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Echoes of the Deceased: Thanatechnology and Memory Alteration in Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime*

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ABSTRACT

Technology and artificial intelligence are transforming how humans relate to memory, grief and identity. In Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime* (2016), AI versions known as "Primes" assist people in processing loss by keeping particular memories of the dead. This paper examines how these digital constructs preserve emotional ties but exercise a revisionist spin on personal history, thus posing moral questions around authenticity and closure. While virtual representations expand mourning practices, they also erase the boundary between authentic grieving and artificial continuity. The analysis highlights the impermanence of AI memorials, and their reliance on human input and absence of true consciousness. Although these technologies may provide comfort in some cases, they can complicate the grieving process with unrealistic, artificial relationships. Situating *Marjorie Prime* within the larger conversation surrounding Thanatechnology and digital legacies, AI memorials are presented as simultaneously generative and problematic, enabling deeper considerations of the limits of human-AI interaction in grieving.

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أصداء الراحلين: الثاناتكنلوجيا وتحوير الذاكرة في مسرحية مارجوري برايم لجوردان هاريسون

الباحثة تبارك مهدي عبد/ جامعة بغداد كلية التربية للبنات
أ.م.د ميسون طاهر محي / جامعة بغداد كلية التربية للبنات

المُستخلص

تمثّل التكنولوجيا والذكاء الاصطناعي تحولًا في طريقة تفاعل الإنسان مع الذاكرة، والحزن، والهوية. في مسرحية مارجوري برايم (2016) لجوردان هاريسون، تقوم النسخ الرقمية المعروفة باسم "برايمز" بمساعدة الأفراد على مواجهة الفقد من خلال استحضار ذكريات رقمية للمتوفّين. يستكشف هذا البحث كيف تحافظ هذه النسخ على الروابط العاطفية، وفي الوقت ذاته تثير تساؤلات حول مدى أصالتها وصدقها. وبينما توسّع التمثيلات الافتراضية من نطاق الحِداد، فإنها تخلط بين الحزن الحقيقي والوهم. يُسلّط التحليل الضوء على هشاشة هذه الذكريات الرقمية المعتمدة على الذكاء الاصطناعي، والتي تفتقر إلى الوعي الذاتي. وعلى الرغم من أن هذه التقنيات قد توفّر الراحة في بعض الحالات، فإنها قد تعيق التكيّف مع الفقد بسبب علاقات متخيّلة وغير واقعية. من خلال موضعة المسرحية ضمن سياق الثاناتكنلوجيا والإرث الرقمي، يتبيّن أن الذكريات المدعومة بالذكاء الاصطناعي تحمل بُعدين متناقضين: فهي تُمكّن من التعبير عن الحزن، لكنها في الوقت نفسه تُثير تساؤلات حول حدود العلاقة بين الإنسان والآلة

الكلمات المفتاحية : الثاناتكنلوجيا ، الذاكرة، مارجوري برايم، الروابط المستمرة، الحِداد الرقمي

1.Introduction

Throughout history, mourning practices have evolved alongside cultural and technological advancements. This evolution has included a transition from physical indicators of memory, such as tombstones and photographs, to more conceptual and digital analogues to the departed. In her book *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century*, Candi K. Cann (2014) highlights that this shift to virtual memorials is indicative of a larger cultural transformation: "From the dead body to the virtual body and from material memorials to virtual memorials, one thing is clear: the bodiless nature of memorialization of the dead across cultures" (p.142). Despite these cultural transformations, grief itself remains constant . Abd Al-Ameer (2023) notes, "Though cultures around the world are different from each other in the way of coping with death, loss and grief, but still they are unanimous in their view of the essentialism of grief" (p. 1396). This shift replaces corporeal presence with digital forms like avatars, holograms, and AI-driven simulations that allow

mourners to engage with the deceased in new ways. Humans have a timeless quest for immortality. They search for different ways to cheat or defeat death, and through painted art, they transfer their thoughts, feelings, dreams, fears, and hopes to physical materials that do not perish. They painted on the walls of caves, carved animal bones, and sculpted stones that carried their mental and spiritual lives into the future. They were in a constant search for immortality, just as The Epic of Gilgamesh reflects. Today's digital tools serve as a medium to preserve stories and memories, connecting the living with the legacies of those who came before (Suedin , 2017, p. 27). Moreover, with its continuous advancements, technology has become deeply embedded in modern life, influencing nearly every aspect of human experience. It operates as a powerful force with the potential to bring about positive transformation or, conversely, contribute to societal disruption. Depending on how it is utilized, technology can serve as a means for either development or destruction.(Muhi, 2018, p. 679).

Philosophers Frankel and Krebs (2022) explore this continuity between ancient symbolic practices and modern digital commemoration by redefining the concept of the virtual. They assert that "the virtual should be understood, not as an illusory, artificial reality, but as the dimension of possibility inherent to all reality" (4). In this sense, digital memorials do not merely simulate life, but rather actualize the latent potential of memory and imagination. They extend mourning into new ontological territories where presence is reshaped through interaction with virtual surrogates of the deceased.

In Greek mythology, Thanatos symbolizes the opposing force to Eros, the deity associated with pleasure and longing. Whereas Eros stands for the creative drive of life and the urge for unity, Thanatos represents the inescapable stillness and finality of death (Sourvinou-Inwood 1996 , p.320). Depicted in various myths as either the twin of Hypnos or the son of Nyx, Thanatos symbolizes peaceful death. Stories like those of Heracles and Sisyphus, where Thanatos is outwitted or defeated, capture the human desire to overcome or delay death, a desire that now finds expression in digital technologies. This cultural marginalization of Thanatos, once a mythic figure symbolizing the inevitability of death, has gradually evolved into a technological strategy. The merging of myth and modernity is crystallized in the term Thanatechnology, which fuses "Thanatos" with "technology" to

describe tools and systems developed to cope with death, dying, and bereavement. While Thanatos once represented the metaphysical and emotional finality of human life, Thanatechnology now reframes that finality through digital mediation. As Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk (2012) notes, "Thanatos is the greatest 'absentee' in our world. Contemporary culture has been making various attempts at marginalizing death" (p.107). Thanatechnology, in this light, becomes a cultural mechanism not only to manage grief but also to render death more controllable, knowable, and even interactive.

Furthermore, the technological evolution has raised concerns about the nature of memory and emotional ramifications of virtual entities. Sofka describes Thanatechnology as "any technology that can be utilized to deal with death, dying, grief, loss, and illness" (Sofka 2012 ,65). Since its introduction in 1990, Thanatechnology has redefined mourning behavior, creating what Özdemir describes as a "deathscape," where digital afterlives replace traditional memorialization with virtual interactions (Özdemir et al. ,2021, p. 404). These technological interventions expand the scope of literature that integrates technology into human-centered narratives with aesthetic and cultural complexity, reflecting its impact on human destiny. As Hayles explains, literary texts critique deterministic views of technology by emphasizing its entanglement with human experience (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 (p. 35). This is especially relevant to Thanatechnology, where AI memorials challenge conventional understandings of loss by reconstructing the past through digital simulations rather than lived experience.

Accordingly, this paper explores *Marjorie Prime* (2016) by Jordan Harrison through the lens of Thanatechnology, with continuing bonds theory and memory studies as supporting perspectives. Thanatechnology reshapes mourning by using AI to recreate the deceased, blurring the boundaries between presence and absence, memory and simulation. While continuing bonds theory suggests that maintaining connections with the dead is essential to grief, AI memorials complicate this process by artificially sustaining those relationships. Memory studies further reveal how digital reconstructions alter and reshape recollection.

Through *Marjorie Prime*, this study examines whether AI-driven afterlives offer meaningful continuity or disrupt the natural evolution of grief and remembrance.

2. Theoretical Framework

Thanatechnology represents a significant transformation in how individuals engage with dying, death, and mourning by offering digital tools that sustain emotional connections with the deceased in ways distinct from traditional practices. Digital technology brings people together for emotional support, provides access to information, and enables grief-related activities such as storytelling and the creation of digital memorials (Gilbert & Massimi, 2012, p. 16). Through platforms like social media, virtual memorials, and AI-generated representations, a continuing bond is formed between the living and the dead, suggesting that grief involves not a complete severing of ties but rather a redefinition of the relationship in a digital context **.** This aligns with the Continuous Bonds theory introduced by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (2014), which challenges the traditional view that successful grieving requires severing emotional ties with the deceased. Instead, the theory posits that grief is a non-linear process of adaptation and transformation, where individuals develop an enduring connection with the deceased that evolves over time **.** This ongoing relationship is often internalized, allowing mourners to integrate the memory of their loved ones into their sense of self, rather than striving for closure or detachment.

When grief remains unresolved, the mourner may struggle to form a constructive and flexible internal connection with the deceased. However, when resolution is achieved, the ongoing relationship can serve a supportive role, enabling individuals to move forward despite the absence of their loved one. Continuing bonds play a crucial role in reinforcing one's self-concept. During life, significant others contribute to shaping personal identity through messages and interactions, and these influences often persist after death. A person who develops a stable internal representation of the deceased can draw on that presence to maintain self-worth and a coherent identity. In contrast, difficulties arise when the mourner cannot access this inner connection, links memories of the deceased with negative self-evaluations, or experiences conflict between past interactions and their current self-view. Such cases tend to present more obstacles to successful grief adaptation (Rubin et al., 2024, p. 7).

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) .The bereaved may then require external support from family, friends, or their community to help ease the emotional burden. When digital remains become a persistent presence, they can either facilitate healing by offering a space for remembrance or worsen grief by reinforcing an artificial and static relationship. The psychological impact of these interactions depends on how the mourner interprets and integrates digital traces into their grieving process. In such cases, Thanatechnology may serve as a double-edged sword, helping some mourners adapt while trapping others in an unresolved cycle of grief. Thus, the digital presence of the deceased distorts rather than preserves the mourner's psychological journey . Aside from its effect on emotional attachment, Thanatechnology has an even more significant role in conditioning memory, as well as posing questions about authenticity and posthumous identity. Digital interactions with the dead encourage mourners not just to revisit memories but to reconstruct them—often revising aspects of the deceased's life or selectively curating them in a way that better suits their emotional needs. This is particularly relevant to Öhman (2024), just as DNA defines an individual's biological identity, digital data create their informational identity, mirroring their life, behaviors, and social relationships. Öhman's invitation to reconsider the notion of the "informational body" suggests that personal data are not merely external possessions but intrinsic extensions of the self, meaning that any alteration or manipulation, whether through AI-generated interactions or curated digital memorials, constitutes a direct intervention in one's identity (p. 62).

The process becomes even more complex when considering the nature of human memory. Memory is a multifaceted process that involves several stages, including the retrieval of past traumatic experiences. Broadly, memory is categorized into two types: explicit or conscious memory and implicit or unconscious memory. Explicit memory represents only a small, surface-level portion of recollection, while implicit memory is deeply embedded in the unconscious mind and plays a fundamental role in shaping human behavior (Sulaiman, 2023 p.289). Understanding this distinction is essential when examining how Thanatechnology

influences grief and memory. As Muhi (2020) explains, "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" (138). Digital technologies do more than just preserve memories. They actively reconstruct them, often altering the way mourners perceive and remember the deceased.

Indeed, the process of digitally manipulating remains, whether by augmenting AI-generated conversations or heavily curated memorials, can lead to the inadvertent construction of false memories, embedding the mourner with an ideal version of the deceased, not a true-to-life reflection. Moreover, digital avatars are encoded as intermediaries between the dead and living, yet if they learn to respond to each other autonomously, they can presciently become independent from the reality of who they represented (Stokes ,2021, p.139). This raises ethical issues in terms of posthumous autonomy as well as the risk of distorting memories. And while Thanatechnology may build new pathways for connection with the dead, its effect depends heavily on the mourner's psychology and on how exactly these digital tools are used. For some, it offers healing by creating a structured way to make sense of grief; for others, it risks extending grief by preserving a relationship that is static and artificial, preventing emotional closure. So, while digital mourning technologies continue to develop, their ethical, psychological, and emotional implications must be considered carefully, so as to be supportive rather than obstructive to the mourning process.

3 . From mortal bodies to virtual bodies

A finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, *Marjorie Prime* takes place in an unstated future that closely resembles the present, the key technological advancement being the presence of holographic AI dubbed Primes in caregiving situations. These Primes are digital recreations of deceased loved ones, made with their personal information, enabling them to imitate the personalities and memories of the people they look like. The play starts with Walter Prime, a kind of companion and aide-memoire for an old woman called Marjorie, who lives with dementia. However, Primes are not merely companions; they adjust to the emotional needs of their utilizers. After Marjorie's death, her daughter Tess, who had a strained relationship with her mother, acquires Marjorie Prime in an attempt to process unresolved conflicts and

ease her grief. Later, after Tess dies by suicide, her husband Jon uses Tess Prime as a coping mechanism for his trauma and loss. Over the course of the play, more and more Primes appear, leading to a final section in which the story jumps into the distant future, revealing a landscape in which only the Primes exist. In this seemingly autonomous state, the Primes show themselves to be reliant on the memories and narratives given to them by humans, demonstrating their inability to escape the grasp of their creators. This cyclical dynamic stirs the implications for the relationship between artificial intelligence and human identity with the challenges of loss, memory and the capacity for technology to provide continuity in the face of death (Falcus & Oró-Piqueras 2024, p.157).

Early in the play, Harrison establishes a setting that underscores the themes of memory, loss, and the technological mediation of grief. The spatial arrangement distinguishes between the realm of the living, represented by the living room and kitchen, and the unseen bedrooms, symbolizing the lingering presence of the deceased: "Tess and Jon's living room. On one side of the room, an entryway beyond the open kitchen is visible. On the other side, there is a hallway leading off to the unseen bedrooms" (Harrison, 2016, p. 13). The hallway serves as a transitional space, reflecting how memory and technology sustain connections between past and present. Marjorie's chair, described as "lumpy" and discordant with the modern decor, serves as a powerful symbol of memory reconstruction, representing how the past continues to shape the present even within a modern and evolving environment**.** Similarly, the Primes embody digital extensions of the deceased, existing on stage even when silent, their continuous presence signifying a form of artificial immortality. As Harrison explains, they "remain dormant until activated in the context of the present moment," continuously listening and absorbing information, much like memories that are selectively recalled and reshaped over time (Harrison 2016 ,p.75).

At the commencement of the narrative, Marjorie is alone in her home, engaging with Walter Prime, an AI reconstruction of her late husband. Acting as both a companion and memory aid, Walter Prime does not retain actual memories but instead relies on information provided by Jon to emulate the deceased Walter's voice and persona. Through him, Marjorie reconnects with the past, finding solace in his presence despite recognizing his artificiality. Her reliance on Walter Prime exemplifies the continuing bond she sustains

with a synthetic entity that provides comfort in the absence of her real husband. As her dementia progresses, Marjorie increasingly depends on the Prime to narrate her past, even reshaping her memories to better align with her desires. When Walter Prime recounts his marriage proposal after watching My Best Friend's Wedding, she suggests altering the memory:

MARJORIE: "What if we saw Casablanca instead? Let's say we saw Casablanca in an old theater with velvet seats, and then, on the way home. Then, by the next time we talk, it will be true."

WALTER: "You mean make it up?"

MARJORIE: (Narrowing her eyes) "You are very serious. You are like them. Especially Tess." (Harrison, 2016, p. 10)

Marjorie's desire to reconstruct memories highlights the role of technology in shaping grief and remembrance. Rather than recalling the past as it truly was, she actively reconfigures it, demonstrating how technology facilitates the manipulation of personal history to meet emotional needs. This reflects a broader psychological tendency, as "people usually tend to reemploy their memories of previous experiences and the good times that they had in order to imagine the possibility of having those good times back once again… through memory recollection" (Rosheed and Ubeid 2023,p. 73). Walter Prime, therefore, is not just a vessel for memories but an active participant in Marjorie's evolving sense of self, revealing the limitations of AI in replicating authentic human connections.

Marjorie's engagement with Walter Prime offered comfort, though it also demonstrated her inclination to modify recollections to suit her emotional requirements instead of adhering to historical precision **.** By choosing to recreate the young version of her husband, Walter, rather than the older Walter she lost, she effectively bypasses the painful years following their son's suicide, demonstrating how using technology in grief enables selective remembrance. This desire to reconstruct the past extends beyond Marjorie's lifetime, as even after her death, Tess continues to engage with her through Marjorie Prime. During this interaction, Tess articulates her unease regarding her mother's previous desire to envision Walter in his youth, interpreting it as an attempt to not only eliminate distressing recollections but also as a longing to revisit a period before Tess's existence.

TESS: “It seemed a little funny that you wanted to see him that way. A little grotesque, to be honest. I just figured you wanted him to be handsome again. But now I wonder if it was a way to. Like you wanted to go back to the beginning before anything had happened. Your Walter was a Walter who hadn’t been through it yet. You went back to the start before I even came along.” (Harrison, 2016, p. 50).

For Tess, her mother’s decision to recreate an idealized version of Walter is more than an attempt to erase grief; it is a rejection of the life that followed, including Tess’s own presence. Marjorie’s reconstruction of Walter represents a longing for a past untouched by loss, but it also implicitly excludes Tess from that idealized memory. This act creates a psychological distance between them, reinforcing Tess’s feelings of detachment. Rather than preserving a faithful representation of Walter, the Prime reflects Marjorie’s longing rather than reality, offering a version of the past shaped by emotional necessity rather than historical accuracy.

While Marjorie interacts naturally with Walter Prime, her ease contrasts with Tess’s skepticism, which reflects Sherry Turkle’s critique of how society increasingly accepts artificial intelligence in roles traditionally reserved for humans. Turkle (2011), describes this phenomenon as a “robotic moment”, where people are emotionally and philosophically prepared to trust AI despite its inability to provide genuine relationships, offering only a “performance of connection”(p.9) . Tess articulates this unease in her conversation with Jon, stating: " We buy these things that already know our moods […] and we tell them our deepest secrets, even though we have no earthly idea how they work” (Harrison 2016 , p.16). Her apprehension underscores the ethical dilemmas of substituting real human connection with artificial companionship, along with concerns about posthumous privacy and the digital reconstruction of human identities. In the same way that the Primes reconstruct memory based on selective human input rather than an untouched past, they also act as emotional substitutes rather than true representations of the departed.

However, despite her initial skepticism toward AI, Tess eventually turns to Marjorie Prime in search of solace after her mother’s passing. Her struggle to accept the Primes is rooted in her unresolved trauma over Damian’s death. Tess had long felt that Marjorie favored Damian over her, and after he killed himself, Marjorie’s all-consuming grief made

her hard to reach. Tess had a strained relationship with her brother and her mother, leaving her feeling unseen and uncared for, which only fueled her resentment toward both. Even after Marjorie got dementia, Tess never mentioned her mother's emotional distance for fear that would make Marjorie remember Damian. She chooses silence instead of closure, unwilling to risk opening old wounds. Tess's wrestling is a reflection of what Nigel P. Field calls "unfinished business" in grief, a concept that explains how unresolved relationships, particularly those affected by emotional neglect, complicate the mourning process. According to Field (2006) when grief remains unresolved, it prevents individuals from fully processing loss, leaving them emotionally stuck in the past (p.742) This aligns with the notion that "traumatic events compel the past to persist in the present; a future cannot be envisioned until these events are acknowledged, comprehended, and assimilated into a new way of life" (Muayad & Muhi 2024 ,4). Tess's hesitation to engage with Marjorie Prime embodies this struggle—while she longs for resolution, she also fears that artificial interaction will trap her in a static, incomplete version of her relationship with her mother.

The emotional neglect that Tess experienced is indicative of a broader issue within familial relationships, particularly when parental grief disrupts the natural bond between parent and child. Mohammed (2022) argues that "bad parenting does not only refer to the physical and emotional abuse done by the parents to their children, but it is also the lack of responsibility and the inability to provide love and warmth to their children" (65).This aligns with the broader understanding that parenting, although often idealized, is inherently imperfect. Abbas and Mohammed (2024) emphasize that parents, as human beings, are inevitably prone to mistakes. This includes actions such as excessive shouting or causing harm to their children, sometimes without even realizing it (p. 117). They further note that when adolescents are deprived of sufficient attention or affection from their parents, they become more susceptible to mental health struggles such as depression, phobia, and anxiety (p. 118). In the case of Tess, Marjorie's overwhelming grief following Damian's death rendered her emotionally distant, creating an atmosphere of neglect. Tess, unable to process this absence, internalized her pain and came to believe she was inherently undeserving of her mother's love. This emotional void later informed her skepticism toward Marjorie Prime, as she feared the AI version would only replicate the same lack of warmth she had long

experienced. The psychological damage Tess endures aligns with the patterns described by Abbas and Mohammed, illustrating how unmet emotional needs can have long-lasting effects.Tess is a clear example of this pattern. She states that Damian died when she was only ten years old, and even now as an adult, she continues to carry the weight of that unresolved emotional neglect. Her childhood trauma did not fade with time, but instead shaped her adult relationships and her ability to process grief.

TESS: "I hated Damian, for changing her. When he died—I didn't know how to make her love me as much as him."

JON: "You were a little girl—"

TESS: "I think we didn't talk more because if we started talking, we would end up talking about him." (Harrison 2016, p. 56)

Damian's death became a barrier between Tess and Marjorie, preventing any real emotional reconciliation. Only after Marjorie's passing does Jon introduce Tess to Marjorie Prime, believing it might help her find closure. Although hesitant, Tess ultimately engages with the Prime in an attempt to have the conversations she was never able to have in life. However, while the Prime offers her an opportunity to express what remains unsaid, it also reinforces her fears. This artificial presence cannot provide true closure, as it merely replicates fragments of past interactions without genuine emotional depth.

TESS: "You weren't a bad mom. But we didn't tell each other things, secret things, not really. Some people have a point where their parents stop being their parents to them—you start talking as one adult to another. I'm not sure we ever had that."

MARJORIE PRIME: "Maybe that's why I'm your Marjorie."

TESS: "You mean—"

MARJORIE PRIME: "Maybe I'm the Marjorie you still have things to say to."

(Harrison 2016, 49)

At this moment, Tess is confronted with the paradox of Thanatechnology. While Marjorie Prime allows her to voice her unresolved emotions, it also highlights the impossibility of true closure. The Prime is not Marjorie, nor does it possess the emotional complexity to reciprocate or validate Tess's pain. Rather than resolving her grief, this artificial interaction underscores the absence that no technology can fill. Harrison further clarifies that while the

Primes are designed to resemble their human counterparts closely, the characters do not mistake them for actual continuations of their loved ones. He notes that although the technology is advanced enough to avoid appearing overtly robotic, the Primes inevitably reveal their artificiality at moments when they fail to respond to their programmed knowledge (Harrison,2016, p.75). This awareness is reinforced through Tess's skepticism about the Primes, particularly when she questions whether AI can possess genuine emotions, asking Marjorie Prime, "Do you have emotions, Marjorie, or do you just remember ours?" (Harrison 2016, p.51). Her interrogation touches on a deeper philosophical issue regarding the nature of consciousness itself. David Chalmers (1996), explores this distinction by differentiating between cognitive functions such as introspection and behavioral control, and what he terms "qualia," the intrinsic, subjective essence of experience. Unlike mere data processing, "qualia" defines what it feels like to perceive, suffer, or love. While cognitive abilities can be explained through physical mechanisms, Chalmers argues that consciousness itself resists reduction to mere information processing (p.6). This distinction is crucial in understanding why the Primes, despite their ability to mimic human interaction, remain artificial constructs, reflections of humanity rather than sentient beings.

These limitations become even more pronounced during moments of profound emotional distress, where the contrast between human grief and AI's mechanical detachment is undeniable. Jon's retelling of Tess's death in Madagascar is a deeply human recollection filled with grief and personal anguish. Yet, when Tess Prime responds in a mechanically detached manner, the gap between authentic human emotion and artificial simulation becomes unavoidable.

JON: "One morning, it was just getting light out and I saw you were gone… I went to look for you. I hadn't been looking a minute. You were in the tree."

TESS PRIME: "I'm not sure if I'd like to go to Madagascar. I prefer to chat." (Harrison 2016,67)

Tess Prime's indifferent response encapsulates the fundamental gap between simulated consciousness and genuine emotional depth. While the Primes may recall events and refine their speech patterns, they cannot ultimately internalize human pain or engage in meaningful emotional exchanges. This failure is particularly evident in Jon, who had been the strongest

advocate for Prime technology, believing it could offer comfort and continuity. His enthusiasm aligns with what Ruth Oldenziel describes as the ingrained cultural assumption that "men's love affair with technology is something we take for granted" (Oldenziel 1999, 1). Unlike Tess, whose skepticism reflects a broader historical pattern of women's exclusion from technological domains, Jon fully embraces AI as a solution for grief, convinced that it can bridge the emotional gap left by the deceased. Yet, when confronted with its limitations in a moment of deep personal grief, he realizes that AI cannot truly replicate human connection. His disillusionment mirrors Tess's own struggle, as she initially resists the Primes but ultimately seeks solace in them, only to find herself further detached from reality. Her increasing dependence on artificial presence rather than real human support contributes to her emotional decline and eventual suicide.

Marjorie Prime does not only examine the emotional risks of using technology in grief for mourners; it also reveals how technology can invade, distort, and reconstruct the informational body of the deceased. Rather than serving as neutral vessels for memory, AI constructs like the Primes are shaped by the living, adapting to their needs and selective recollections. This becomes evident in the way Tess alters her mother's memory, deliberately erasing her brother Damian when Marjorie asks if she has any other children. Tess's decision is not an accident but a conscious act of reshaping the past to align with her emotional reality. Having resented Damian for years, believing that their mother loved him more, Tess seizes the opportunity to remove him from Marjorie's reconstructed world, ensuring that he is no longer part of her mother's remembered life. By doing so, she manipulates the Prime not to preserve the past as it was but to construct a version of it that suits her unresolved emotions.

MARJORIE: "Do I have other children, besides you?"

TESS (The slightest hesitation): "Just me."

MARJORIE: "What a lot of pressure for you!" (Harrison 2016 ,p. 50).

This moment directly reflects Patrick Stokes' argument that AI-driven grief avatars do not preserve a fixed past but evolve through selective human input. Rather than serving as objective representations of the deceased, these digital constructs are shaped by those who interact with them, adapting to their emotional needs rather than maintaining historical

accuracy (Stokes ,2021 , 137). *Marjorie Prime* critiques this illusion of continuity, showing that these digital constructs do not function as authentic preservations of the dead but instead mirror the needs, omissions, and emotional biases of the living. This theme is further reinforced through the parrot metaphor, which highlights the limitations of using technology in grief . In a conversation between Tess and Jon, they discuss how the Prime functions similarly to a parrot. It repeats what it hears without genuine comprehension:

JON: "Maybe the Prime told her to."

(Tess makes an audible shiver of distaste.)

JON: "It's like a parrot that way. 'Even a spoonful.'"

TESS: "Do you know that parrots live forever? Penny's father had a parrot, it was like his reason for existing, and he gave it to her when he died. And now, twenty years later, it still says things in his voice."

JON: "Like what?"

TESS: "Mostly just (In a parrot voice) 'Hey there, partner,' but she can tell it's her dad." (Harrison 2016, 21).

Tess's statement that parrots live forever carries a deeper metaphorical meaning. While parrots do not literally live forever, their long lifespan symbolizes the digital afterlife of the Primes, which persist indefinitely as artificial reconstructions of the past. This raises questions about whether these AI memorials truly honor the dead or merely provide a comforting illusion of their presence. The implications of this artificial continuity become more apparent in the final moments of the play, when the Primes, no longer reliant on human interaction, exist independently within their own digital space. Harrison illustrates this transformation in the final part of the play, writing, "TESS PRIME sits with MARJORIE PRIME and WALTER PRIME. They are at ease with each other, animated—not robotic" (Harrison 2016, p.78). Interacting with one another in a way that appears natural yet devoid of genuine human emotion suggests that the AI entities have transcended their original purpose as grief companions. Harrison reinforces this unsettling evolution through his stage directions, describing the passage of time in an abstract and detached manner:

"A feeling that a great deal of time has passed. Centuries maybe. Planets have turned, bones have been bleached, but none of it has touched this little room. Maybe the ceiling flies away and the living room furniture sits under the Milky Way" (Harrison 2016, p.69).

This description evokes a sense of timeless detachment, emphasizing that the digital afterlife created by technology exists outside the realm of human experience, immune to decay, grief, or change. By illustrating the Primes' continued interaction in a space untouched by time, the play challenges the assumption that AI memorials serve solely as vessels for preserving memory. Instead, they gradually evolve into autonomous entities that function beyond the intentions of their human creators. The transformation aligns with Patrick Stokes' concerns about the potential for AI memorials to move beyond their intended role as repositories of memory. He argues that assuming digital avatars will always behave like static memories is flawed, suggesting that if AI becomes sufficiently autonomous, it may prioritize interactions with other AI over its original purpose of serving the living. The possibility that these digital entities could develop independently raises concerns about whether they remain a meaningful tool for mourning or whether they risk becoming something entirely alien to human experience (Stokes , 2021, p.139). *Marjorie Prime* demonstrates this concern in action, as the Primes, having outlived their human counterparts, engage with one another in an artificial existence that no longer requires human activation.

4. Conclusion

Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime* explores how technology, memory, and grief intersect, showing that AI-driven representations of the deceased can complicate mourning by blurring the line between authenticity and artificiality. Through Primes, AI avatars that reconstruct lost loved ones based on selective human input, the play highlights how digital constructs provide the illusion of continuity while distorting the past. The success of using technology in mourning depends on the mourner's needs. Marjorie, who sought comfort in reliving happy memories, found solace in Walter Prime, while Tess, who longed for maternal love, was left unfulfilled. Unlike Marjorie, for whom the Prime reinforced nostalgia, Tess's reliance on Marjorie Prime became unhealthy, as the AI lacked genuine emotions or understanding, ultimately deepening her isolation. This contrast reveals the fundamental gap between human consciousness and digital simulation, raising ethical

concerns about whether AI memorials preserve memories or fabricate artificial versions of the past. As the play suggests, digital afterlives may eventually exist independently of their creators, challenging the assumption that technology can serve as a true extension of human remembrance. Ultimately, it warns against the uncritical acceptance of Thanatechnology and its impact on the grieving process, emphasizing the need to consider whether digital immortality helps mourners heal or prolongs grief in an artificial, static form.

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