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## How We Create Closeness with Remote Communication

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The COVID-19 pandemic has generated tremendous changes in daily life across the globe. Initially, without biomedical therapies and vaccines to reduce sickness and suffering, people reduced their risk of infection by covering faces, washing hands, and especially by remaining physically distant from family, friends, and colleagues as well as strangers. Physical separation continues to provide basic safety even as vaccines become available, but this distancing—more generally called social distancing—has also created new forms of distress from social displacement and inadequate emotional connections. In particular, the pandemic's social displacements have posed thorny challenges for people seeking to exchange ideas, offer comfort, and express feelings in close relationships.

To stay connected, people have explored innovative cultural and technological strategies to communicate remotely about family, romance, work, healthcare, and other matters. Many of us, for example, increasingly rely on FaceTime, Twitter, Zoom, and other technologies and social media to express ourselves—particularly by displaying our faces—across multiple cultural and social contexts. Anthropologists have long observed that human groups who encounter new social contexts develop innovative means for exchanging ideas and feelings with others. As happens with any new cultural pattern, the initial encounters with unfamiliar communication practices seem unsettling and stressful, particularly during everyday conversations. The fundamental human desire to connect with family and friends, celebrate life events, enjoy romance, complete work, and protest social injustices does not disappear during a pandemic. Rather, discussion and action take new forms. As experienced educators, we currently grapple with the complexities of sharing knowledge remotely rather than in face-to-face classrooms. For example, Zoom fatigue has become a common issue that educators address with students. Having gained familiarity with new communication practices in our own personal and work lives, we offer our anthropological reflections on how this pandemic moment relates to broader human experiences with remote communication.

For this issue of *Open Anthropology*, we selected anthropological studies of how humans in contemporary and past societies have used remote communication to connect socially despite physical separation. While contemporary cultural studies emphasize how people currently depend on digital and electronic modes of transmission to connect remotely, archaeological cases show that humans have striven to bridge separations across time and space for millennia. Remote communication is indeed an aspect of the human condition. What insights have anthropologists gained about how humans convey meaning remotely? How do people become present to each other while occupying different territories? How do materiality and a speaker's physical location shape communication across distance? How do people share emotional closeness and secrets when open face-to-face conversations are not possible or not desirable? In this time of COVID-19, the anthropology of remote human communication highlights human practices for creating and maintaining close social connections and new identities with people located in distant physical places. These perspectives also offer insights into how to understand and address the distress associated with distant social interactions.

### **Facing remote conversations**

Human communication is an embodied practice, and the human face is a significant feature of conversations. Whether talking closely or remotely, human communication regularly involves moments when speakers alter or conceal their faces to influence social relations. Physical separation modifies access to viewing another person's face, but this context does not necessarily reduce information or conceal what people regard as truthful. Rather, the remote context offers new possibilities to exchange thoughts and feelings that shape social interactions across physical locations.

Drawing insight from masked faces in ritual contexts in Austria, John J. Honigmann (1977) considers how humans rely on face-to-face speech to exchange ideas in close physical proximity. Cross-culturally, "the face is the organ by which self and society carry on the largest portion of communication in which they engage, not only linguistic communication but paralinguistic as well" (275). The normally unclothed face indexes a speaker's mental and emotional states, offering a sense of openness in social interactions. On the other hand, we might assume that covering a face reduces information. Honigmann, however, observes that masks in ritual contexts modify visual access to a speaker's face and transform (rather than necessarily reduce) information available for interpretation. Indeed, human interaction routinely involves altering the face in many ways, such as with makeup, jewelry, tattoos, hairstyles, veils, hats, and other articles of clothing. In any conversation, altering the face's appearance may permit an individual to engage in novel conduct and language, which also allows a speaker to gain self-awareness based on how others respond. Applying Honigmann's insights, a remote conversation is not inevitably an inferior form of communication. A person's face may appear differently using remote technologies, but these differences can lead to new possibilities for expressing ideas and feelings.

Christina Wasson (2006) explores virtual work in a U.S. company to reveal how colleagues communicate across two (or more) interactional spaces at the same time. In virtual contexts, speakers do not always have the same immediate access to faces, voices, and other embodied

aspects of identity as they do in closer encounters. Without the usual communicative features, virtual conversations may provoke tensions and uncertainties about whether a speaker is offering reliable information from another physical location. On the other hand, people who are aware that remote technology conceals speakers from each other may construct alternative practices to ensure an open exchange of ideas and feelings. Wasson, most notably, shows how people learn to be “polyfocal,” meaning they become skilled at focusing and participating in more than one interaction simultaneously with people occupying different territorial spaces. Even when physically displaced, people using remote communication learn to be copresent and monitor each other in structured interactional spaces. Wasson observes that “humans appear to be able to navigate through such hybrid geographies with ease . . .” (125). People embody new cultural practices linked to turn taking, problem solving, conflict management, relationship building, joking, and side conversations. People signal attentiveness and mutual awareness of intentions, feelings, and points of agreement and disagreement. Wasson challenges the tendency to idealize face-to-face conversations, offering instead a framework for considering advantages and disadvantages of remote communication.

What happens when an image of a person’s face become a central feature in remote communication? Jesse Weaver Shipley (2015) explores the “explosion of the selfie” cross-culturally to describe how people produce new social connections. With mobile phones in hand, people increasingly depend on digital photography and social media to represent themselves digitally and create new social identities in dispersed territories. Selfies typically highlight the face to reveal thoughts, intentions, and feelings to others. As individuals monitor responses to their selfies, they deepen self-awareness, which shapes subsequent conversations and interactions with others. Selfie-to-selfie communication with rapidly circulating digital images engages discourses on gender, sexuality, and race as well as intimacy, humor, loss, and violence. For Shipley, the images of embodied experience—posing, eating, traveling, encountering life—animate discourse with social symbols, provoking emotions and bringing focus to social issues. Given that people usually choose to take their selfie in a specific place or with specific things, we can conclude that physical location and the material objects displayed are essential aspects of the experience being shared. The selfie “is a type of self-representation that allows you to imagine a time-space that you compose, create, curate, caption, and adorn” (405). Like Wasson, Shipley’s perspective contests the usual characterization of virtual spaces as less real than face-to-face communication. Individuals can manipulate digital face images located in particular contexts to express ideas about reality and, in the process, come to know themselves and their place in that reality. Even if people are not within each other’s sight in the same physical space, they can become copresent, mutually aware, and united in a similar time-space that they access by rapidly shared selfies.

### **Mobile phones and intimacy**

The mobile phone is an important resource for creating culturally diverse lives, especially with family, friends, and intimate partners. Anthropologists recognize that the mobile phone is much more than a means for transmitting messages. People use mobile phones to create remote interactional spaces where subjects form beliefs and emotions—using voices, texts, selfies, emoji, memes, and other audiovisual representations. People may particularly treasure accessing

such spaces where they are not comfortable talking privately while others watch and listen nearby. For these interactions, the mobile phone offers greater comfort and freedom than face-to-face encounters.

For instance, Julie Soleil Archambault (2013) describes how mobile phones in Mozambique allow young people, especially women, to form discrete, intimate relationships. In some contexts, crafting private social spaces for discussing meaningful life moments is more valued than direct communication in a shared physical space. Displaying a mobile phone, as a material object, is part of *visão* (being seen), which expresses, among other things, an ability to share secrets and carry out discrete relationships. Using the phone instead of talking in person allows young people to create identities for specific activities, including fun, intimacy, romance, economic opportunity, and political gain. For young women, mobile phone practices support new ideals of femininity, romance, and purpose, allowing women to conceal intimate social relationships that may violate traditional gendered notions of respectability. As Archambault observes, concealing these relationships “creates remoteness” from others, particular other household members (97).

Similarly, Lourdes de León (2013) describes how Tzotzil Mayan youth in Mexico use smart phones and WhatsApp to create cross-gender romantic relationships. As with youth in Mozambique, some Mexican youth form private relationships with new communication technologies. De León notes that “friends and intimate partners’ relationships are sustained primarily by texting, rather than by face-to-face communication” (469). Youth text in Spanish and Tzotzil to create new identities, feelings, and moralities away from the monitoring of Tzotzil-speaking elders at home. The youth remotely experience a range of emotions—love, desire, trust, jealousy, doubt, longing, and suffering. In the process, the remote communication transforms local gender relations and ideologies, especially traditional cultural norms prohibiting close romantic communication before marriage.

Both Archambault and de León suggest that young women in particular contest gender-based restrictions with remote conversations. These anthropologists demonstrate that the mobile phone is more than a tool for communicating ideas when speakers occupy separate physical spaces. Youth also gain proficiency in local technology and linguistic skills to create independent social networks and virtual mobility. In these contexts, remote communication removes social barriers to closeness and privacy rather than merely bridging physical dislocation.

### **Visibility in remote work and healthcare**

Remote communication increasingly influences work lives and clinical experiences. Telecommuting and telemedicine require culture adjustments when people adopt newer communication technologies, which are processes that have intensified during the pandemic. Communicating with people beyond family and friends involves negotiating important social boundaries.

Perri Strawn (2008) reflects on her remote employee experiences in the U.S. and the social and emotional process of defining a hybrid relationship between work and home. A remote worker

draws on multiple communication technologies (e.g., email, mobile phones, videoconferencing) to establish ongoing relationships with other employees as well as family, friends, and neighbors. Strawn suggests that the fragmentation of time and space creates tensions of being “seen-not seen” and “there-not there” in both workplace and home. Absent from the physical workspace, remote workers achieve interactive visibility by virtually displaying productivity and responsiveness to coworkers and supervisors. Remote workers lose “face time” and informal conversations with colleagues, so they incorporate “real-time” interactions in remote communication. Likewise, remote employees address the “seen-not seen” tension by reconfiguring their domestic space, which is symbolically associated with rest, pleasure, and privacy. Women especially may attend to this tension since their gender identity is often associated closely with a domestic sphere. Similar to Wasson, Strawn observes that people are capable of learning the culture of remote communication, including how to sort out ambiguous boundaries between public and private life.

Like remote work, remote healthcare interactions focus on managing how people see others who are not present in the same physical space. Arushi Sinha (2000) explores early examples of providing healthcare at a distance in the United States. Telemedicine first emerged to serve prisons, military populations, and rural areas, which are places with limited means for healthcare workers to have direct contact with people seeking healthcare. Sinha points out that the “medical gaze” assumes that knowledge in any healthcare interaction depends on a healthcare worker seeing a patient. In remote clinical interactions, seeing includes interpreting visual representations available by videoconferencing as well from digital charts, lab results, and x-rays. Sinha shows that the goals for creating remote healthcare interactions depend on a sufferer’s personal experience as well as the political and economic context. Sick people with the means to present evidence visually may gain more access to remote medicine, and clinics tend to offer treatments for types of distress that have greater visual components. Valuing visibility in remote clinical communication risks restricting suffering to specific physical signs. Consequently, the virtual process can marginalize other kinds of information, such as personal narratives, changes in emotions, language variations in expressing pain, and symptoms that do not correspond to clear observable indications of disease. Sinha also points out that expanding remote medicine may centralize human and technological services, which has the unintended consequence of further isolating marginal populations, including elderly, homebound, and people with disabilities.

Both Strawn and Sinha illustrate that successful remote interactions in workplaces and clinics involve people learning cultural communication practices that integrate social, emotional, and visual components. With COVID-19, remote interactions have expanded tremendously, and we expect further modifications in identities and roles among individuals who used to interact across multiple physical locations. As many of us quarantine and isolate, we increasingly experience work, family, and healthcare from fewer physical locations. Achieving meaningful connections remotely requires reducing social boundaries and enhancing the ability of others to perceive our embodied emotional and social experiences.

### **Social media and uniting strangers**



In exploring cultural aspects of social media, anthropologists have also examined remote communication strategies that unite strangers across different territories. In some situations, remote conversations create unity among people with common interests, from opposing social inequality to seeking freedom from local expectations. In these situations, the communicative context focuses on creating new relationships among strangers rather than restoring intimacy within established relationships affected by physical dislocation.

Before current social media options, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, became available, Helán Enoch Page (1999) described the conventional mass media in the U.S. as white public space. Movies, television, radio, and print sources constrained African-American visibility as well as the creativity and agency that could be generated by a Black public space. Page critiqued the limited African-American images in commercial mass media, pointing out the fallacy of the prevailing view at the time that “Black visibility is thought to prove African American’s full integration into America’s racial order” (111). Unequal access to personal computers further diminished Black public space. To address the digital gap, Page argued that “African Americans must gain access to the full spectrum of technical skills and communications technology” (112), something we have seen partially come to pass in the decades after Page first offered his critique. Thus, we continue to see how deracializing communications technology can help to address the symbolic violence of Black images in conventional white public space. Over time, Black residents and other subordinate groups have reduced the digital gap and harnessed social media to unite strangers opposing racial violence and other ongoing injustices. For instance, Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa (2015) call attention to hashtag activism on Twitter regarding the killing of 18-year old Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. The virtual activism protesting the fatal shooting of a young Black man brought about new visibilities, of “police brutality and the misrepresentation of racialized bodies in mainstream media” (4). The mediated discourse included user-generated content: texts, selfies, other images, and videos. As Page urged more than two decades earlier, Bonilla and Rosa point out that “increased use and availability of these technologies has provided marginalized and racialized populations with new tools for documenting incidents of state-sanctioned violence and contesting media representations of racialized bodies and marginalized communities” (5). Social media activism on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms produces social sites with discourse confronting racial inequality, state violence, and media representations of the lives and deaths of young Black people. For Bonilla and Rosa, remote conversations about the killing of Michael Brown became the subject of a shared political moment, and social media like Twitter “allows users who are territorially displaced to feel like they are united across both space and time” (7).

These anthropologists foreshadowed practices that have expanded during the pandemic. Social media activism protesting the killing of George Floyd helped mobilize Black Lives Matter solidarity, despite the severe social dislocations that activists encountered due to the pandemic, economic slowdown, and ongoing racial segregation. The names and faces of Black people killed by police have circulated rapidly in overlapping fields of language, images, and action. From a distance, many of us are strangers to each other, but we have joined together in broader public conversations about specific individuals whose deaths we grieve. Bonilla and Rosa show that social media conversations, including among strangers, create new time-space for

collectively constructing counter-narratives and reimagining group identities. Instead of privileging in-person activism, these researchers show that social media expands public spaces and provides opportunities to integrate digital modes with face-to-face modes of dialog, activism, expression, and visibility. The multimodal integration allows a broader public to imagine and create justice.

Exploring social media in northern China, Tom McDonald (2018) reveals ways strangers connect through intimate forms of remote interaction. He describes “strangerships” that emerge from online interactions in a rural town where people have extensive in-person relationships with family, friends, and work colleagues. Instead of viewing strangers as unknown and therefore untrustworthy outsiders, online conversations with strangers using WeChat and QQ produce new social possibilities unfettered by local traditional expectations and obligations. These physically remote but digitally close strangerships engage common interests, such as romance, games, hobbies, music, and popular culture. A stranger’s physical and social distance offers freedom from customary expectations and thereby generates possibilities for intimacy and closeness. Individuals may initially use avatars and creative online usernames that, like masks, make room for constructing novel social interactions. Subsequent communication may involve exchanging selfies, sharing personal details, and meeting in person. Cherished strangerships involve trust and respect for boundaries outside of social media conversations. The privacy and open explorations lead to new self-awareness and “new types of sociality as individual identities supplant collective ones” (79). In short, remoteness with strangers allows for intimacy and closeness that may not be available in face-to-face contexts.

### **The materiality of communication**

Given the nature of their subjects (dead) and evidence (material culture), archaeologists describe how remote communication involves broad temporal dimensions and sensory and cognitive signals beyond the aural and visual cues present in digital modes. In past societies, message senders and receivers in many contexts did not see or hear one another. Rather, they relied on the material culture intermediaries—tangible things such as cylinder seals, monuments, and even mundane objects such as tableware—to transmit and express thoughts and feelings. In these contexts, humans used material objects as communicative devices to mediate non-face-to-face interactions. Further, material communication media are often quite intentionally meant to transcend not just the physical distance between the sender and those to whom messages are addressed but also temporal boundaries exceeding generations and aiming towards perpetuity. Moreover, archaeologists rarely deal with detailed, highly specific person-to-person messages, but rather are concerned with the communication of broader issues such as identity, solidarity, and power. At the heart of archaeological analyses is the recognition that almost all things are signs—they “stand for something else” (Anderson 2012, 167). Even when archaeologists cannot determine the specific content of a message, we can construe its broader social, political, or ritual intent. Likewise, studies of past societies highlight how the location and context of communication—where the message is emplaced and received—is of great significance in remote communication, because setting and arrangement often yield fruitful evidence for the nature of messages being conveyed.

Archaeological studies of communication focus on how material culture communicates. A key point John Schoenfelder (2012) makes is that there is intentionality in communication through material culture, just as there is intentionality in verbal communication. Messages about intangibles such as identity, emotional attachment, or power can be materialized and transmitted. Emily Anderson (2012), for example, draws heavily on theories of material communication that focus on the central role of objects, not merely as communication tools but as agents that interact with each other and with humans. Studying cylinder seals in Bronze Age Crete, she demonstrates that while their overt function in remote transmission was to verify the integrity of a storehouse or a shipment of goods, seals were also symbolic objects that helped forge a transregional community by signally shared identity, such as social status or membership in a group of religious or community leaders.

In exploring how material objects transmit information, Anderson notes that the tactile and material qualities of symbolic objects can affect how and what they communicate, comparing the use of gold versus the use of wood to craft a Christian cross. The former, she argues, connotes the “richness, loftiness, fineness” associated with the divine, while the latter material connects the divine with “humbleness and unadorned piety” (171). She also draws a correlation between attributes such as these and the stylistic features of symbolic objects on the one hand and intonation in spoken utterances on the other as means of imbuing conventionalized messages with more specific meaning. In her analysis of a distinctive sub-group of Cretan cylinder seals in use just before the appearance of the famous palaces such as Knossos and Phaistos, she suggests that the choice of material (hippopotamus ivory), iconography, and the particular way in which motifs were rendered signaled membership in groups associated with new forms of power and authority on the island. Thus, we see here a good example of the proposition that new modes of sociopolitical organization necessitated new ways of communicating remotely in antiquity as well as today.

Much of what we miss during the current period of lockdown are the small, mundane face-to-face interactions that are part of everyday life—in the hallway, on the street, in the supermarket aisles—that serve to bind us to our family, neighbors, and colleagues. Whereas today we can use cellphones, tablets, and laptops to maintain our social relationships and our place(s) in the social landscape, in prior eras this was done through the exchange of material tokens to create tangible reminders of physically absent persons. Magdalena Naum (2015) illustrates how material culture maintains connections among dispersed community members. In the case of the medieval Hanseatic merchants, diasporic groups and their communities of origin used written missives to communicate about business dealings and to keep abreast of political and social events within their network. They also used a variety of everyday goods—what Naum calls the “cornucopia of anonymous objects” (73) filling domestic and workspaces—such as tableware and furniture to maintain emotional connections to their hometowns and to communicate identity and social differences within their communities. Some of these things were carried into the diaspora by the German-speaking migrants who settled in ports around the Baltic Sea. Others were sent to diasporic residents by friends and family who remained in the homeland. As Naum notes, tangible, ubiquitous personal items stood for missing friends and loved ones, bidding them to acknowledge relationships and reminisce about people with whom they could no longer interact face-to-face. She goes on to argue that the “importance of material culture in maintaining these



connections lies in the ability of physical objects to extend personhood beyond the individual's body, becoming a representation of absent individuals" (82).

Sandra Blakeley's (2012) work on the sanctuary of the Great Gods of Samothrace focuses on "communicative strategies that simultaneously conceal and reveal" (50). She demonstrates how the initiates of this mystery cult materialized ideas about and connections to a distant, pre-Greek past through their use of archaizing sculptural and architectural styles, representations of antiquated forms of clothing, and inscriptions in the language of pre-Greek peoples. She also addresses the basic question of how a secret is communicated across time and space, informing us of something quite distinctive about communicating secrets as opposed to other kinds of messages. Blakely argues that secrecy requires modes of communication that simultaneously announce the presence of a secret yet keep its content hidden, the intent of which is to broadcast a distinction between, essentially, haves and have-nots.

Secrecy, Blakely reminds us, is not the same thing as privacy. Privacy is keeping something to oneself. It is essentially a lack of communication; no one else need know that a private thought exists. In contrast, secrecy is a form of exclusionary power and requires that those who are excluded know there is a secret. Thus, two distinct messages are communicated. One broadcasts the fact that a secret exists and that only some people are privy to its contexts. The second message is the actual "secret" information. The existence of a secret is communicated explicitly, but the sharing of its content across time and space requires that the message be coded or abstracted so that it can only be understood by those authorized to know its specific content.

### **Physical location as a mode of transmission**

Archaeological cases of transmitting information through immobile material culture include detailed descriptions of the physical measurements, locations, and layouts of emplaced features. These descriptions help explain how the material culture acts to transmit information and also provides clues about larger social and political messages they embody. For example, Blakely explains how the physical layout of structures can communicate the presence of secrecy and exclusionary knowledge and practice.

Large monuments visible across the landscape are particularly apt and effective modes of transmitting information about the social world. For example, one does not need words or text to get the message that the sponsor or builder of a substantial structure or earthwork has amassed significant authority and control over resources and labor. Variation in the size of public monuments often indicates hierarchical structures, while relative comparability in aspects such as size, placement, and formal features can be a sign of relative equality among entities. Calling the 11th century stone shrine of Gunung Kawi in Java a "materialization of an ideological statement" (160), John Schoenfelder (2012) argues that the size and arrangement of the temples, buildings, and sculptures directly represent the relative status and power of social entities within and between groups. He suggests that at this level of representation, ideas about equality, solidarity, and inequality can be near-universally recognized and understood when communicated through the size, layout, and formal elements of public structures.

In the case of the temple buildings of Gunung Kawi, Schoenfelder observes that formal similarity among the structures—such as the height, width, and number of spires and doorways in each—represents shared identity, partnership, or alliance of some sort, while differences in the inscriptions represent the individuality of the members that constitute the group, although we cannot identify the specific persons or beings memorialized in the structures. Thus, in Schoenfelder’s interpretation, the overall size of the temple complex communicates the presence of a powerful authority capable of sponsoring and maintaining the monument, “but what the [internal] organization of the site says about the pinnacle of power is not ‘there is one,’ but rather something like ‘there are nine’” (160).

In analyzing changes in burial rituals and mortuary practices in the lower Illinois River Valley over a span of several millennia, Douglas Charles and Jane Buikstra (2008) also consider what can be regarded a communicative act. The placement and structure of mortuary facilities—which were often visible at great distance across the landscape and endured over generations—communicated information about the nature of community in the region across time as well as space. They demonstrate that changes in forms and locations in the mortuary landscape coincided with changes in sociopolitical structure, the degree of sedentism, the nature of subsistence practices, and demographic transformations. They determined that the first use of highly visible bluff-top knoll mortuary facilities coincided with increasing sedentism and territoriality during the Archaic period. This practice linked the ancestors to the land, as they were placed where they could be sighted and cited. Charles and Buikstra suggest that the placement of mortuary features communicated inclusiveness to community members and exclusion of members of other communities. At the same time, a small number of individuals were buried in floodplain locations that served as gathering points for intercommunity events such as seeking mates, exchanging valuables, performing certain rituals, and perhaps negotiating among kin- or residential-groups. Charles and Buikstra describe how these latter burials communicated growing integration among communities and reflected nascent hierarchical differentiation among individuals and communities.

Charles and Buikstra go on to show how the location of mortuary features changed as social and political messages changed. The Archaic pattern was abandoned when population densities dropped and households dispersed, only to be reinvigorated in more elaborate form during the Middle Woodland/Hopewell period when people once again congregated in larger communities. In this latter period, bluff-top burial mounds held most community members, but the most high-status individuals were buried at floodplain gathering sites. Hopewell floodplain burials differed from earlier Archaic ones in that they too had mound buildings visible at great distance, signaling a “community of communities”—that is, regional sociopolitical integration. Overall, the authors argue that the placement and form of funerary structures served as a mode of communication through which residents of the lower Illinois River Valley communicated and negotiated political and social concerns. To the extent that burial practices were a mode of communication, then, these authors, along with Anderson and Blakely, underscore how a wide variety of societal changes can necessitate not only new messages but also new ways of communicating them.

**Conclusions: engaging remote possibilities**

We face the current phase of the COVID-19 pandemic with both hope and ambivalence. Vaccines and new therapeutics have begun to reduce distress and sorrow. Yet, new variants of the virus along with ongoing political disputes and uneven access to healthcare signal that a quick resolution remains elusive. Many people across the globe will continue living for some time with restrictions on face-to-face interactions with family, friends, and coworkers as well as strangers. In this context, remote communication remains vital for fostering meaningful social relationships.

Our selection of anthropological accounts of contemporary and past societies demonstrates the depth and breadth of remote communication as an aspect of human experience. Anthropologists bring to light how people embody social relationships using communication technologies as varied as digital means such as Facebook, FaceTime, Instagram, Messenger, TikTok, Tumbler, Twitter, QQ, WhatsApp, WeChat, QQ, Vine, and Zoom as well as through material objects that range from tchotchkes to monuments. People actively build social spaces using video conferencing, texting, hashtags, emoji, memes, and selfies. Individuals fashion selves and create social identities as they expand discourse occurring separately from and in relation to face-to-face encounters. While some dimensions of human conversations seem altered, anthropologists show that people in diverse cultural contexts learn new embodied practices to exchange ideas and feelings and to foster social unity.

Insights from past societies particularly call attention to how humans use material objects and physical locations to develop modes of transmission. With contemporary digital media, users may emphasize the auditory, visual, and linguistic dimensions and may not perceive that materiality and the sense of physical place enrich the intonation of distant conversations. Yet, we have observed that the mass shift to new communication technologies includes discussions about how speakers should present physical locations and create digital backgrounds on Zoom and other meeting platforms. Remote conversations also regularly incorporate everyday material objects, evoking tangible qualities of food, furniture, clothing, and other recognizable items to unite people across space. Objects, like hashtags and selfies, become part of dynamic conversations, interacting with each other and humans, often seeking to convey ideas and feelings that transcend physical and temporal boundaries. Likewise, mobile phones and laptop computers themselves become material representations of discretion and social mobility. The proliferation of advice on objects to include and scenes to organize for online gatherings suggests that while geographic coordinates might not matter much today, material objects and physical settings remain fundamental components of human communication. Whether in the past or the present, remote communication relies on shared understanding of material qualities and symbolism of objects to bring scattered people together in communities of like-interested persons. Put simply, effective remote communication is an embodied experience that engages symbolic and material dimensions of being human.

Our hopefulness at this point in the pandemic comes from knowing that remote conversations can promote human closeness and unity. The anthropologists in this collection show that remote communication involves shared time-space where people experience friendship and solidarity as well as suffering and sorrow. People value creating privacy, discretion, and secrecy away from

nearby others, whether they be family and friends or political rivals. Strangerships bring joy and playfulness to social interactions and create new possibilities of closeness and caring unavailable from others living in nearby physical proximity. Remote others, including remote strangers, can generate tangible human intimacy.

Seeking closeness, people learn to be visible to each other and address the “seen-not seen” tensions in remote conversations with people who occupy separate physical spaces. We are also more likely to gain greater personal comfort and wellbeing by closely bonding with others, including strangers who live in other physical locations. In other words, embodying our self to connect to others remotely also closely connects something of our self to our self!

In organizing this collection, we have come to appreciate how remote conversations are symbolic and material practices that people learn and embody. People who cover their faces with masks in ritual contexts initially may feel disoriented during social interactions, but they soon enjoy the novel conduct and behavior made possible with a transformed material presentation of the self to others. Likewise, during the pandemic, we took a collective leap of learning to embody a digital world with the desire to nurture and sustain our relationships across many domains.

As educators who experienced abrupt shifts to remote education and remote family interactions this year, we fully recognize the burden and distress produced by adopting unfamiliar remote communication practices. Nevertheless, instead of viewing remote communication as an inferior or temporary alternative for face-to-face interaction, we rely on an anthropological sense of possibility to recognize that remote communication practices can create remarkably close relationships, including some relationships that may not be possible in a face-to-face context. We gain optimism knowing that people across time and space have created valuable, enriching possibilities for connecting with each other remotely. Indeed, reaching across space to care for each other expresses a core human quality. Many people feel displaced and disconnected at this moment, but remote communication can offer new possibilities and opportunities—from romance to protest. The ideological separation of physical spaces from digital spaces becomes more and more tenuous as humans integrate multiple modes of communication. Engaging new time-space experiences with our curiosity and creativity will make closeness more possible, both during and after the pandemic.

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