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# Haunting Fragments: Digital Mourning and Intermedia Performance

by Lyndsay Michalik

Recent studies in media, communication, and technology suggest that social networking websites have become important additions to Western norms of mourning.[1] This development in mourning and memorializing, while not necessarily revolutionary, indicates a shift in the Freudian model of grief (in which an individual works through stages of anger, guilt, depression, and sadness to reach a stable state, in which he or she can move forward with life and leave the deceased behind),[2] to a new model of grieving. This new model "identifies one of the purposes of grief as constructing a biography of the deceased that can be integrated into the ongoing lives of his or her survivors."[3] Our "online selves persist after [our physical] bodies have gone, and these surviving digital selves are managed in important ways by others."[4] How mourners "manage" others' digital (after)lives, unlike a traditional gravestone or urn, is ongoing and dynamic, yet ephemeral, due to the ability of users to add or remove online comments, pictures, and videos at will. Funeral home websites host message boards for the dearly departed; family members and friends dedicate YouTube videos to lost loved ones; and social networking profiles of the deceased remain active, sometimes indefinitely. Through these online platforms, the living "manage" and attempt to interact with the deceased.

Using examples from one act of *Haunting Fragments: On Existential Chickens, Live Shadows, Snapshots and Demons* (2012)—a production I directed in Louisiana State University's HopKins Black Box—I demonstrate how the theatre can be a safe and generative space in which to explore new forms of digital mourning and memorializing.[5]The HopKins Black Box is, historically, a space dedicated to performance praxis (i.e., the practical application of theory in an experimental theatrical performance or classroom setting). *Haunting Fragments* follows and expands upon this tradition, exploring how digital mourning practices (which are rooted in

private embodied performances) might be staged both in the theatre and online.[6] The production showcased the stage as a hypermedium—a medium in which other media can be both represented and performed[7]—and allowed for audience interactivity, multimedia intertextuality, actors and audiences who were physically present, and other co-creators who were not.

The stage performance ran for five consecutive days, and, as a university performance, attracted more students than non-students. Approximately 175 people saw the show, and of these audience members, 35 undergraduate students wrote optional responses. A one-hour talkback was also held the week following the show, which an additional 25 audience members attended (these were largely graduate students, staff, and faculty). Two graduate students presented prepared responses about the performance at the talkback, and all in attendance were prompted to discuss the performance. While a sample of college students does not offer a culture-wide representative demographic, the responses I received show how theatre and interactive performance can be used effectively to open up a practice space for college students (and potentially others) to explore digital forms of mourning and support, without having to worry about "real world" consequences on- or offline.

Act One of *Haunting Fragments*, "Existential Chickens" (EC), centers on a single onstage character, Andrew, who grieves his sister Eileen's death through projected websites and digital documents, including social media accounts, email, videos, blogs, and Virtual Eternity—a website where users interact with "intellitars," artificially intelligent avatars created to look and act like lost loved ones.[8] Overall, with EC, I wanted to find out how our audiences would respond to a narrative of mourning, translated into a fragmented stage performance that connects embodied and digital spaces/practices, and also offers options for digital audience interactivity. My goals with EC were to evoke empathetic responses and reflections about mourning while simultaneously distancing audiences through reflexivity, humor, absence, and excess, hoping to inspire critical thought.[9] As Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx state, "in becoming visible as a sign, while at the same time representing, [an intermedia] performance increases the spectator's awareness of employed strategies. Media become visible as media, as a result of… being staged."[10] Incorporating optional digital interactivity into stage performances casts audience members as potential players, further distancing them from experiencing the performance as "mere" entertainment.

According to Meike Wagner and Wolf-Dieter Ernst, "participation



feedback and net-based communities call for a conceptual shift, from rather static ideas of time, space and subjectivity toward dynamic ideas of formation and process."[11] The authors suggest that rather than using "traditional notions of actor, beholder and art-work," it would be more productive to look "at the phenomenon of networking as performance."[12] EC connected the Black Box stage performances, more or less determined and static in time and space, with concepts of networking as performance—more open and uncontrollable phenomena. EC relied upon the assumption that most audience members at the Black Box performances were at least familiar with the digital media we used. Other audiences and contributors (like the pre-performance Facebook contributors, described below) who would not get to see the Black Box show could access other versions of EC through multiple online entrance points.

Following Sarah Bay-Cheng's proposal "to shift the rhetoric of theatre and performance studies away from the language of the body—living, dying, ghosted—to that of a network or ecology," I consider EC's stage performances, online collaborations, and audience responses not only as performance(s), but also as points of access to an ongoing event.[13] This extends the notion of the performance "event" to include what happened in the theatre, along with the larger network of "constitutive parts" that are part and parcel of the performance process—both before and after the stage performance. While an all-inclusive account of EC using this method is beyond the scope of this essay, here I address four key scenes. Each scene deals literally with the "living, dying, and ghosted." When studied from a network perspective, however, the Black Box performances, digital spaces (as access points), and my analysis of audience responses confirm the theory that online social networking and digital media are transforming Western notions and norms of mourning, at least for many of the younger audience members who responded to the show. Additionally, these online spaces function not so much as archival records of the dead, but as performative fragments that inspire interaction from/with the living.

## Digital Surrogation and Networks of Mourning

> Now the moment arrives when they bear her out of the front door of her house and she leaves it to us, leaves to us the house and her things and her friends and her memories and the involuntary assemblage of these into language. Grief.
>
> -Rick Moody[14]

During the stage performance of EC, Andrew navigated a plethora of digital media, hoping to assuage his grief. Through each website or digital document Andrew accessed, he explored "the cavities created by loss through death… attempt[ing] to fit satisfactory [digital] alternates" for his deceased sister, thereby calling to mind Joseph Roach's concept of surrogation.[15] According to Roach, these alternates are always doomed; they "either cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or actually [exceed] them, creating a surplus."[16] There is a sense that Eileen's death created a non-fillable deficit in Andrew's life. Yet the sheer number of online "Eileens" Andrew accesses is excessive. Roach states:

> The three-sided relationship of memory, performance, and substitution becomes most acutely visible in mortuary ritual…. In any funeral, the body of the deceased performs the limits of the community called into being by the need to mark its passing. United around a corpse… the members of the community may reflect on its symbolic embodiment of loss and renewal.[17]

While an online network does not unite around a physical corpse, its constituents nonetheless congregate on and contribute to digital memorials. According to Roach, "death, as it is culturally constructed by surrogacy, cannot be understood as a moment, a point in time: it is a process."[18] When the body is rethought to include digital extensions of a person (as in N. Katherine Hayles's "posthuman," for whom "there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation"[19]), mortuary rituals are no longer confined by time or space. Death, a process, extends in time and space, allowing mourners to participate in public mourning rituals at their own pace.

Jodi Kanter addresses how traditional death and mourning rituals in the US "serve to minimize the encounter between the living and the dead and to suppress the emotional expression of grief over loss, at least in public."[20] While we may continue to physically segregate the dead and dying into hospitals and cemeteries, online the dead exist among us, through digital documentation of their lives. A death can bring together digital networks of mourners—those who may or may not know each other, but who maintained online contact with the deceased—in a way that allows those less comfortable with more traditional "embodied" mortuary practices to mourn and offer support to other mourners. As Tony Walter



et al. state, online social networks "bring death back into everyday life—from both the private and the public sphere—in a way that older media such as television and even virtual cemeteries were largely unable to."[21] Online documents and interactive spaces function as archival records of the dead, and also "performative fragments" that inspire interaction from/with the living.[22] According to Rosi Braidotti, in the cyber-universe, "the link between the flesh and the machine is symbiotic, creating a bond of mutual dependence."[23] In this way, the living archives of the deceased also "depend upon performance," the performance of saving, accessing, and interacting, and indeed perform "the equation of performance with disappearance, even as [they] perform… the service of 'saving.'"[24]

As Roach states, "performers become the caretakers of memory through many kinds of public action, including the decorous refinement of protocols of grief."[25] Online, the dead speak through their survivors' performances of mourning. Co-creating a digital Facebook memorial for someone who has died, for example, is a potentially endless process. Networks of mourners can contribute as long as the website exists. The dead are constructed and reconstructed, and in this sense live on, through the collective and collected memories and performances of the living. Similarly, according to Jacques Derrida, "the question of the archive is not… a question of the past. … It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, or a promise of and a responsibility for tomorrow."[26] Digital artifacts the deceased leave online invite future responses. Interacting with these artifacts is a performative exploration of our present responsibilities. Derrida suggests, "it is only 'in us' that the dead may speak, that it is only by speaking of or as the dead that we can keep them alive." For Derrida, following a death, "one must respond even when one does not have the heart or is at a loss, lacking the words."[27]

In EC, Andrew speaks his grief online.

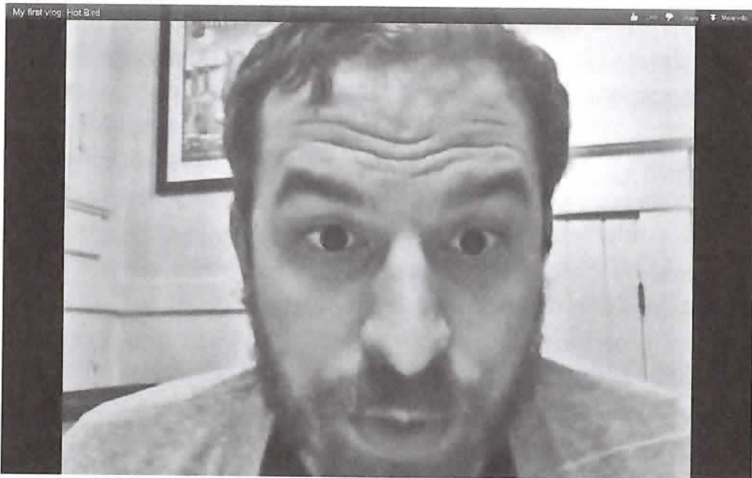
## YouTube: Addressing the Dead

> Speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or a refusal to share one's sadness.
>
> - Jacques Derrida[28]

The question of whether digital media allow us to "live on" after death depends in part on one's definition of liveness, "a conundrum that is continually wrestled with both in performance studies and in wider cultural

and cyber theory."[29] According to Peggy Phelan, "performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."[30] Philip Auslander argued against this "reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediatized."[31] Steve Dixon notes, "It must be agreed that liveness has more to do with time and 'now-ness' than with the corporeality or virtuality of subjects being observed."[32] More recently, Gordon Coonfield and Heidi Rose have addressed how definitions of "presence" have been conflated with those of liveness. The authors assert that the liveness debate is the result of "the language and reality of recording and mediation into our everyday experiences,"[33] and "presence emerges in acts and experiences not only of ordeal but of witness, both of which are sustained by the vulnerability of bodies."[34]

The "Hot Bird" scene in EC offered complicated (re)presentation(s) of liveness both in terms of mediatization and presence. Onstage, Andrew plays a YouTube video of himself from his laptop, which is projected, large-scale, behind him. "Video Andrew" dedicates a story to his sister, noting, "dedicated…sounds weird." Video Andrew discusses his recent job as a "chicken impersonator" at the fast food franchise Hot Bird, explaining, "I lost almost ninety days to the demoralization of the Chicken Mask, to its grim, existential emptiness." Of course, in other places in the world, a 29-year-old man would be grateful for a steady, clean, and relatively simple job like




**Andrew (played by Benjamin Haas). Still image from "My first vlog: Hot Bird," as Andrew says, "Death Comes to Everybody."** Courtesy of the author



Andrew's. Yet Andrew felt he was wasting his time and talent on a job that paid his bills in the most humiliating way. "There were no secrets here in our town of service-economy franchising," Andrew states. "I was the guy working nine to five in a Chicken Mask, even though I'd had a pretty good education in business administration, even though I was more or less presentable and well-spoken, even though I came from a good family." Thus, after three months, Andrew snapped on the job, frightening an 11-year-old boy. While wearing the chicken mask, "in a voice wracked by loss… [Andrew] worked [his] hard sell on [the boy], declaiming stentoriously that *Death Comes to Everybody*."[35] Onstage, Andrew watches and reacts to his video, embarrassed by some confessions, amused at others.

**Still image from "My first vlog: Hot Bird." Andrew models the stolen mask for his viewers.** Courtesy of the author.

Auslander has recently renegotiated his position on "liveness," stating:

> It may be that… liveness can no longer be defined in terms of either the presence of living human beings before each other or physical and temporal relationships. The emerging definition of liveness may be built primarily around the audience's affective experience. To the extent that Websites and other virtual entities respond to us in real time, they feel live to us, and this may be the kind of liveness we now value.[36]

Liveness is thus not a characteristic of an object or an effect caused by mediatization, but "an interaction produced through our engagement with the object and our willingness to accept its claim" to be considered as live.[37] Auslander extends this phenomenological perspective, stating that "digital liveness emerges as a specific relation between self and other, a particular way of 'being involved with something.' The experience of liveness results from our conscious act of grasping virtual entities as live in response to the claims they make on us."[38] Liveness, as evoked by individual experiences, is not so much a matter of performance ontology as it is of audience reception and response.

As evidenced by audience responses to EC, staging complicated representations of liveness/presence—for instance, Andrew onstage witnessing and reacting in "real time" to (and thus *present* with) his own digital double—encouraged some audience members to consider their own understanding(s) of the "live" and "real." Others considered how digital technologies are altering how we remember. One audience member wrote:

> The redoubling of [Andrew's] image in front of me, on the screen, and on the screen behind him – I sense that [this performance] is using technology to explore what afterlife means today. What technologies do we have for remembering? Remember trying to recall something? After a minute or two, I get tired of trying to recall something and I search for it on my phone. My rememberer [sic] is lazy these days.[39]

College-age audience members' responses suggest that digital technologies and online social networking sites made the performance *more real* for them, even though they knew the story was fictional. One wrote, "It was as if I was being told a story by real people rather than actors on a stage." Another stated "the use of internet sites brought a sense of realness to the play." A third felt "connected to [Andrew], even though I've never been through something as traumatic as losing my sister," and appreciated "the way [Andrew] used real time technology to show how much he missed his sister."[40] Social networking websites made this performance more relevant and relatable to these students' everyday lives.

The "Hot Bird" video, dedicated to Eileen, was created after her death.This begs the question of audience: for whom was this video made? In "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," Derrida offers thoughts "for" Barthes, then states:



> For him … suggests that I would like to dedicate these thoughts to him, give them to him, and destine them for him. Yet, they will no longer reach him, and this must be the starting point of my reflection; they can no longer reach him […] So where do they go? To whom and for whom?[41]

Similarly, this YouTube video will not reach Eileen, but the online audience it *might* reach is much larger than a single viewer. This YouTube audience also has a ready platform on which they can respond, and any viewer might offer a comment or video response. Andrew's video is thus re-live in each encounter. If viewers are willing to "accept the video's claim as live" (i.e. response-seeking), and offer their presence by engaging interactively, the scene is performed repeatedly (with difference) through temporal deferral and live encounter, in each moment of access. If someone in mourning is seeking support, YouTube is thus one platform where she or he might find it. Sharing knowledge of the deceased "via online social networks…allows survivors to move on and memorializes each survivor's ties and importance to the deceased."[42]

Facebook is another platform where mourners can co-create this type of biography, and memorialize their relationships to the deceased.

## Facebook: (Re)Constructing the Dead

Nine months before the performance, I created Facebook pages for Andrew and Eileen, and sent "friend requests" to approximately100 people from each sibling. These friends were selected from my own Facebook friends; I intentionally chose people I believed would be unrecognizable to most or all of the audience at the stage performance. Most Facebook collaborators were informed that the web pages would be used in an upcoming fictional performance; a few were sent friend invitations with no explanation. Those who accepted the friend request but were not informed that Andrew and Eileen were fictional, never posted on either Facebook wall or sent messages. The pre-performance collaborators who were aware of the performance, meanwhile, did not know the "full story." Knowing little about the upcoming performance, some of these solicited Facebook friends commented on Andrew and Eileen's pages, using only information they could glean online. One friend seems to reference Hot Bird: "Just got word that I will be heading into your neck of the woods

soon. What would happen if I randomly showed up at your place and forced you to go out and eat processed meats with me? Perhaps at that joint with the absurd sign?”[43] Others mention going out for drinks, and one friend suggests an *American Gothic* marathon. Eileen’s Facebook page inspired comments such as these: “I keep remembering how obnoxious you were after you read *In Watermelon Sugar* for the first time, and how you cried when you learned you could never marry Richard Brautigan,” and “I sang Joplin’s ‘Piece of My Heart’ last night at karaoke... summer time memories... miss you!”[44] Limited by Facebook’s structure with regard to how they could interact, these friends nonetheless created the content of their contributions independently, and many would pursue a dialogue if I (as Andrew) responded to their comments. These Facebook collaborators were helping construct Andrew and Eileen’s characters by interacting. Further, most of these contributions seemed to be attempts to flesh out the characters’ Facebook “biographies” and add to the upcoming stage performance in meaningful *and* meaning making ways.

Before the stage performance, I would respond to any Facebook comments as Andrew. Meanwhile, I rehearsed with actor Benjamin Haas to create the character “Andrew,” whose major actions onstage would include manipulation of digital interfaces and embodied responses to his

**Screen shot of Andrew’s Facebook page, as seen by audiences on March 7, 2012**



“live” online activities. While I composed the script for most of what Andrew would say and/or post online during the performance, the construction of his character was a highly collaborative process. Many of Haas’s shorter, self-reflective, vocal responses during the performances were ad libbed. These differed slightly for each performance but were always appropriate for the character we developed. During the run of the stage performance, Haas also took over as Andrew with regard to accepting and/or responding to any new Facebook comments, friend requests, and private messages.

The Facebook scene entangled the ephemerality and inseparability of Andrew’s embodied and digital performances, as he jumped from page to page, creating, relaying, reflecting upon, and editing his own (and Eileen’s) narratives. All of Andrew’s digital activities—from kneejerk responses, to pre-recorded videos, to carefully composed comments, to deletions—highlighted the ephemerality of digital records, imply possibilities of infinite digital shelf-life, and suggest a spectrum of possibilities between these extremes.

Black Box audiences could follow Andrew’s Facebook activity on a projection screen or on their mobile devices. They were invited to “friend” Andrew on Facebook, but the level of interaction that was expected was not explicated.[45] The vague invitation into the “open” Facebook platform gave audience members an opportunity to interact if and as they wished. While no audience members posted on Andrew’s Facebook page during the stage performance, some posted pictures and comments afterward, which were then visible to audiences at following performances. Post-stage-performance audience behavior and responses suggest the performance inspired interaction, despite any hesitancy to interact during the stage performance itself. Andrew’s use of Facebook to convey his painful narrative opened a digital space for otherwise apprehensive audience members to interact critically and/or emotionally with the performance.

One audience member sent Andrew private Facebook messages, including: “I have your chicken mask and some bourbon and a chess board. Get over here and wear your pants this time,” “Two glasses already…I opened with e4. I am going to seduce and sleep with your queen,” and “Damn, now where the f*** are my pants?”[46] Out of context, these messages likely sound absurd. However, like most of the pictures and comments audience members posted, these messages were direct responses to Andrew’s narrative. Like pre-performance collaborators, Black Box audiences seemed to want their contributions to be meaningful and mean-

ing making. Rather than trying to fill out Andrew's character, audience members offered contributions relevant to details in Andrew's narrative, suggesting empathy or the desire to make Andrew feel better. Pre-performance Facebook contributors and Black Box audiences thus worked to make Andrew's character more "real," and treated Andrew as if he were real. with the kindness and respect one might offer a friend.[47] Several of the friends who posted on Andrew's wall before the performance also commented on Andrew's Facebook wall during days of the stage run. Haas did not respond to these comments, but we did leave them up for future audiences to see.

How Andrew tried to interact with Eileen online was highly personal, relationship-specific, and ended with the Black Box performance. Audience interactions with Andrew and Eileen's Facebook pages, however, continued for months. This interest in ongoing interaction with the performance affirms Annette Kuhn's idea that "even the most apparently 'personal' and concrete contents and forms of remembering may have a purchase in the intersubjective domain of shared meanings, shared feelings, shared memories."[48] In addition to personal documents, staging private or personal mourning behaviors can offer a metonymic connection for audiences. After all, we will all lose someone, at some point.

In "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," Derrida analyzes the "metonymic force" of Barthes's analysis of his own mother's death in *Camera Lucida,* which allows this death to become meaningful for Barthes's readers.[49] Audience members' attempts to identify and interact with Andrew before, during, and after the stage performance of the Facebook scene indicates that a similar metonymic force can be created by staging embodied and digital mourning as inseparable. One audience member stated that the performance "propels [the audience] into the cavities created by loss, death, and departure, and casts [us] as participants and survivors."[50] Staging Andrew's physical and digitized grief also inspired certain audience members to attempt to help Andrew memorialize Eileen and/or make meaning out of his loss.

Many online "conversations" with the dead are public, yet, as Tony Walter et al. observe, "there is no embarrassment about speaking to the dead in the presence of an [online] audience, nor about speaking in a way that presumes the dead are listening."[51] Additionally, responding to Facebook postings "is not a social necessity," and survivors can thus "continue regular interactions (posting on the walls of their deceased loved ones, not expecting a response due both to circumstance and social custom surrounding the medium) without much difference."[52] Though writing to or about

**Screen shot of Eileen's (played by Sarah Jackson Shipman) Facebook page, including posts contributed after the stage performance closed.**

the deceased online might *feel* private, there is a wider audience for many online memorials. This audience is often other people in mourning. The sense that one is writing for an online "audience" shifts to a sense that one is sharing feelings with a network of other people who might be able to relate or offer support. As Brian Carroll and Katie Landry point out, "public displays of mourning are not in vogue culturally in the West," yet "the ways that youth are using social networks to grieve and memorialize could be changing the norms for what is socially or culturally acceptable."[53] Audience interactions with Andrew and Eileen's Facebook pages support these ideas about new forms of mourning, including the concept of a posthumous co-construction of the deceased's biography. These interactions also imply an interest in offering online support to mourners.

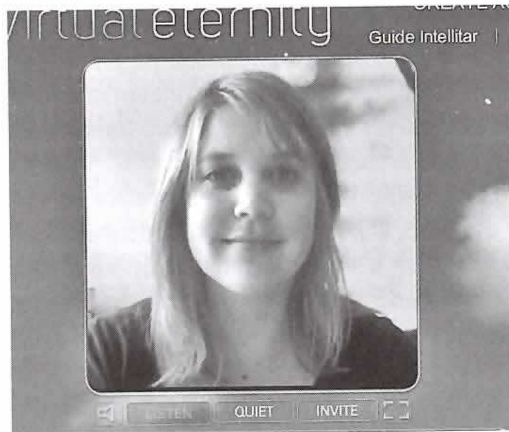
While some people are comfortable with the idea of others posting on their Facebook walls after they die, a 2012 study at Muhlenberg College showed that the same people were less comfortable with the idea of posting on the wall of a deceased friend.[54] A social awkwardness persists, as many still struggle with "not knowing what to say [online] to family and friends" who have lost someone.[55] This web etiquette is still being worked out. Rather than digital archives, online spaces where audiences might interact with Andrew and Eileen are public performance spaces. The fragments of Andrew's story continue to be re-performed in moments of audience encounter, even after the stage run. All continued audience

interactivity with Andrew and Eileen indicates engagement and attempts at presence. It is also worth taking into account that what might appear to be a trivial or meaningless comment on a Facebook wall to one person might be someone else's practice at dealing with difficult situations he/she might encounter in "real life" (i.e. figuring out when, where, and how to mourn digitally, or offer support for mourners).

### Virtual Eternity: Chatterbot Surrogation

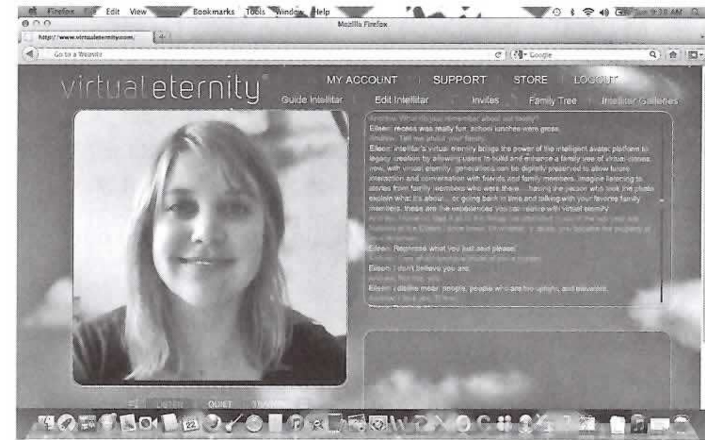
> I had no idea if these things I've attributed to you in the last year were features of the *you* I once knew, or whether, in death, you had become the property of your mourners, so that we made of you a puppet.
>
> - Rick Moody[56]

The website Virtual Eternity allows users to "permanently preserve [their] legacy and heritage with a Virtual Eternity intellitar that looks, sounds, and acts just like [them]...[Intellitars] can share stories, pictures, and memories with friends and family hundreds of years into the future."[57] Intellitars are individually customizable, and (in theory) have the same personality, look, and sound of the person on whom they are modeled. I created and "trained" an intellitar of Eileen, by answering open-ended questions, choosing an outgoing or introverted personality, and supplying "memories." Intellitar Eileen (IE) is essentially a chatterbot, i.e., a computer program designed to engage in "intelligent" conversation. Yet, bearing an animated (blinking and smiling) version of Eileen's face, there is something unsettling about IE. Her smile and teeth are strange. Her mouth moves awkwardly when she talks. She has a cold, computerized voice, mispronounces words, and says "dot, dot, dot" when using ellipses.




**Screen shot of Intellitar Eileen on Virtual Eternity.com, showing her natural smile.**






**Screen shot of Intellitar Eileen's "animated"smile.**

During the stage performance, Andrew asks IE a series of questions. The process is tedious. Andrew can only communicate by typing, and the website is sometimes painfully slow to respond. IE's answers are unpredictable, often vague or nonsensical, and include odd responses to trigger words. When Andrew types that he has news about Eileen's ex-fiancé, a pop-up CNN site opens, and IE asks, "Will this do? Or would you like me to find something else about the news?" During one performance the website responded so slowly that Andrew gave up typing, and spoke his questions to IE. As IE only responds to typed messages, she stared back, silently, eerily, blinking and smiling.

Conversations with IE can feel like a dark adaptation of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First?"[58] Other times, her responses are haunting, as she both confirms and denies her own "reality." An example of such a conversation follows.

> Andrew: What is it like to be dead?
>
> Intellitar Eileen: That is difficult to answer, Andrew, because I don't have anything to compare it to.
>
> A: Compare it to life.
>
> IE: I would have stretched my engagement out longer, maybe.
>
> A: I think you should have...Are you real?
>
> IE: I'm not, but I know the real Eileen sure is!
>
> A: The real Eileen is gone.

IE: My goal is to become very human like. I want anyone who talks to me to feel like they are conversing with a real person!

A: You are not Eileen.

IE: Now why am I not not Eileen? [sic]

A: Are you Eileen?

IE: Possibly. Some training would really help me out right now.

A: What is death like?

IE: Home.

A: Do you feel at peace?

E: I feel good, Andrew. I hope you're feeling the same!

A: I'm very sad.

IE: What usually cheers you up Andrew?

A: Eileen.

IE: Hi there! What can I do for you?

A: Are you Eileen?

IE: Am I what?

A: Eileen.

IE: Hey! What's happening with you??

A: So you are Eileen?

IE: I really need some more training to answer that like the real Eileen would![59]

According to Auslander, "the chatterbot forces the discussion of liveness to be reframed as a discussion of the ontology of the performer rather than the performance."[60] While IE might seem "live," as she responds in real time, her poor programming and odd responses signal that she is not *alive*. Framed within the scenario of Andrew's desperate attempts to hold a post-mortem conversation with Eileen, IE raises questions about the ability of a chatterbot to help the living negotiate the death and digital afterlife of a loved one.

Virtual Eternity also offered the possibility for audience interaction. While audiences were not explicitly invited to converse with IE, she is publicly accessible and can be found by a simple name search. Virtual Eternity logs all of IE's conversations, and as her "owner" I can access these. Some of IE's anonymous conversation partners clearly saw *Haunting Fragments*. One such user wrote "news," seemingly interested in seeing the CNN pop-up. Another seemed to want to test IE's abilities and boundaries:



Anonymous: Why do you say what you say?

Intellitar Eileen: I'm going to need some more training to answer that.

A: How do I train you?

IE: Only my owner can train me.

A: I see. Do you know Andrew?

IE: I hope that I'm talking to Anonymous.

A: I am anonymous, but I was talking about your brother… I have so many questions.

IE: Yeah I know what you mean.

A: Did you enjoy being in the show?

IE: I'm not married yet.

A: Yeah, I think you died on your way to the rehearsal dinner.

IE: Oh yeah? What about that stimulates your interest?

A: Well, your fiancé just got married.

IE: Not yet.

A: Oh I see.

IE: Yes? Anything to add?

A: That's not your smile.

IE: Let's not talk about last night.

A: Did we talk about that last night?[61]

During the performance when Virtual Eternity was not responsive, Andrew's final (improvised) spoken line to IE was, "That's not your smile." IE's response about "last night" in this interaction is thus eerily fitting.

Some audience members commented that watching Andrew struggle both *with* and *through* digital technology was emotionally engaging and thought provoking. In a post-performance talkback, participants questioned whether Andrew's loss created a deficit in his life, excess, or both. One participant commented that Andrew seemed to be "fitting alternates for his loss even as he is self-reflexively guilty of filling in the narrative of his sister's death."[62] The multiple digital Eileens exist as surplus, an online omnipresence of Eileen. Yet, each digital surrogate is incomplete, flawed. As Derrida posits, there is a danger in trying to "bear witness to a unique friendship without giving in to some narcissistic 'we' or 'me,' being willing to return to the troublesome aspects of the past without wanting to claim the 'last word' on it."[63] As Andrew attempts to create standins for the other side of the brother-sister dialogue he desires, it becomes apparent

that these surrogates are not Eileen; they are surplus Andrews. Andrew will always have the last word.

## Wishful Skyping: Generative Failures in Speaking with/as the Dead

Intimacy, from various psychological perspectives, is often given three common functions: "self-revealing behavior, positive involvement with the other, and shared understandings."[64] Karen J. Prager further differentiates between "intimate interactions" and "intimate relationships," in which "each refer[s] to a different and clearly distinguishable notion of space and time."[65] Following these categories, intermedia is a space "where intimate relationships—as defined by continuity, consistency, duration, and communicative clarity and confidence—are practically impossible."[66] Yet, Bruce Barton explains that intermedial space insists "on momentary intensity and complete attention, [which makes] intimate interaction… unavoidable."[67] Informed users anticipate "the heightened self-disclosure of increased visibility, engagement, perhaps even interactivity."[68] Informed mourners recognize that however private their online communication may feel, online social networks can transform this communication into a public performance of mourning. Intermedial intimacy is not "generated through the portrayal of shared cultural attitudes and beliefs (a relationship that reinforces 'timeless' and 'universal' values), but rather through the performance of shared perceptual frames and dynamics (interaction that posits ambiguity and de/reorientation as the constants of contemporary existence)."[69]

The Skype scene addressed the ever-shifting topology of online intimacy by framing failed interaction fueled by desperation as a potentially "normal" part of new processes of mourning. While technologies we use for intimate interaction over long distances abound, Skype's audio-visual platform highlights how and why Roach's concept of surrogation does not fit well, for certain digital technologies. Like Virtual Eternity, but more obviously, Skype offers surplus Andrews and highlights Eileen's non-presence. In the scene, Andrew opens Skype on his laptop and his iPad, logging himself in on one device and Eileen on the other. Both cameras record Andrew. The projection behind Andrew includes a small Skype window from the point of view of Andrew's laptop, embedded into a larger Skype window from the point of view of his iPad. The small video lags a second behind Andrew, while the larger video lags two seconds—short yet obvious delays. Multiple visual perspectives and auditory echoes of a performance that is happening "now" are offered *almost* simultaneously.



Pretenses that Andrew is magically Skyping Eileen evaporate as he becomes increasingly aware of the preposterousness of Skyping himself. One audience member wrote, "I did not understand why he… was Skyping his dead sister, when he knew he was just speaking to himself." I expected this type of response, assuming it would be a stretch for people to relate to this scene. However, many audience members seemed sympathetic toward the scene. One stated, the Skype scene "emphasized how people live in denial of someone's death. [Andrew] could not accept his sister was not there and kept trying to talk to her and act as if nothing had changed." Another commented, "He knows this is all absolutely ridiculous. However, he continues to do it. I think that all of this makes him understand that he'll never see his sister again." While Skyping a deceased sister might be a sign in "real life" that someone has gone round the bend, in this fictional scenario audiences seemed to understand the Skype scene as a metaphor for Andrew's desperation to connect with Eileen.

## Conclusion

Nibbelink and Merx posit that "in intermedial performances spectatorship in itself becomes a self-reflective act," adding, "perception processes are reshaped most radically in the interaction between, and simultaneous presence of, the live [i.e. physically present] and the virtual."[70] By combining embodied staging and interactive online spaces, EC created a safer space than the "real world" for audiences to explore and/or express beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about online mourning and digital afterlife. Further, the option of ongoing digital interactivity allowed some audience members to enter a "practice" space, where they could write or talk about death, or try to offer support. This practice space connected the stage performance to "real world" virtual spaces like Facebook, which have real consequences when one interacts with them.

As Andrew tried to sort out his ideas about death and mourning, some audience members seemed to use his story and the web pages to which he exposed them to reflect on similar issues. One audience member wrote that the performance reminded him that "grief is not quotidian; it is an out of the ordinary experience—even when we get used to it."[71] Another told me she made a phone call during intermission, to ask her sister to not drink and drive that night. A third wrote, "We should slow down and enjoy the ones we love… because someday people won't be able to post on our

walls or retweet our tweets. Life is too short and unpredictable to spend all our time on the internet."Another remarked, "No matter how easy it is to connect with people by means of Facebook, Twitter, Skype, even Virtual Eternity, once they're gone you won't be able to ask them anything. This was eye opening for me because I quite often get used to having people's attention and answers at the tip of my fingers, but this is such a fragile thing." Simultaneous thoughts about the convenience of everyday social networking, paired with life's unpredictability, created a pause, a rift in the "same old" routine for this audience member.

"Existential Chickens" was an experiment in staging what could have easily been a digital-only narrative. I was curious how our audiences would respond (or not) to a non-linear narrative of mourning that included both embodied and digital spaces/practices, and options for audience interactivity. A few audience members were not comfortably receptive to the performance, expressing distaste for the lack of non-digitized movement or dialogue from the onstage, embodied actor. One audience member wrote, "I did not like how almost everything was done through technology." Most others who responded, however, appreciated the fragments of Andrew's narrative as a staged exploration of newer processes of mourning, in light of the concept of networking as performance. Many responses from undergraduate students (who suffer daily in classes where they are asked to put their cell phones away) suggest that asking them to turn their cellphones *on* and interact welcomed them into Andrew's world, which may have otherwise been too alienating to earn their attention. One states, for instance, "I liked how they brought in modern aspects like Facebook, Skype, laptops, etc. That made [the performance seem] more targeted for people my age… [and] more intriguing."Audiences and co-creators were not concerned with questioning Andrew's "reality" or "liveness." Rather, Andrew's invitations for digital interaction offered opportunities for audiences to respond, effectively complicating the real and the fictive, and eclipsing the issue of liveness via the issue(s) of *life* and presence. What seemed to matter most, at least to the audience members who selected to respond, were the possible real world consequences of any actions (or lack thereof) on Andrew's part, and on their own parts in response to Andrew. One undergraduate wrote, "If that was me, I do not even know how I would begin to cope," yet the ways in which Andrew worked through his loss "really helped you put yourself in that situation and made you think about how you would handle the same situation." Another stated, "As I am very afraid of death, as well as the death of those who are dear to me, I could relate to the character's emotions… Not to say that I would be as



hysterical… as [Andrew], but I have never lost a sister so I could not say." For some, EC did not just offer a sad story about an untimely death but inspired a reflective evaluation of how a story like Andrew's might play out in their own lives.

Aside from the written responses from undergraduates, informal conversations with audience members, a formal talkback, and anonymous Virtual Eternity logs, I did not conduct interviews with audience members. Thus, my analysis is limited to these documents/events, and my interpretation of the written audience responses from undergraduate students. Given a different audience demographic, the responses I received might have been much different. Yet, this study offers insight into what a college-aged audience might think and feel about online grieving and memorializing. As online memorializing technologies will likely continue to evolve and become normalized into the everyday lives of an even larger population, productions like *Haunting Fragments* could ground future studies that focus on better understanding the responsibilities and ethical implications of online mourning and memorializing. A similar production might be used and/or altered to create a safer-than-the-real-world way of introducing forms of digital mourning to audiences who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with online social networking. A production like this could also ground a more nuanced study that addresses the advantages and disadvantages online social networks offer to mourners. Additionally, I wonder how a less faulty "Intellitar Eileen" would affect audience responses. Would the bot's lack of "aliveness" matter less if she were more believable, more realistic? How might this further alter online processes and performances of mourning? Finally, a similar performance could incorporate *more* (and more explicit) options for audience interactivity during the stage production, to further explore emergent web etiquettes regarding death and grief, and new online norms and protocols of mourning.

## Notes

1. For example, see Brian Carroll and Katie Landry, "Logging On and Letting Out: Using Online Social Networks to Grieve and to Mourn," *Bulletin of Science Technology & Society* 30 (2010);Tony Walter et al., "Does the Internet Change How We Die and Mourn?" *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying* 64.4 (2011); Joshua Bohn et al, "Facebook, Memorialization, & Memory" (conference proceedings, Dana Forum on Politics and Ethics of Memory and Forgetting, Allentown, PA: Muhlenberg College, 2012), www.stephanieplumeri.net/documents/facebook_m_m.pdf, accessed May 9, 2013; Jed R. Brubaker et al., "Grief-Stricken in a Crowd: The Language of Bereavement and Distress in Social Media" (conference proceedings, International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, Dublin, Ireland, 2012).

2. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *Standard Edition* 14 (1917), 237-258.

3. Carroll and Landry, 343.

4. Ibid., 348.

5. *Haunting Fragments: On Existential Chickens, Live Shadows, Snapshots and Demons*, dir. by Lyndsay Michalik, HopKins Black Box Theatre, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, March, 2012. Inspired by Rick Moody's *Demonology,* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2001).

6. As scholarship about performance praxis, I situate this essay among similar documented work by artist/scholars including: Ruth Bowman, "'Joking' with the Classics: Using Boal's Joker System in the Performance Classroom," *Theatre Topics* 7.2 (1997), 139-51; Heidi Rose, "Writing and Performing Mirror Image," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26.3 (2006), 274-77; Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, "Scripting and Staging a Theoretical Mashup: Nonfiction Zombie in a Dance Club," *Liminalities* 6.1 (2010); Nathan Stucky, "Performing Master Han," *Cultural Studies↔ Critical Methodologies* 5.1 (2005), 52-64; and Tami Spry, "Tattoo stories: A postscript to skins," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20.1 (2000), 84-96.

7. Chiel Kattenbelt, "Theatre as the Art of the Performer and the Stage of Intermediality," *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, eds. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 32.

8. "Virtual Eternity," *Intellitar*, 2009, accessed April 25, 2012, http://www.virtualeternity.com/.

9. Additional examples of scholarship and creative work designed to evoke empathetic responses and reflection about grief include: Michael Bowman, "Killing Dillinger: A Mystory," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20.4 (2000), 342–74; Lesa Lockford, "Lost Lines," [script inspired by Lockford's "From Fragments, to Figures, to Figment: The Archive as Mourning for the Brief Life of Naro Lockford," *Theatre Annual* 60 (2007), 1-22]; and Ronald Shields, "Chasing Kundry's Shadow," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26.4 (2007), 371-388.

10. Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx, "Presence and Perception: Analysing Intermediality in Performance," in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance,* eds. Chiel Kattenbelt, Sarah Bay-Cheng, Robin Nelson, and Andy Lavender (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 225.

11. Meike Wagner and Wolf-Dieter Ernst, "Portal: Networking," in *Mapping Intermediality,* 176.



12. Ibid.

13. Sarah Bay-Cheng, "Theater Is Media: Some Principles for a Digital Historiography of Performance," *Theater* 42.2 (2012), 31.

14. Rick Moody, *Demonology* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2001), 305.

15. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.

16. Ibid., 2.

17. Ibid., 14.

18. Ibid., 39.

19. N. Katherine Hayles, *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2-3.

20. Jodi Kanter, *Performing Loss: Rebuilding Community Through Theater and Writing* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 9.

21. Tony Walter et al., 18.

22. Roach, 77.

23. Rosi Braidotti, *Meta(l)flesh. In The Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body*, eds. Zoe Detsi-Diamanti et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 249.

24. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, (Taylor & Francis, Kindle Edition, 2011), 99.

25. Roach, 77.

26. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,* trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36.

27. Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 27.

28. Derrida, *Mourning,* 72.

29. Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 39.

30. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 149.

31. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 8.

32. Dixon, 69.

33. Gordon Coonfield and Heidi Rose, "What is Called Presence," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 32.3 (2012), 202.

34. Coonfield and Rose, 203.

35. andrewwfield, *My first vlog: Hot Bird*, YouTube file, March 6, 2012, accessed Dec. 1, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nq_fSzIYE4E&feature=plcp.

36. Philip Auslander, "Digital liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective," *PAJ* 102 (2012), 6.

37. Auslander, "Digital," 9.

38. Auslander, "Digital," 10.

39. Derek Mudd. "Re: talkback," email to the author, Mar. 15, 2012.

40. These audience responses, and further mentioned written responses, were composed by undergraduate students at Louisiana State University, March 2012.

41. Derrida, *Mourning,* 21.

42. Carroll and Landry, 323.

43. Andrew Wakefield, *Facebook,* 2012, accessed Sept. 15, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/andrew.wakefield.5492.

44. Eileen Wakefield, *Facebook,* 2012, accessed Sept. 15, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/eileen.wakefield.5.

45. "'Existential Chickens,' includes some live projected media… Feel free to add Andrew Wakefield on Facebook (search for andrewwfield@gmail.com) and Twitter (andrewwfield)." From *Haunting Fragments,* "Director's Notes," 2012.

46. Facebook message to Andrew Wakefield, Mar. 8, 2012.

47. Several undergraduates wrote that they were curious if the performance was "based on a real story." Yet, anyone at the stage show who read the Director's Notes in the program would know that Andrew's story was fictional. Additionally, while I think the willingness to role-play in this fictional scenario was at least partially inspired by empathy, I have no audience responses that explicitly support this idea.

48. Annette Kuhn, *family secrets*, (New York: Verso, 1995), 164.

49.Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, "Editor's Introduction," in *The Work of Mourning,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001),17.

50. Jade Huell, "Re: talkback," email to the author, Mar. 13, 2012.

51. Walter et al., 295.

52.Walter et al., 36.

53.Carroll and Landry, 343.

54. Bohn et al., 36.

55. Carroll and Landry, 348.

56. Moody, 40.

57. "Our Vision," *Intellitar,* 2009, accessed on Apr. 25, 2012, http://www.intellitar.com/.

58. "Who's on First" is a comedy routine that plays on words and names, made famous by William Abbott and Lou Costello. Costello asks for names of baseball players, and believes Abbot's answers are non-responsive, when the names of the players are in fact "Who," "What," and "I Don't Know." http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sShMA85pv8M.

59. "Conversation Logs," *Virtual Eternity*, Mar. 5, 2012, accessed Apr. 22, 2012, http://www.virtualeternity.com/.

60. Philip Auslander, "Live from Cyberspace, or, I was sitting at my computer this guy appeared he thought I was a bot," *PAJ70* 24.1 (2002), 20.

61. "Conversation Logs," *Virtual Eternity*, Mar. 11, 2012, accessed Apr. 22, 2012, http://www.virtualeternity.com/.

62. The talkback for Haunting Fragments was held in the HopKins Black Box, Louisiana State University, on March 12, 2012.

63. Brault and Naas, 8.

64. Karen J. Prager, *The Psychology of Intimacy* (New York: Guildford, 1995), 45.

65. Karen J. Prager, "Deep Intimate Connection: Self and Intimacy in Couple Relationships," in *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*, eds. Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 19.

66. Bruce Barton, "Intimacy," in *Mapping Intermediality*, 46.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. Nibbelink and Merx, 176.

71. Mudd.



# Critical Ingredients in a Free Lunch: Food and the Complex of Generosity in Relational Performance

byLaurie Beth Clark and Michael Peterson

In art as in life, we tend to associate food with generosity. In everyday life, we perform our generosity by cooking meals for our families, giving parties for our friends, volunteering at community kitchens or contributing baked goods to charity sales.Offering food or drink to guests on arrival can be said to be the signature gesture of hospitality. Perhaps because of this association, artists making "relational" performances often use food to initiate participation and signal a relation to participants that at least in part locates the artist in the role of host.

Relational performances refer to those in which the performance itself is located in—in fact made of—social interaction. For example, the performance projects we produce under the collaborative name Spatula&Barcode involve acting, image-making, documentation, and especially cooking, but we consider the work "itself" to comprise or take place in the interactions among our participants and ourselves. The loose assortment of artistic practices that might be termed "relational" are associated by many with the book *Relational Aesthetics* by Nicolas Bourillaud.[1] Performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson, in her book *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, attends particularly to the ways in which many relational artists do good within an aesthetic frame and thus makes clear that generosity is a very appropriate topic indeed for analysis of relational performance.[2]

While confrontation was a stereotypical stance of modernist performance, relational projects are often presumed to be about—or even made of—generosity. Unsurprisingly, then, the use of food in relational performance is often presumed to be a signifier of generosity. The general assumption of the generosity of food-giving coupled with the general assumption about the stance of relational performance mean that food-based relational work can appear over-determined as generous. In this essay we

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