



## ANIMATING RELATIONS: Digitally Mediated Intimacies between the Living and the Dead

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Shortly after her mother Patricia's unexpected death, Erin set out to digitally track her persistent presence by recording each time that Patricia made an appearance in her life.<sup>1</sup> She created a form using the software program Google Documents, a form that she playfully referred to as her "app" and kept bookmarked on her smartphone. The app included space to indicate the date and time, the location, and what Erin was doing when a memory of her mother arose. It also contained boxes that she could check off to indicate her emotional state, such as sad or nostalgic. At the bottom was a text box entitled "comments" where she could type out any additional information that she wanted to include. When she was finished, she hit the submit button and the entry was uploaded into a spreadsheet alongside her past entries.

Erin envisioned the app as a way to track the progression of her own grief. As she began to use it, 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." To reflect this new understanding, she termed her entries "mom sightings."

Recent theorizations of animation offer intriguing possibilities for recognizing and attending to the sociality of a range of entities, including the dead. These literatures explore the linkages between animator, animated character, and medium, showing how objects and figures can be brought to life as characters 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 character, and medium, illustrating 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 this way we move from animation in a technical sense as a media genre to animation in a sense that borders on animism—bringing to life, in this case by producing an animated nonhuman person, the character.

Such insights are productive not only for understanding characters but also for understanding an emergent way of interacting with the dead, one that we find in Erin's use of her app to sustain her relationship with her mother. In his ethnography of Japanese characters, [Shusuke Nozawa \(2013\)](#) 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.

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 can spark new understandings of death and digitization. By exploring the intimate relationships that those like Erin and Patricia are cultivating, I show how the dead are brought to life as characters through coconstitutive relations organized around the partial, iterative, and fragmented qualities of the digital media that sustain them. I do so in order to explore what happens to relationships with the dead when they migrate onto digital media.

In the broader research from which this article emerges, I explore the intimacies that some maintain with dead loved ones using a range of digital technologies, including online memorials, social media pages, smartphone apps, and virtual reality experiences ([Hales 2018](#)). The first online memorials date back to the early days of the internet, when *The Worldwide Cemetery* invited users to create digital monuments to the deceased. Some of my ethnographic subjects continue to use online memorials as a space of connection, including one young woman who

told me: “It’s very important to me that [the online memorial] is there, because it feels like a continuation of [our] relationship. . . . It’s a way of making sure that that connection stays strong.” Many of the people I spoke with use social media to maintain and even deepen relations with the dead, including families who use memorial groups to keep the dead alive for each other, as well as individuals who linger on the profile pages of the deceased. Others of my ethnographic subjects use digital tools to craft unique forms of connection. One family created a website that displays scanned images of paper postcards that friends and family have sent to the dead, highlighting the ways that digital media incorporate nondigital forms of remembrance. Another young man collaborated with his best friend to create a virtual reality experience where he could quietly share a park bench with the virtual body of his late father.

For my ethnographic subjects, digital media offer more than an opportunity for occasional reminiscence. They create mutual entanglements between the living and the dead, helping bring the deceased to life. In attending to the dead in this way, I align myself with a growing literature on the efficacy of the dead today, including their participation in practices of labor (Derrida 1994; Stanyek and Piekut 2010), care (Langford 2013; Stevenson 2014), kinship (Sharp 2006), politics (Feldman 1991; Verdery 1999; Robben 2005), and social life (Gordon 1997; Ochoa 2010). Such work extends long-standing anthropological preoccupations with the sociality of the dead, dating back to Robert Hertz’s (2004) famous description of the liminal status of the deceased (see also van Gennep 1961; A. Strathern 1981; Harris 1982; Watson 1982; Klima 2002; Aries 2005; Conklin 2005; Kan 2005; Malinowski 2005; Radcliffe-Brown 2005; Tsintjilonis 2007). Literatures on the Spiritualism movement offer a comparative touchpoint for mediatized relationships with the dead in the United States (Connor 1999; Sconce 2000; McGarry 2008; Manning 2018).

But digital media do not just vivify the dead; they vivify the dead *as characters*. The interrelated concepts of character and animation are joined by certain features specific to their shared genre. Animated characters are variable, appearing and reappearing somewhat differently as they move through time, context, and genre. They are partial and fragmentary, cohering around a database of elements rather than a cohesive, narrative identity. Finally, they are sparse, evoked rather than represented. Animated by digital media, the dead invite their loved ones to fill them, expanding into a multiplicity of different versions to which shifting attachments can form.

## ANIMATION

One of the questions that has come up in my research involves the ways in which the dead continue to exist for us, making problematic both popular and psychological understandings in the United States about how mourning ought to proceed. In his famous essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” [Sigmund Freud \(1957\)](#) argues that the work of mourning involves a gradual detachment from the deceased, without which the bereaved could descend into the pathological state of melancholia. The necessity of detachment undergirds many of the most popular psychological models of grief throughout the twentieth century, including Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s famous description of the five stages of grief (see [Maciejewski et al. 2007](#)). In the past thirty years, however, the model of “continuing bonds” ([Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996](#)) with the deceased has gained traction, and with it the recognition that it is relatively common to maintain relationships with the dead throughout one’s life. Even so, models of severance continue to haunt these new perspectives on grief. The dead are assumed to be a fantasy or projection of the living, confined to a past that is accessed through deliberate acts of reminiscence. Thus, even models of ongoing attachment are underwritten by ontological assumptions about the limited subjective capacities of the dead.

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. In her article “Animation: The New Performance?,” the anthropologist [Teri Silvio \(2010\)](#) proposes that animation might offer the same range of theoretical possibilities as performance, which has been used not only to understand specific forms of media such as theater but also as a productive analytic for subjectivity and sociality. Drawing from three disciplinary approaches—the arts, anthropology, and psychology—she 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).

In addition to proposing animation as a broad analytic, Silvio argues that existing forms and practices of animation cannot be understood using the conceptual apparatus at hand—notably, performance. She writes:

The concept of performance . . . tends to hide the ontological differences between animated characters and the people who create, use, and interact with them. We lose sight of the uncanny “illusion of life” that makes these

characters appealing, of their particular blend of materiality and imagination, and of their diffuse agency. (Silvio 2010, 423)

Silvio's reflections on animation developed out of her own experiences doing field-work with producers and fans of a popular Taiwanese video puppetry series. She found that questions such as "how do you get into character?" did not make sense to fans who were cosplaying puppet characters, dressing up as animated figures in public spaces. She writes, "I found that the vast majority saw cosplay as reanimating the characters by substituting the human body for the wooden one" (Silvio 2010, 433). Silvio thus highlights the hybrid nature of the animated figure, whose existence is both enabled by others and in excess of them. In her discussion of cosplay (Silvio 2006), she suggests that it is not solely the cosplayer who is animating the character but also the character who is animating the cosplayer (see also Manning and Gershon 2013; Manning 2017).

Shunsuke Nozawa (2016) builds on Silvio's insights by further subverting the sense of one-sided control between animator and animated. In his analysis of Japanese voice actors who voice popular characters, he writes:

Our 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.

I push forth the ambiguities between the conscious attempt to enact, embody, or voice a character and the sense of being overcome by that character. I do so in part by extending characters to include certain mediated forms of the dead. *Character* usually denotes a rendered figure that stems from another's imagination. As I use the term, *character* describes those not-quite-human persons brought to life by a particular mode of mediation built on the animating database. As formerly human, characters represent a special class of characters. Yet they also point to some of the essential qualities of characters, including the way that they emerge

and reemerge in relation to those others who are willing to fill them in, and in the process to be swept away by them.

To be clear, I am not arguing that digital media define the way that people relate to others, including the dead (cf. [Turkle 1995](#); [Castells 1996](#); [Hayles 1999](#); [Weinberger 2007](#)). Animation underscores the ways in which digital media build on and extend analog technologies, pointing to a generative reciprocity between analog and digital forms ([Bolter and Grusin 1999](#); [Gitelman 2006](#); [Galloway, Thacker, and Wark 2013](#); [Peters 2017](#)). Digital animations such as avatars remediate not only analog artistic genres such as drawings of cartoons and anime characters but also practices such as puppetry, which vivify nonhuman objects ([Manning 2009](#); [Silvio 2010](#); [Boellstorff 2015](#)). I thus draw attention to the interdependence of analog and digital technologies in making possible this emergent form of relations with the dead.

Furthermore, the dead are not just animated by the technological parameters of the media but also by the practices that my ethnographic subjects have developed around them. These practices cultivate forms of attention through which the living open themselves up to the dead. They also foster a particular relationship to memory, one in which memories are experienced as an evolving database of encounters continually drawing together past and present. Through their digital practice, my ethnographic subjects extend their hospitality to the dead, inviting them deeper within at the same time as they project themselves onto the screens that mediate their intimacies with the deceased ([Lacan 1981](#)).

I explore these animated relationships by delving deeply into one such practice—Erin’s use of her app to animate her relationship with her mother, Patricia. My conversations with Erin began in San Francisco shortly after Patricia’s untimely death, when Erin was still trying to figure out whether and how it would be possible to maintain their relationship. Several years and cross-country moves later, my own conversations with Erin 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 reminded of the limitations introduced by digital media, as well as the possibilities that they opened up for our continued conversations.

Over the course of nearly five years, I witnessed the ups and downs of Erin and Patricia’s relationship, and grew to understand the intricacies of the app’s involvement in it. Although it was far from the most common way that people maintained intimacies with the dead using digital media, I came to see Erin’s practice as diagnostic of this emergent form of relation, gathering together and bringing

into focus many of the key elements of my research. The app participated in the enchantments that it rendered, animating the objects, people, and places that contained memories of her mother. These animated entities were inscribed into the medium, becoming entries in the database that was the site and source of Erin and Patricia's persistent relationship. The fragmented structure of the database encouraged Erin to approach her mother as a set of partial iterations that could evoke Patricia without fully capturing her. It opened up a mediated relationship that crosscut divisions between inside and outside, grounding an ethics of hospitality toward the dead. By sustaining a phatic connection between mother and daughter, the app nourished a dynamic intimacy that left both Erin and Patricia room to grow and change.

### INTIMATE MEDIATIONS

On a hot July afternoon, 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 our tears.

Erin struggled to remember where the idea for the app had originated, although I had not asked her for its history. She told me that it had partly developed out of her own interest in new forms of digital media, which she worked with professionally. She mused: “But it also came from this sense that with grief, there’s just little moments of your life that pop up, where the person who’s gone, they’re almost haunting it. . . . I guess I just wanted to make space for all those moments in the flow of my life where my mom appeared.”

Erin used her app to record these moments of haunting, allowing her to “dive deeper” into the experience. In the process, the app animated the objects, places, and people through which Erin encountered her mother. This was a common theme in my ethnographic material: the technologies that mediated relations with the dead were also a means of animating them. Erin told me that the app offered her a way “to capture the sightings, the physical sightings in the world. To animate the objects into life. To animate these things that had ghostlike qualities.” In her framing, animation blurs into the related concept of animacy, the quality of “agency, awareness, mobility, and liveness” (Chen 2012, 2) that can inhere in di-

verse entities (see also [Kohn 2013](#); [Povinelli 2016](#)). Although she joked, “I’m not an animist!,” Erin also told me that in using the app, “I wanted to take seriously the idea that my mom kind of lives in that weird water bottle over there.”

The forms of animation that the app rendered were built on Erin’s own memories of her mother. Although this held true for all my ethnographic subjects, Erin’s app made the relationship between animation and memory particularly transparent. Erin drew together recording, animation, and memory in her explanation of what constitutes a mom sighting:

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!

Erin’s descriptions of memory recall Marcel Proust’s musings on the persistent life of the dead. 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](#), 34)

Erin’s app is likewise built on the idea that objects do not just trigger internal memories but also might actually bring Erin into contact with her mother. In Erin’s description, she and Patricia catch each other off guard, just as Proust’s trees “start and tremble” when a loved one passes by. Notably, in Proust’s account, reunion depends on the efforts of both the living and the dead. The dead must call out, alerting the living to their presence. And the living must perceive in these objects those whom they have lost, offering their recognition to break the spell



of imprisonment. This is part of what the app offers Erin and Patricia. Through her digital practice, Erin becomes attuned to Patricia's varied manifestations. By recording them, she registers her mother's continued presence, interrupting their mutual isolation. The app thus constitutes a crucial means by which Erin and Patricia are brought together.

At the same time, Patricia's liveliness is not merely an effect of the medium. Like an animated character, Patricia is not animated *by* a particular technology, but *in the presence* of that technology. Silvio describes this phenomenon among Taiwanese cosplayers who are animated by puppet characters from the television series *Pili*. As [Paul Manning and Ilana Gershon \(2013, 117\)](#) note, "the [cosplayer's] body can be activated when surrounded by the right combination of media," including the recording device of the camera, the recorded text of a *Pili* skit, and the adorned body of the cosplayer. Just as the costumed cosplayers' bodies are insufficient to channel the characters that animate them, the objects that participate in Erin's mom sightings contain only the possibility of being animated. For animation to take place, the right combination of media must be present—in this case, the app through which Erin recorded her mom sightings. Her app helped transform these objects into conduits for her persistent relationship to her mother.

For those like Erin who use digital technologies to stay close to dead loved ones, these media participate in the enchantments that they simultaneously record and render. Yet like Patricia, the dead are continually exceeding the media that animate them. This is a defining feature of animated characters, which [Manning \(2009, 320\)](#) describes as "a Peircean secondness, an alterity, an otherness, a set of dispositions, needs, desires, alien to themselves." One of my ethnographic subjects conveyed this with respect to her brother's Facebook profile by saying: "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."

In her use of new media to animate a relationship with the dead, Erin's digital practice bears a striking resemblance to American Spiritualist practices. In the nineteenth century, the advent of new electronic technologies of communication and transmission was met with a growing Spiritualist movement in which these technologies facilitated communion with the dead. Just four years after the public debut of the telegraph, Spiritualists developed a similar system of knocks and raps with which to communicate with the deceased ([Sconce 2000; McGarry 2008](#)). [Jeffrey Sconce \(2000, 12\)](#) writes: "More than a metaphor, the spiritual telegraph was for many an actual technology of the afterlife." In one notable example, a telegraph

was placed at the center of a *séance* circle to facilitate communication with the dead (Connor 1999, 221). Today, as the scope and reach of digital media expand, a similar spirit of experimentation may be taking hold, encouraging people like Erin to explore new ways to stay close to dead loved ones. These parallels remind us that history, like memory, unfolds not as an orderly sequence of past events but as a series of ruptures and reappearances that bring past and present into proximity.

Yet it is noteworthy that Erin's digital practice did not rely on a community of fellow participants. Spiritualist materializations of the dead were formed from what Steven Connor (1999, 210) calls the "collective psychical resources of the [*séance*] circle" (see also McGarry 2008), dependent on social relations among the living to vivify the dead. For Erin, recording her mom sightings remains an intensely private experience, and I was the first person with whom she shared any of her entries.

I draw this contrast not to suggest that Erin's digital practice was devoid of sociality, but to emphasize the very different way in which the social is configured in Spiritualist mediumship and digital animation. My ethnographic subjects found the social inscribed *within* the media through which they encounter the dead. This inscription of the social becomes more readily apparent when we move from Erin's app to the social media pages of the dead. I found that very few people who use social media to maintain intimacies with the dead look back at the posts that the deceased made when they were alive. Instead, they are drawn back by the messages, memories, photographs, and digital materials posted to the deceased's profile page by members of their social network after their death. For example, one of my ethnographic subjects, Lois, became very attached to her brother Frank's Facebook profile page after his untimely death. In the year that followed, people posted to his page almost every day, as well as responding to each other's messages. His page became the database of an active social network that centered on Frank, which imparted a certain vivacity to the deceased. This vivacity energized the intimate and dyadic relationship that Lois formed with Frank on social media.

Like these social media posts to the dead, Erin's app records ongoing social relationships that bring together herself, Patricia, and a variety of others. In the case of Erin's app, these others include not just other people but also water bottles, cafés, and cell phones—a sociality that extends beyond the human. Her digital practice inscribes these social relationships into the app, converting them into entries in a database—a database through which her mother is animated.

## THE DATABASE

Erin's mom sightings are automatically uploaded into a spreadsheet by the software that Erin used to create the original form. The entries are arranged vertically in chronological order, numbered according to the date and time when they were logged. Each entry is contained in a single horizontal row, the elements of the mom sighting separated into seven columns with titles such as Timestamp, Mom Sighting, and Comments. There are enough columns that they cannot be displayed on the screen at once, making it necessary to scroll sideways to read a full entry. When last we spoke, the database contained nearly one hundred and fifty entries, spanning a period of five years. Erin often downplayed the extent of this database, worrying over her periodic lapses in logging. Yet when the spreadsheet was loaded onto her laptop screen, it filled more than thirty-six pages and struck me as remarkably extensive. During the times when Erin was tracking her mom sightings most diligently, she was logging several entries each day.

Interestingly, these features of the database proved more important to me as an ethnographer than they were to Erin. During one of our early conversations, I asked if we could look at some of her previous mom sightings together. Although Erin quickly agreed, she seemed somewhat uneasy as she began reading them, and I watched a series of emotions flit across her face: sadness, worry, recognition, surprise. Eventually she confessed that she did not think she had ever read her old entries before. I was taken aback; I had assumed that the retrospective dimension of logging would be part of its appeal.

As I learned more about the app and the relationship that it mediated, Erin's decision to forgo this form of retrospection began to make more sense. Erin told me that she wanted to use her app to log the same thing over and over again throughout the course of her life. She built this possibility into the parameters of the app; her fastidiousness in recording the context of each encounter meant that each mom sighting was necessarily different than its previous iteration. Even if she were reminded of the same attribute—say, her mother's commitment to holistic health care—she would not be in the same café, reading the same book, at the same time of day as she had been the last time she remembered it.

The malleability of Erin's mom sightings goes beyond the context of the encounter to the very content of her memories. She explained:

Say I log something about a song in 2014, and then fast forward twenty years later, I encounter that same 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 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.

Erin used the technological parameters of the app to intensify, rather than mitigate, the plasticity of memory. When I asked Erin how her practice might have differed had she used a paper journal rather than an app, she noted that once she submitted an entry, “it went into the ether.” Although the entries were saved, she no longer had ready access to them. She suggested that if she had used a paper journal, she would have been more likely to leaf through her old entries. By making it onerous to do so, the app intensified the experience of connecting with her mother in the present, rather than recalling her as she had been in the past.

Erin related the variability of her mom sightings to the sense of dynamism that inhered in her relationship with her mother. She told me: “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.” By downplaying the retrospective aspect of logging, Erin refused to allow a single, authentic version of Patricia to take root.

Erin's attachments to varying versions of Patricia leads us back to animation. The iterations of an animated 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 they come alive (Silvio 2010, 428; Nozawa 2016, 185). In his work on Japanese *otaku*, fans of animation genres such as anime and video games, Hiroki Azuma (2009) uses the structure of the database to illustrate the significance of the character's variability. He argues that *otaku* are not drawn to a compelling narrative, but are instead attached to specific attributes. As Nozawa (2013) points out, these attributes are “carefully typologized and classified” into a conceptual database that uniquely identifies the character. Azuma (2009) suggests that contemporary animation moves away from the notion of the original and its derivatives toward a model of proliferating versions that gesture toward an invisible center from which the character issues forth.

In Azuma's and Nozawa's writing, the database is an analytic construct used to understand the way that *otaku* form attachments to disarticulated fragments of a character, rather than to a singular, narrative identity. Erin's app, like many of the digital media used to maintain intimacies with the dead, takes Azuma's concept to its logical extreme. It creates a *literal* database—in this case, a spreadsheet of their encounters. Each entry registers a different Patricia, manifesting a slightly different set of qualities and invoked through a subtly different iteration of memory. It accentuates Patricia's variability, offering these partial fragments as a point of connection between Erin and Patricia. Yet interestingly, the database does not mediate their relationship by offering a repository of past events that Erin can periodically revisit. Erin engages with the archive by holding, cherishing, and adding to it, not by consulting it.

In addition, Erin's app shifts attention from Patricia herself to the relationship between Erin and Patricia. The repetitive nature of Erin's digital practice suggests that what is experienced or recalled in these encounters is secondary to the sense of an ongoing sociality that they establish. We might therefore interpret Erin's mom sightings as a form of phatic communication whose purpose is not to convey new information, but to engage another for the sake of engagement.<sup>2</sup> They are like a greeting, the "hey there" that signals an everyday familiarity while opening a channel to further communication (Elyachar 2010). Such mundane exchanges can be what is most difficult to maintain when a loved one dies, when daily contact can so easily give way to yearly pilgrimages to a gravesite. What Erin longs for is the myriad connections that sustain a different kind of intimacy, one built on the everyday forms of contact often taken for granted among those who share their lives.

Consider Erin's most recent entry. It begins with the timestamp that denotes the precise time and date it was logged. The next column, "Mom Sighting," contains a single word: "Reading." In the Comments box are a few 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; she rated both 9 out of 10.

Reading a book about the food industry, Erin was interrupted by her mother's unexpected appearance. Yet neither the appearance, nor Patricia herself, are narrated in the entry. Instead, it captures the elements of the encounter, each of which is separated and itemized, rendered sortable and searchable in the spread-

sheet into which it has been automatically uploaded. The content of the entry is shaped in part by the structure of the app and the database that it feeds into; it is difficult to imagine Erin listing so many specific attributes surrounding the encounter if she were instead jotting down memories in a paper journal, for example. Furthermore, much of the content of the entry describes Erin's own subjective conditions. These are not incidental, but are the very substrate of Patricia's animation. These details cement their ongoing connection, fostering the everyday contact that sustains their relationship. The resulting database remains indefinitely open to further additions, an evolving record of a dynamic relation. Their iterative encounters make possible a singular relationship that is continually nourished by their phatic contact (Nozawa 2015).

This marks one of the key features of animation: characters are only partially rendered, evoked rather than fully represented. It is also one aspect of digitally mediated relations with the dead that distinguishes it from other forms of mediated relations, including Spiritualist practices. Histories of Spiritualism join anthropological work exploring the use of analog technologies such as photography and telegraphy to bring the dead to presence (Morris 2000; Ivy 2009). Although there are intriguing parallels between my ethnographic subjects' digital practices and the use of mass media such as photographs to vivify the dead, there are also important departures that help clarify what is distinctive about the media form. In her ethnography of Thai spirit mediumship, Rosalind Morris (2000) 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. She writes: “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” (Morris 2000, 190). This notion is taken up and amplified by practices of spirit mediumship, which rely on the truth of the image formed on the surface of the body and captured by the photograph.

In contrast, the digital media that my ethnographic subjects use materialize partial representations of the deceased. The power of these media depends precisely on one's ability to “see beyond them,” in Morris's words, recognizing the dead among the fragments of their former selves. For example, the online memorial that one woman, Corey, created for her beloved friend Marty seems almost bare, the generic template modified with only a few pieces of biographical information that are carefully arranged on the page. Yet Corey asserted that this digital space

fosters their ongoing intimacy to a degree unmatched by other media, including the photograph of Marty that she keeps on her dresser. This unexpected configuration is captured in the analytic of animation and its theorizations; as [Silvio \(2010, 431\)](#) points out, “one of the key characteristics of many animated characters is incompleteness.” This incompleteness drew Corey to Marty, inviting her to draw and redraw the outlines of their relationship.

I found this necessary incompleteness even in places where I least expected it, like the virtual reality experience that Mike and Alex are creating to reunite Mike with his late father, George. Despite virtual reality’s promise of lifelike immersion, Mike and Alex suggested that the accuracy and completeness of George’s avatar contributed little to the experience of connecting with him on virtual reality. Alex reflected: “Hands are hands, clothes are clothes. The body shape, the body *stance*, was more what I was going for, and it just worked somehow.” Rather than creating an exact reproduction of the deceased, Alex seeks above all to capture his stance, an indefinable quality that evokes George to those who know him. In this way, even the avatar, a three-dimensional replica of George, acts much like an animated character drawn with a few sparse pen strokes. It provides just enough of a resemblance to create a moment of recognition, one that depends as much on the relationship between George and Alex as it does on the avatar that mediates their encounter. In a parallel way, each of Erin’s entries gestures toward some ineffable quality of Patricia, calling to mind the fullness of a person who can never be completely captured in any medium. These partial renderings animate Patricia by sustaining her phatic connection to Erin, invigorating the relationship between them.

The sparse outline sketched out by these animating media can open up mutual entanglements between the character and the one who answers its call. It bids the other to fill it in—and, perhaps, to be filled in as well, moved by the attachments that form and reform between them. Through technologies such as Erin’s app, the dead manifest as an intimate part of the self as well as a presence on the screen, traversing and complicating the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other ([Lacan 1981, 1997](#); [Miller 1994](#); [Mazzarella 2017](#)). Indeed, for Erin, the practice of recording her mom sightings helped open her up to these unexpected encounters, encouraging an interchange between herself and her mother.

### COCONSTITUTIVE RELATIONS

Throughout our conversations, Erin suggested that she and her mother continued to shape each other, in part through the coming together facilitated by the

app. She reflected that her mom sightings were not encounters with an independent entity, but manifestations of their relationship. She mused:

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.

This indeterminacy did not necessarily undermine their status as mom sightings. Erin later explained:

I kept trying to inject a little criticism of how people [are] collecting all this data about themselves and all these experiences in their life. 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!

Erin's digital practice opened up forms of reciprocity between herself and her mother. Exploring her ongoing intimacy with Patricia allowed Erin to see her mother as a relational being who persisted through her ties to the people, places, and objects in the world (M. Strathern 1988; Butler 2004). At the same time, it helped Erin understand *herself* as relational. As she noted above, the app did not just allow her to record her mom sightings but also to explore the intertwining between her mother and herself.

Erin's decision to create the app was influenced by the advice of her grief counselor. At the time, Erin kept finding herself in situations where she wanted to talk to her mother about what was taking place. She explained:

Whenever I would encounter these situations and bring them up to [my grief counselor] 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. . . . 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!” . . . So part of this logging experiment was just to see if that can be true.

While the grief counselor located Patricia inside of Erin, Erin herself told me that relationships with the dead “live in our heads, as well as with things, and then with other people.” When I asked her to elaborate, 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. . . . [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.

The app allowed her memories—and her mother—to move from within her head into the world, and from within the world inside of herself. Her descriptions of her mom sightings blurred the boundaries between memories that emerged from within and encounters that occurred outside of herself.

The double movement of internalization and externalization proved an ongoing theme in my ethnographic research. I discovered it even in the virtual reality experience reuniting Mike with his father, George. To me their project seemed a quintessential example of animation in the narrowly technical sense, creating the illusion of life by endowing a media object with the seeming ability to move independently. Yet Mike and Alex took me by surprise by returning again and again to the internal experience of connection that virtual reality was meant to foster, what Alex referred to as “inner work.” Describing the experience of entering the virtual world, Alex told me:

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 V[irtual] R[eality], 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 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 through which a connection to the dead could be sustained. Yet the props of the virtual world and body 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.

The example of Mike and Alex's virtual reality experience helps us see that Erin and Patricia are not just brought together by the technological parameters of an app, but by the practice that Erin has built around it. Recording her mom sightings is an *askesis*, a labor on the self that transforms the self (Foucault 2005, 2010). For Michel Foucault, the notion of *askesis* offers a point of contrast to the confessional mode of self-regulation through which the modern, unified subject is produced. *Askesis* involves a permanent state of self-examination and self-censorship that takes place in part through the careful cultivation of ethical relations with others. My ethnographic subjects' digital *askesis* likewise constitutes a labor to produce an ethical self in relation to another. It is a relational *askesis* that does not produce the modern, living, self-enclosed subject, but animates a relationship through which both living and dead are constituted. This *askesis* transforms Erin and Mike through their encounters with another—the dead loved one who traverses the boundaries between inside and outside. Similarly, Erin's app opens her up to Patricia's ongoing presence, allowing Patricia to dwell (see Ingold 2011) not only in the digital database but within Erin herself as well.

### AMBIVALENT HOSPITALITIES

Although Erin's app was born out of her grief counselor's advice, the relationship it made possible proved both more intimate and more ambivalent than her counselor had predicted. Reading through her old entries, she described one to me 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 momlike. 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 was a very different experience than the one proposed by her therapist. The grief counselor imagined an internal dialogue where Erin would pose questions and then consider how Patricia would answer them if she were still alive. Paraphrasing her counselor's advice, Erin explained:

“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.

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

Patricia's persistent otherness introduced forms of ambivalence into their relationship. Despite her own best intentions, Erin was never able to sustain the practice of logging her mom sightings for very long. Although she attributed this to her struggles with diligence, she also suggested that her relationship with her mother could sometimes feel like too much. At times, her words suggested a degree of antagonism toward her late mother. Describing the experience of listening to Patricia's voicemails, she 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 incited by her mother's death, but it was also directed toward her mother's persistent presence in her life, a presence made possible by the digital recordings that her phone had captured and preserved.

Ethnographies of ghosts and spirits are rife with unwanted encounters with the dead, as well as with the many methods that the living have developed to attend to them (Harris 1982; Middleton 1982; Watson 1982; Kohn 2013). Less attention has been paid to these unwelcome encounters in the animation literature, although the ubiquity of branded characters and of characters used to convey instructions by the state suggests that further consideration is warranted (Silvio 2010; Occhi 2012; Nozawa 2013). Erin's descriptions of her digital practice suggest that the purpose of the app is not just to animate Patricia but also to open a channel between them, taking moments of unwelcome distraction and reframing them as opportunities to intensify a desired connection. Her digital practice constitutes a form of "leaning in," signaling to Patricia her willingness to be addressed (Zuckerman 2016, 297).

In this way, Erin's attitude toward her app resonates with Jacques Derrida's notion of ambivalent hospitality toward the dead. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida (1994, 216–17) 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 (*das Heimliche-Unheimliche*), more intimate with one than one is oneself.

When such hospitality is offered, the self that one feels in possession of becomes the home of another. One is dispossessed (Butler 2004). And the other is equally dispossessed, both occupying "places belonging finally neither to us nor to it" (Derrida 1994, 217). Derrida thus describes an attitude of hospitality that is cultivated toward the dead despite the recognition that the deceased is radically other and potentially threatening to the self.

Logging her mom sightings was one way that Erin extended hospitality to her mother despite the aversion this intimacy engendered. At one point in our conversations, she pulled up an entry that she had logged while 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 the "distraction." It helped her cultivate the ability to "honor that tangent," rather than using her mother's persistent "intrusiveness" as grounds for excluding her. Erin's app thus grounded her own ethical

relationship with her late mother, allowing Patricia to dwell within, as well as on the digital database.

### CONCLUSION

Five years after her death, Patricia continues to animate diverse entities that Erin comes across in her daily life. Their encounters are mediated by the objects, places, people, and activities that bring Patricia to presence, as well as by the app that Erin uses to record her mom sightings. Engaging in this practice of digital recording opens Erin up to her mother's presence, extending a form of ambivalent hospitality to her that deepens the intimacy between them.

Erin and Patricia's relationship is diagnostic of an emergent form of relation between the living and the dead, one built around a digital *askesis*. Seeing these practices as a form of animation illuminates the mediated and mediatized relations that they make possible. Animation highlights the variability and multiplicity of the dead, the partiality of their representations, and the way that these partial representations cohere as a database of elements rather than a singular narrative of the lives or personalities of the dead. This database of elements can be continually refigured to create new juxtapositions and uncanny associations that bring forth the dead in different ways. Thus animation is not just of interest to scholars of characters and characterization; as [Silvio \(2010\)](#) suggests, it offers a productive trope for understanding mediated relationships today, including, but not limited to, those between the living and the dead.

As I have used it, animation is not about seeing how the dead come to have lives of their own when resurrected by digital media. Rather, it means seeing how a particular set of practices developing around digital media is being used to open up a pathway between the living and the dead. In my work, the dead were animated by digital technologies that conjured and perpetuated them, from Facebook profile pages to avatars of the deceased. But more than that, they were animated by their relationships with others, relationships that depended on particular digital media to persist in their current form. These relationships are by no means easy. The living and the dead are tangled up in them, done and undone, animated and reanimated by their intimacies. Digital practices such as Erin's offer a means of cultivating an ethical hospitality in the face of this constitutive undoing, balancing desire and ambivalence through a digital *askesis*. By maintaining their mutually constitutive relationships, the living and the dead are carried forth, brought to life by and for each other.

**ABSTRACT**

*Recent theorizations of animation offer intriguing possibilities for recognizing and attending to the sociality of a range of entities, including the dead. Today, diverse digital media are being used to maintain and even deepen intimate relationships with deceased loved ones. These media bring the dead to presence through forms of animation, understood not only in the narrow technical sense as a media genre but more broadly as a mode of mediation that vivifies in particular ways. This mode of mediation is iterative, bringing forth the multiplicity of the dead. Their materializations are partial and fragmentary, cohering around a database of elements rather than a cohesive, narrative identity. They are sparsely outlined, evoked rather than depicted. When the dead are animated by digital media, they invite their loved ones to fill them, expanding into many versions to which shifting attachments can form. Those who answer their call extend their ambivalent hospitality, maintaining mutually constitutive relationships through which both the living and the dead are carried forth. [animation, relations with the dead, new media, mourning, mediation, database, haunting]*

**NOTES**

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1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
2. Phatic communication, or what Bronislaw Malinowski referred to as *phatic communion*, refers to “a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words” (Malinowski 1946, 315). Phatic language is defined by its “nonreferential character” and its “emphasis on social ties” (Meltzer and Musolf 2003, 143). I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing the literature on the phatic to my attention.

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