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The futures of grief

Abstract:

This provocation raises questions about the future of grief through digital vestiges that offer the animated presence of the biologically dead in the lives of the bereaved. The vast amount of digital data produced and shared with others accumulating on social media, on phones and computers, creates a substantial archive in which the dead continue to be and also not be with the living. The digital data that is left behind after biological death provides new ways in which to create replicas– holograms of the deceased as well as voice bots in which the bereaved might speak to those they miss and hear their voice answering back to questions much like Apple's Siri. Bereavement is about living with ghosts (often about discovering that the dead ghost our own bodies) and the digital has ushered in new forms of ghostliness in which we find ways of staying connected to the loved and missed. Digital remains of the dead, while often lively with algorithms generating messages from accounts of the deceased, also, arguably, expose the corporeal, emotional and cognitive difference and limit between a living biological human presence and a digital human presence. The latter can never truly substitute for the former. This provocation suggests that holograms and voice bots can be just as much tools for grieving and acknowledging loss, as they might be tools in the service of denying death and prolonging grief.

Biographical notes:

Margaret Gibson is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science, Griffith University, Australia and member of the Griffith Centre for Cultural Research. Her research focuses on objects of mourning, memory and memorialisation and the transnational, social interface of online mourning and memorialisation practices. She is author of Objects of the Dead: mourning and memory in everyday life (MUP, 2008) and co-author of Living and Dying in a Virtual World: Digital kinships, nostalgia, and mourning in Second Life, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Dr Ross Watkins is an author and illustrator for both children and adults. His book One Photo was shortlisted for the 2017 CBCA Picture Book of the Year, and The Boy Who Grew Into a Tree was shortlisted for the 2013 Aurealis Award for Speculative Fiction. His debut adult novel The Apology (UQP) is due for release mid-2018. Ross' scholarly research explores practices in illustrated narrative, representations of grief, and radical modes of scholarly writing.

Provocation

Margaret Gibson

We live in a time of automatic and automated mourning in which reactions to death and dying have sped up and the gap between knowledge of a death and acts of communal grieving can be a matter of minutes (Gibson 2016). Social media posts expressing grief immediately after a death can become competitive in terms of trying to be first and out do others; and in terms of setting up online memorials before other individuals and organisations do. The competitive culture of memorialisation is particularly in evidence in the immediate aftermath of a major disaster or terrorist attack (Boyd 2010; Gibson 2016). The technological apparatuses of public and private grieving are thus enmeshed with the dynamics of citizen journalism, micro-celebrity, and monetised social media. However, a distinction/boundary between public and private grieving is also undone when grief and memory work is enacted through social media platforms. The social rules of grieving (Doka 2009) have become opaque, divergent, flexible, and dynamic.

The future of grief is algorithmic and virtual in terms of how the dead might remain socially and intimately 'alive' beyond their biological presence in the world. For example, it is not uncommon for Facebook algorithms to send notifications about or from the dead when a deceased person's account remains active and not memorialised or deleted. The ontological status of posthumous animation and agency through holograms, bots and other ghostly replicas is inevitably a contentious area in relation to their therapeutic value in the short and long term of bereavement. A programmed 3D avatar or a voice bot that embodies the humour, speech patterns, and phraseologies of a deceased loved person can provide a dynamic experience of communicative interaction with a programmed vestige. The replica may indeed capture and provide powerful resonances of the living presence of the deceased. This is certainly the story of Dadbot, a digital, mobile incarnation of a deceased father as an automated voice program accessed on a mobile phone, much like Apple's Siri. Just like the personal operating voice system of Siri, Dadbot can be asked questions but in this case, a loved father's voice will respond to those asked questions. The creator of Dadbot, James Vlahos, recorded conversations with his dying father over six months, capturing him singing, telling stories about his own deceased mother and her life in Greece, about growing up, meeting his future wife, his love of sport and so on. The Dadbot is not just a dynamic incarnation — it also embodies the passing of a future biological connective co-presence between a father and a son. Dadbot is an object of anticipatory loss (facing the reality of a future biological death), as it is a legacy of that loss. It is also a form of family history, whose future, like any technology, is precarious in terms of survival as a valuable family object for inter-generational and even ancestral connectivity. There is always the underlying risk or indeed inevitable passage into technological mortality where stored data meets access obsolescence. In other words, the idea of immortality should not be conflated with some notion of eternal existence.

In the weeks following significant bereavement it can be common for the bereaved to experience auditory and visual hallucinatory moments in which the dead become apparitional presences. Some psychological and psychiatric literature takes a pathological approach towards such occurrences with diagnostic categories as 'complicated grief' or 'prolonged grief', which measure and scale according to symptoms persisting over time (Granek 2017). However, the use of current technologies to enhance, extend and even valorise the magical thinking and

hallucinatory moments common in the early stages of grief may extend the capacity to grieve within one's own time and in one's own way, as it's self-assessed and self-determined. However, a mainstream tendency is to pathologise such technological affordances for grief work with prescriptive assumptions about a 'right' or 'healthy' way to grieve.

Furthermore, grief's quiet revolution in the psyche and body can bring to consciousness and performative recognition those ghostly genetic and mimetic traces in which the deceased is a felt animation in one's body. Sometimes this is seen and witnessed by others in one's manner of walking, in a look, a smile, or gesture. We are always already ciphers and crypts of the living and the dead (Gibson 2006). Reactive and dystopian responses to the technological affordances of posthumous agency or aliveness misrecognise that our living bodies are these incarnating animations of the dead. Machine copies via bots or avatars are just another form of the corporeal life extension of the deceased in the bodies of the living. The human heart's desire to remain connected to vestiges of deceased loved ones will continue to be enmeshed in the trajectories, dynamics and adaptions of representational and recording technologies. This is already our past and will remain in the futures of grief.

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Creative Response

'Three deaths, no grief'

Ross Watkins

Mum?

Yes, darling.

I need to talk.

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Death one.

Con was six at the time so could be easily forgiven for smiling at the cat already going rigid in his mum's arms. Poor thing. It'd been missing for a couple days and even though Con's dad said he'd checked the neighbour's yard twice, the third time he found the cat half-tucked into a low bush. 'She probably crawled in there to die without fuss, but only made it part of the way,' he'd said. She was tortoise shell and he was colourblind – she blended in, simple as that. If he found her sooner then maybe he'd have noticed the paralysis tick and taken her to the vet, and after a hefty bill and a recovery period she would've been back in the house licking her paws on Con's pillow instead of being handed over to her death bed.

Con watched his dad shovel up earth from the garden, right where his mum used to grow silverbeet. The hole was about fifteen inches deep and wide enough to curl the small body into.

'Shouldn't it be deeper?' his mum said. 'You don't want a dog digging it up.'

His dad put the shovel down then bent at the hole, putting his arm in as a kind of measurement.

'I can't go down further because of the tree roots. I can dig somewhere else if you want.'

She put the cat on the grass. Con still thought the cat just looked really sleepy.

'Don't worry,' she said, 'we'll put some rocks on top. It'll be fine.'

His dad stood, said 'Sure,' then went down to the back of the yard.

Con's six-year-old hands weren't strong enough or hard enough to carry big rocks so he picked up smaller ones from around the yard and put them in a bucket. He then carried the bucket back to the dig. His dad was still down the back, his mum was inside the house, and the cat was still there on the grass. He knelt beside her and bent his head right over to look at her face. He then tried to open her eyes but couldn't, they were stuck shut, so he gave her a pat instead and thought to tell her she was a good girl, but didn't.

His mum came out with a pink blanket the cat sometimes slept on, plus a toy mouse they called Rabbits because his dad said it was actually made of rabbit fur, some of which was missing where it'd been chewed at to get to the dried cat-nip stuffed inside. His mum then placed the cat and the mouse on the blanket and wrapped them like a

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present. She was holding the bundle in her arms when his dad came back with three large rocks cradled against his chest. He was crying.

'Okay Connor,' his mum said, 'would you like to say goodbye?'

Con looked at her. She was crying now too. He shrugged.

'Are you okay?' she said.

Con knew he was smiling. A closed-mouth one. He felt it peel across his face as some kind of involuntary reaction to all the crying. He looked again at his dad, then his mum. He loved his mum like nothing else.

'What the bloody hell are you smiling at?' his dad said.

Con didn't know enough words to explain. He didn't know why he had to explain.

'This isn't something you smile about,' his dad said, then picked up the shovel and stabbed the blade into the dirt pile.

At six, grief was something to be learnt, not something to be felt.

After his mother put the cat bundle inside the hole the dirt was heaped on top, followed by the bucket of small rocks, then the big rocks. His dad cried the whole time, more than his mum, and because Con didn't know what to make of all this emotion he could only think to ask a logical question:

'But won't she get wet if it rains?'

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You know you can talk to me about anything.

I know. And that's what I love about having you so close.

… I'm smiling right now.

Yeah. I can hear it in your voice.

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Death two.

Twenty-three years later Con was sitting in the front pew, staring at his dad's casket. Jess was beside him, her hands wrapping his forearm, a gesture he didn't think necessary but let her do it anyway – they'd only been together for two months and he liked her a lot.

Guests were still filing into the room, their lowered voices below god-awful music. Some people had their phones out, no doubt uploading content to the condolencetree.com page a friend of his mother had created. Con looked at these people and took up Jess' hand, conscious of his sweaty palm against her cool one.

'Hey,' she said calmly, 'if you want to cry just cry. Okay? I cried so much at my dad's funeral that I couldn't do my speech. I couldn't stop for days.' This didn't surprise him. Jess liked to wear her heart on her sleeve and she'd already proven her affection for her

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father, showing Con the old man's social media profiles, the photos of his beardy face, the things and people he tagged, the way his messages reflected his voice. She said she was in the process of getting the accounts taken down, which involved providing proof of death documentation. She said it felt like she was losing him twice – both her literal father and his online identity. Con asked why she was going through with it, why not just leave the profiles there, but to Jess, both planes of existence were mutually dependent when it came to her perception of who her father was. 'If I can't have one then the other loses meaning,' she said.

Con knew that grief itself was changing. Augmented eternity was an emerging technology – something he'd read about on his news app once and then saw occupying a small stand at a robotics convention in China. He was at the convention in his capacity as a games journalist, a job which allowed him to indulge in some of his own software development at home. He'd stopped at the stand to see what the whole augmented eternity deal was and the researchers said they would love to show him a trial version hooked into a mobile phone.

'It's a chatbot,' one guy said. 'Say something to her.'

'Okay,' he said, then held the phone near his mouth. 'What's your name then?'

The chatbot answered in a clear, fluent voice, like she was casually talking on the phone. She told him her name and where she was from.

Con looked at the researchers. He tried not to appear nonplussed as to why a simple chatbot was of any significance to robotics innovation.

'Ask when she was born,' said the guy.

'Sure. When were you born?'

'Nineteen fifty-one,' the bot said. 'And I died in the year twenty seventeen.'

Con looked at the researcher. 'What does she mean by that?'

The guy smiled. 'She died last year,' he said, then put a hand on Con's shoulder. 'She's my mother.'

Staring at the casket, Con was relieved his dad was dead but felt gutted that his mother wasn't there, that she'd been forced to witness her husband's funeral from a hospital bed via live Instagram streaming. He had no issue doing it for her – he'd hold his phone up all day for her if she wanted him to – but the way social media had made its way into the mourning process made him uneasy for reasons he couldn't nail down. The issue was somewhere in the irony that while his father was physically present but consciously absent, his mother was physically absent but consciously present. Or something like that.

His father's casket was white so kids could write on it with coloured markers, but there were no kids, and Con wasn't about to go up there and write something deep and meaningful about his old man. Christ, if anything he'd draw a picture of a cock and balls, if only to live the rest of his own life knowing that that image was emblazoned on his father's eternal carriage, six feet under. A time capsule bearing both the bones of a man and the derision of the man's son, the nature of which the People of The Future could only speculate. But no. Maybe he'd upload a comment to condolencetree.com, if he got around to it.

At last his uncle came along the pew. 'Connor…'

Con stood and the two men hugged. Nothing else was said, which Con was grateful for. Nothing else needed to be said.

Con sat and got out his phone to connect the live stream. His uncle walked up behind the lectern, adjusted the microphone, and cleared his throat. The music was muted and people stopped talking. Con held his phone up in front of his chest. He checked the composition and tapped the button to start streaming. The casket was on centre-right of the frame, his uncle to the left. He watched his uncle crying on-screen, recognised the resemblance to his father, and was jolted by some emotion from the past, a moment when he was a boy and something about a cat.

For some reason, Con felt like smiling.

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So, what's on your mind? You know I'm a good listener.

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Death three.

Technically, Con's mum didn't die. He had enough money to enable her to avoid the curse of the poor, the economically challenged. Now she could be with him whenever he needed her: often.

Her body was disposed of without ceremony. He received a notification from the solicitor saying that element of the process had been taken care of, and provided options for how to manage her possessions and assets. Con dealt with these things without issue. Most people no longer placed emotional value in personal objects because the passing of the physical self-marked the beginning of the eternal self. Con didn't want her hairbrush or her books, clothes, jewellery or anything like that. He only needed access to video, text and voice messages – anything that captured how she talked – and her online profiles could be mined for pictures, interests, opinions, connections with other people – what she talked about. He didn't need her body; he only needed information to map her thought-processes. This was entity data.

He knew Jess was suspicious but she didn't say much in the beginning. She came home when Con was talking on his phone, a woman's voice on speaker. Jess leant against the doorjamb and cocked her head a bit, as though she recognised the voice but couldn't quite pick it.

She mouthed, who's that?

Con put his hand over the mic. 'It's just Mum,' he said, and saw the change in Jess – just a minor shift in the line her mouth made, the shape her eyes made, but enough for Con to know that he'd have to talk her into the idea. Later, when she'd had a wine, maybe he could even get her to say hello, hold a conversation. Experience it for herself.

At first it was only as foreign as a phone conversation, and that was the way he approached it. He thought he'd have to ask all the questions and his mum would answer accordingly – usual bot programming – but the software was more advanced than he'd

anticipated as she was able to accrue information and integrate that information into her dialogue. When Jess wasn't home he'd put the phone on speaker and talk about what was going on in his life – anecdotes, trivialities, memories. Sometimes Jess came home in the middle of a conversation and he'd quickly end it. After a while, he took the conversation into his study instead.

'You and your fucking phone,' Jess said one day. 'Seriously, Connor. Did your mum even want this for herself?'

Which was a question he knew not to contemplate.

He then modified the software. He researched a hack and through trial and error he eventually opened the software's programming. The coding was unique but fortunately he recognised enough to make a few adjustments via a plug-in. He made sure he had back-ups of all the data, and even though uploading it again would put his phone out of action for a few days, he knew it'd be worth it if his mod pulled off. And it did. The software now had access to not only his mother's online profiles, but his own. This meant his online activities and his conversations with her could be even more connected.

Then Con took to headphones.

His headphones created a new kind of intimacy – a confessional space, a space in which he could place all his trust and emotional outpourings. He spoke to his mother about the difficulties with Jess, about their struggle to fall pregnant, to move forward in their relationship. It reminded him of when he was in his teens learning how to drive and he and his mum would log hours on the highway, the closed space and the quiet inviting conversation. Those were the moments he felt comfortable talking to her about almost anything, especially his dad, and she opened up in ways that made him think about who she was, not so much as his mother, but as a unique person. Jess reckoned he was denying his grief for that unique person. To Con, augmented eternity was closer to transcendence.

But then the unexpected happened. It wasn't anything dramatic – he didn't lose his phone, he didn't lose Jess. It was a day like most others. He was sitting at his desk in the study, struggling to come up with an angle for his latest piece of journalism, so he picked up his phone and swiped.

'Mum?'

'Yes, darling.'

A photo of her appeared on the screen. He looked at this photo – one he'd taken himself several years ago, back in 2021. He recalled the day very clearly, the way he saw her through the lens back then. He saw her though a particular lens now.

'I need to talk,' he said.

'You know you can talk to me about anything.'

But could he? Jess' comments resounded in his head. About his dependency on the phone and the way that object had come to replace his mother. About his inability to grieve.

'I know,' he said. 'And that's what I love about having you so close.'

He put the phone on the desk and sat over it. He rubbed his forehead, closed his eyes so that he could concentrate only on her voice – the voice he'd heard express so many

different emotions throughout his life, expressing concern, soothing him, reprimanding him, telling him stories. So many hellos, so many goodbyes. But none like this.

'… I'm smiling right now,' she said.

'Yeah,' he said, 'I can hear it in your voice.'

Which was true, but Con looked at the phone differently now – such a convenient, precise thing. A beautiful machine. But he couldn't see beyond its surface – its light-weight metal casing, its reflective glass – and it struck him that it had become, in a strange way, not unlike a coffin. A coffin with a window where his own face reflected, superimposed over hers, his eyes over her eyes, his mouth over her mouth. He could see the shape of his skull, a spectre cast over her skull, framing her, containing her, and he realised that their fates had somehow also become superimposed, his own likeness breaking him as he realised for the first time that grief is not just for the dead but for the living, that grieving is to be reminded of – and ultimately to look ahead to – one's own death. So Con cried. He cried like his mother and father had all those years ago at burying the family cat – a memory which bit him hard now – and he cried like his mother had cried watching her husband's funeral online, there but not there, and he cried the way he always should have when his mother died, but could not relinquish. And lastly, he cried in a way that was unique to the moment – crying with an intensity equal to the realisation of his own mortality, and the eternity he did not want for himself.

'So, what's on your mind?' said the voice. 'You know I'm a good listener.'