Chapter 10

Missed Connection: A Semi-Liminal Encounter with a Digitized Holocaust Survivor

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> *"Meet Holocaust survivor Pinchas Gutter. Through Dimensions in Testimony, students and educators can ask questions that prompt real-time responses from a pre-recorded video of Pinchas-engaging in virtual conversation, redefining inquiry-based education."* Pinchas Gutter - Dimensions in Testimony | IWitness (usc.edu)

Abstract

Using Anders Lindseth's (2017, 2020) reflective practice as a methodological starting point, I present compiled vignettes reflecting my own and my students' experiences with USC Shoah Foundation's Dimensions in Testimony, on their educational platform- IWitness, an interactive digital storytelling app where students can virtually dialogue with a pre-recorded real-life Holocaust survivor, "Pinchas." The main research question that propels my analysis is: "What is at stake in these digitized interactions with Pinchas?" Specifically, I want to understand whether real connection and empathy are fostered by such technology or whether it flattens creative imagination and limits one's esoteric connection with the past. Relevant literature related to memory, witnessing, and dialogical epistemology will be presented. Theoretical reflection inspired by Walter Benjamin's (1936) critique of the effects of technological changes presented in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" will be emphasized. The reflections presented herein raise concern about ethics and the

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possible somatic and liminal void that emerges in relation to interactive "inquiry-based" artificial intelligence technology that turns humans into digitized humanish chat-objects. I contend that what is at stake with this technology is hermeneutical injustice, a lack of heart-based connection, and a possible disconnect from our own sense of humanness in an increasingly digitized world.

Keywords

Reflective Practice Research, kaleidoscopic epistemology, digitalization, technology, heritage, enchantment

Meet Pinchas

On the screen is an old bald heavy-set man sitting awkwardly in a black, plush fabric chair that seems two sizes too small for his stocky frame. The armrests are almost up to his shoulders, creating the sense that the armrests are containing him in the chair. He is wearing a simple button up light blue collared shirt, dark blue sweater vest and black slacks. His shiny black shoes seem firmly planted on some type of invisible ground. The figure is very still but his blinking light blue eyes catch the viewer's attention. He seems to be staring at the viewer or just passed them. The student is invited to speak into the microphone and ask Pinchas about his time in the concentration camps. The student speaks into the microphone "What was it like?" Pinchas responds in a slow tone and shaky voice characteristic of a man almost 90 years old who has seen too much.

The student turns away saying something about the whole experience being "creepy".

Introduction

As a PhD researcher in the field of digitalization and heritage, I often question whether technology is truly the answer to helping people preserve memories and connect with history. I am particularly interested in lived experiences, in the people behind the objects. Stories of people who have survived traumatic experiences figure prominently in my work. I am also an educator, hired to teach master's students who specialize in the field of human rights education. My students are from around the world and are based in Norway. Much of our coursework emphasizes critical thinking and the need for empowerment from the bottom up rather than the top down. Paolo Freire's work figures prominently in our foundational framework. It is in this context that I have

become drawn to reflective practice methodology to engage my students in understanding their world.

Reflective praxis research, the methodology developed by Anders Lindseth (2017, 2020), can be considered a practical extension of Freire's model of problem-posing education to encourage critical literacy. According to Freire, "in problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 2000, p. 83). Whereas Freire encourages people to critically reflect on their positionality in their world through the lens of empowerment, Lindseth (2020) implements these ideals of critical literacy by presenting a methodology of transformative reflective practice where participants are prompted to explore "what is at stake?" in various situations they encounter (p. 93). Asking about the stakes is a form of problem-posing in which the participants begin to engage the world as a transformative space because there is meaning in it. Lindseth (2020) explains that when a researcher investigates other people's practical knowledge, it is about working towards a possible common understanding (p. 100). By asking about stakes as a departure point, dialogue tends to open, which may cause one to feel more compelled to reflect on a deeper, more expansive level. The aim is not to magically come up with solutions to the problems posed, but rather to reflect on the experience and oneself in relation to the experience (Anders 2018, p. 244 as cited in Weiss 2021, p. 243). For example, often these stakes-based discussions include delving into the ethical implications of what one has witnessed or experienced. The participant actively engages in "meaning making" by pondering this simple yet complex question of what is at stake.

Hansen (2023) expands on Lindseth's reflective practice research by articulating the ontological and epistemological potentials of this methodology. She explains that "a participative ontology opens for seeing knowledge development as a reflection over lived experience, which can open for new insights and give a better basis for orientation and meaning in life" (see chapter 1, Helskog & Weiss 2023). This characterization echoes my assessment that reflective practice research can be viewed as an expansion or application of Paolo Freire's model of problem-posing education to encourage critical literacy. "Participative researchers do not only study the world around them, but they also study the understanding they meet the world with" (Helskog & Weiss, 2023). Hansen goes further in her elaboration by presenting what she describes as a "kaleidoscopic epistemology" that emerges. Helskog and Weiss (2023) build upon Lindseth's foundation

and emphasize a multivocal epistemological application of Reflective Practice Research in pedagogical contexts. They explain "that the phenomenon "good teaching" can be fruitfully understood through the metaphor of the kaleidoscope and the notion *kaleidoscopic epistemology* (Helskog, 2015) as an approach of multi-perspectivism." This multi-perspectivism aligns with the philosophical dialogical nature of reflective practice by allowing for people to reflect on their experiences and situate or re-situate their knowledge.

I chose to use reflexive praxis methodology because it allows me to situate my experiences in relation to my students, engaging a multi-perspective kaleidoscopic approach to explore my own bias and perspectives about the technology**.** This methodology was chosen specifically because **"**a kaleidoscopic participatory and dialogical approach makes it impossible to fixate narrow self-conceptions, ideologies, theories or models" (Helskog &Weiss, 2023). It is important to note that this method is subjective in that "by focusing on one aspect of a phenomenon and drawing this to the foreground, other aspects are pushed to the background…by shedding light on some aspects, other aspects are left in the shadows" (Helskog & Weiss, 2023). This aspect of the shadows cast in a kaleidoscopic approach is a biproduct of the themes that emerge through dialogue, and in fact, some would say that this potential shortcoming is a strength because it encourages new perspectives to emerge through "the structuring mind of the researcher or by all the participating subjects" (ibid. 2023).

My other reason for utilizing this methodology is because I see the need to philosophize as essential for personal and societal development. In the current times, technology is evolving faster than the human, and there is a struggle to manage how one can situate themselves in this fast-shifting technological world propelled by corporate and governmental policies that seem to push for digitalization of key areas of life. The push for digital tools in the field of education has become increasingly emphasized, but what does this look like in practice?

I asked student volunteers to be my co-researchers go to USC Shoah Foundation's online educational platform, IWitness and try out Dimensions in Testimony, an interactive digital storytelling program aimed for classroom use as a way for students to virtually dialogue with Holocaust survivors. "Pinchas" is the survivor featured in the prototype, and it is our interactions with him that will be referred to herein. In this essay, I fuse the students' sharing of their experiences into vignettes propelled by the question, "What is at stake in these digitized interactions with Pinchas?" Aside from theories around the theme of memory and dialogue, I apply Walter Benjamin's (1936) insights from his essay "The Work of Art in the

Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (abbreviated WA henceforth) as a way of addressing the logistical and ethical issues that may arise when an audience engages with recorded images of people on a screen. Specifically, I question whether this emerging technology has the potential to create a liminal digital dialogical space of empathetic connection with people of the past, presented on the flat screen of a laptop. I contend that what is at stake in Dimensions in Testimony is humanness, connection with a person who is eager to share his experiences with future generations.

I argue that these interactions, without proper contextualization, are problematic and flatten the potential for engagement and creative imagination. With the decontextualization of a person from the past "interacting" on a computer screen in the present time, the potential for hermeneutical injustice cannot be ignored. By hermeneutical injustice, I mean the way the medium and technology might affect how the person, "Pinchas" in this example, interprets his own life and how others may interpret his personhood and life experiences.

Contextualizing the Technology of Dimensions in Testimony

In 2019, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), a group that works to uphold the 2000 Stockholm Declaration pledge to "strengthen, advance and promote Holocaust education, research and remembrance," announced a renewed commitment to Holocaust education and presented a revised *Recommendations for Teaching and Learning about the* Holocaust, published in partnership with UNESCO. IHRA suggested utilizing a participatory learning model with an emphasis on critical thinking, self-reflection and integrating new media to educate people about the Holocaust. It emphasized the importance of preserving oral history and engaging with the testimonies of survivors as integral to Holocaust and genocide prevention education. With digitalization and technology becoming increasingly integrated into our daily lives, a push towards digital heritage preservation and education is emerging, specifically in the field of Holocaust studies and new media. This new field of memory studies has been described by Dr. Matthew Boswell as "virtual Holocaust memory." It "involves forms of cultural and educational encounter[s] that are highly experiential, digitally mediated, and linked to powerful utopian narratives about personal development and political resolution (such as the refrain "never again")" (https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH/ M009432/1). (Boswell, as cited in Walden, 2019, p. 622).

My initial interest in this digital dialogical project stems from my previous research about how ancestral dialogue, whether real or imagined,

may have the potential to mitigate intergenerational trauma transmission (Bloom, 2018). In my research, I focused on Jewish postmemory and how many second- and third-generation descendants of Holocaust survivors felt a sense of guilt about whether their grandparents and parents would feel that their memory was being properly honored and respected by the present generation. In my conclusion, I envisioned a hypothetical situation in which people could actively engage and converse with their ancestors about the past and how the lessons of the past can be applied to present and future generations. I was pleased to find that there was already technology being developed to do just that, with the aim of Holocaust education – via Dimension in Testimony and the IWitness platform.

Dimension in Testimony technology is an evolution from the Shoah Foundation's traditional video testimony filming of Holocaust survivors. The video testimonies were often drab and depressing multi-hour videos of Holocaust survivors sharing their experiences of the atrocities they lived through and were often left unwatched by the general public. The video testimony project evolved into a pilot project of interactive testimony with the help of AI and VR technology. The project can also be found in select Holocaust Centers around the world through the *Dimension in Testimony* exhibition project where the public can ask questions to a holographic projection of a Holocaust survivor and the holographic-like person responds. Due to the expense and accessibility issues around the hologram of the survivor, the program was adjusted for classroom settings via their IWitness platform. How it works:

> "On average, each survivor answered more than 1,000 questions, which were pre-recorded using ultra high definition 3d filming techniques. When a live audience asks a question, the technology matches this with the responses." It is marketed as enabling the audience to engage with survivor's testimony "more deeply than would be possible with a normal film – preserving the experience of meeting a survivor of the Holocaust." (Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/news/interactive-for-ever-project-comes-to-the-va)

In reaction to people wanting to create and/or interact with these video testimonies at home, Dimensions in Testimony was developed for schools and the general public to access online via their educational website- IWitness. Dimensions in Testimony allows people to have one-to-one interaction with the digitized recorded testimonies, allowing questions to be posed to the recorded human. With the help of artificial intelligence, the response deemed to be the most fitting answer from all the hours of recorded responses is cued up for the viewer, similar to the key word technology in chat bots. It stops short of being a full fledge dialogue in its current state,

but with the technology progressing rapidly, it is only a matter of time before these recordings become so seamless that it will be like talking to the person in the flesh, or will it?

Methodology

I was introduced to Reflective Praxis through a workshop led by Guro Hansen Helskog and Michael Weiss in which they used Socratic methodology to interrogate lived experiences. Currently, they are using this method in educational settings with great success. What they found was that students are hungry for connection but often do not have the starting points to engage in deep reflection. Particularly in traditional school systems that focus on test results and quotas, the lack of reflectivity is jarring (Helskog & Weiss, 2021).

In reflective practice research, one's own narrative and experiences are the empirical material that form the basis of reflection and wonder about their own experiences, in which they draw out themes and, in this case, elucidate the stakes of what they observed and experienced, namely the possible implications for society at large (Lindseth, 2020, p. 80). Lindseth (2020) emphasizes the need to move away from the natural science standards of proof and rigid objectivity and towards a more organic, personal, integrated, and body-based knowledge – a situated knowledge (p. 81). This reflective methodology counters the concept of objective knowledge because the phenomenon that is being researched and explored is internally processed, then dialogically processed, and ultimately situated in the complexity and multiplicity of one's lived experiences, including but not limited to culture, worldview, emotions, and interests.

This philosophical and hermeneutical awareness of our different life worlds that we give meaning and theory to is at the core of this methodology. It is this awareness of situated knowledge that gives voice to my students (and their future students). It encourages them to hold personal knowledge sacred while being open to developing and accessing theory that can then be selected, expanded, refuted, and situationally applied to their practical knowledge. This leads to deeper, multilayered reflection, internally taken in and processed, and outwardly dialogical. Reflexive practice research is commonly researched in first person, driven by a compelling question or discrepancy that the researcher is trying to understand. It is a space of trying to delve into the unknown, which often includes talking with other researchers, not necessarily as formal interviews but more as a way of philosophizing rather than utilizing the traditional methodological framework of "HDM (hypothetico-deductive method)" (Lindseth, 2020, p. 99-100). Lindseth emphasizes that conversations with others can be useful,

but when a researcher investigates other people's practical knowledge, ideally, they are working towards common understanding (ibid.).

I chose to focus on the experiences of my student volunteer co-researchers to investigate and compare my experiences with Pinchas with theirs. My aim was propelled by the hope of finding common understanding in the form of the themes and issues that arose. I explained to the student volunteers that I was writing an essay in which I use reflective praxis methodology to process and situate my experiences with Dimensions in Testimony in relation to theirs to get to the core of articulating what is at stake in our interactions with Pinchas. I invited the student volunteers to go directly to the website and try it out. I presented Dimensions in Testimony without context; I said to them, "As future teachers, you are given this website to access the program *Dimensions in Testimony* for you to decide how and whether this is technology you would like to use in a classroom context." I encouraged them to keep in mind the technology's potential and downfalls and how they can use Dimensions in Testimony in their classrooms. I invited the students to meet with me one-to-one over Zoom to talk about their experiences and make them concrete, so that they could be explored and discussed dialogically (Lindseth, 2020, p. 97). I did not limit them to where they chose to start since I was aware that my own starting point was strongly biased by my own situated knowledge, and I wanted to know what their impressions were first. The students then critically reflected on what they experienced – what was it about? They layered meaning onto the experience and shared their feedback (ibid). After hearing their concrete reflection, I then proceeded to use the question prompts that Lindseth encourages for this methodology: "What was this experience about? What was wrong with this experience? What was at stake here? (Hov, 2015, Lindseth, 2020, p. 93).

After this was discussed, I shared with the participants the theories I chose for this essay and asked whether they had more insights that would fit the theoretical framework I chose or whether there were themes that needed to be included. Initially, I exclusively focused on Walter Benjamin's work as the framework to address the technology of reproduction and its effect on perception and relationality to history. After talking with the students, it became clear that themes of justice and connection needed to be featured; otherwise, the act of omitting the themes that emerged for them would be a form of silencing the students' contributions. Thus, the order of the research process went from concrete experience to critical reflection and then to theoretical reflection, leading to gaining practical wisdom (Lindseth, 2020, p. 98). Below are our experiences presented and compiled in vignette form.

Concrete Reflection
My impression

I look at Pinchas, my first impression is that he has a grandfatherly presence. His skin is strangely white, like a bluish white, his eyes are piercingly light blue. He is so small on my screen, I squint to see his face. I think of my own grandfather and whether I would want to see him like this. I think of the collected photos, the memories of him, how I wished he told me more about his life. Would I want to see him like this? I think of when he died, and the years leading up to it, the withdrawal, the quietness of a once robust man. Something about this technology makes me so sad. I feel a pit of nausea come over me. For me, seeing Pinchas is personal. He reminds me of the old men my grandfather knew. Maybe it's his Jewishness, his accent, but I see him as a shell of an old generation, and I do not know what to make of it. I am reminded of the saying "ghost in the shell", I cannot seem to get those words out of my head. He is a ghost, his image is a shell, but at the time of this writing, Pinchas is still alive, so is he omnipresent? He has made a career out of being a public witness giving his testimony of surviving the Holocaust to many. I tell myself to look up the book that is written about his life (Memories in Focus, 2017) but for the purposes of this analysis, I want him and the technology to stand alone. The question I ask myself is whether he is enough. I think of Walter Benjamin's words about the loss of aura of those immortalized on film, I think of images of the Holocaust I was exposed to at too young of an age, by the teacher who was a descendant of a survivor. I think of the tattoos on the arms of the old men who I grew up around, whose concentration camp prisoner identification numbers sat at eye level for me at 5 years old. I find myself grieving the language of Yiddish, a language my grandfather understood fluently but never taught me. I remind myself that my grandfather was not a survivor of the Holocaust, he worked and raised a family in the United States during the war, while some of his brothers fought in the war. I wonder what it was like for him existing in that space. I hear the words in my mind "never forget"– the anthem of my childhood. The Jewish guilt remains strong. To me this interaction with Pinchas is unnerving. I am more interested in being in front of him – of connecting, of seeing him as a type of surrogate for my relative. I realized that I am not interested in what he has to say, I just want to feel his presence.

Here are some of the students' initial reflections, which for the purpose of this article is combined into a vignette:

Student 1, Teacher of social science in upper secondary high school in Norway.

This is impressive technology, professional, everything looks like it was thought through, but his words felt very dense. He spoke a lot and gave out

so much information at once. If I was to use this technology in a classroom setting, I would have to take a good amount of time to get to know this new resource. Understanding and using new technology and new resources is difficult, and this particular program was a bit difficult to navigate. So, for us teachers, I wish it was more intuitive to access and use. For example, I decided to be spontaneous and just talk into the microphone to ask Pinchas questions. Pinchas seemed to answer some questions very quickly, especially if it was about history and the Holocaust. But questions like "have you ever been in love? Do you like animals?" More personal questions did not get a reply. In that way, you can lose something of a "personal" connection because it was hard to get to know him. He would say "I don't want to answer that….Rephrase…Maybe you can ask me something else." Then questions about his professional life, for example, yielded so much talking from him that I lost interest in his words, and I feel my students would lose interest too. Is the goal to get to know Pinchas or to access his information? There seems to be a text resource with the app that provides background information about Pinchas if you choose to read it, but once that was read, I became less interested in hearing the same information from him. I rather go deeper, more personal. I do see how this could work with the new national curriculum (in Norway) which focuses on interdisciplinarity. You can build lessons around it, but for my students, much of his language is complex and there needs to be additional lessons around this experience. I am not sure if there was a clear objective in talking to him, for example what about his testimony should be focused on? Is it just to learning about the Holocaust? In a way it seems like he is a person that represents something that happened in history, but after this, what are the students supposed to have learned? What has it (the interaction) done for and to them? How is this relevant today? How about contextualizing this and applying it to our society? I guess a teacher is needed to propel this further, because as it is now, it is more like a person talking about the Holocaust. Could students make their own testimonies to link it? History learning, learning agency is not just done by talking to a person, where does it (the interaction) go for the students? Here, now, and in the future? How do we use Pinchas's interaction to propel people to ensure that atrocities like the Holocaust do not happen again? Where are the students in this interaction? It seems they are receiving a lot of information, but it is really not that interactive.

What really struck me is that this conversation/interaction did not feel like what happens in real dialogue, between two people. For example, to take it to extreme, if I have something on my heart that is troubling me, I, like most people reach out to a real person. A dialogue, the ideas,

connotations, interaction, between two people, cannot be staged. It happens in the moment, call it magic, it happens. It (this technology) takes away the deep connection that happens in conversation. Conversation is unplanned, you never know what might happen within you when you communicate with a person. Also, he (Pinchas) looks strict or stern, while he is waiting for questions – authoritative. His presence and facial expression do not invite you to be curious. I ask myself why him? Why did the creators choose him as the representative survivor? His facial expressions while waiting for the next questions were so uninviting. This is not natural. This is not a dialogue, but instead of going to google, I could get an easy answer from here. Maybe it is an alternative to googling?

With more testimonies and perspectives, the project has the potential to get more interesting. His is only one story, one person – one story, but there are thousands of other stories. It is like he is owning the narrative, sitting with a lexicon, given a lot of authority to share his personal testimony. He cannot own the whole narrative. We need those testimonies, but it is not the whole story, it is one of many. In a historical context, I feel that it is a bit more empathetic when someone writes personally.

I would say that when it comes to using this technology or technology in general, I would guide students to be aware of what is out here, teach them how to handle the technology in front of them and to be critical. There is no need to use technology in the classroom all the time. I understand the need to teach digital competency, but not everything needs to be done on a computer. It is a balance, we are living with technology, it is how we communicate, but know to be critical. Using Dimensions in Testimony is a way to start conversation with students about connection, and the good and bad aspects of this technology – what worked and what did not. How would you present your testimony? What is an empathic and respectful way to integrate knowledge in a way that is relevant to our times?

Student 2, international teacher student from country in political turmoil:

Instead of the microphone, I used the chat text feature. I read Pinchas's bio on the website, familiarized myself with him and started with the question "what is most relevant thing that happened in your life?" I did not want to ask questions that seemed to have already been answered in the background blurb about him. I wanted to know what he learned in life. I know this project is about heritage and the Holocaust, but I have studied the Holocaust and really, what is point of asking him the most important lesson of the Holocaust like the guide suggested? I see him (Pinchas) as real person, and instead I wanted to know more about him personally. I felt like he is still alive, so I

wanted to connect. Maybe it's my own perspective of someone coming from a country that has been through wars and trauma. I do not think it is right to ask victims of the lessons, they are victims who suffered. I just want to hear their heart. I was very optimistic in my questioning because I wanted to hear the perspective of a survivor who is wiser, who is reflecting after a lifetime beyond the Holocaust. Yet all the answers to the questions I asked were super focused on the Holocaust. For example, he said "World is Dangerous place" so I asked, "What is your definition of a safe place." He replied saying "the concentration camp was a place of torture." He turned my optimistic questions negative, he kept speaking of torture, killing, concentration camps. I asked him, "What do you fear the most, to live or to die?" He said something like, the only fear that I had during the Holocaust was the gas chamber. Everything he said seemed Holocaust-based. Nothing beyond the Holocaust. I wanted to know how he passed that time since then, I want to know, now what do you think? I wanted him to reflect on his near-death experience.

Finally, I decided to ask him to tell me about his loved ones. Instead, he told me everything about himself, a long biography…super long. Long answers no one wants to read. I am not interested reading, "in this year this happened…" It was draining, so detailed, so I stopped. This is not natural.

My first impression was "oh wow, he's alive and in front of me talking and once the conversation started, the feeling went away. I would say that this technology can keep his memory alive, for example, you remember the name of this person. I could compare his experiences with that of others I read about, I guess. I liked looking at his image, I feel I would know him if I saw him somewhere else. The image they chose of him is blinking and it looks like he is actually sitting on the other side of the screen for a moment. My first impression was that this is a live person. I remember thinking oh he's sitting right here. This can be a good way of learning about the Holocaust and some might find it useful. It might have potential uses in post-conflict situations for certain people. I just wanted more connection, optimism, and humanness in the dialogue. I think I would rather hear the experiences of a woman, maybe I would have connected better with her. I just wanted more philosophy and positivity, more reflection.

Putting together the Kaleidoscope: A Multivocal Critical Reflection of What is at Stake

What is at Stake, my initial thoughts

For me, what is at stake felt personal, therefore I chose to begin this section by referring to my students' experiences first to see how they process their experience. After, I reflect on my own positionality as well as "what is at stake."

What is at Stake for "Student Teacher 1"?

What I see from the above vignette is that accessibility was important, as the teacher is brainstorming ways to make the interaction with Pinchas more interactive and engaging. She views Dimensions in Testimony as one of many teaching tools, but for her, what is at stake is the fact that this was a frustrating interaction, and she felt the need to intervene and mitigate it for her students. She sees it as a potential starting point for larger philosophical topics such as the positives and negatives of using technology to present testimonies and how technology can feel counterintuitive to natural dialogue-based learning. She emphasized a "heart-centric" approach to dialogue and connection.

From Student 1, I extracted that what was at stake was the need to explore the hermeneutical injustice that comes from limited narratives. As Student 1 says, "he is not the spokesman for all." She was concerned about the impression Pinchas gave and questioned why he was chosen as the prototype representative for the Holocaust. She was concerned that the students would be turned off by his presence as well as by his long, dense narrative. She wanted her students to know that Pinchas was just one of many people who had a range of experiences surviving the Holocaust. Also, his answer to more "human" icebreaker-type questions was so lacking that it caused resentment towards the technology and, in a way, towards Pinchas himself, so was this technology really presenting all facets of Pinchas's humanity?

What is at Stake for Student 2:

Student 2 saw the potential for connection, which it seemed she craved. What was at stake for her was that the technology was very promising, and she was drawn to Pinchas, but he seemed to focus so much on the past that the present and future felt like an afterthought. It seemed like the app creators were not quite aware of Pinchas's ability to motivate and spin his experiences in a positive way that would leave those seeking motivation and inspiration to persevere to continue. Both students mentioned a need for a "heart-to-heart" connection. Both commented on his physical presence but had very different experiences of his "humanness," or lack thereof. Student 2 felt that much of the history of the Holocaust has already been heavily documented, and she wanted the technology to expand it rather than rehash it. She also questioned how this technology might work in her home country, which was currently in a dire situation where censorship was overwhelming.

My Thoughts of what is at Stake after reflecting on Students' feedback:

Utilizing this methodology, I identified two to three key themes of what is at stake that emerged after reflecting on the students' feedback. I then synthesized their experiences and applied theory to delve deeper into the nuances of what is at stake on a theoretical and tangible level. I distilled the main themes of what is at stake into the following keywords that seemed to be repeated often by the student volunteers: "Heart-centered, story, connection, truth, and future." I used these key words to launch my own reflections on what is at stake with the utilization of this technology. Furthermore, I would expand this and say that what is at stake is essentially our own legacy, humanity/humanness. Particularly, I use the above keywords as launching points to focus on areas I wish to delve into in the subsequent theoretical reflection subtheme sections of this essay. The following sub-themes fall under this theme:

1. The Liminal Space of Witnessing and Dialogue
2. Hermeneutical Injustice: Encounters with History and Illusion
3. How Technology Can Inhibit Human Connection: Disappearing Auras and Fleeting Connection

Since this type of technology is being expanded and encouraged for classroom and archival use, I ask: To what extent can interactive conversations with digitalized humans be the future of heritage and digital storytelling? Does it do justice to the memory, or does it turn the person into an object and a spectacle, distracting from the person's innate humanness? Can this go too far?

One shared issue at stake that the students allude to is that of hermeneutical injustice, which appears to be a byproduct of the limitations of technology, programming and the humans who designed the technology. By "feeding" real-life Pinchas with questions that they felt were important and needed to be recorded and preserved, a bias was created. Pinchas was shaped by the questions the program designers initially asked him; thus, his humanness was flattened and limited as he could only respond to the right keywords. In essence, he is something of a sophisticated chatbot, and when his limitations are highlighted, the "human" connection can break, turning him from digitized human to flat film cued up to what the programmer felt would be the right parts.

For example, Professor Valtysson (2017) of the University of Copenhagen explains that much of the research in the field of participation and digital media "has been characterized by discourses of digitization and preservation rather than of access and use" (p. 559). Henningsen, E., & Larsen, H. (2020) write about the "fetishization of the digital." By this

they mean that in pushing for digitalization in the culture and education sectors, questions about whether digitalization is really the right approach and whether it is ethically sound tend to be overlooked in the rhetoric and heavy funding that go towards "digitalization" (p. 335). Often, questions of how memory operates and how stories are told and related over time are set aside during the "push for preservation."

Ideally, one of the goals of the digitalization of heritage is to cultivate a "historical present," which is a socio-cultural space where memory and history are embodied in the present (Berlant 2008, p. 848). For example, Connerton (1989) describes how social memory operates on many levels and, at times, needs to be addressed in the context of remembering and "reclaiming" that which has been socially neglected or forgotten (p. 21). Pierre Nora (1989) describes sites of memory as places where a traumatic event occurred or where memories are commemorated (p. 7). Museums and exhibitions about the past are sites of memory. Halbwachs (1980) describes a socially constructed 'phenomenon of memory' (p. 24). Ignatieff (2017) explains that "What human beings share…is a common desire, in their own vernacular, for moral order. For a framework of expectations that allow them to think of their life, no matter how brutal or difficult, as meaningful" (p. 202). Assmann (2008) focuses on the role of culture and memory transmission as integral to one's identity, sense of communal belonging, and overall well-being. When cultural memory is lost, the psychological repercussions on the individual and on the group can affect communicative memory, which can cause a group to feel helpless and assimilate to dominant power structures. In these situations, there may be a call for rediscovery and a renewal of interest in accessing narratives that help shape collective history.

I argue that by presencing people from the past, this AI VR digitalized human interactive technology can be a tool of digital immortality and digital resurrection that may challenge how one frames their place in the world and possibly have the potential for meaning-making for their own lives and those who "dialogue" with them after they depart from their earthly lives. What is at stake is the question of what it is to be human, how memory is transmitted, and whether there is something very human lost in these virtual "connections." As Hansen and Weiss (2022) explain, "Our ability to engage in intimate relationships with others, with nature and the world, shrinks as we learn to objectify the world and others. We become increasingly separated and isolated in our own world of fragmented I-it relationships, as Martin Buber called it" (Helskog & Weiss 2023).

I believe that Dimensions in Testimony can show the range of ways people seek to address a core organic human need – to feel like their

life matters. Humans are inherently social beings, and these examples demonstrate that meaning-making can be closely linked with interactivity and a sense of connection.

- Does this technology create false connections and, by doing so, limit and flatten our sense of humanness and creative imagination, or does it foster connection and empathy for the students?
- Is this a true dialogue or authentic encounter? The digital human is contextualized according to the time in which the recording took place. They would know or understand the time their viewer /student lives in. It is also one-sided in the way that the digitized human would not know the personality of the person asking questions. They would not be physically there to experience the presence of the spectator, so is it a true connection?

Furthermore, I would expand this and say that what is at stake here is the concept of our own humanity at the turning point of digitalized history, where AI algorithms are employed to create virtual humans, where people are turning into holograms and beamed across the world, and where technology can be at once magical and manipulated. It is a place of potentials and for harm, and I ask my students where they fit on this spectrum and how they envision the future of humanity if technology continues to evolve.

A quote that resonates with my positionality regarding what is at stake revolves around the question of whether we can say that Pinchas or the interaction was "real." By real, I mean whether it is our imagination filling in the gaps of the interaction or whether Pinchas in this current form has the "integrity" of being a virtual being. Peter Levine (1997) explains that the "realness of an image is reinforced by the intensity of the arousal associated with it" (p. 210). What "arousal" or reaction is elicited from interacting with digital Pinchas on the screen? Which emotional response can validate or enhance the "realness of his image" as well as the "realness" of the interaction itself?

I noticed that often my questions touch upon the existential question of what it is to be human. To be remembered and to preserve ancestral memory for future generations is often engaged within the context of religion, tradition, and faith. Why is that? It is a liminal space of an ancient question: What is life? Why are we here? Where do we belong? Questions directly related to themes around mortality and the afterlife are age-old. Shamans and mediums straddle worlds in their communications; different religious traditions and cultural practices address memorializing, how we process traumatic memory, how stories are told and navigated and how compelled

we are as a collective to avenge or correct historic wrongs. Is justice and the future of humanity in our hands or god's hands? Do we look forward or back? Does history repeat itself, and if you have faith, what does it matter?

Grob (2008) refers to the question of "what is at stake" in "the act of remembering". He explains that the dynamics of remembering "implies subjects who remember and whose identities and values shape their memories; at the same time the act of remembering creates an educational space in which our memories can help redefine our identities and commitments." What memory commitments can this educational space be activating? I would expand the notion of the "educational space" to include references to humanistic values. For example, memory is intricately related to concepts of personhood, being or soul, whether one applies personhood to the physical or spiritual. When discussing memory, the space becomes instantly liminal, like the concepts of tangible or intangible heritage, or rather, what is passed on between people and generations. Dimensions in Testimony in its current form seems to engage this space, yet whether the students or participants look at Pinchas in this way is to be discussed. I also appreciate that these students who spent the semester studying Freire, critical literacy, and concepts of empowerment feel that some aspect of humanity is lost and not being fulfilled by this technology.

Theoretical and Philosophical Reflection
The Liminal Space of Witnessing and Dialogue

> *"The etymology of dialogue does not derive from di, meaning "two," but dia meaning "across" and as such, it suggests not so much engaging in something that is shared, such as a version of the "common good" about which we can then begin to talk, as it does the image of a bridge that spans a gap or difference."* (Todd, 2015 p. 59)

The idea of dialogue as a way of bridging the gap of understanding for the sake of the common good may be one of the key motives propelling the use of this technology. For example, Helskog and Weiss (2021) describe *"The relational-communicative wisdom dimension"* of dialogue. This dimension emphasizes the existential nature of building connection through dialogue. By "developing the ability to engage in profound, meaningful dialogue and heart-to-heart communication with others, with the aim of reaching mutual understanding, and thus to engage in the lives of other people in ways that make others and oneself grow" (ibid., p. 80). They also emphasize the ethical implications of this dimension because it encourages giving voice to the participant in ways that establish what they are comfortable with and

"being able to judge when such connecting is inappropriate and stay with-
in limits that prevents unwanted intrusion into the life world of the other"
(ibid.). The concept of boundaries and unwanted intrusion is very important
and touches upon the theme of hermeneutical justice and the ethics of dia-
logue. Hermeneutical justice emerges when boundaries are respected, and
the narrative (and its delivery) is controlled by the speaker within reason.
This is also why what emerges from this digital Dimensions in Testimony
interaction seems to throw into question whether this is a true "dialogue"?
Is the speaker really controlling the message if it is digitized? Is this inter-
action something akin to what Freire would describe as the banking model
of education. For example, Freire calls for a critical literacy in which people
are self-reflective and see themselves as co-creators of knowledge. Freire
(2000) explains:

> Dialogue is an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter
> in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed
> to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue
> cannot be reduced to the act of one person's "depositing" ideas in anoth-
> er, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the
> discussants. (p. 88-89)

When speaking of Freire's well-known characterization of depositing in-
formation vs. bottom-up critical thinking, the deeper question that echoes
is about receiving information vs. synthesizing knowledge or information
to create meaning that reverberates personally in the students' lives in a
way that leaves an impression or possibility for future use. For example,
Larry Green and Gary (2016) refer to "the relationship between experience
and meaning, between ontology and epistemology," which "moves the em-
phasis away from 'received wisdom' in favor of the process of meaning
making" (Gendlin 1997, as cited in Green and Gary, 2016 p. 48). What
the students explain here is that Pinchas is presented by the creators as the
giver of information, but upon further reflection, I am not sure if the in-
formation participants receive from him would be considered wisdom. We
need to really question the definition of wisdom. What the student volun-
teers emphasized is that they want to create meaning from his words, and
they ask whether meaning-making occurs in this space. Some felt that they
needed to put the effort into synthesizing his information to create mean-
ing, which shows that perhaps he was not "designed" to create meaning
for the students but rather to give raw information for them to synthesize.
Perhaps in this way, this project was successful since it allowed students to
see what the digital person was or was not able to provide, and therefore,
if they chose to, they could use their own creative imagination to fill those

gaps left in the so-called dialogue to create or negotiate a more personal meaning to their interaction.

This space where not everything was answered by digital Pinchas could be considered a liminal space if presented under the right conditions and can encourage reflection where "ambiguity and ambivalence are finally being acknowledged rather than abolished" (Green and Gary, 2016, p. 52). By acknowledging the vagueness and ambiguity, both students and teacher can question what is omitted and whose responsibility it is to fill in the gaps. It is in this ambiguous liminal space that the technology can be a case or catalyst for a reflective dialogical classroom space where ambiguity and the liminal can be discussed. With proper guidance, the emerging dialogue about the shortcomings of Dimensions in Testimony has the potential to expand students' perceptions of what they are experiencing as well as the ethical and futuristic implications. "Modern thought, impatiently grasping for concepts, is quick to dismiss or discard experience that cannot be framed within objective, conceptual thinking, as not worthy of analysis, or to deem it simply it as experience yet-to-be objectified (Marcel 2011, Green and Gary, 2016, p. 56). If presented in an existential light, this "experience yet-to-be objectified" is fertile ground for utilizing reflective praxis methodology to encourage larger reflection about human nature, perception, and technological interventions. So, for example, according to Biesta (2013), the experience of "being taught" versus "learning from" requires an openness to transcendence. Could the notion of "being taught" be applied to Pinchas's words, but the action of "learning from" require a more reciprocal engagement? When conversing with a person from the past who is on the verge of their own mortality, the student views them as someone with end-of-life knowledge. For the students, the elder's reflection on their life is the gem of this person's wisdom, rather than in hearing a rehashing of the subject's life story, especially one that has already been documented. Details about the person's life are just details, but the students are craving the big picture, a more existential dialogue. They seem to want philosophical interaction, possibly even mentorship. There is something strangely transcendent happening in the student's desire for connection with the person present on the screen in the not quite dialogical space of Dimensions in Testimony.

Green and Gary (2016) characterize "modern education" "as the development of curiosity via critical thinking, the pedagogical aim for a time of liminality needs to be the cultivation of wonder that is open to the emergent" (p. 57). This yearning for true existential connection is tangible and noteworthy, but when technology does not allow for emergence or denies the student this, can the teacher create that space? "Openness to the

emergent" can also include the discomfort that emerges when technology and the analogue converge in the mind. There is a sorting out that happens in the question of "what is real" that can be swept away or more fully explored.

Perhaps this technology seeks to freeze Pinchas and his life into a point in time while the students view him as something timeless and to be engaged with. Perhaps there is a craving there. The word that might be used is "authenticity". Can Pinchas be considered an "authentic human" once his words are fed through a chat machine? To what extent is Pinchas a historic being or an ahistorical being or is he a "being" at all? Todd (2014) explains that the pedagogical space where dialogue and conversation occur has a liminal potential (p. 55). "Such pedagogical spaces can be seen as sites of liminality, or threshold spaces, whereby the self undergoes a process of change occasioned by what lies in-between what one knows and what is utterly strange. The liminality of pedagogical spaces is very much concerned with actual encounters in the present instead of with measuring our experiences (of others) against the standard of some idealized view of humanity" (Todd, 2014, p. 59).

Dimensions in Testimony is a pedagogical space in which the past is presenced in a digital encounter, in which those who had formerly been alive are preserved to be interacted with. Why are the ethics of this not being addressed? Why is it taken as a given that it is okay to resurrect the dead for the purposes of storytelling? I feel that this should be addressed in relation to the "liminal" potential. The other question that emerges from this characterization is the liminality of memory itself. Lambek (2016) explains:

> We must understand memory as essentially incomplete; memory is perspectival, and the perspective is a continuously shifting one. The voicing of memory is transitional, no longer fully subjective, and not yet fully objective before it is legitimated in collective constructions like history textbooks, ritual commemorations, or legal testimony (or vice versa). (p. 242)

In the context of witnessing, there is the assumption that the speaker is the truth-teller, the person giving their testimony. To whom? In a media age, this often looks like digital or online truth-telling. But often this is one-sided, speaker to listener, testimony to witness, one could say that Dimensions in Testimony might try to offer a shift in this dynamic.

Yerushalmi (2011) explains that people's agency to remember and to forget can be an active process. "A people can never 'forget' what it has never received in the first place." Therefore, remembering is an act of

transmission of that which has been "accepted as meaningful." The role of the current generation to filter what they find meaningful and worthy of transmission is a form of selectivity, omission, and censorship. "The break in transmission can occur abruptly or by a process of erosion" (ibid.). This conscious or unconscious hermeneutical injustice will be further discussed in the next section.

Hermeneutical Injustice, An Encounter with History or illusion?

> And each of these methods of evading memory is related to larger social and political circumstances of their recounting. As remembering is a social act, so too is forgetting. The contemporary landscape of memory is created through the modern ars memoria, which involve not so much feats of hypermnesia as of strategic forgetting. (Herman, 2016, p. 191).

In the context of philosophical pedagogy and reflective practice research, it was my hope that the students' individual experiences using this technology would provide a space for existential reflection about such themes as mortality, justice, and legacy. The duality of life, which Zygmunt Bauman (2011) characterized as "mortal and immortality" makes death and life co-present, a "ghostly presence: the obsession of all cultures and religions with bridge-building between admittedly brief biological life and life-after-death", a space where bridges can be built between worlds (Bauman as cited in Jacobsen & Davies, 2011, p. 386). This "bridge-building" can spur one to become preoccupied with death and fearful of life, or it can motivate one to make an impact, create a legacy, have offspring, take photographs, document their existence, and leave a mark somehow. This technology is marketed as the latter, and it was my hope that the participants might also perceive these large themes. For example, one might say that the above interaction was "other-worldly." It was meant to immortalize those before they die, to live on after death. Here is a person who was recorded when they were alive, and now, after death, they are reembodied and accessible in holographic or screen form, ready to make "eye contact" and talk to the public. When people who have been historically silenced are given space to share about their lives, this is an act of liberation, of re-humanizing oneself in a larger societal context.

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back,' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that

is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (hooks, 1989)

In this format, Pinchas is the Levinian "other" with whom the participant seeks to dialogue. "For Levinas, speaking to the Other- a dialogue- is an ethical relation. To do otherwise, Levinas insists, is to reduce the Other to an Object" (Levinas cited in Marková, 2016, p.161). Since Pinchas is not in earthly form, there is an imbalance because he does not have the capacity to truly engage. Yet an ethical relation is taking place; the student may feel subservient, pressured to keep the legacy alive and share his story further. But to what extent is this an ethical relation in the Levinian sense since Pinchas is not quite human and this is not quite a dialogue?

Is "digitized" Pinchas a person or an object? Human, posthuman, or digitized human? Can his words be considered "historical testimony" or a "liberated voice" if it is filtered through computer algorithms, cueing up what it deems to be appropriate responses to the spectator's select questions? The information might be given to the public, but as the students discussed, the question of what you do with it is a major concern. What is the listener supposed to do with this information? Where does empowerment fit in? Who is the intended listener? Who does this technology truly serve? Then again, in the context of never forgetting the trauma of the Holocaust, there is a humanitarian call for stories to be remembered and shared with future generations.

I encourage students to question the limits of technology as memory keeper. For example, what does it mean when Pinchas can only answer certain questions? How is that epistemologically sound? Perhaps this technology uses antiquated concepts of knowledge as information and dialogue as merely questions and answers, but has the nuances and synergy of these historic testimonial encounters. For example, Walter Benjamin explains, "The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object" (ibid., p. 221). In the context of Dimensions in Testimony, the students became disenchanted in a sense. They were not suspending disbelief; they were questioning "the authority of the object."

If Dimensions in Testimony seeks a space for producing or sharing history and people's narratives, the questions of who is given a voice, which topics are voiced, and which are silenced is a vague space that is not alluded

to in the technology. How much of the testimony is scrapped, asked to be retold, or geared to specific audiences or to yield specific emotions or calls to action? This dynamic is at the core of what historians and archivists (amongst others) grapple with. In *From Silencing the Past – Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015) notes:

> For what history is changes with time and place or, better said, history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives. What matters most are the process and conditions of production of such narratives. Only a focus on that process can uncover the ways in which the two sides of historicity intertwine in a particular context. Only through that overlap can we discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others. (p. 25)

The themes of presence, authenticity and temporality may lead one to question whether this digitized person has been created for "historic" uses. I contend that while the digitized human may be created or immortalized for documentation, there is a level of affect that goes beyond the notion of history. This digitized person is speaking in the first person about their experiences, knowing that it will be viewed by the masses. Would this alter what they say? Also, the person is describing their experiences that may have happened over 70 years from the date they are recording their testimony. Memory is malleable and not infallible. Also, there is a distinction between historic truth and personal truth that needs to be considered whenever someone gives testimony.

Part of this existential exploration includes an exploration of how Pinchas and the student participants are situated in the time-space continuum on the screen of Dimensions in Testimony on the IWitness platform. Freire explains (2000):

> Through their continuing praxis, men and women simultaneously create history and become historical-social beings. Because-in contrast to animals-people can tridimensionalize time into the past, the present, and the future, their history, in function of their own creations, develops as a constant process of transformation within which epochal units materialize. These epochal units are not closed periods of time, static compartments within which people are confined. (p. 101)

In terms of temporality, in its current form, if you ask the digitized human questions beyond its intended use, you will get a recording of him saying that he was made in 2014 and is unable to talk about the current time context in which the student encounters him. With his statement about temporality, you are snapped out of the time continuum. Does this enhance authenticity for the viewer by situating Pinchas back in his contextual time,

or does it interrupt or snap the viewer out of suspended disbelief about the nowness of the encounter? Then again, the technology as it is now is not advanced enough for the digitized human to seem solid or completely embodied.

Walter Benjamin explains, "technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record" (WA, p. 220-221). In the examples of Pinchas, the digitized human, not only does this technology presence the person into a foreign environment, it almost literally presences the deceased back onto this physical earthly plane.

"One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition" (WA, p. 221). A traditional and especially a secular or atheistic point of view would emphasize that it would be impossible for this "dead" person to be present and "alive" in any environment. If we broaden our perspective, this digitized human is "displaced" and put into a museum setting or on a laptop screen, thus disrupting concepts of culture that emphasize understanding the past in the context of the past. Benjamin explains that in most situations, reproduction limits contextuality, or the story of the work. "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (WA, p. 220) One can liken this to spiritualist minstrel-type shows where "ghosts" appeared for audiences, but it turned out the ghostly presence was merely a magic trick designed to fool the audience. The ghostly presence was part of the collective allure.

Besides the allure of the novelty of encountering a digitized human, another consideration is the intention and consent of the person being recorded. In the case of Dimensions in Testimony, this person was recorded for posterity purposes to educate the public about the atrocities of the Holocaust, with the aim that history would not repeat itself. Benjamin writes, "But now the separated image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public" (WA, p. 231). With the aim to "never forget" the Holocaust, the interactive recording of Pinchas is present in select traveling exhibitions and assorted Holocaust Centers around the world.

The idea that this recording will knowingly be made available to the masses changes the dynamics of the intention of the participants (both actor and receiver). Benjamin (1936) writes: "While facing the camera he knows that ultimately, he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market. This market, where he offers not only his labor but also

his whole self, his heart and soul, is beyond his reach" (WA, p. 231). It is interesting to note that Benjamin sees these mechanical productions through the lens of their possible effect on the masses and their link to capitalistic models. While my project does not overtly focus on politics, it is important to mention that this type of technology that is designed for a somewhat personal or intimate encounter has the potential to be used for the betterment or detriment of society. Specifically, Benjamin's concern is that the mass spreading of imagery and film can be used for fascist purposes. For example, what if this recording was of someone whose testimony was created or edited for the purposes of riling up the masses? This level of encounter might be more persuasive than other forms of propaganda, and the potential for unethical applications of this technology needs to be further explored.

Digitalization, Fleeting Connection and Disappearing Auras

Dimensions in Testimony technology can be characterized as an extension or new iteration of the technologies of film and photography. As such, it is reasonable to use Benjamin's theories to see how they might be relevant to Dimensions in Testimony. Importantly, Benjamin highlights that technology cannot quite replicate true humanness, embodiment and the "aura." "This situation might also be characterized as follows: for the first time – and this is the effect of the film – man has to operate with his whole living person yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence, there can be no replica of it" (WA, p. 229). In this way, the actor becomes less than human and less than present. The actor is more of a shell, lacking the life force that animates it. The lack of aura via the interference of the camera is disorienting and unnerving. Benjamin refers to the reflexive and reflective aspect of seeing a person on film as a state of estrangement. He describes this as the "same kind of estrangement felt before one's own image in the mirror" (WA, p. 230). Does this technology take away the innate humanness of the subject and skew our concepts of mortality?

Benjamin's concern is that the person on film's "whole self, his heart and soul, is beyond his reach" (WA, p. 231). If we look at this person's video, we know that this person is potentially no longer physically present, but does that mean that it is not emotive, that we do not experience or feel the "heart and soul" or essence of the person? Benjamin uses the phrase "beyond reach," but what would the viewer be reaching for? Is there a physicality he is referring to? Do humans ever really feel "within reach" of each other? Is it possible to truly "know" someone? Perhaps Benjamin is referring to the "shriveling up of the aura with an artificial

buildup" (WA, p. 231). He explains, "To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" (WA, p. 223). If we apply Benjamin's characterization, how embodied or how human is this being, "Pinchas"?

Benjamin explains that film's potentiality is in its persuasiveness, "in its unique faculty to express by natural means and with incomparable persuasiveness all that is fairylike, marvelous, supernatural" (WA, p. 228). It is interesting to note that when Benjamin refers to film, he seems to not describe the act of filming oneself (perhaps a more recent byproduct of the selfie/blogging fixated culture of the 2000s). In his characterization, there is the role of "film actor" and "audience" and the lack of presence of the live audience when filming. The audience instead becomes the critic "without experiencing any personal contact with the actor" (WA, p. 228). Noting the mechanical and unnatural technology of camera as interloper, Benjamin explains that "The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera" (WA, p. 228). Thus, technology is the gatekeeper to one's experience of the person.

In the medium of photography or film, authenticity could possibly be considered by the viewer as what is seen; for example, the person is situated in a place, and in those images, the real seems within reach. The characters appear embodied and moving; they are "real." "The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this" (WA p. 232). In this spectacle, the viewer sees a visual product void of the process that it took to create the experience. He notes that the spectator's viewpoint does not include "camera equipment, lighting machinery, staff assistants, etc.—unless his eye were on a line parallel with the lens" (WA p. 233). This exclusive, intimate gaze to that which is on its screen lends itself to a proximity in which the viewer can feel "present" to the moment. He writes, "The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology" (WA p. 233). His metaphor of "orchid in the land of technology" emphasizes that in the midst of all of these mechanics there is the potential to "cultivate" something precious and organic that has value for the masses.

Does this way of preserving an image of oneself, even if it includes voice and story, result in a shortening of time and space to such a degree that the person becomes ahistorical and, in turn, loses their autonomy? The word "façade" is also applicable to describe the dynamic Benjamin is referring to. As one gets physically or even emotionally closer to these

digitized humans, the digitization's effect may lose something "real." Then again, this encounter may engage more of the senses than either film or photography. It might have an "aura." "The aura is a medium that envelopes and physically connects—and this blurs the boundaries between—subject and object" (Hansen, 2008, p. 351).

This technology causes a shift in how we perceive the subject. For example, "With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject" (WA, p. 236). This allows us to look closely from different angles, creating an unnatural intimacy yet a limited sense of a person. "The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses" (WA, p. 237).

If this digitization of a person is presented as being able to "make eye contact," would that create an aura that a viewer might feel some type of connection to in ways that affect them? Van den Akker (2016) writes, "The aura as the cult value of the work, distant though apparent in the work because of a historicizing gaze, gives us a sense of what has been and is no longer" (p. 46). Yet Benjamin explains, "in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind" (WA, p. 221). In this space bridging past and present resides the viewer, whose positionality could be considered liminal.

The questions the spectator asks shape their experience, which can be viewed from a different perspective, i.e., that the digitized human is trying to cultivate an earthly bond with the viewer. Yet, when a collective's sense of reality is altered and skewed by a technological intervention, what does that say about the future of culture, especially a culture whose identity is situated in personal and collective memory and experiences? Would it make you value life more or less? What does it say about being in the moment and appreciating the present? Is it wrong to process grief over an encounter through a computer screen?

If we are to agree with Hillman's (1975) perspective, "the modern view imagines a universe divided into living subjects and dead objects. There is no space for anything intermediate, ambiguous, and metaphorical." Then we can ask ourselves whether Pinchas in digital form is "intermediate, ambiguous, and metaphorical." If he is, then perhaps we might adjust our expectations of what an interaction with him "should" be like. Are the students truly interacting or conversing with a person or rather with an illusory being based on a person who existed named "Pinchas"

who now exists in digitized form on a digital storytelling platform for the purpose of educating people about the Holocaust?

> For many, digital technology and the Internet remain incomprehensible, leaving room for mythical and magical interpretations especially in relation to a prospect many prefer to deny: ultimate nonexistence….Ironically, it seems that science and new technology now provide the fuel for a re-enchantment of society, and the now normalized suspension of disbelief inherent in the consumption of media entertainment and popular culture helps to facilitate this process. (Sherlock, 2013)

In the context of such a traumatic event as the Holocaust, the question of "ultimate nonexistence" is deeply rooted in the context of remembering and forgetting and the technologies that may play a role in that process. This leads us to question and explore the role media and culture play in the future of preserving life stories. Whether virtual dialogue is the answer to re-enlivening the past is an emerging field that will need to be explored ethically and practically as these technologies continue to evolve.

Final Reflections

As a researcher of digitalization and heritage, I find myself grappling with the push to digitalize. When I adjust the kaleidoscope of my reflective praxis, I see the past and present and future converging, mixing, and separating out. I consistently ask myself about the beauty of books, the joys of imagination, and how, when we read, worlds come alive, gain shape inside our brains, and live there. While there is such a thing as historical truths, we are still subjective human beings shaped by our own unique wiring, socio-cultural lenses, and religious lenses, amongst many other things. I ask myself what memories are meant to be held onto, and what needs to be let go, and how and why. Obviously, the topic of the Holocaust in this paper is uniquely situated under the category of what shall be remembered so it can never happen again, but the difference between historic fact and the way people discuss their lived experiences is broad. Recently, I went to the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. There were guided tours and codes that people could scan to hear about Anne Frank and the others who were forced to live in an attic during the German occupation. I chose to walk through the exhibit without the handheld tour devices and just feel the space, smell the air, and imagine what it would be like to be Anne and her family existing in hiding in this space. I think of Anne's diary that I read in 5th grade and how close I felt to her. I remember how she wrote about birds in a cage and craving air. Although it has been decades since I read her book, I was amazed to remember her metaphoric descriptions. I cannot

say that I ever heard Anne's voice or sat across from her in real or virtual form, but I felt a connection to her that reached beyond the typed words of her book. I ask myself again: is this digitized interactive storytelling technology really the answer to continuing the legacy of those who have gone before us?

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