

Charting the Yeast Radio Virus: Exploring the Potential of Critical Virology

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Charting the Yeast Radio Virus: Exploring the Potential of Critical Virology

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This interpretive account lays the methodological foundation for a specific form of personal narrative inquiry: viral criticism. Specifically, the author considers how a popular gay-themed podcaster’s use of persona moves through cyberspace and “infects” audiences. The essay also chronicles how personal narrative, as an interpretive act, affects/infects an object of study. 5

Keywords: Gay; Persona; Personal Narrative; Podcasting; Viral Criticism 10

Being there¹: December 1, 2004. Today, my friend introduces me to a new form of digital communication called podcasting. Podcast is a term used to describe both amateur and professional audio performances disseminated by way of digital technology. 15

“It’s kinda’ like an audio blog,” my friend explains.

“I can’t wait to see what ‘the gays’ do with this technology,” I joke.

Hours later, I surf through various gay and lesbian podcast directories and stumble across the name “Madge Weinstein.” Madge is a self-described “56-year-old, bloated Jewish lesbian” who complains of chronic yeast infections. Chuckling as I read Weinstein’s description, I click on a hypertext link that takes me to her Web site, YeastRadio.com. The site resembles a blog, or online journal. Podcast episodes are embedded in individual, date-organized blog entries. 20

A picture of a man in drag sits at the top of the Web page. A short, curly, and copper wig sits on his head and hangs over a pair of oversized glasses. Bright pink 25

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lipstick spans the course of a mouth open in mid-scream. Pictures of the drag queen appear in a few places on the *Yeast Radio* Web site; the repetition of “her” image provides my first indication that the performer who portrays Madge Weinstein is a man.

Curious to hear Madge’s voice, I randomly select a podcast episode and click on the media file’s corresponding play button. Seconds later, I hear the strain of a husky, masculine voice trying to sound feminine. The performer mimics the cadence of a stereotypical Jewish woman one might find playing gin rummy on the warm, sandy beaches of Miami. Madge begins her performance with a shriek:

Oy! This day could not be worse. Uh! I just flew up from Boca Raton. I busted my ass getting these old ladies to go to the goddamn polls and vote. And what good did it do me? We got this asshole again. Terrible! You know, I really thought Kerry was going to win; I really did. And now the Supreme Court is fucked. No more partial birth abortions for me. (Bluestein, “Listen”) 35

I laugh and clap my hands while listening to Madge’s campy vocal performance and brash speech. When the episode ends, I e-mail a number of my friends a link to *Yeast Radio*’s Web site along with a message that reads, “You HAVE to listen to this show!” 40

Many of Madge’s podcasts are what digital media scholars would describe as viral content. The term viral metaphorically references compelling online performances that warrant a high pass-along rate among computer users (Miller 33). Like passing a viral infection by way of a handshake, people share viral audio and videos files in e-mail forwards, blog entries, and on community broadcasting Web sites, like YouTube and Google Video. Viral suggests that digital content has been disseminated to a global audience of thousands of individuals (Dedman and Paul 12). 50

Yeast Radio draws in roughly 4,500 listeners per episode (Acohidio). Fans from all over the world listen and respond to Madge Weinstein, a lesbian persona who claims to perform “sociological studies of gay male culture.” In a time when gay people often lack adequate representation in the mass media (Battles and Hilton-Morrow; Dow; Gross; Keller; Shugart 84; Walters), *Yeast Radio* provides a “view into gay life that [remains] largely absent from television shows, movies, popular magazines, and newspapers” (Fox, “Sober” 1260). I find Madge’s gay bathhouse stories and acerbic, gay-positive political rants to be an earnest and refreshing representation of gay people and themes. Conventional understandings of persona performance unfortunately inhibit my ability to explain the resonant sincerity I find in Madge Weinstein’s podcast. These difficulties emerge almost every time I tell a friend about *Yeast Radio*. 60

After describing the podcast to a group of friends, one of my pals asked, “Madge is a guy pretending to be a woman?”

“Exactly,” I answer. 65

“So Madge is just a character and her stories aren’t real?”

“But the stories are real. Madge talks about current events and discusses issues relevant to the gay community. Sometimes she has guests on her show, and the conversations they have are real.”

“But Madge isn’t real.” 70

Responding to my friend’s “Madge isn’t real” statement necessitates a nuanced analysis of persona performance, coupled by a personal account of why Madge is “real” to several *Yeast Radio* fans, myself included. In this interpretive account, I employ metaphorical understanding of persona performance to chronicle and interpret how *Yeast Radio* affects a specific gay listener.² I also rely on various chains of hypertextual audience response to triangulate my findings. 75

Metaphorical Understandings of Persona

Being there: May 15, 2005. While talking to a fellow podcaster, I learn that “Madge Weinstein” is a 37-year-old, gay, Chicago-based performance artist named Richard Bluestein. In the past fifteen days, I have listened to twelve hour-long episodes of *Yeast Radio* and talked to a number of friends about Bluestein’s infectious performances. On some shows, Weinstein waxes pessimistic about George W. Bush-era politics; in others, “she” kvetches about aging and managing an all-girl music band. 80

Bluestein’s fidelity to the Madge Weinstein persona is impressively consistent. Whenever Weinstein’s guests use male pronouns to describe the podcaster or accidentally refer to Madge as “Richard,” Weinstein quickly asks, “Who’s he? Who is this Richard everyone keeps mentioning?” Weinstein’s interlocutors, more often than not, follow the podcaster’s lead, apologize for their mistake, and talk to Madge about *her* day. The persona performance exemplifies “double-negativity” (Schechner) insofar as Richard Bluestein is not Madge Weinstein, but he is not-not his alter ego. 85 90

Being here: Understanding Bluestein’s strategic performance of Madge Weinstein requires a brief theoretical consideration of persona. Persona’s most basic and literal definition is “sounding through,” whether the performance of identity takes place onstage or is an everyday “role to be projected to the outside world” (Steinman 28–29). This definition of persona acknowledges how performance metaphors apply to everyday life situations, where people perform roles in contexts that are not theater but not-not theater (Goffman). 95

Several metaphors have been used to interpret personae. Some conceptualize a persona as a mask that hides a performer’s “real” identity (Jung; Meier). This interpretation is consistent with ancient Greek performance rituals in which actors were required to speak or “sound through” masks they wore onstage. While Bluestein’s vocal and visual performances of Madge mask Richard Bluestein’s typical manner of speech and dress, the performer, as I argue throughout this essay, uses Weinstein as a conduit personality to share autobiographical narratives that, without Madge, might remain unspoken. Because the mask metaphor situates Richard Bluestein as authentic and Madge Weinstein as little more than a masquerade that conceals truth, the analogue fails to accurately capture the complex dynamics of Bluestein’s *Yeast Radio* performances. 100 105

Postmodern insights challenge the notion of authentic, unitary subjectivities, in favor of “permeability, plurality, and decentering of selves” (Hamera 42). In the world of performance art, personae may function as a rhetorical and performative 110

strategy by which “the performer’s ‘real’ identity and his or her performance persona may be simultaneously present, or may ‘exchange places’ in the performance situation” (Hamera 39). Persona performers have been said to “curdle” (Lugones) artificial and arbitrary distinctions between autobiography and character monologue (Gingrich-Philbrook, “Autobiographical Performance” 64). The curdle metaphor describes a hybrid state, where an autobiographical performer and his or her performance personae can no longer be separated; like egg and oil used to form mayonnaise (Lugones), once mixed, the elements “curdle and transform (with/in) one another” (Gingrich-Philbrook, “Autobiographical Performance” 64).

Performance scholar Craig Gingrich-Philbrook suggests that curdling specifies three primary and hybrid ways of interpreting persona performance. First, persona performers curdle autobiography and character. “When we *both* distinguish autobiographical from character-work *and* insist upon the dramatic, discursive construction of the self,” Gingrich-Philbrook argues, “we overlook their interdependent stake in narration” (“Autobiographical Performance” 65). Curdling, as a structural model, highlights the concomitant relationship between autobiography and persona performance. Second, persona performances curdle epistemic and aesthetic qualities of rhetoric, insofar as performance aesthetics (e.g., costuming and characterization) help package, frame, and generate knowledge. Third, persona performances curdle performer and audience. Curdling performer and audience provides a “realization that autobiography calls upon both autobiographer and audience to internalize a view of their relationship with each other as the object of reflection” (Gingrich-Philbrook, “Autobiographical Performance” 73).

Curdling suggests a relatively uniform process. Regardless of time and temperament, mix two ingredients and one expects the same results. The curdle metaphor stops short of providing specific insights as to how individual audience members and performers forge inimitable connections and promote a shared sense of fidelity. How, for example, have I developed a unique relationship with Richard Bluestein/Madge Weinstein? What role does my individual history play in understanding and interpreting Bluestein’s persona performances? A metaphorical process of coagulation ignores dynamic elements that help structure perceived relationships with and understandings of the podcaster. Performance criticism would be enriched by a metaphor that more effectively describes how specific audience members respond to persona performances. In other words, how might Bluestein’s viral performances affect or “infect” individual listeners?

The term infect connotes a viral conceptualization of persona performance. Because viruses mutate and may infect different people in different ways, viral metaphors provide a keener understanding of Bluestein’s individuated relationships with his listeners. The viral metaphor is also a tip of the hat to how his performances hypertextually move between and among computer users (i.e., viral content passed along by his listeners). In this essay, I rely on viral terminology to communicate how I make sense of Bluestein’s personae.

My reliance on viral verbiage necessitates a basic understanding of how viruses function. Originally a Latin term, virus’s earliest definitions include toxin and poison.

Numerous significations of the term virus are found in contemporary lexicon. Biological viruses are genetic materials that infect host cells of organisms, take control of infected cells, and reproduce viral material. Many reproduced viruses mutate, or alter as they replicate.

Viral metaphors regularly emerge in communication about gay people. Gay men are frequently depicted as viruses that infect a host cell (or organization), rework its replication system (change social conventions and laws), and then kill the host (devastate the group) (Brouwer 420). Using viral metaphors to examine gay male performance potentially perpetuates myths that causally link gay men to viral outbreak and destruction. Given my study of viral digital performance, ignoring viral tropes seems impractical, if not impossible. I, therefore, re-appropriate and re-deploy viral metaphors to examine gay persona performance, its marginalization, and its possibilities.

Specifically, I contend that the *Yeast Radio* virus (Bluestein's use of the Madge persona) infects numerous host cells (individual listeners) and disrupts systems of performative replication (produces discourses that challenge normative organizations of Western culture). The trope of the virus specifies distinctive audience and performer amalgamations. In other words, viral metaphors are employed to describe a few of the many specific ways that Bluestein's podcast "infects" individual audience members.

Performing a "Critical Virology"

Focusing on individual infections requires a research method that privileges subjectivity and individual experience. I rely on personal narrative to document and interpret my reactions to Richard Bluestein's persona(l narrative) performances. I parenthetically reference "persona(l narrative)" to highlight how all personal narrative functions as persona performance. The unusual typography visually depicts a viral encounter, where personal narratives are infected by and inextricably bound to the character(s) played and portrayed in the performance of personal tales. In this essay, for example, I enact the persona of a performance studies scholar by utilizing a particular type of personal story that is both constrained and enabled by my academic persona. Persona(l narrative) performance criticism chronicles performative enactments of identity and documents how the "social is articulated, structured, and struggled over" (Langellier 128).

I also utilize personal narrative because master/dominant narratives tend to omit and distort gay people and queer themes (Corey). Personal narrative performances construct a "useful gay mythology," from which gay people may build collective histories and continue dialogues about gay identity (Dillard 79). In this sense, personal narrative performs a significant epistemic function for gay people.

Gingrich-Philbrook claims that personal tales are situated between "epistemic and aesthetic poles" (Gingrich-Philbrook, "Autoethnography's Family Values" 312). I agree with his sentiment but challenge polarized conceptualizations of knowledge and art. Borrowing from Gingrich-Philbrook's earlier work, I suggest that personal

narrative does not fall between epistemic and aesthetic poles. Personal stories are sites where the epistemic and aesthetic uniquely and provocatively infect one another. I hope to contribute to personal narrative theory by describing and utilizing a specific mode of personal narrative inquiry inspired by viral tropes. 200

I am not the first performance studies scholar to develop a connection between personal narrative research and viral metaphors. A variant of viral infection as the metaphor relates to performance methodology has recently been explored in *Text and Performance Quarterly*. Fenske (“Aesthetic”) writes about “viral criticism,” or how a certain form of inquiry infects researchers (e.g., Ragan Fox), research objects (e.g., Richard Bluestein/Madge Weinstein), and research readers (e.g., you). Fenske contends that, just as performers, performances, and audience members infect one another, so too does the act of criticism (“Movement”). Viral criticism, or what I also call persona(l narrative) performance criticism and critical virology, provides a fitting interpretive lens through which to study Richard Bluestein’s podcast, because personal narrative accounts of how the *Yeast Radio* virus infected me necessarily alter readings of (or *contaminate*) the virus. Fenske suggests, “Since the critical encounter brings part of itself (in)to the event that it also transforms and is transformed by, the reproductive performance powerfully changes (rather than merely resists) that which it encounters” (“Movement” 153). Viral criticism documents how a specific form of narrative inquiry constrains and enables interpretation. 205 210 215

This essay also illuminates how a specific style of online persona performance uniquely affects a few of Bluestein’s other audience members.³ I compare my reactions to the *Yeast Radio* podcast to online feedback that has been posted to digital message forums by some of Bluestein’s other listeners. Digital responses to online persona performances provide a unique opportunity to triangulate my findings. 220

By comparing my reactions to online feedback, I chart multiple strains of the *Yeast Radio* virus and partially map their unique movement. Viral criticism does not gauge transformation solely in the intent of the performer or reception of the text, but considers how a viral performance has agency—an unpredictable movement that often ignores intention and expectation. Viruses infect, replicate, and expand without regard for the “satisfactions of completion or enclosure” (Keep 173). Similarly, Bluestein’s artistic product defies “predetermined appropriate interpretation” and opens up a “dialogic space of engagement” (Fenske, “Aesthetic” 16). I trace viral movement as it makes its way through hypertextual “viral pathways,” which take the form of audience comments posted to podcast message forums. The best a critical “virologist” can do is map individual processes of replication, pinpointing possible points of discursive departure and mutation, all the while emphasizing the partiality of any mapped viral code, or communication-based infection. 225 230 235

Charting the *Yeast Radio* Virus

Being here: Unlike instances of “sock puppeting,” in which online performers deliberately hide their identities and aim to deceive audiences (Stone and Richtel 8), Bluestein utilizes various performance tactics to highlight how Madge is

a self-consciously constructed persona. The following section reviews a few of the ways that he reveals the “stakes of [Madge’s] construction” and does not “hide the process in the product” (Fenske, “Aesthetic” 15). The world Bluestein constructs functions as a “screenic order,” where “two separate tracks of print and image, body and spectacle have merged, recontextualizing body and performance within the screen” (Case 235). 240

I now turn my attention to two thought-provoking occurrences that involve Bluestein and Weinstein and exemplify the aforementioned merger. These events include a controversy dubbed “Madge-gate” and the death of Bluestein’s lover. Various audience reactions to the “Madge-gate” debate are used to highlight distinct viral strains, suggesting that *Yeast Radio* infections are relatively unique to each host (or listener). I conclude the analysis with a narrative account of Juan’s memorial service, an event that put me face-to-face with Richard Bluestein and allowed me to witness his shifting persona performances “in the flesh.” 245 250

Madge-Gate

Being there: June 28, 2005. iTunes, one of the world’s most popular digital media stores, began carrying podcasts today! iTunes acts as a podcast aggregator. The software employs RSS enclosure technology to automatically locate and download MP3 (audio) and MOV (visual) content for podcast subscribers. Aggregators generate abundant copies of a podcast, much like the process of viral replication reproduces numerous copies of its genome. 255

I open the iTunes application on my computer and quickly type the letters that comprise the name of my favorite gay podcaster: “M-A-D-G-E W-E-I-N-S-T-E-I-N.” After clicking on the search button, an album cover of Bluestein’s podcast appears on my screen. The words “Yeast Radio” hover over a colorful cartoon depiction of Madge. Because I associate iTunes with mainstream media, finding Madge’s name in the iTunes directory, in my mind, legitimates Bluestein’s work. I am not surprised to discover Bluestein’s podcast in the index. He associates with Adam Curry, a former MTV video jockey and one of the two men primarily credited with creating podcast technology. Curry has worked closely with Apple to ensure that most podcasts are listed in iTunes. Many gay and lesbian podcasts, unfortunately, are not included in the iTunes database. Exclusion from iTunes is significant, because absence from the directory inhibits viral replication by making it more difficult for some gay and lesbian podcasters to produce viral, or widely disseminated, content. 260 265 270

While searching the iTunes catalog for *Yeast Radio* and other gay-oriented podcasts, I notice that gay and lesbian shows included in the directory have been placed in the health category. No gay and lesbian grouping has been established to help consumers find lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) content. The absence of a gay and lesbian category further inhibits viral replication. I, like most digital media consumers, depend on themes and categories to find specific subject matter. I think to myself, “Why health? Why would anyone think gay and lesbian content is a health issue?” The suspect choice creates a discursive smokescreen that hides gay and lesbian programs. Categorizing gay and lesbian 275 280

content under the health theme also echoes days when “homosexuals” were subjected to a “psychiatrization of perverse pleasure” (Foucault 105) and expected to keep their sexual identities concealed.

After I spend some time making my way through the new iTunes podcasting database, I call Richard Bluestein to vent my frustrations. Bluestein and I became friends after I submitted my podcast’s Web address to an LGBTQ podcast directory he manages. I credit Bluestein with the sudden popularity of my podcast, *Fox and the City*. He, as Madge, regularly promotes my program on *Yeast Radio*. We also frequently talk on the phone and discuss politics and podcasting.

When I get Bluestein on the phone, he tells me that he is not surprised by Apple’s oversights and faulty categorization of gay content. He fears that iTunes will ruin the countercultural appeal of podcasting. “Look at the shows they have already featured on the main page of the podcasting directory!” he exclaims. “Most of them are repackaged content from television shows, like *Lost* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.” When I ask him if he has talked to Adam Curry about his concerns, he intimates that the self-described “PodFather” is not interested in the unique role gay and lesbian people have played in the development of podcasting. Given Bluestein’s close relationship with Curry, the news surprises me. Bluestein explains to me that his friendship with Curry has seen better days. “You never heard about ‘Madge-gate,’” Bluestein asks.

“No,” I reply.

“Adam used to think Madge was real. He thought that I, well, Madge was an actual transsexual. He and Dave Winer said some pretty horrible things about me when they found out that I was a guy. Go to the *Trade Secrets* archive and look for a podcast that was posted on January 8 of 2005.”

After I get off the phone with Richard, I make my way to the *Trade Secrets* Web site. *Trade Secrets* is a podcast produced by the other co-founder of podcasting, Dave Winer. After Curry and Winer figured out Weinstein was a persona performed by Richard Bluestein, the men spent an entire episode of *Trade Secrets* attacking Bluestein, demanding that he admit which parts of his rants were “honest” and which parts were “fake.” The blog entry associated with the episode includes the following statement written by Winer:

Oh shit, Madge is a hoax. We listened to the latest *Yeast Radio* podcast, and laughed until we realized it was all an act. I looked over at Adam and asked how he felt about this. “Not good.” Then he asked how I felt, and I said I had repped Madge as being something other than what she or he was. An act. We both agreed we should do an instant podcast to explain and raise questions. (Winer and Curry)

Throughout the episode, Winer and Curry attack Bluestein for what they deem to be an unethical use of persona. The men realized that Madge Weinstein was probably born a man, but both seemed to have earnestly believed that Madge was a transsexual. Several times in the episode, Winer refers to the “very clear image” of Weinstein that he had conjured up in his head. Winer thought Madge was a “short, 50-year-old, bearded transsexual.” For the men, Madge turned out to be a hoax, because the image

of Bluestein they discovered on the Internet did not meet up to their “short, 50-year-old, bearded transsexual” standard of transgendered performance.

Blood rushes to my cheeks and sweat dampens my palms as I listen to two heterosexual men use stereotypes to construct an ethics of persona performance for gay men and transgendered people. I am, in this moment, reminded of so many times my performances of gender and sexual identity have been put on display and evaluated by heterosexual men and women who, by virtue of living in a heteronormative culture, have limited understanding of or contact with gay people, gay history, and gay aesthetics. Winer and Curry remind me of my high school guidance counselor, who believed my lilting cadence, long hair, and gender-ambiguous style of dress “welcomed” bullying by my peers, as if I deserved abuse for having the audacity to be young, awkward, and gay. Winer and Curry’s *contaminating* interpretation of Bluestein and Weinstein affects how my body and brain react to the virus.⁴ Each comparative memory individuates my particular *Yeast Radio* infection. 330

Winer and Curry’s criticism also infects other audience members, who, in turn, infect the rapidly morphing *Yeast Radio* virus as it moves through multiple chains of hypertext. The January 8, 2005, episode of *Trade Secrets* featuring the anti-Bluestein dialogue garnered 101 audience comments. Many episode respondents dubbed the controversy “Madge-gate.” Overwhelmingly, audience members questioned Winer and Curry’s modernist critique of persona performance. Two key types of audience response emerge salient. 340

First, some audience members challenge Winer and Curry’s notion of what constitutes “reality.” One listener claims that Madge is, in fact, “real.” The audience member contends that:

The great thing about putting on the hat of “Madge Weinstein” for Madge is that she gets to say and be a person who is 100% uninhibited and honest. She can say whatever she wants to say about the world due to the fact that she exists outside of the physical world, in the mind of Richard Bluestein. In many ways, Madge is a prophet and a goddess because she lives in the hearts and minds of all her fans. Madge is real, as much as Marilyn Monroe, Elton John, Muhammed [sic] Ali, Bono, Whoopi Goldberg, and Howard Cosell are. Hollywood is littered with thousands of people whose names aren’t the ones they are born with. Madge Weinstein is Richard Bluestein. (Winer and Curry) 350 355

A vast majority of people who responded to Winer and Curry’s show were aware of Bluestein’s sex long before the January 8, 2005, podcast. Rather than hide his performance framework, Richard Bluestein reveals the contours and structures of his digital productions. As a *Trade Secrets* and *Yeast Radio* fan named Tibor writes, “Looking at the website and seeing the photo, to me, it’s pretty obvious. I don’t have the impression he/she is trying to hide that” (Winer and Curry). 360

“Infected” audience members engage in what can be described as a “consensual hallucination” (Gourgey and Smith; Lindemann 360), in which physical reality is thought to be only one possible interpretation of lived experience. Bluestein’s persona performances privilege multiple manifestations of “reality.” Performers and audience members who are fans of the persona style acknowledge the partiality of any 365

single rendering of experience. One respondent to the “Madge-gate” *Trade Secrets* 370 episode remarked, “The problem with a postmodern medium like the internet (and podcasting as well) is that a lot of people still look at it [through] a modernist perspective” (Winer and Curry).

Second, other listeners call attention to and challenge what they perceive to be Winer and Curry’s homophobic reaction to Bluestein. Many of these respondents engage in 375 “flaming” rhetoric, or the “use of invective and/or verbal aggressiveness in computer-mediated communication” (Vrooman 52). Flaming also holds a special meaning in the gay community. Many people call gay men flamers when their behavior is read as effeminate, dramatic, or “over-the-top” (Fox, “Gay Grows Up” 37). After hearing the episode, a self-described “transvestite” listener “flames” the podcasting personalities when she 380 writes: “This says a lot more about [Dave and Adam] than Madge. [They] got fooled by an unrealistic woman, feel embarrassed, and want to lash out at the source of embarrassment. Grow up” (Winer and Curry). Another listener “flames” the men by exclaiming, “What the hell made you think Madge’s a real, 50+ transgendered Jewish guy with a beard?! Only thing I can think of is that the last *Trade Secrets* is a hoax. You guys must 385 have been smoking the wrong dope” (Winer and Curry). A listener named Tim asks the men, “Have you never heard a real lesbian? Or a real transgendered person? Sheesh! Adam, you always represent yourself 100%? Even on MTV?” (Winer and Curry).

The aforementioned reactions demonstrate how Madge is more than merely a mask Richard wears. The responses also suggest that interpretations of his persona 390 performances are anything but uniform. Viral metaphors better encapsulate the fusion of Madge and Richard, and unique, sometimes contradictory audience reactions to Bluestein’s persona work.

Applying the trope of the virus enriches the interpretive process and helps to describe Bluestein’s complex mode of performance. Bluestein turns to podcast aggregators to spread the *Yeast Radio* virus. After viral replication occurs (or podcast episodes are reproduced and disseminated to the general public), the virus infects 395 thousands of audience members who may re-infect one another with different strains (or interpretations) of Bluestein’s personae. Much like a virus becomes a part of a person, Madge and Richard enter the bloodstream (consciousness) of their host cells 400 (listeners). Processes of interpretation then re-contaminate, mutate, and replicate Bluestein’s digital persona performances.

Viral Persona Performance and the Transmutation of Identity

Being here: Bluestein regularly reveals the constructed-ness of his artistic form. The performer produces a second podcast, titled *Yeast 2*, in which he speaks as Richard 405 Bluestein. In one episode of *Yeast 2*, Richard both explains his use of the Madge persona and references his boyfriend Juan. Bluestein shares the following words in a deep, gruff pitch that sounds more masculine, soft in volume, and forlorn than his Madge voice:

See, this is why I use Madge, I think. It’s easier for me to use her to get through this 410 stuff, to process it. When I try to talk about it, I get into these dead ends. It just

becomes really personal to me. I'm here in Florida; my boyfriend is sick. Hopefully, tomorrow, we'll figure something out when he goes in for his biopsy results. ("Richard Bluestein")

Right around the time Bluestein made these confessions on *Yeast 2*, Weinstein 415 talked about her girlfriend Gussie's medical problems on *Yeast Radio*. Madge frequently mentions her lesbian lover, a Jewish Alzheimer's patient named Gussie Iskowitz, on *Yeast Radio*. Gussie's viral counterpart is Richard's boyfriend, Juan. Madge claims that Gussie's "Alzen-hemier's" disease causes her girlfriend to believe that she is a gay Puerto Rican hairdresser, which are identity affiliations that accurately 420 describe Juan. In the following monologue, the parallels between Gussie and Juan are made clear:

Gussie, right now, is getting a biopsy at the Mount Sinai Medical Center. I took her there this morning. It's not a terrible procedure. I'm not worried about the actual procedure. Of course, I'm more concerned with the results of the procedure. She's 425 been having a lot of these exploratory things going on. I'm not going to give you the details. ("YR 289: CLIT-STEM-GEL")

As a listener who stays current with *Yeast Radio*, I understand that Madge Weinstein is a conduit personality that Bluestein utilizes when performing personal narrative. As previously indicated, many audience members also obscure 430 the fact/fiction line that would have some believe that Madge Weinstein is either fake or real.

Being there: February 11–16, 2006. While dancing at a gay club in Phoenix, I receive a number of calls from Bluestein. The bar is not a quiet setting conducive to a midnight chat with my new friend, so I let my messaging service answer his call. 435

I arrive home at 2:30 a.m. and decide to listen to an episode of *Yeast Radio* before I fall asleep; this has become my latest method of "counting sheep." The most recent posting on the *Yeast Radio* blog knocks the drunk out of me. The message reads, "Gussie passed away this morning at around 6:40 a.m." ("Fin"). Weeks earlier, Richard let me know the extent to which his boyfriend Juan was ill. Bluestein's latest 440 post to *Yeast Radio* is a clear indication that Bluestein's lover, Juan, died.

Later in the day, Bluestein posts a picture of Juan out of drag; over the picture, Bluestein writes: "Juan Montealegre: August 28, 1966–February 11, 2006." Several of Bluestein's audience members visit the *Yeast Radio* message forums and continue to refer to Juan as "Gussie," even after Bluestein speaks as Bluestein. A listener named 445 P.W. writes, "Peace and relief, to you and Madge. Gussie, you are in my heart" ("Juan Montealegre"). An audience member named Marcus says, "Barbara and I are devastated by your tragic loss. We had been so excited for you that Gussie would be coming to Chicago" ("Juan Montealegre"). Similarly, Boldblend types, "I'm so sorry, Madge. I loved the story you related about Gussie being cold, and how she 450 didn't want any blankets, but only you lying next to her" ("Juan Montealegre"). Other listeners find ways to typographically acknowledge Weinstein and Bluestein. RedBackFur employs slash marks that simultaneously bifurcate and merge the implicated personae. The listener writes, "Gussie/Juan was lucky to have a friend like

you to take care of and watch over her/him during this battle with cancer” (“Juan Montealegre”). 455

I spend roughly thirty minutes reading condolences that have been posted to Bluestein’s Web site. We have only communicated online and over the phone, but my heart genuinely aches for Richard’s loss. I scroll through my cell phone directory to find his number, which is attached to the name Madge Weinstein, not Richard Bluestein. I have a lot in common with the men and women who responded to Juan’s digital death notice, insofar as I nominally recognize Madge more than Richard. But, unlike most of his listeners, I know Bluestein *as Bluestein* on an interpersonal level. 460

When Richard and I finally speak on the phone, I do my best to comfort him as he mourns. Having lost my father only a year and a half ago, I know how important it is for friends to be present in times of profound loss. Richard remains surprisingly calm. In the midst of our conversation, I recite a cliché line spoken in situations of death and illness: “If you need anything, I’m here for you.” 465

Bluestein replies, “Do you think you could come to South Beach and officiate Juan’s memorial service?” 470

“Why me?”

“I don’t want the services to be mired down in religion. The event should be a celebration of his sexuality. I know that you’re into public speaking and poetry, and, quite frankly, I don’t know who else to ask.” 475

I want to tell him that I am a terrible choice. I am, without a doubt, one of the least spiritually “in tune” people on the planet. My financial situation constrains my ability to provide a prompt response to his request. I explain to him that I will post a message to my blog detailing the events of the last twenty-four hours and ask my readers to donate funds to get me to Florida for the funeral services. 480

I am shocked when, the next day, I wake up and discover that several of Bluestein’s audience members and readers of my online diary express their empathy by donating roughly \$1,500 to fly me to South Beach, where, on Valentine’s Day, I will officiate Montealegre’s memorial service. Although Richard utilized a theatrical persona to relay most of the tragic details leading up to Juan’s death, the story rings true to listeners. Audience donations memorialize Gussie’s memory, as much as they do Juan’s memories. The donated money is a testament to the world that Bluestein constructs with digital technology. 485

Sitting on a plane and headed toward Florida, I wonder how sharing space with Bluestein’s physicality will affect my perceptions of Madge and the world that she inhabits. Will the touch of Bluestein’s skin, grip of his handshake, speed of his gestures, and distinction of his scent disrupt the reiterative, reproductive power of the virus he creates and disseminates? Will Bluestein’s physicality function like an antibiotic? 490

These questions become increasingly relevant to me when I first meet Richard Bluestein in a face-to-face encounter at Juan’s funeral. His half-smile and intent eyes add important layers of communication that were missing from telephone and e-mail conversations. He appears to be perpetually in the midst of inspired and creative 495

thought. Determined to record the funeral service, Richard painstakingly situates a digital recording device at the podium. Before I get up to recite the ten-minute speech that I concocted on the airplane, Bluestein leans over and encourages me to confirm that the audio device is in its record setting. 500

As I make my way to the speaking area, pronoun and other name-related fears paralyze me. Is Richard planning to post an audio-recording of the funeral service on the *Yeast Radio* Web site? Should I call Juan by his actual name or Gussie? Am I more loyal to Madge or Richard? The ethics of the moment dizzy me. I squint my eyes, re-open them, and shake my head. Symptoms of the *Yeast Radio* virus emerge and leave me feeling utterly disoriented. As I stand before a room filled with Richard's family, Juan's Spanish-speaking relatives, and a few *Yeast Radio* fans, I opt to talk about Juan Montealegre. 505 510

The moment partially illustrates the viral implications of Bluestein's podcast. The *Yeast Radio* virus infects Juan's character, in life and death. Madge Weinstein also affects/infects the performative encounter of Montealegre's funeral service. I characterize the encounter as an infection, because Madge Weinstein, although never directly referenced, sits like a proverbial elephant in the funeral parlor. Madge is not in attendance, but she is not-not there. Madge is not simply a character in a play, she *is* Richard Bluestein; or, more aptly stated, Madge has infected my perception of Bluestein, and this infection performatively renders the world from which she emerged. Queer media scholar Juana Rodriguez speaks to the concomitant relationship between cyberspace and "real" place when she suggests that, "Cyberspace, like the theatrical stage, implicates the real outside the machine. Both serve as a catalyst for the radical reconceptualization of reality, its representation, and its reproduction" (119). If Madge were simply a character in a play in which Bluestein had been cast, I doubt I would have struggled with pronoun and name choice. 515 520 525

The services conclude. Everyone makes their way to a sitting area in the lobby of the funeral parlor. Bluestein has set up several pictorial monuments of Juan, including images of Juan in drag and surrounded by flamboyantly dressed men who I assume are gay. Juan's short, stocky mother appears unflinching as she slowly waddles from one group of pictures to the next. She and one of Juan's multilingual friends make their way over to Richard and me. Mrs. Montealegre speaks Spanish to Juan's friend, who, in turn, translates her words to English. The friend nervously asks, "When will his mother be able to take half of Juan's ashes?" Richard raises a single eyebrow and purses his lips. On an earlier episode of *Yeast Radio*, Bluestein mentioned that "Gussie" did not want any of her remains to go to her family, people who had kicked her out of the house at age fourteen. When Juan's mother makes her request, Bluestein's wide eyes wane. His erect, "take-no-prisoners" posture indicates that he means business. I am shocked when, after fifteen minutes of heated negotiations, a somewhat defeated Bluestein agrees to the mother's demands. I sit across the room from the exchange. I cannot hear much of what the two say to one another, but Bluestein's dropped shoulders and agreeable smile indicate that he has relented. 530 535 540

The following afternoon, I ask Bluestein about the conversation. With a crooked grin, he informs me that he has absolutely no intention of giving Juan's mother half of his ashes.

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"But you said you'd give her the ashes," I say matter-of-factly.

"Oh, I plan to give her ashes, just not Juan's ashes. I've been thinking about going to a bunch of Miami hotels, collecting cigarette ashes, mixing them with broken seashells, and pawning them off as half of Juan's remains."⁵

"Why broken seashells," I ask.

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"Haven't you ever seen the remains of cremation? Chunks of bone are mixed in with the ash."

Witnessing Bluestein's improvisation alters my reading of his strategic use of persona. I was perplexed when I first learned that Richard agreed to surrender half of Juan's ashes. I could never imagine Madge acquiescing to Gussie's mother. Bluestein's afternoon announcement signals that he, like Madge (or perhaps *as* Madge), is not afraid to dupe a heteronormative family structure that mistreated Juan. For Bluestein and Weinstein, persona-related improvisation constitutes a method of emotional survival. I did not fully understand the depth of that need until I saw it play out in a physical setting.

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Two days later, I return home, sit in my computer chair, turn on my shiny, white iMac, and click my way to the *Yeast Radio* Web site. Bluestein's most recent podcast entry is titled "YR 328: Juan Montealegre's Memorial Service Officiated by Ragan Fox and Rachel Kann." I click the episode's play button and listen to the service. In my spoken portion of the memorial, I never refer to Bluestein as Madge, nor do I call Montealegre, Gussie. Surprisingly, most people who respond to the memorial service episode remain faithful to Madge and Gussie. Andy comments, "Madge, thank you so much for sharing this with all of us who could not attend. This was a very, very nice tribute to Gussie" ("YR 328"). A listener named Aaron writes, "This entire service was a testament of your love for Gussie. Gussie's memory is, indeed, a blessing" ("YR 328"). Aaron's reference to "Gussie's memory" helps to explain why so many *Yeast Radio* audience members continue to speak to Madge about Gussie, rather than to Richard about Juan. *Yeast Radio* listeners have built memories that were grounded in the digital worlds of Gussie and Madge. Their knowledge of Richard and Juan is limited to bit-based "truths" about the men that were gleaned from persona(l narrative) performances featured on *Yeast Radio*. A listener named Erik even comments, "Who is this Richard that [Ragan and Rachel] keep talking about?" ("YR 238").

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Erik's question haunts me: Who *is* this Richard that I keep talking about?" My search to understand Bluestein is also an exploration of my identity as it relates to Bluestein. My interpretation of his performances, both online and in person, say something about my subjectivity, multiplicity, worldview, creativity in the midst of loneliness, and desire to connect with other gay men. Bluestein's narrative replicates many of the dead-end (in its most literal sense) gay tales I have read in novels and seen staged in theaters. Juan's death reignites fears initially set ablaze when, after disclosing my sexual identity to my father, Dad responded, "Gay? It's a lonely life,

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Rago.” Growing up during the apex of the AIDS pandemic, I have internalized gay-themed narrative structures. I associate love with death. Although AIDS may not have been a factor in Juan’s passing, Bluestein’s story is a mutated replication and performative enactment of a narrative I know and fear. Repeat the story enough 590 times and gay characters seem interchangeable. Bluestein’s tale infects me, just as I infect his tale through the process of documenting it.

The death of Juan/Gussie also exemplifies the viral workings of Bluestein’s digital performance in other ways. Madge Weinstein is a *mutated* version of Bluestein. The persona *replicates* significant events and people in Bluestein’s life, but the replications 595 are imperfect copies. The virus relies on digital technologies to *expand* into the “podosphere” and *infect* Bluestein’s audience. Symptoms of the virus include using female pronouns to reference Bluestein, opting to call the performer Madge, and investing money and care when Bluestein/Weinstein is in need.

Implications of Performing a Critical Virology 600

Being here. Viral metaphors extend understandings of persona performance by highlighting how personae become part of their hosts (or performers). Madge Weinstein is more than merely a mask worn by Richard Bluestein. Madge, like a virus, infects performative encounters in which Bluestein performs and articulates his identity. 605

Viral conceptualizations of persona performance also specify some of the ways that audience members come to know and understand personae. Previous persona-related metaphors (e.g., persona as mask and persona as curdling) fail to account for unique interactions that occur between a performer’s personae and specific audience members. The current study exemplifies how an individual’s history and standpoint affect his or her meaning-making processes, which may alter significations of a performance. In other words, no single performance is ever singular. A performance infects different people in different ways and each audience member walks away from the event with individuated strains of a performative infection. 610 615

This argument is perhaps best illustrated when interpretive scholars employ personal narrative to chronicle particular reactions to enacted personae. Viral criticism provides a methodological opportunity for performance scholars to better articulate how criticism infects (or alters the signification of) interpreted phenomena. My interpretive reading of Bluestein chronicles a dialogic encounter, in which two 620 gay men rely on personal narrative to share experiences and make a case for gay ethos. Much like a virus becomes part of a person, my search to understand Bluestein is also a search for self. Bluestein and I share indignities: mis-categorizations, marginalization, and uncertain gay futures. We also both turn to computers to connect with other gay men. 625

Bluestein’s persona virus continues to move through digital atmospheres, re-speaking, re-performing, and infecting new organisms (e.g., listeners and digital databases). Critical virologies chronicle how discourse, like a virus, mutates and

moves among members of the population. Fenske claims that, “The purpose or function of this attention to movement is not to eschew the interpretation of meaning, but to open up more possibilities within the operation of meaning, one of which is to see how meaning-making acts, how it moves” (“Movement” 156). By documenting my own habits of consumption and noting potential viral routes others have traversed after listening to Bluestein’s podcast, I consider meaning-making processes in situ and via hypertext. Specifically, I map partial but significant chains of personal comprehension and digital iteration. The form of viral criticism that I advocate and execute in this essay typifies how personal narrative and online response may dialogically speak to cultural phenomena.

Theorists interested in the activist/interventionist potential of performance have struggled to find a method that accurately gauges how productions affect audience members. Park-Fuller speaks to this conundrum when she asks:

How do we ask audience members to articulate changes in awareness about social issues as they view a given production without, on one hand, prejudicing them through language that may lead to a presumed response or, on the other, resorting to simplistic questions that prompt only a “yes, no, or sort of” response that tells us very little? (290)

The audience analysis problem becomes more complex when considering artificial binaries and analytical biases that tend to place audience members in opposition to performers (Park-Fuller 291). The method of audience-related triangulation relevant to this critical virology is of consequence, because, unlike audience analysis that might take place during a post-show discussion, I had no hand in prompting audience responses found in the comments section of a podcast, nor did I influence informants with leading questions. Reactions to Bluestein’s podcasts were spontaneous, and, when shared, completely unstructured by the researcher.

Viral criticism places special emphasis on the transformative power of dialogic encounters. As a specific mode of narrative inquiry, critical virology underscores the role interpretation plays in contaminating (for better or worse) performance artifacts, whether they take the form of everyday life performances, theatrical productions, or a little bit of both. Critical virology challenges marginalizing interpretations of infection; the practice celebrates the individual, but emphasizes his or her partiality; it replicates discourse but stumbles and stutters as it speaks, mutating that which it repeats.

Notes

- [1] To help distinguish between reconstructed moments of the past presented in situ (“being there”) and instances of scholarly reflection (“being here”), I borrow Tami Spry’s “being there”/“being here” sequencing from her essay “Performing Autoethnography.” Spry’s organization is an adaptation of Geertz’s celebrated distinction of “being there” and “being here.”
- [2] I use the term “gay” instead of “queer” to more ethically reflect the identities implicated in my interpretive account. When the term “queer” is used in a qualitative research project, cultural critics should make an “effort to display the various ways in which sexuality

intersects and interacts with race, gender, and age” (Fox, “Gay Grows Up” 39). Because I focus almost exclusively on the performances of two gay, white men, I feel more sincere using the term “gay” (instead of “queer”). “Gay” is sometimes used as a catchall, male generic label meant to represent lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities. In this paper and other contexts, “gay” represents the specific subjectivities of gay men. My reliance on the term “gay” should not inhibit readers from recognizing and enjoying some of the queer implications of the *Yeast Radio* podcast. Queer performance aesthetics reject rigid adherence to heterosexist paradigms and celebrate brash, excessive productions that reveal gender as a social construct. While several aspects of *Yeast Radio* may be interpreted as “queer,” other elements of the show re-inscribe heteronormativity, sexism, and racism. A queer critique of the podcast would, in my mind, be ethically bound to focus on the intersectional dynamics of the aforementioned social constructs. Queer criticism is not the goal of this project.

- [3] I use the term online here to stipulate where most audience members consume and respond to *Yeast Radio* performances. “Online” and “real life” binaries misrepresent the fields in which Bluestein performs; the “online”/“real life” dyad also obfuscates my observation of his persona performances.

Studying online “fields,” according to Markham, requires interpretive scholars to “shift from geographic to computerized spaces” and “from place to interaction” (801). This description, unfortunately, reifies a binary and hierarchical relationship between cyberspace and physical place. Viral criticism challenges the binaries (e.g., “from geographic to computerized space”) that Markham references. Geography and virtual space, as I argue throughout this essay, co-constitute one another. Material place and digital interaction are dialogic. Fenske speaks to multi-directional transactions between corporeality and virtuality, when she eloquently argues that:

Corporeality and virtuality are unified. Theory is practice/practice is theory. Exteriors and interiors co-produce each other. Art and life are connected, one is not meant to transcend the other. Both content and experience, form and production, in other words, exist inside the unified act in constant interaction. It is only through the practice of isolating one from another that the impression of dissociation is produced. (“Aesthetic” 9)

Viral criticism calls for a reconsideration of how interactions take place in and move through dialogic fields.

- [4] I would also describe this personal narrative as “contaminating.”
- [5] Bluestein has read this essay and agreed to let me share the details of his planned deception. After days of contemplation, he decided to simply ignore Juan’s mother’s request, rather than deliver her a bag filled with cigarette ash and seashells.

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