She writes, “In the previous mass media era, the critical questions were about censorship—“What can be said?”—and access—“Who can speak?””¹² (Langlois 2012:96). In the new era of participatory media, “[T]he locus of power is shifting away from control over content to the management of degrees of meaningfulness and the attribution of cultural value” (Langlois 2012:99). Facebook provides a platform for nearly any content to be posted and shared, yet the sheer quantity of this content means that most users are only exposed to a small fraction of what’s available to them. By controlling the relative visibility of posted content, Facebook can influence what users will see and respond to without resorting to deleting or altering the content itself.

Langlois’s insights suggest that although dead user accounts are no longer deleted from Facebook, they are effectively buried in the mass of content that Facebook prioritizes. Memorializing an account removes the profile from Facebook’s public spaces, greatly reducing its visibility. The dead fade into the background, subsumed by the content that Facebook has deemed more relevant and appropriate.

Yet by removing the dead from “public spaces,” Facebook not only decreases the visibility of dead user profiles, but also mitigates the possibility of unexpected encounters between the living and the dead. By removing the deceased from algorithms that prompt users to remember, get in touch with, wish happy birthday to, or otherwise engage with the profiles of their friends, Facebook policies may remove the element of surprise that the platform has the potential to open up in relationships with the dead.

¹² Langlois’s analysis fails to account for the ways in which Facebook continues to censor users in ways that reproduce and amplify longstanding inequalities. Facebook has repeatedly come under scrutiny for flagging and removing content posted by African-American users that critiques racist comments and attitudes. They can also ban “repeat offenders” from posting any content, effectively silencing black voices (<https://medium.com/@thedidideldgado/mark-zuckerberg-hates-black-people-ae65426e3d2a>).

In Brubaker and Callison-Burch's 2016 design paper for the Legacy Contact feature, the authors explain their decision to reduce the use of these automated notifications by saying, "Earlier research found that automated content and notifications can result in confusion and concern for the well-being of the account holder" (Brubaker and Callison-Burch 2016:4). In an interview, Jed Brubaker expanded on this point by giving an example of the mistakes made by earlier Facebook policies:

So for example if one of our mutual friends died, and then you were reminiscing on their third anniversary and you put a message on that photo like, "Oh I remember these were such great times," then Facebook bumps that up and puts it in my News Feed. Years ago, the way the interface was set up, it kind of made it look like our dead friend had produced, that something that our dead friend had done had resulted in that information being in my News Feed. In a sense, it ended up looking like animating, like Facebook was animating my dead friend. And then the fact that it was because you had commented wasn't always necessarily as prominent. So things like those are distressing, and of course Facebook wants to make those not be distressing. So they end up getting resolved. Brubaker framed the persistent animation of the dead on Facebook as "distressing," a technical glitch that Facebook was motivated to "resolve."

Brubaker's published writing suggests that Facebook's attempts to mitigate the element of surprise in interactions with the dead is in part influenced by contemporary grief theory. In his 2011 analysis of comments left on MySpace pages of the dead, Brubaker contrasts Kubler-Ross's stages of grief with the more recent "continuing bonds" theory. He and his co-author suggest that MySpace users experience both a desire to detach and move on and a desire to maintain attachments to the deceased. Thus, some use MySpace to say their last good-byes,

while others use the site to “maintain relationships with the deceased” (Brubaker and Hayes 2011:128).

In his later study of bereaved Facebook users, Brubaker reconciles these contrasting desires by introducing Stroebe and Schut’s Dual Process Model of grief, written several years after the *Continuing Bonds* volume. Brubaker and his co-authors explain,

[The] D[ual] P[rocess] M[odel] focuses on the balance between the need to process grief in order to prevent serious emotional problems and the need to acknowledge and maintain continuing bonds with the deceased. In effect, this oscillation allows the survivors to engage selectively with their loss, while employing restorative behavior that allows them to move past their grief” (Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013:153).

Brubaker and his colleagues note that Facebook introduces several new ways for users to experience “unexpected encounters” with the dead: learning about a friend’s death on Facebook, seeing others’ displays of grief, and stumbling upon content related to a dead friend that Facebook’s algorithms have inadvertently presented to them (Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013:156-158). They note that while some of their research subjects described these unexpected encounters as “weird,” “odd,” and “gross,” others were grateful for the opportunity to remember and connect with the dead (2013:157). One user described the Reconnect messages he had received regarding his deceased friend as “communication beyond the grave,” and at least one other responded to the prompt to reconnect by posting to the deceased (2013:158). Yet in their discussion section, the authors suggest that these unexpected encounters might be emotionally damaging. They write, “The ways in which SNSs are designed to promote broad social interaction may eliminate the forms of agency over when and how one grieves valued by clinical approaches to grief” (2013:160). According to the Dual Process Model, the bereaved should

have control over whether they are actively maintaining bonds with the deceased or moving past them. Unexpected encounters with the dead on Facebook violate this paradigm by taking control over engagements with the dead out of the hands of users.

When I spoke with Jed Brubaker, he suggested that his own evolving understanding of the impact of these unexpected “public” encounters was less clear-cut than his published writing might suggest. At first, he stated in bold terms, “What I can tell you from a user experience standpoint is that I am having a hard time thinking of more than one or two instances when what these kind of unexpected encounters or these uncanny encounters, when they are *good*. They tend to be overwhelmingly *bad*.” I followed up by asking if his ideal would be for users to be able to fully control when and how they’re going to encounter their dead friends and loved ones. Brubaker hesitated to endorse my hypothetical policy. He explained,

I think the only way you would actually pull that off is by saying you’re never going to encounter them unless you *go to their page*. And profiles just aren’t as central in our social network sites’ user experiences as much as they were anymore, as much as they were in the past. So yeah, I mean in a sense it would probably go away. And I’ve heard—I mean I’ve not done a study on this, it’s just kind of come up in other interviews—that people appreciate these momentary reminders. I think a lot of it has to do with *how* it’s presented, and how it’s contextualized. I mean what you’re proposing is maybe the equivalent of us saying, “We’re never going to talk about our shared dead friend unless we’re both in a cemetery.” And instead maybe it’s actually, “Well how about we just don’t talk about our dead friend at a comedy show?” So I would think that it would be a little too heavy-handed, and would end up actually being kind of like a re-sequestration,

to use death language, that I don't think we need. But I think *how* it's presented is a space that we still need some good design work on now.

Rather than erasing or obscuring the dead, Brubaker emphasized the need to sensitively control invocations of the dead so that they would not be inappropriate. Although memories of the dead are to be treasured and shared, the experience of recounting these memories must be done in a manner that was not unseemly.

The shift from deleting to memorializing dead user profiles was not just influenced by contemporary grief theory, but also by the drive for profit that forms Facebook's larger project. Although the dead are no longer used in advertising campaigns, they can draw members of the deceased's social network onto the site to visit or post on their profile page. Tamara Kneese terms this the *affective value* of dead user profiles. She writes, "The decision to keep the profiles of the dead is strategic in this way, as it ensures that individuals maintain affective attachments to Facebook across their lifecycles. After all, living users who visit the profiles of dead loved ones can still view advertisements and provide more data for Facebook and other companies to mine" (Kneese 2016:98).

Kneese's insights demonstrate that users' value does not end with their deaths, providing Facebook with further motivation to retain dead user profiles on the network. Yet in Kneese's analysis, the affective value of the dead is reduced to the ongoing activities of the living. In what follows, I draw from Stanyek and Piekut's arguments to highlight the *interpenetration* between the labor of the living and the labor of the dead, an analytic shift that draws attention to the way the dead continue to participate in forms of profit-making.

The collaborative labor of the (Facebook) dead

In late capitalism, the dead are highly productive. Of course, all capital is dead labor, but the dead also generate capital in collaboration with the living. What is “late” about late capitalism could be the new arrangements of interpenetration between worlds of living and dead, arrangements that might best be termed *intermundane* (Stanyek and Piekut 2010:14).

In their article “Deadness,” Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut suggest that one of the defining characteristics of late capitalism is the peculiar productivity of the dead.¹³ Their term *intermundane* suggests that these productive collaborations have become such an integral part of daily life that they are no longer supernatural, but banal, and that this banality is produced at the intersection of the labor of the living and the labor of the dead. They explore this productivity through the duet between Natalie Cole and her late father Nat “King” Cole, titled “Unforgettable.” To create the duet, the original recordings of Nat “King” Cole were exhumed and then manipulated to further isolate his voice from the larger mass of sound. His voice was then overlaid with Natalie Cole’s to create a call-and-response between father and daughter that became wildly popular.

The authors argue that the productivity of the dead in this example cannot be reduced to merely “selling the dead to the living,” a phrase the authors use to describe the re-packaging and re-release of hit recordings by deceased musicians (Stanyek and Piekut 2010:17). Instead, they

¹³ This is not to say that the dead are newly productive under late capitalism. The practice of body snatching in early modern Britain points towards a much earlier history in which the dead were likewise a source of profit that was similarly scandalous. See for example Jonathan Swift’s 1729 satire *A Modest Proposal* (Swift 2008[1729]).

suggest that “Unforgettable” was produced through intricate forms of collaborative labor in which both the living and the dead took part. By lending their voices to this new sonic enterprise, both Natalie Cole and her late father created something novel that was both arresting and affecting for listeners. In this way, “Unforgettable” is taken as emblematic of a larger structure of labor that is emergent in late capitalism. They write, “In this arrangement, the living do not one-sidedly handle the dead, but participate in an inter-handling, a mutually effective co-laboring” (Stanyek and Piekut 2010:14).

Stanyek and Piekut suggest that recording sets the stage for these interpenetrating forms of labor. They point out that recording interrupts linear temporality, opening up “multiple presents and futures” (2010:18). They write, “Effects are unpredictably durative, and can be indirect, delayed, unintended, and even unmarked. We might even say that this is the only guarantee that sound recording offers: being recorded means being enrolled in futures (and pasts) that one cannot wholly predict nor control” (Stanyek and Piekut 2010:18). Although the authors are looking at sound recording, the content created and uploaded onto Facebook while users are alive is also a form of recording that enrolls users in uncertain futures that extend long after their deaths. This content continues to be viewed, Liked, and commented on. It can be Shared on others’ pages. Photos and messages can be pulled from users’ profiles and recirculated elsewhere on or off of Facebook, subjected to forms of “recombination” that the authors suggest shape engagements with contemporary recordings (Stanyek and Piekut 2010:16).

I see important points of intersection between the posthumous duet that Stanyek and Piekut explore in their article and contemporary relations with the dead on social media. The persistent value of the Facebook profile pages of the dead is generated by the interpenetration of the labor of the living and the labor of the dead, and can’t be reduced to a mere combination of

their effects. The labor of the dead draws users onto the Facebook and into conversation, reminiscences, and other forms of engagement both with each other and with the dead. In the process, the living create new content that can increase traffic onto the profile pages of the deceased, just as Frank's Friends' posts drew Lois onto his page and held her there. Lois's story also makes clear that it is not just the remnants of the living user that retains some value for survivors. It's the absence opened up by the user's death that incites the kinds of collective practices that generate affective value for other users, as well as financial value for Facebook and its advertisers. Although Stanyek and Piekut introduce notions of collaboration to argue against any simplistic notion that the dead are merely being exploited, they also point out that collaboration can involve a very uneven distribution of power. In the case of Facebook, the dead collaborate in the production of value for the company and its advertisers, but they are positioned in ways that ultimately give Facebook control over the uses of dead profiles and their content.

These collaborative labors underscore that the dead on Facebook not only participate in ongoing affective attachments, but also in contemporary political economies. Yet the profitability of the dead is also unseemly, threatening the very platform poised to benefit from their labor. Facebook's corporate response to the increasing visibility and anxiety around dead user profiles attempts to capture the co-productive labors of the living and the dead while at the same time appearing to remove the dead from the taint of capitalist profit-making. Although they retain dead user profiles on the network, their memorialization policy dictates that these profiles will no longer be used in advertising campaigns.

By removing the dead from advertisements, Facebook is signaling the inappropriateness of associating the dead with profit generation. But in doing so, they are also trying to develop policies towards dead users that will not threaten their own financial value. The generation of ad

revenue is not the only, or even the primary, way that the dead might affect Facebook's profitability. Since 2012 Facebook has been a publicly-traded company, which means that their financial value depends not only on ad sales but also on the value of their shares on the stock market (Kafka 2015). The value of these shares, in turn, is affected by public opinion as well as by predictive models that try to determine whether Facebook will continue to expand to new users and to retain existing users. As the Virginia Tech shootings and the Reconnect fiasco make clear, the way that Facebook manages the dead impacts its value in ways that go beyond mere ad revenue. The association between death and profit is potentially polluting, threatening to taint not only the deceased person whose words and images are used to sell products, but also the platform that supports such advertisements. Facebook's policy of blocking advertisers from utilizing deceased users' information is an experiment in protecting their brand from being contaminated by the dead, preserving their public image and thus their profitability.¹⁴

Although Facebook has taken steps to ensure that users will be shielded from seeing the dead participate in advertising campaigns, their efforts don't always hit the mark. Lois's response to seeing her brother's Likes pop up in her News Feed reveals that for some users, advertising strategies introduce an element of surprise that their other mediated encounters with the dead do not. Her response also reveals the centrality of political economy to the relationships

¹⁴ For another example of Facebook leveraging loss to increase public opinion, consider Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's wildly popular public Facebook post memorializing her late husband and her follow-up memoir/self-help book. In the book, Sandberg celebrates Facebook as a place where she and others who are grieving can connect with each other and with their online communities. Describing the outpouring of stories posted to her husband's profile page after his death, she writes, "I did not truly understand how important Facebook could be to those suffering from loss until I experienced it myself" (Sandberg 2017, cited in Mead 2017). She says that as a result of her experiences, "I connected with the Facebook mission of helping people share in a way that I never had before" (Sandberg 2017, cited in Mead 2017). Sandberg was able to leverage her personal experience of loss into an indirect endorsement and promotion of Facebook.

that are sustained on digital media. Lois's relationship with her brother is organized around Facebook's profit-driven policies in ways that are both generative and problematic.

Frank Rossi Likes This Page

Many months after the death of her brother, I asked Lois whether she felt that her relationship with his Facebook page had changed. She told me that she didn't think that it had, despite the fact that her activity had "leveled off." She explained,

There's still always this really weird element of surprise when I go on there, like I'm not sure what to expect, although I should know what to expect, nothing's really going to change. Or... Every once in a while when Facebook will show you, they'll say, "Oh, so-and-so, your friend so-and-so Liked this too!" Or I'll see, "Frank Rossi Likes this!" I'm like [gasps audibly]. If I go there...right? And there's that moment where...

Actually, I was talking about that with my brother Daniel. He said, "Yeah, every once in a while when that pops up, my heart just flutters." And mine does too!

As I listened to Lois describe her response to seeing Frank pop up in her News Feed, I wondered if she knew that it was part of an advertising campaign meant to leverage her attachment to her brother towards an attachment to a brand¹⁵. Showing the members of a person's social network the Pages that the person has Liked is one of the primary means of advertising on Facebook, a method that is both more effective and more insidious than the banner-style ads featured next to the News Feed. One advertising executive told me that his first major social media project was to increase the number of Likes for the BlackBerry mobile device's Facebook Page. I was confused about why a company like BlackBerry would pay to

¹⁵ There are Facebook Pages devoted to nonprofits, bands, artists, and causes as well as for-profit companies, but few of these have the resources to pay to widely promote their Pages.

advertise their Facebook Page rather than advertising their product directly. He explained that Facebook Likes were potentially quite lucrative, albeit indirectly. Users who Liked the Page would subsequently see every post from BlackBerry in their News Feeds, allowing the company to advertise new products and promotions for free to their most loyal customers. BlackBerry was also trusting in the power of what Facebook terms “social context.” If I Like the BlackBerry page, then any advertisements that BlackBerry directs towards my Facebook Friends will be accompanied by the tagline “Molly Hales Likes Blackberry.” Blackberry can even choose to target their ads specifically to my Friends, allowing them to incorporate my Like into their advertisements while building an audience that is similar to their existing support base.

In this case, a policy that was meant to drive up advertising revenue was also what provided an opportunity for Lois and Frank to draw closer. As she struggled to articulate her ongoing connection to his page, Lois brought up the element of surprise that inhered in their relationship on Facebook. She didn’t connect this element of surprise to the new content being added by others in Frank’s network; instead, it seemed to come from Frank himself. Words failed as she tried to convey her response to the sudden appearance of her brother in her News Feed, and she resorted to sounds and gestures. She gasped with a mix of shock and pleasure, as though she had seen a ghost. “If I go there...” she began, but even she didn’t have an answer.

Lois and her other brother Daniel connected over the intensity of their responses to these unexpected encounters, and Lois fell back on his words as she tried to describe the sensation to me. She told me, “my heart just flutters,” an expression that conveys unease, excitement, and pleasure all at once. Your heart flutters when a shadow suddenly darkens the room, making your own furniture suddenly unfamiliar. Your heart flutters when you’re falling in love and you glimpse the object of your affection across a crowded room. The ambiguity of that sensation

seemed to be part of its appeal. Seeing one of Frank's Facebook actions in her News Feed alongside photos and messages that had been posted only a few minutes before made her feel that Frank was still a living presence, surfing Facebook and clicking on interesting Pages. Yet it also directed her back to Frank's absence. Lois was able to connect with her brother after his death over their shared appreciation for a Page, yet this connection often brought her back to his Facebook profile, the very place where his absence was most strongly indexed.

This mode of mediation is not specific to relations with the dead; it likewise animates relationships among the living. I might be surprised by seeing that my own brother Liked a particular Page. Perhaps I'd click on the Page to find out more, and from there be led back to his profile. If I were in the right mood, I might end up absorbed by his page, reading and re-reading old posts, flipping through photographs of the two of us, and leaving Likes and comments on his Timeline. In this case, Facebook's advertising strategy would be one avenue through which my brother and I sustained our relationship, spurring new interactions between us. This is despite the fact that the moment in which I encountered my brother occurred by way of an algorithm that was designed to make our relationship profitable to Facebook and its advertisers. As with relations among the living on digital media, the political economy of the platform participates in the mediations through which relationships with the dead are enacted. Yet as Frank and Lois demonstrate, these mediated relationships still have the potential to be substantive.

The difference when it comes to relationships with the dead is that the moment of surprise that spurs the exchange is inadvertent. Memorialized profiles are no longer used in advertisements, which means that if Lois had followed Facebook policy in memorializing Frank's page, she would not be seeing his Likes in her News Feed. By continuing to surface in these unexpected moments, Frank and the other unmemorialized dead are animated in ways that

are made possible by Facebook algorithms, but that also subvert their explicit policies. These dead haunt the network, underscoring the limits of the corporation's ability to carefully delineate the living from the dead, and thus to dictate the appropriate uses of dead user profiles. And as these unexpected encounters drawn Lois and others again and again to the profile pages of their dead loved ones, Facebook becomes a means through which the living haunt the dead as well, confounding grief theory's subtle message that relationships with the dead must remain secondary to relationships with the living. In this case, an advertising algorithm brings Frank to presence for Lois, leading her closer to her brother.

Thus far, I have been discussing how Facebook's corporate policies both foster and regulate relations between the living and the dead. But as a social platform, Facebook also has its own norms regarding appropriate relations with the dead, norms that shape the kinds of relationships that are supported as well as the ways that these relationships unfold. In what follows, I explore the norms that have taken shape around relations with the dead on Facebook, as well as the implications of these norms for intimacies between the living and the dead.

Public/private

The emergent literature on mourning on social media repeatedly argues that these practices mark a shift from private to public mourning (Brubaker and Hayes 2011; de Vries and Rutherford 2004; Irwin 2015; Kern et al. 2013;). This argument dates back to the first studies of early online memorials, which were indeed visible and accessible to anyone with internet access (de Vries and Rutherford 2004:23). Later writing on social media preserved the notion that the internet was a public space, despite the complicated privacy settings introduced by social media platforms (Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Irwin 2015; Kern et al. 2013). Recent studies such those

by Arnold et al., Kern, and Irwin restrict their analysis to memorial pages that can be viewed by anyone with a Facebook account, allowing the researchers ready access to these pages (Arnold et al. 2018; Irwin 2015; Kern et al. 2013). Yet in doing so, the authors excluded the many memorial groups that are only open to specific users. Thus the conclusions they draw about the public nature of mourning on social media are specific to the minority of social media pages that do not have any privacy restrictions.

As I attempted to demonstrate in the previous chapter, “public” does not adequately capture the nature of the social network that enlivened Frank’s Facebook page. Lois’s posts to Frank were intimate messages of continued connection that were amplified and intensified by his social network who read, Liked, and commented on each post. The participation of his network was vitally important to the relationship between Lois and Frank, but it was also vital that each of those participants knew, loved, and missed Frank themselves. Although some of them had been strangers to Lois, not one of them had been a stranger to Frank. Their own messages of loss and longing evoked Frank’s absent presence in a way that would never have been possible if they had had been members of a broader Facebook “public.”

Furthermore, the purported shift from private to public mourning suggests that the family has been marginalized by these online practices. “Private” not only denotes the interior self, but also the domestic sphere. This slippage is evident in Irwin’s article, which concludes:

Although Klass and Goss (1999, p. 561) argued that continuing bonds serve a private, rather than a public, function, where “the bond with the dead is relegated to the private sphere of the family or a community of friends that is separated in modernity from the sphere of public discourse,” the analysis reveals that individuals are now able to continue

their relationships with the deceased in a new, public, ritualized online space, such as Facebook” (Irwin 2015:141).

Drawing from grief theorist Dennis Klass, Irwin contrasts the “sphere of public discourse” with the “private sphere of family or a community of friends” before arguing that relations with the dead on Facebook take place in the public sphere. She thus distances these relations from the domestic structure of the family.

The relationship between individual connections to the dead and the online networks in which they are situated is more complicated than can be captured by the dichotomy between “public” and “private.” In what follows, I show that Facebook is marked as a site for friendships. For Lois, this marking does not marginalize her bond with her brother, but instead reconfigures it. At the same time, Facebook’s privacy settings facilitate forms of exclusion that may privilege kin over other members of the deceased’s social network. For Sam’s family, the creation of a private Facebook group intensified their intimacy to both each other and to Sam by setting it apart from his larger social network.

A Place for Friends

Through my conversations with bereaved Facebook users, it became clear to me that as a space of mourning, Facebook was marked for friends. That is not to say that friends were the exclusive or even the primary users of the Facebook pages of the dead. Although I spoke with many people who had other kinds of relationships with the deceased, most suggested that they understood their loved one’s page as in some way belonging to their friends.

The history of social media, as well as Facebook’s specific history, has contributed to the association between Facebook and friendship. In his ethnography of Second Life, Boellstorff

(2015[2008]) points out that friendship is defined around ideals of choice and self-definition that conform to contemporary understandings of online relationship. He concludes, ““Friendships are the foundation of cyber-sociality; the friend is the originary social form for homo cyber” (2015[2008]:157). Facebook intensified this association by granting access first to Harvard students, then to college students, then to high school students before eventually allowing anyone with an email address to join. As a result of these early exclusionary policies, the first relationships to move onto Facebook were horizontal relationships among students at the same school. Furthermore, Facebook uses the designation “friend” to refer to every member of a person’s network. Social media scholar danah boyd (2008) points out that this has led to forms of “context collapse” in which “various connections representing different aspects of one’s identity are flattened into an unnuanced, one-dimensional group”” (Ellison 2013, quoted in Brubaker 2015:17). Although Facebook has since introduced features that allow users to distinguish among different kinds of relationships, friendship remains the default.

While scholars such as Brubaker, boyd, Ellison, and Marwick focus on the privacy concerns introduced by the mixed audience of social media content, this “context collapse” opened up new possibilities for Lois’s relationship with Frank. She was able to mobilize the medium’s emphasis on friendships to re-shape their relationship, emphasizing their chosen intimacy rather than their kinship bonds. In short, she became his friend.

Lois’s motivations for transforming their relationship are in part due to particularities of their history. Frank lived under structural conditions of social and economic precarity after a work accident that left him partially disabled. Lois explained,

When I would go home to visit, sometimes he would come over for barbecues, but a lot of times he would just *call* me. And he wouldn’t come over. I mean, our eldest brother is

an attorney, a retired attorney, and the rest of us are pretty successful. And so I think we all understood that it was hard for him. It kind of highlighted that he wasn't successful. That he was still moving from place to place. He was living in subsidized housing, and he was on disability, and his pain medication would always run out before the end of the month. He would occasionally have to ask for money so that he could buy cat food and dog food. And so it was hard for him to see us, I think. Hard for him, for us. Hard for him, thinking of us seeing him, I think, more than anything.

Lois spoke slowly, as though overcome with exhaustion. I understood why it had been so important for her to craft a different relationship with Frank, one that was not weighed down by the obligation, frustration, and shame that had dogged their sibling bond when he was alive.

Socializing with Frank on his Facebook page allowed Lois to re-align herself with his friends. Nowhere was this more clear than in her posts about watching the DVDs that she had inherited. The morning after she posted an emotional message on his page about watching his Harry Potter movies, Lois posted again: "Okay, Frankie, what happened to The Order of the Phoenix, The Half-Blood Prince, and Deathly Hallows, Part I???? Just sayin!!! Love you." In contrast to the emotional weight the previous night's post, this one was playful and lighthearted. She teased Frank about the gaps in his DVD collection while demonstrating her commitment to watching every one of the movies in the 7-part Harry Potter series.

Sensing the importance that Lois afforded to watching his movies, I asked her if it was something that she had done with Frank. She told me that she actually couldn't remember the two of them ever having watched a movie together; Frank's tenuous and transient living situations meant that, as she put it, "I never really spent a lot of time at his places." She immediately added, "But I mean, he did with his friends all the time!" Lois's eagerness to take

up an activity that Frank had shared with his friends bolstered my impression that Lois was transforming her relationship with Frank into a friendship that followed Boellstorff's ideal type, defined by choice and egalitarianism. She positioned herself as his friend by embarking on this activity with him, but she also positioned herself as his friend by posting about it on Facebook, addressing him from within this online space of friendship. Indeed, several of the posts that Frank's friends had made on his Facebook page after his death referenced fond memories of watching movies with him.

Lois's effort to re-position her relationship with Frank as a friendship is particularly interesting given the ways it runs against the grain of expected responses to a death on Facebook. After someone has passed away, the people in that person's social network are often eager to post tributes to the deceased that are also testaments to the strength of their relationship. Consider the following exchange on Frank's page, which took place through a series of back-and-forth replies to a prior comment:

Debbie: RIP Franky my friend

James: How did you know Frank? I didn't know you knew him.

Debbie: South Portland schools

James: He was like a brother, we were inseparable for a lot of years. I remember him knocking on my window late at night wanting to go out to party.

In this brief exchange, James drew on the purported intimacy between siblings to express the closeness between he and Frank.

Yet there's also evidence in online posts to the dead that friendship is seen as a special kind of intimacy, one that family members like Lois might be eager to lay claim to. In browsing through scores of online memorial and Facebook posts to the dead, I found many that took the

form, “S/he was my parent/child/sibling, but s/he was also my best friend.” Sarah described her brother Sam more than once as her “best friend since childhood.” She extended this privilege to her father as well, saying, “My brother was his best friend in many ways.” When I asked Madison about her relationship with Sam, she explained, “We were cousins, but it felt more to me that we were best friends.” Although familial bonds are often presumed to be the most intimate kinds of relationships, the social obligations that inhere in them also taint them. Family members may want to claim “best friend” status as a way of asserting that their closeness was not just born of circumstance or necessity but grew out of a chosen intimacy.

At least some of the people who have helped shape Facebook’s policy towards dead users are aware of the normative pressure towards friendship as the default relationship on Facebook. When I asked Jed Brubaker what improvements he thought still needed to be made to Facebook’s policies towards dead users, he reflected on the differences among bereaved users and the difficulties that these differences introduced into any attempt at a uniform design solution. He mused,

One of the interesting paradoxes that I’ve always noted is that it tends to be the next of kin, the people that we culturally at least in the US tend to privilege, who oftentimes need Facebook the least, because they have social structures built in elsewhere...

And I always struggle, this is a big issue that I struggled with in the design, is do we privilege next of kin or family of choice? Family of birth or family of choice? And Facebook was always very thoughtful about this.

He told me that the shortly before he’d started working at Facebook, they’d screened the film *Bridegroom*. The documentary follows the travails of a young gay man whose partner of six

years is tragically killed in an accident, after which he's cut off from both legal protection and social support. Brubaker explained,

The widowed partner was saying that one of the most painful things about that process was that, in the end, his partner's Facebook account was shut down, and that was a history of their life together. So it was an interesting climate, and ideal climate for me to step into Facebook where people were already very aware of, and committed to, thinking through *all* the ways in which death, social deaths, are oftentimes more complicated than financial deaths, right? It's not, "Who gets the money?" and then you close the account. These are life stories.

Brubaker suggested that Facebook might be a particularly important site of mourning and remembrance for people whose relationships to the deceased do not fit into normative models of kinship—what the grief literature often refers to as “disenfranchised grievers” (Doka 1989, 2002; Worden 2009). These friends and loved ones don't have the same “social structures built in elsewhere” to recognize and affirm their grief, nor are their relationships to the deceased acknowledged in the way that next of kin often are. At the same time, Brubaker notes that Facebook can become the site of social exclusions that map onto existing norms regarding kinship and family. Thus *Bridegroom's* Shane Bitney Crone found himself doubly bereft when his partner's Facebook account was shut down by his immediate family, the only ones with permission to do so.

While Facebook remains normatively associated with peer groups, it both hosts and supports existing family structures. In what follows, I tell the story of Sam and his family to explore two interrelated aspects of relations with the dead on Facebook: First, the norms that have developed around these relations and how they affect the experiences of Sam and his

family. Second, the way that the privacy settings used to shield relationships with the dead from scrutiny can also re-shape practices of care within the family. As norms of kinship intersect with emergent norms around social media use in the wake of a death, care and surveillance are linked in new ways as they are brought to bear on online relations with the dead.

We Miss you Spiderman

When Sam passed away after a long battle with cancer, his cousin Madison created a private Facebook group for their family to share memories and post messages. She named it We Miss You Spiderman, a reference to his favorite superhero and occasional nickname. She invited only his closest family members and a couple of his childhood best friends to join, making the group and its content invisible to the rest of his network.

The exclusivity of the memorial group set its members' relationships with Sam apart from those of his larger social network. While they could see the posts that his Friends left on his profile page, the rest of his network couldn't see the photos or read the memories that his family was sharing. In this case, the privacy secured by the Facebook group signaled both protection from the larger online public and the domestic sphere of home and family, since the vast majority of the people that Madison invited to join the group were close family members of Sam's. The inclusion of these family members in the closed group asserted the primacy of kinship bonds.

The Spiderman group didn't just reflect an existing, offline kinship structure. It established who was and was not family to Sam. Sam's father Mark and his sister Sarah were both fond of his first wife, the mother of his two young children, although Sam himself had not maintained close ties with her after re-marrying the year before his death. Nonetheless, they

invited his ex-wife and her sisters to join the group. Sam's former sisters-in-law became among the group's most active members. When I asked Sarah if she, Madison, and Mark were the people who posted most often, she said, "Yeah, but also Shannon's [Sam's ex-wife's] sisters, who it's socially awkward for them to post anywhere else. But this was private. So we were good friends with their family, but to the rest of the world it's hard to explain that dynamic." By including them in the memorial group, Sam's family re-established the kinship between Sam and his ex-wife's family, including them in the group of people they deemed closest to Sam and who had the right to mourn him.

The Spiderman group intensified its members' relationships to each other as well as to Sam. Mark, Sarah, and Madison each told me that they felt more comfortable posting on the memorial page because only a small group of family members could see their posts, which in turn encouraged them to share memories and messages that were more emotional than those that they shared on his profile page. Mark explained,

I posted more on the Spiderman memorial site, because that was a select few people were invited to that group, and it was sort of close friends and family. Not even all of our family. It was really like a handful of people, so it was like the people I thought were closest to us. And so I felt more okay with sharing my grief in that way then to share it in a big, public way.

Mark also told me that the group had brought him closer to his own family. He said that Madison was among several family members that "I wouldn't necessarily talk to on a daily basis [but] that may have posted on a daily basis" on Sam's memorial page. Their own relationships to Sam became the grounds of a growing intimacy with one another.

Creating a private Facebook group was also a way for Sam's family to avoid the scrutiny that they perceived from his wider social network. His father Mark told me,

I can see Sam has like 400 or 500 friends, and a lot of them I didn't even know. So I thought, "Okay, it's kind of..." To post something on his Wall, it's like...Not everybody needs to hear about my grief, so it's like, probably if I'm feeling something and I feel like I want to voice it, to post it to the audience of like 25 people that we had in the Rest in Peace Spiderman site was a more... people that are closer to me. I feel close to everybody in that group. They're like our best friends. Sam's best friends. Our family members. And so that was the group of people that I would feel more comfortable expressing grief with than the site, you know, Sam's personal Wall which has a few hundred Friends, and like I said many of which I didn't even know.

Messages that are posted to or about the dead can be seen and responded to by others. The awareness of this visibility is part of the appeal of relations with the dead on social media, but it also alters these relations. For example, Sam's sister Sarah described drafting a birthday post to her brother well in advance:

I posted on his Wall. I've posted a few times. And I usually try to think about it before I put it out in the world. I've watched plenty of people just post their stream of conscious and see what the repercussions are of that. So I try really hard to think long and hard about it before I put it out there. But on his birthday, the first birthday that we missed him, I definitely posted a very long memory from each of his birthdays throughout his life, for each year of his life. And I shared it with my parents before I posted it.

While for Lois Facebook was a place where she could post a spontaneous message to her brother in a moment of deep loss and longing, Sarah suggested that her posts were carefully scripted,

drafted with an awareness of the wider audience. She told me that the message that she posted on her brother's birthday was in part intended for his social network, to remind them of his ongoing significance while sharing her own childhood memories of Sam. Yet her awareness that his network will be reading her post also caused her to second-guess her message, making sure that the rest of her family approved before posting.

Her father described a similar process preceding his own posts to or about Sam:

I'm always real careful about, should I put this on Facebook or not? If I have a long thought process I'll write something in my notes. And I'll write something, and I'll look it over, and I'll read it, and I'll read it, and then I edit it. Like I always think about it a while before I put it on there anymore.

While Lois's story illuminates how the social network can strengthen and enliven ties to the dead, Sam's families' words show the other side of the network's participation in these relations. For Sarah's family, their awareness that others might be scrutinizing their posts could at times make it difficult to be forthcoming.

Sam's family's reluctance to post on his profile page wasn't just due to the wide audience of these posts; their decisions were also shaped by the norms that have developed around relations with the dead on social media. The existing literature often celebrates social media for offering a more open, egalitarian, and informal alternative to offline mourning (de Vries and Rutherford 2004; Irwin 2015; Musambira et al. 2006-2007). On social media, the authors suggest, the unspoken rules that govern appropriate grief—who is permitted to grieve, how, and how much—do not apply. Instead, anyone may continue their bond with the deceased indefinitely, inventing new forms of connection in the process. For example, an early article analyzing online memorials created by members of The Compassionate Friends, a support group

for parents who have lost a child, argued that cyberspace allowed gendered patterns of grief to be transcended (Musambira et al. 2006-2007). The authors hypothesized that posts by fathers would demonstrate a more “instrumental” style of grieving while those from mothers would demonstrate a more “intuitive” style, but they found no significant difference. Rather than questioning the assumption of gender difference that undergirded their hypotheses, the authors concluded that cyberspace liberated men and women from gendered norms of mourning. Articles such as these suggest that online relationships between the living and the dead are not subject to the subtle forms of regulation that mark offline ones.

The norms regarding appropriate relations between the living and the dead might be different on Facebook, but Sam’s family’s experiences suggest that they are no less powerful or prevalent. Although Mark felt obliged to post on Sam’s profile page shortly after his death, he was also aware of expectations about how often it was appropriate to post and how long such posts could continue. Three years after his son’s death, he explained,

Me, a parent, I grieve him every day. I could get up and write something on Facebook every single day. But what good does that do, and how does that...I don’t want people to think that I’m *sad* every day. I mean yes, I grieve him every day, and there are times I feel sad. But there’s still a lot of happy things. And I like to be a positive person, and dwell on positive things.

Continuing to post “sad” messages about his son’s death would have violated not only norms around how often it’s appropriate to post to or about the dead, but also about the appropriate emotional content of Facebook posts. In her article “Mourning 2.0,” Melissa Irwin (2015) interprets the upbeat tone of Facebook posts to the dead as further evidence of the absence of norms regulating online grief. But Sam’s family suggested that they felt pressured to

put a positive spin on their posts to and about Sam. When I asked Sam's cousin Madison about the first time that she'd posted on his profile, she told me,

When I posted on his profile, it took me I want to say like two hours to figure out what to say...I'd type it, I'd read it, and I'd erase it...I didn't want to sound too sad, and I didn't want to sound happy, because I wasn't happy that he'd passed, because it was so sad. But I didn't want to bring *too* much attention to the post.

Like Mark, Madison felt the need to post on Sam's profile page despite not knowing what to say to him. She didn't want her post to stand out from the many others being left on his page, instead striving to match the tone and content of standard posts to the deceased. In doing so, she recognized the need to strike the right balance between being sober and upbeat, which would require acknowledging the pain of his death without being "too sad." She later confirmed the importance of avoiding an overtly negative tone in her posts to Sam. She told me, "I really post on Facebook if I'm happy. I only talk to him [aloud] if I'm sad or I'm upset about something." While Madison communicated with Sam both by posting and by speaking aloud to him, she reserved her Facebook posts for the moments when she had something upbeat to say. Mark and Madison were not the only ones to express hesitation about posting sad or emotionally-fraught material to or about the Facebook dead. Another young woman who lost her best friend to cancer told me that she sometimes held herself back from posting to her. She explained, "I don't want to bombard my Facebook with very sad posts."

Surveillance/Care

The private Facebook group was a way for Mark, Sarah, Madison, and the other members of Sam's family to escape the perceived scrutiny of Sam's larger social network, including the

expectation that their posts would not be too frequent or too sad. At the same time, the close group altered the way that care was enacted *within* Sam's family, helping to shape forms of mutual obligation between family members.

Sarah described her reasons for frequenting the memorial site as follows:

So my dad will check in there, and he'll post something. And my dad is really bad at sharing how he's feeling, but it's written all over his face. And my brother was his best friend, in many ways. And I was very cognizant every time he would post something that the subtext was he's struggling, and I would want to comfort him or reach out to him or do something more for him, but ironically that was what he needed was to be able to post something there. It was easier to support him there than in person sometimes, because we all were hurting so badly that I think we all wanted to hold it together for each other in person. I always told him, "You don't need to hold it together for me. You can be a mess." And they're like, "Well we want to support you, you're his sister, you guys were best friends." But it's different. They've lost a child. You should never lose a child. And I still think my dad, my parents are very much grieving losing a child. So that site was nice for me to be able to know that my dad was really hurting. Not that I wanted him to be hurting but, it's going to hurt.

In their offline relationship, Sarah's father Mark was careful to mask his pain so that he didn't put Sarah in the position of having to comfort him. Yet Sarah assumed this obligation within the We Miss You Batman site, where Mark posted heart-wrenching messages that conveyed the depth of his grief. His posts opened up a form of care between father and daughter that was specific to the medium of the Facebook group. Sarah was able to reach out and comfort her father through Likes and comments on the memorial page in a way that would have been

difficult over the phone or in person, when both were downplaying the extent of their devastation. Although Mark's messages on the group page were addressed to Sam as well as to their larger extended family, it was Sarah who felt responsible for reading and responding to them. She specifically logged onto her brother's memorial page in order to check up on her father, mobilizing a form of surveillance that that wasn't present in their offline relationship.

Sarah and Mark's story suggests that their family's recruitment into social media institutions may have re-shaped obligations of care along the lines of what Foucault and others have described in charting the medicalization of the European and Euroamerican family (Donzelot 1979[1977]; Foucault 1978[1976], 1994). In his essay "The Politics of Health in the 18th Century," Foucault argues that the rise of the medical and public health establishment reshaped the European family, introducing forms of surveillance that were tied to new obligations of bodily care between family members (Foucault 1994). For Sam's family, Facebook has similarly introduced both new methods and new obligations of care, perhaps extending familial obligations from bodily to mental health. The medium of the Facebook memorial group is structured around the expectation that close family members will post messages to and about the deceased that convey the depth of their loss, particularly at those moments when this loss is most acutely felt. It's also structured around the expectation that others will read and respond to these posts, carefully monitoring one another's emotional states and offering comfort in the form of Facebook reactions (such as Likes) and replies. As a result, a specific kind of familial relationship is given form, one in which a daughter might assume responsibility for keeping tabs on her father and caring for him within the space of the online memorial group.

In Foucault's history, practices of care within the family amplified and extended political economies of monitoring and management being carried out within and between multiple sites, involving not only medical professionals but state government, religious organizations, charitable organizations, and so-called "learned societies" (Foucault 1994:91) I want to suggest that something loosely parallel is happening on social media today. Facebook is a platform that facilitates techniques of surveillance that tie together multiple players, from multinational corporations vying for access to specific sub-groups of consumers, to Facebook employees seeking out new strategies for mining user data. These techniques of surveillance also enroll individuals and families, encouraging users to log on frequently to keep track of one other's political affiliations, vacation photographs, parenting strategies, and emotional states. Although their responses often open up practices of care within social networks, care is structured around techniques of "attentive proximity" that may differ from the occasional calls and messages that take place on other media.

These techniques of surveillance/care are carried out at the level of the Facebook population in addition to within families. Consider Facebook's recent attempts to develop software algorithms that assess their users' emotional states. In June of 2017, Facebook announced the unrolling of a new artificial intelligence program designed to identify and intervene with suicidal users. If the program found that a particular post suggested suicidal thoughts, the "report post" button would be displayed more prominently alongside the post to encourage the user's friends to alert Facebook of the need for intervention. If the program found that a post strongly suggested suicidal intent, the algorithm would automatically report the post to Facebook's Community Operations team. If either pathway results in the identification of potentially suicidal content, the distressed user is presented with a list of suicide prevention

resources on their News Feed the next time that they log in (Callison-Burch, Guadagno, and Davis 2017; Kwon 2017). Notably, the algorithm makes friends and family the first line of defense against suicide, charging them with the responsibility for checking up on each other's posts and reporting them if necessary. Thus the techniques of mass surveillance and corporate care that Facebook enacts towards its population rely on techniques of individual surveillance and care within social networks.

It's possible that in the future, something similar to the suicide algorithm might be implemented for bereaved Facebook users. In 2011, Brubaker and his colleagues conducted a research study to determine whether machine-learning algorithms could be used to automatically detect bereavement-related distress on social media (Brubaker et al. 2011). In the article presenting their findings, the authors report modest success distinguishing comments exhibiting emotional distress from "other post-mortem comments" (Brubaker et al. 2011:6). The authors conclude,

This work marks an initial step towards using content in SNSs [social network sites] to identify emotionally distressed at a large scale. As such, this could result in tools to classify social media content similar to NLP [natural language processing]-based work on classifying suicide letters...

Identifying users who are struggling with the loss of a loved one can also result in development of tools or programs to intervene... It is not hard to imagine that users experiencing ED [emotional distress] following their friends' passing might also benefit from similar support systems [as suicidal users] (Brubaker et al 2011).

Although Facebook has not yet pursued this automated surveillance of the bereaved, it is within their capabilities and scope of practice, and might represent the next step in Facebook's affective surveillance of its users.

Facebook's attempts to monitor their bereaved user's emotional states represents a practice of care organized around forms of mass surveillance. Such techniques resonate with the practices that are being carried out among some bereaved families on social media, who care for each other in part by keeping track of each other's emotional states online in ways that are not available to them offline. Seen in this light, Sarah and Mark's relationship of care can be seen as partly shaped by the techniques of management that resonate throughout the platform, techniques that are built around forms of "attentive proximity" that blur the line between care and surveillance.

Conclusion

Relations with the dead are profoundly ambiguous. This ambiguity goes beyond whether the person is alive or dead, touching on the question of what it means to be dead and what it means to have a relationship to someone who is dead when digital technologies are opening up new forms of connection that the dead can and do participate in. Who, or what, does Lois encounter when she sees that Frank Liked a particular Facebook page? What complicated mix of emotions does Sarah experience when she reads her father's posts, which both express his pain and bring her brother to life for her?

Contemporary grief theory sometimes threatens to settle relationships with the dead into something pat, encouraging the bereaved to internalize an idealized image of the deceased that they can choose whether or not to revisit (Worden 2009). Facebook's memorialization feature

similarly forecloses ambiguity, allowing both the system and its users to definitively identify the dead, as well as educating users on the appropriate ways to engage with them.

Although Frank's network produces a distinction between dead and living Facebook users, the effect is very different. The network produces her brother's absence as set against the dense web of relations that his page continually revitalizes. The contours of this absence shift with each post, taking on new form as each person elaborates the specific fragment of loss they are experiencing. Although their collective action produces a distinction between the living and the dead, it does so in a way that embraces Frank's dynamic and ambiguous status, as well as the ambiguity embedded in their ongoing relationships with him. In contrast, Facebook's memorialization policy attempts to establish a set of categorical distinctions that would not only ossify the division between Frank and his network, but also freeze him as he was at the moment of death.

The ambiguity entailed by relations with the digital dead can sometimes be the very thing that sustains and enlivens them. Over a year after Lois first told me that Frank's Facebook page is "where he is for me," I asked her if she still felt that way. She told me, "Sometimes yes but sometimes no. I think now that I... I don't know that that's consistent. I think that might have everything to do with my frame of mind at the time, and how much I need to feel that he's there, or not." She brought up the fact that she had recently come across a photograph of him as a small child while attending an anniversary party for some family friends. She said, "Finding that picture of him was so unexpected that I think I did feel like he was there when I posted that on his page, like, "Here! Look! Here you are!" But I don't know that I feel that every time. I don't think I do." Lois highlighted not only the ambiguity surrounding Frank's Facebook page, but also the importance of surprise to her connection to her brother. In this particular case, the

unexpectedness of discovering Frank in an old photo album opened up a line of communication between them, allowing her to excitedly tell him about it by posting the photo on his Facebook page. This moment of connection didn't erase the ongoing uncertainty that Lois felt about whether or not Frank continued to dwell on his Facebook page. Instead, their connection was forged within this very space of ambiguity.

5. Bodies of the dead:

Mike and George in Elysian Fields

Introduction

The video begins with a distorted image of an empty chair in a strange and surreal landscape. In the background, Alex begins to speak.

We are Paranormal Games' two-man team. Work out of our garage. We're working on a project called Elysian Fields for the Challenge Post, Oculus Gear VR competition. The video cuts to two young men seated side by side. They appear to be in their late 20s, and they wear graphic t-shirts beneath black bomber jackets. They both have several days' worth of stubble. The second man, Mike, continues.

So we came up with the idea for Elysian Fields basically because both of our fathers passed away, and obviously dealing through that kind of grief and mourning. And then Alex one day contacted me. I was overseas. And he said to me, "I've got this idea. I was thinking, it'd be awesome to see my dad. And then I realized, I can just build him. And that would be really cool, just to stand next to him." And I loved the idea as well, obviously, thinking about it with my dad. And that's where the project grew from.

We basically kind of shelved the idea, and then the VR Challenge came around, and that's when we realized that we can do this now, with this sort of technology.

Alex cuts in:

Yeah, I create worlds. Why can't I just create my father?

He says this as though it's obvious, something that he should have realized a long time ago.

After a moment he continues.

When you chuck the VR goggles on, it will load up the experience that we've custom built for a particular client only. And you just, you come to in Elysian Fields, and you're basically waiting, then, for your loved one to come out of Elysian Fields so that you can spend time with them.

The video shows Alex seated at his computer. On his screen, a man's face is nestled amongst an array of controls in what appears to be the software program that is being used to create him. The face bears an eerie resemblance to Mike, although the man is older, perhaps in his forties. Mike's voice comes on again.

We've made contact with grief counselors, and a few other people in the mental health industry. We're talking to them, explaining the ideas and that. And finding out a lot of information on how we should handle it, and how we should go about this stuff.

I feel excited, and I also feel nervous about the whole thing. I mean I pretty much am Elysian Fields' first client. Alex is building my dad, and I'm not going to see the model until I'm finally in there.

As he speaks, the video shifts between shots of the two men looking earnestly into the camera and footage of Alex working on the prototype. His computer screen now shows Mike's father's body, arms outstretched as though he's being fitted for a suit. Mike continues,

So I want to be as open and honest as possible. I really want to understand how this is going to affect people, so doing it on myself is probably the best option, and the greatest way to handle it right now, I think.

Yeah so, it's been emotional. It's been heavy. Obviously getting reference photos of my dad. Starting to think about seeing him again. All of that kind of weighs a little bit heavy on you.

I came across this short video in 2015, as I was still in the early stages of putting together a project on digitally mediated relations between the dead and the living. Perusing the internet for ideas, I stumbled on an article describing Elysian Fields, which at the time was being developed as part of a competition sponsored by the virtual reality company Oculus. Over the next three years, I followed Mike and Alex's progress as they developed the prototype, competed and ultimately lost the competition, put the project on hold, and eventually re-started work on Mike's father, George.

I've never met Mike and Alex in person. They live in southern Australia, and all of our conversations to date have taken place over Skype. The two men also have a YouTube channel where they occasionally post videos of themselves drinking beer and playing video games in Alex's garage, dressed in masks and hoodies. Having watched a handful of these videos, I had a vision of Mike and Alex as nerdy single guys living in their parents' basements. The first time I Skyped with Mike, I was taken aback when the video feed came on and showed him seated in a spacious home that was absolutely spotless. I was even more surprised when he told me that he was married with two young children (and having young children myself at the time, I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen my own floor clear of toys). I learned that both men have full-time professional jobs in addition to the independent gaming company that they've started together.

Mike was chatty, disarming, straightforward, and personable. He spoke openly and honestly about the death of his father, his experience of grief, and his relationship with Alex. When the conversation turned to Elysian Fields, I occasionally got the sense that he was giving me a sales pitch. Alex took almost the opposite approach, immediately telling me about all of the technical and personal difficulties that they had encountered with Elysian Fields, as well as the flaws that he worried might be inherent in the project itself. His defensiveness eased as we got to know each other better, and he seemed to enjoy speculating on the possibilities that the project might offer, not only to Mike but to others as well. I found both men charming, and was always astonished at how quickly the time flew by when we were talking.

Of all of the cases considered in this ethnography, Elysian Fields seems to represent the most straightforward use of animation to bring the living and the dead together. Mike's father is being recreated as a three-dimensional model using the same digital tools that are used to make video game characters. The model is endowed with the ability to carry out a handful of scripted movements designed to make the avatar appear lifelike. Yet digging deeper, we find that what is most important to the reunion between Mike and his father is not the accuracy of the avatar or the lifelike quality of his movements. Instead, it is the way that the avatar evokes a figure that is recognizable. The avatar acts as an outline that invites Mike to fill in the details, contributing to his animation.

Elysian Fields thus sits at the intersection of three related notions of animation. Animation describes the way a fabricated figure comes to life through manual or digital manipulation that endow it with lifelike qualities—in this case, the ability to walk, sit, make and break eye contact, and touch Mike gently on the knee. But I have also used animation more expansively in this ethnography to describe a mode of mediation in which the multiplicity,

partiality, and sparseness engendered by the medium contribute to its affective impact. In the case of Elysian Fields, these qualities are essential to the connection between George and Mike. They help bring George to life, animating the dead by invigorating their ongoing relationships.

Elysian Fields bears many unexpected resemblances to Marty's online memorial. Like the single photograph of Marty featured on her memorial page, the avatar evokes George fully reproducing him. Furthermore, the sense of space and place in the virtual world is as central to the experience of connection as the avatar itself. Elysian Fields offers a home for Mike and George's continuing relationship, one that has been deliberately fabricated to bridge the imagined gap between this world and the next. By engaging with the medium, Mike is likewise drawn into an intimate relationship with his father, deepening his sense that George continues to dwell and grow within him.

At the same time, the specificities of the medium help shape the relationship between George and Mike in important ways. Virtual reality is meant to create a sense of presence within the virtual world, which Alex mobilizes to create a sense of *co*-presence between Mike and George. This sense of copresence means that Mike's own body is implicated in their interactions in a way that's distinct from the online memorial. Recall that Corey contrasted the diffuse "Martyness" that was concentrated in her online memorial with the sense of bodily presence that she experienced in the pool when Marty encouraged her to swim. Elysian Fields uses virtual reality to try to capture Corey's sense that Marty was right beside her that day. The sociality of the (virtual) body contributes to the intimacy between Mike and George, acting as a locus for relations that continue. I thus begin by asking: What is the significance of the avatar in Elysian Fields?

Ontological blurring

The avatar that Alex is crafting does not speak, and it has no artificial intelligence behind it; it's strictly a body whose scripted movements and gestures are designed to capture the peculiarities of a once-living body. Yet in the video that they released in 2015, Mike explains that "Alex's building my dad," suggesting that the body alone is enough to conjure the presence of his dead father. In our conversations, there was a similar slippage between the virtual body that Alex had created and George himself. Mike repeatedly referred to the VR model as "my dad," saying things like, "Alex started to design my dad," "he's already built my dad," "[my wife] was in there with my dad." In contrast, Alex tended to use words like "model" when he described the process of building George's virtual body. When describing the user experience, however, he likewise obfuscated the distinction between the virtual body and the dead man, referring to both as "Mike's father."

What is it that allows the avatar to stand in for Mike's father? It's not just that the avatar is a virtual body but that it's an *animated* body, one that appears lifelike. George's avatar cuts to the heart of the question of what it means to animate, as well as what it means to *be* animate. Is the animated figure the creation of the animator and the projection of the user, or does its sociality exceed their parameters?

Silvio defines animation as "the projection of qualities perceived as human—life, power, agency, will, personality, and so on—outside the self, and into the sensory environment, through acts of creation, perception, and interaction" (Silvio 2010:427). Her definition draws attention to the artistry involved in creating an animated figure, but it also obfuscates the potential animacy of that figure. According to her definition, the avatar is a projection of its creator and user, and its seeming liveliness is due to the human-like qualities that others have endowed it with.

Anthropologists Paul Manning and Ilana Gershon (2013) elaborate on Silvio's framework by exploring digital technologies of animation, drawing from Manning's ethnographic work on the Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) Ryzom to productively engage the avatar as an animated figure.¹⁶ They describe how players come to experience their avatars as both an extension of the self and as something apart from the self, encapsulated by the authors' designation player-character.

While the authors' descriptions of the player-character underscore the gap between the avatar and the user, their descriptions of the secondary avatars or "alts" that many Ryzom users maintain emphasize the control that users exert over these avatars. They write,

When players speak of alts, they explore metaphors of nonpersons and persons as property: "servants," "slaves," and as "things." They are property, rather than persons.

Alts do not have an identity except through a main character: when one meets a new alt, one does not ask "who are you?" but "whose alt is this?" (Manning and Gershon 2013:123).

This very question denies the sociality of the alt avatar, making it into an object that is possessed rather than a person who participates in their interactions with others. The authors interpret these "slave or servant" avatars as paradigmatic figures of animation, in contrast to the player-characters whose movements adhere to the trope of performance. Thus at the same time that they recognize and draw out the otherness of the alt avatar, they locate its alterity in its inability to achieve the degree of active agency that they presume is required to be human.

¹⁶ Massively Multiple Online Games (MMOG) can accommodate large numbers of players and include popular role-playing games such as World of Warcraft. Avatars are the online embodiments of players and characters who interact in MMOGs and virtual worlds such as Second Life.

In his ethnography of the virtual world *Second Life*, Tom Boellstorff suggests that the avatar occupies a liminal position as both an extension of the user and as a person in their own right (Boellstorff 2015[2008]). He argues that avatars have a social presence even when their users are “afk” or “away from keyboard.” Although they are no longer being actively controlled or inhabited, these avatars can contribute to social situations, becoming the focus of commentary or joking relations. He also wrote that many users maintain multiple avatars or “alts” that they perceive as having distinct personas. For example, Wendy is a user who is a man offline but is usually a woman in Second Life. Wendy recounts to Boellstorff, “ “[O]ne day, I realized that my avatar had the hots for a lesbian girl’s avatar. I mean, it wasn’t me—I just realized that it fitted the part” ” (Boellstorff 2015[2008]:149). Although Wendy is ostensibly inhabiting the avatar, the avatar is also understood to have her own distinct preferences; in this case, the avatar seems to control Wendy as much as Wendy controls the avatar. These findings led Boellstorff to expand on Gayatri Spivak’s famous question “can the subaltern speak?” to ask instead: “Can the avatar speak?” (Boellstorff 2015[2008]:149; Spivak 1988). Linguistic anthropologist Paul Manning takes up this question in his 2009 essay of the same name. Manning attributes to the avatar “a Peircean secondness, an alterity, an otherness, a set of dispositions, needs, desires,” arguing that it cannot be reduced to a virtual reproduction or even an extension of the user (Manning 2009:320; see also Manning and Gershon 2013).

In our conversations, Alex recognized the ambiguous status of the body that he was creating. The first time we spoke, he referred to the avatar as a sculpture. After mulling over his words, I asked him in our next conversation whether he felt like he had left his mark on the avatar the way that a sculptor sometimes leaves fingerprints on his work. He laughed at my strange analogy, but then took a moment to consider. He answered, “Maybe. I mean you’re not

literally creating a person, but you kind of are. So yeah, you kind of feel a bit, I don't know, maybe like God a little bit? That you can re-create this person... Because you're not actually creating an actual person, but you kind of are." My question was meant to get at Alex's role in animating the avatar, but his answer returned us to the animacy of the avatar itself. Alex suggested that the virtual body both was and was not a person. He was both creating and *re-*creating Elysian Fields' central figure.

Boellstorff, Manning, and Gershon open an important gap between avatar and user, suggesting provocative ways that the animated virtual body might have a social life of its own. Yet the authors presume a living body or bodies behind the avatar. In the case of Elysian Fields, this assumption doesn't fully capture the significance of the virtual body, which does not stand in for the living, but for the dead. Elysian Fields therefore raises questions not only about the personhood of the virtual body, but about the animacy of the dead. Boellstorff's question "Can the avatar speak?" becomes a way of asking, "Can the avatar of the dead speak?"

To begin to answer this question for Elysian Fields requires us to move away from querying the individual personhood of Mike's father, instead recognizing the ways in which Mike, Alex, and George are animated by one another. In the writing of Boellstorff, Manning, and Gershon, the avatar is recognized as a person because of its separation from others—specifically, from the user who would otherwise be seen to control it. In contrast, Eduardo Kohn finds (2007) personhood to be embedded within forms of relatedness through which self and other are brought into being through their mutuality. In his article "How Dogs Dream," Kohn introduces the concept of *ontological blurring* to denote the slippages between human owners and their dogs. He explains that among the Runa of the Upper Amazon, it is common for owners to closely watch and listen to their dogs while they sleep in order to be able to interpret their dreams. As the

owners strive to understand the muted, semi-conscious “speech” of their dogs’ sleeping bodies and the dogs strive to understand the simplified “pidgin” of their owners’ exaggerated gestures, the line between dog and owner blurs. Their communion draws dog and human into a mutual becoming in which both turn into something different than they were before.

Kohn’s insights point towards the shared becoming taking place in Elysian Fields, as well as to the integral part played by George’s animated virtual body in this shared becoming. As dog and owner labor to relate to each other, the body of the dog becomes something uncertain, a kind of shared form that materializes the relationship between them. He writes, “In dog dream interpretation, the ontological gaps that are often assiduously respected collapse, at least for a moment, as dogs and people come together as part of a single affective field that transcends their boundaries as species—an emergent and highly ephemeral self distributed over two bodies” (Kohn 2007:17). In Kohn’s configuration, the bodies of dog and owner are necessary to the ontological blurring that he describes. Through their mutual engagement, both bodies become sites of a shared personhood.

I would suggest that in a similar way, George’s avatar is an integral site for the shared becoming that Elysian Fields opens up. Drawing from Kantorowicz and Agamben’s theorizations of the effigy, I suggest that his avatar is a double that can stand in for him without erasing the gaps between them. George’s virtual body is animated by the digital codes that Alex writes for it, which allow it to move, gaze, and gesture. But he is also animated by Alex and Mike’s willingness to recognize him as a person, just as the living are brought to life in and through their relations with others. The medium itself plays an essential role in this shared becoming. Mike and Alex perceived that virtual reality provided access to a kind of subjectivity

that went beyond the contours of the body, signaling the kernel of life within the avatar of the dead.

Into Elysian Fields

Elysian Fields was designed for a virtual reality system that was released to consumers in late 2015, the Samsung Gear VR. The system uses a Samsung GALAXY smartphone to power virtual reality experiences, or “apps,” that users can purchase and download from their phones. The smartphone is inserted into a virtual reality headset that completely obscures the user’s vision, so that only the screen is visible. On one side of the headset, a touchpad and button allow users to make selections or swipe between screens to move within or between apps. By connecting headphones to their smartphone, users can hear music or speech within an app (Karner 2015).

When you first load Elysian Fields, all you can see are pink clouds all around you. The clouds are moving continuously into the foreground, giving the impression that you’re being propelled forward, or perhaps downwards. A piano plays a rhythmic, high-pitched melodic line. After a moment, an image becomes visible within the haze, a photograph of Mike and his father standing next to each other. On the other side of the screen, another photograph of Mike and George approaches and passes. The words “Elysian Fields” appear, and the sound of the piano rises briefly before the words fade.

Through the clouds, you see the ground approach. A dreamlike landscape comes into view, a desert island surrounded by blue waters. The island is empty except for a single wrought-iron bench at its center. Above, the skies are a vivid magenta, more intense than the brightest sunset. You reach the ground. At this point you’ve shifted from being a spectator to being a

player, and you can use your headset to take in the landscape and move around the island. When you approach the bench in the center of the island, text appears prompting you to begin the experience.

As soon as you hit the button, there's a flash of light in the distance. Mike's father begins walking out of the bright light. At first all you can see is a silhouette of him as he approaches, walking on top of the water that surrounds the island. He continues towards you, gradually coming into focus, until he's no more than an arm's length away. There's a soft halo of light all around him. Dark eyes peer at you from beneath a pronounced widow's peak. You move around him, taking him in from every angle. He watches as you do so, occasionally breaking eye contact before looking back at you.

After a few moments have passed, George turns around and walks to the bench behind him, taking a seat. You sit down next to him. He continues to look at you without speaking, a silent presence beside you. Every once in a while he reaches out and touches you on the leg, now visible beneath you as you sit. Peaceful music continues to play softly in the background. There's no prescribed end to this encounter; it can last a minute or an hour. When you're ready, you press the button on your headset, and you both stand up. He looks at you a moment longer, and then turns and begins to walk back to where he came from. As he reaches the edge of the sand he turns around one last time and waves good-bye before slowly walking back into the light. As he disappears from sight, the light expands and the island fades to white.

One of the most striking aspects of this virtual reality experience is the sense of place that it affords. Elysian Fields seeks to transport you to another world, one that feels fully immersive. It does so in part through the long introductory sequence in which you are propelled through the

clouds before gradually arriving in Elysian Fields itself. Once you've arrived, there isn't much to do aside from moving around this fabricated landscape, exploring its contours. These movements are a preparation of sorts for George's arrival, helping to more fully situate you in this new setting. The turquoise water and impossibly pink clouds contribute to both the worldliness and the otherworldliness of Elysian Fields, setting the scene of an encounter with the dead. The piano melody helps transport you, creating a sense of calm, quiet, and introspection that amplifies the emotional resonance of the scenery. When George emerges from a flash of light in the distance, it feels somehow appropriate.

The sense of space is as striking as the sense of place. With the outside world fully obscured from view, you have a strong sense of whether objects and people are nearby or far away. George's long walk from the horizon intensifies your awareness of the distance between his body and your own. By the time he arrives in front of you, his proximity is electric. To say that you feel like you could reach out and touch him is an understatement. It feels as if you already are.

Both literally and figuratively, virtual reality stakes a claim to depth. VR systems use a stereoscopic display, meaning that they project a different image into each eye (Charara 2017). When looking at a virtual object that is close up, each eye is shown an image of the object in a slightly different position and from a slightly different angle. The closer the object, the greater the difference will be. In this way, VR systems attempts to mimic the way that spatial relationships are interpreted by the visual field outside of virtual reality.

On a metaphorical level, discourses around virtual reality suggest that it is able to create a depth of experience that surpasses what's available through 2-dimensional images. This depth of experience is often linked to the head tracking feature, through which the virtual reality headset

measures the user's head movements and adjust what they are seeing accordingly.¹⁷ The ability to look around the virtual landscape is meant to reduce the sense that one's experience is being mediated by the technology itself. Indeed, the medium's own self-erasure is a celebrated aspect of virtual reality that is often used to set it apart from other media. In an article for the online news site *Tech Crunch*, the author writes, "The VR user...requires only one thing to maximize their experience: make the technology disappear" (Marinkovic 2015). Another article on the technology website *Wareable* declares, "Total immersion is what everyone making a VR headset, game or app is aiming towards - making the virtual reality experience so real that we forget the computer, headgear and accessories and act exactly as we would in the real world" (Charara 2017). In this last quote in particular, immediation is revealed as a path to the real—or the user's perception of it. The very term "virtual reality" pairs the virtuality of the medium to the sense of realism that it is meant to evoke, suggesting that it approaches the experience of being in the "real world" even as it offers users an alternative to it.

Alex and Mike both suggested that there was something about a person that could be captured in virtual reality that couldn't be captured by an image. By denigrating the status of the image, they produced the inadequacy of the photograph as a technology of remembrance. Yet they also relied on photographs as the ultimate evidence of the dead. Alex built the avatar based on a series of photographs that Mike had supplied him with. Photographs continued to provide the truth of who George had been, even as they failed to offer an experience of connection to him. Furthermore, Mike and Alex sometimes discussed virtual reality as already inadequate,

¹⁷ The parameters of both stereoscopic display and head tracking vary from one virtual reality hardware system to another. The original Oculus Gear VR that Elysian Fields was designed for has only rotational tracking, meaning that it can detect when users turn their heads to look from one shoulder to another or above and below them. Other VR systems such as the Oculus Rift can also track movement forwards and backwards or side to side, allowing users to move around in space (Moynihan 2016).

situating it within a larger trajectory of technological development that retrospectively rendered it deficient. Alex **told me**, “Your son’s kids will have probably holograms of the people that came before him. Literal full-sized, human-sized messages that you can go and look at. That’s the other thing I’m interested in is doing stuff like that. Holograms don’t exist yet, but they’re going to, very soon.” He suggested that virtual reality was a step on the path towards developing digital renditions of people that would be so lifelike as to render unnecessary every technology of remembrance that came before, including the virtual reality experience that Alex and Mike were still in the process of creating.

Although it’s relatively easy to see what virtual reality claims to offer that might be different from an image such as a photograph, it’s more difficult to see how virtual reality might capture something that video cannot. After all, video likewise depicts the body in motion, showing things like gesture, posture, and gait. For Mike and Alex, the difference came down to virtual reality’s ability to “make the medium disappear.” In separate conversations, both of them told me that when looking at a flat image one remains aware that one is looking at a flat image, whereas in virtual reality the user is “tricked” into believing that he or she is in a different environment. Alex summed this up by saying that what was distinct about virtual reality was, “Just the presence of it. I mean it really feels like you’re somewhere else. Whereas a video game on the screen, yeah, I mean, you know you’re just looking at something on the screen.” As technologies of remembrance, then, they suggested that photographs and videos draw attention to their own status as media, and in so doing they disrupt the intimacy of communing with the deceased.

Alex expanded on the distinctiveness of virtual reality in one of our early conversations. When I asked him how it was distinct from other media such as videos or video games, he replied,

The presence. You really feel like you go to another *place* when you put the goggles on. You really lose track. I'm in the garage, and when I put the goggles on I do feel somewhere else. And I'm always, every time I take them off I always feel weird that I'm back in the garage. It doesn't matter how bad the graphics are or anything in the game. It's amazing how it does that. So when you can look around, the camera is literally your eyes. You feel every little bump and movement that you do. And yeah, you can look full 360 up and down everywhere. You can walk behind, say, the person you're talking to, or walk in front of them. And they try to keep eye contact with you, to a certain point. So you can walk past them, and then it will lag. They'll give up, and they'll just like go back to their constant stance.

According to Alex, virtual reality was able to bring objects and people to presence so fully that it obliterated any lingering sense of the non-virtual world. Echoing prevalent understandings of virtual reality, he claimed that "the camera is your eyes," collapsing user and medium. Although virtual reality exerts its effects by manipulating the visual field, Alex suggested that the experience of using VR exceeded the visual. He claimed that with virtual reality, the user could "feel every little bump and movement," suggesting that VR was not just a visual experience, but a bodily one. He attributed this to the medium of virtual reality itself, contrasting it with video games and other 2-dimensional experiences that relied on the quality of the graphics to try to give users a sense of being elsewhere.

Alex's words suggest that it's not just the avatar that contributes to the intimacy between Mike and George. The setting in which both avatar and user are located is likewise essential. Elysian Fields draws on common visual tropes to construct a world where the user might imagine that the barriers separating the living and the dead are thin. Alex told me that when he was creating the experience, he had in mind the movie *Ghost*, in which a deceased man returns to Earth to warn his lover that she is in danger. He explained, "You know all video games, when you play, you want to hit a certain aesthetic, and my aesthetic was that look, to me, from *Ghost*, that movie, when he goes into heaven. It's what I was going for." The movie ends with the deceased man walking into a bright light after bidding good-bye to his lover, a visual effect that is reproduced at the conclusion of the virtual reality experience. The setting of Elysian Fields also recalls the scene in the movie *Contact* where the protagonist (played by Jodie Foster) re-encounters her dead father on a tropical beach.¹⁸ Together, these visual tropes suggest that Elysian Fields is a world somewhere between this life and the next, one in which the living and the dead might come together.

Reflecting on what was distinct about virtual reality, Alex began with the sense of place that it affords. He ended, however, with the importance of people, describing the experience of walking around an avatar. He suggested that the virtue of VR is that it creates a lifelike relationship between user and avatar, one that does not depend on the realistic appearance of the avatar or on its ability to speak and move in lifelike ways. Instead, the relationship again hinges on space and place—this time, the co-location of the avatar and the user. He noted that the user can walk all the way around the avatar, exploring the way that their bodies relate to each other in space. He also noted that the avatar will respond as a living person would be expected to do,

¹⁸ He turns out to be one of the extraterrestrials who has arranged their meeting.

following the user with his or her eyes for as long as it would be comfortable to do so before breaking eye contact and returning to their previous activity. In his description, the virtual body is animated by the presence of the user. The user's movements spur a series of counter-movements that turns the virtual body into a person who is responding to the presence of another in socially appropriate ways. Reciprocally, the presence of the virtual body animates the user, compelling Alex to orient himself around the virtual other as he takes in their movements and gestures.

Alex further suggested that by situating them in the same shared space, virtual reality made user and character present to each other in a way that was distinctive to the medium. Although video game characters can likewise follow a user's avatar with their eyes (and a film actor can follow the movement of the camera), the sense of depth that virtual reality affords changes the dynamic of the gaze. In this shared space, the gaze both measures and traverses the space between user and character, emphasizing their changing relationship to each other as Alex moves from front to back.

In Alex's description, then, presence comes to signify *copresence*, the sense of being with another. The emphasis on copresence has significant ramifications for a VR experience that seeks to stage a reunion between the living and the dead. Copresence forges a connection between bodies based on the proximity between them, a proximity that Mike has not experienced with his father since his death. In the video described above, Mike recalls Alex saying, "I just feel like building my dad. Just so I can hang out with him, you know? And just *be* somewhere *with* him." There's a seductively mundane quality to what he describes, where just hanging out signals and creates a sense of closeness with someone that you see every day. Mike similarly described Elysian Fields as a place where "you could spend time with your loved one." Their

emphasis on copresence suggests that the body alone is sufficient to instantiate a particular kind of intimacy, an everyday closeness based on proximity. It further suggests that the avatar is capable of establishing and perhaps experiencing this intimacy, its virtual body fostering a sense of closeness.

Mike himself illustrated the slippage between presence and copresence in connection to his father's virtual body. He explained,

Well one of the things with VR, the way that virtual reality works, is that it really creates... If you have someone standing next to you or if you're sitting in a crowd with someone, or there's a lot of people around, because of the ways that your eyes work and the way that your mind is used to shortcutting things, you trick your mind into creating this feeling of presence, even though there's nobody here. And it's something that's different to looking at a flat screen. Which is a very strong feeling when you're dealing with someone that hasn't been around you for a while. And obviously your mind, your logical brain knows that they are deceased, and they're not with us anymore. So yeah, you get this real strong feeling of presence, which is a key factor. I think it's the main strong point of doing something like this in virtual reality.

For Mike, presence wasn't as much about feeling that he had been transported to a particular place as much as it was about experiencing a relationship between his own body and another's. He described it as "feeling" that was elicited by being in close proximity to someone else, standing or sitting beside them in the virtual world. He similarly attributed this sense of (co)presence to the specific qualities of the medium itself, suggesting that it was the shortcuts that one's brain created when interpreting visual stimuli that created this sense of bodily proximity.

Mike's description suggest to me the kind of sensation that you might experience when someone sits down beside you, almost, but not quite, brushing your leg. As you become aware of the ease with which your bodies could touch, it creates a kind of tingling in your knee, almost as though you already have. In my interpretation, the sense of copresence that Mike is describing is a form of touch that is built around the *possibility* of touch, where that possibility alone links you to another.

As Boellstorff (2015[2008]) has described, touch between avatars can be a powerful experience of embodied connection to another. Indeed, Alex has incorporated such forms of touch into the experience that he is building, programming the avatar to periodically reach out and gently touch Mike's virtual knee in a gesture of comfort and reassurance. But Alex also suggested that what's more important than these brief moments of physical contact is the sensation produced by sitting on the bench together, side by side. Touch is part of copresence, but it doesn't fully capture it.

To create a sense of copresence, Alex had to make Mike present to George as well as making George present to Mike. He explained, "I just wanted to get that, convey that sense of presence, with the eye contact and the head turning, and touch of the knee here and there." Alex used words such as "convey" to maintain a gap between the avatar that he was creating and George himself. Yet the gestures that he's programmed into George's avatar are meant to make the experience feel more interactive and authentic, bringing Mike and George closer together. The "sense of presence" he described involved gestures of acknowledgement by George such as turning his head towards Mike, following him with his eyes, and reaching towards him. Such responses are meant to show that he recognized the presence of his son and was affected by it. It facilitated an exchange of gazes through space as well as well as an exchange of touch, both

carried out by way of their virtual bodies. Copresence, then, signifies a bodily sense of being situated alongside another, of sharing a place and a time with them. It is this reciprocal experience of silently being with someone that is the foundation of the virtual reality encounter between Mike and George.

As Mike explained the sense of copresence that he hoped to foster, my thoughts turned at once to Geneva, with whom I shared a complicated intimacy in which copresence played a key role. I met Geneva in the small town in southwestern Alaska where I had spent several summers doing fieldwork for a prior research project. Towards the end of my first summer there, Geneva told me that she was flying back to her hometown at the mouth of the Yukon-Kuskokwim River, where she would be spending a week visiting family and gathering berries for the long winter ahead. She asked me if I would like to join her, and I eagerly agreed.

As it turns out, we didn't do much berry picking. It rained for most of our visit, and a heavy fog of frigid ocean air settled over the town. We spent the week marooned on the couch, watching TV and waiting for friends and family to drop by.

Those long hours tucked up on the couch with Geneva changed our relationship profoundly. We had always been amiable in the office, but we weren't close. Sitting next to her on the couch as the hours oozed slowly by opened up a different kind of intimacy between us. It was the intimacy of being able to sit next to someone without speaking, to enjoy the presence of another body and to take comfort in its proximity. After a while I stopped feeling like I needed to fill the silence with chatter and questions, or to seek out distraction in my books and notebooks. I stopped even trying to take careful note of everything that was taking place, although I was ideally situated to collect "data" for my research. I gradually relaxed into the repose that Geneva had invited me into. The closeness of our bodies was heightened by their inactivity, by the fact

that we had very little to distract us from the experience of just sitting, of just being together. By the end of a week I felt almost tethered to her, and it was jolting to go our separate ways when we returned were back in town. I think that is what Mike and Alex are proposing to offer with Elysian Fields: an intimacy that is not based on the exchange of words but on bodily proximity.

One morning, I came across a Facebook post from an old friend in Alaska. She had tagged Geneva and written, “THANK YOU Geneva for the berries you gave me. You lived a beautiful life and will be greatly missed.”

My stomach clenched. I was certain that I had misunderstood. I immediately went to Geneva’s Facebook page. I searched for confirmation that it was true, scanning the recent posts that had been made on her page to see if any alluded to her recent death. Really I was searching for confirmation that it couldn’t possibly be true, reading the messages that she had put up only days before. She was right there. How could she be dead?

Over the next several days, her Facebook page filled with commemorative messages that left little doubt about her death. I read these posts hungrily, eager for the stories and memories that conjured her onto my small laptop screen. I altered my Facebook settings so that anything posted on her page would show up at the top of my News Feed, a daily reminder of her. But Facebook offered me a connection to Geneva that was very different than the one that I had experienced on our trip together. The absence that it invoked didn’t fill the space that her body had once occupied.

Would I ever want to enter a virtual reality world where Geneva and I could sit together on the couch once again, side by side? It’s certainly an experience that is within Mike and Alex’s capabilities to develop, requiring no long speeches or complicated actions on her behalf. I don’t

know whether I would, or what it would do to our relationship. But when it comes to their own fathers, Mike and Alex intend to find out.

Stance

As we have seen, the bodily presence of the avatar is essential to the reunion that Alex is staging between Mike and George. Situated within the fabricated landscape of Elysian Fields—a home for their relationship—the avatar opens up an intimate connection between father and son based on their bodily co-presence in this shared space. Yet surprisingly, the accuracy and completeness of the virtual body contributes little to their experience of connection. The details of the avatar are fuzzy, softened both by the low resolution of the virtual reality system it was built for and by the halo of light that Alex deliberately added around George. Rather than creating an exact reproduction of George, Alex seeks above all to capture his *stance*, a certain ineffable quality that evokes George to those who know him. In this way, the avatar acts much like an animated figure who has been drawn with a few sparse penstrokes, providing just enough of a resemblance to create a moment of recognition in those already familiar with the character. Mike is left to fill in the details.

In our first conversation, I asked Alex to tell me more about the kind of body that he was creating, and what it meant. He told me,

You know, because I was strapped for time as well, I couldn't make the body exact.

Strangely, the body that I did use just really fit him. It had his stance and everything.

Because he was a tall guy, he kind of hunched over a bit, and it just kind of *worked*. And

because Mike is the same. The body just *worked*, the way that I put the head and the

bodies together. Because I had used these other bodies that I've got. And clothing,

because clothes are clothes. So I used all these things that... Basically the head is what I've done a lot of the work on, just the head. I mean, you don't really look at the hands and all that. Are they exactly...? So all that stuff just had to look right. Hands are hands, clothes are clothes. The body shape, the body *stance*, was more what I was going for, and it just worked somehow. I was lucky in that way.

Alex used *stance* to describe the slightly hunched way that George stood and moved, but he also used it to convey the indexical quality of the avatar, which pointed towards George without reproducing him. *Stance* gestured beyond the body, signaling the person himself. When Alex put the head and body together for the first time, he had a moment of recognition where George came alive for him. Alex contrasted the gestalt fit between bodies with what was offered by the visual image, suggested that an image could provide an accurate depiction of a person but could not conjure them in the same way. Declaring that "hands are hands, clothes are clothes," he dismissed the need for accuracy regarding these bodily details.

When the body is finally "just right," the avatar speaks. It speaks to Alex of its own fit, and thus of Alex's success in creating it. In Mike's imaginings of Elysian Fields, it speaks to him as well. When I asked him about their decision not to have George say anything to the user, he defended the expressiveness of the moving body. He told me, "There's still a lot that you can convey with body language, and body language is a lot easier to animate and basically communicate to people." He leaned all the way back in his chair, looking up towards the ceiling and stroking an imaginary beard, imitating one of his father's characteristic gestures. He explained, "If we had my dad sitting on a park bench, he'd be there, and he'd go like that, basically. Or he'd look at me. Or if the person had a certain limp, or anything. Body language, basically, and body characteristics. Much easier to interpret and much easier to reach that

believable level.” Mike suggested that body language wasn’t a second-rate substitute for speech. It was more expressive, easier to communicate and to interpret. It was also, perhaps, more truthful; while a user might not believe the words of the avatar, the gestures of the body revealed the person within.

The language of George’s virtual body is once again made possible by the circulation of intimacies between Mike, Alex, and George. Mike explained, “So with Alex building my dad, he *knows* characteristics of my dad. He knows my dad walked a certain way, because he can remember that. He knows that when my dad sat down, my dad would scratch his beard if he was talking about something.” He sat back in his chair again, this time scratching the side of his face almost absentmindedly, turning himself into a living double of his father. It was the intimacy between Alex and George that allowed the game developer to animate the virtual body in ways that spoke to Mike. And it was the intimacy between Mike and Alex that drew Alex to do so, struggling to ensure that there was the right “fit” between bodies.

Furthermore, in Alex’s earlier description of building the virtual body, he recognized that the slightly hunched stance of the body “fit” George “because Mike is the same.” Later, he revealed that their resemblances were more than coincidental. He explained,

I basically used Mike’s head model and modified it, because obviously being of the same genetics, it would be somewhat similar. So I used his head, so that was good, as a base, and then basically remodeled it all to fit the photos, references that I had of his dad. And created the textures, you know skin texture, hair and everything, from that as well. And he had a mustache, so... Yeah, that was pretty difficult. I was really picky, because I wanted it to look really realistic.

Alex used Mike's own head as a model on the assumption that the two of them must bear a strong resemblance. Although he knew George while he was alive, he didn't base his decision on his own recognition of the similarities between them, but rather on the tenants of kinship as shared substance. He declared that it was because Mike and his father have "the same genetics" that he was able to use Mike's head to build his father's.

The head model doesn't just reflect Alex's understanding of kinship, it also creates new forms of relatedness between Mike and his father. Because Alex began with Mike's head and tweaked it to account for the more obvious differences between them, the final prototype is likely to emphasize the similarities between George and his son. The way that Alex built the model thus creates the similarities that it's purportedly based off of, producing relatedness as resemblance based on shared substance (Schneider 1968). In this case, however, that shared substance is a digital blueprint, the 3D scan that gives rise to both Mike's virtual body and his father's. Furthermore, Alex violated one of the central tenets of kinship in creating the model as he did, reversing the direction of descent. In the case of Elysian Fields, it is the son who begets the father.

The spectral body of the dead

The status of George's virtual body was complicated by Mike and Alex's own reflections on its role in the experience. When I asked Alex if there was a connection between the body that he was building and the dead body of Mike's father, he seemed taken aback at the suggestion and quickly denied it. He explained, "It felt like I was creating the spirit." Later he elaborated:

I'm definitely thinking of the spirit when I'm creating the model. So even with the 3D model itself, the material that is on the model of Mike's father is glowy, like it glows. It

emanates light. So yeah, they're literally, they're literally spirits... The person looks like they're emanating light, and Elysian Fields that he goes into emanates light, so it's like, you become light, or some form of light. Another star in the sky, when you go to heaven, or wherever the spirit goes. And then it comes back in the form of the way you used to look, I guess.

Alex imagined an afterlife where bodies were no longer necessary, the dead taking the form of pure light. In this scenario, George was only assuming a body for the benefit of his son as he ventured from his heavenly resting place to the in-between world of Elysian Fields. While the body is the locus of intimacy between Mike and George as they encounter each other in Elysian Fields, it's also a temporary body that transiently houses the light of George's spirit.

Whereas Alex spoke of the George's spirit, Mike spoke of his specter. He compared the experience of seeing his father in Elysian Fields to encountering a ghost, a spectral figure that both is and is not present in the moment of encounter. He told me, "The first time that I see him is definitely going to be like looking at a ghost of him." Derrida distinguishes the ghost or specter by its inchoate embodiment. He writes,

For there is no ghost, there is never any becoming-specter of the spirit without at least an appearance of flesh, in a space of invisible visibility, like the dis-appearing of an apparition. For there to be a ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever (Derrida 1994:157).

Here Derrida suggests that it's not the body of the specter that distinguishes it from the spirit, but the *appearance* of a body, an appearance that is only ever partial and temporary, an "invisible visibility." Thus the body that the dead return to remains "more abstract than ever."

The link that Mike draws between his father's ghost and his virtual reality body complicates their reunion in Elysian Fields. It is the *appearance* of George's body that the virtual reality experience offers, and even this appearance is brief, already in the process of disappearing from the moment it begins. Thus Elysian Fields doesn't place users in proximity with a body but in proximity to something more abstract, something that gestures towards a body without fully occupying it.

The ghostliness also imparts a fundamental ambivalence to the project of resurrecting Mike's father. Mike described his mounting sense of anticipation at seeing the final product as follows:

I started to get this feeling like I was meddling in something that I shouldn't be. Does that make sense? I was sticking my fingers in another realm that perhaps I shouldn't be in. I think it's like people that do Ouija boards or something like that, and the messing with like this demon realm, kind of thing. You get this excitement and anxiety, and you know it's not right, and it doesn't feel right, but then you start to think, "But then is this even real?" There's so many different emotions and thoughts going through your head. So that's, I felt like that, going through it. Like I said, it's uncharted territory as well. When we first came up with Elysian Fields, we looked it up, there was nobody else that was thinking of doing something like this. We searched and searched and couldn't find anything.

So yeah, it's like...It's like walking through a creepy house in the middle of the dark, in the dead of night. And every now and then you hear a strange sound, but you've got someone with you as well, which was Alex. So we're going through this creepy

house together. And you get all of those emotions, like if you've ever done that with a friend, creep around somewhere at nighttime.

“Meddling” in the affairs of the dead left Mike both excited and somewhat frightened. He captured this ambivalence in the image of he and Alex clinging to each other as they moved through a haunted house in the dead of night, full of fear and anxiety as well as adrenaline and excitement. That mix of emotions might provide a thrill that is not altogether unpleasant, leaving them both hoping that they'll stumble on a ghost and praying that they will not. This is also a beautiful image of the intimacy between Mike and Alex, who are joined together in their night wanderings. Mike's comment “but you've got someone with you” conveys a sense of reassurance based on the knowledge that neither is alone as they prepare to confront whatever they might find.

We see, then, that Alex is not building George's body, but something that simultaneously encompasses and exceeds the body. It stands in for the body; it is the embodiment of the spirit. To understand the forms of doubling and substitution at play, it is helpful to turn to the philosophical and anthropological writing on the effigies of the dead.

Substitutions and displacements

Kantorowicz (2016[1957]) explores the doubling of the body in relation to the spirit in his study of medieval political thought, *The King's Two Bodies*. He notes that beginning in the Middle Ages, the monarch was juridically recognized as having two bodies: an earthly body and a “body politic” or “mystical body” (Kantorowicz 2016[1957]:15). The king's two bodies occupy a paradoxical relationship to each other. They are distinct, and yet they “form one unit indivisible, each being fully contained in the other” (Kantorowicz 2016[1957]:9).

One implication of this doubling was the creation of effigies at the time of the king's death, life-sized wax figures of the deceased monarch. As an instantiation of the king's political body, Kantorowicz claims that the wax effigy represents the perpetual nature of sovereignty and its endurance beyond the lifespan of the sovereign. But Kantorowicz also gives detailed examples of the treatment of these effigies that complicates their status as mere symbols of sovereignty. He points out that, "During that period, the image...was attended as though the dummy were the living king himself" (Kantorowicz 2016[1957]:426). He goes on to cite a 16th-century French text describing the attentions that were offered to the king's effigy:

The table being set by the officers of the commissary; the service carried by the gentleman servants, bread-carrier, cup-bearer, and carver, with the usher marching before them and followed by the officer of the cupboard, who spread the table with the reverences and samplings that were customarily made. After the bread was broken and prepared, the meat and other courses were brought in...The napkin was presented by the steward to the most dignified person present, to wipe the hands of the Seigneur [i.e. the king in effigy]. The table blessed by a Cardinal; the basins of water for washing the hands presented at the chair of the Seigneur, as if he had been living, and seated in it. The three courses of the meal were carried out with the same forms, ceremonies, and samplings as they were wont to do during the life of the Seigneur, without forgetting those of the wine, with the presentation of the cup at the places and hours that the Seigneur had been accustomed to drink, two times at each of his meals... (Kantorowicz 2016[1957]:426).

The effigy was not only attended to with all the ceremony demanded by a sovereign, it was also nourished with the foods and wine that the king enjoyed in life. In this case, it seems to stand in

not for eternal sovereignty, but for the living body of this particular king, with all his associated needs and desires.

Yet Kantorowicz also gives another example from the same period that complicates this seeming association between the effigy and the living body of the king. He writes,

At the funeral of Francis I, the encoffined body in the flesh was exhibited for about ten days in the hall of the palace. Then the scenario changed: the coffin containing the corpse was placed in a small chamber while in the hall the lifelike effigy of the king, made by Francois Clouet, took its place and lay in state—the so-called “imperial” crown on its head, the hands folded, scepter and *main de justice* on pillows on either side of it (Kantorowicz 2016[1957]:425).

According to Kantorowicz’s descriptions, the rituals surrounding the corpse and the effigy of Francis I intensified the distinction between the king’s two bodies. The coffin containing the corpse was attended to with solemnity, while the effigy was celebrated, the room cheerfully decorated with colorful cloths and flowers. Yet the fact that these two bodies were alternately laid out for visitors and clergy to attend to also suggests a certain interchangeability between them, partially collapsing the distinction between the natural body and the body politic.

Furthermore, at the same time that Kantorowicz notes the “lifelike” qualities of the effigy, he also points out that it was displayed in the manner of a corpse, lying on a bed of pillows with the symbols of the crown arranged around it. Kantorowicz’s effigy is thus an ambiguous figure, created at the time of death to represent the king’s eternal life, but also standing in for, and doubling, the dead body that it negates.

Giorgio Agamben (1998) disputes Kantorowicz’s interpretation of these effigies as symbols of eternal sovereignty, setting them alongside a series of other doubles whose purposes

are less straightforward. He begins by drawing out Kantorowicz's own example of a possible predecessor to the Medieval English and French rituals that he describes, the treatment of the wax effigy of the emperor at the height of the Roman empire. Following the death of Emperor Septimius Severus, "the effigy, treated like a sick man, lies on a bed; senators and matrons are lined up on either side; physicians pretend to feel the pulse of the image and give it their medical aid until, after seven days, the effigy "dies"" (Kantorowicz 2016[1857]:427, quoted in Agamben 1998:93).

Agamben turns to antiquity scholar Elias Bickerman, who suggests that in this scene and the public funeral that followed, the wax effigy is a substitute not for the living body of the king but for his corpse, which has already been burned and buried before the start of these public ceremonies. Yet he also writes that, "the wax effigy, which is 'in all things similar' to the dead man, and which lies on the official bed wearing the dead man's clothes, is the emperor himself, whose life has been transferred to the wax doll by means of this and perhaps other magical rites" (Bickerman 1972, quoted in Agamben 1998:95). He thus complicates the status of the effigy as a substitute for the corpse by arguing that the emperor's *life* has been transferred to the effigy, making the effigy a materialization of the (living) emperor.

Later, Bickerman complicates this effigy still further by contrasting it with the wax figures that were sometimes made and buried in cases where there was no corpse to receive the funeral rites. Whereas these wax figures who were buried substituted for the absent body, "In the case of the imperial ceremony, [the effigy] appears instead beside the corpse, doubling the dead body without substituting for it" (Agamben 1998:95; see also Yurchak 2015). The effigy was a materialization of the Roman emperor, but it was also a double of the emperor. It was, therefore, a double of itself.

In Agamben's reading, the two bodies of the king are not easily separable. As Kantorowicz himself points out, each one is fully contained in the other. And as the funeral ritual for Francis I makes clear, each body is both a substitute for, and a double of, the other. The status of the effigy is thus more ambiguous than a hasty reading of Kantorowicz would suggest. It's not just a representation of the living body of the sovereign. It can stand in for what's eternal and ongoing in the monarch at the same time that it represents, and is interchangeable with, the corpse. It signals the ways that the monarch continues to be a person after his death, and it also *allows* the monarch to continue to be a person after his death.

In my interpretation of both Kantorowicz and Agamben, the effigy is a double of the person, rather than a substitute for him. A substitute suggests that the body is able to fully take the place of the original. A double is a version, bringing out the multiplicity that inhered in the original. Anthropologist Jean Langford writes, "Ghosts...are not substitutes for the dead. Rather they might better be understood, following Todd Ramon Ochoa, as versions of the dead (2010, 2007) or, following Deleuze, masks of the dead, where every repetition is a mask that hides nothing but other masks" (Langford 2013:212). Langford here extends the complicated subjectivities of the living to the dead, recognizing their multiplicity and fragmentation. In her vision, the dead are also doubles of themselves; they are only versions; they can only be found in the in-between of relations. Following Langford, I would argue that the effigy is a version, a materialization that does not negate the mortal status of the deceased. The avatar thus animates George by emphasizing his multiplicity, offering one bodily version of him that points towards other possible manifestations.

The figure of the effigy in Kantorowicz and Agamben suggests a way to think about George's virtual body, illuminating its significance without resolving the many tensions that

surround it. Like the effigy, it's not a substitute but a double of George, a version of him that lives on. As Kantorowicz points out, the effigy retains something of the essence or "life" of the person, "magically" transferred to its new body. For this reason, the body is both necessary and, in a sense, incidental. Its materialization allows the magical transfer to take place, yet it's the eternal and ineffable quality of the person that gives the virtual body its significance.

Agamben suggests that the ineffable quality of the effigy is tied to the social life of the person and not just the sovereign status of the king. In each of his examples, he draws out the ways that the effigy takes on its magical quality as a double of the person through the community that recognizes and engages it. In this way, Agamben suggests that the effigy comes alive through its relations with others, and it depends on those others for its survival. As he points out, when the effigy is burned or buried, it ceases to be recognized as a person and dies its second death. When Mike and Alex talk about the virtual body as though it is Mike's father, they likewise suggest that something of his "life" or essence has been transferred to his virtual body, and in the process they recognize him as a person. The virtual body manifests something of George by representing him as he was when he was alive, and therefore the virtual body always exceeds itself.

In Kantorowicz and Agamben as well as in *Elysian Fields*, the doubled body is the locus of relations that continue, be they relations between the sovereign and his subjects or relations between a father and his son. By offering the effigy food and wine, or taking its pulse and wiping its brow, or simply gazing at it, the living enter into reciprocal relationships of caring concern with the dead. These actions allow them to receive the gaze of the dead, to receive the gratitude and comfort provided by the doubled body. But such ongoing relations do not deny or obscure the death of the person that is doubled by the effigy. After all, it is his death that makes this

particular kind of relationship possible, inciting the creation of the effigy that draws others to him.

Like the medieval and Roman effigies, George's avatar was born out of his death, and at the same time it signals that death did not put an end to him. The avatar re-animating him, bringing George back to life by giving him a new body that can see, move, touch, and spend time with his son. Yet Alex also designed the aesthetics of the experience to heighten the user's sense that they were encountering a dead person. He depicted George materializing from a state of pure light, walking into a heavenly realm that appears purposely ethereal. George continues to emanate light even after he takes bodily form, reminding the user of his mortal status. The avatar allows Mike and George to draw near each other, intensifying an intimacy that is premised on George's death.

Before we leave the effigy, I'd like to consider one final implication of its persistent presence: the care provided to these doubled bodies. Kantorowicz describes the feeding and nourishment of the effigy of Francis I as well as the careful attention given to the ailing effigy of Emperor Septimius Severus, yet he doesn't pursue the implications of these practices. For this, we must turn to the anthropological literature. Anthropologists have long described how people across a diversity of times and places have created substitute bodies for the dead through which relations with the deceased can endure. While Kantorowicz focuses on the sovereign status of the effigy, anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis (1991) explores the role that the care for these doubled bodies plays in ongoing relations with the dead.

Care for the bodies of the dead

In *The Last Word*, Seremetakis argues that ethical relations between the living and the dead in rural Greece are organized around the reciprocal exchange of care. These relations congeal around the *klama*, the women's mourning ritual. During the *klama*, female relatives touch and tend to the body of the dead. Seremetakis writes,

The *moiroloyistra* (mourner) creates the center with her physical presence by molding her body through gestures, caresses, and improvised discourses around the space of the corpse. All these are dramatic expressions of an ethic of care and of tending the dead. Mourning necessitates touching and caressing the dead, leaning over the dead with tender gestures as if talking to a sleeping person. The mourner holds the forehead of the dead while talking with an outpouring of emotions (Seremetakis 1991:96).

According to Seremetakis, tenderly caressing the dead establishes a relationship of shared substance, and becomes the grounds for an ongoing reciprocal exchange. These forms of physical touch function "as a reciprocation for the concern and care that the dying show the living when the former plan for the gaps and social obligations that arise from death" (Seremetakis 1991:65). Failure to perform these duties is perceived by others as a lapse in one's ethical duties, as well as a failure of the reciprocal bonds of kinship that persist after death.

Seremetakis further argues that in rural Greece, such practices of care are not restricted to the biological body. Kin create multiple bodies for the dead, each of which must be lovingly tended. Exhumed bones are considered the "second body" of the dead. They must be tenderly cleaned, wiped in vinegar, dried in the sun, and carefully arranged in order to take their appropriate form. Similarly, Seremetakis suggests that the care provided to gravesites do not just signal the presence of the body beneath the gravestone, but the persistence of the person in the

form of the gravestone itself, which becomes another body of the dead. The dead may also be embodied in stone heads carved into the homes of their clansmembers, which likewise bring with them obligations of physical care. Seremetakis even suggests that the corpse itself is a kind of effigy. She writes that the preparation of the corpse before burial constructs the dead as a “doll” (*skoutsas*), adorning the deceased in order to foreground his or her significance to kin (Seremetakis 1991:215).

Following Seremetakis, we might likewise see Mike and Alex’s efforts as a form of care for George. Just as Seremetakis’s ethnographic subjects must clean, dry, and carefully arrange the bones of the dead in order to provide them with their “second body,” Alex must fastidiously craft the component parts of George’s body and ensure that they are properly attached to form an animated whole that captures his stance (and thus, perhaps, his spirit). Viewing the construction of George’s body in this light also opens up the possibility that other reciprocal practices of care may cohere around the virtual body. When George sits beside his son as he speaks, remembers, and cries, he is caring for Mike. We can even speculate that Mike may be drawn back to Elysian Fields in order to care for his father, offering him a few minutes of companionship to combat the loneliness of death.

In Seremetakis’s descriptions, the care offered to the dead is simultaneously a form of care for the bereaved. She notes that the Greek women who participate in the *klama* do so in order to assist the bereaved in granting their loved one a ‘good death.’ By attending the *klama* and participating in its loud laments, participants reassure kin that their loved one has been, and continues to be, a valuable member of the community. Their screams comfort the bereaved by recognizing the ongoing significance of their dead loved on.

Seremetakis's insights suggest that Alex's efforts to carefully construct the virtual body of Mike's father might be seen as a form of care for his best friend. Indeed, Alex himself suggested the same. He told me that after putting the project on hold for more than a year, he was picking it up again in the hopes of having it finished by Mike's birthday so that he could surprise him with the finished product. When I asked Alex what would make Elysian Fields feel like a success for him, his response turned on his own relationship with Mike, which has become entangled with Mike's relationship with his father. Alex told me, "Just a hug and a thank you, that's it. And that he had a *good* experience with it. It wasn't, like, traumatic in some way...I just want it to not break, once, and him to have a good experience at least once with it." After countless hours of painstaking labor, Alex's hope was that Mike's encounter with his father would go reasonably well, and that he would acknowledge Alex's role in bringing him to life. By creating this experience for Mike, Alex was offering him a way to connect with his father in a way that he had been missing and longing for.

Alex's efforts can also be seen as a form of care for his *own* father, Kostas. His original intention was to create a virtual reality experience that would bring Kostas to life for him, although he and Mike ended up deciding to create Mike's father instead. In Alex's descriptions of his work on the avatar, there was a sometimes a slippage between Mike's father and his own. He told me, "I cried a bunch of times, making it. Just because I knew his dad as well. Yeah, and just thinking of my own father, and things. Yeah, it was really emotional, actually." The pain of losing Mike's father shaded into the pain of losing his own, and in crying for George he was also crying for Kostas. Creating George's virtual body was thus an indirect form of care for his own father, supplying Kostas with a substitute body in the form of George's substitute body.

In sum, George's avatar is a kind of effigy that relies on the signification afforded to the body but that exceeds the parameters of the body, manifesting the social person. It is built around the death of the person but demonstrates that death does not put an end to that person, who can inhabit the multiple bodies that may be built for them. Participating in the creation of the effigy draws both Mike and Alex into practices of reciprocal care for their fathers, for each other's fathers, and for each other.

Too personal

Alex and Mike began work on Elysian Fields as part of a competition sponsored by the virtual reality company Oculus, which was offering over one million dollars in awards to developers. Although the two of them had never created an experience in virtual reality before, they were confident that their skills as game developers would translate to the medium. Even if they didn't win, entering the competition would motivate them to quickly develop a prototype for a VR experience that they believed could be widely marketed. Two years later, Mike and Alex had all but abandoned their aspirations to offer Elysian Fields to the public. Although neither was prepared to completely dismiss the possibility, both expressed strong hesitations about building such projects for others. Their reasons speak volumes about the kinds of investments that they have made in the project to date.

Mike and Alex haven't put the project on hold because there wasn't a market for such virtual reality projects. On the contrary, it was the interest that others showed in their work that lead to their first doubts. Alex seemed almost embarrassed as he explained,

We received a couple of emails of people that actually wanted to get one made, and I just... The impact of that on me was *really* serious. Making a video game is a certain

amount of pressure, to make it good and everything, but this was another whole, like, times that by a million. To make something great that's going to represent, you know... And as an independent game developer, I actually just didn't want to *do* it, actually. Because I wouldn't... I mean I could do *something*, but I couldn't do it justice, like say if a big corporation did do it. But then with a big corporation, they will take advantage. They will do things that are going to take advantage, whereas I wasn't going to. It was more just a personal thing.

Alex's reply signals that the affects and presences that inhere in the virtual world of Elysian Fields are very different than those found in the video games that he ordinarily designs. They impact not only the user, but also the developer. He struggled with the sense that he wouldn't be able to "do justice" to the experience, disappointing the user and perhaps the deceased person he was embodying. He also struggled with the sense that to do it right, creating the experience needed to be an act of care and not an attempt to secure profit. Although a "big corporation" might be better equipped to resurrect the dead, they would also "take advantage" of the vulnerable position of the dead and the bereaved.

More than anything, I am caught by Alex's concluding statement that Elysian Fields was "just a personal thing." This descriptor, "personal," came up frequently in both he and Mike's descriptions of the project, as well as in their explanations as to why they had moved away from trying to develop it as a viable product. On one level, they used "personal" to mark the fact that they'd be designing each experience for a specific customer. Their repetition of this descriptor underscored the relational aspect of these kinds of personalized experiences, emphasizing that they were meant to foster a specific relationship between the user and his or her loved one based on the particularities of their bond.

Yet their use of “personal” seemed to signal other things as well, gesturing towards the kinds of uncomfortable intimacies that were forged in the process of creating and launching Elysian Fields. The most obvious of these was the intimacy between the bereaved and their deceased loved one—in this case, Mike and George. Now that the prototype was nearing completion, Alex expressed doubts about whether they would ever make it public in the way that the competition had originally demanded. He explained, “It’s for Mike, and his dad. It’s got *nothing* to do with anybody else. So that’s why it’s not going to be online. If it was, like in the competition form, the way it is right now, I’d have to discuss that with Mike if he even wants it up there. It’s *really* personal.” Alex suggested that sharing the virtual experience with others online would be a violation of sorts, exposing Mike and his father in a way that felt unseemly. He insinuated that there would be something voyeuristic about looking in on their “*really* personal” time together, positioning it as a private exchange that needed to be shielded from prying eyes. The intensity of their imagined bond in Elysian Fields seemed to contribute to Alex’s discomfort with the idea of creating such projects for others, which would require him to open up a similar intimacy between two people that he barely knew.

Although Alex declared that the VR experience between Mike and his father has “got nothing to do with anybody else,” his protectiveness points towards his own participation in their virtual encounter. Indeed, the intimacy between Mike and George seemed at times to have Alex at its center. Mike told me,

We’re best friends. To us we’re basically like brothers. And not just that, my dad was an uncle to him. There were moments that he spent talking to my dad when I wasn’t around, getting advice, that sort of stuff. So it was somebody that was a key part in him growing up as well. So yeah, it definitely impacts him. There are moments that, even when he was

building my dad, I made sure that I worked in another room, he'd still come out a little bit teary. Or I could tell, because I know him, that he had just had a cry, kind of thing. So yeah, it's definitely been a big process for him as well.

Mike emphasized the closeness of the bond between he and Alex as well as between Alex and George, asserting that the relationships among them went beyond affection to the indissoluble ties of kinship. He linked this intimacy to Alex's experience building the project, pointing out that it had been a difficult process for him as well. Alex himself declared, "The impact of that on me was *really* serious."

Having been through it once with Mike and George, Alex didn't necessarily want to put himself through it again with a stranger. He explained,

Once I received emails and things about it, I just *did not want* to do that. Not in that form. Not in the personal project form. It's just way too personal. But that could evolve. I'm not saying it's not possible. But there really has to be a whole system developed around that, in the same way that funeral homes do, in taking care of families and that whole thing, and doing a service with respect, and all that type of stuff.

Alex's aversion to the idea of creating projects for others suggests that he was deeply affected by the experience of creating Elysian Fields for Mike. In this context, his assertion that "It's just way too personal" can be read as a reluctance to become further entangled in the intimate relationships between the living and the dead.

But Alex's words also suggested that the relationship between he and Mike was in some way necessary to the experience that he'd created. The depth of their personal relationship to each other allowed Alex to care for Mike by creating a new body for his father. To do so with a stranger would require establishing some form of institutionalized care that could step in to fill

the role that he had filled. He envisioned this as a variation on the way that funeral homes have established systems for taking care of families, leading them through the emotionally-fraught process of managing their loved one's other body. He thus not only suggested that creating these projects was a form of care, but also that it was a form of care that was built on the intimacy between the user and the creator. Alex's assessment that it would be "too personal" to try to create a similar kind of experience for a customer suggests that the bond between he and Mike is in some way necessary to the success of the virtual encounter between Mike and his father.

The degree to which Alex was implicated in the relationship between Mike and George further troubles the presumption that intimate relationships with the dead are necessarily dyadic. In the previous chapters, we saw that Fran's relationship with her brother was made possible by the participation of his larger network, as well as by the corporation that fosters and structures their relationship. In this case, it is the relationship between the two developers that opened up possibilities for intimacy between Mike and his father.

It also seemed at times like Mike and Alex weren't just referring to their customers when they assessed the projects as "too personal." It was also "too personal" to be in such intimate contact with the dead. Mike recounted,

We had one lady who contacted us that her son had passed away two years earlier. And she's still struggling. She sent us a massive email. And she's still struggling to deal with losing him. And we read through that email, and we weren't even working on the project, but it was a really heavy email for us to deal with. To think that if this was something that we would do, we would have to do a project like that for someone, possibly, where we're building a child that's not here anymore. On a personal level, that takes us on a completely different path, emotionally. It made us start really thinking about whether this

is really something that we could do. As ourselves. As the people that we are. As the ethics that Alex and I have. Would we want to go down that pathway?

Just contemplating the possibility of creating a virtual rendition of a beloved child who had died was enough to make Mike and Alex question whether they were emotionally capable of building these projects for others. Doing so would bring the two of them—particularly Alex, who does the bulk of the design work—into a close relationship with the dead person they were re-animating. Developing this kind of intimacy with a dead child was deeply troubling, threatening to their emotional stability as well as to their ethical sensibilities, which would demand that they devote sustained attention to the care of this mother and child.

To further explore Mike and Alex’s reluctance to build these projects for others, it’s helpful to turn to Tsintjilonis’s writing on death rites among the Sa’dan Toraja of Indonesia (2004, 2007). Tsintjilonis explains that after a death, the deceased person’s kin can “share one breath” with the dead, allowing them to experience their desires. This intimacy allows kin to know the “true nature” of the dead, which they can then make manifest through the ritual disassembly of the body and its re-articulation in a new form (Tsintjilonis 2004:376). Although sharing the knowledge and desires of the dead allows the living to create their true bodies, this kind of comingling also be dangerous. When Tsintjilonis’s friend Pong Lampa leads him into the room where Ne’ Layuk was ‘sleeping,’ he warned him about the threat that she posed. Tsintjilonis writes, “He described her senses as extremely dangerous (‘sharp’)—unless she was shown the proper respect, using her senses as ‘snares’ (*poyan*), she could harm those near her by snaring and forcing them to share her illness” (Tsintjilonis 2007:178). As Tsintjilonis’s descriptions make clear, the kinds of intimacies that are opened up by creating the body or

bodies of the dead can also leave both parties vulnerable, exposed each to the possibility of violence or wrongdoing at the hands of the other.

Tsintjilonis's insights point towards the ways that even intimate relationships with the dead can be unwelcome or intrusive. For the Sa'dan Toraja, this intrusive intimacy involves a kind of sensory comingling in which the living and the dead come to share one body, distributed between the living body that experiences the thoughts and senses of the dead and the dead body that is in the process of assuming its true form. Alex was less able to articulate the intrusive intimacy that he came to experience with George and Mike. He continued to repeat that it was "too personal," as though to signal that some threshold had been crossed in the hours that he had spent lingering over George's body. He and Mike were hesitant to invite a similar kind of experience with another user, and they questioned whether their efforts would be successful. Perhaps, as with the Sa'dan Toraja, it is only "kin" who can take on this intimacy in order to create the new body of the dead.

Finally, Mike and Alex's hesitations about developing Elysian Fields into a marketable product had to do with the deeply melancholic nature of the work. As Mike contemplated the young mother's request, he found himself unable to fathom taking on the pain of reuniting her with her son. His hesitation suggests that creating the virtual bodies of the deceased demanded a sustained engagement with loss, even as it attempted to mitigate that loss. That is, even though he and Alex were working to bring the dead to presence in the virtual world of Elysian Fields, the experience paradoxically underscored their absence. This point was brought home to me when Alex explained his decision to create an avatar of Mike's father instead of his own.

I was going to make the Elysian Fields about me and my father, actually, but I just couldn't deal with it, at that point in time. You know, I haven't even deleted my dad's

phone number out of my phone. I've still got it. Just *cannot do* it. Don't want to. I mean I've got rid of other things of his, but, I don't know, just scrolling through sometimes and you see it... I don't know, you just feel good in some way, that he's *somewhere*, even though I can't call him...

I mean I've got pictures of my dad, and every now and then I'll just realize that he's *gone*. I'll look at them. I just felt like I would be in that constant state, and it was just too much to deal with, with all the other pressure of what was going on.

But I mean if I had... I'd take my time with that. Kind of like creating a statue of someone you love, by literally sculpting them out of stone or clay or whatever. That's how I want to do it, for my father and my grandfather.

By comparing building an avatar of his father with deleting his phone number, Alex suggested that both would require acknowledging that Kostas was dead. He imagined that he would one day be ready to do so, and envisioned the experience as a kind of prolonged meditation on loss. Alex's words powerfully point to the ways that the virtual body underscores the death of the person even as it offers the bereaved—and the developer—a way to continue to have a relationship with them.

Grief theory and extimacy, revisited

For Mike and Alex, virtual reality fosters forms of immersive presence and copresence that are crucial to the experience that they are building. Yet they also worried that these very attributes might be threatening to the mourner and potential consumer. Their anxieties seemed to have been largely incited by their conversation with a grief counselor, one of several experts they met with when in the process of developing Elysian Fields. According to Mike, the grief

counselor affirmed that, “there is an ongoing relationship that lasts your entire life” with a deceased loved one. Yet the counselor also raised concerns about the impact of Elysian Fields on its potential users, posing multiple “what if” scenarios that the young developers struggled to answer. Mike explained, “her main what if was, what if they can’t separate Elysian Fields from reality because of their state of mind in that period of time?”

The grief counselor’s concern signals the implicit limits that contemporary grief theory sets on relations with the dead. Even after he amended his handbook of grief counseling to accommodate the shift towards continuing bonds with the dead, Worden nonetheless asserted, “The first task of grieving is to come full face with the reality that the person is dead, that the person is gone and will not return. Part of the acceptance of this reality is coming to believe that reunion is impossible, at least in this life” (Worden 2009:39). The grief counselor conveyed a concern that Elysian Fields might violate this first task of grief, preventing people from fully accepting the death. She alerted Mike to the possibility that potential clients wouldn’t be able to move forward, rendering the project more harmful than helpful.

After their conversation, Mike shared many of the grief counselor’s concern. He told me that he was worried about the possibility that customers would want to “just keep going in, and in, and in.” He added that in this situation, “It wouldn’t help them carry on. It would keep them in one spot.” He thus signaled his acceptance of a model of grief in which “recovery” unfolds progressively, bearing the bereaved further and further from the deceased.

When Mike and Alex applied to the Oculus Mobile VR Jam competition, they called Elysian Fields, “a personalized VR afterlife experience *reuniting* people with loved ones who have passed” (emphasis added). Mike’s descriptions of the project demonstrate his sense that their prototype would offer an unprecedented opportunity for communion with the dead. Yet

they also seem to have taken the grief counselor's concerns to heart, putting them in the strange position of trying to ensure that their potential users will understand that "reunion [with the dead] is impossible" (Worden 2009) even while developing a product that they hope will offer just such a reunion.

To mitigate the dangers of the medium, Mike and Alex have decided to include a series of "safeguards" if they ever market Elysian Fields to the public. Mike outlined these safeguards in our first conversation. First, the program will have a "lockout period," a set amount of time that has to pass before the user will be allowed back into Elysian Fields. Second, the aesthetics of the environment are purposely "dreamscape-y." While the avatar and its immediate environment are designed to appear as lifelike as possible, the more distant landscape is highly stylized, full of strange colors and shapes that don't occur in nature. In this way, the experience was meant to feel "believable" but not "realistic." By drawing a distinction between realistic and believable, Mike attempted to partially resolve the tension between wanting to make the experience fully immersive and wanting to prevent potential users from confusing it with reality.

Mike's response to the grief counselor's concerns contrast with his attitude towards popular understandings regarding death and the dead. When describing some of the negative attention that their project initially garnered, Mike told me, "That comes down to the conditioning, and our traditions, and what we're used to, and knowing that, having this whole concept in Western society that death is separate to us." Ruminating on the mixed responses that their competition submission received, Mike situated these "Western" understandings of death in the larger context of global death. He told me,

If you have a look at, I think it's in the Philippines, there's a small tribe there that, I think they actually dig up their dead and dress them. There's a few other places as well that do

that. In Mongolia, or in Tibet, they do sky burials, where they basically have vultures come and eat their deceased loved ones, and they sit there and watch it. But death is always, especially in Western society, as you know, it's very...we're separated from it, a lot. And I think that's the influence of the Christian church, and the Roman Catholic Church. It's just their traditions, and then we've all carried on with that. That idea that it is a separate border. So when you hear something like a sky burial, you react emotionally, I think. And that's exactly what happened to us. We had a lot of people who reacted emotionally.

Mike suggested that this separation from death is a holdover from Christian and particularly Roman Catholic traditions that police a border between the living and the dead. He relativized this perspective by referring to the diversity of ways that people treat the dead, including practices that might seem abhorrent to white Americans, Europeans, and Australians. He didn't feel the need to consult with an expert on cultural understandings of death; he felt confident dismissing those that contradicted his own. In contrast, he and Alex took the grief counselor's comments as expert knowledge that they needed to incorporate into the project design. While attitudes towards the dead might vary from place to place, he understood grief to be a universal and transhistorical phenomenon that required expertise to understand and manage. At one point, Mike said that they'd decided that if they offered Elysian Fields to the public, then they would need to have a counselor on hand to manage the emotional reactions of their clients.

Although Mike put a lot of faith in the grief counselor's expertise, his relationship with his father interestingly reverses the trajectory established by contemporary grief theory. In the introduction to their volume *Continuing Bonds*, the editors write that "the bereaved actively construct an inner representation of the deceased that is part of the normal grieving process"

(Klass, Silverman, and Mikeman 1996:16). When Mike spoke with me about his father's death, he described an ongoing relationship that seemed to fit the criterion for an "inner representation."

He recalled,

I remember when, the first two years of my dad passing away, I definitely remember I'd be driving, or whenever I had quiet time, I'd be thinking of him and remember him, and almost, in my mind, *with* him. With him in memories of, like I said earlier, him laying down watching the news. Or him paying me out [pulling my leg] about something and laughing at me. That sort of stuff. So yeah, I definitely, even though he was gone, you definitely spend a lot of time with them, within your own mind. With that person.

In contemporary grief theory, the kind of inner representation that Mike described is formed gradually as the deceased person is progressively relocated from the external world to the internal self. In contrast, Mike suggested that this inner representation was present immediately after his father's death.

Like Erin's app, Elysian Fields complicates the distinction between internal and external. On the one hand, by re-creating Mike's father in virtual reality, Mike and Alex are not only embodying him but also situating him within a distinct site of encounter, the Elysian Fields landscape that Alex has constructed. Before, Mike carried his father with him as he moved from place to place, spending time with him while he drove and communing with him when he had a few minutes of down time. Once Elysian Fields is complete, spending time with him will involve entering Elysian Fields and awaiting his father's return from the heavenly realm that surrounds it. In this sense, the "relocation" that George is undergoing seems to involve a movement from inside to outside.

Yet at the same time, Alex suggested that Elysian Fields was designed to foster an inner experience of connection. As a provocation, I once mentioned to Alex that anthropologists tended to be very interested in the rituals surrounding death, and I asked him if there was anything ritualistic about the experience that he was creating, or about the act of creating it. He mused,

I mean yeah, you're making a digital memorial, I guess. Kind of like creating an altar, or a place to go, to prayer... I mean, my grandma, my Greek grandma, which is my grandfather's mother, actually, she was my great-Grandma, she would always go to this altar which had all these pictures of Jesus and candles or whatever, and Mary, and every night she would pray there. So I guess it's kind of... And that was also for her son who passed away when he was 18. So I guess, yeah, it [Elysian Fields] was a little bit ritualistic, I guess. I mean that sounds occult. It wasn't like that. But a memorial, yeah, sure, why not. Definitely. I guess that's what I *was* creating, like I said, because the interaction is more... Yeah, you're getting some visual things, but it's more like inner work that you're doing at that point, when you're having that experience. It's more just thoughts, or things that you might want to say out loud, so I guess similar to a prayer, or a memorial, or, you know...

Alex compared Elysian Fields to a digital memorial, but he also compared it to his great-grandmother's altar, a sacred place where she would go to privately pray in the presence of Jesus, Mary, and her dead son. The parallel went beyond the shared sense of sacred space to the "inner work" entailed by both. Although Alex's inspiration for the project was his desire to "just hang out" with his dad, he also asserted, "I don't think it would be an everyday experience." Instead, visiting the avatar would be similar to praying, a deliberate moment of melancholic

reflection. Alex thus suggested that the external cues of the virtual world and George's virtual body were meant to provide a space for the inner work of reflection, prayer, and memory. Here again, we find that the avatar acts as an evocation rather than a depiction, gesturing towards the person without reproducing him.

In this way, Elysian Fields fosters a relationship of extimacy between Mike and his father. It involves an outward movement in which the dead other within the self is cast away, as well as a reciprocal movement in which that other is internalized. This double movement is captured in the following quote, in which Alex imagined what it would be like to share a bench with a loved one in Elysian Fields.

At that point, it's like that's your meditation space. Now you can just say what you want, looking at them, having memories, thinking of them, all in VR, in this place. And you're just doing that, you have your moment with them. They don't talk to you or anything. It's just literally an experience to trigger your memories and *see* them, almost, in some sort of fashion, I guess. Experience *something*. Whereas they're just *gone* before, and you don't have anything.

Alex again underscored the inner work of melancholic connection entailed by visiting Elysian Fields. The deceased person does not interrupt this meditation by speaking; instead, his bodily presence serves to trigger more memories. Yet the props of the virtual body and the ethereal Elysium are also vital to this inner work. Without them, Alex asserts that the deceased is "just *gone*," leaving the bereaved with nothing— not even memory.

What Mike will encounter in Elysian Fields is himself as well as his father. The experience is designed to intensify his self-reflection. Furthermore, the avatar is a version of Mike as well as of George, both literally and figuratively. Alex built the model from a 3D scan of

Mike; it contains Mike at its origin. It also anticipates the day that Mike will scan himself in order to leave his virtual bodies behind for the ones he loves. It is, as Morris put it, “the anticipation of one’s future recall *as image*”—or in this case, as the virtual reality body that will one day take one’s place. In this way, his father takes the form of the extimate other, the inner kernel of himself that is cast away and made other. And at the same time, Mike draws his father further into himself in the act of entering Elysian Fields, deepening his capacity to connect with his father within his own mind. Visiting his father’s virtual body in Elysian Fields is a way of nourishing the inner representation that he carries with him, encouraging the “inner work” that is required to sustain his father within himself.

The medium of virtual reality is in many ways ideally suited to the double movement of extimacy. What makes virtual reality so compelling for Mike and Alex is the way that it transports them to another place, taking them out of the everyday spaces of work and home in which their fathers are absent. Yet it does so by altering their perception, projecting a landscape into their vision. Recall that Mike described virtual reality by saying, “Because of the ways that your eyes work and the way that your mind is used to shortcutting things, you trick your mind into creating this feeling of presence, even though there’s nobody here.” In Mike’s estimation, the world that virtual reality transports you to is an inner world, one that takes place in the mind.

Conclusion

I conclude by returning to the beginning. If George’s virtual body is just a body, then how is it that Mike can talk about “seeing him again”? As we have seen, the answer in part lies in the nature of the avatar and the signification that Mike and Alex afford to it. A gap persists between George and his virtual body, which gestures towards George without reproducing him.

It is sufficient that the avatar capture his stance, because the details of his face and body are beside the point. It is not a re-creation of George that can stand in for him, but a partial version of Mike's father that indexes many other versions of him, just as the effigy underscores the multiplicity of the dead. Although George's avatar is the most detailed and complete replica of the dead that we have encountered in the digital technologies considered here, there is a sparseness to it that is necessary to its function. The avatar acts as an outline, inviting Mike to undertake the inner work that keeps their relationship alive.

The avatar also retains an element of unknowability, posing without answering the question that lies at the heart of animation: Is the animated figure merely a projection of the animator and user, or does it exceed the parameters of its animation? To put it otherwise, can the avatar speak? The ambiguity entailed by the avatar opens up an element of unknowability between Mike and George. Yet this very ambiguity may be part of what bring the two of them closer together. Recall Butler's words from "Violence, Mourning, Politics," which I cited in the introduction:

For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you,' by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know (Butler 2004:49).

Although language is what makes recognition possible, Butler suggests that the failure of language is a precondition of relation to the other. Forging the relation entails an experience of

“disorientation and loss.” You can try to translate the other, but in the end it is the failure of translation through which you gain the other—who remains as-yet-unknowable.

Unraveling Mike’s comment about “seeing him again” also requires recognizing the ways that both he and George are brought forth by the mutual relation that is instantiated through their avatars. Butler writes,

When we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are, as we already are, as we have always been as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself. Instead, in the asking, in the petition, we have already become something new, since we are constituted by virtue of the address, a need and desire for the Other that takes place in language in the broadest sense, one without which we could not be. To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other. It is also to stake one’s own being, and one’s own persistence in one’s own being, in the struggle for recognition (Butler 2004:43-44).

Butler’s notion of recognition is not based on the prior existence of two entities who come into contact and enact an exchange. It involves a “becoming,” a “transformation” that is constitutive. The relationship between self and Other brings both into being through the forms of recognition that pass between them. In the case of Mike and George, “language in the broadest sense” might include the gesture of intimacy entailed by bodily proximity, through which the felt relationship between another’s body and one’s own creates a sensation of closeness that can’t be measured by distance alone.

There's something almost paradoxical about Butler's notion of recognition. We have to be recognized by another to come into being, but it is the recognition itself that brings us into being. So what is there to recognize in the first place?

Perhaps what is recognized is a possibility: the possibility of a relationship that has not yet been forged, and that is brought forth through the very willingness to recognize its possibility. It is this sense of possibility that Elysian Fields has offered Mike and George. Although they have not yet encountered each other in the virtual world, its creation has shortened the distance between them. It has intensified their intimacy, re-organizing it around the double that Alex is crafting. As Alex puts the finishing touches on George's body, he grants his friend's father the possibility of exceeding the body that he has built for him, of inhabiting it through something called *stance* in a way that makes the body into the spirit. As Mike anticipates meeting his father again in Elysian Fields, he grants his father the possibility of being other than he remembers, and perhaps even other than he desires. He grants his father the possibility of surprising him. If we follow Butler in recognizing the ways in which people are constituted by their relations, then the transformation in Mike and George's relationship has also involved a transformation in each of them. Their persistent relationship brings them both into being, animating George and Alex for each other.

Conclusion

Data and the dead

When I began this project, I expected to uncover the many ways that data can ground an ongoing relationship with the dead. What I found instead took me by surprise. Despite Derrida's predictions and my own, the dead do not speak through the archives of data that they leave behind (Derrida 1995). Mike's father speaks with his stance, a posture that evokes him without quite depicting him. He and his son connect through a sense of copresence, a proximity between bodies whose virtuality intensifies rather than mitigates their intimacy. Frank speaks in and through his network, whose stories and memories allow Lois to get to know her brother in a way that she couldn't while he was alive. His network outlines the contours of his absence, allowing Lois to draw near him. Patricia speaks through the places and objects that she inhabits, appearing before her daughter in unexpected moments of encounter through which the two of them remain close. Marty speaks in her native tongue, the words welling up inside of Corey as she sits at her keyboard trying to remember her rudimentary Spanish. From her home in the online memorial, she offers her hospitality to Corey, reversing Derrida's formulation of ethics. It seems that it is not just that the living who offer their hospitality to the dead, building them homes both online and off. It is also the dead who offer their hospitality to the living, taking us within themselves.

Many now believe that digital technologies will one day be capable of resurrecting the dead. American computer scientist and inventor Ray Kurzweil has famously proposed that humanity is on the verge of a technological singularity in which an artificial intelligence will surpass human intelligence, leading to sweeping changes in technology and society, including

the possibility of indefinite life extension (Galeon and Reedy 2017; Kneese 2016). In the documentary *Transcendent Man*, filmmaker Barry Ptolemy suggests that Kurzweil's efforts to usher in the singularity are spurred in part by his desire to be reunited with his father, who died when he was a young man. Kurzweil believes that once artificial superintelligence has been achieved, he will be able to interact with a virtual simulation that is realistic enough to take his father's place (Ptolemy 2011; VOA News 2009). In order to prepare for this eventuality, he has stored over 50 boxes of documents that he believes could be used to assist with his father's resurrection, including letters, photos, manuscripts of his music compositions, and even financial records (VOA News 2009).

Some have already attempted to build the digital tools necessary to create such virtual simulations. Lifonaut recruits users to create free, comprehensive databases that will ostensibly capture every aspect of their personality, memory, and life story, with the hope that technological innovations will one day allow each person to be reconstituted as an AI (Bruce Duncan, personal correspondence, July 31, 2015). The free online platform includes a feature that allows users to, "Create a computer-based avatar to interact and respond with your attitudes, values, mannerisms and beliefs" (Lifonaut, n.d.-b). Lifonaut therefore offers users the opportunity to create a virtual simulation of themselves that will persist after their deaths, preserving "their essential, unique qualities for future generations and family members" (Lifonaut, n.d.-b). Yet Lifonaut is also clear that the rudimentary avatars that users can now create pale in comparison to the resurrections that will one day be possible. Their website states, "perhaps in the next 20 or 30 years technology will be developed to upload these files, together with futuristic software into a body of some sort (Mindclone)—perhaps cellular, perhaps holographic, perhaps robotic" (Lifonaut n.d.-a).

Some are pursuing the potential profitability of these digital renditions. The start-up Eternime is one of several that proposes to use artificial intelligence algorithms to build an avatar of each of their users. Eternime describes its service as follows:

Become virtually immortal

Eternime collects your thoughts, stories and memories, curates them and creates an intelligent avatar that looks like you. This avatar will live forever and allow other people in the future to access your memories (Eternime n.d.).

The Eternime avatar is a distillation of digital information about a person, including emails and social media updates (Chayka 2014). In one article, founder Marius Ursache writes,

The new Eternime avatar will be your personal biographer. It will want to learn as many things about you as possible, picking up cues from your social media, email or smartphone. It will try to find meaning and context in everything you do, and it will try to have short chats with you everyday in order to get more information about you. If you want to upload your thoughts, your personality and (maybe in the future) your consciousness, there's no cable now. You will have to do it a little bit every day, for the rest of your life. Ten minutes every day will add up to thousands of hours telling your story. Fact by fact (Ursache 2015).

In a vision that bears surprising similarities to Derrida's theorizations of the archive, the Eternime creators explicitly compare their avatars to a digital library. The website reads, "We want to preserve for eternity the memories, ideas, creations and stories of billions of people. Think of it like a library that has people instead of books, or an interactive history of the current and future generations. An invaluable treasure for humanity" (Eternime n.d.).

Eternime is built on the assumption that data can be used to reconstruct a person. In his article “Millions Now Living Will Never Die,” Bollmer suggests that this is part of a larger trend towards seeing online or “networked” data as fully representative of the human. He writes, “That technology seems to bring the deceased back to life is not something unique to network technology. Recordings have always animated traces of the deceased. What is new about network technology is the belief that the amount of data recorded and externalized gives a nearly full representation of the authentic identity of the human being” (Bollmer 2013:145). This vision of digital immortality presumes that the more data is made available, the more accurate the reconstruction will be. Indeed, the article by Eternime founder Marius Ursache quoted above announces in boldface, “the more information you give the avatar access to, the smarter it will become” (Ursache 2015).

Yet as we have seen, more data does not always translate into richer relationships between the living and the dead. Both Corey and Erin were ultimately disappointed by their archives. Erin found her voicemails too painful to revisit, and Corey found that her archive of conversations with Marty didn’t leave room for their relationship to evolve. Lois had little interest in going through the wealth of online material that her brother had posted on his Facebook page while he was alive, preferring to engage with Frank through the social network that brought him to presence on an ongoing basis. Similarly, Mike and Alex suggested that if their avatar were to speak, its words might only interrupt the experience of quiet communion between father and son. In the case studies explored here, the sparseness of the media contributes to their effectiveness, challenging the dreams of technological immortality that projects such as Eternime are built on.

Anticipation of futures past

Although the relationships that I grew to know didn't meet my expectations about the role that digital data would play, they do share something in common with projects like Lifenaut and Eternime. Lifenaut and Eternime look towards a temporal horizon where the living and the dead will be reunited, yet this millennial moment remains always just on the horizon, situated in the immediate future. The promise of rapidly evolving digital technology seems to foster this particular millennialism, in which relations with the dead are foreseen but perpetually deferred.

Although Mike has not yet entered Elysian Fields, the anticipation that he feels towards the moment of encounter has already forged a new kind of connection between he and his father. When I asked him about the first time he would test the prototype, he told me, "I've thought about it a thousand times. More than a thousand times. Millions of times. The moment that I put that on and I see him walk out of that mist." Deciding to develop this virtual reality experience has turned his thoughts towards his father over and over again, spurring him to imagine and re-imagine their reunion.

Mike's anticipation has partially re-situated his relationship with his father from the past into the future. He told me that while he was gathering photographs to use as source material for the prototype, his thoughts were strangely bifurcated. On the one hand, looking through old photographs brought up memories of the time that he and his father had spent together. Yet the knowledge that the photographs would be used to build the prototype also meant that he was simultaneously looking forward to their reunion. He told me, "Your brain almost jumps between the two, and you get excitement, you get sorrow, and you also get fear, a lot of fear from it as well." Past memories and future visits became the poles around which his present relationship with his father orbited.

As I spoke with more and more people about their experience using digital technology in the wake of a loved one's death, I was struck by how much of our conversations revolved around what they were hoping to do rather than what they had already done. At times it seemed as if their future plans overshadowed their past experiences with their loved ones, and perhaps even their present relationships with them. I sometimes wondered whether Alex and Mike's prolonged deferral of completing and testing the prototype was in part motivated by their desire to maintain the anticipation of a future reunion with Mike's father. The virtual reality experience that they are designing will offer him a new kind of body, allowing him to stand, walk, and look into his son's eyes again. By deferring the gift of embodiment, Mike and Alex are prolonging their obligation to Mike's father and thus protecting their ongoing relationship with him.

More than one person volunteered to participate in my research in order to discuss the plans that they had for building a relationship with their loved one using digital materials. Becca told me all about the website that she was building for her mother, who had died earlier that year. Her mother was an artist, and she had asked Becca for her help creating a website where she could display some of her work. Becca hadn't gotten around to it while her mother was alive, but she created the site soon after her death. She told me, "I would like to get a lot of her art pieces and have them sort of photographed, well-photographed, and then put them up there, and maybe with some information about just when she made it and the materials. Basically just gallery stuff." It wasn't just her mother's desires that spurred her to build the site. She explained,

She didn't have basically any online presence at all. She didn't have Facebook. She had an email, but she didn't use it. She used her email for business, for signing up for classes, for paying the bills, for buying things online. She didn't use it to chat or interact or keep up with anybody, really. And so it means that the physical stuff is what exists. And I

think that for me, so much of my life *is* online and *is* digital that the single copy which in many cases is day-to-day inaccessible for me of the things that she's made makes the online appealing to me. Because I can't wear every piece of jewelry that she made all at once. [It's] physically impossible. But if I got it all cataloged I could go to the website and I could see all of them.

Becca wanted to find a way to bring her mother into the online spaces that she herself frequented, spaces that her mother didn't occupy while she was alive but that were important sites of social connection for Becca. It was also a way for her to ensure that her mother would remain accessible to others. She told me, "Because she had no other online presence, it's like, well if someone was going to want to look her up some day, it's kind of like, "Oh, well, I need to maintain and care for this so that they can find it.'" She wanted to ensure that her mother had an ongoing social life online, both for herself and for the others that she imagined might one day encounter her.

When I spoke with Becca the website was still in its early stages, and it contained only a photograph of her mother along with a copy of her obituary. We made plans to speak again in a couple of months, after she'd had a chance to begin photographing and posting her mother's artwork. I checked back frequently over the course of the next year, but the website never materialized further.

After these conversations about the future started piling up, I began to think that the pervasive sense of unfulfilled obligation to the dead might not be entirely accidental. The deferral of fulfillment kept the people that I spoke with tied to the dead by obligations that seemed to be of their own making, drawing them into a kind of gift exchange with their loved ones. In his canonical work *The Gift* (2011[1954]), Marcel Mauss suggests that cycles of debt

and repayment create a state of mutual reciprocity that characterizes an ethical mode of relation, and may even ground an ethical sociality (Mauss 2011[1954]). Receiving a gift turns the recipient into a debtor, compelling him to reciprocate with a gift whose value exceeds the original. Rather than canceling the original debt, the increased value of the return gift creates a new obligation to reciprocate with a still greater gift.

For Mauss, gift exchange is a spiritual practice. He suggests that what is given away is not merely an object, but partakes in the life force of the original owner. He writes that in this system, “one gives away what is in reality a part of one’s nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence” (Mauss 2011[1954]:10). These endless cycles of debt and excess intimately tie exchange partners together, providing the foundation for a lasting sociality.

Crucially, it is not the moment when the gift is given that forges this ethical relationship. Instead, it is the period of time *between* when the gift is given and when it is returned that is significant. To reciprocate immediately by returning the gift would negate it; the deferral of the return gives the gift its very meaning. And while the return of the gift always holds the possibility of canceling the debt, the deferral of the return holds both exchange partners in an intimate relationship of expectation and obligation. As Whitmarsh points out, “Mauss’s analytic of debt is not so much a give and take as a continual deferral” (Whitmarsh 2017).

In *Consoling Ghosts* (2013), Langford suggests that the absence of gift exchange with the dead is what sets contemporary American death practices apart from those of Lao and Cambodian emigrants. Kmhmu, Hmong, Lao, and Khmer offer material goods such as food, money, and household items to the dead. These gifts are considered a repayment of debts that the living have incurred towards the dead, which simultaneously place the dead under the obligation

to reciprocate. The return gifts from the dead take many forms, including physical or spiritual protection, counter-gifts that the giver receives upon his or her own death, and the generalized circulation of merit that redoubles to the giver (Langford 2013:192-193). Langford critiques the American biopolitical institutions that manage death for repeatedly disallowing these forms of gift exchange. She argues that such disavowals do not stem from a biopolitical commitment to secularity, pointing out that American institutions of death are filled with spirits (Langford 2013:12-13). Rather, she asserts that biopolitical institutions are differently enchanted by a Protestant eschatology that presumes an immediate rupture between matter and spirit at the moment of death. This eschatology suppresses the possibility of ongoing reciprocal exchange with the dead.

Langford's critique of biopolitical institutions attends to the complexities of the secular-sacred U.S. practices around death and dying. However, in repeatedly contrasting Cambodian and Laos relations with the dead to Euroamerican understandings of death, Langford risks committing a similar violence to the one she accuses biopolitical institutions of committing. She refuses the possibility of gift exchange between the living and the dead among Euroamericans. At one point Langford writes,

[T]here is a self-consciously therapeutic or symbolic cast to Euroamerican interactions with the dead. The point is not that these encounters are empty of genuine belief... The point, rather, is that messages to the dead in Euroamerican mourning are largely detached from an imagination of the desires of the dead in an ongoing existence (Langford 2013:106).

Here as elsewhere, Langford contrasts Euroamerican's "symbolic" relations with the material gift exchanges undertaken by Lao and Cambodian emigrants, suggesting that Euroamerican mourners deny the ongoing needs and desires of the dead.

Although practices such as building a website or diligently using an app are not as straightforwardly material as leaving fruit or rice for a deceased loved one, I would argue that they represent another kind of gift exchange with the dead. When Becca promised that she would create an online gallery of her mother's art, was placing herself under an obligation to her dead mother. Her seeming inability to fulfill this obligation does not represent a failure of duty, but a deferral of return. By perpetually putting off the completion of her self-imposed project, she ensured that her debt would never be canceled. She established an ongoing sociality based on the anticipation of the gift that she would one day offer to her mother.

In the case of Langford's emigrants, gift exchange with the dead tends towards a state in which the obligation to return the gift lies with the dead. Her ethnographic subjects made material offerings to their deceased loved ones, placing them under the obligation to reciprocate as they saw fit. The living might only receive a counter-gift upon their own deaths, leaving them in a perpetual state of expectation. For people like Becca, the situation was reversed. They themselves deferred offering their gifts to the dead, leaving their deceased loved ones in a state of expectation. Yet in both cases, the effect is same. The ongoing relationships between the living and the dead are fed by the deferrals that hold both exchange partners together.

Animation returns

This ethnography is built around a series of case studies, each of which explores a single relationship that is mediated by a particular kind of digital technology. Looking across these

various platforms, one can see a nexus of distinct but related efforts to foster intimate relationships with loved ones who have passed away. The media through which these relationships are maintained differ significantly, from the online memorial that contains only a single photo and a handful of messages to the immersive virtual reality experience that re-creates the dead as an avatar. Yet these media share certain qualities that are vital to the way that relations with the dead take shape around them, qualities that are foregrounded by the concept of animation. I have thus used animation through this ethnography to capture and bring together two related concepts: the ongoing animacy of the dead and the particular form of mediation that fosters this animacy.

First, these media are iterative, bringing forth the variability and multiplicity of the dead. They are built on repeated encounters in which both the living and the dead appear different each time. From the series of encounters that Erin records and re-records, to the many versions of Frank that his network describes, to the series of substitutions and displacements that George's avatar points towards, the iterative nature of these media give the dead room to grow and change, mediating dynamic relationships rather than static remembrances.

Second, their representations of the dead are partial and fragmentary. These media form a database of elements rather than an exhaustive archive of the dead or a cohesive narrative of their lives. This structure produces its own affective impact, which I have explored by drawing from Nozawa's gloss on database theory and Zizek's descriptions of the fragment. Both suggest a way to think about how the fragments of a person can provide a stronger tether for attachments than a more complete representation or a full re-presencing, whether of the dead or of the living.

Third, there is a sparseness built into these media that is essential to their potency. The dead are merely outlined and evoked rather than being fully elaborated. This sparseness demands

a certain affective labor on the part of the bereaved, who must fill in the gaps left by these media. Because the gaps can be filled in differently each time, the sparseness of the media contributes to the dynamism of the relationships that they mediate. It also contributes to their efficacy. As Silvio points out with regard to animated figures, a spare outline can be more evocative than a detailed portrayal.

This last finding is perhaps the most significant. It suggests that while these digital media make possible the ongoing relations that I explore, they do not do so through an exhaustive portrayal of the deceased. It's not important that Marty's online memorial captures her essence or records the events of her life. A single photograph and a name are enough to establish a home for her relationship with Corey, particularly when they are made public in the peculiar way that the internet makes possible. The extent to which Frank's Facebook profile offers an authentic version of the person that he was when he was alive is similarly beside the point; instead, what matters is the network that his page engenders and the way that their posts are nested so as to draw Lois further and further into orbit around him. The online memorial and the Facebook page are platforms for the work that people undertake in bringing the dead to presence. What is left out of these media is as important as what is included.

There is a cyclicity built into people's engagements with these media that amplifies their intimacies with the dead. Digital media animate the dead in the ways that I have described: by offering them as fragments, by underscoring their multiplicity, and by evoking them sparsely. These forms of animation help connect the living and the dead, inviting the bereaved (and perhaps the dead) to undertaking the work of remembrance and to extend their ambivalent hospitality to each other. Digital practices thus breathe life into relationships with the dead, animating them. As these relationships are enlivened, the dead themselves are further animated,

brought to life by their participation in dynamic and ongoing relationships. As Butler points out, each of us is constituted in part by the relationships that we are caught up in. The dead are thus further animated by the enlivening of their relationships, which in turn allows these very relationships to grow and deepen. The cyclicity of this animating creates a schismogenic system (Bateson 1972), so that relationships with the dead tend to intensify over time rather than gradually waning as the bereaved learn to let go and move on. This unexpected temporality is one of the many ways that animated relationships with the dead confound contemporary psychological models of continuing bonds with the deceased.

While my findings speak back to grief theory, they also run against some of what is described in the nascent literature on animation. They demonstrate that it is not just individual entities that can be animated, but relations. Digital media are invigorating relationships between the living and the dead, ensuring that these relationships remain lively rather than stagnating into deadened bonds relegated to the past. Furthermore, the dead here participate in their own animation, contributing to the relationships that enliven them. They thus undermine animation theory's tendency to see animated figures as projections of living human actors.

Thus, animation captures the particular form of mediation involved in relationships between the living and the dead that take place on digital technologies. Animation describes both the technical ways that the dead are re-presented on these media, as well as the ways in which they continue to exist in and through the relationships that such media make possible. But what kinds of relationships does animation open up? What form do these animated relationships with the dead take? I have argued that animation fosters a particular kind of relationship with the dead—one of *extimacy*.

Extimate mediations

Intimate relationships between the living and the dead are made possible by multiple forms of mediation. They are mediated by the participation of others, who enliven each of the relationships that I describe. These collectivities differ from one media to another, ranging from the anonymous internet “public” that Corey invites into her relationship with Marty, to the friends whose conversations constitute some of Erin’s mom sightings, to the online social network that brings Frank to presence, to Mike’s own best friend. These collectives share the capacity to deepen the bond between a living person and a dead one, intensifying the experience of connecting on digital media.

I have used the term intimacy not only to denote the sense of closeness involved in these relationships, but also as a nod to Berlant’s (2000) provocation to reconsider the ways that public and private are organized. In this ethnography, intimacies that appear to be dyadic and familial are demonstrated to be reliant on others—including online others who may not be known to either the user or the deceased. Kinship is re-formed through these posthumous digital practices, as Lois remakes her relationship with Frank from a familial bond to a friendship in part by inviting previously unknown others into their relationship. Such intimacies are also subject to, and shaped by, the policies and politics of the digital platforms that they rely on, which both incite and regulate relationships with the dead. Berlant contends that rethinking public and private can levy an implicit challenge to the heteronormative nuclear family, which relies on the seeming self-evidence with which these spheres are separated. At times my ethnographic material makes that challenge more directly. Some of the online relations described in this ethnography are closer than kin, such as Corey and Marty’s ongoing intimacy. Even within

families, certain exchanges are allowed online that would not be allowed face-to-face, such as Sarah's care for her grieving father on Sam's Facebook memorial group.

I have also used intimacy to invoke the related concept of extimacy, the form that relations with the dead take on digital media. In my interlocutors' words and actions, there is a persistent tension between their desire to use digital technologies to create homes for the dead and their sense that the dead dwell within. Extimacy recognizes the necessity of these digital homes outside of the self, while also drawing out the ways that the dead are internalized. This is not a paradox, but the double movement of extimacy. The self is constantly flung outside of the self, to be discovered and re-discovered in the other. And at the same time, the other is brought into the innermost recesses of the self, while remaining radically other. For my interlocutors, the digital technologies that they engage with allow the dead to be internalized, not as the "inner representations" that grief theory predicts, but as the persistently strange other.

The mediator of the Facebook page, online memorial, app, or virtual reality body provides a locus that facilitates the double movement of extimacy. The homes that Corey, Erin, Lois, Mike, and Alex have constructed traverse the boundaries between inside and outside. Corey, Lois, Erin, and Mike find a kernel of themselves by way of these media, discovering themselves to be held within their loved ones who have passed away. In the process, they draw Marty, Frank, Patricia, and George deeper into themselves, nourishing them. This is another kind of gift exchange with the dead, one in which the gift that is exchanged is nothing less than the self. As Miller points out, Lacan used to say, "To love is to give what you haven't got" (Miller 2013).

Extimacy also gestures towards the persistent sense of absence that inheres in these relationships. Lacan suggests that there is an originary lack at the center of the subject, which

leaves us always moving towards the other (Lacan 1981[1973]). In his writing on extimacy, he further suggests that this foundational lack might be the location of the other, with one's own absence providing a home for that other (1997[1986]). By departing from Lacan to suggest a certain mutuality between self and other, I suggest that the lack that constitutes the other might likewise be where one finds oneself. That absence draws you closer, making the other into a substitute for yourself at the same time that you become a substitute for the other. My interlocutors' relationships suggest that extimacy can exist between the living and the dead, mediated by digital technologies in which absence plays a key role. These media animate the dead in ways that are deliberately incomplete, inviting the living into the empty space within the sketch. They also allow the living to discover the dead loved one dwelling within, the kernel of strangeness that makes a home in one's own absence. Digital media thus make absence a point of connection, drawing the living and the dead closer together.

By extending extimacy as I have in this ethnography, the dead beloved is not taken to be a stagnant representation of a person who has been lost, as Worden's final task of grief seems to suggest. Instead, they are a seed that takes root within the living other. As the dead beloved grows and changes, the relationship between the living and the dead likewise continues to unfurl.

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