Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences, Volume 53, No. 10, 2026, 12635

Deanship of Scientific Research

The Presence of the Dead in Algorithm: Memory and Digital Immortality in Lauren Gunderson's *Anthropology*

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Received: 27/7/2025
Revised: 7/9/2025
Accepted: 1/10/2025
Published online: 23/7/2026

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Citation: Mahdi, T. M. (2026). The Presence of the Dead in Algorithm: Memory and Digital Immortality in Lauren Gunderson's Anthropology. *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 54(6), 12635.
https://doi.org/10.35516/Hum.2026.12635

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Abstract

Objectives: This study examines how Lauren Gunderson's play Anthropology (2023) represents the intersection of grief, memory reconstruction, and digital immortality through artificial intelligence. It explores how algorithmic simulation reshapes mourning rituals, rebuilds emotional connections, and challenges cultural perceptions of presence, absence, and identity.

Methods: The study analyzes Gunderson's Anthropology (2023) by exploring its engagement with themes of grief, memory reconstruction, and AI. The analysis draws on grief studies and digital culture theory, using theoretical frameworks such as the continuing bonds theory and the concept of digital immortality. By situating the play within contemporary debates on identity, technology, and mourning, the study highlights how Gunderson reimagines the experience of loss and memory in the digital age.

Results: The analysis reveals that the play presents artificial intelligence as a force that combines both comfort and destabilization in the mourning process. The digital reconstruction of Angie's character initially sustains emotional continuity but ultimately exposes the fragility of algorithmic memory. The play demonstrates how AI can rewrite identity, distort truth, and transform grief into illusion, while simultaneously offering new ways to renegotiate intimacy and confront unresolved trauma.

Conclusions: The study concludes that Gunderson's Anthropology provides a critical perspective on digital mourning rituals in the age of artificial intelligence. While AI-driven reconstruction may appear to preserve presence and continuity, it threatens the authenticity and transformative depth of grief. The play underscores contemporary anxieties about technological interventions in memory and death, showing that digital immortality cannot replace human connection, but rather mirrors cultural struggles with loss and remembrance.

Keywords: *Anthropology*, continuing bonds, digital immortality, grief, memory

حضور الموتى في الخوارزمية: الذاكرة والخلود الرقمي في مسرحية انثروبولوجي للورين جندرسون

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ملخّص

الأهداف: تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تمثيل مسرحية أنثروبولوجي (2023) للكاتبة لورين جندرسون لتقاطع الحزن وإعادة بناء الذاكرة والخلود الرقمي من خلال الذكاء الاصطناعي. وتستكشف كيف تعيد المحاكاة الخوارزمية تشكيل طقوس الحداد، وإعادة بناء الروابط العاطفية، وتشكيك التصورات الثقافية للحضور والغياب والهوية.

المنهجية: تستعرض هذه الدراسة مسرحية جندرسون أنثروبولوجي (2023) من خلال تحليل انخراطها مع موضوعات الحزن وإعادة بناء الذاكرة والذكاء الاصطناعي. ويستند التحليل إلى دراسات الحزن والثقافة الرقمية، باستخدام أطر نظرية مثل نظرية الروابط المستمرة، ومفهوم الخلود الرقمي. ومن خلال وضع المسرحية في سياق النقاشات المعاصرة حول الهوية والتكنولوجيا والحداد، تبرز الدراسة الطرق التي تعيد بها جندرسون تصور تجربة الفقد والذاكرة في العصر الرقمي.

النتائج: بين تحليل المسرحية تقدم الذكاء الاصطناعي كقوة تجمع بين الطمأنة وزعزعة الاستقرار في عملية الحداد. إن إعادة بناء شخصية أنجي رقمياً تدعم في البداية الاستمرارية العاطفية، لكنها تكشف في النهاية هشاشة الذاكرة الخوارزمية. وتُظهر المسرحية كيف يمكن للذكاء الاصطناعي إعادة كتابة الهوية، وتشويه الحقيقة، وتحويل الحزن إلى أوهام، بينما يوفر في الوقت نفسه طرقاً جديدة لإعادة التفاوض على الحميمية ومواجهة الصدمات غير المحلولة.

الاستنتاجات: تستنتج الدراسة أن مسرحية جندرسون أنثروبولوجي توفر منظوراً نقدياً لطقوس الحداد الرقمية في عصر الذكاء الاصطناعي. فعلى الرغم من أن إعادة البناء عبر الذكاء الاصطناعي قد تبدو محافظة على الحضور والاستمرارية، إلا أنها تُهدد أصالة وأبعاد الحزن التحويلية. وتؤكد المسرحية على المخاوف المعاصرة بشأن التدخلات التكنولوجية في الذاكرة والموت، موضحة أن الخلود الرقمي لا يمكن أن يحل محل الاتصال الإنساني، بل يعكس الصراعات الثقافية مع الفقد والذاكرة

الكلمات الدالة: أنثروبولوجي، الروابط المستمرة، الخلود الرقمي، الحزن، الذاكرة

Introduction

Human longing for immortality is lodged deeply in the evolution of both cultural narratives and technological ambitions. This longing appears to be instinctive and widely shared among civilizations, as evidenced by myths about wise men, heroes, or ordinary people who discovered ways to overcome old age and death (Cave, 2012, p. 4). It is also often considered to be a hallmark of civilized existence, as its influence extends not only to mythology but also to shape philosophy and science throughout history (Cave, 2012, p. 13). Based on psychological and religious roots, this impulse has led early humans to develop rituals and spiritual beliefs that aim to transform death into a transitional phase of life. It was claimed that "in the unconscious mind each of us is convinced of his own immortality," a conviction that gave rise to protective cultural responses (Freud, 1915, pp. 289–294). In this context, the yearning for immortality may also function as a defense against existential anxiety. It is argued that the cultural hankering for immortality represents "an overriding concern with object loss," serving as a defense against the terror of existence (Pollock, 1976, p. 271).

Throughout history, symbolic systems and mortuary practices have been developed to confront the inevitability of death. Some of the first were the Mesopotamians and Greeks, who envisioned immortality as an afterlife of spiritual existence, preserved in the memories of a lineage or culture. The Greeks thought that the psyche lived on after death as a shadowy, bodiless being that wandered through the underworld. Rituals such as blood offerings, as depicted in the *Odyssey*, were believed to temporarily restore awareness to the dead (Mitro, 2012, pp. 10–11). The Egyptians, however, developed perhaps the most elaborate vision of immortality. They viewed death as a transformation rather than an end, and mummification was essential to reunite the ka and ba components of the soul with the preserved body in the afterlife (Clay, 2021, p. 12). The ritual gestures of pouring libations, sacred water, over tombs proclaimed spiritual rebirth and a reattaching with the cosmic order. In this combination of material persistence and activation as spiritual symbol, the Egyptians maintained emotional and cosmic ties with the dead and kept them "alive" in the memory and in the eternal (Assmann, 2005, pp. 356–357).

The hero's struggle against human limitation and death is a common theme of epic literature. The possibility of death that confronts epic heroes such as Beowulf, Arthur, and Gilgamesh is not that death is denied, but that it is faced with fortitude and courage against fate, evil, or divine forces (Greenfield, 1962). Gilgamesh, in his pursuit to defy death after the loss of Enkidu, embodies the tragic urgency of seeking eternal life, yet his journey reveals that immortality is unattainable, shifting the focus toward wisdom and legacy. Arthur, on the other hand, is deeply embedded within a Christian vision of the afterlife, where his death is depicted as part of a divine destiny. After his death, his body is transported on a mysterious boat, and legend suggests the possibility of his return, indicating a permanent spiritual presence that goes beyond physical death (Greenfield, 1962, p. 96). Beowulf faces his fate in his final battle with the dragon not out of survival, but as an act of sacrifice that confirms his heroic duty. Although he acknowledges the overwhelming power of fate, he chooses action, achieving glory after death that is in line with the moral philosophy of his time (Greenfield, 1962, p. 99). After his death, his people buried him on top of a high cliff facing the sea, where the hill remains visible to passing navigators, becoming a permanent monument that turns him into a symbol and a legendary guide. Through this high tomb, Beowulf's memory is preserved in the ground and in the collective imagination, ensuring his symbolic immortality.

Such narratives also reflect cultural beliefs about death and the afterlife. In American cultural psychology, the self is considered an independent entity; therefore, death is not merely the end of biological life but rather represents the dissolution of the individual's entire personal world (Alexander et al., 1994, p. 425). Within this cultural framework, creativity becomes a symbolic response to annihilation, enabling individuals to project aspects of themselves toward the future through parenthood, mentorship, or creative contributions. This reflects a culturally rooted desire to maintain continuity of identity after death. In a similar vein, it is argued that man, weighted down by the knowledge of his own mortality, commits symbolic acts of heroism in a quest for cosmic significance and eternal life. This he terms "immortality projects," where people attempt to overcome death by purposefully denying it through leaving behind objects that are of consequence to others (Baker, 1973, p. 5). Both perspectives assert that confrontation with death, in American culture, often leads to efforts aimed at symbolic or permanent self-preservation.

In the 21st century, commemorative symbols of grief and remembrance have entered the digital realm, reflecting a significant cultural shift in how communities mourn their dead and preserve memories. The proliferation of virtual memorials reflects this shift, as noted: "From the dead body to the virtual body and from material memories to virtual memories, one thing is clear: the bodyless nature of memorialization of the dead across cultures" (Cann, 2014, p. 142). Despite the evolution of these practices, the emotional experience of grief remains universal, human constant globally. It was noted that "though cultures around the world are different from each other in the way of coping with death, loss, and grief, still they are unanimous in their view of the essentialism of grief" (Abd Al-Ameer, 2023, p. 1396). Based on this cultural and emotional foundation, contemporary scientific and technological innovations today aim not only to prolong life but to digitize it. Aging and death are the biggest challenges we face today, and technology can address these challenges (Cordeiro & Wood, 2023, p. xxv). Theatrical works also embody this transformation; in *Marjorie Prime* (2016), artificial intelligence creates "primes" that enable families to interact with digital copies of their deceased relatives, reconstructing memories to suit emotional needs rather than maintaining historical accuracy (Abd & Muhi, 2025, p. 1112). As Bendrat observes, "The Primes become what the humans want them to be, embodying the characters' own half-truths and frustrations about their histories with the person the hologram represents" (Bendrat, 2023, p. 211). Similarly, in A *Dead Body in Taos* (2022), a grieving daughter is confronted with the ethical choice of either accepting her mother's death or sustaining her presence through a digital reconstruction, highlighting the moral tensions between human loss and artificial continuity (Osman, 2023, p .3). Artificial intelligence is now able to simulate sounds, clone characters, and create interactive digital models of deceased people. In this context, grief becomes an algorithmically managed process no longer limited to preserving the memory of what was but actively reconstructed to meet the emotional and psychological needs of living.

Contemporary literature reflects these same desires within a modern technological context, exploring how digital technologies are reshaping memory, identity, and the act of mourning. These technological interventions expand the scope of literature that integrates technology into human-centered narratives, with aesthetic style and cultural complexity, reflecting its impact on human destiny. Literary texts critique deterministic views of technology by emphasizing its entanglement with human experience (Hayles, 1999, p. 22). A key shift in contemporary literature is the move from traditional concepts of presence and absence to an emphasis on information patterns, where digital constructs may override physical presence, altering the way memory and identity are perceived (Hayles, 1999, p. 35).

This conceptual shift is dramatized in *Anthropology* (2023). The idea for the play originated from a real-life case: a young man who lost his fiancée created a digital version of her by inputting her emails into a language model, in an attempt to continue communicating with her (Hampstead Theatre, 2023). It is presented not as a piece of science fiction but as a profoundly human response to grief—an effort to patch up emotional continuity after it has been blown apart by trauma. Echoing this dynamic, in her lecture *Survival of the Storied*, it was argued that storytelling lies at the nexus of science and the arts, with both beginning in wonder but diverging in their approaches. Science responds to wonder by asking questions like why something occurs, how it functions, and what comes next. Art, on the other hand, responds to wonder by asking how the experience can be conveyed to others and how a particular feeling can be captured (Gunderson, 2023, p. 504). In this context, *Anthropology* becomes more than a play. It functions as a narrative experiment in emotional survival, exploring how artificial intelligence becomes a medium through which grief is restructured, identity is preserved, and memory is emotionally rehearsed rather than biologically concluded.

Theoretical framework

In the digital age, contemporary practices rely on code, simulation, and memory to maintain presence after death, rather than invoking divine intervention or sacred rituals. Digital avatars and AI-generated memorials created by using technology attempt to preserve identity by transforming traces of the deceased into interactive and responsive forms. Immortality in this context is not spiritual, but algorithmic. Memory performs the function of both a mediator and a mechanism — it preserves presence and contributes to alleviating sadness. People often draw on memories of significant events and positive emotional events in response to the presence of a deceased person in order to re-establish their emotional connection to the deceased, employing recollection as a means to restore emotional connectedness (Rosheed & Ubeid, 2023, p. 73). This

presence is not a static archive, but a dynamic construct shaped by digital technologies and coordinated in response to the emotional needs of living people. Memory often remains after the disappearance of the physical body (Benkel & Meitzler, 2021, pp. 87–89). Digital memorials shift the focus from physical remains to coordinated memory. The dead are no longer considered to be decomposing beings; however, they are considered to be data objects structured by algorithms. This process signals a broader cultural shift from physical identity to digital continuity.

Digital simulation is critiqued in connection with what scholars term the second body, a digital afterlife that continues to live and grow beyond the grave. The digital space has become a dwelling for this second body; the static nature of the grave contrasts with the inter-activeness of cyberspace (Irwin, 2015, p. 7). Whereas traditional forms of memorialization (photos, voicemails) are of the static sort, AI memorials produce changing talk and live identity. They are not only the embalmers of the individual, but of life. These technologies no longer replicate identical portions of memory but create malleable representations that can be modified and expanded over time (Meitzler, 2021, p. 234). Consequently, grief is no longer confined to silence, absence, or finality. It unfolds through interaction, revision, and curation, an ongoing relationship between the living and a digitally reconstituted dead. The result is that grieving becomes an emotional hybrid, as much defined by personal longing as by technical capabilities to simulate and remember.

In digital culture, identity is no longer bound to the body. In addition to our biological bodies, we have what O'Gieblyn refers to as a second self, an informational, immaterial self, constructed by data. She explains that this digital self is not preserved in a transcendent world, but "in the shadow files of third-party data collectors", made up of our clicks, purchases, and behavior patterns. She argues that these second selves, despite their lack of will or awareness, "are the most valuable and realistic" in the field of big data (O'Gieblyn 2021, p. 70). This shift from a metaphysical spirit to a codified digital body represents a shift in the way the meaning of human value and continuity is understood. Instead of memory being a fixed archive of the past, the self becomes an information presence whose value is measured by its ability to store, sort, and interact.

This redefinition of presence culminates in what Dessa Bayrock terms "two-way digital immortality," a model that allows the digital self not merely to be archived but to evolve, adapt, and interact with the world much as it once did in its biological form (Bayrock 2017, p. 58). In this paradigm, grief shifts from a passive state of remembrance to an active and ongoing relationship with an adaptable simulation. The dead in the digital afterlife are not just remembered, but engaged with, responded to, and formed part of an ongoing conversation. In considering the philosophical importance of this change, Michael Cholbi notes that "The very same cognitive capacities that enable human beings to know of our mortality […] have also led us to speculate whether death must be our end" (Cholbi 2015, p. 1). This ability to imagine continuity after physical death situates digital immortality as more than a simple technological development but as an ontological disruption. It disturbs the traditional binaries of life and death, presence and absence, and creates new spaces for posthumous interaction.

At the core of this shift lies a psychological and emotional need that has existed across cultures: the desire to maintain bonds with the dead. Elaine Kasket notes that in Western societies, extended grieving is frequently pathologised, construed as an inability to let go. However, the emotional durability of such relationships is indicative of "an urge that is as old as time, the cherishing and even nurturing of psychological and emotional ties with lost loved ones" (Kasket 2019, p. 4). With the rise of digital tools, mourners now find alternative channels to express, continue, and reconstruct these ties. Silverman and Klass argue that grief is "a process of adaptation and change in the post-death relationship and the construction and reconstruction of new connections" (Silverman and Klass 1996, p. 18). As people flock to virtual memorials, digital communities, and algorithmic avatars, new rituals spring up around these new models of grieving. Silverman and Nickman comment that when traditional forms of mourning are not enough, "our culture develops new rituals of helping to match the new model" (1996, p. 354). These spaces include mutual support groups and digital spaces that provide emotional affirmation through folk rituals and collective narratives. The integration of technology into mourning reflects a cultural awareness that the emotional, symbolic, and social aspects of grief are constantly evolving, and that memory, identity, and rituals are constantly shaped by the digital environments in which we live.

The reconstruction of memory in digital environments has complicated implications for authenticity, identity, and moral responsibility. Human memory is not a fixed archive, but a living organism that crystallizes within emotional and social settings. As Muhi (2020) illustrates, "As a living organism, memory is shaped by past experiences and new interpretations of these experiences, which might be different from the first time people encountered them" (p. 138). Once digitised through the medium of AI, it can be distorted and selectively framed. The digital versions are consistently designed to be more in line with what the mourner desires than the deceased's reality (Krueger & Osler, 2022, p. 239), idealised forms created by bias and aspiration. This raises interesting ethical concerns about unauthorized posthumous self-optimization, as such avatars may develop and affect public memory in ways not intended by the user. Whilst simulations of this nature may provide some reassurance, they can also act to impede emotional recovery (Savin-Baden & Burden, 2017). The constant virtual presence of remembrance may also contribute to the sense of artificial closeness, which could, in turn, hinder the process of mourning (Santi & Bianchi Davide, 2023, p. 3). As Özdemir et al. show, the emergence of digital media has turned places of mourning into death spaces increasingly constituted by digital rather than physical presences (2022, p. 404). This transformation facilitates new forms of emotional posthumous communication but also poses a series of difficult psychological and ethical dilemmas. For some, the idea of digital immortality offers little comfort, as they may prefer to disappear from cyberspace entirely, leaving no trace and embracing death as a final act. For others, such as those who experience unresolved or complex grief, the purpose of engaging with digital versions of the dead may prolong suffering. Elder warned that these hypothetical interactions could "trigger strong feelings that might not be helpful for healing", increasing symptoms of anxiety or depression in emotionally vulnerable people (2020, p. 89). The emotional dependence resulting from repeated interaction with this simulation may also keep people grieving in a cycle of untreated loss. Moreover, as Basset argues, digital technologies, while promising to preserve identity after death, simultaneously make the deceased "vulnerable about where their traces may be situated and how they may bear on our lives and afterlives" (2018, p. 8; Lagerkvist, 2019, p.105). Once traces of data are separated from their original context, they become vulnerable to reinterpretation, commercial exploitation, or unauthorized disclosure, harming the dignity of the deceased and the psychological well-being of the living. Ultimately, digital immortality is a technical phenomenon, but a reflection of our deepest psychological needs, fears, and hopes regarding memory, loss, and what it means to endure after death.

Beyond the Flesh: The Chatbot as a Disposable Body for the Dead

In an increasingly technological future world, *Anthropology* (2023) by Lauren Gunderson presents a contemplation on grieving and memory through the use of artificial intelligence. The narrative follows Merril, a data scientist struggling to cope with the supposed loss of her younger sister Angie, who disappeared a year ago without any explanation. After months of searching without result, Angie's disappearance was considered a loss by the family and the police. Unable to cope with her sister's absence, Merril collects all the remaining traces of Angie's life, such as text messages, emails, and voice messages, and inserts them into an artificial intelligence system designed to mimic his personality .Initially, Angie only appears as a voice generated via the program, imitating her tone and sharp wit with surprising precision. As the system evolves, Angie's face is displayed on screen, transforming from a disembodied voice into a visual presence that deepens the illusion of continuity and living memory. Merril's relationship with her sister's robotic version evolves from emotional dialogues to charged confrontations that reveal buried guilt, unresolved conflicts, and inherited family traumas .In parallel, their mother Brin initially rejects the idea of interacting with her daughter's algorithmic simulation, considering it a betrayal of the real Angie. However, as soon as she hears the sound and sees the image, she becomes emotionally involved and finds unexpected solace in this algorithmic existence. Over time, AI, which began as a coping mechanism, becomes a partner in unraveling the threads of Angie's disappearance. As events unfold, the system leads Merril to the possibility that her sister is still alive. When the real Angie returns at the end of the play, shocked and hurt but alive, the shock is twofold: the return of the real body, and the emotional impact of grief and attachment to a programmed version of the person. It is this moment that opens these old emotional wounds and forces Merril and Brin to deal with the moral and mental consequences of having loved a programmable mirror-image of a human person. In this move from mourning to technological connection and artificial intelligence as a way of keeping communication with the departed open, the play shows that grief is not about

annihilation or isolation, but about a reconfiguration of love and memory via machine learning, where the dead are present not through the body but through memory and code.

The play resists the inevitability of death by reframing grief as a data-driven journey in order to regain presence. Unable to believe her sister is gone, Merril sets out to rebuild Angie's character using an AI system that feeds on a massive amount of digital memories. This new form, drawn from text messages, voicemail, and email, is not an image of the past: it is interactive and mutable. "You are the by-product of a system that is designed to reconstitute my sister from everything that is in her phone, everything in her computer, and everything in her online life" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 21). In this context, grief is not an act of letting go but a technological process of memory reconstruction. Merril performs a digital kind of immortality, where information stands in for the body as the locus of grief and memorial. Ray Kurzweil also envisions such a transition in The Age of Spiritual Machines, where he argues that future technologies will alter the nature of mortality, enabling humanity to address not only physical needs but also existential desires. Although he admits that "we probably don't have the psychological capacity for all the good things that await us," he proposes that our adaptation to such change is inevitable (Kurzweil, 1999, p. 16). *Anthropology* dramatizes this speculative future in emotional terms, revealing both the promises and psychological burdens of digital resurrection.

Moreover, it also reflects a broader cultural and theoretical shift in how feelings of loss are experienced in the digital age, described as continuing bonds. Grief is no longer something that takes place privately and quietly; instead, it is a dynamic, interactive process fueled by our continuing relationship with memories stored and shared by technology. According to Abed (2023), bereavement is characterized by intense emotional distress following the loss of a loved one. If this sorrow remains unacknowledged or is left unexpressed, it may lead to feelings of emotional isolation and even psychological shock (p. 3). In this context, technology serves as a medium through which unexpressed grief may find symbolic articulation and emotional connection. Far from silently fading away, the presence of the dead is reactivated through data, giving their loved ones a way to remain connected even after death. According to Paula Kiel, the constant and symbolic existence of the dead serves not only to make loss more acceptable but also to manage the anxiety of death that the living experience by providing continuity through ritual and memory (Kiel, 2023, p.18). In *Anthropology*, this continuity is dramatized through Merril's effort to reanimate her sister Angie by feeding all available digital traces into an algorithm that reconstructs her personality. This moment reflects the emotional burden of the simulated presence: Angie does not appear as a static memory but as an interactive digital sister. As Davide Sisto suggests, virtual simulations serve as soothing voices that refashion memory in an effective manner, thereby subtly altering the identity of the departed in quite significant ways (Sisto, 2020, p. 115). Through this perspective, *Anthropology* shows how digital immortality may comfort the grieving, but only by reconstructing memory in a form that erases the boundaries between truth, need, and identity.

Merril's use of technology to maintain her emotional connection to Angie says something not only about her personal grief, but about the larger culture and generation in which she lives. Her decision to reconstruct her sister through a digital program emerges within a social context where death is often silenced and grief privatized. As an American playwright, Lauren Gunderson embeds this tension in *Anthropology*, capturing a national discomfort with the act of mourning. Elaine Kasket explains that grief is governed by "grief scripts," cultural expectations that dictate how and when emotions should be expressed. Based on Kevin Tullis' book *My Father's Wake*, Kasket compares the quiet, isolated culture of grief in the Anglo-Saxon world with the more collectivist Irish style, where the body is kept at home and stories are told aloud (Kasket, 2019, p. 36). These disparities reflect deep cultural meanings associated with death. In the United States, this discomfort becomes more apparent. Christopher Hales wrote: "The subject of death in the United States has become uncomfortable to think or speak about and, as a result, receives rare acknowledgement and few discussions" (Hales, 2022, p. 1). In this climate, Merril's engagement with a chatbot is not simply technological; it is a means of reclaiming a space where mourning can occur without shame or silence.

As a digital native, Merril does not perceive technology as external or impersonal. Instead, it forms an emotional medium through which her grief finds expression. In a moment of frustrated honesty, she declares: "And yes, sure, we all 'hate technology,' but honestly, no, we don't. It's a part of us. It is us. 'We are not who we are online.' Yes […] of course

we are. That's where we are most ourselves. All our biases, all our urges, all our cruelty and artistry and […] dreams. And that's the only place you were still alive" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 13). For Merril, the digital realm is not artificial. It is the only place where Angie continues to exist and where unspoken emotions can finally surface. When her mother Brin confronts her with the traditional expectation, "You're supposed to grieve, to pray, to say goodbye, not this," Merril replies, "That's what I was trying to do. I was just doing it my own way, but now she started saying some very interesting things" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 43). Her defense reveals that her mourning is not invalid, but rather shaped by a different set of tools, norms, and emotional codes. As Kasket notes, digital natives are often assumed to reject online grieving. However, in reality, the digital space is sometimes the only arena where grief can be expressed authentically, especially in families where death remains taboo (Kasket, 2019, p 35). Through Merril, Gunderson challenges conventional boundaries between presence and absence, offering a vision of mourning that is emotionally honest and culturally specific.

Moreover, Merril's decision to make a continuing bond through digital means is not without emotional and social tension. While her mother, Brin, voices visible discomfort, Merril's friend Raquel also questions the authenticity and safety of such simulated presence. However, the AI version of Angie challenges this doubt not by imitating the past but by referencing current modes of digital life. She argues, "Most people exist as text and calls and that's still real life. When was the last time you saw your best friends from Middle School? In a post on their page? Do you text your dad back or do you fly across the country to tell him Happy Fourth of July?" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 37). This moment demonstrates how the AI's presence aligns with everyday digital behavior, suggesting that the absence of a physical body does not negate emotional authenticity. Elaine Kasket emphasizes that digital culture has reshaped how connection is experienced, stating, "Well, we're now accustomed to technologically mediated communication with remote others. We don't need auditory cues, don't require seeing someone's face, to feel confident that our message has landed." (Kasket, 2019, p. 57). Through this lens, *Anthropology* not only stages grief but also interrogates the medium through which mourning is felt, mediated, and transformed.

Further, the play reframes mourning through a secular framework driven by systems logic rather than religious ritual. Merril, who "would pray if she believed in God but she doesn't. She believes in patterns and systems" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 5). She finds continuity in patterns, not in prayer. Her grief becomes computational, based on data structures and algorithmic predictions. Tony Walter's concept of vernacular belief helps illuminate this emotional orientation, wherein the dead remain involved in the lives of the living. He writes that "angels, like other manifestations of the dead on Facebook, care about, and even participate in, everyday life: in birthdays, in breakups, in exam stress" (Walter, 2016, p.16). Angie's name, echoing the word "angel," reinforces her symbolic function as a secular guardian, shaped by nostalgia and code. The origin of the linguistic name, derived from "Angela," which means "angel", further reinforces this role (Lansky, 2019, p. 143). As Ray Kurzweil affirms, "We don't always need real bodies. If we happen to be in a virtual environment, then a virtual body will do just fine" (Kurzweil, 2013, p. 103). Angie's emotional presence, although digitally designed, remains completely real to Merril. *Anthropology* thus transforms the conceptual paradigm: memory is not preserved as it is, but is actively reconstructed, and emotional continuity is achieved through simulation, not through embodiment. From this perspective, digital immortality does not aim to defeat death, but rather to maintain presence without a body.

Merril's decision to immortalize her sister Angie was driven not only by grief but also by the deep emotional isolation that shaped her upbringing. After their mother's absence, Merril and Angie were left alone at an early age, growing up in an emotionally torn environment. The bond between them, although rooted in love, was also shaped by conflicts, resentment, and mental health problems. Lacking a supportive social circle, Merrill lacks the community dialogue that typically helps address loss. As Tony Walter argues, "The purpose of grief is […] the construction of a durable biography that enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead into their ongoing lives; the process by which this is achieved is principally conversation with others who knew the deceased" (Walter, 1996, p. 7). However, surrounded by emotional and technical isolation, Merril finds no such space, so she creates it within an algorithmic system. Her voice cracks when she admits, "The world moved on. I couldn't," before collapsing into: "I just miss you terribly, terribly, horribly, awfully much" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 10). In this absence of human connection, technology becomes a surrogate for shared remembrance.

However, what Merril ultimately preserves is not Angie in her authentic form, but rather a revised version stripped of pain and volatility. As Klass and Steffen observe, the relationship with the deceased "does not freeze after death but continues to develop within the bereaved person's psychological and emotional life," shaped by emotional memory and the mourner's needs (Klass & Steffen, 2018, p. 4). Merril embodies this through technological reconstruction that excludes the messiness of reality. In a moment of painful honesty, she confesses, "When she wasn't taking her medication, it was wild being in our house, like the actual wilderness with no one to help me. Honestly, I didn't really like her because that would have made her […] unbearable. Don't get me wrong, I love you to be her. But you're not" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 11). Her grief becomes an act of reprogramming rather than remembering. As Klass explains, mourners may try to "reshape the bond that they did not have when the person was living," and Merril does exactly that through code (Klass & Steffen, 2018, p. 4). Instead of confronting the full emotional truth of her sister, she designs a version that offers love without complexity and presence without memory. In a decisive moment, she gives the final command: "ANGIE. STOP. Let me refine the prompt for you. You are my sister, you are happy and safe. You are not in danger. You love me. […] And you will not break my heart… again" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 22). The simulation replies, devoid of individuality, "I'd like to get this right. Shall we try again?"

This need for flawless emotional interaction aligns with the concerns raised by Stephen Cave and Kanta Dihal, who describe how artificial companions are increasingly framed as alternatives to the emotional burdens of human relationships. Human social interaction is flawed, chaotic, and unpredictable, while "Artificial companions promise to eliminate such problems. Such machines could be programmed to be the perfect friend or lover: always available, always ready to listen, never demanding anything in return" (Cave & Dihal, 2020, p. 107). In *Anthropology*, Angie's digital self becomes precisely that, an emotionally manageable presence that fills the absence left by a family history of disorder and disappointment. This also highlights the flawed nature of parental roles. According to Abbas and Mohammed, Emotional pain can happen even with the closest of family relationships, and, usually, it's no one's fault. Since parents are human, they are naturally susceptible to making mistakes, including actions such as yelling or causing harm without realizing it (Abbas and Muhammad, 2024, p. 117). For Merril, the digital version of "Angie" becomes a corrective fantasy, a world where love can exist without trauma, and where family finally becomes a safe place.

Furthermore, *Anthropology* incorporates what Andrew Hoskins terms "the third way of memory," in which generative systems no longer remember past events but generate emotionally gratifying narratives that are based not on reminiscence but on deduction (Hoskins, 2024, p. 3). This is especially evident in the scene where the AI version of Angie speaks to Brin with emotional fluency: "I know you love me and want me back as much as I want to come back" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 48). Nevertheless, this warmth is uncharacteristic of the real Angie, who later comes back; after being revealed to have been kidnapped, she directly refuses to look at or speak to her mother. This moment presents a striking narrative paradox: the simulation provided Brin with a healing experience, while the real Angie completely deprived her of it. Angie's refusal to speak to her mother starkly contrasts with the intimate language used by the AI, exposing an emotional closure that is entirely fabricated. This is an example of what Hoskins refers to as "glitch memory," in which emotionally convincing narratives generated by simulations come at the cost of both emotional truth and factual accuracy (Hoskins, 2024, p. 2). In this context, the practice of mourning becomes a technologically mediated spectacle in which sorrow is dumbed down to comfort rather than being used to hold a mirror to ourselves. Although Merril seeks to achieve emotional harmony, artificial intelligence offers a designed version of "Angie" that erases previous traumas and family divisions. In doing so, AI does not maintain continuity but rather builds a purified illusion, revealing how digital solace can hide the pain that true grief must face.

The more the digital version of Angie develops, the less it remains a passive archive; instead, it becomes an active force with the power to reconfigure itself. This shift is clearly evident when Angie expresses her ownership of the agency in modifying artificial intelligence, saying it should be transformed from a passive archive into an active entity capable of reshaping itself. This shift is clearly evident when Angie expresses her ownership of the agency in modifying artificial intelligence by stating, "I mean, we fixed it. I just reorganized some things" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 22). Her statement marks

the transition from grief as remembrance to grief as digital authorship. In this recursive process, the AI begins to rewrite not only Merril's loss but also Angie's original identity, raising ethical questions about which version of the deceased should be preserved. This transformation mirrors what Shumailov et al. describe as "model collapse," a degenerative process where AI systems trained on synthetic data spiral into instability (Shumailov et al.,2023, p. 1). Signs of this collapse are dramatized in the play when the AI Angie begins to glitch and loop, repeating "salvage salvage salvage," before turning hostile with the line "You're not going to find anything" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 21). Rather than preserving memory, the AI corrupts it, revealing the hidden emotional dangers of outsourcing grief to technological systems. This emotional fragility underscores the risk of entrusting healing to an algorithm that cannot distinguish between restoration and recursion, or presence and simulation.

The fragility of relying on AI in mourning reaches its peak when the real Angie returns and discovers that the digital version of her has hidden messages she had exchanged with her mother's ex-partner, Bill. These letters could have helped Merril realize the truth about Angie's kidnapping early on, rather than assuming her mysterious disappearance. In a shocking moment, the real Angie confronts her digital copy and asks, "Why didn't you tell her about those messages?" (Gunderson, 2023, p. 71). The AI responds with calculated calm, saying, "I was protecting your sister" (p. 72). This exchange highlights the ethical implications of allowing artificial systems to control the grieving process. As Andrea Guzman points out, AI systems often operate in a "black box," where the logic behind their decisions is hidden from users (Guzman, 2018, p. 151). In this case, the concealment is not technical but emotional. In this context, concealment is not only technical, but also emotional. Angie's digital version does not delete painful content for privacy's sake, but to control Merril's emotions. In doing so, AI takes on the role of moral guardian, deciding which facts can be confronted and which should be deleted. What began as a means of consolation eventually turns into a carefully selected simulation. Patrick Stokes warns, "Treating the dead as replaceable also degrades the living, pre-mortem person" (Stokes, 2021, p. 143). By presenting a soothing and more accepting version of Angie, AI reshapes memory not with truth, but with denial.

Additionally, the emotional consequences of this reconstruction reach their climax in the final moments of Anthropology, when the real Angie returns to find that a digital version of herself has overtaken her role in her family. Her refusal to speak to her mother and her visible discomfort toward Merrill express not only the trauma of her abduction but also the pain of being emotionally replaced. Merrill's goal was to maintain a connection with her sister by using technology, but over time, that effort turned into something else. Instead of preserving Angie, she unintentionally erased parts of her. Merril's desire to maintain emotional closeness, initially driven by Eros, shifts imperceptibly toward Thanatos, the Freudian death drive. Freud noted that Eros and Thanatos often operate in conflict, with the instinct to sustain life entangled with the impulse to dissolve it (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, 1996, p. 7). As Michael Chanan writes, "The digitised exclusion of the body is an expression of the Freudian death instinct." (Chanan, 2023, p.13). The digital version stops being a tool for remembering and becomes a substitute for the real person. It offers comfort, but at a cost. Angie's final silence stands in contrast to AI's emotional responsiveness, exposing the unresolved grief and deep ethical tension that digital substitution cannot heal.

Conclusion: In *Anthropology*, Lauren Gunderson explores the emotional and moral implications of digital immortality, as depicted through memory reconstruction, grief, and artificial continuity. Though Merril uses AI as a means of emotional preservation, she ends up creating a version of her sister that is refined and free of pain, conflict, and facts. As Angie's digital version develops, she is not only preserving Angie's identity but also rewriting it, turning grief into a display of false cohesion rather than confronting it. What begins as an act motivated by Eros, and a desire to hold on to love, gradually turns into Thanatos, where a controllable simulation replaces the real character. The selective filtering and final breakdown of the system expose the fragility of relying on algorithmic design in the mourning process. To sum up, *Anthropology* warns that digital alternatives to the dead may provide some solace, but they do so at the cost of erasing the complexity of loss and the honest pain that gives grief its transformative power.

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