

Title: “Holocaust Ventriloquism?: Virtual Dyad or Living Performance”

Abstract: Living Testimony, or the ‘Era of Witness’ will soon come to and end. In response, Holocaust institutions and scholars across the world are responding with urgency and vigor—employing cutting edge technology, such as Holocaust survivor Pinchas Gutter’s virtual reality program “The Last Goodbye,” and the Illinois Holocaust Museum’s “Holocaust Holograms.” While these technological developments are remarkable with their ability to portray a specter of the past, they are unable to fully embody the testimonial experience exemplified in living testimony programs, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s (USHMM) *First Person*. *First Person* (2000-present) is an intimate conversation between a Holocaust survivor and the program’s host, Bill Benson. Over the course of the program’s 19-years, 107 individuals shared their stories, many between 15-26 times (some survivors shared multiple times in a summer). The longevity and documentation of *First Person* is unique: every session is filmed and follows the same structure as Benson and the survivors have an hour long conversation regarding the survivors’ pre-war; war; and post-war life, and conclude with closing comments by the survivors. Yet, despite Benson’s structural consistency, an individual testimony still varies between appearances. For example, each of Agi Geva’s 18 appearances are 18 *different* testimonies.

Drawing from my own research and fieldwork, interviews with the digital programs’ curators and host Bill Benson, I investigate and compare the temporal, living memory of *First Person* to that of the atemporal digital representations, which address the need for permanency, but are grounded in a particular time and place. In this paper, I demonstrate that testimony in the ‘era of witness’ is fluid and changing, while the digital ‘solutions’ are not. I conclude by arguing that digital representations demonstrate a canonization of Holocaust memory, removing any sense of ethical urgency.