

# Spatio-Temporal Translations

## Practices of Intimacy under Absence

*Erica Baffelli and Frederik Schröer*

**ABSTRACT:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, access to space has been strictly regulated and restricted. Many of us feel acutely disconnected from our relationships, while at the same time new forms of (virtual) intimacies have become ubiquitous. In the pandemic present, nearly all interpersonal relations are now characterised by a double absence that is concrete and material, and also emotional and felt. This article offers a theoretical reflection on how conditions of absence create new practices of intimacy and new strategies of coping. It does so by discussing how pre-pandemic emotional repertoires are translated into new forms of intimacy that can synchronise or throw out of sync. It highlights the centrality of spatial and temporal relations under absence in uncovering new mediated practices.

**KEYWORDS:** absence, emotions, intimacy, mediated practices, time, synchronisation

25 February 2020

*Frederik: You're flying tomorrow?*

*Erica: . . . No, I'm going on Thursday. Waiting to hear about the conference in Trento, but I may not go. I'm a bit worried about getting stuck in Italy or being put into quarantine when I am back.*

*Frederik: A. and I have booked a weekend in Venice in early April. . . . I'm more worried about that.*

*Erica: April should be fine, I hope.*

In late February, Frederik was attending a Winter School in India and Erica was about to fly to Sweden for a PhD defence and then to Italy for a conference.<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 was already spreading in northern Italy, but in our online conversations (such as the one reported above) we were mainly discussing our co-writing schedule and our plan for future travels.<sup>2</sup>

Fast-forward two weeks and the tone of our conversations drastically changed:

8 March 2020

*Erica: Hi Frederik, just wanted to say that I will try to work on our paper next week, but my mind is a bit all over the place at the moment. My sister has been hospitalised*

*on Friday for coronavirus and she is in intensive care. Today we have been told that they are moving her to another hospital in Milan. She is in non-invasive ventilation at the moment, but they may intubate her.*

. . .

*Frederik: . . . it is in situations like these that the utter helplessness of distance is the most terrible.*

In the matter of a few days, both countries where we live (Germany and the United Kingdom) went into lockdown, schools closed, our institutions shut down and teaching was moved online. Erica's sister was fighting coronavirus in a hospital in northern Italy. By late March, we started referring to February in our conversations as 'the great before'.

In the last few months, our access to space has been strictly regulated and restricted as part of the measures to control, slow down or eliminate the spread of COVID-19. At the moment of writing (July 2020), several countries have lifted or relaxed lockdown restrictions, though in others they remain in place or they are returning after spikes in new cases. While we are aware that the pandemic has highly unevenly impacted people's lives around the globe,

*Anthropology in Action*, 28, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 57–62 © The Author(s)

ISSN 0967-201X (Print) ISSN 1752-2285 (Online)

doi:10.3167/aia.2021.280111



This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial No Derivatives 4.0 International license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). For uses beyond those covered in the license contact Berghahn Books.



this reflection is based on our own experience as researchers, based in Manchester and Berlin, as part of a privileged globalised middle class. Until today, we still cannot freely go and meet friends and family overseas, one of us is still not allowed to enter their workplace, and we cannot travel as we used to. Even the most quotidian of interactions and intimacies, such as running into a friend on the street, are regulated by more or less invisible barriers of distance, which are expressed by avoiding physical contacts or bodily proximity. Our intimacies and relationships are undoubtedly affected by the threat of infection and the fear for our own health and that of others. Such biopolitical (Lorenzini 2020) regulations and restrictions – often unprecedented – extend to all aspects of our private and social lives. They stretch from work suspensions to hospital visits, to the restrictions of attendance at funerals and weddings.

Experiences of time, also, have changed in radical ways. Our viral present reaches over an unknown temporal horizon, since we do not know for how long the disease will continue, and there is no time machine that can lead us back to pre-COVID-19 times. Therefore, in our present moment, though the experiences manifest in myriad ways depending on geographical and social contexts, we find ourselves in situations of double absence. We experience spatial inaccessibilities and temporal irreversibility.

This article offers a theoretical reflection on how conditions of absence create new practices of intimacy and belonging (and ultimately, distancing), and on how we are finding new strategies of coping and enduring these profound conditions of absence. It does so by uncovering spatial and temporal experiences as relational – connecting multiple places and times by translating pre-pandemic emotional repertoires to new forms of intimacy.

## The Presence of Absence

Intimacy in long-distance relationships has to be sustained over periods of absence, with or without a pandemic. And new communication technologies have long become central to regular practices of intimacy in many such cases (Jurkane-Hobein 2015). And yet, the context of COVID-19 has afforded absence a much larger presence, breaking the rhythms of encounter, long- or short-distance. Suddenly, what were temporary periods of solitude between encounters are now stretched out into an ocean of unpredictability, as Frederik expressed in this message:

3 July 2020

*Frederik: I guess I'm also just quite thin-skinned right now, with A. gone and probably another three months of loneliness ahead, corona becoming worse again, and the end of times of my PhD and all that that entails for now and for my bleak future.*

In the pandemic present, nearly all interpersonal relations and consequently their practices of intimacy are now characterised by an absence. This absence is concrete and material; it is the absence of bodily and embodied proximities, such as not being able to physically meet with family and friends, a topic that dominated most of our online conversations. 'Not knowing when I will be able to see my family [in Italy and Japan] and my friends is really painful', wrote Erica on 20 April 2020. I can only imagine how hard it is for you [being alone and in a distance relationship].

This absence is also emotional and felt; it is not limited to feelings of missing, desire, loss or longing, but it produces belonging (Baffelli and Schröer 2020a). It speaks to 'what is *not anymore*', our lives before COVID-19, and 'what is *not yet*' (Searle 2020: 167), that is, our lives in an uncertain post-corona future. In addition to its spatial character, this absence is further articulated through temporal relations – socially specific ways in which individuals and groups emotionally connect to imagined pasts, uncertain futures and radically different presents. Today, our lives are dominated by the palpable presence of this absence that cannot simply be reversed, that divides our lived present from those of others, and that casts radical uncertainties upon the future. Some countries in East Asia entered absence already from January 2020, when early news started to emerge from China about a new virus. In Europe, we began living in absence in mid-March, when the World Health Organization declared the epidemic to be a pandemic and one country after another started introducing restrictions. In May–June, some countries began relaxing restrictions, others approached new peaks in case numbers, and yet others reinstated regulations; the situation remains uncertain.

This double absence as both spatial and temporal, we argue, can create feelings of belonging. Such feelings are engendered not by the *absence of a presence*, as in the absence of intimate others, or the inability of travelling to see them. Instead, we argue that in this situation they are produced by the *presence of absence*, that is by a shared experience of being in an overwhelming situation of absence. It is not that the

restrictions and their consequences pertain only to limited areas of our lives; they encompass and affect everything and all our relationships and practices of intimacy, and constantly articulate the presence of absence.

## Translating Intimacy

20 March 2020

*Frederik: . . . We have the luxury of being able to be in contact, even over vast distances.*

How does the presence of this double absence impact our interpersonal relationships and practices of intimacy? As lockdown and social-distancing measures came into full swing, usage of technology platforms for virtual meetings shot through the roof. Compared to a pre-pandemic daily maximum of 10 million users, the video-conferencing software Zoom reported an increase of daily users to over 300 million by 22 April (Zoom Blog 2020). Usage of other similar software and social media platforms grew likewise, as populations under lockdown increasingly shifted sociability online. We define the resulting mediated practices of interaction and intimacy – ranging from business communications or gatherings of families and friends, to the interactions of partners and spouses in relationships suddenly turned ‘long-distance’ – as promises of presence. They operate as acts of translation in so far as they recode the spatio-temporal frameworks of interpersonal relations onto new, virtualised formats, creating a kind of a commensurability between the practices of intimacy before the pandemic and those under conditions of absence. As all acts of translation, this introduces change to the practices carried over into mediation, which in turn affects their emotional repertoires.

Distance, mediation and virtuality do not mean that such encounters are necessarily less intense or less emotional. As Iveta Jurkane-Hobein has argued for long-distance relationships, the lack of non-verbal communication cues can lead to an increase in textual or verbal communication, in which ‘it is non-co-presence that allows for more emotional intimacy than would be possible if [the partners] spent more time together in the same place’ (2015: 234). As demonstrated in a study on mediated intimacies, distance and anonymity can even enable practices of intimacy and ‘mediated proximity’ (Petersen et al. 2018). Such ‘mediated presence of others’ can be felt as very concrete, comforting and material (Cefai and

Couldry 2019: 298), especially given contemporary technological means and, as pointed out in the quote presented above, if we have the luxury to be able to maintain this contact over distances. On the other hand, although these mediated practices make the presence of others ‘felt’, they also amplify the intensity of the feeling of absence – as in the deafening silence that can settle after a virtual meeting ends and the computer is shut down.

But how does this current situation differ from the everyday experiences of families, firms or relationships spread across countries and around the globe? Both of us are used to remote communication with family, friends and colleagues, and often we do not see our family and friends for months. However, under the circumstances of the pandemic, mediated and distanced forms of intimacy became not a choice but often the only option available. Whereas before one could, depending on one’s means, board trains or planes to visit distant friends or family, or simply walk to a friend’s house in the neighbourhood, now mediated practices of interaction and intimacy are often the only option, even across short distances. Therefore, the mediated forms of intimacy we are thinking about only exist under the conditions of absence, and must be analysed accordingly. Of course, (new) media technologies and platforms, such as social media, have been intersecting with our daily lives and intimate practices for a while (Petersen et al. 2018). It has been already demonstrated how they influence our ‘social and intimate lives’ (2018: 2) and how they change ways in which intimacies are enabled and accessed. Studies of queer intimacies in particular have shown how minorities have long relied on mediation since the early days of the Internet to create spaces allowing for the safe practice of non-heteronormative intimacies (Attwood et al. 2017). On the other hand, mediation can as much become an instrument of exclusion: it can exclude the differently abled, the non-tech-savvy, or those with limited access to the necessary infrastructures. However, in a pandemic such as the current one, the presence of absence impacts both majorities and minorities, albeit still unevenly. What if mediated practices of intimacy are the only option available to share our emotions and experiences and to replace bodily proximities, at least for a while?

Rikke Andreassen (2017) defines intimacy as *experience of belonging*, as relational, but what happens when the practice of negotiating belonging and connectedness is restricted and non-negotiable? Simply put, the feelings of ‘being there’ and ‘being there to

gether', that is, the experiences of physical and social presence (Villi 2015: 5), are made possible through acts of translation: in mediated environments, which we create and use because of the very presence of absence (that is, otherwise we would likely meet in person instead), practices of intimacy are translated from the visceral encounter of bodies to virtual mediation and the promise of future presence. Central to this are, as we argue, the temporal experience of synchronicity and the establishing of (new) spatio-temporal relations.

### **Spatio-Temporal Relations: Intimacies in and out of Sync**

On 19 May, a friend sent Erica a picture they took together in Stockholm during the trip she made in February and mentioned in the conversation at the beginning of this article. 'My last trip in the great before! Was fun'. She said, and added: 'Really feels like another life. And it was only late February'.

As we live under current restrictions, how does the presence of absence shape our experience? We have been thrown out of our lives before the pandemic, and very often this leaves us feeling stranded, adrift and disconnected temporally to the great before. All we can do now is arrange ourselves within this new situation by finding strategies of coping and enduring the profound absence that has settled into our lives. We do so with the help of others – family, friends, loved ones, colleagues, or virtual strangers who offer solace. To deal with these acutely felt disconnections, new forms of (virtual) intimacies and belonging have become ubiquitous for many of us.

These new (virtual) practices – translations of intimacy to new media – offer promises of presence. Physical co-presence is translated to virtual presence in the imagined globality of the pandemic – as mediated and experienced through the global imaginaries of COVID-19 dashboards and maps visualising the transnational spread of the virus. Even if local experiences differ significantly, this imagined globality has also created an experience of synchronicity. At least for a while, many of us around the world suddenly felt synchronised in facing the pandemic as a new facet of globalisation. Such an experience was engendered by practices of synchronisation often based on transnational media consumption, or the proliferation of medical language and its spatio-temporal categories of zones, vectors and phases. At the micro-level of our personal experiences and daily practices,

media as tools of synchronisation (Jordheim and Ytreberg 2020) allow us to synchronise our lives by sharing simultaneous moments in time despite the lack of bodily co-presence in the same space.

At different scales, therefore, belonging is constituted under conditions of absence through mediated practices as translations of intimacy. The range of feelings with which we experience this situation ranges from emotions of anxiety, loss, anger or longing, to emotions of resolve, hope or solidarity. As time went on, others such as guilt and shame became stable parts of the pandemic's emotional spectrum. These feelings are shaped by and experienced through the spatio-temporal relations that are specific to this situation, and are therefore placed into specific frames of meaning-making. They include the temporality of the pandemic as a 'crisis' (implying a clear beginning and end, but also a spatial and temporal break) and the spatialities of (stranded) migrant labour or (interrupted) commodity chains, and they reach down to the micro-levels of neighbourhoods and shared houses. Once established through mediated practices, these translations of intimacy and the new spatio-temporal relations that attend them affect our lives in new and powerful ways. Today, this most readily becomes apparent not in the feelings of global or local synchronicity engendered in the earlier phases of the pandemic, but through the increasing experiences of their opposite: being out of sync.

In the different phases of the pandemic and of living the absence, feelings of dissonance started emerging regarding practices of intimacy. Some of us have started to feel insecure or even fearful about resuming unmediated bodily proximities. A stranger's shoulder brushing ours in the supermarket can make us flinch; we need to negotiate anew our bodily interactions with friends and family, or how we react to a pet or a small child approaching us on the street.

We may feel guilty or ashamed about expressing relief when restrictions are lifted and we start living in the 'new normal'; we may even resent now-ubiquitous mediated intimacies and lack of spontaneity in interactions with friends and colleagues, as illustrated in a conversation between one of us and a friend about how to negotiate meeting people when some restrictions were lifted:

*18 May 2020*

*Robert: There are no unmediated social situations. Everything requires conscientious initiation.*

*Erica: Exactly. Everything requires extra effort, and planning.*

Similarly to the case of people with chronic or severe illnesses sharing their emotions and experiences via electronic media such as blogs, which is discussed by Espen Ytreberg (2019), mediated practices initially may have fostered ‘a sense of togetherness with others’ that we felt in-sync with emotionally. However, much like rehabilitated people not wanting to keep going back to their experiences of suffering, we may now also simultaneously or gradually feel distant and out of sync with others experiencing a different phase of the pandemic. In such cases, we feel a new disconnection with the emotions and experiences of intimate others.

Absence, as we have explained in brief above, has had a powerful presence in times of COVID-19, with the potential to change previous practices of intimacy in the longer term. Absence, experienced as the promise of presence through mediated practices, has therefore not only established feelings of proximity and synchronicity, but also feelings of distance and being out of sync. While Sarah Cefai and Nick Couldry (2017) have argued that mediated practices often remain experienced as ‘intangible’ and can interfere with forms of intimacy grounded in physical co-presence, the spatio-temporal translations we have described straddle the distinction between virtual and material. Both synchronicity and asynchronicity are experienced in intensely emotional and visceral ways online as well as offline. Irrespective of the different strategies of different governments, the virus is here to stay, at least for a while. And therefore the impact on our practices of intimacy cannot be dismissed as temporary. Absence is not likely to rescind its presence any time soon.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Espen Ytreberg for his advice on literature and Jane Caple and Paulina Kolata for their comments on a draft version of this article.

**ERICA BAFFELLI** is currently Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in Japanese Studies at the University of Manchester. She is interested in religion in contemporary Japan, with a focus on groups founded from the 1970s onwards. Recent publications include *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese ‘New’ Religion* (2019, with Ian Reader) and *Media and New Religions in Japan* (2016).

E-mail: erica.baffelli@manchester.ac.uk

**FREDERIK SCHRÖER** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for the History of Emotions, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin. In his recently submitted PhD dissertation in Global History, he explored the role of emotions, time and space in diasporic community formation in the case of the early Tibetan diaspora in India.

E-mail: schroeer@mpib-berlin.mpg.de

## Notes

1. This article expands on points we sketched out in Baffelli and Schröer (2020b).
2. All conversations reported in this article are personal communications exchanged on Facebook Messenger between February and July 2020. Personal names have been changed to protect anonymity.

## References

- Andreassen, R. (2017), ‘New Kinships, New Family Formations and Negotiations of Intimacy via Social Media Sites’, *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 3: 361–371, doi:10.1080/09589236.2017.1287683.
- Attwood, F., J. Hakim and A. Winch (2017), ‘Mediated Intimacies: Bodies, Technologies and Relationships’, *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 3: 249–253, doi:10.1080/09589236.2017.1297888.
- Baffelli, E., and F. Schröer (2020a), ‘Communities of Absence: Emotions and Time in the Creation of Belonging’, unpublished manuscript.
- Baffelli, E., and F. Schröer (2020b), ‘A Double Absence: Feeling Time in the COVID-19 Pandemic’, *Feeling News*, 12 May, <https://mpib.iwww.mpg.de/forschung/forschungsbereiche/geschichte-der-gefuehle/blog-feeling-news/a-double-absence>.
- Cefai, S., and N. Couldry (2017), ‘Mediating the Presence of Others: Reconceptualising Co-Presence as Mediated Intimacy’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 3: 291–308, doi:10.1177/1367549417743040.
- Jordheim, H., and E. Ytreberg (2020), ‘After Supersynchronization: How Media Synchronize the Social’, unpublished manuscript.
- Jurkane-Hobein, I. (2015), ‘Imagining the Absent Partner: Intimacy and Imagination in Long-Distance Relationships’, *Innovative Issues and Approaches in Social Sciences* 8, no. 1: 223–241, doi:10.12959/issn.1855-0541.IIASS-2015-no1-art13.

- Lorenzini, D. (2020), 'Biopolitics in the Time of Coronavirus', *Critical Inquiry*, 2 April, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/02/biopolitics-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>.
- Petersen, M. N., R. Andreassen, K. Harrison and T. Raun, (eds) (2018), *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities* (London: Routledge).
- Searle, A. (2020), 'Absence', *Environmental Humanities* 12, no. 1: 167–172, doi:10.1215/22011919-8142253.
- Villi, M. (2015), "'Hey, I'm Here Right Now": Camera Phone Photographs and Mediated Presence', *Photographies* 8, no. 1: 3–22, doi:10.1080/17540763.2014.968937.
- Ytreberg, E. (2019), 'Control over Stories of Illness and Life: The Case of a Career Media Participant Turned Media Professional', *Nordicom Review* 40, no. 2: 37–48, doi:10.2478/nor-2019-0023.
- Zoom Blog (2020), '90-Day Security Plan Progress Report: April 22', Zoom Blog, 22 April, <https://blog.zoom.us/90-day-security-plan-progress-report-april-22/>.