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## **“If You’re Out There, Please Listen to Me...”: Voices of Mourning Through the Wind Phone (*Kaze no Denwa*)**

Laura J. Boyce

Overlooking the ocean, near the town of Ōtsuchi, Japan, a white telephone booth containing a disconnected rotary phone sits within the Bell Guardia Kujira-Yama garden. Itaru Sasaki, its creator, named this booth *kaze no denwa*, or the *wind phone*. Sasaki built the *wind phone* in 2011 to “call” his cousin, who had recently died of cancer. He built the *wind phone* for personal use; however, after the March 11, 2011, earthquake/tsunami that claimed the lives of nearly twenty thousand people and left around twenty-five hundred missing, the *wind phone* unexpectedly became a destination for others mourning the loss of their loved ones. In the documentary *The Phone of the Wind: Whispers to Lost Families*, Sasaki elaborates on the naming of the phone booth: “The phone won’t carry my voice. So I let the wind do it.”<sup>1</sup> Over the years as people travel to use the phone, Sasaki has welcomed them to his garden, where they too can feel the wind transport their voices.

As Sasaki’s *wind phone* rose to popularity in Japan,<sup>2</sup> it also became popular in other parts of the world, inspiring films, novels, news articles, and other media. Many people journey from around the world to visit the *wind phone*, while others have built and continue to build their own versions. Each wind phone has different cultural contexts, geographic locations, and environments, but their purpose remains consistent: to give people a chance to speak to and feel heard by their departed loved ones.<sup>3</sup>

This essay examines how the wind phone reinvents the communication technology of the telephone as a technology of mourning that helps the living feel heard by and connected to the dead.<sup>4</sup> Taking on multiple forms, the wind phone offers an interactive sensorial encounter that is not necessarily available through

traditional material objects associated with mourning, such as gravestones, statues, plaques, and other inanimate objects. The wind phone differs in that its purpose is to provide a space and an apparatus for people to feel listened to, to listen for, and even to hear the voices (or traces) of the dead and missing. Through its site-specific attributes, the wind phone allows visitors to confront (and sometimes disavow) the absence of the dead through the nostalgic performance of a rotary telephone call.<sup>5</sup> I examine how the anachronistic use of this nostalgic form of media works to make the impossible endeavor of speaking to and, more important, feeling heard by those who are no longer living feel possible.<sup>6</sup> Through the lack of physical connection to any material phone line, the wind replaces infrastructural elements such as telephone cables, cell phone towers, and other manufactured technologies, swapping calls with the living for calls to the dead and providing an alternative infrastructure necessary to connect to the dead. The functionality of the telephone is in turn reformulated, inviting a sensorial encounter specific to the wind phone—an auditory experience of listening for lost loved ones and speaking to them—while distinguishing its utility from functioning telephones used to call the living.

I discuss Sasaki's *wind phone* and how it has become a form reproduced cross-culturally, in order to indicate the need for a place to maintain a sort of attention, that is not about assimilating the lost object into some kind of ontological certainty but instead about sustaining the attention as an end in itself. Analyzing the *wind phone* as an emerging form points to the way it subtly abstracts the telephone as a form; this repetition of an existing technology with a slight but very important difference produces the *wind phone* as its own technology. Each wind phone invites a sensorial encounter tied to place, where the physical setting allows for a particular sensorial experience and constitutes a form of ritual in relation to loss. Since its invention, the wind phone has been replicated multiple times by different people in different locations, demonstrating a need for dedicated places to maintain sustained relationships with the dead.

Providing a location, medium, and ritual through which sustained attention via the act of listening for hints of the absent interlocutor's voice provides a different purpose and, for some visitors, even replaces the singular event of burying physical remains (e.g., when remains cannot be located). Acknowledging the loss of an individual does not mean we cannot listen for, hear, and feel their presence at times. It is, of course, still possible to have a relationship with a departed loved one, though the relationship is markedly different; the *wind phone* allows a place dedicated to renegotiating this relationship.

### Apostrophe, Animation, Audition

While the *wind phone* repurposes the telephone, its capacity for connection relies on the quotidian familiarity of a telephone call, which helps visitors to feel comfortable.<sup>7</sup> When the journalist Tessa Fontaine asked Sasaki why people cannot just call their departed loved ones from their personal phones, he explained:

It's not like anything else. It isn't therapy. . . . It isn't the same as the thing you say to your friend over your second glass of wine about wishing you could talk to your dead mother about something. It isn't praying. It isn't talking to a loved one who also knew the dead. You pick up the phone and your brain has readied your mouth to speak. . . . It's wired. We do it all the time. You don't think what it is you want to say, you just say it. Out loud. Into the phone, which is connected to nothing. From there, there is nothing for your words to do but follow the directives of the thing itself—be carried on the wind.<sup>8</sup>

Sasaki highlights how our brains are indeed “wired” for this connection because of the familiarity of a phone call, suggesting that there is no need for literal wires to connect us; our imaginations do that work. He asserts that the *wind phone* is “not like anything else,” yet the quotidian nature of a telephone call means visitors are “wired” to spontaneously speak into the telephone, showing how the familiar components and the singular purpose of the *wind phone* combine to help visitors carry on a relationship to the dead by providing them a space to feel listened to and in turn creating a continuity with those who have passed.

The *wind phone* has become a sort of unofficial memorial—a shrine even—for victims of the 2011 Tōhoku tsunami, despite this not being the site's initial purpose. Like Fontaine, many visitors describe their journeys to the wind phone as a “pilgrimage,” implying the sacred site specificity of this artifact and its capacity to facilitate direct address in the ambiguous circumstances in which they lost their loved ones. Broadly speaking, since the *wind phone* overlooks the ocean—an indeterminate burial site—its proximity to the site of the catastrophe personalizes the impersonal and strengthens the absent presence so often felt by its visitors. More precisely, the wind phone's proximity both to Ōtsuchi (one of the worst sites of devastation of the 2011 tsunami) and to the ocean allows visitors who were affected by the tsunami to address the specificity of their loss by bringing them near the site of destruction while conceding the vastness of the

ocean and using the boundlessness of the wind to carry voices great distances. In other words, the *wind phone* imports the significance derived from the context of place and history, against the paradoxical backdrop of the ocean's immensity.

Importantly, the *wind phone* is not just a rotary phone sitting in a garden; it is enclosed by a traditional phone booth. The enclosure of the booth allows visitors to envelop and contain their messages for transportation to the dead. The enclosure of the booth allows a concentrated space for apostrophe, the act of addressing an absent person or object, which each visitor performs when they make a call on the *wind phone*. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant discusses apostrophe via Barbara Johnson's "Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion," describing apostrophe as

an indirect, unstable, physically impossible but phenomenologically vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space of others, the objects of desire who make you possible (by having some promising qualities, but also by not being there).<sup>9</sup>

This "vitalizing movement"—the moment where the living can feel a momentary, affective resurrection of the absent other—is precisely where visitors feel the *wind phone*'s uncanny capacity. For the few moments they are inside the booth, they can inhabit the same virtual ("psychic") space, wherein their desired interlocutor can hear them, partly made possible by the enclosure of the booth. Berlant (via Barbara Johnson) describes how, through apostrophe, "a silent, affectively present but physically displaced interlocutor (a lover, a fetus) is animated in speech as distant enough for a conversation but close enough to be imaginable by the speaker in whose head the entire scene is happening."<sup>10</sup> The *wind phone* facilitates this address of an "affectively present but physically displaced interlocutor" by structuring the apostrophic animation of the displaced interlocutor. This allows visitors to connect affectively to a trace (or absent presence) of their missing loved one through entering the same psychic space.

Through apostrophe, the *wind phone* animates. Johnson expresses the important connection between wind, animation, and apostrophe through a close reading of Percy Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," which she describes as "perhaps the ultimate apostrophaic poem, makes even more explicit the relation between apostrophe and animation."<sup>11</sup> She explains how in the poem, "the west wind is a figure for the power to animate: it is described as the breath of being, moving everywhere, blowing movement and energy through the world . . . parting

the waters of the Atlantic, uncontrollable.”<sup>12</sup> The *wind phone* uses this figuration of wind to animate the dead; wind is also the source of mass destruction (through the tsunami). As Johnson puts it, “The wind animates by bringing death, winter, destruction” while allowing for this powerful extension of relation to the dead.<sup>13</sup> She reiterates that “the wind, which is to give animation, is also the giver of death,” and asks, “how do the rhetorical strategies of the poem carry out this program of animation through the giving of death?”<sup>14</sup> These same questions apply to the *wind phone*. Not only does the *wind phone* bring visitors near the site of destruction, for those who visit to connect with victims of the tsunami, the wind acts doubly as the cause of death and the force of animation.<sup>15</sup>

Among apostrophe and animation, visitors listen—for hints of the voices of lost loved ones and the potentiality of feeling listened to or heard by their departed interlocutors. Accordingly, Berlant describes the condition of hearing in apostrophe and the possibilities projected in the transmitter of vocal messages:

(T)he condition of projected possibility, of a hearing that cannot take place in the terms of its enunciation (“you” are not here, “you” are eternally belated to the conversation with you that I am imagining) creates a fake<sup>16</sup> present moment of intersubjectivity in which, nonetheless, a performance of address can take place.<sup>17</sup>

Through this type of apostrophe, the *wind phone* permits hearing—a continuity wherein the dead are temporarily present in the imaginations of the visitors. In this way, the moment of intersubjectivity is not “fake,” as Berlant claims; rather, I see it more as the virtual presence of the other. Despite the other being “eternally belated,” the imagined conversation can take place (in the present), which is why I see virtual as a more fitting word. If we consider Johnson’s description, the wind, as it animates, also creates this moment of virtual presence, even if it must be sustained by the imagination.

Relatedly, Jacques Khalip elaborates on the nature of listening, hearing, and speaking to the dead in relation to loss through his essay on Derek Jarman’s film *Blue*, an hour-long film composed of an International Klein Blue screen for its entirety. This screen is accompanied by an elaborate two-part narrative soundscape, a surreal meditation on his life, as he is dying of AIDS.<sup>18</sup> Hearing, listening, address, and mourning are integral to *Blue* and coalesce similarly in the wind phone. Khalip, via Jean-Luc Nancy, explains that “to listen (*écouter*) is decidedly not the same as to hear (*entendre*).”<sup>19</sup> Expanding on Nancy’s discussion of hearing and listening, he explains:

To be listening is thus to enter into tension and to be on the lookout for a relation to the self. . . . listening is passing over to the register of presence to self, it being understood that the “self” is precisely nothing available (substantial or subsistent) to which one can be “present,” but precisely the resonance of a return [*renvoi*]. For this reason, listening . . . can and must appear to us not as a metaphor for access to self, but as the reality of this access.<sup>20</sup>

Nancy’s understanding complicates the relation between apostrophe and animation while breaking down the process. The reality of access to the self, according to Nancy, is made apparent through listening and feeling listened to, which, paradoxically, provides solace for many visitors of the *wind phone*. For Nancy, the practice of self is an attention that delinks the listener from an expectation of presence of their own self and, instead, is linked to the absence of presence and/or loss of presence in the other. Not only is the absence of presence a constitutive part of mourning: it is, through Nancy, also a constitutive part of listening, which, in part, links these two experiences. The absence of the deceased interlocutor reflects on the idea that absence is a constitutive element of the self, which cuts against ideological priors. In the recorded calls, visitors say things like: “If this voice reaches you, please *listen*”<sup>21</sup>—importantly here, the caller understands the (im)possibility; by indicating “if” the interlocutor hears their voice, they request that the interlocutor *listen*, not to hear, but to listen, which is “decidedly different” than hearing.<sup>22</sup> However, this experience is not always consistent. One visitor’s friend insists that her late husband *heard* her, while another visitor, who lost his family (his wife, one-year-old child, and both his parents in the tsunami), pleads: “If you can *hear* me, please *listen* to me.” Similarly, a father dials the phone number of his pregnant daughter who died in the tsunami, asking: “Can you hear me? I’m here again.” To this end, the living can speak to the dead through the feeling that the other is listening, and the living can listen reciprocally for the “resonance of a return [*renvoi*]”<sup>23</sup> (despite the absence of presence of the dead), entering the same psychic space—out there somewhere, “distant enough for a conversation but close enough to be imaginable by the speaker.”<sup>24</sup> Visitors can lend voice to the dead, psychically, acknowledging the “reality of access to the self” and in turn acknowledging the reality of access to another’s self.

Further complicating and expanding on the notion of voice in relation to the *wind phone*, some visitors enact prosopopoeia: “a rhetorical device by which an imaginary, absent, or dead person is represented as speaking or acting.”<sup>25</sup> I consider this an extended aspect of animation. Robert Pogue Harrison describes

prosopopoeia as “a type of personification, a giving of face and voice to that which, properly speaking, possesses neither”; he continues:

While it is true that we speak with the words of the dead, it is equally true that the dead speak in and through the voices of the living. We inherit their words so as to lend them voice. . . . The living do not have a constitutive need to speak as much as to hear themselves spoken to, above all by the ancestor. We lend voice to the dead so that they may speak to us from their underworld—address us, instruct us, reprove us, bless us, enlighten us, and in general alleviate the historical terror and loneliness of being in the world.<sup>26</sup>

Visitors to the *wind phone* invite their loved ones to speak through and to them through prosopopoeia and animation. Through the indication that the other is listening, and at times responding and interacting, the callers can confront their loved one’s absent presence. One mother claimed that she could “keep on living,” since her son had heard her message. Without his own voice, he urged her to continue living through the alleviating act of prosopopoeia. As Pogue suggests, the living have a need to *hear themselves spoken to*, more than to *speak*. This need, to hear themselves spoken to and to feel heard, is a crucial aspect of the mourning self. It is also the crux of this installation, and perhaps why and how it has become a popular technology of mourning, not only in Japan but in different locations and cultures. This is an aspect of mourning that, when you lose someone, you lose access to them, and the wind phone reintroduces this part of a relationship through animation. Similarly, one of the *wind phone*’s frequent visitors, Sachiko Okawa, often calls her late husband, whom she was married to for forty-four years, using the *wind phone*. In one call, she tells him, “I’m lonely . . . Bye for now, I’ll be back soon.”<sup>27</sup>

Like other technologies of mourning, the *wind phone* “rupture[s] the conventional relations of person and address,” as well as temporal experiences of speaking and listening in a way that is similar to obituaries, although through aural form, rather than written.<sup>28</sup> Khalip begins his ““Archaeology of Sound”” with a lengthy quotation from Eve Sedgwick’s “White Glasses,” where she discusses the complicated nature of this rupture of conventions in mourning sites:

The most compelling thing about obituaries is how openly they rupture the conventional relations of person and of address. From a tombstone, from the tiny print in the New York Times, from the



panels on panels on panels of the Names Project quilt, whose voice speaks impossibly to whom? From where is this rhetorical power borrowed, and how and to whom is it to be repaid? We miss you. Remember me. She hated to say goodbye. Participating in these speech acts, we hardly know whether to be interpellated as survivors, bereft; as witnesses or even judges; or as the very dead . . . in the panels of the quilt, I see that anyone, living or dead, may occupy the position of the speaker, the spoken to, the spoken about.<sup>29</sup>

Visitors to the wind phone perform transmutations of address, too, such that “anyone, living or dead, may occupy the position of the speaker, the spoken to, the spoken about.” Through apostrophe and the animation it invites, the wind phone recasts the positions of the “speaker, spoken to and spoken about.” As Khalip explains, “Speech vexes the voiced act of commemoration and redirects [Sedgwick] within the sonorities of the departed.”<sup>30</sup> Perhaps, then, the prevalence of apostrophe and prosopopoeia in relation to mourning indicate the desire to speak directly to and with the dead in mourning. This desire is not addressed through other technologies of mourning, or is a secondary function of these technologies. The *wind phone* provides an enclosed space and a medium through which to directly address the dead and through which the positions of speaker and addressee can transfigure.

### **Wind, Infrastructure**

Each wind phone is unconnected to electricity and phone wires. The physical disconnection enables the connection to the spirit world as it is deliberately disconnected from telecommunications infrastructure, which facilitates the specificity of this phone’s function: calling the dead. As Sasaki explains, “The phone won’t carry my voice. So I let the wind do it.”<sup>31</sup> This generates the alternative purpose of the wind phone, taking it out of the realm of its usual function and redirecting calls to the dead via its disconnection. Instead of phone lines, electricity, and built aspects of functioning telephone infrastructures, the wind acts as the apparatus’s infrastructure and serves to maintain a different kind of connection. My formulation of infrastructure stems from various thinkers. Heavily influenced by Deborah Cowen (among others), I see infrastructures as “collectively constructed systems that also build and sustain human life,” systems that “endure and bind us to one another’s pasts, presents and futures” and

“implicate us in collective life and death.”<sup>32</sup> The wind phone is intentionally disconnected in order to set up a spiritual infrastructure, which I see as the existing realm of spirits and the connections and relations between the spirit world and the living world, where the connections to pasts, presents, and futures indeed endure and are bound through an alternative structure, in this case, the wind. Put plainly, the phone is intended for the nonliving or unreachable only, thus it must be connected to nowhere, denied of its typical function in order to access the spiritual realm, or spiritual infrastructure. In Berlant’s words, “[Infrastructure] is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure,” that is to say, while infrastructure builds structures, the structures also build us.<sup>33</sup> In this case, the “living mediation” is complicated, wind is not necessarily living, but it animates, so there is a tension here between the living mediation with the dead. Berlant asserts that infrastructures include “all the systems that link ongoing proximity to being in a world-sustaining relation.”<sup>34</sup> The boundless wind, in contrast with the confined telephone booth, promotes the wavering of the boundary between living and dead. A telephone call is intended for a specific destination; but in this case, the destination is beyond the living.

To expand on the infrastructural elements of the wind phone, I draw on Susan Leigh Star, who writes that infrastructure “becomes visible upon breakdown.”<sup>35</sup> In relation to the wind phone, it is the intentional breakdown that makes the infrastructure function and makes it both invisible (the wind) and audible (voices in the wind). Building on Star, Brian Larkin defines infrastructure as

built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space. As physical forms they shape the nature of a network, the speed and direction of its movement, its temporalities, and its vulnerability to breakdown. They comprise the architecture for circulation, literally providing the undergirding of modern societies, and they generate the ambient environment of everyday life.<sup>36</sup>

Larkin also defines infrastructure as the “matter that enables the movement of other matter . . . things and also the relation between things.”<sup>37</sup> Contrastingly, the queer Indigenous scholar Anne Spice contests the “tacit assumption that infrastructures, as ‘things and also the relation between things,’ are inanimate, are not alive.”<sup>38</sup> In “Fighting Invasive Infrastructures: Indigenous Relations against Pipelines,” Spice traces the Canadian government’s discourse surrounding oil and gas as “critical infrastructure,” which “naturalizes the environmental destruction

wrought by the oil and gas industry while criminalizing Indigenous resistance.”<sup>39</sup> They argue that in Indigenous ontologies, infrastructures are living and, therefore, merit a different approach. Spice references Freda Huson, the spokesperson for the Wet’suwet’en pipeline resistance camp in Unist’ot’en territory in British Columbia, who “calls attention to the salmon, the berries, and the bears that form [Indigenous] critical infrastructure.”<sup>40</sup> Spice asserts that “this living network is not an assemblage of ‘things and relation between things,’ but rather a set of relations and things between relations.”<sup>41</sup> Spice’s alternatives to Western formulations of infrastructure provide insight into the differing systems. Their understanding of Indigenous infrastructures that require “caretaking, which Indigenous peoples are accountable to,” provide a way to consider the relations available through the wind phone, which “are built through the agency of not only humans but also other-than-human kin.”<sup>42</sup> Correspondingly, wind phones can, perhaps, be understood as invoking “a set of relations and things between relations,” the apparatus and the wind being the animators of these relations (and things between relations). It can also be seen via Larkin as “things and relation between things”—the things being the living, the dead, and the apparatus itself, and the relations being everything that goes on in between.

By transmitting the voices of the visitors and their perceived interlocutors, the wind as an animating infrastructure carries the messages out of the realm of the living, out of the realm of efficiency and logistics, and into the realm of the spiritual, the ghostly, the dead. It also elicits a ghostly transmission in the psyches of the visitors. The wind phone allows for a substitution, where the loss of a loved one’s voice is addressed through the voicing of their loss, ultimately giving visitors an opportunity to begin to narrate and account for this loss.

### Hearing the Past in the Present

“Can the past be heard in the present? What or who speaks or makes a sound? How do lost voices of the dead contribute to the time of the present?”<sup>43</sup> The *wind phone* suggests possible answers to these questions. Inside Sasaki’s telephone booth, a framed poem reads: “Who will you call, at the phone of the wind, you will talk to them from your heart, if you hear the wind tell them how you feel, surely your thoughts will reach them.”<sup>44</sup> The nostalgic rotary phone plays a role in connecting the voice of one alive in the present to the voice of another who is no longer living, performing a metaphorical, temporal manipulation in the time of the present. The temporal paradox of listening for voices of the past through a medium (the telephone) that requires immediacy while using an anachronistic

rotary telephone provides two key functions for the wind phone. The nostalgia of the rotary phone and the phone booth hark back to the past, whereas the telephone allows visitors to connect instantaneously with their loved ones. Together, these elements of the wind phone suspend the experience of temporality—being heard presently by those who are no longer living in the present, thus, revisiting the past in the present. This can be compared with early experiences of sound recording, though it is markedly different. The sound historian and media theorist Jonathan Sterne discusses the history of the relation between sound recording and death culture, referring to sound recording as a “resonant tomb.” Sterne explains:

Is this the ultimate and shocking power of sound reproduction—that it finally set the voice free from the living and self-aware body (if only for a few moments)? This is the tale often told about sound reproduction. In this formulation, death appears as a philosophical limit case for sound reproduction, and sound recording becomes a philosophical index for sound reproduction in general. The reasoning goes like this: when recorded, one’s voice was abstracted from one’s body, and, once so abstracted, the voice could be preserved indefinitely on record. The ultimate case of this scenario is, of course, the voice’s persistence through recordings after the death of the speaker.<sup>45</sup>

Sterne makes an important distinction between sound recording and sound reproduction. What is interesting about the wind phone is its departure from sound recording; in fact, the recording would disrupt the function all together. If “the recording is . . . a resonant tomb, offering the exteriority of the voice with none of its interior self-awareness,” as Sterne suggests, what is this technology that is purposefully not recorded, or in ways not resonant? The loved one’s voice is not so much a repetition as a re-production, in the sense that hearing is about feeling the presence or the trace of the other. That is to say, the *wind phone* reproduces differently—it is obscured or distorted as opposed to being a recording like a voice message for an answering machine, and so forth. The spontaneity and unpredictability of what each individual will feel and hear, where sound recording is not part of the process, allows for the spontaneity of the voice’s “interior self-awareness.” Why travel to a booth near the sea to speak into an unconnected phone and listen for a trace of a lost loved one? Especially if you have access to multiple recordings of this person? Sterne argues that “*the voices of the dead* is a striking figure of exteriority” and explains how “speech is traditionally considered

as both interior and exterior, both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the limits of subjectivity.”<sup>46</sup> This is “because it comes from within the body and extends out into the world, whereas “the voices of the dead no longer emanate from bodies that serve as containers for self-awareness.”<sup>47</sup> Visitors desire the imagined interiority, spontaneity, and lack of repetition that comes with the wind phone. In this way, the wind phone allows for a kind of reinvention of the other’s self-awareness by invoking the voices of the dead through spontaneous phone calls.

While the process departs from recorded sound, it invokes a kind of nostalgia through the use of the rotary phone. Eugenie Brinkema describes why some “theorizations of nostalgia (*nostos* [to return home]; *algos* [pain]) are so reminiscent of those of grief.”<sup>48</sup> Brinkema shows the potent connection between nostalgia and grief, leading to an understanding of why a nostalgic rotary phone makes a powerful technology of mourning. Sasaki’s nostalgic rotary telephone harks back to the original uses for telephones as simple devices connecting the voice of one individual to the voice of another, instantly, however long the physical distance. Departing from the modern-day multipurpose use of smartphones, the wind phone embraces the nostalgic use of a rotary phone as a technology for intimate connection. While acknowledging both individual and collective grief brought on by a natural disaster, the wind phone represents a bridging of individual loss, by nature of the physical limits of the space, and collective loss, by way of its accessibility and wide appeal as a technology of mourning. The wind phone suspends how we experience time and communication where visitors are invited to embrace the temporal paradox of hearing the past in the present. In the case of the wind phone, the anachronistic use of the rotary telephone acts to alter the visitor’s experience of temporality, suspending the delivery, dislocating subject, object, and time.

Since their respective inventions, the telephone and the phonograph have been associated with the supernatural and have on numerous occasions been considered technologies that can communicate with the spirit world.<sup>49</sup> This could be in part because “the telephone facilitated the hearing of a voice physically absent to the listener,” so it left space for the uncanny, and as the sound historian Jonathan Sterne explains, “the phonograph took this a step further by dramatically facilitating the audition of voices absent to themselves.”<sup>50</sup>

The first person to use a telephone in Japan exclaimed, “Ohh, it’s just like hearing the voice of a ghost!”<sup>51</sup> When telephones were first introduced in Japan, people who did not have their own telephones would travel outside their homes to engage in a practice called “*yobidashi denwa*” (telephone summons)—emphasizing the feeling of a sort of magic when “summoning” another through the telephone.<sup>52</sup> The process sometimes involved going to the office multiple

times in order to reach the intended receiver. Despite the cumbersome nature of *yobidashi denwa*, there was still demand for these calls; users “wanted, simply, to hear one another’s voices even when one or both parties didn’t have a phone installed.”<sup>53</sup> The wind phone, in a way, mimics this summoning of the distant presence of a departed loved one; however, the wind phone obscures the voice, or the expectation of what visitors expect to encounter. Yasar highlights the history and cultural significance of orality in Japan and how the voice is often used synonymously with identity. He explains:

The voice itself straddles the boundary, as Michel Chion has noted, between materiality and immateriality. In other words, technologically mediated listening over long distances offered users pleasure derived . . . both from technological magic and from the sensual medium of the human voice.<sup>54</sup>

While *yobidashi denwa* emphasizes the appeal of listening to a technologically mediated voice over a long distance, the wind phone produces a “technological magic” through the use of wind as infrastructure, obscuring and redressing the “sensual medium of the human voice” over long distance, and even across the barrier of the living and dead.<sup>55</sup> The idea of the human voice as a “sensual medium” helps account for the sensorium associated with the wind phone. A replacement takes place, where the senses are attuned to traces of departed loved ones, aided by the wind’s animating capacity.

Yasar explains how “residual traces [of an individual’s voice] remain only in the memories of mortal bodies.”<sup>56</sup> To hear a loved one’s voice or feel/hear a trace of their voice, then, indicates that they are reachable, through recognizing their absence. So perhaps it is memories or traces that the visitors speak to and want to feel heard by. Trace, according to Jacques Derrida, “is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers to itself, it properly has no site—erasure belongs to its structure.”<sup>57</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit expands on Derrida’s notion of trace, defining it as “an erasable sign and sign of erasure that erases as it signs and is in turn erased already.”<sup>58</sup> That is to say, the voice is associated with mortality as well as vitality, which is key to the functioning of the wind phone—visitors are aware that they are listening for voices that they literally cannot hear, though there are substitutions for their voices, the animation force of the wind, for example, that allow the visitors to hear a representation of their presence. Importantly, in the context of using a rotary phone in a phone booth, the unique sound of someone’s voice in present time actively indicates that they are alive.

In cases where physical remains cannot be located, people still feel it is necessary for living loved ones and the remains of the deceased to be ceremoniously “reunified.”<sup>59</sup> For example, a mother of three, who lost her husband, is recorded in the booth, and translated in *This American Life: One Last Thing Before I Go* podcast:

I feel like you’re still alive—somewhere. Over the phone, we always said to each other, are you alive? Yes, I’m alive. It was our password between the two of us, wasn’t it? I can’t ask you that anymore. Come back. We, all four of us together, we will be waiting. Bye.<sup>60</sup>

For this woman, the fact that her husband’s body was never found creates the sense that he may be alive, out there somewhere. In this regard, Harrison notes:

the work of getting the dead to die in us, as opposed to dying with our dead, is all the more arduous if not impossible when the dead body goes missing, given the almost universal association between corpse and person among human beings and the fact that mortal remains are never a matter of indifference where bonds of love and kinship exist.<sup>61</sup>

For some visitors, the wind phone allows the commencement of the “work of getting the dead to die in us,” though as Harrison notes, this work is exceedingly difficult when letting go of the missing. In Harrison’s conception, this release is the very work of mourning—“Just as burial lays the dead to rest in the earth, mourning lays them to rest in us.”<sup>62</sup> At times, the work of mourning through the wind telephone is the intimacy of feeling that wherever a loved one may be, however far away, the living can continue to feel a connection, even after the dead are made to die within the living. When mortal remains are swept up by the ocean or obscured by piles of debris—like in the aftermath of the 3/11 earthquake and tsunami—the impossibility of laying the dead to rest is immensely difficult to grapple with. The loss of remains complicates the process of mourning and maintains, or at least acknowledges, the temporal suspension of those mourning the missing. Furthermore, in this case, mourning does not mean letting go or “letting the dead die in our imagination” but precisely the opposite: visitors maintain some kind of a relationship with their departed loved ones through the phone booth, ultimately letting the dead live in their imaginations and in these site-specific conversations. Visitors can sustain their attention but also

concentrate their desires through this site-specific memorial/communication technology.

## Conclusion

As I have demonstrated, the wind phone, as a technology of mourning, provides a space where visitors can reconcile an altered relationship to the dead, particularly in the case where there are no physical remains of those who have passed. Repurposing the telephone, a common communication technology, wind phones allow a place for people to externalize their grief and connect with traces of their lost loved ones. Since the *wind phone* overlooks the ocean, not far from where the town of Ōtsuchi suffered immense loss, the site specificity foregrounds the important and intimate details of personal loss and sets it against the indeterminate scene of the waters, allowing for a sort of confrontation of the ambiguity of loss. What takes place is a renegotiation of mourning, where overlapping rhetorical devices, like apostrophe, prosopopoeia, and animation, along with nostalgic media—the rotary telephone—summon the dead and at times give them voice, all in the psychically and spiritually dense confines of a phone booth connected to nothing but the wind. The absent presence or trace of a departed loved one now becomes possible, palpable, as if the dead were really speaking through the wind phone.

\* \* \*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Phone of the Wind: Whispers to Lost Families*, NHK Documentary, aired March 11, 2017. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/tv/documentary/20210307/4001232/>.

<sup>2</sup> When referring to Sasaki's *wind phone*, I use italics to indicate the specific artwork I am referring to; when wind phone is not in italics, I am referring to the wind phone as a form that has been reproduced in various locations.

<sup>3</sup> For example, one particular reproduction is located in a garden behind a hospice in Port Moody, British Columbia, where employees built a wind phone so that people whose loved ones are dying in the hospice could have a chance to say things and/or feel the presence of their loved ones who are dying or have died.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term *technology* to emphasize the utility of the wind phone as a tool. In this case, it can also be considered a technology for its innovative reappropriation of the common communication technology: the telephone and telephone booth. It also complicates the notion of technology by putting this common technology to a different use in a different way (reinterpreting the literal material functionality of a telephone).

<sup>5</sup> By site-specific attributes, I am referring to the site itself, the disconnected rotary phone, the telephone booth, and its specific use for contacting the dead/absent and only those interlocutors (as opposed to a regular telephone booth with a phone that is connected to a phone line, which is used for contacting the living). The site's proximity to the ocean, and to Ōtsuchi, also add to the site specificity of this *wind phone*.

<sup>6</sup> This is an important part of the functioning of the *wind phone*. According to the *OED*, anachronisms are things that belong to or are appropriate to different periods of time, so the rotary phone here is an anachronistic type of media.

<sup>7</sup> The title of this section is referencing Barbara Johnson's "Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion," in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Tessa Fontaine, "The Phone of the Wind: A Pilgrimage to a Disconnected Phone in Ōtsuchi, Japan," July 25, 2018, <https://culture.org/logger/the-phone-of-the-wind/>.

<sup>9</sup> Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," in *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 26, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394716>.

<sup>10</sup> Berlant is paraphrasing Johnson's "Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion" in *Cruel Optimism* (25).

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion," 187.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> The wind is, of course, not always a double actor in this sense. However, it remains a powerful animator in every case.

<sup>16</sup> I want to trouble Berlant's use of *fake* here. What makes it fake? Can one not be virtually present in a moment with someone who is not physically there? Does this make it fake?

<sup>17</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Khalip, "The Archaeology of Sound?: Derek Jarman's Blue and Queer Audiovisuality in the Time of Aids," *differences* 21, no. 2 (2010): 73–108, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2010-004>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, quoted in Khalip, "Archaeology of Sound," 78.

<sup>21</sup> The translation of this phrase is from episode 597 of *This American Life*, "One Last Thing Before I Go, Act One: Really Long Distance." The episode uses the recorded phone calls from the documentary, however, Miki Meek, a producer on the show, translates the calls in the podcast. It is one translation of the words, which, in the documentary *The Phone of the Wind: Whispers to Lost Families*, were alternatively translated as "If you're out there, please listen to me." I chose to use both translations of this visitor's words in this essay.

<sup>22</sup> *The Phone of the Wind: Whispers to Lost Families*.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Listening," in *Listening*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>24</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "prosopopoeia," May 20, 2022, <https://www-oed-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/view/Entry/153015?redirectedFrom=prosopopoeia>.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 151, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226317922.001.0001>.

<sup>27</sup> Mari Saito, "Japan's Tsunami Survivors Call Lost Loves on the Phone of the Wind," Reuters, March 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/wider-image-japans-tsunami-survivors-call-lost-loves-phone-wind-2021-03-05/>.

<sup>28</sup> Eve Sedgwick, quoted in Khalip, "Archaeology of Sound," 73.

<sup>29</sup> Eve Sedgwick, "White Glasses," in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 264.

<sup>30</sup> Khalip, "Archaeology of Sound," 74.

<sup>31</sup> *The Phone of the Wind: Whispers to Lost Families*.

<sup>32</sup> Deborah Cowen, “Infrastructures of Empire and Resistance,” Verso, January 25, 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3067-infrastructures-of-empire-and-resistance>.

<sup>33</sup> This is a reference to Berlant as well as Cowen, who writes: “‘We’ build infrastructure, and it builds ‘us’” (“Infrastructures of Empire and Resistance”).

<sup>34</sup> Lauren Berlant, “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 393, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816645989>.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Leigh Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 3 (1999): 377–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027649921955326>.

<sup>36</sup> Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 328, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>38</sup> Anne Spice, “Fighting Invasive Infrastructures: Indigenous Relations against Pipelines,” *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 9 (2018): 42. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2018.090104>.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Khalip, “‘Archaeology of Sound,’” 76.

<sup>44</sup> Saito, “Japan’s Tsunami Survivors Call Lost Loves on the Phone of the Wind.”

<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 290. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822384250>.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 57, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822376774>.

<sup>49</sup> For more on this topic, see Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Jeffery Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); and Sterne, *Audible Past*.

<sup>50</sup> Sterne, *Audible Past*, 290.

<sup>51</sup> Kerim Yasar, “Vocal Cords and Telephone Wires,” in *Electrified Voices: How the Telephone, Phonograph, and Radio Shaped Modern Japan, 1868–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 42. <https://doi.org/10.7312/yasa18712-004>.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>57</sup> Derrida, quoted in Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 54.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 147.

<sup>60</sup> Meek, “One Last Thing Before I Go, Act One: Really Long Distance,” *This American Life* podcast.

<sup>61</sup> Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 147.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 50.