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## Critique Beyond Judgment: Exploring Testimony and Truth in the Classroom

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# Critique Beyond Judgment: Exploring Testimony and Truth in the Classroom

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## Introduction

Including survivor voices and testimony in classroom conversations about genocide, its impact, its representation, and the possibilities for its prevention, is crucial to a holistic and ethical pedagogy. However, instructors who wish to include first-person accounts of genocide in the classroom are faced with a number of practical, conceptual, and ideological decisions in how the material is presented and contextualized for their students. The use of survivor testimony as historical data raises questions about the relationship between memory and experience, and the authority of historical scholarship. In each encounter with testimony and with an individual survivor sharing their traumatic experience (even when recorded or mediated, but especially when physically present in the classroom), there is an implicit conflict between the authority of the historical archive, and the experiential and testimonial authority of the survivor.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, as if this were not enough to negotiate, instructors are also faced with the loaded and complex moral imperative that often accompanies the teaching of genocide. In the case of the Holocaust, which will be the primary focus of this article, these issues are made even more prominent by the long and complex history of the reception of the Holocaust in the United States, including its public memory and memorialization, and the ways in which it has been utilized as a moral touchstone in the decades since the end of WWII.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the use of testimony in our Holocaust and Genocide Studies courses carries with it the need for a careful balance of critique and analysis, while respecting the autonomy and traumatic reality of the survivor's own experience.

These difficulties motivated much of the conversation on teaching Holocaust and Genocide Studies during the 2021 Curt C. and Else Silberman Faculty Seminar offered by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies. Seminar participants came from a wide range of disciplinary

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<sup>1</sup> Within the field of Holocaust literary studies (which closely involves the study of written testimony) Lawrence Langer is among the most prominent of the scholars who claim a privileged place for the voices of survivors. See especially, Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982). On the other hand, Berel Lang argues that historicity ought to be the benchmark against which all representations, even the highly subjective (such as memoirs), ought to be measured. See Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). Of particular note is James Young's discussion of the reception and treatment of *literary* testimony (including wartime diaries) as history, and the tendency of readers, scholars included, to overlook the constructed and self-aware nature of the literary composition of such texts. James E. Young, "Interpreting Literary Testimony: A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs." *New Literary History* 18, no. 2 (1987), 403–423, accessed August 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468737>. For a now-dated but broad set of discussions, most of which centralize the place of survivor memoir and testimony while acknowledging that the kinds of information that can be gleaned from first-person accounts of genocide differ from other kinds of historical data, see Samuel Totten and William S. Parsons, eds. "Special Section: Teaching about Genocide," *Social Education* 55, no. 2 (1991), 84–133.

<sup>2</sup> For two particularly insightful overviews of how the Holocaust came to be utilized as a moral touchstone, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The 'Holocaust' from War Crime to Trauma Drama," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002), 5–85; Thomas Pegelow Kaplan, "The Universalisation of the Holocaust as a Moral Standard," in *Beyond "Ordinary Men": Christopher R. Browning and Holocaust Historiography*, ed. Thomas Pegelow Kaplan et al. (Leiden: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019), 159–175. For an exemplary case study of the moral work of Holocaust memory in practice, see Irit Dekel, *Mediation at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

specializations, including Genocide Studies, History, International Relations, Jewish Studies, Religious Studies, and others. Over the course of the seminar, the participants continually expressed concern for, and discussed the difficulties of balancing their courses, such that voices of victims and witnesses were given space to be heard, while maintaining a level of scholarly rigor that would allow students to leave the course familiar with historical data, legal histories, and a broad set of tools for engaging in independent research. At the close of the seminar, groups of participants were tasked with developing classroom activities or exercises that engaged with a pressing pedagogical issue they had identified over the course of the seminar. This article presents one of these classroom activities and contextualizes it within the field of Holocaust Studies.<sup>3</sup> This exercise is a scaffolded examination of video clips of survivor testimony that focuses on a different element of the filmed testimony at each stage. It proposes an approach to the critical analysis of filmed testimony that is not interested in collecting from its historical data, or evaluating its historicity, but rather in engaging with the constructed, performative, and experiential nature of the testimonial act.<sup>4</sup>

Although the classroom activity was designed as a general framework that could be applied to clips of survivors of any genocide, because of its distinctive place within the public memory of the United States, this article will focus on how this activity might be understood in the context of Holocaust Studies. I will begin by discussing some of the conceptual and epistemological issues that have emerged in scholarship on the place and role of survivor testimony (and survivor memory) within the study of the Holocaust. There is a vast amount of scholarship in Holocaust Studies that engages with the historiographical place of survivor testimony. For the purposes of this article, in order to highlight the central issues that motivated the development of this classroom activity, I will be drawing primarily on Paul Ricœur, whose inquiries into the relationship between memory and history mark the Holocaust as having special significance, and Annette Wieviorka, whose 2006 *The Era of the Witness* offers a conceptual history of how the figure of the Holocaust survivor came to occupy its distinctive epistemological position in the decades after the trial of Adolf Eichmann.

From there, I will present the classroom activity, which takes a constructed approach to the study of (filmed) survivor testimony. The critical approach modeled in this activity offers a framework for classroom discussions of the testimonial act itself, and for reflecting on the act of viewing, witnessing, or listening to testimony. The conclusion of this article reflects on the value of helping students to recognize the constructed and mediated nature of filmed testimony as a generative source of meaning, rather than a barrier to historicity or historical data.

### Testimony as History

Paul Ricœur argues that the vast collection of oral testimony that emerged from the Holocaust complicates the writing of its history. Ricœur claims that the emotional intensity of the personal narratives these testimonies recall, and of the experience of the Holocaust, are at extreme odds with anything its audience might relate to. As such, oral testimony, (“even when written”):

poses a problem of reception that being placed in an archive does not answer and for which it even seems inappropriate, even provisionally incongruous. This has to do with such literally extraordinary limit experiences—which make for a

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<sup>3</sup> Harry Merritt et al., “Assignment: Survivor Testimony” (Pedagogy Presentation presented at the 2021 Curt C. and Else Silberman Faculty Seminar offered by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Online, June 2021).

<sup>4</sup> See especially Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 176.

difficult pathway in encountering the ordinary, limited capacities for reception of auditors educated on the bases of a shared comprehension.<sup>5</sup>

Ricœur, here, writing in 2000, echoes an assumption that was central to the early scholarly discourse of Holocaust representation in the United States, and which has formed one of the core debates in the field since: whether the Holocaust is in some way distinctively (perhaps “uniquely”) unrepresentable or inaccessible to those who did not experience it.<sup>6</sup> As Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel remarked in a lecture in 1990: “The survivor speaks in an alien tongue. You will never break its code. His works will be of only limited use to you. They are feeble, stammering, unfinished, incoherent attempts to describe a single moment of being painfully, excruciatingly alive.”<sup>7</sup> This claim in its most common form asserts that the Holocaust is strictly beyond the understanding of anyone who did not experience it directly, and in its more radical forms, that the Holocaust is fundamentally unrepresentable.<sup>8</sup>

When Ricœur speaks of a “crisis of testimony”<sup>9</sup> resulting from the incongruity between survivors’ experience and recollections of concentration camps and what their audience is able to imagine and relate to, he is simultaneously enshrining “comprehension” as the necessary condition for testimony to be received, and denying the possibility of that comprehension.<sup>10</sup> Wiesel seems to be a hidden interlocutor of the epistemology of testimony Ricœur describes above. In addition to echoing Wiesel’s impassable division between the survivor and the reader or audience, Ricœur also claims for the witness an identical authority from which testimony is delivered: “I was there.”<sup>11</sup> The ability to utter this statement, and thus to displace oneself from the present into memory and distant space is what characterizes the function and authority of testimony for both writers.

For Wiesel and Ricœur, this authority is grounded in the implicit claim to a continuity of subjectivity, an unbroken connection between the now and then, the here and there: “Memory implies personal witness,” wrote Wiesel a decade prior to Ricœur, citing the opening lines to *Lamentations 3*, “‘*Ani hagever*’—I am the man, I was there.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, for both writers, a survivor’s testimonial authority is evinced by both their words and by their physical existence itself: “Look at the [memorial] stones. They are testimonies, as are our lives,” Wiesel said in a

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<sup>5</sup> Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 175.

<sup>6</sup> The two most consistent proponents of the notion that survivor testimony provides information that cannot be gleaned from archival data, and which is to a greater or lesser extent inaccessible to those who did not experience the Holocaust, are Lawrence L. Langer and Alvin H. Rosenfeld. See, especially, Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) and Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980). See also Susan Gubar, *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Elie Wiesel, “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration,” in *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, annot. Elliot Lefkowitz, 2nd ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to these scholars, Berel Lang’s 1988 edited collection includes essays from a dozen or so scholars and writers of Holocaust literature, all of whom uphold this position. See Berel Lang, ed., *Writing and the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988). As I will note briefly below, this notion of unrepresentability found influential proponents among scholars influenced by psychoanalysis, most notably Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, who extend this assumption to the claim that even survivors cannot fully understand their experiences. See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 176.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>12</sup> Elie Wiesel, “Looking Back,” in *Lessons and Legacies III: Memory, Memorialization, and Denial*, ed. Peter Hayes (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 14.

lecture delivered at Yad Vashem in 2002.<sup>13</sup> The living body, Ricœur notes, “the body, the absolute here, is the landmark for any there,” is the ultimate authorization for a survivor’s or witness’ claim to having been present elsewhere, and the resultant claim to authenticity and authority of the testimony.<sup>14</sup>

The centrality of survivors and survivor testimony to both history and public memorialization of the Holocaust in the United States was closely tied to hierarchies that emerged among survivors themselves in the immediate postwar years.<sup>15</sup> As historian Raul Hilberg notes, there was an entrenched hierarchy among survivors of the Holocaust, grounded, essentially, in their proximity to the gas chambers and sites of mass killing:

There is an unmistakable rank order among the Jews who lived through the wartime Nazi years. In this hierarchy, the decisive criteria are exposure to risk and depth of suffering. Members of communities that were left intact and people who continued to live in their own homes are hardly considered survivors at all. At the other end of the scale, individuals who emerged from the woods or the camps are the survivors par excellence.<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, physical sites of memorialization, notably museums, that were established in the decades that followed similarly privilege survivors’ voices.<sup>17</sup> This hierarchy, transformed into a seemingly impassable barrier symbolically represented by the walls and gates of the concentration camp, entered into the general and scholarly lexicon of the Holocaust

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<sup>13</sup> Elie Wiesel, “Whoever Listens to a Witness, Becomes a Witness,” (closing remarks at the closing session of the International Conference “The Legacy of Holocaust Survivors,” Yad Vashem, April 2002), accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/elie-wiesel.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 149. Giorgio Agamben takes up this binary as a conceptual touchstone in his analysis of the figure of the *Muselmann*, and its metaphysical implications for our understanding of the Holocaust, grounding his argument in Primo Levi’s assertion that the survivor speaks for the dead and only because the dead cannot, that the dead are the “true witnesses.” See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2002); Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 84.

<sup>15</sup> For examples of the ways in which this manifested in scholarship, see George Steiner’s *Language and Silence*, which I will discuss below, in which he asserts the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust in several essays. George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays On Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*, 1st ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1967). Among historians, see in particular the work of Steven T. Katz, *Historicism, the Holocaust, and Zionism: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought and History* (New York: New York University Press, 1992). For a more recent anthology generally critiquing of the notion of uniqueness and its implications, see Alan Rosenbaum’s edited collection. Alan S. Rosenbaum, ed. *Is the Holocaust Unique?: Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 187.

<sup>17</sup> For a close case study of this phenomenon, see Edward Linenthal’s history of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum* (New York: Viking, 1997); for a comparative study of how the privileging of survivor voices shapes the experience of several Holocaust memorial museums, see Avril Alba, *The Holocaust Memorial Museum: Sacred Secular Place* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Survivors continue to be given primacy in much public memorialization practice: see, for example, the recent special issue of *Holocaust Studies* on teaching the Holocaust in the post-pandemic world, and especially Marcus et al., “Holocaust Education in Transition from Live to Virtual Survivor Testimony: Pedagogical and Ethical Dilemmas,” *Holocaust Studies* 28, no. 3 (2022), 279–301, accessed September 26, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2021.1979176>. Marcus et. al examine museums that are specifically responding to the absence of live survivor voices, operating under the explicit assumption that first-person accounts are the best way of presenting the history of the Holocaust. Literary scholar Gary Weissman even goes so far as to argue, as discussed below, that the experience of surviving is a crucial part of the “full experience” of the Holocaust. See Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 92, emphasis in original.

in metaphors for absolute otherness of the Holocaust experience, such as “the other kingdom,” “*l’univers concentrationnaire*” (“concentrationary universe”), or Wiesel’s “the kingdom of night.”<sup>18</sup>

The 1960s was a watershed moment in the public memory of the Holocaust in the United States.<sup>19</sup> The Eichmann trial, in combination with the rising publication and popularity of survivor memoir in the late fifties and early sixties, enshrined what Annette Wieviorka has called “the era of the witness” in post-war remembrance, concretizing the survivor as *witness* to the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup> This moment in the reception and legal history of the Holocaust, Wieviorka claims, had the remarkable effect of turning the survivor into “the bearer of history:”

And the advent of the witness profoundly transformed the very conditions of writing the history of the genocide. With the Eichmann trial, the witness became an embodiment of memory [*un homme-mémoire*], attesting to the past and to the continuing presence of the past. Concurrently, the genocide came to be defined as a succession of individual experiences with which the public was supposed to identify.<sup>21</sup>

Part of prosecutor Gideon Hausner’s strategy was flooding the courtroom with an abundance of witness testimony. In stark contrast to the Nuremberg trials, in which the focus was on the perpetrators, here, the public story of the Holocaust was told through the voices of its victims, and *individual* victims at that. There was a distinct *didactic* aim to this method: “For the first time,” writes Wieviorka, “a trial explicitly set out to provide a lesson in history. For the first time, the Holocaust was linked to themes of pedagogy and transmission.”<sup>22</sup> Hausner was aiming, it seems, to affect the viewing public emotionally, such that they might begin to comprehend the depths of the victims’ suffering, more than gleaning historical data, to identify with those testifying victims.<sup>23</sup> In the wake of the Eichmann trial, as Wieviorka describes it, this became a model for the way in which the Holocaust was presented, both in popular culture and in public discourse surrounding Holocaust remembrance, thus laying the conditions for Ricœur’s “crisis of testimony,” in which the central mechanism through which the public can

<sup>18</sup> “The other kingdom” is Guthrie’s broad translation of the title of Rousset’s memoir, “*L’univers Concentrationnaire*,” which first appeared in English in 1947. Though it had negligible impact on the reading public when compared to Anne Frank’s diary (first published in English in 1952) and Wiesel’s *Night* (first published in English in 1956), it has served as a critical and comparative touchstone for much of the early scholarship on Holocaust literature, and as an early model for the kind of ontological othering of the concentration camp that we see above. Interestingly, scholars such as Lawrence Langer and Alvin Rosenfeld tended to employ the French phrase, “*l’univers concentrationnaire*,” as their primary referent, perhaps because of its further alienating quality for an English-language readership. See David Rousset, *L’univers Concentrationnaire* (Paris: Éditions du Pavois, 1946); David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom*, trans. Ramon Guthrie (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947); Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (New York: Modern Library, 1952); Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1960); Langer, *Literary Imagination*; Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*; Elie Wiesel, “Acceptance Speech” (speech, Oslo, December 10, 1986), *NobelPrize.Org*, accessed September 25, 2021, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/acceptance-speech/>.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed study of the post-war decades in broad US reception of the Holocaust, see Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957–1965* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). For an examination of the impact of Holocaust memoirs on the public perception of the Holocaust, see Alvin Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). For studies that engage survivor memoir alongside other popular culture representations of the Holocaust, see Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), and Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 88.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–70.

relate and respond to the Holocaust is one that presents an experience beyond their ability to even imagine.<sup>24</sup>

Wieviorka argues that a number of major institutions in the United States consciously adopted a similar approach (that is, identification with survivors) to relaying information about (and creating emotional response to) the Holocaust.<sup>25</sup> The method developed by the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies for interviewing and collecting testimonials from survivors, which places a primary emphasis on unearthing ostensibly repressed memories, has had a significant influence on other testimony collection and oral history projects that have emerged in the last fifty years.<sup>26</sup> These are characterized, according to Wieviorka, by taking place in a space separate from the survivor's normal environment, "so that nothing will distract him or her from delving deeply into memory and the past," and with an interviewer whose primary role is to encourage, perhaps comfort, and aid the survivor in telling a singular and deeply individual memory-narrative.<sup>27</sup> "The interviewer is not supposed to comment on or correct the narrative."<sup>28</sup> The survivor's voice, and their recollection of the Holocaust *as they experienced it*, is granted absolute authority.

The Fortunoff archive, in this way, stands as an exemplar of the commitment to the memory and authority of the survivor as a critical and authoritative source for the historical archive. The question of historicity, that is, of the relationship between a survivor's memory and the documentable data of the Holocaust, seems to lie outside of the concern of the Holocaust testimony.

Before turning to our classroom activity, I want to first draw out some of the conceptual and epistemological implications of this use of testimony as history. First, in a persistent refusal

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 88; Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 176. See also Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 85–124; Shandler, *While America Watches*, 85–154. Shandler's chapters are a particularly careful history of the presentation of the Holocaust on broadcast televisions in the United States in the years between the Eichmann trial and the 1978 miniseries *Holocaust*, and the ways in which the trial shaped the iconography of the Holocaust in the US.

<sup>25</sup> Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 56–57, 70–71, 108–110. Wieviorka primarily cites Geoffrey Hartman, a literary theorist who was one of the founders of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, now housed at Yale University, as one of the foremost proponents of this approach to testimonial collections. See also Geoffrey Hartman, "Learning from Survivors" in *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). Jovan Byford notes that, while this is not uniquely American, it is an approach closely linked to the Fortunoff archive and characterizes the approach testimony collections that developed in the US from the 1970s onward. Jovan Byford, "Remembering Jasenovac: Survivor Testimonies and the Cultural Dimension of Bearing Witness." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 28, no. 1 (2014), 62–67, accessed September 26, 2022, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/543474>. This article is particularly interesting insofar as it contrasts US institutions, notably the Fortunoff archive and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and institutions in other nations conducting testimonial collection projects in Serbia.

<sup>26</sup> Hartman's full quotation: "The open-ended interview used at Yale is supposed never to interrupt an ongoing train of thought in order to pursue set questions, except to make sure that the time before persecution and after liberation is covered as well as the persecution itself. The aim is to release all memories, including *those latent or dissociated* (my emphasis)." Geoffrey Hartman, "The Humanities of Testimony: An Introduction," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006), 254–255, accessed September 22, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2005-002>. See also, Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 57–74; Hartman, *Learning from Survivors*; Byford, *Remembering Jasenovac*, 64–65. Other projects that modeled themselves on the Fortunoff Archive include, for example the University of Southern California (USC) Shoah Foundation: The Institute for Visual History and Education, founded by Steven Spielberg, which, in contrast to the Fortunoff collection, strives to emphasize the post-Holocaust reclamation and continuation of life that has been achieved by these survivors. This may be further evidence to Weissman's claim, discussed below, that the "full experience" of the Holocaust, as it is understood in the United States, belongs to the survivors, not the dead; Wieviorka is particularly critical of the Shoah Foundation on these grounds. Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 92; Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 110–120. In contrast, the interviews contained in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive seem to take pains to make those they interview comfortable, most often conducting the interviews in the survivor's own home. See, for example, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), *Oral History Interview Guidelines*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: USHMM, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 109; Hartman, *Humanities of Testimony*, 250–255.

<sup>28</sup> Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 109.

or even active hostility toward any critique or analysis of the survivor's testimony or written, published memoirs (as if they, too, are not carefully constructed, reviewed, and edited literary creations); and second, the broad and gradual reduction of the public understanding of the Holocaust and the survivor's experience to a singular narrative trajectory through the ghettos, camps (and specifically Auschwitz) and finally to liberation, that is not representative of the varied experiences of the Holocaust, its victims, or its survivors.

### *Critique as Denial*

The complex relationship between history and memory that troubles the place of testimony as historical data is not limited to the elevation of the survivor as the keeper of that memory, nor as a primary source of historical data. Much of the scholarship in Holocaust literature and representation, especially during the late 1970s and into the early 1980s, insisted on maintaining a sense of phenomenological and even ontological otherness to the Holocaust and the concentration camp experience in particular.<sup>29</sup> This position was motivated, in part, by a moralizing and protective instinct toward the survivors and their memories, an attempt to construct or reinforce a bulwark against silence, denial, and even revisionist narratives that had begun during the war and persisted in the postwar decades.<sup>30</sup>

In early scholarship on written Holocaust testimony (memoir, in particular), this occasionally took the extreme form of a refusal of critique itself. This position is epitomized by George Steiner in the early 1960s, who broadly asserts in several of his essays that: "The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside of reason."<sup>31</sup> Steiner would step back from this position as time passed, but his moral certitude that literary criticism and Holocaust testimony (particularly survivor writing) ought to be mutually exclusive remained assertive: "These books and the documents that have survived are not for 'review.' Not unless 'review' signifies, as perhaps it should in these instances, a 'seeing-again,' over and over."<sup>32</sup>

Although by the time he was writing in the 1980s, Alvin Rosenfeld had recognized that Steiner's position was "impossible to sustain in an extended study of the literature,"<sup>33</sup> he nevertheless asserts strongly that one ought to approach Holocaust documents as if they carry "the aura of a holy text," and (though he refrains from saying *how* it should be read) that we cannot "take it in our hands and read it as we do those books that reach us through the normal channels of composition and publication."<sup>34</sup> We must, rather, suspend our critical impulse in order to take Holocaust literature at its word, to recognize the historical truth that is implicit in each text. In doing so, we maintain both the inaccessibility of the Holocaust for ourselves, and concretize the place of the survivor (and their testimony) as singular authoritative source through which we might access the Holocaust.

This moral positioning, the sanctification, we might say, of survivor memory and its fortification against moral critique, reached a notable apex in the late 1990s when Elie Wiesel, responding to a critique made by literary critic Alfred Kazin about the literary realism of a particular passage in *Night*, suggested that for Kazin to doubt the "unvarnished" truth of

<sup>29</sup> See Langer, *Literary Imagination*; Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*; Lang, *Writing and the Holocaust*. Even Alan Mintz and David Roskies, writing separate but parallel projects in the early eighties, seems committed to this notion, even as they construct their histories of catastrophe literature around the notion that the mechanisms available for individuals to respond to destruction are anything but unique. See Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>30</sup> This was in part a direct response to a broader process in US public memory and discourse especially, in the wake of the Eichmann trial, by which the Holocaust became entrenched as *the* moral benchmark for historical events, the Nazis as absolute evil, and the Jewish people as their primary and direct victims. See also Alexander, *Social Construction*; Kaplan, *Universalisation*.

<sup>31</sup> Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 123.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>33</sup> Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Wiesel's memoir is tantamount to approving of Holocaust denial.<sup>35</sup> Kazin had previously written, in an essay that purported to recount the impact that Wiesel and Primo Levi had had on his career and his own literary thinking, a relatively mundane comment on the relationship between Wiesel's memorial writings and historical fact: "The more I learned about him, the *more I pursued the vast literature about Auschwitz*, the less surprised I would have been to learn that the episode of the boy struggling on the rope never happened."<sup>36</sup> By bringing into direct conflict the memory of the survivor (and *this* survivor, no less) and the "vast" literature available to Kazin about the Holocaust—though whether he refers to historical scholarship, other survivor writing, or both is unclear—Kazin, and Wiesel's subsequent response, draw our attention to the stakes of the epistemological conflict enacted by the conflation of, and continuing uncritical use of survivor memory as history.

### *Narrative Normativity*

The centrality of the survivor to discourse about the Holocaust, and their continued elevation as the primary, and in some cases, sole source of knowledge about the genocide has led to a particularly narrow understanding in the minds of much of the public of what the Holocaust is, and what it means to have experienced the Holocaust.<sup>37</sup> The reception history of the Holocaust in the United States played a crucial role in shaping this narrow public understanding of the Holocaust. It is still the case, as David Shneer points out, that "most people in the west imagine the [concentration] camps through the literary representations written by survivors of Auschwitz-Birkenau, because most survivors of the Holocaust found themselves in Auschwitz at one point in their tragic narratives."<sup>38</sup> As such, and given the strong survivor activism in the years and decades after the war, the proliferation of survivor narrative, both literary and archival, and especially the teaching of texts like Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (albeit its famously edited published versions) and Elie Wiesel's *Night* in schools, the broad US public has developed a limited sense for what it meant to have experienced the Holocaust.<sup>39</sup> This goes partway to explain why the gates of Auschwitz, despite the camp being liberated by the Red Army, has become one of the foremost images of the Holocaust in the visual representative landscape of the US.<sup>40</sup>

This need not have been the case, of course. The US military liberated Buchenwald and Dachau, and although photos of the mass graves and victims of those sites remain touchstone images, they certainly do not have the ubiquity or imagistic force of the "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" that

<sup>35</sup> Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 336; Wiesel, *Night* [1960]; Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Kazin, here, refers to a famous passage from Wiesel's *Night* in which he witnesses a young boy being hanged between two other men, and undergoes a crisis of faith, of sorts. Ironically, Wiesel himself would call into question the crisis of faith that most readers and critics inferred from this scene, in a chapter of his later memoir *All Rivers Run to the Sea* that recounts moments within Auschwitz in which the inmates prayed or performed other religious ceremonies. Alfred Kazin, "My Debt to Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi," in *Testimony: Contemporary Writers Make the Holocaust Personal*, ed. David Rosenberg (New York: Random House, 1989), 123, my emphasis; Wiesel, *Night* [2006], 61–65; Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 51–100.

<sup>37</sup> Linenthal quotes from interviews with Michael Berenbaum, who had been Deputy Director of the President's Commission on the Holocaust and then Project Director for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum up to its opening in 1993. See Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 44–45, and throughout.

<sup>38</sup> David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 153.

<sup>39</sup> See especially Rosenfeld, *End of the Holocaust*, 14–31; see also Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 9–17.

<sup>40</sup> Barbie Zelizer, in her extensive study of Holocaust photographs and their relationship to collective memory and memorialization, notes how important the pairing of images of atrocity is with descriptions and narratives. See Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5–10, 160–161. 180–197. The important metonymic function of iconic photographs of the Holocaust, paired with the observation Shneer makes of the ubiquity of Auschwitz to survivor accounts of the Holocaust and its impact on the western imagination of the camps, helps in part to explain the centrality of the images of Auschwitz itself.

hangs over the gates of Auschwitz. We might argue that these images offer a universalized and relatable icon of the Holocaust, far less alienating than the “piles of bodies and emaciated survivors, whom American journalists photographed extensively [at Dachau and Buchenwald];” yet, it is difficult to ignore the connection between the proliferation of testimonial and memoiristic representations and the centrality of Auschwitz to the public imagination of the Holocaust that Shneer highlights above.<sup>41</sup> As Shneer discusses at length, the example of the Soviet Union demonstrates the extent to which the elevation of particular symbols for the Holocaust was directly tied to the histories of reportage and public discourse within given nations during and after the war. Despite having liberated Auschwitz and Majdanek, among the largest concentration or extermination camps, it was the mass killing site at the ravine of Babi Yar, just outside of Kyiv, that “became the biggest and most lasting symbol of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union . . . as the largest burial pit, ravine, and trench, Babi Yar, more than Auschwitz, Majdanek, or other concentration camps came to symbolize the Soviet experience of Nazi atrocities.”<sup>42</sup> That the *concentration camp* at all became the central image for the Holocaust in the mindset of the US public, though unsurprising to us now, was equally tied to the centrality of survivors to the Holocaust narrative as it was constructed and received in the United States.<sup>43</sup>

This process, sometimes critically referred to as the “Americanization” of the Holocaust—that is, the entry of the Holocaust into the broader landscape of US public memory and history, both as a specific historical event and as a symbol for absolute evil—further centralized the survivor and imbued this narrative with a sense of progression and hope.<sup>44</sup> For Wieviorka, this is one of the criteria that distinguishes the Shoah Foundation and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) as pedagogical institutions and spaces from those such as the Fortunoff archive: the latter, she claims, centralizes “the person of the survivor,” the former institutions focus on the “issue of transmission.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, Fortunoff archive looks more to the past for its own sake, whereas the Shoah Foundation and USHMM aim to present the past as lessons for the future.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the USHMM seems less committed, given its pedagogical mission, to the notion that the experience of the Holocaust was unknowable to anyone who was not there, though the institution has grappled with this question for most of its history.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, there are those who assert that the experience of the survivor is the *only* knowable experience of the Holocaust. Gary Weissman, for example, argues that:

This term [the Holocaust experience] refers not to the experiences of the millions who died of starvation, disease, beating, hanging, bullets, or gassing, but rather to the wartime experiences of individuals who *survived* the Holocaust. Survival is a necessary part of the Holocaust experience when the *full* experience of the Holocaust is implicitly understood to include not only wearing the yellow star and starving in the ghetto, but learning that most or all of one’s family has been killed; not only deportation to the camps, but liberation and

<sup>41</sup> Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes*, 153.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 153; Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 89–139.

<sup>44</sup> See also Hilene Flanzbaum’s edited collection, Hilene Flanzbaum, *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) and Rosenfeld, *End of the Holocaust*.

<sup>45</sup> Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 111.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 107–135; Hartman, *Learning from Survivors*, 133–150.

<sup>47</sup> This forms the core of Linenthal’s discussion of the museum’s founding throughout *Preserving Memory*, but see especially Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 250–272.

emigration; not only being engulfed in the catastrophe, but bearing witness to the catastrophe in its aftermath.<sup>48</sup>

Here, Weissman argues against the conflation of two objects of inquiry, “the Holocaust,” which he takes to mean data-driven knowledge, and “the Holocaust experience,” which he understands as phenomenological knowledge that he argues can only come from survivors. Weissman seeks to reclaim a space for the legitimacy of survivor’s experience as a form of knowledge not judged on the ground of empirical, historical data.<sup>49</sup> Weissman’s position seems to be reflective of the ubiquity of that singular and selfsame narrative that we described above, in which the experiential knowledge of the survivor comes not so much to count as historical data, but to serve as a symbolic representation of what is otherwise unknowable for those of us who were not there. Insofar as the survivor themselves comes to embody the Holocaust as a historical event, then the testimony, in which the survivor must also reckon with the time between the end of the Holocaust and the moment of testifying, becomes symbolically part of the Holocaust experience in the act of testifying.<sup>50</sup>

### Critique and Judgment

Both the tendency toward treating critique as denial, and the normative representations of the Holocaust and its survivors, emerge from the conflation of survivor memory with history and the epistemological confusion that ensues. There is a clash, as Kazin alluded to, between the history of the Holocaust as understood by scholars, and the history as understood by the broader public, survivors included. It is the latter that has informed the shape of the Holocaust narrative as it entered the wider sphere of US public memory, including influencing the direction of such critical (simultaneously) memorial and historical spaces as the USHMM, as well as the way the Holocaust is taught and presented in secondary education throughout the United States.<sup>51</sup> As such, we can return here to Ricœur, to recognize that what he identifies as a “crisis of testimony,” in the inability of an audience to “comprehend” the experience of the survivor recounted in testimony, might be better understood as a crisis of historical authority. That is, the result of two competing forms of knowledge vying for authority in the construction of both Holocaust history and public Holocaust memory, borne of the attempt to integrate testimony, unqualified and unexamined, into the historical archive (thus, again, conflating memory and history in the process).

Ricœur’s most specific claim about the result of this “crisis of testimony,” and its requisite barrier to comprehension, is that the “expected comprehension must itself be a judgment, a judgment on the fly, a judgment without mediation, absolute blame.”<sup>52</sup> In this short pronouncement, Ricœur neatly captures the concerns that motivate both those who seek to protect the authority of the survivor, and those who seek to highlight the uniqueness of the

<sup>48</sup> Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 92, emphasis in original.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Furthermore, in asserting without hesitation that the “full,” (read: authentic or authoritative) experience of the Holocaust, Weissman creates yet another binary between the living and the dead. The experience of the dead, he implies, is fundamentally unknowable, and relegated to the realm of historical data. In the same movement, Weissman further devalues the experiences of any of those survivors who were, for example, in hiding or on the run. Perpetuating the elevation of a very limited population of those who experienced the Holocaust as somehow representative and emblematic of the “full” event, refuses the critical fact that to survive at all places an individual in a minority among those who did enter into the ghettos and camps.

<sup>50</sup> Hartman, *Humanities of Testimony*, 250. Although framed in more oblique psychoanalytical terms, see Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 75–92. For an overview of the ways in which testimony, in particular diaries and memoir, are taken themselves to be representative of the entirety of the Holocaust, see Young, *Interpreting Literary Testimony*.

<sup>51</sup> Edward Linenthal offers the most in-depth study of the history of the museum and its establishment, and Avril Alba is, as far as I am aware, the first scholar to closely examine the particular implications of the concept and pedagogy of the dual function of “memorial museum,” an odd and amalgam institutional formation that largely arose through Holocaust museums. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*; Alba, *Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

<sup>52</sup> Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 176.

experiential knowledge gained from receiving testimony. Judgment, in this case, is figured as the negative outcome of critical engagements, and calls into question the authenticity and authority of the survivor to speak.

For judgment, in this sense, to take place, however, in particular the kind of unmediated and absolute judgment of which Ricœur is so wary, one must assume that a testimony is a closed, static, and complete record of an individual's experience and memory, and that to critique a testimony is to call into question the very authenticity of the witness' experience itself. Such judgment collapses the necessary distance "between a survivor's memory and its reflection in words, his own included" that Wiesel himself was so insistent upon.<sup>53</sup> Memory, though, is a product of the conditions under which it is recalled as much as the events *being* recalled, and testimony is equally and directly shaped by the contexts in which it is uttered.<sup>54</sup> We have understood this feature of memory since Augustine, and outside of the continuing desire to preserve the centrality of the survivor to the history and historiography of the events, it remains unclear why it is really only in the case of the Holocaust that scholars seem to forget this quality of memory.<sup>55</sup>

It is with this understanding, both of judgment and of memory, that I want to turn to our classroom exercise. The use of testimony in the classroom as historical data presents a crucial challenge to the instructor aiming to balance the desire for historical insight with the need to recognize the individual survivor whose voice is being heard. Testimony is always mediated, and a critical engagement with the mechanisms of that mediation can be valuable tools for aiding students in understanding the history and experience of the Holocaust, the nuances of the testimonial act itself, and the complex mediated contexts in which every act of testifying takes place.

### Video Testimony: A Constructive Approach<sup>56</sup>

Developed during the 2021 Silberman Seminar, the classroom exercise presented below offers a guided and scaffolded introduction to video testimony that emphasizes the complex interplay of text, context, performance, and media that shapes both the testimonial act and its viewing or reception by students and broader public audiences.<sup>57</sup> The exercise asks students to watch and respond to a short clip, of two or three minutes in length, such as those collected on the public-facing pages of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website. The length of the clips was specifically chosen to highlight the mediated nature of the testimony, and to ease students' transition into the close reading and media analysis techniques that the assignment

<sup>53</sup> Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1978), 234.

<sup>54</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 57–72; Hartman, *Humanities of Testimony*, 250; Oren Baruch Stier addresses this at length. See Oren Baruch Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 67–109.

<sup>55</sup> Amos Funkenstein was the most prominent scholar to invoke Augustine's work on memory in the context of the Holocaust, paraphrasing the classical commentator as follows: "Memory is defined by the present and by the contents of the soul at present." Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7; Saint Augustine, "The Confessions of Saint Augustine," *Project Gutenberg EBook of The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, by Saint Augustine, accessed September 30, 2021, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0011](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm#link2H_4_0011); see also Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996); James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>56</sup> Merritt et al., *Assignment: Survivor Testimony*.

<sup>57</sup> This activity was designed and co-authored by Harry Merritt, Ausra Park, Justine Pas, and Sean Sidky and presented during the 2021 Silberman Seminar, June 2021 (online). The participants strove to source only publicly accessible videos in order that the activity be generalizable and accessible to teachers who would wish to draw on it. Merritt et al., *Assignment: Survivor Testimony*.

intends to teach them.<sup>58</sup> In this exercise, students watch a short clip of a video testimony given by a witness to or survivor of the Holocaust. Over the course of the activity, students view and discuss a single clip three times, each time given a set of questions to help guide their viewing. Each set of questions focuses on a different aspect of the video and its presentations within its contexts: first, how the video is presented within the context of a website or archive, and their initial impressions of the clip itself; second, the technical and filmic aspects of the clip, including how and where it begins and ends; third, the content of the testimony itself, and the way in which the individual giving the testimony presents it.

### *Objectives*

Broadly speaking, this exercise aims to challenge the assumptions noted above that the testimony is a singular, complete, and unmediated recollection of the survivor's experience of the events. Rather, it is designed to grant students insight into the plethora of factors that influence and affect both the performance or delivery of testimony and its reception by even generous and empathetic audiences. In addition, by focusing on paratextual features of the setting and context, and film techniques in play prior to discussing the content of the testimony itself, this exercise aims to delimit any sense that critique of the testimony is equivalent to judgment of its truth value, or critique of the survivor and their experience. Through the scaffolded questions and multiple viewings of a single clip of testimony, students will develop the analytical skills necessary to contextualize these primary sources, and to identify the different paratextual, media, filmic, and performative aspects that make up each of these testimonial clips.

Samuel Totten identifies three significant issues that face instructors wanting to incorporate testimonial accounts of genocide into the classroom:

- a) the critical need to provide contextualization of the account;
- b) the need to help students understand the distinction between various types of sources (i.e., accounts written during the genocide versus those recollected in the aftermath—and then how long after the aftermath, and the impact that might have had on one's memory, etc.); and
- c) the need to avoid over-generalizing based on one, two, or three accounts.<sup>59</sup>

This exercise aims to accomplish all three of these goals, while simultaneously providing a framework for later engagement with other, or longer, filmed testimony. The primary goal of the exercise is contextualization, not only of the account itself and its recording, but also of the presentations of that account for the viewing public, drawing attention to what, if any, additional contextual information is provided by the virtual space that houses the clip, as well as the choices involved in extracting a short clip from a larger testimony. Moreover, the exercise is designed to highlight the ways in which the distance between the recording/giving

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<sup>58</sup> The assignment itself was designed as a framework for examining video clips of testimony that could be employed or adapted to clips of testimony beyond that of Holocaust survivors. This was done so because of the institutional positioning of several of the participants in the seminar that meant that the courses they taught were either general introductions to "Holocaust and Genocide Studies," or introductions to genocide as a historical concept, necessitating a set of exercises that could be generalized beyond a single historical event. However, that necessity also requires instructors to overlook the complex debates that have plagued the study of the Holocaust, as noted above, regarding the possibility of comparison between the Holocaust and other genocides, regardless of one's own position on that issue. See, for example, Rosenbaum, *Is the Holocaust Unique?*. Because this paper has intentionally limited its context and discussion to that of Holocaust Studies, the exercise below has been adapted to reflect that positioning.

<sup>59</sup> Samuel Totten, *Teaching and Learning about Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity: Fundamental Issues and Pedagogical Approaches* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2019), 193.

of the testimony and the experience being recounted shapes the presentation of that testimony, noting physical location, time, and the conditions under which the testimony is given.

#### *Pre-Viewing Questions*

Prior to viewing the video, students are asked questions about how the video is accessed, and what information is presented surrounding the video by the institution that hosts it, such as a museum or archive. Example questions include:

- What would you like to know before viewing this clip?
- How is the video presented on the website?
- What descriptive, contextual, or historical information is available?
- Is there a link to a larger interview or project that this clip was taken from?

Class discussion between these questions and the first viewing of the clip would focus on historical background and contextual information, helping to address answers to the above questions, and to provide any background that the instructor deems necessary for understanding the clip. This is particularly dependent on the placement of this activity within the semester or module.

The method of testimony collection developed at Yale for the Fortunoff archive (which has become commonplace among testimonial projects) aims, explicitly, to limit the presence of the interviewer; they are “supposed never to interrupt an ongoing train of thought in order to pursue set questions, except to make sure that the time before persecution and after liberation is covered as well as the persecution itself.”<sup>60</sup> Even the physical location of the testimony, a studio, was chosen specifically to be, as Wieviorka notes, “closed off from the normal environment of the person, so that nothing will distract him or her from delving deeply into memory and the past.”<sup>61</sup> This method aims to centralize the voice and figure of the survivor and, it seems to limit the mechanism of the interview (physical space, interviewer, etc.) from drawing attention to themselves and away from the experiences being shared. That is, it aims to make less visible the constructed and performative nature of the testimony, such that viewers might connect emotionally with, even identify with the speaker and, in doing so, become somehow implicated in the event of testimony itself.<sup>62</sup>

Several elements of this exercise are specifically designed to highlight features obscured by this method of testimony collection. In the first instance, selecting short clips excerpted from longer interviews makes it near impossible to overlook the presence of editing; drawing students’ attention to the ways in which the clip is embedded in a webpage or website prior to its viewing further emphasizes that each of these testimonial excerpts is presented with particular educational aims in mind. Testimonial clips often recount only single, notable events (such as a moment of rescue, or a particularly traumatic experience), implicitly inviting viewers to seek out the full testimony, bolstered by the contextual information supplied on the webpage.

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<sup>60</sup> Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 108–112; Hartman, *Humanities of Testimony*, 254–255.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>62</sup> Shoshana Felman intends the teaching of testimony to engender a moment of crisis and transformation in students, noting that the kind of teaching she calls for in the case of crises like the Holocaust, is “interested not merely in new information, but, primarily, in the capacity of their recipients to *transform themselves* in function of the newness of that information.” Similarly, Dori Laub, one of the co-founders of the Fortunoff Archive and who played a crucial role in shaping the approach outlined above, goes even further: “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a *co-owner of the traumatic event*: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself [ . . . ] The listening her to feel the victim’s victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony.” Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 53–54, 57–59, my emphasis; see also 71–72, where Laub states, unequivocally, “the task of the listener is to be *unobtrusively present*, throughout the testimony,” (emphasis in original).

Each of these elements shapes the encounter with testimony, limiting students' ability to, as Alvin Rosenfeld described it, suspend the critical impulse in order to discern the truth behind the words.<sup>63</sup> Instead, utilizing short clips, paired with pre-viewing questions, requires reflecting first and foremost on the performative and constructed elements of the testimonial act *and* its subsequent presentation within an archive, or educational website.

### *First Viewing*

In this first viewing, the students are encouraged to watch closely and, considering the contextual and website information, identify what stands out as important to them, and to reflect on their emotional responses, if any, to the video itself. This is simultaneously a diagnostic exercise, as well a guide for further discussion following subsequent viewings, ensuring that the discussion remains significantly influenced by the students' own interest impressions, and observations, particularly during the final discussion on content.

The first viewing also offers a chance for reflection on students' assumptions about the survivor and their experiences. In my experience, regardless of the pre-viewing questions that may be posed to students, their initial responses to filmed survivor testimony tend to reflect dominant cultural norms about the Holocaust and its representation, mirroring the kind of deference that is intended by the Fortunoff method of interviewing, often to the point of hesitance to discuss the clip, and certainly, reluctance to do so critically.<sup>64</sup> At this stage of the exercise, there is a risk of reinforcing encoded responses to the Holocaust, insofar as these first stages affirm the centrality of survivor voices in telling the history of the Holocaust and, moreover, utilize excerpts from longer testimonies that are often chosen by websites and archives for their affective intensity, rather than because they serve as representative of the broader experience of the individual or of the event. Totten's warning against over-generalizing from a single example is perhaps amplified by the short and piecemeal nature of these filmed excerpts. The focus of the second viewing on technical aspects of the clip, apart from the survivor and the events they are recounting, aims to lessen this risk by foregrounding the constructed nature of the clips themselves.

### *Second Viewing*

The second viewing asks students to focus on the setting of the interview, the *mise en scene*, and asks them questions about the medium itself. A supplementary handout might be provided that explains critical film terminology, such as lighting, different kinds of camera movements, angles, or shots, editing techniques, *mise en scene*, etc. Example questions include:

- What is visible on screen? Are there other people besides the survivor/witness?
- Can you tell where the video was filmed? Are they, for example, at home, on a stage giving a lecture, or in a studio?
- Is the survivor/witness speaking as if responding to someone off-camera? How can you tell? Is this clip excerpted from a larger or ongoing conversation?
- Where is the camera positioned in relation to the survivor/witness? Are they looking directly at the camera, or somewhere else?
- What is the lighting like?
- Are there subtitles or captions? Where and how are they displayed?

<sup>63</sup> Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 9, 26.

<sup>64</sup> Although I have not had a chance to implement this activity as represented here, these observations are drawn from several semesters of teaching a course on representations of the Holocaust, and represent the general response of students in my classes to discussion about film clips of survivor testimony.

- Is the testimony the only thing you hear during the clip? Are there ambient sounds, like wind, or an audience? Is there a soundtrack or music?

With each subsequent viewing, the students are asked to examine the video in more detail, as their familiarity with the clip grows. Following this second viewing, there is an opportunity for breakout or small group discussions, in which the students are encouraged to share their various observations; different students are likely to observe and focus on different aspects of the media, thus supplementing each other's viewing. This is particularly useful at this stage of the exercise, when the questions are still broadly descriptive.

It is worth, at this stage of the exercise, to revisit the Fortunoff method described above, perhaps even introducing the quotation from Hartman above, to reflect on the role of the interviewer and production team in shaping the delivery of the testimony, even before the process of selecting and editing a single clip.<sup>65</sup> Primarily aimed at allowing the survivor's voice to be heard, the absence of the interviewer from the frame of the testimonial video implicitly claims to offer an unmediated glimpse into the memory of the speaking survivor.<sup>66</sup> Hartman, elsewhere, describes these filmed testimony as "a representational mode with a special counter-cinematic integrity:" in contrast to cinema (meaning fictional film) and documentaries, Hartman claims, "in video testimonies (or "testimonial video" generally) there is nothing between us and the survivor; nor, when an interview really gets going, between the survivor and his/her recollections."<sup>67</sup> And yet, each of the elements gestured to in the questions above mark a critical point of intervention between the viewer and the survivor, and several of the filmic elements noted (camera positioning, lighting, physical location, to whom the survivor is speaking directly, etc.) necessarily play a role in the performance that occurs in recollecting their memories on film, for the purposes of a testimonial archive.

### *Third and Final Viewing*

For the final viewing, having already discussed the presentation of the clip and its technical aspects, students are asked to use this knowledge to help them understand the content of the testimony. The example questions below ask for detailed responses, and, as such, a second round of small group or breakout discussions may prove particularly useful here as well. Example questions include:

- How would you describe the survivor/witness's facial expressions and/or body language? What might this tell you about their state of mind, or their emotions as they speak? Does this change throughout the clip?
- Does the survivor/witness tell a story? If so, what is it about? If not, what do they talk about?
- Do they recount specific events? What kinds?
- Do they mention other people?
- Do they describe perpetrators?
- Do they describe rescuers?
- Do they describe other victims?
- Do they describe bystanders, or others who don't fit into one of the categories above?
- What details do they provide about these people? What are they doing?

<sup>65</sup> Hartman, *Humanities of Testimony*, 254–255.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Hartman, *Learning from Survivors*, 139–140.

- Is there some specific takeaway, lesson, or piece of information in which you get the sense that the survivor/witness wants the audience to know? Do they reflect on the broader moral or political implications of their experiences?
- Where in their story does this clip take place? Is it the beginning of the genocide? Somewhere in the middle? Is it a story of escape or rescue?
- How does the video clip end? Why might it stop here?

There are a number of possible directions this activity can take following the final viewing. In particular, students should be encouraged to share and compile their responses with each other, as well as to consider if there is other information that they would have liked to know more about. This is also a valuable opportunity for the instructor to clarify specific details by asking students whether there were terms, phrases, references, or descriptions that they did not understand, and how clarification might have helped deepen their understanding of the clip. As with similar activities, students should be invited to answer each other's questions before the instructor provides answers, thus further encouraging a communal and cohesive discussion environment within the classroom and creating a space in which students feel comfortable asking clarifying questions.

As the Holocaust entered into the public media landscape in the United States, certain kinds of representations came to dominate the symbolic landscape: I mentioned the gates of Auschwitz above, but we can also see shoes, glasses, hair, of course the railway cars used to transport inmates.<sup>68</sup> Oren Baruch Stier refers to such images as "Holocaust iconography" to capture the ways in which singular objects and images can come metonymically to represent the entirety of the event of the Holocaust.<sup>69</sup> Certain kinds of narratives, certain patterns of experience have come to function in a similar way: as Shneer notes, most people in the west imagine concentration camps "through the literary representations written by survivors of Auschwitz-Birkenau, because most survivors of the Holocaust found themselves in Auschwitz at one point in their tragic narratives," often reflected in the most prominent literary representations to reach the English language, foremost among them Elie Wiesel's *Night*.<sup>70</sup>

This final viewing presents the opportunity for students to reflect on their initial responses to the video itself, and to examine the ways in which their understanding of, or response to the clip has changed in light of subsequent discussions, and to reflect on the assumptions that students may have brought with them into the classroom and into the exercise. The events recounted, whether of capture, transport, incarceration, or liberation, offer only a moment in a longer implicit history, which the questions outlined above aim to guide students toward considering. If there is a risk in the first viewing, as mentioned above, in students over-generalizing the ability of a given clip or testimony to represent the Holocaust as a whole, this final viewing aims to counter that possibility by focusing intently on the specific, individuated experience, and the subjectivity of the chosen clip. Moreover, following on from the technical discussion after the second viewing, there is space in this final discussion to revisit the clip in its virtual contexts, and to re-engage with the specific didactic choices that were made by a given website, archive, or museum, in selecting and presenting this clip in this particular way.

#### *Possible Continuations and Follow-Ups*

This scaffolded exercise might, for example, be embedded in a larger assignment structure, introducing the students to primary source analysis, either of their own choosing or of an assigned set of class resources. It may also serve as a basis for a comparative assignment in

<sup>68</sup> Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes*, 149–153; Stier, *Committed to Memory*, 24–66.

<sup>69</sup> See also Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 5–10, 108–127, 160–161, and throughout; Shandler, *While America Watches*, 5–26.

<sup>70</sup> Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes*, 153.

which students analyze multiple clips and compare the representational, media, and compositional choices made in the presentation of those clips. In a composition course, or one focused on writing, the exercise itself might serve as a model for constructing analytical arguments or claims, not only by introducing them to a critical vocabulary for studying audiovisual media, but also by offering them several perspectives from which to approach film clip and testimony analysis. Additionally, this might serve as the basis for reflective assignments. One might, for example, ask students to consider *why* certain representational or media choices were made, and the effects of very specific decisions—such as the placement of captions or subtitles, the use of scoring or soundtrack, or the moments in which an interviewer is seen or heard—on the presentation of the individual and the reception of their testimony. An instructor might take that reflection one step further, by asking students to interrogate their own position as viewers, returning to their answers to the pre-viewing questions and describing their own incremental experience of viewing and *re-viewing* the testimony, as well as how their understanding of it has changed.

### Conclusion

There is always a chance, in the encounter with survivor testimony, that students will be dismissive or judgmental toward the testimony, especially when it deviates or departs from an established or normalized narrative of the particular genocide or set of events (or, even, if the student has some pre-existing familiarity with the events, from personal experience or media representations). The prevalence of easily accessible information, and the increasing difficulty of distinguishing demonstrable historical fact from opinion and assertion, especially online, only adds to this risk. Fear of this judgment is, in part, what motivates the protective instinct evinced by Wiesel, Hartman, and others, and precipitated the “crisis” described by Ricœur. The goal of this exercise, ultimately, is to engender in students encountering video testimony, and perhaps even encountering the study of the Holocaust for the first time, the recognition that testimony is not the same as experience, that to *speak* about an event is to do so always in a specific context and for a specific purpose, and as such, it cannot be understood through the same interpretive frameworks through which we encounter historical fact.

“Every testimony,” writes Wieviorka, “is recorded at a precise moment in time, and as such may be instrumentalized in political and ideological contexts that, like all such contexts, are bound to change.”<sup>71</sup> Yet, further contexts play critical roles in shaping the form and content of a given testimony: the age of the survivor; the location of the testimonial act; the identity, presence, and comportment of the interviewer; the organization for whom or in which the testimony is being made; the contemporaneous discourse of public memory, and, of course; the survivor’s own continually changing relationship to their own past and memories. We can add additional complications to the *reception* of the testimony, by acknowledging the framing power of paratext, for example: the context in which the testimony is being viewed; the previous knowledge of the viewer about the events; the layout and makeup of the website, archive, or location the testimony is housed; filmic or literary qualities such as type, copy, score, sub- or super-titles, editing and lighting. All of these criteria are critical features of the experience of the testimonial act, and we cannot, as educators and scholars, ignore these in favor of focusing only on the content of the testimony in terms of its truth value. To do so would be to implicitly claim that the individual survivor and the specificity of their experience is to be read through in order to mine their testimony for data about the a genocidal event, when, rather, the critical value of bringing testimony into the classroom is precisely in its ability to ground the data in human figures, and to provide an additional entry point, in conversation with data and statistics, toward understanding and recognition of the human cost and experience of the Holocaust.

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<sup>71</sup> Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 137.

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