

## (Dis)Affect, Photography, Place

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Travelling by Photograph: Representing and Reframing Migration

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Article abstract

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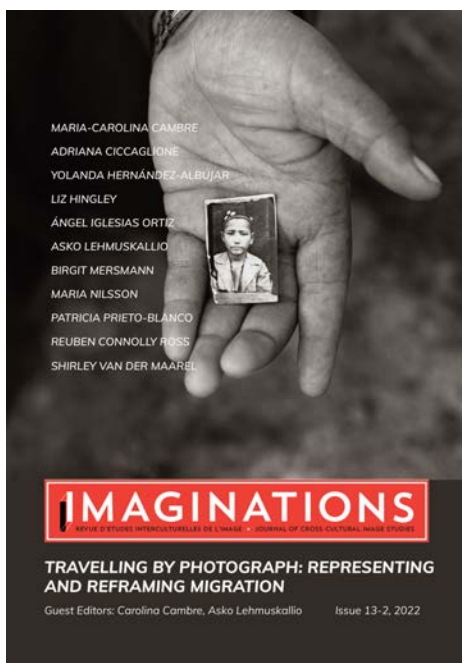
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## Travelling by Photograph: Representing and Reframing Migration

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portrait shown to him in 1997 at an Afghan  
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## (DIS)AFFECT, PHOTOGRAPHY, PLACE

PATRICIA PRIETO-BLANCO

Migrants are connected for a variety of reasons (Leurs and Prabhakar 2018, p. 247), and in a myriad of ways (Cabalquinto 2018; Özdemir, Mutluer, and Özyürek 2019; Gencil Bek and Prieto-Blanco 2020). Drawing from a larger project of ethnographic nature (Prieto-Blanco 2016b), this paper argues that photographic practices advance socialization in transnational families, and that each practice activates certain relational affordances to support bonding and familial intimacy. This also serves to offer an alternative reading of phatic communication (Malinowski 1923) as an emotion-based process. Finally, the paper proposes to understand (digital) photography as a medium of (inter)action and experience for transnational families.

Les migrants sont liés entre eux pour un grand nombre de raisons (Leurs and Prabhakar, p. 247) et d'une myriade de manières (Cabalquinto 2018; Özdemir, Mutluer, and Özyürek 2019; Gencil Bek and Prieto-Blanco 2020). S'inspirant d'un plus grand projet de nature ethnographique (Prieto-Blanco 2016b), cet article argumente que les pratiques photographiques aident à la socialisation au sein des familles transnationales et que chaque pratique active des potentiels relationnels pour soutenir les liens et l'intimité familiales. Cela permet également d'offrir une lecture alternative de la communication phatique (Malinowski 1923) comme un processus reposant sur les émotions. Enfin, l'article offre une compréhension de la photographie (digitale) comme un moyen d'(inter)action et d'expérience pour les familles transnationales.

## INTRODUCTION

While for many current constellations of hardwares, softwares, and, analogue objects (*polymediations*, Herrmann and Tyma 2015) represent a shift brought about by the context of COVID-19 and remote work/socializing, a complex landscape of *new* mediations has been present in the everyday of transnational families for years now (Madianou and Miller 2012). This paper uses a conceptual framework focused on the contextualization of photographic exchanges within “socio-technical” photographic practices (Lehmuskallio and Gómez Cruz 2016) and potential emotive character of photographic exchanges to analyze (digital) photographic practices in eleven Irish-Spanish families for eighteen months. The research design was particularly informed by narrative inquiry and visual sociology (Bach 2007; Bell 2013; Squire 2015), and three research methods were originally developed for this research—three phased consent process, visualization of circle of reference, and the home tour of photographic displays. All participants participated in four stages: a narrative interview with a photo-elicitation element; a second narrative interview followed by a visual exploration of their photographic displays at their homes; semi-structured interview about their photographic practices; and in three follow-up interviews. For readers interested in the methodological approach and research design, allow me to refer you to a previous piece of mine (Prieto-Blanco, 2016a). The aim of this paper is to argue that photographic practices of Spanish-Irish families complement analogue “third places” (Oldenburg 1989, 23) by subsidizing social interactions and advancing (informal) socialization. It will be argued that success depends on the “relational affordances” (Kono 2009) of the technology/medium employed, and that concrete affordances (publishing, indexicality) are activated to support strategies of inclusion and exclusion (boundary work). The next section provides the theoretical contextualization of the argument, before findings are presented and subsequently discussed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**A**lthough the scholarly use of affordances has been inconsistent (Wright and Parchoma 2011, 249-250), it is a term that allows the exploration of interactions between humans and non-humans—i.e. Bruno Latour’s hybrid actor (1999, 181), or Ian Russell’s “Humedia” (2007). Affordances are always framed by systems, which include artifacts, actions, and social contexts. Tetsuya Kono provides a more comprehensive and pragmatic definition of the term: “Affordances are the dispositions of the environment; an individual can integrate some of them into his or her action” (369). Thus, affordances are necessary conditions for action produced and maintained by conventions, and when perceived render intentional responses possible (Kono 361, 369). Images need media to become visible, our bodies being one of those (Belting 2001). They are “transmitted in the interplay between media carrying images and bodies directing their attention in perceiving them” (Lehmuskallio 2012, 40). Often the images carried by media are of our bodies, which Mikko Villi describes as “mediated presence” (2015). Sometimes, the mediation of presence allows for tele-cocoons to emerge, “[...] a zone of intimacy in which people can continuously maintain their relationships with others who they have already encountered without being restricted by geography and time” (Habuchi 2005,167), such as I will argue below, kinship making. Obviously, not any *place* is a tele-cocoon, but could any place *become* one? How would this happen?

By looking at the affordances activated through concrete practices, I believe we can start outlining patterns of interaction between people and images/objects. For instance, my research with Irish-Spanish families revealed that social processes such as socialization of young children (read below), go on through photographic exchanges and related visual practices. Their visual practices were organised in social settings around shared understandings and objects. Antoine Henion argues there is a process of attachment—affective attachment, one may say—that reveals relations between people and things as well as between people, and that does not need to be beneficial, as attachment could signify “a bind, restriction, restraint, and depen-

dence” (2012, 4). The way we relate to each other—or using Hen-ion’s vocabulary, attach to each other—is emplaced and experiential, and “concerns shared history, common property and shared objects” (Jamieson 1998, 200). It is exactly this important connection of emplacement between human and nonhuman actors that is highlighted here with the aim to explore in depth the social life of (digital) photographs, thus advocating for an approach to media that accounts for the social relations existing in and through material worlds (Edwards 2002, 2009, 2012), as well as for their “ever more complex organizational patterns” (Couldry and Hepp 2016, 35-36).

Working with Spanish-Irish families was fundamental to explore social processes that go through media, because their specific geographical settings meant that family members lived in different countries and interacted physically face-to-face at best a handful of times a year. They turned to digital media to mediate social interactions, thereby sustaining affective relationships and extending their home beyond their house (Rose 2003, 9-15). In spite of their seemingly transient and ephemeral character (Murray 2008; Grainge 2011), digital media offer the possibility of frequent and constant communication, co-presence (Villi 2015) and tele-cocooning (Habuchi 2005). This suggests some degree of performative force: (Austin 1961, 119, 287). Photographic practices comprise three stages: participation, repetition, and emplacement, which foster and sustain emotional interactions among members of transnational families, and are supported by flexible polymediations and some concrete affordances (publishing, indexicality). At the same time, as research participants explain below, their families often include chosen family members who live in near geographical proximity. In forming “families of choice” (Weston 1997) that support their emplacement and sense of belonging, transnational families contribute to the contemporary elasticity of family, and of friendship (Watters 2009; King-O’Riain 2015). Family and family making no longer depend on rules, but on feelings of affection (Beck-Gernsheim 1998; Jamieson 1998; Gabb 2008), which may explain why even people “normally living alone” are extensively involved in family relations (Inglis 2015, 75). Contemporary family—whether transnational or not—seems to respond to an

ongoing process of negotiation ongoing as a commitment and negotiation as a variation in responding to individual and collective situations of proximity, distance, and propinquity, many of which are mediated. Could photography be thought as a tool of kinship making?

Constellations of hardwares, softwares, and analogue objects (poly-mediations) offered these Irish-Spanish families opportunities to negotiate feelings of familial affection, by creating places that family members inhabit, even if only momentarily. I suggest that mutual participation is present in photographic practices of transnational families, and that photographs are employed as social objects (Engeström 2005) circulating within existing/developing larger everyday media practices. Photographs are used to do intimate boundary work. How could this mediated boundary work be best observed? This paper argues that ethnography and narrative inquiry allow for the affective experience of mediated attachments to be observed/explored. Through emphasis on fieldwork stories, this paper argues that, in transnational families, photographic practices are processes of attachment, whereby affect is articulated. But, as one might say, the proof is in the pudding.

## FINDINGS

### Photographs that travel

Celia, a Spanish migrant living in Ireland and mother of two, explains that when an image appears in her WhatsApp, she knows that somebody has intentionally sent it, and the image still retains “the magical meaning” and the sense of permanence that she attributes to analogue photographs. Celia’s phone was on the kitchen table while we talked about the photographs she had recently shared. She took it and started showing me some. She was explaining how she only takes photographs with her camera phone and how these are a way of transforming geographical distance into emotional closeness, for example between her children and her cousin, who lived in Ireland with them for over nine months. Ever since, they have kept in touch regularly, mainly through phone messaging.

Celia: "It's been four years since. Four years of relationship really. [...] I send her loads of photos, mostly of the kids so that they have a relationship. I like to keep her posted on our day-to-day lives. For example, I have also sent her photos of the recent snowfall"<sup>2</sup>.

In Pedro's case, geolocated and synchronized photographs allowed his family members abroad to "have a walk around the house." Gala's story of her daughter's prom night includes a photograph travelling by phone from Ireland to Spain, and by foot in Spain from Gala's cousin's phone to Gala's mother's living room. As these insights reveal, sending photographs to relatives who live far away is a common practice for transnational families. Moreover, they suggest that networked photographs not only mediate physical presence by giving the illusion of being there, but also mediate social presence by giving the illusion of being together. A connection is established over distance that allows for digital third places to emerge. The question of generating a common place, of emplacement of their photographic practices, arises again. And my suggestion is that: a) photographic practices of transnational families respond to connectivity, reflexivity, and material emplacement; and b) it is through synaesthetic, discursive, and pragmatic qualities that transnational families make their intentional choices among the myriad of mediation choices at their disposal.

Let's look at the photograph of prom night in more detail. Gala made use of the affordances of propinquity and publishing to share the image of her daughter's prom immediately, and only to whom she wanted to. In this case camera phone photography didn't fix the unexpected or spontaneous, nor did it enhance phone communication per se (Rivière 2005, 177-178). Instead, it provided a connection and a sense of belonging to those involved in the visual practice (producing, sharing, storing, viewing). The platform used to share the photograph, WhatsApp, allowed Gala to implement control strategies regarding inclusion/exclusion. Here and in further examples below, it becomes clear that Irish-Spanish families perceived WhatsApp as a tool that allows for social co-presence to be generated and managed



for a particular group. I believe that the clear parameters of publishing present in WhatsApp partially explain its popularity regarding the sharing of more intimate images.

[Talking about ways in which she shares images]

Celia - [talking about her artificial sister-in-law (cuñada postiza)]: “With her for example, the way to keep in touch, although I don’t know if you are interested in it, we have made a blog about cooking so then we take cooking photos.”

Patricia: “Ah, well that is ok.”

Celia: “It is a way of maintaining the relationship.”

Patricia: “I will ask you for the address of the blog.”

Celia: “Ok, well so far we only have a couple of things. She has published some and she has added her sister and her sister--in-law also. For example my artificial sister-in-law has uploaded photos of her daughter. The other day my cousin, I mean the father, who is my real cousin, and my goddaughter, well we all shack up together but [...] They two made a potato tortilla together, although as far as I know my cousin is not into cooking, but well, the two of them made it. And there are photos of her [Celia’s goddaughter] adding the eggs and mixing them and so on. But, well, what would have been amazing is a photograph of my cousin because he was wearing a glorious apron, one of those that make you look like a Greek statue.”

Celia knew about the apron because, parallel to the production of content for the blog, there was an exchange of snapshots in WhatsApp between her and her artificial sister-in-law.

The choice of medium/technology, i.e. the configuration of the poly-mediation, whether it involves camera phones, video conferencing or social media (or several at the same time, as we are starting to observe with regard to homework and COVID-19), seems to respond as well to boundary work, to frequency, and relevance. Be-

longing/membership(s) is managed through both variables. Messages are generated and shared as often as required by the group, inasmuch as they are relevant to the group. And as they do so, they bring about a sense of continuity to the relationships they mediate. The dialogues in which digital photographs are often embedded have no foreseeable end, despite being continuously interrupted. Pedro: “My sister is more prone to send photos. But that is not the norm. The norm is that it [the photo] leads to a conversation: ‘Hello, how are you doing?’ And then you talk about other things.”

In fact, continuity (which can be interpreted as the commitment of keeping in touch) is a key element of photographic practices of transnational families. The sharing of photographs generates a temporary and partial obliteration of physical distance. It also creates a space of sharing intimately, a tele-cocoon. Like other places of informal socialization, tele-cocoons seem to also respond to belonging, congeniality, spontaneity (Oldenburg 1989) as well as to conventions, norms, and repetitions. In short, we may want to consider tele-cocoons as mediated third places, and explore how digital photographic practices seem to ensure that the socialization process will go on. It will be forever resumed. Thus, the sharing becomes as important as what is being pictured (Lobinger and Schreiber 2017). In other words, image content is contextualized through socio-material and affective processes.

[Talking about the ways in which they share images impacts on the images they share]

Maria: “It depends, if they [their children] are au naturel or in their pyjamas...”

Pedro: “That is true, if the children are naked for example I do not like to send photos of the children naked via Internet. From the waist up that is ok. I mean, if they are in the bathtub and you can’t see it, ok. And I am careful that they are not exposed. But it gives me the creeps, you know. And then those photos in which... So it is somebody’s name day and you go to sing to their bed and everybody is in their pyjamas and they have bad

hair and so on, well I might send those photographs to parents and siblings and that is it.”

Maria: “And to one very good friend. Yes, somebody who knows me but not the neighbor.”

[Talking about the photograph she took on her daughter’s prom night]

Gala: “Well, yes. Not the ones I took, but the ones that thousands of people who were there took, yes. Those are on Facebook from that night. But not mine. [...] I believe I showed this one to somebody from Dario’s family or... no... no it was to my neighbours. My neighbours, yes, I showed it to them.”

[Talking about the ways in which she shares images]

Yessica: “Not by email. Normal email, no. I would say that among us, well maybe a little less with my brother who lives here [Ireland], but 99% [of the time] what works really well is Facebook. Also there is my brother’s daughter who is a teenager now and she has Facebook. [...] but it is getting out of her hands because she already has three hundred and fifty friends and he told her ‘you need to do a selection of people who are really your friends and the ones who are not.’”

The fieldwork stories suggest that photographic practices of transnational families revolve around sharing, co-presence, and belonging. They produce, share, and store photographs in a myriad of ways, using networked technologies and isolated ones (as we shall see below). In the midst of choice and difference, there seems to be a constant: photographs are treated as active testimonies of everyday life, i.e. as indexical signs. The affordance of indexicality, which “[...] is only realized and significant as it is activated, as it were, by particular practices (Rose 2010, 29), seems to be activated throughout. The same applies to the affordance of publishing. When the affordance of indexicality is activated, there is a need to control the potential effects of sharing: reaching unintended audiences, stress, and discomfort. Because while the indexical nature of emotional traces of photographs

surely shapes the sharing process, the affordance of publishing ultimately determines who is in control, and therefore how photographs are shared. As Yessica puts it: “It is a matter of not losing control over the distribution of my photographs.” Publishing in social media differs from platform to platform, but participants expressed very similar views when it came to their perception of it and the strategies of control they had in turn developed. Hence, again, platforms such as WhatsApp, which allow for great control regarding publishing, were preferred by transnational families. Indexicality and publishing seem to be activated throughout, even when the photographs are not digital/digitally mediated.

Yessica: “And why in the living room? Because we spend 80% of the time in the living room [...] We play here. Well, I am also a woman, I am a bit ... I mean I also like that when people come for a visit ... I don’t know, but not having photos on a wall is like there is no life in the house. I don’t know, but that is how I see it.

Patricia: “Where else do you have photographs?”

Yessica: “In the corridor. Yes, here for example I have the photographs of my sister-in-law’s wedding. Up there we have the family, well the siblings anyway.”

Patricia: “These photographs are more formal.”

Yessica: “Yes, that is it. These ones are here because they hired a professional photographer for the wedding, and the photographs came out really beautiful and great to be enlarged. So I chose the ones that suited me best, which were the family, my son with the telephone because it is very cute, and myself with my son because my daughter wasn’t here yet [...] and then over there was another of the whole family, but I am not sure how but when using the stairs it broke [...] so I replaced it with one of us four.”

Patricia: “Of the family now”

Yessica: "MY, MY family now. On St. Patrick's Day."

Analogue photographs are perceived as a constant presence in the family. Their materiality not only offers durability but also stability, a crucial factor when it comes to socialization. One could argue that paper-based photographs transmit a sense of ontological security, because as analogue objects, they exist in the world and hold a degree of permanence. Pedro commented, "So to speak, people look at digital photos for five minutes, and they like them, but that is it, then they save them onto their hard drives, and they do not open the photos any more. But then when you go back, my parents have some on the fridge. So I think it is worth [to print them] and so we give it more importance." It is no coincidence that Pedro mentions the refrigerator here. Using the refrigerator as a display allows for spatially distant family members to be incorporated into the everyday life of the household. Refrigerators become "a kind of communications centre [...] where one can place information in the confident knowledge that one's fellow household members can then have no excuse for saying that they did not see it" (Morley 2007, 263). In houses where the refrigerator is panelled, an alternative display was available, and placed around the kitchen/eating area. Celia had a notice board next to the refrigerator; Pedro and Maria created a family collage. Like refrigerators, these displays are constant companions of transnational family life.

Mediated interactions are fundamental for transnational families if only because face-to-face encounters are very limited. The routines linked to cooking and meal sharing explains why family photographs coexist next to spaces for the chores of everyday life. According to recent sociological work on kinship (Weston 1997; Beck-Gernsheim 1988; Gabb 2008; Inglis 2015; King-O'Riain, 2015), a proactive attitude is fundamental in order to create, reaffirm, and sustain family ties. Digital photographs seem to function as prompts for further interaction, while photo-objects may be seen as aide-de-memoires that contribute to levelling out the irregular pattern of interaction/participation of transnational families. The combination of everyday life, domesticity, and communication make refrigerators very dynamic sites

of exhibition. The efficiency associated with invoices and errands intersects with processes of family-making. The act of keeping in touch responds to the affective and the chore-like.

Sometimes these analogue versions are used to contain misfortune, a practice that is far from new, but in fact strongly resembles the Victorian tradition of using the parlour to display images of the deceased, often decorated with dried flowers, hair, and textiles. The emotional challenge that permanent and temporary absences pose is partially mitigated through these images. In the case of Yessica, she placed the last photograph of her father on her refrigerator (the image shows him hugging her son and another of his grandchildren). The activated affordance of indexicality allows Yessica, her partner, and her children, to treat the photograph as if it was alive (Lehmuskallio 2012). The indexicality accounts for its authenticity and testimonial role; the punctum pierces twice: distance and absence (Villi 2014). In this particular case, it is almost as if the real affordance of the refrigerator, preserving food, had been transplanted into the photograph (transformed into a perceived affordance of affect, perhaps?). In Gala's house there were also analogue photographs of deceased family members. They were located on top of a chest of drawers, which is placed between the eating and the living area. In transnational families, printed photographs respond to contexts of analogue photography, such as framing and exhibiting on walls, mantelpieces, or albums. The ubiquitous but fragile co-presence that digital means such as video calls and phone messaging offer, is complemented by paper-based photographs, in which time has frozen. Photographs on refrigerators are an expression thereof, but there are others.

Pedro and Maria do in fact do more than that. On the door of their living room, they have a large collage displaying all family members in Slovakia and Spain. Photo frames are present in every room of the house except for the bathrooms. They send analogue photo Christmas cards to relatives and friends every year. And Pedro's mother creates her own "poster" to celebrate every birthday and name day of a member of the family, which she prints, laminates, and sends. The one below had arrived a few days before one of our encounters to mark Pedro's and Maria's daughter's birthday.



Figure 1: This handmade “poster” combines the flexibility of digital manipulation with the robustness of printed photographs. Being laminated speaks to durability and to Pedro’s and Maria’s fondness of hanging images around the house. The central image depicts the grandparents together with the grandchild during one of their visits, which manifests the networked character of this seemingly analogue print.

Digital and analogue photography and photographs coexist in the everyday of Irish-Spanish families, and both seem to respond to different social processes. Digital practices respond to everyday desires and pressures of sharing certain instants, mediating experiences, and bringing worlds together; while analogue practices seem to respond to questions of durability and remembrance/memory. It is almost as if the analogue transmits a sense of ontological security because analogue objects exist in the world only as they are, and hold a degree of permanence. The digital seems to transmit a sense of togetherness/belonging, but one that responds to relevance, and thus needs to be endlessly renewed/re-experienced/resumed.

## DISCUSSION

### Phatic Photography

The photographic practices of Irish-Spanish were impacted by a myriad of technological and sociocultural factors. In addition, availability and use of new media are also impacted by media literacy migration and buying power (Madianou and Miller 2012; Ponzanesi and Leurs 2014). In the field, the cost of cameras, camera phones, laptops, and prints was mentioned as a significant factor to the practice. For example, for Yessica and her husband, the purchase of a digital camera (as a luxury item), could be justified only by a big event, in this case, their first pregnancy. Pedro and Maria invest on prints and other technologies of display (digital frames for instance) and interaction (a smartphone) so that their parents can see their grandchildren. A few months into the fieldwork, Celia mentioned she was working on an analogue album for her goddaughter (Celia did some analogue black and white photography before having children), and that it was going slowly because it was both difficult and expensive to craft. Towards the end of the fieldwork, Yessica's mother was handed down a laptop so that she could be more present in the Irish lives of both Yessica and her brother.

The polymediations employed by transnational families work as affective currency (Ahmed 2004, 118-120). Emotions are attached to the constantly resumed communicative exchanges within the family, which often involves photographs. Many of the stories of mediation of Spanish-Irish family life were described as alternatives to spending time together in person. Celia talked about their cooking blog in these terms; so did Dario about a blog he had going with his dad; Pedro and Maria talked about grandparents reading goodnight stories to their grandchildren over Skype; Yessica explained how she would "go out for coffee" with her mum over Skype, and how every now and then she would look at photo albums and prints with her own children, something that Gala, her husband, and their two daughters also did. The mediation of kin keeping involves analogue and digital outputs. It is a complex practice in which different affordances



are activated to support the development of social ties based both on normative and elective frameworks.

As we continue to see, photographic practices of transnational families are essentially a series of repeatable and customary acts, whereby affect is mediated and tele-cocoons emerge, allowing for intimate interactions to take place in them and through them. Celia, Gala, Pedro, and other participants consider photographs as extensions of experiences shared with others, and as such, they are not just click-bait: they are constitutive and the result of ongoing relationships. When present in the routines of everyday life (whether on the door of the refrigerator or as a background image on the screen of a camera phone), photographs enable participation in place-related affairs (Agnew 2011, 23-24), activate social solidarity, and contribute to create a sense of belonging. In this context, photography is being in transformation. It creates a mode of action whereby actors visually share tacit and intersubjective knowledge. As social objects (Engeström 2005) and objects of affect (Edwards 2012), shared photographs allow transnational families to engage affectively. They expand possibilities for interaction over spatial distances. Distinct tacit knowledge is developed around shared photographs, which both imbues them with agency and performative force. Photographic exchanges are much more than the casual swapping of snapshots. These back and forth interactions, seemingly impromptu and casual, respond to an appeal for emotional communication and, arguably, function at a phatic level.

The phatic is the communicative factor that regulates relationships of proximity and social contact (Malinowski 1923). Processes of inclusion and exclusion in a group are in the first instance phatically managed through interactions that are socially and materially located. The originality of phaticity in the digital era resides in its ubiquity and immediacy, but the phatic acts are still emplaced, structured, and contextualized by a community. The phatic element of digital photography allows for an engagement with the reciprocal, intersubjective, and often tacit knowledge and actions that presuppose, but are also the fabric of, contemporary digital photographic prac-

tices. Connectedness and empathy are established phatically in first instance.

In short, for transnational families, phatic interactions activate three dimensions of communication: social binding, experience sharing, and mediated cohabitation. The engagement in these customary, repetitive, and always emotive interactions results in what I call the “phatic community” (Prieto-Blanco 2010). Within phatic communities, exchanged photographs function as both initiators as well as outcomes of established phaticity. The photographs exchanged work as externalizations of shared experiences, and as such, they are enablers of community via both immediate identification as well as anticipated remembrance. Photographic exchanges establish and sustain kinship in spite of distances apart. By the structural repetition inherent to these exchanges, social capital is created (Prieto-Blanco 2017). Children are socialized in larger family units, and photographs become intrinsic elements of networks of social support. As performatives, shared photographs are felicitous only for the phatic community.<sup>3</sup> Senders and receivers become bonded in phatic interactions (Lobinger 2016; Jänkälä, Lehmuskallio, and Takala 2019; Ehrlén and Villi 2020) that take place in phatic zones, where cultural expectations have the potential to become malleable, flexible, and expanded. Thereby, experiential contexts are reinforced, intersubjective knowledge is developed, and implicit knowledge surfaces along with the acknowledgment of failure to comprehend the cultural other (Loenhoff 2011). This moment can productively lead to a further exploration and generation of empathy towards cultural and social difference.

As Roswhita Breckner discusses, photographs are created with the intention of surpassing reality by adding something new to it. The process of visualizing moments, as well as looking at the resulting images, brings about a unique and striking phenomenon (*Erscheinung*) as well as potential for change (Breckner 2014, 128). The Spanish-Irish families who collaborated with me certainly shared photographs in phatic zones, and these images precipitated processes of inclusion and exclusion as well as redefined the ability to act upon social realities. The near future will tell to what extent digital pho-

tographs continue to sustain and develop (dis)affect over time and space, particularly if their distribution as automated actions further evolves.

Furthermore, the conceptualization of phatic photography presented here has implications for the wider research and discussion of phaticity. The analysis of data and the theoretical framework proposed here can be further expanded by scholars interrogating interpersonal communication and the different functions of language. This investigation has unveiled the productive value of the phatic dimension of everyday, intimate visual communication, demonstrating that it is fundamental in processes of socialization of transnational families. Minimal communicative acts through which presence is reaffirmed are acts of emotion, varying in degree of depth but strengthened by perpetuity. The (dis)affective nature of phaticity leads to the creation and corroboration of circles of reference and to the establishment of intimate modes of interaction. Even the barest form of phatic communication encapsulates tacit and intersubjective knowledge, being thus an instance full of contextualized meaning. This line of research was timidly pointed out by Bronislaw Malinowski (1923) and only significantly developed by other scholars (La Barre 1954; Ruesch 1972) since then. The present investigation signals the potential of the phatic to further understand emotional communication and its mediation, and points to a number of ways to further expand the work herein.

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## NOTES

1. Austin acknowledged the potential of non-verbal means of communication to perform as successfully as verbal means, as long as they are conventional, i.e. customized to the group. Theory of language is applied here from the standpoint that language is in constant evolution and that it is co-constructed by users, techniques, and technologies in place. It is worth mentioning that language theory has already been employed to research pragmatics of media use (Langford 2001, 2006).↵
2. This and all other quotes have been translated by the author for the purpose of readability. The original languages of quotes were Spanish and Spanglish.↵
3. Even if approached more simply as signs, exchanged photographs are still always taken, distributed, and recalled in reference to the shared experiences they point to, whether that experience was lived together at the moment of image production, and/or whether it takes place across generations and locations, or time and space—either way the paramount element of "phatic communion" (Malinowski 1923) remains.↵