

being dead otherwise



anne allison

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A stone marker for disconnected dead at
Tama Reian Cemetery, Koganei, Tokyo



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To Yoshiko

For all you have taught me, shared with
me, and accompanied me in

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In a stream of new enterprises catering to death, this one washes and pulverizes human remains. Called a “bone business” (*hone-ya-san*), the company is small and sits quietly in a residential neighborhood in Tokyo. But things are active inside. Boxes of cremains from all over the country stand high in the main room. Posted straight from the crematorium or dug up from ancestral graves and destined for reburial in an urban cemetery, the ashes have traveled here to be further compacted. Whether to be scattered in the sea (*sankotsu*) or interred in a high-rise columbarium, bone fragments are sent to be ground into fine powder (*funkotsu*). This is a delicate process, the owner tells me, displaying the mortar and pestle he uses in the final step.

The body, in death, reformulated for changing times, reflecting a landscape where the dead don't necessarily wind up where they used to: in a family or ancestral plot in the ground, attached to a Buddhist temple passed down for generations, and tended fastidiously by patrilineal kin. This was once sanctioned by law in a genealogical principle that sutured the nation-state to the continuity of the imperial system incarnated by the emperor. But alongside reforms in the postwar “democratic” constitution adopted in 1947, the grave went from being a place to memorialize ancestors to a place for an individual's eternal rest. Since then, a number of factors have contributed to dismantling this family-based mortuary system even further: urbanization and sped-up lifestyles, an aging population with low birth rates, decreasing rates of marriage and cohabitation, the rise of Japanese citizens living and dying alone, and a shift away from long-term employment to more irregular

jobs. For many today, relying on family members to bury the dead in graves in the countryside and to tend to them after that is no longer realistic.

But to be untended at death provokes the specter of disconnected souls (*muenbotoke*) who wander the earth, deprived as they are of a “home.” As attested to by the endless stories these days of abandoned graves in the countryside and city dwellers whose remains go unclaimed after dying alone, their bodies discovered long after the fact (a phenomenon called lonely or solitary death), this is a real possibility. And it generates unease around death. But this, in turn, is being met by a wave of creative, commercial, and civic interest in what is a new politics of the dead: forging ways of handling the deceased less reliant on the ancestral grave, familial caregiving, or management by someone else.

We die alone and in a specific moment in time, biologically at least. But what happens to the dead after that—as material remains and as a presence maintained through memory, mourning, ritual, care—depends on others. How this relationship is undergoing radical change in the context of twenty-first century Japan is the subject of this book. Between the dead and their relationality with others.

Being dead otherwise. Recomposing decomposition in terms of how, where, and with whom one winds up after death.

acknowledgments

This book has been both hard and wondrous for me. About death(s) that pain the soul. But about trappings of life that accompany or embroider the dead as well. The voice of the priest greeting ancestors in the homes of his parishioners during Obon, the care of the cleanup workers gently removing the belongings of those who have died alone in their homes, the craft of the bone crusher lovingly completing the last step of his job with a mortar and pestle. I have been fortunate, in the long years conducting this research, to have had so many working in the intimate work of deathcare in Japan open their jobsites to me. I am grateful for their generosity as I am to that of all the Japanese who shared with me their ways of thinking about, dealing with, and managing (or not managing) ending plans. This is such personal terrain, embedded as it is in the (be)longings we have with others, including material (and nonmaterial) things. This project has been deeply enriched by all those who have been so willing and open in speaking about these matters with me. This includes dear friends (and my dearest Japanese friend, Yoshiko Kuga), close colleagues, my great partner and sons, a loving sister, the best editor ever (Ken Wissoker), smart students, all those who have encouraged this project with invitations to write or present on it, and an energetic core of fellow “death gals”—researchers as compelled as I am by this scholarly topic. I have learned so much from you all. And though “I” may not be overtly present in all the writing and stories that follow, to me, this is the most personal of all my scholarly endeavors. The journey I have taken here is, truly, my own journey in threading the edges of life and loss that I am still embarked on. It is also my response to what some have called the need to

go beyond what they lamentingly see as the turn to the “suffering slot” in anthropology. This book is about death. But it is not about turning away from life—life can surge in and around biological ends. Rather, I see something like hope approaching, if not quite arriving, in the turn toward new ways of “being dead otherwise.” This is what I aim to bring to the page here.

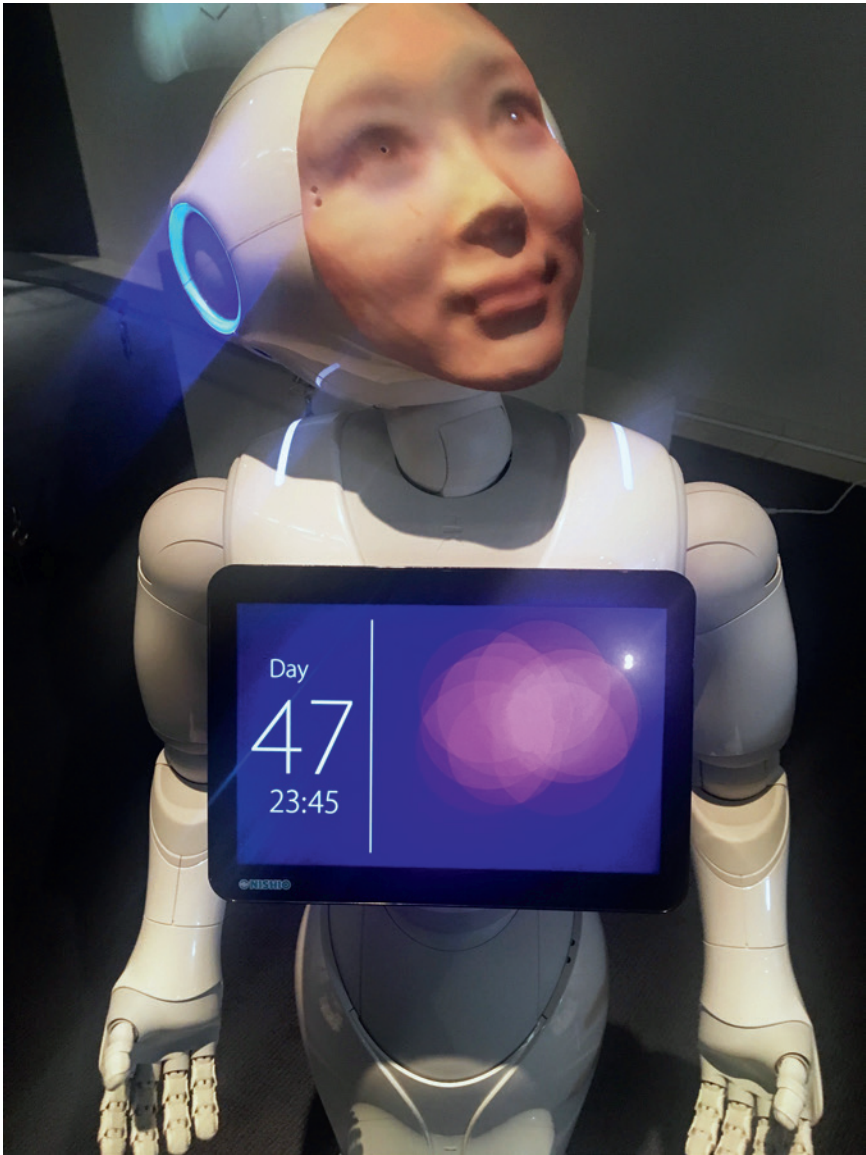
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All of the photos in the book were taken by me. Tony Kim did all of the photo editing of the images and composed the collages. I thank him for the artistry of his work.

And my special thanks, always and forever, to Charlie.



P.1 Lanterns strung over the creek at Myōkōji Temple, showing the route back home for departing spirits during Obon.



P.2 The *Digital Shaman Project*, an art installation by Ishihara Etsuko, displayed summer 2018. Meant to embody a deceased spirit for the forty-nine days of suspension between the two worlds, during which it is tended to by mourners.



P.3 An altar to the ancestors during Obon.



P.4 A composite of miniatures created by Kojima Miyu to commemorate rooms cleanup workers have been commissioned to clean after a lonely death.



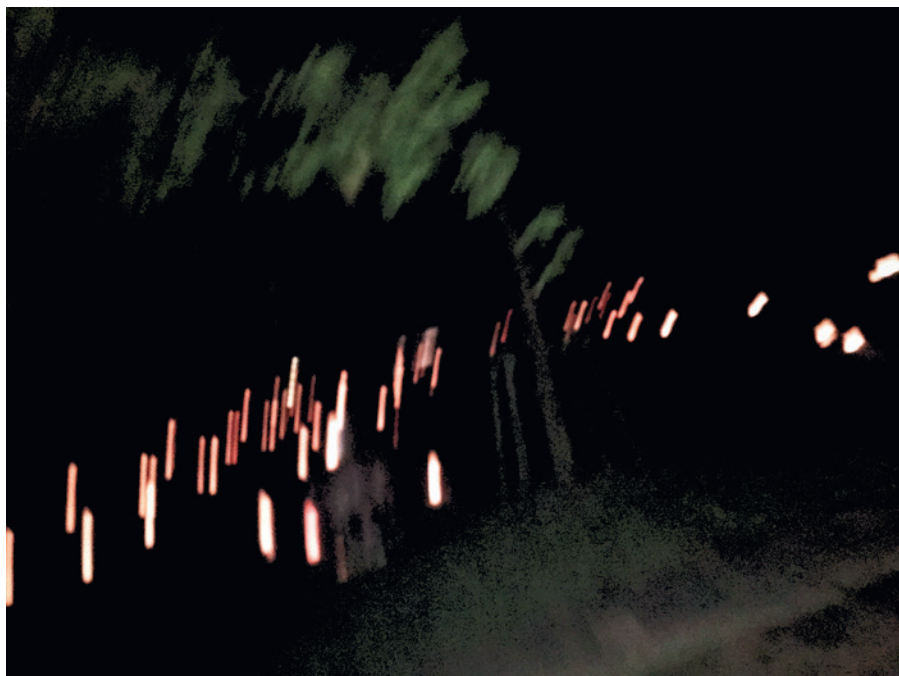
P.5 Two of Kojima Miyu's *gomiyaakushi* miniatures, crafted to reproduce rooms that she was commissioned to clean (such as the one on the right) following lonely deaths. *Gomiyaakushi* translates as "hoarders."



P.6 Softbank's humanoid robot, Pepper, performing as priest during ENDEX, the annual convention for those in the funeral and cemetery industry.



P.7 A wake held at dusk during a monsoon in Tokyo.



P.8 Lanterns accompanying the dead back home. Kakudasan
Myōkōji Temple, Niigata.

introduction

The wake, held at nightfall, surges with mourners. A smaller but sizable crowd gathers the next morning for the upscale funeral in a hall filled with white chrysanthemums and designer photos of the deceased distributed throughout. Filing past the open coffin and lighting incense to the spirit of the deceased at the Buddhist altar, mourners gather outside for the casket to be loaded onto the hearse. Close relatives and friends now accompany the body to the crematorium, where, after final goodbyes and a short respite in a room with cool drinks, they reconvene an hour later in the furnace room. There they greet what has emerged: bone fragments and ash strewn across a gurney still radiating heat. Observing the cremains, the mourners approach the cart where, maneuvering a set of chopsticks, they join in moving a fragment from one tray to another. “Picking the bones” (*kotsuage*), a ritual of intimacy and respect, involves touching, seeing, and being with a loved one as they transition into something else. After this comes a communal meal shared between mourners, priests, and the deceased, whose ashes are now in an urn.

Or, another scenario: after the mandatory twenty-four-hour after-death waiting period, the corpse is taken directly from the hospital to the crematorium instead of to a funeral hall, where the bereaved would otherwise assemble for the wake the night before and the leave-taking (*kokubetsushiki*/告別式) the next morning. At the crematorium only immediate family convene. The ceremony there, quite barebones, is officiated by a staff member or Buddhist priest for a much lower price—as little as three thousand dollars versus up to ten times that amount for a fuller affair. At the crematorium the family is unlikely to engage in bone-picking or to hold on to the remains for the traditional forty-nine days of Buddhist mourning during which the spirit is in transit from this world to the next. Instead, the urn will be deposited immediately: buried in the ground in a cemetery or placed inside an ossuary or in a high-rise locker or automatic-delivery-style columbarium—options becoming popular these days for their convenience and low cost. Such a “direct ceremony” (*chokusō*) takes place—hospital to crematorium to burial ground—all in one shot.

Or, consider this possibility: the deceased, a bachelor without children or close relatives, makes his own burial arrangements ahead of time. His death in a long-term-care facility triggers the stages of his prepaid plan. First the body goes to a holding room, then to a crematorium, and finally to a collective burial spot under cherry trees, to be interred as commingled ashes. Having chosen one of the different options in the burial grounds operated by the nonprofit organization he joined a number of years ago, the deceased will be memorialized by a collective ceremony held annually for all members who have died that year and before. As done in life, members often attend these rituals as well as the regularly held get-togethers for the future deceased to get to know one another while still alive. After cremation, ashes go into the earth alongside not family but “grave friends” (*haka tomo*)—the ties of affiliation that have been formed by virtue of membership in this alternative burial association. As advertised by the promotional brochure, interment in these burial grounds does not depend on having family or a successor. But “no one is lonely” by virtue of being interred alongside others as well as among the host of cherry trees.

Or, another prospect: three weeks after death, the body is discovered because of the smell of its decomposition and the buzz of flies outside the door. The landlord calls in the police, who find the corpse among clutter and garbage strewn inside. Estranged from family and friends, living on welfare since losing his job years ago, the deceased has died a “lonely death” (*kodokushi*). The only relation the local municipality can track down

is a sister who refuses to claim the remains, saying the siblings have been disconnected for years, so the municipality will bear the responsibility and cost for handling the corpse. The body is sent to the local crematorium, then the ashes are interred in a designated Buddhist temple where there is a special plot and shrine for the disconnected (*muenbo*). Meanwhile, the landlord shoulders the expense of commissioning a special cleanup service to repair and restore the apartment to an inhabitable state. It is a massive job to remove the detritus of the lonely death, the numbers of which are rapidly rising these days—as are those of special cleaners who give witness to the life expired there.

.....

As can be seen by this range of possible outcomes—the first becoming less and less common, the others rising in frequency—there are different ways of dying and being buried in Japan today. And as the example of those who end up in graves for the disconnected attests, this is a matter that demands some kind of social response. Even though (or particularly because) a corpse represents the not-ness of a life once there and now gone. That, rather than discarding them, the living have chosen to keep some portion of these remains as tribute to the dead in their midst, has been customary practice since at least Neolithic times, twenty thousand years ago. Differentiating us from animals, this is an act that philosophers have long taken to be constitutive of humanity: holding onto a remnant of those now departed in honor and recognition of the place they once held in the community. For Hegel, making houses for the dead signaled the onset of both memory and symbol-making, uniquely human capacities that extend us beyond biological survival and the temporal here and now. The ability to imagine an otherwise is harbored here. Whereas “houses for the living are mere shelter, structures for preserving life; a tomb is the work of the symbol-making architect” (Hegel, quoted in Laqueur 2015, 90). And to treat a dead body “as if it were ordinary organic matter” (4) is to deny its very humanity—what Thomas Laqueur in his cultural history of mortal remains calls a universal cultural logic.

In his anthropological study of death, Robert Hertz (1960) outlined the three main elements involved in mortuary practice: the corpse, the living survivors, and the deceased on their passage to somewhere or something else. The status of the dead is at once liminal and precarious, and caring for the dead depends on those still living who embark upon doing so at the site of the corpse. This entails a relationship between the living and the dead conducted around the material remnants of the deceased—a substance

that, in the process of decomposition, indexes the present absence of a life once here and now gone. As Hertz pointed out for the Dayak of Borneo, the liminality of the corpse troubled the order of things, indicating a spirit in transition from this world to the next. But once the flesh had sufficiently dissolved, leaving bones neatly white and discrete, the dead were reburied closer to the living, who took solace in the belief that the departed had now arrived at their final destination (somewhere else). Hertz proposed that ritualizing the dead is a mechanism that reconstitutes, by reconfirming, the ongoing life of the community. Though a member has physically departed, those left behind are reminded of the ties they share that enable livelihood to continue. By honoring, but differentiating, the dead, a symbolics is enacted to a social/human enterprise that traverses the spectrum of existence and transcends any biological or temporal part. And by making a space for them to dwell among the living in a home all their own, the deceased are accorded the recognition that they (still) matter in this constellation, now stretching as it does to another plane.

Inherently social, the Hertzian model of a “good death” depends on others who attend to the material remains and spiritual aftermath of the dead, giving the departed the aura of belonging to those who remain behind. In the absence of this care, the deceased become something other than honored dead. These are the ungrievable, in Judith Butler’s term, with lives that fail to matter; something less than human, as Antigone believed when sacrificing her own life to bury her brother in defiance of the king. As recorded by anthropologists from Robert Desjarlais (2016) observing diasporic Tibetan Buddhists to Scott Stonington (2020) studying northern Thai villagers and Sarah Wagner (2019) talking to Americans dealing with MIAs from the Vietnam War, a “bad death” is lonely and cold; unwitnessed, untidy, unadorned. This happens when someone dies far from home, estranged from family and friends; in sudden or painful circumstances; or has remains that go untreated, unrecovered, unnamed (Walter 2017). The opposite is being given a place of sorts among and by the living: remains that are tended to and a reminder of the deceased beyond the earthly existence of an individual. Entailing ritual care, this is not only social but constitutive of a sociality that many see as the essence of humanity itself—taking care of life beyond its existential or instrumental utility.

.....

What happens when the dead can no longer be assured of such places among the living? And when the institutions governing the biopolitics of

life-making become ever less resourceful in managing, or ensuring, those in the making of death? And when none of this is the exception—due to circumstances like war, being marginalized in life, or falling on hard times—but is becoming generalized, even normalized, for a community at large?

Being Dead Otherwise contemplates this necrosociological condition through the lens of Japan at the start of the twenty-first century. As the familial model that once handled mortuary arrangements is coming undone, the ranks of those bereft of the social others who once cared for the dead are on the rise. Signs of this appear daily in the news: abandoned urns on the trains, corpses of the lonely dead going undiscovered for months, the carcasses of ancestral tombs standing empty in rural cemeteries, unclaimed remains interred in tombs for the disconnected. More palpable still is a sense of urgency and unease around the need to prepare one's ending arrangements ahead of time, or to "close" ancestral graves and move the contents somewhere else to avoid the fate of winding up as "disconnected souls." New disposal methods with different (or no) provisions for mortuary care abound these days in what is a booming "ending industry" catering to a population less and less likely to have a predesignated grave or care providers to tend to the dead once there.

If the dead once relied upon the connections of others to avoid becoming a disconnected soul, how is the sociality and governance of mortality today changing away from family, intimate relations, and sometimes human mortuary care altogether? In such new age trends as outsourcing grievability to a company or interring ashes in an automated crypt, do we see a desire to innovate on ritual grieving or a willingness to let it go? What does it say—about a nation-state, a people, an individual once alive and now dead—when the management of grievability is in question? Do any of these social units really need grievability, in other words? What happens without it, or when grievability gets performed by a robot or by and for the self?

Being Dead Otherwise interrogates the interpersonal entanglements of death, considering Japan as a case study of possible futures in the weaning, transforming, and redesigning of others in the management of the dead.

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Twenty-first century Japan is undergoing radical, rapid flux in attitudes and practices regarding death. Having "no place to go" (*ikiba ga nai*) rather than a grave already reserved is a possibility for an increasing number of the population. And the shards of family tombs that, no longer tended to,

now stand abandoned constitute as much as 40 percent of the edifices in some rural cemeteries (Kotani 2018). This reflects a spatial problem in a land-poor country, particularly in cities, where plots in desirable cemeteries are exceedingly scarce and exorbitantly priced. But the scarcity at hand has more to do with relationality: the lack of others to be buried alongside or to care for one's remains and spirit once there. When family lines die out or kin stop maintaining graves or move far away, ancestral plots become "empty" (*akihaka*), and the contents are soon removed to be reburied in tombs for the disconnected. But the to-be-deceased face more challenges still. With the country's high aging and low birthrate demographics, death rates exceeding birth rates every year, and increased "singlification" of households and lifestyles, the still dominant familial model of death making leaves many in a quandary at the end. This is true particularly, but not only, for those without spouses, successors, or the financial wherewithal to enter a family grave. Without finding an alternative, a final resting place with some kind of ritualized care over time, these dead will wind up as disconnected souls (*muenbotoke*)—an unpleasant prospect that raises the specter of hungry, wandering ghosts.

Such a situation is hardly the way it used to be in Japan. People once lived in close proximity to the dead. Caring for the ancestors in graves that were usually in nearby domestic shrines where offerings, including food, were given daily was part of everyday routine. This continued, by custom and religious practice, for thirty-three years, until the dead were thought to have transitioned into ancestors. By that point, others were likely to have died and be on their way (to the "other world"), too, stitching the dead into the fabric of life and premising care on a principle of continuous regeneration. A temporality of "eternity" depended on exchanges of ritual—serving the ancestors and then being served by one's own descendants and becoming an ancestor as well—that were wedded, in turn, to a very specific rubric of and for social reproduction: a national-patriarchal structuring of belonging that dictated (and delimited) relationality through the patrilineal familial system (*ie*). The Meiji Constitution stipulated that all citizens be entered in the Family Registry in terms of patrilineal identification: family name (birth name for men, married name for women), order and position in family (hierarchized by gender and age), dates (of birth, marriage, and death), addresses, employment, and property.¹ The law also designated the grave (*ohaka*) as the material and symbolic seat of the patrilineal *ie* system, which became the ideological bulwark of the imperial nation-state throughout its militaristic buildup to establish, then lead, an