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## Those Thrice Marked By Time: The Significance of the Last Known Survivor, Their Death, and Our Remembrance

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**Those Thrice Marked By Time: The Significance of the Last Known Survivor,  
Their Death, and Our Remembrance**

Michael Tofte

B.A. Philosophy and Government, Evangel University, 2019

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Philosophy

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Those Thrice Marked By Time: The Significance of the Last Known Survivor,  
Their Death, and Our Remembrance

Although academics are not *The Last Leaf's* target readership, the inspiration behind Lutz's work [about last known survivors] certainly raises questions of potential interest to scholars [...] their incorporation may have helped to bring greater cohesion and nuance to this creative and worthwhile project.

—Adam J. Zarakov on Stuart Lutz's *The Last Leaf*

The organization of the *polis* [...] is a kind of organized remembrance. It assures the mortal actor that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and, generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men

—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198

## 1. Introduction

If one asks an American history student to name historical events from the American Revolution, The Boston Tea Party is very likely to fall on that list. However, many may not realize that not only was the Boston Tea Party not considered of prominent historical significance for the first fifty to sixty years but that it originally was not referred to as “the Boston Tea Party.” Though the term may have been used colloquially, it did not feature prominently in any printed material until the two biographies of George Robert Twelves Hewes, considered the last survivor of the Boston Tea Party: *A Retrospect of the Tea-Party* (1834) and *Traits of the Tea Party* (1835).<sup>1</sup> Coinciding with a growing interest in the history of the American Revolution and some political sentiments, Hewes became a symbol that brought the Boston Tea Party to a level of historical prominence and was personally honored for his participation in that event. Alongside Hewes, there are entire lists of significant historical and fictional last survivors who play roles in the political, cultural, historical, and entertainment landscape of collectives.<sup>2</sup> These last survivors are often correlated with or inspire event remembrance in ways that the lives and deaths of other participants often do not.

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 88.

<sup>2</sup> I am using the term “collective” broadly. In most noun usages, I am referring to a loosely defined group of people instead of using “population,” “nation,” or “community.” The group may be small or the size of a national population with sub-groups. It will depend on the context. Collectives regarding WWI memorial will be larger, while those of local events will likely be smaller. Adjectival and adverbial usages generally emphasize performing an action together.

Many of these last known survivors have been ordinary persons who were thrust into the limelight of national/international obituaries, memorials, names in history books, etc. primarily because of the timings of their life and death. They had very little control over most external factors related either to their lived experience of the event or their death: aging, longevity, the death of other survivors, the timing and location of their birth, participating in an unpredicted tragedy or event. I doubt that many would deny the existence or permissibility of the phenomenon of last known survivorship outright; however, this phenomenon of last known survivorship has not been sufficiently assessed on its own merits. There is not a common understanding *of* the significance despite a common intuition that the phenomenon *is* significant. This criticism was levied against Stuart Lutz in Adam Zarakov's review of *The Last Leaf* in that Lutz was "uncritical," yet the central motif of the project offered "questions of potential interest to scholars" about last known survivors.<sup>3</sup> I intend this paper to address that lacuna.

I argue that last known survivors are marked by two temporal characteristics: (1) being present during a particular historical event and (2) the timing of their death and their serial position because of it amongst the other survivors.<sup>4</sup> Few if any additional requirements are needed to be fulfilled to warrant last known survivor remembrance, even over others with comparable biographies. Though all survivors may possess an equal claim to honor based on these characteristics, only a select few—I term *recognized last known survivors*—are honored and remembered by a collective in ways often beyond what their biography seems to merit if it were not for their last known survivorship.<sup>5</sup> I see the collective to be the factor that determines the selection of recognized last known survivors.

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<sup>3</sup> Adam J. Zarakov, "The Last Leaf: Voices of History's Last-Known Survivors" in *HISTORY: Review of New Books*. (Vol. 39, Issue 3, 2011), pp. 94-95.

<sup>4</sup> By survivor, I am using the term to include not simply "survivors" of a tragic event but anyone who has lived through and then beyond a particular event, tragic or non-tragic. Another term would be "last man standing" (or "last person standing"). I prefer the "last known survivor," because the other terms are either gendered or not colloquial respectively.

<sup>5</sup> I will often use the term "recognized last known survivors," but, as this is a subset of "last known survivors," there will be points in which the terms are or can be used interchangeably. For example, I may refer to "a collective recognizing last known survivors" to avoid redundancy. I will specify when the distinction is crucial.

This thesis has two primary aims. The first aim is to motivate philosophical interest in the phenomenon of the last known survivor. I will present case studies from obituaries, newspaper articles, documentaries, “popular” and academic history, and fictional media before reflecting on their features. The second aim is to describe the phenomenon, using a view entitled Symbolic-Personal Remembrance & Recognition, and consider its implications.

This paper is structured in six sections. First, I motivate interest in the last known survivor by considering some historical examples and showing the phenomenon’s ubiquity in culture and entertainment.

Second, I will present an etymological intuition pump to prime the identification of the three necessary conditions of recognized last known survivorship: (1) relevant connection to a particular event, (2) actual or perceived to be last person connected to the event, and (3) the event must achieve a certain level of interest or meaning to the collective, thereby being recognized, honored, and remembered by it.

Third, I use an Arendtian heuristic to frame these three features of survivorship and collective remembrance and tease out their importance. I then conclude by describing the phenomenon that can be supported by the Arendtian framing. I entitle this view “Symbolic-Personal Remembrance & Recognition.” On SPRR, memorializing a last known survivor often both recognizes the person and their symbolic role, enabling collective remembrance of the event, other participants, and the survivor through the preserved story of the last survivor and the recognition the person receives through this remembrance.

Fourth, I then introduce some characteristics of SPRR beyond Hannah Arendt’s thought, showing that the view remains relevant beyond an Arendtian philosophical system. I also maintain that the tension between the symbolic and the personal is needed to properly address two thought puzzles concerning how recognized last known survivorship is practiced today.

Fifth, I critique a frequently cited explanation of last known survivorship by those involved in historical preservation—the loss of the last person with first-hand memory, knowledge, or

experience of the event—as being inadequate. I find its salient features to be compatible with SPRR, while the exclusive emphasis upon a person’s direct memory faces some difficulty when faced with some counterexamples.

Sixth, I present some ethical questions related to how the last known survivors are selected and honored. My primary interest throughout this paper is to descriptively frame the phenomenon due to the lacunae in the literature and collective reflection, emphasizing how the last known survivor *is* honored rather than how the last known survivor *ought to be* honored. In this section, I motivate that further engagement is not confined to an appreciation of a curious novelty; it has normative implications for how collectives remember and honor individuals, acknowledging I cannot provide a satisfactory answer here.

## 2. Motivating Interest in the Last Known Survivor

The phenomenon of the last known survivor is best illuminated through narratives. As such, I will allow the story of the most striking case, the last American veteran of WWI, to speak before I introduce my thoughts. As I am arguing that there is a real yet unacknowledged convention of history, remembrances, and storytelling, the features I believe to be valuable and prominent will be best expressed narratively.

### 2.1.1 Frank Buckles: The Last American WWI Veteran

Frank Buckles tried to enlist in the military multiple times, lying on multiple occasions to different branches about his age.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, he was able to convince a recruiter that he had no birth certificate, and Buckles volunteered for the ambulance service.<sup>7</sup> Restless because he was unassigned in England instead of the trenches in France, Buckles nearly left his post to leave for France. There, he volunteered as an escort and office aide to an officer in the signal corps.<sup>8</sup> Corporal Buckles never

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<sup>6</sup> Stuart Lutz, *The Last Leaf*, (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2010), 62.

<sup>7</sup> Lutz, *The Last Leaf*, 62.

<sup>8</sup> Lutz, *The Last Leaf*, 62-66.

saw the frontlines, and the closest he came was his service as a transport guard of German POWs *after* the war.<sup>9</sup> As a civilian during WWII, Buckles was captured by the Japanese and was imprisoned in a camp for over three years.<sup>10</sup> In his later years, Buckles advocated strongly and publicly for the rights of WWI veterans and the need for a physical memorial to WWI before dying at the age of 110 in 2011 as the last American veteran of WWI.<sup>11</sup>

Ross Perot advocated for Buckles' state memorial as an exception to Arlington's burial requirements because Buckles was ineligible due to his not being (i) killed in action, (ii) a recipient of a Purple Heart, or (iii) a recipient of a Medal of Honor.<sup>12</sup> His memorial was attended by "hundreds of strangers" as well as President Obama and Vice President Biden who "came to salute Buckles' deceased generation, the vanished millions of soldiers and sailors he came to symbolize in the end."<sup>13</sup> The federal government recommended flags to be at half-staff on federal, military, and state properties. A free public ceremony was held in Kansas City, MO, which featured the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard B. Myers, the family of the decorated Sergeant Alvin C. York, a US congressman, and the Missouri Poet Laureate.<sup>14,15</sup>

Frank Buckles did not serve on the frontlines but rather spent the war unassigned or in supporting roles. As a corporal, he likely did not know much about Allied operations. When he did serve as a transport guard—a role involving direct interactions with German soldiers—it was after

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<sup>9</sup> Lutz, *The Last Leaf*, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Lutz, *The Last Leaf*, 67-68.

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Stone, "Frank Buckles, Last U.S. World War I Veteran, Laid to Rest (VIDEO)," *Huffington Post*. Last Updated May 25, 2011. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/frank-buckles-funeral-arlington\\_n\\_836204](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/frank-buckles-funeral-arlington_n_836204)

<sup>12</sup> "Arlington Cemetery Makes Historic Exception for World War I Veteran," Salem News. Last updated April 8, 2008. [http://www.salem-news.com/articles/april082008/ww1\\_vet\\_4-8-08.php](http://www.salem-news.com/articles/april082008/ww1_vet_4-8-08.php)

<sup>13</sup> Paul Duggan, "Frank Buckles, last known U.S. World War I veteran, is laid to rest at Arlington," *Washington Post*. Last updated March 15, 2011. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/frank-buckles-last-known-us-world-war-i-veteran-is-laid-to-rest-at-arlington/2011/03/10/ABHVLfZ\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/frank-buckles-last-known-us-world-war-i-veteran-is-laid-to-rest-at-arlington/2011/03/10/ABHVLfZ_story.html)

<sup>14</sup> A smaller service was held at his home church in Charles Town, West Virginia. Richard F. Belisle, "Buckles honored at Zion Episcopal," *Herald Mail*. Last updated March 16, 2011. <https://web.archive.org/web/20110711163237/http://www.herald-mail.com/news/tristate/hm-buckles-honored-at-zion-episcopal-20110316,0,2482317.story>

<sup>15</sup> Kate Schuler, "'Great War Generation' to be honored March 12 at Liberty Memorial," *Sedalia News-Journal*, Last updated March 5, 2011. <https://web.archive.org/web/20110309013726/http://sedalianewsjournal.com/2011/03/05/great-war-generation-to-be-honored-march-12-at-liberty-memorial/>

the war. Though his biography certainly shows that he had certain civic, if not moral, virtues such as loyalty, patriotism, selflessness, eagerness, and responsibility, there is not much about Buckles' story (other than his later advocacy work)<sup>16</sup> that would telegraph to an outsider to read his biography over another WWI veteran's, particularly another veteran who had served in the trenches. This ordinary corporal received a full suite of honors, chiefly because of his status as the last American WWI veteran. Buckles highlights the first distinguishing characteristic of last known survivorship as opposed to other historical or memorial remembrances: average people are recognized in ways beyond their station because of matters beyond their control or history: i.e., timing of their death.

### 2.1.2 World War I Last Known Survivorship

Buckles' story and memorial is an extravagant example of a last known survivor being shown honor beyond his station as an ordinary serviceman; however, the previous section was just the tip of the iceberg. Ross Perot's actions were initiated because Frank Buckles' nephew Ken learned at a different military funeral that, as of 2007, the United States was the only one of the Allied Powers—including Canada, France, Australia, and the United Kingdom—who had not performed or had not offered a state funeral for their last WWI veteran.<sup>17</sup> This realization started the process towards the arrangements for a future state funeral of the last known American World War I veteran, presumed to be Frank Buckles. Buckles' burial exception by Arlington was the only one as of this paper's writing other than the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

In 2005, Australia arranged for a state funeral for William Evan Allan, their last WWI veteran and last veteran who served in both WWI and WWII.<sup>18</sup> Following a national campaign for Canada to promise a state funeral to the last of its three living veterans, the Canadian parliament

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Courson, "Last surviving U.S. World War I vet honored by president," *CNN*. Last updated March 8, 2008. <https://www.cnn.com/2008/US/03/07/war.veteran/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> "Arlington Cemetery Makes Historic Exception for World War I Veteran," *Salem News*. Last updated April 8, 2008. [http://www.salem-news.com/articles/april082008/ww1\\_vet\\_4-8-08.php](http://www.salem-news.com/articles/april082008/ww1_vet_4-8-08.php)

<sup>18</sup> "State funeral for last WWI digger," *The Age*. Last updated October 18, 2005. <https://www.theage.com.au/national/state-funeral-for-last-wwi-digger-20051018-ge12na.html>

unanimously passed such a motion in 2006. However, each of the three veterans declined the offer.<sup>19</sup> Also in 2006, the British government promised to hold a state funeral upon the passing of their last known veteran, which would not be until the death of Harry Patch in 2009, despite the government's initial reluctance.<sup>20</sup> In March 2008, France held a state funeral for their last WWI veteran Nicolas Sarkozy. Sarkozy initially had refused the offer, but he later accepted ““in the name of all those who died, men and women.””<sup>22</sup> Erich Kaestner, the last German WWI veteran, died in 2008. His death was reported internationally that week. However, the news almost went unnoticed, even in Germany itself. The German public was not aware of the survivor's death until someone saw the newspaper obituary and updated the Wikipedia entry.<sup>23</sup>

In this singular event of World War I, several last known survivors received some form of recognition primarily because of their status as the last survivor, which is mostly beyond their control, in memorials beyond their service history's typical merits. In these cases, an otherwise ordinary person is highlighted by a national, international, or governmental spotlight, thereby receiving collective honor and remembrance. Some funerals were unreflectively offered to the veteran without citizen appeals, while others were offered once there was expressed interest. With the Canadian veterans, the state promised a funeral despite not knowing to whom the honor would be extended. Some state funerals were extended with language that emphasized the last of the WWI

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<sup>19</sup> Lee Carter, “Canada WWI veterans reject honour,” *BBC News*. Last updated January 3, 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6227287.stm>; John Goddard, “Dwight Wilson, 106: WWI veteran,” *Toronto Star*. Last updated May 10, 2007.

[https://www.thestar.com/news/2007/05/10/dwight\\_wilson\\_106\\_wwi\\_veteran.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/2007/05/10/dwight_wilson_106_wwi_veteran.html)  
<sup>20</sup> “Last WWI veteran to be honoured,” *BBC News*. Last updated June 27, 2006. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/5120358.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/5120358.stm)

<sup>21</sup> Harry Patch's funeral is also worth noting. His funeral was held in a 13<sup>th</sup> century Gothic cathedral and televised live in the UK. The pallbearers included German, Belgium, French, and British soldiers. No ceremonial weapons were allowed. A German diplomat spoke on reconciliation from Corinthians. The mourners included the Duchess of Cornwall and the chief of the general staff. A crowd of 2,500 people watched the funeral live just outside the cathedral. This funeral incorporated (i) Patch's pacifist, reconciliatory, and anti-war views; (ii) mourning of Patch's life; and (iii) a national mourning of all UK veterans of WWI. (John F. Burns, “Thousands Mourn Britain's Oldest Warrior,” *The New York Times*. Last Updated on August 6, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/07/world/europe/07funeral.html>).

<sup>22</sup> “France's final WWI veteran dies,” *BBC News*. Last updated March 12, 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7292109.stm>

<sup>23</sup> “Last German WWI veteran dies at 107,” *NBC News*. Last updated on January 25, 2008. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna22844413>

veterans rather than the particular person, even if their identity was known. Many funerals were performed or accepted in the name of the person alongside the unnamed millions of compatriots. Finally, the German veteran was nearly forgotten by the national population, likely due to a collective embarrassment of their historical involvement, while his symbolic role brought similar attention by international news without an official state memorial. WWI memorialization centered around this phenomenon of a last known survivor, and these collectives intuitively regarded their last known survivor as worthy of official honor, excepting modern-day Germany, even if they were still awaiting a particular person to receive that title.

WWI memorialization also introduces a puzzle that I will return to later: are last known survivors memorialized as symbols or as persons? Both ways of recognition are liable to a collective's dehumanizing appropriation of the last survivor for ideological purposes. In the former, the person's biography and life story are deemphasized or ignored, transforming the survivor into an archetype, similar to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, with little resemblance to their lived biography. In the latter, there is the concern that a person's personal and private funeral or memorial service is not serving the role of familial mourning but is a means to honor others, loosely connected to the survivor, involved in the event. Both are at best taboos that should be reassessed and at worst unethical depersonalizations of human survivors. I will return to this puzzle later as I aim to show that the phenomenon of collective remembrances of last survivors generally avoids these concerns if viewed from a certain perspective, but the question itself runs through this paper.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.2 How Do Some Collectives, Individuals, and History Presently Honor Last Known Survivors?

In this subsection, I describe the main categories of evidential sources I am using with an eye towards how these sources inform philosophical engagement. As a disclaimer, I do not see these

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<sup>24</sup> See either Stuart Lutz's *The Last Leaf* or the following Wikipedia webpage for a full listing of last survivors. Some individuals listed on both are still disputed or have been proven to be incorrectly attributed after further evidence. (Wikipedia. "List of last survivors of historical events." Last edited on February 20, 2021. Accessed on March 4, 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_last\\_survivors\\_of\\_historical\\_events](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_last_survivors_of_historical_events))

categories to be exclusive to last known survivorship. Many non-survivors, well-known or ordinary, are honored in one or more of these ways or mediums. Last known survivorship adds its color to these sources. For this paper, I primarily draw from memorials and funerals, obituaries, news articles, pre-death interviews, and history books as my thesis concerns the survivor's death and remembrance after death. I will mention a few examples about the lived experience of last survivors while still alive to show that collectives do treat recognized last known survivors differently in general.<sup>25</sup>

Obituaries are a standard section in nearly any newspaper or similar publication. They are one of the primary ways to honor a loved one and to inform the community about details related to their remembrance and mourning. However, the obituaries of the recognized last known survivor are different both in where they are located—which newspaper or news sources—and why they are included there. Many recognized last known survivors are featured in international and national news as this paper's citations will show. For instance, earlier in 2021, my phone received a push notification from the Associated Press that the last Civil War Widow had passed at 101-years old, Helen Viola Jackson.<sup>26</sup> Jackson was not even alive during the Civil War. She had only married a veteran, decades afterward. Still, she was recognized by *AP*, the *Smithsonian*, *The Telegraph*, *The New York Post* in addition to her hometown of Marshfield, MO. The mere fact that she was the last survivor, despite having not disclosed that information until four years before her death, elevated her remembrance and recognition to national and international news, even push notifications to phones as if it were breaking news.<sup>27</sup> This recognition is typically reserved for celebrities or well-known

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<sup>25</sup> Museums or physical artifacts are relevant, but often a last survivor's collection is just one exhibit in the greater event's museum, unlike exclusively dedicating an obituary or memorial service. Additionally, many survivors are not connected to a historical event that is bestowed a well-trafficked museum. A full treatment should consider examples like Adella Wotherspoon's collection of items and newspaper clippings of the *General Slocum* disaster (Lutz, *The Last Leaf*, 244).

<sup>26</sup> *The Last Leaf* mentioned two other persons who were once seen as the last Civil War widow, making Mrs. Jackson the third in the past two decades. (Jim Salter, "Missouri woman believed to be last Civil War widow dies," *AP*. Last updated on January 7, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/last-civil-war-widow-dead-367329af8e4e6c8524bef9f2ad1d1181>)

<sup>27</sup> In "Concept of History," Arendt describes history as the "single instances, deeds or events, interrupt[ing] the circular movement of daily life [...] history is these interruptions—the extraordinary." With push notifications or international breaking news about recognized last known survivors, this abstract conception of history as "interruptions" has become a lived phenomenological experience of "the extraordinary" *interrupting* the

historical figures; however, with last known survivors, otherwise ordinary individuals are being honored in similar ways.

As seen in the cases of Mrs. Jackson, the WWI veterans, and Hewes, these remembrances and recognitions primarily emphasize the person's survivorship and their connection to the event, while secondarily emphasizing the person. The standard function of obituaries is to tell the person's life narrative and serve as a written memorial to their personhood, life, family members, and actions. In the case of the recognized last survivor, global papers are reporting their deaths but in ways that focus on the greater context or the symbolic role of the survivor: e.g., the quotations of WWI last survivors representing all WWI servicepersons. Buckles, Patch, and the others were not the only WWI veterans to be recognized in these news sources. However, they are unique in that the reason for their inclusion is largely independent of their actual service history during the event. In other cases, these papers emphasized heroic actions, people of rank, or other characteristics related more closely to the veteran's service history. The last survivor is being recognized because he outlived others within a defined population. There have been countless servicepersons and survivors or victims of trauma with similar stories to these last survivors whose stories are not recognized internationally. One may argue that some of these less recognized persons are "better" or "worthier" comparatively; they saved one more person, lived through one more event, or demonstrated a little more virtue. None of these "worthier" people can claim the significance that is derived from a certain position in death. Somehow, being the last person despite never having seen combat or demonstrating the related civic virtues, as in the case of Frank Buckles, can qualify one for collective recognition, while a person who fought in the trenches does not receive that attention as assuredly. The inclusion of an average veteran's life story alongside presidents and celebrities is unique enough before considering Buckles would not have been honored in this way if his death date were different or if another person managed to outlive him.

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collective's "daily life" and phones (Hannah Arendt. "Concept of History" in *Between Past and Future*. New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 43.

I resist the impression that last survivors are only recognized upon death. In *The Last Leaf*, Lutz sought out and collected interviews with well-known and obscure last survivors, giving each survivor five to fifteen pages of fame. George Robert Twelves Hewes was the “featured guest at South Boston’s [Fourth of July] observance” and was publicly honored at the dinner.<sup>28</sup> Hewes became a minor celebrity, and “newspapers reported his every move.”<sup>29</sup> Dewey Beard, considered the last known Lakota survivor of Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee, supplemented his government assistance by “pos[ing] with tourists” and being paid a quarter to dress up in his family’s clothing.<sup>30</sup> He and his family were also “unofficial Indian [sic] ‘ambassadors’” for their tribal association at fairs in the Midwest.<sup>31</sup> Millvina Dean, the last survivor of the *Titanic*, had her entire care home expenses covered by James Cameron, Kate Winslet, and Leonardo DiCaprio, even despite refusing to watch their film, while no other survivor was extended such an offer in the past.<sup>32</sup> On *I’ve Got a Secret*, Samuel J. Seymour, the last person to witness Abraham Lincoln’s assassination, was even allowed to keep the full cash prize and a substituted chewing tobacco prize despite not deserving the full reward by the game show’s rules.<sup>33</sup> These examples support the notion that these survivors are extended significance before their death, even if explaining the significance of living survivors would require expansion beyond my account of their memorials, and that primary evidential sources show a real significance to be philosophically considered without falling to a critique of “meaning-making” where there is none.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 80-81, 170-171.

<sup>29</sup> “Hewes went to church; Hewes was having his portrait painted; Hewes left for Maine to visit relatives; Hewes was the guest at a tea party in Augusta; Hewes sang songs in the stagecoach; Hewes returned.” (Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, 174-175).

<sup>30</sup> Phillip Burnham. *Song of Dewey Beard: Last Survivor of the Little Bighorn*. (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2014. Accessed on February 2, 2021), 158.

<sup>31</sup> Burnham, *Song of Dewey Beard*, 170.

<sup>32</sup> “Last Titanic survivor dies at 97,” *BBC News*. Last updated on June 1, 2009. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/hampshire/8070095.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/hampshire/8070095.stm)

<sup>33</sup> *I’ve Got a Secret*, Aired on February 8, 1956. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RPoymt3Jx4>. Accessed on March 28, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Another case of living fame is the former last known Confederate widow Alberta Martin who was described as “relish[ing] the fame her unique status has given her.” (Lutz, *The Last Leaf*, 49).

### 2.3 Fictional and Cultural Trope

Contemporary media such as film, television, video games, and books seem to grapple with this theme without a coherent answer.<sup>35</sup> I am not claiming that these fictional characters would not be recognized as important, popular, or culturally momentous if they were not a fictional last known survivor (e.g., Superman is still an iconic hero even if he were just *a* Kryptonian). My listing is intended to prime one to recognize the cultural ubiquity of this phenomenon in forms of popular entertainment in contrast to the silence in scholarship. The prevalence of this theme suggests that this phenomenon is peripherally in the zeitgeist with little acknowledgement of its significance.

*Doctor Who*, one of the longest-running sci-fi television shows, features the titular character as the last survivor of the Last Great Time War on Gallifrey. Superman was the sole survivor of the destruction of Krypton. *I Am Legend* follows Will Smith's character as the sole "human" survivor during an apocalyptic event until he meets others in the third act. *Interstellar* prominently features two possible candidates for the last known survivor of the initial exploratory mission: a virtuous Edmunds, who died off-screen, or the unpraiseworthy Mann, who lied and nearly sabotaged the entire mission out of his fear of facing a lonely death, fearing survivorship. *Logan* features the final three X-Men: Logan (Wolverine), Professor X, and Caliban. The latter two die, leaving Logan the last X-Man. His later death and memorial—a large, wooden X—are depicted on-screen and serve as a passing-of-the-torch to Dafne Keen's X-23.

Other notable fictional last survivors include, in film and television, Phil Miller (for the pilot episode of *The Last Man on Earth*); Ripley (*Alien*); Jessica Jones (*Jessica Jones*); Gamora, Rocket Raccoon, Groot, Drax (*Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Avengers: Infinity War*); Will Turner (*Pirates of the Caribbean*); David Dunn (*Unbreakable*); Detective Pikachu (*Detective Pikachu*); and The Punisher (*Punisher*). In

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<sup>35</sup> I am including works that feature characters who were at one time presented as the last known survivor, last person standing, sole survivor, last of one's kind. A common convention is to "ret-con" or retroactively canonize the counterfactual that they are not the last. This "ret-conning" may be a way to re-inject expectancy and interest in the audience to prevent stagnating or declining ratings. On the other hand, media creators may be intrigued by the concept of the last known survivor and their death, but they may find it difficult to present it in a fictional medium unreflectively.

literature, there are Odysseus (the *Odyssey*), the Formic Hive Queen (*Ender's Game*), Horatio (of the royal court Danes in *Hamlet*), Justice Wargrave (*Then There Were None*)<sup>36</sup>. Additionally, video games such as *God of War* (2018), *NieR: Automata*, *The Last of Us Parts I & II*, and *Ghost of Tsushima* are concerned with survivorship in light of existential reflections upon loss, remembrance, and humanity. This list is only a sampling of recent cultural use. These examples show that this phenomenon is prominently featured, intentionally and unintentionally, in cultural narratives, fictional and historical.

### 3. The Marks of Recognized Last Known Survivorship

I argue that there are two essential features of last known survivorship as a broad category, while there is a third that moves a particular survivor from this broader population into the role of a recognized last known survivor by a collective. These survivors are marked by time in three ways. The individual is first connected to a particular historical time, context, or event when they were alive. Second, the person is marked by the timing and serial position of their death within the population related to the event, again involving factors beyond their influence. The third mark of time is the collective's act or acts of remembrance and recognition after the survivor's passing. Unlike the previous two, this third mark of time has the potential to be unbounded and continuous; it need not be confined to a discrete date or event.

I can best illustrate these three marks through an etymological puzzle based on the contemporary usages of "last." One usage of "last" refers to the thing in final serial position within a list, series, or population: according to Merriam-Webster, "following all the rest," "being the only remaining," "belonging to the final stage (as of life)," "in conclusion."<sup>37</sup> These definitions are likely the first to come to mind when thinking of the "last person standing" or the "last survivor." There are no living peers alongside the survivor's solitary self or at all if the survivor has died. However, another usage of "last" refers to the endurance or the existence of an object: "to continue in time,"

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<sup>36</sup> Also, in *Then There Were None*, Vera Claythorne falsely believes she's the last before committing suicide.

<sup>37</sup> Adjective 1a, 1b; adjective 2; adverb 3. (*Merriam-Webster*, "last," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/last>. Accessed on March 26, 2021).

“to manage to continue (as in a course of action),” “to continue to live.”<sup>38</sup> This set of meanings picks out the “survivorship” with particular emphasis upon the survivor being marked by time as the event occurs. Already, there is a thematic tension between the notion of static finality and one of persisting existence and survival. Also, the “persistence” usage maps well onto the idea that the symbolic role of the survivor or the collective’s remembrances “last” beyond the person’s death.

This tension between these sets of definitions would be worth conceptualizing on its own, but there is another set that completes the etymological chord. This set parallels the collective remembrance of the survivor after death: “next before the present : most recent,” “most up-to-date,” “most lately.”<sup>39</sup> There is a liminal space between present and past. The usage refers to something in the past from the perspective of the present. In the survivorship case, a person is remembering or recognizing another person, the survivor, who is connected to the past. The connection becomes more nuanced when understanding “most recent” as not contemporary but close to being recent: a deceased survivor who is the closest to being one’s contemporary but is still firmly in the past. “Last” points to the (1) living (or lived) endurance and survivorship of the person, (2) the static serial position set by death that is the easiest to be noticed by the untrained eye, and (3) a present person’s gaze towards the past with the potential for symbolic preservation to persist.

#### 4. Arendtian Heuristic and Symbolic-Personal Remembrance-Recognition

Moving from etymology to phenomenology, I follow the previous section by adapting an Arendtian heuristic to view how these details relate to the remembrance of deceased, recognized last known survivors. I consider these characteristics in two divisions: the first two marks will be considered under last known survivorship generally and the third mark will be considered under recognized last known survivorship. I conclude with a view that is supported by Arendt’s treatment of history and remembrance after death without requiring a commitment to her broader framework.

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<sup>38</sup> Intransitive verb 1, 2b, 2c. (Ibid.)

<sup>39</sup> Adjective 3a, 3b; adverb 2. (Ibid.)

#### 4.1 Last Known Survivorship Broadly

In this subsection, I am concerned with the first two marks, the relation to a particular event as a “survivor” and the serial position of the survivor’s death. Both marks are by temporal factors beyond a person’s merits or biography, while still being uniquely significant in a way that the ninth or twentieth survivor is not. As such, I am adapting some of Hannah Arendt’s “The Concept of History” to address both the survivor-event relation and the significance of the *last* survivor, specifically.

Arendt notes that “animals exist only as members of their species and not as individuals.”<sup>40</sup> The species itself has a sense of “immortality,” in her view, these individuals only grasp immortality in that they relate to the species through the species’ self-propagating cyclical patterns: reproduction, eating, sleeping, other species-related activities. These preserve the species and maintain the uniqueness of the species, but the individual is subsumed into simply being a member of the species if it were not for recognition of the individual by something or someone. Humanity—an interpretive note about Arendt, not *homo sapiens* but creatures conditioned to be human by their performance of certain activities—possesses the same relationship to a species, but she understands humans to be distinctly mortal in the sense that each person has an individual life story from birth to death. This mortality can be understood in that an individual’s life can both end and be forgotten with the death of an individual, perishing in a way that the species will not with one individual’s death. Humanity is conditioned by speech, deeds, and work products as they are brought into the public realm and received because, for Arendt, “appearance [...] constitutes reality.”<sup>41</sup> This “rectilinear” biography of the individual stands apart from the rhythms of the species and “cut[s] through” and “interrupt[s] the circular movement of daily life” of both other individuals and the species as a whole.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The Concept of History” in *Between Past and Future*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 42-43.

<sup>41</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

<sup>42</sup> Arendt, “The Concept of History,” 42-43. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Second Edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 17-21.

Viewing individual persons in this kind of light, excusing some of the stronger ontological language or some claims about non-human animals, provides a lens for recognizing and honoring living individuals for their survivorship. There is a similarity between individual-species and survivor-event relationships. An event, such as a war, is often characterized by cyclical patterns: both internal—battles, advances, counters, retreats, surrenders—and external—their similarities to other wars. The event is also composed of a population of these will-be survivors. Also, the significance of the event may be derived from all participants and preserved by living participants, implying that the event's significance begins to coalesce around those who are still living as survivors begin to die until the mantle of the event's significance for the collective is concentrated upon the last survivor. Analogously, the significance of the species as, for example, a hedgehog (setting aside individual significance) is distributed abstractly across the entire species, unless only one hedgehog remains. Then a singular hedgehog can be identified with the species' significance and the individual hedgehog's. I find the significance of the last living survivor also to be a similarly real symbolic marker of the greater event that is caused by mostly temporal factors without trivializing the life stories of any other participant in the event. The last known survivor is significant because, for some period of time, they have lived with the full weight of the event upon them, and there is no other survivor to whom that event's significance can pass.

#### 4.2 Recognized Last Known Survivorship

Up until now, the last survivor is seen to be significant because they are the only living person and symbol related to the event who can continue to appear, speak, act, remember, persuade, and teach in public. Does this unique significance carry into and beyond their death? Their death marks the end of any living, active “appearer” from this event, setting the event into the historical past. Individuals from that event can no longer act in a novel way in this world or directly interact with others. Their death marks the need for some form of preservation of the last survivor for recognition to continue.

To allow for continued remembrance and recognition beyond death, Arendt describes stories as “immortalizing” the individual. “Storytelling” is one “transformation” of the person “into a shape to fit them for public appearance.”<sup>43</sup> Those lives of individuals can be crafted and told by a storyteller, reintroducing the individual into public appearance or continuing their past appearance.<sup>44</sup>

Of special note to recognized last known survivors, Arendt mentions some storytelling features that can support the phenomenon’s distinctive attributes. First, the fullest significance of the survivor may only be known after their passing as they are being remembered: “whatever the character and content of the [...] story [...] its full meaning can reveal itself only when it has ended.”<sup>45</sup> So each survivor’s life possesses the potential for their significance in that survivor-event relationship. Yet, the significance may not be fully expressed until their story is complete and recognized, emphasizing the last *known* survivor over the last *actual* survivor.

Second, she understands the “hero” of the story as not requiring stereotypical “heroic qualities” like courage and being “no other than every free man was capable.”<sup>46</sup> This perspective supports my understanding that recognizing the last survivor does not require diminishing other survivors, recognized or not, as objectively less deserving. It also lowers the standard that a survivor must clear to be recognized, allowing for broadening the phenomenon to include witnesses or background participants, if the collective recognizes their connection to be germane to the event and worthy of honor.

Third, the usage of story, whether in history proper or more colloquial forms, enables the person, their character, and their deeds to be preserved alongside the greater event, preventing the

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<sup>43</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

<sup>44</sup> The case of Ishi, presumed last Yahi man, raises concerns regarding language and story. Ishi was named after his language’s word for “man” as custom dictated that he had to be formally introduced by another Yahi in their language. Lacking this customary recognition, Ishi is essentially nameless in his culture, and his story can be told in English (with multiple books and films) but never in this language which would have granted him his identity in name, biography, memorial, and legacy. The last speaker of a language may be a more significant loss as they may be the last survivor that future collectives can only recognize and mourn incompletely. *Mohican Press*, “Ishi: A Real-Life *The Last of the Mohicans*.” Accessed on April 1, 2021. <https://www.mohicanpress.com/mo08019.html>

<sup>45</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 192.

<sup>46</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 186.

survivor's symbolic status from fully eclipsing the personal identity of the survivor. Following her concern about the Tomb of the Unknown Survivor, which I will later consider, she discusses inappropriate forms of recognition: "The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is."<sup>47</sup> Historical records, including listing names of all individuals involved, or abstract memorials may dehumanize or depersonalize the actual survivor. The use of stories resists that pull, as the story centers around the person's life narrative, their name and biographical details, and their subjective perspective of the event.

Fourth, stories can be preserved within non-speech mediums. As much as Arendt values unmediated speech and appearance directly between persons, the fear will always be that something significant is forgotten or distorted and can never be recovered. End products of the activity Arendt labels "work" can persist beyond a speech act. Arendt lists several ways that stories can persist or be re-adapted to meet specific ends: "stories may then be recorded in documents and monuments, [sic] they may be visible use objects or art works, they may be told or retold and worked into all kinds of reality."<sup>48</sup> All match the lists of ways that last known survivors feature in memorials, history, and fiction I detailed earlier.

Stories, alongside the survivor's corpse if in a funeral context, allow for the third mark's realization: the remembrance by the collective after one's death. For Arendt, the political realm is organized around "a kind of *organized remembrance*. It assures the mortal actor that his *passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality* that comes from [...] appearing before an audience of fellow men."<sup>49</sup> Collective recognition and remembrance bestows, recognizes, and preserves the survivor's significance and thereby that of the other participants against the threat of time and forgetfulness, ironically, *because of* primarily temporal factors.

Further, individual stories allow for more recognition and not less. Earlier I mentioned that historical events can be understood as a specified set of stories interrupting biological life. The arrow

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<sup>47</sup> Emphasis in the original. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 181.

<sup>48</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184.

<sup>49</sup> Emphasis mine. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198.

of recognition can be reversed to extend from the last survivor to the event. In doing so, the story of the survivor can serve as an anchor of the greater event, which enables the collective to possibly seek out and recognize other survivors, victims, or participants. Hearing the story of one ordinary person may spark an interest in the lives of others, moving from last survivor to event to the entire survivor population. The last survivor may serve as a non-idealized symbol of recognition (an ordinary person) that can allow for the redirection of recognition to other, “non-heroic” persons, who may have been forgotten over time, while participating in a collectively useful significant, symbolic type that allows for consistent selection of an anchor across events.

#### 4.3 Symbolic-Personal Remembrance & Recognitions

I conclude this section with a formulation that summarizes these Arendtian characteristics for broader philosophical consideration. Both the symbolic (read as a heroic narrative or story) and the personal (read as biographical, often private) features of last known survivorship are significant when held in tension against the other in what I call Symbolic-Personal Remembrance & Recognition.<sup>50</sup>

**Symbolic-Personal Remembrance & Recognition (SPRR):** Recognized last known survivors are remembered and recognized both as their distinct person and as their symbolic role of *last known survivor* of a certain event or context in varying degrees by different segments of a population. This recognition and remembrance can be positive, negative, or neutral in valence. These activities may be done at a single event or over time and through physical activity, speech, or writing and often involve a biographical narrative being told alongside a presentation of details or reflections concerning the larger event.

I argue that no appropriate remembrance of a recognized last known survivor omits either of these aspects—symbolic or personal—and, if properly performed, the remembrance resists possible tendencies towards such an omission. Symbolic-Personal Remembrance-Recognition should capture the historical and experiential relations of survivor to event, while also emphasizing that this recognition is preserved appropriately through story, narrative, and symbolic aspects. The person mourning the survivor as their grandfather is still concerned with his identity as a survivor as the community understands his survivorship, and the person mourning the survivor as a symbolic

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<sup>50</sup> This view is adaptable to other remembrances. It is not exclusive to this phenomenon despite its relevant application.

representation of an event still addresses the person and their (private) biographical details. I will expand on this view in the following section.

## 5. Remembrance & Recognition

This section augments the previous section and the SPRR view with elements from contemporary sources beyond the Arendtian framing before advancing the need for this symbolic-personal tension through two theoretical puzzles and their assessments.

A collective influences whether the last known survivor is received into collective recognition or honor. Collectives or individual persons perform a singular act or a continuing series of activities preserving this survivor and event in remembrance. These collective remembrances recognize that the last known survivor, along with the corresponding event, meets a criterion of collective significance.

### 5.1.1 Remembrance

Collective remembrance is concerned with two activities: evaluating the past from the perspective of present values and preserving the narrative in a manner that will sustain present values and aspirations. This might involve some “suppression” or “omission,” but it could also involve emphasizing those narratives that are the most compatible with present sentiments.<sup>51</sup> James Wertsch adds that there is still an “accuracy criterion.” Otherwise, there would be no grounds to accuse an individual of remembering something incorrectly. The criterion is simply one of many in remembrance rather than the primary one as in history: “other criteria for assessing the appropriateness and power of memory may be involved.”<sup>52</sup> As in the case of stories, remembrance is understood to be concerned with historical accuracy in so much as to refer to events and persons

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<sup>51</sup> Roediger III, Henry L., Franklin M. Zaromb, and Andrew C. Butler. “The Role of Repeated Retrieval in Shaping Collective Memory” in *Memory in Mind and Culture*. Edited by Pascal Boyer and James V. Wertsch. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 140.

<sup>52</sup> Wertsch, James. “Collective Memory” in *Memory in Mind and Culture*. Edited by Pascal Boyer and James V. Wertsch. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 122.

appropriately, but the main emphasis is upon the personal narrative of the survivor through the collective's subjective perspective or values.

As an additional note, there can be disputing collectives or sub-groups while preserving the notion of a collective remembrance. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan use collective remembrance to “disentangle the behaviour [sic] of different groups within the collective. Some act; others — most others — [sic] do not.” With collective remembrance, the focus is upon whether some actors are performing these remembrance activities and the level of collective participation. However, it is not the case that the entire collective must participate or must even agree about a shared meaning of the remembrance. Winter allows for the possibility for a communal site of memory—his example is a war memorial—to be both used positively by a collective while also being used in opposition by another sub-group. “Some critics claim that commemorative practices sacralize war and the political order that governs it (Klein, 2000). But this objection misses the point that pacifists have used sites of memory for precisely the opposite purpose.”<sup>53</sup> There can be disputing sub-groups without undermining the existence of collective remembrance activities or sites, allowing for collective remembrance to avoid having to fulfill such a high standard as the totality of a collective participating in these remembrances. Since collective remembrance and recognition are concerned with stories of a person's life, interpretive meaning or moral assessment of the event can be contested as long as the survivor as a person remains central within these disputing interpretations.

### 5.1.2 Recognition

Recognition should both (i) bestow an honor, appreciate excellence, denounce vice, etc., and (ii) identify the person. For Arendt, excellence involves the recognition by one's peers for doing something praiseworthy or appearing praiseworthy.<sup>54</sup> This kind of praise of the person can also come from appreciating a product of their work: e.g., a great carpenter can be known and affirmed through

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<sup>53</sup> Jay Winter, “Historians and Sites of Memory” in *Memory Mind and Culture*. Edited by Pascal Boyer and James V. Wertsch. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 256.

<sup>54</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 49.

appreciating the house they constructed. Both aspects she derives from Greek uses of virtue. The recognition of a self is crucial as she vehemently denies that an absolute, selfless good qualifies as virtue and claims that it has no role in the political realm.<sup>55</sup> Recognition similar to Arendt's allows for more appropriate usages of symbolic remembrance. One can recognize and honor the last known survivor, not simply through direct praise of the individual, but through their life story and through utilizing the survivor's story to remember others, as long as this utilization maintains the survivor to be an ends and not a symbolic means alone. Without this piece, the ethical concern regarding the inclusion of the event and other survivors in their obituary or memorial services may be seen as detracting from the survivor's honor or appropriating the individual for some collective purpose. This recognition may include an expressivist approval of the survivor or the appreciation of an objective moral property among others; I am not siding with a particular variant for this paper.<sup>56</sup>

### 5.1.3 Criteria for Event Significance

Not every last known survivor will be recognized as such. There are still selection processes and tendencies, formal and informal, that influence who are recognized and how they are recognized. A complete explication of these processes is beyond this paper. I will offer a few criteria that may predict which events, and thereby which survivors, are prioritized as significant.

Drawing from James W. Pennebaker and Amy L. Gonzales, some rough tent poles can be fashioned as to why certain events are held to be significant. Collectives generally prioritize recent events over older events. The "distanced" events are often "reinterpreted and changed to match the needs of the culture," becoming "mythlike, with positive outcomes, emphasized and the costs forgotten", "influenced by recency and self-relevance."<sup>57</sup> Pennebaker and Gonzales note that

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<sup>55</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 73-78.

<sup>56</sup> Recognition can include both approval and disapproval. Generally, these survivors are positively honored. Theoretically, recognized last known survivors can be negatively recognized. I will address this in a later section.

<sup>57</sup> James W. Pennebaker and Amy L. Gonzales, "Making History: Social and Psychological Processes Underlying Collective Memory" in *Memory in Mind and Culture*. Edited by Pascal Boyer and James V. Wertsch. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 186-187.

“communicative memories” are characterized by being “actively transmitted between three living generations.”<sup>58</sup> A recency condition tracks with how most of the detailed, compelling survivor examples to date are post-20<sup>th</sup> century individuals. Also, the event generally must involve some lasting, observable impact. In their consideration of the Persian Gulf War, they theorize that the quick forgetting of details was because no significant, long-term regime or global change had occurred. The final tentpole is simply that people are drawn to stories that resonate with their values, worldview, or curiosities: “Historical memories are shaped by the interests and subjective experiences unique to each culture and era.”<sup>59</sup> There will be exceptions to these criteria, but they do seem to be fairly accurate as predictors of which survivors and events will receive what kinds of recognitions, all things being equal.

There are some final details to establish regarding SPRR before turning to the relevant theoretical puzzles. First, merely being a survivor does not necessitate that one will be honored in this way. I have already posited that the survivor must be able to fit within the greater collective narrative with little dissonance, and they also are connected to an event that a collective happens to grant significance to over other eligible ones. The identity of being the last known survivor allows such recognition to be appropriate if the collective chooses to recognize them. On the flipside, as seen in the case of the Canadian veterans, individuals can refuse to be honored in certain ways, remaining in private mourning, even if they cannot refuse all forms of collective recognition. The story and narrative remain a viable means of remembrance as the story can be constructed from details of past public appearance without infringing upon private mourning, making these obituaries a viable option while respecting privacy.

Second, as I have mentioned, the symbolic and the personal elements can be present in varying degrees based on the circumstance. Some events and survivors will be emphasized more symbolically, as seen with Frank Buckles. Others will be seen with more personal details like some

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<sup>58</sup> Pennebaker and Gonzales, “Making History,” 187.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

lesser-known persons in *The Last Leaf* or private familial remembrances. They still are honored and remembered in their symbolic role of being connected to a certain event, but their memorial is still mostly personal in that it is primarily performed by family, friends, their community, and maybe a handful of strangers who have read their story.

Third, there is no objective measure, qualitatively or quantitatively, of recognition that determines a recognized last known survivor, and not crossing from last known survivorship into recognized last known survivorship does not lessen the survivor's significance as a person or survivor. The real distinction here is simply how significant is the event in question in the collective's perception and how the collective preserves the survivor through remembrance. Those conferred the title of "last known survivor" will have some symbolic role and significance in that their identity is the "last known survivor of [Event X]," even if it is seen as minor or soon forgotten. Someone in the future, even far from the event's occurrence, can appropriately rediscover and revive their remembrance and recognize them in the retelling or sharing of their story.

## 5.2 First Puzzle for the Personal: Funerals of Recognized Last Survivors

The last known survivor was someone's friend or family member. They had a name, job, biography, and relationships. They were a living person and not some abstract conceit. These personal characteristics allow for private or personal mourning by family, friends, and a small community, like non-last survivors. Framing these survivors against some symbolic construction that is not applied to other ordinary, "non-heroic," persons may seem unnecessary or, worse, a misappropriation of the person. I argue that symbolic remembrance is crucial to explain how a survivor can both be remembered as an individual person by those who knew them and serve as an anchor for remembrance of the larger event without dehumanizing them.

A typical funeral service generally follows a certain model. These services are oriented towards the family, friends, and community. They serve as a means of honoring the deceased's legacy as well as to collectively show solidarity in the mourning process. The focus of the funeral is one

deceased individual, whom that person's family and close friends mourn and remember. In obituaries and funeral announcements, they detail the person's biography, relevant historical or community-oriented details, surviving kin, and ways of expressing sympathy or support. These obituaries are reserved for honoring that person. Funerals are typically private affairs, and, if they are open to the public, they still primarily are communal mournings or celebrations of a particular person. Finally, barring political or military service, governmental or political aspects are less likely to be involved than the person's religious, familial, or organizational affiliations.

Memorial services of recognized last known survivors can differ drastically from this model.<sup>60</sup> Some of the more extravagant services were open to the public. Hundreds or thousands attended some services, lined the streets for the procession as with Harry Patch or Reggie Kray, or attended similar public events like Buckles' memorial in Kansas City or the livestream of Harry Patch's funeral outside the cathedral. The WWI events featured family members of veterans other than Buckles or Patch, honoring the designated veteran but also all veterans, including those who had received their own exclusive memorial service. The accounts from *The Last Leaf* or newspaper articles may focus on the entire life biography of the individual, but they often detail the event with which they were connected, even describing parts that they were not involved or with information to which they were not privy. Also, the central structure of the memorials is not the religious, relational, or philosophical features of the individual. These events can involve military honors beyond the standard military funeral or one's service awards. There can be speeches by military and political leaders, and the memorials emphasize the person's impact upon the collective rather than their personal relationships.<sup>61</sup>

Arendt's private and public distinction can help explain why these funerals seem to be operating in different worlds. For Arendt, love—variants such as erotic, romantic, familial, or deep

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<sup>60</sup> As my project is mainly descriptive, I am trying to explain the phenomenon that is presently instantiated. I will consider some questions on whether this *ought* to be the case in a later section on normative concerns. For now, I will assume that how collectives remember survivors are valid and representative of the phenomenon, or at least permissible.

<sup>61</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.

friend love—is reserved for the private realm. She assumes that such love “can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes.” Further, the public “signifies the world itself, insofar as it is common to all.” Familial, romantic, and some instances of friendship are not open for participation from all. My romantic love for my dearest friend is reserved for her and cannot be shared in some common way with another in the same intensity or way as with her. So, any memorial in the public is going to emphasize the survivor as a person, citizen, or friend. Identities and appearances that all can recognize and engage. The two types of funerals so far seem to fall into these private and public domains fairly easily with some adaptation.

The puzzle originates in attempts to reconcile the memorials of recognized last known survivors with a familial funeral into one particular event, blurring or erasing any such Arendtian distinction. In the familial/personal funeral, one honors a distinct individual, whereas, in the recognized last known survivor, the funeral is dedicated to the named survivor while also honoring others in the population. People at these memorial services could be honoring person A but also, by following a basic substitution principle, person B or C (another person of the population) at person A’s memorial. As far as I am aware, there is no articulated normative rule that prohibits such a remembrance at any funeral. If a funeral brings to mind someone’s lost loved one, it would seem permissible *prima facie* for them to mourn both. The service is still dedicated to one particular person. Presumably one is approaching taboo territory if the family is told that that mourner saw the funeral to be equally or solely about his loved one. A taboo seems even more likely if the family was told that, instead of the named person or a personal loved one, that this mourner just honored strangers or imagined persons fitting similar characteristics of this person but not the named person himself or herself.

Recognized last known survivor memorials do not simply have these kinds of mourning another at a named person’s memorial, but it seems encouraged, even by the family members or survivors themselves. Returning to the example of Ken Buckles, he recognized the significance of state funerals for WWI veterans and advocated for one for America’s last known survivor. Ken

Buckles knew full well that his uncle Frank Buckles would be the likely recipient. Despite the personal relationship he had with his uncle, he expressed his motivation by emphasizing his honoring his uncle's symbolic identity while speaking as the director of Remembering America's Heroes rather than as a family member. "I thought it was just a travesty that the United States is the only country that doesn't honor its *World War One Veterans* this way [...] Our mission [...] is to remember, honor and thank our *Veterans*. So I felt we had to do something about this."<sup>62</sup> Ken Buckles is highlighting "veterans" plural, fully intending for the funeral to be dedicated to more than his uncle. At the same time, this funeral is very much a military funeral *dedicated to and for* Frank Buckles in the same vein as those for personal remembrance of "ordinary" veterans by their families. Without the inclusion of a symbolic element, there is a concern that Frank Buckles would not be granted his due honor, even by his own family. If he did, it might be as a means for collective remembrance of others, the event, and collective values. Here the significance of the recognized last known survivor would be that he is paradoxically less significant than other participants as he did not receive an exclusive funeral and is an appropriated means for the collective.

Introducing a symbolic element allows for both types of remembrances to be permissibly realized. The familial and friend love is too exclusive and directed towards a particular individual to allow for the deceased's memorial to be used for any other purpose other than their remembrance without being taboo or parasitic upon familial mourning. However, the additional symbolic role of the person as a last known survivor, created through the transformation of the survivor's life into a preserved story, allows for this remembrance. Families can see the event from some psychological distance, say as citizens, and appreciate the broader memorial. Strangers can attend the memorial and remember their loved ones in relation to the symbolic survivor role while still recognizing the deceased as the person occupying it, reducing the possible taboo. Further, since the survivor was both the person and the symbol in some sense, this remembrance better captures that person's full

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<sup>62</sup> Emphasis mine. "Arlington Cemetery Makes Historic Exception for World War I Veteran," Salem News. Last updated April 8, 2008. [http://www.salem-news.com/articles/april082008/ww1\\_vet\\_4-8-08.php](http://www.salem-news.com/articles/april082008/ww1_vet_4-8-08.php)

identity and story. Buckles is neither simply being remembered as a citizen and soldier nor only as a family man and friend. Individuals and the collective can honor both simultaneously.

### 5.3 Second Puzzle for the Symbolic: Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

At the same time, one neither needs to nor should erase the personal features from these collective remembrances and understand them as solely symbolic as there may be undesirable consequences. To show these, I turn to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington. This memorial site is to honor all soldiers who remain missing in action or were killed in action having been rendered unidentifiable, whether by time or weaponry. By the Vietnam War's conclusion, only two sets of remains were unidentifiable by the Central Identification Laboratory, and one was chosen to be laid to rest on Memorial Day 1984. The low body count in comparison to past wars was a result of improved identification technology and methods that were able to keep pace with the advances in weaponry. The Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and the Reagan administration advocated for the inclusion of a set of remains, in the words of Michael Naas, to "symbolically include the Vietnam War into the twentieth century's list of honorable or glorious war efforts." Congress passed a resolution in 1973 to construct a tomb for Vietnam, moving this advocacy into the space of federal law. This resolution was passed despite opposition by groups like the National League of POW-MIA who argued that less effort would be applied towards identifying the remains of veterans for families and friends of missing veterans, thereby rejecting the personal element of a memorial.<sup>63</sup>

The Department of Defense followed through the selection and burial, but the process demonstrates undesirable implications with solely symbolic memorials. Naas details that, to ensure the remains served as a static symbol of the "unknown soldier," the government felt compelled to maintain the unidentified condition of the remains: "To ensure that the remains would remain

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<sup>63</sup> Naas, Michael. "History's Remains: Of Memory, Mourning, and the Event" in *Research in Phenomenology*. (Vol. 33, Issue 1, 2003, pp. 75-96), 89-92.

unidentifiable into perpetuity [...] an Army spokesperson said, ‘To preserve the casualty’s anonymity,’ the ‘Army ordered all records pertaining to the case destroyed.’” Even more troubling, the Blassie family of St. Louis hypothesized that it might be a missing family member, Michael Joseph Blassie. Rather than rush to grant closure to the mourning family, the Department of Defense was more concerned with the preservation of the symbol and its possible loss, as identified remains are by definition not unknown. “[The] remains of the unknown soldier were disinterred, the ‘hallowed ground’ disturbed, as Defense Secretary William Cohen put it, ‘with deep reluctance.’” DNA testing confirmed that the soldier was Blassie, and he was reburied in St. Louis.<sup>64</sup>

This case highlights the undesirability of understanding memorials and remembrances as principally or solely symbolic; a dehumanization of the survivor for some collective purpose may result. I am not suggesting that the motivation or the symbolic motif is immoral or undesirable in and of itself. All things being equal, I would see a memorial to those missing or killed in action without the dignity of a funeral to be worth memorializing. However, preserving the symbolism of “the unknown soldier” prevented a family’s mourning and made political leaders recalcitrant towards transforming the memorial from the unknown into the known. If it were not for the DNA testing, Blassie would have been in a paradoxical state of having been both recognized and unrecognized in his memorial. Hannah Arendt’s critique of the WWI Tombs of the Unknown, quoted earlier, applies to this scenario. These anonymous, symbolic memorials show a “still existing need for glorification, for finding a ‘who,’ an identifiable somebody”; these monuments are dedicated to those “the war had failed to make known and had robbed thereby, not of their achievement, but of their human dignity.”<sup>65</sup> Blassie was recognized indirectly as a symbol but at the cost of erasing his identity.

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier’s ethical concerns may not necessitate similar variants with last known survivors, especially if viewed through SPRR. The symbolic elements of both vary greatly. With the unknown, one must preserve the anonymity of the individual. Symbolic

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 180-181.

memorialization and remembrance of the last known survivor may be less problematic due to the inclusion of “known” within the definition. The symbol can be preserved in ways that do not erase the person’s identity or personhood. This “known” characteristic suggests that there is still an interest in the “identifiable somebody” beyond the symbol. This “known-ness” concerns recognition by another, which as understood earlier, will concern the life story of the survivor complete with private biographical details beyond the symbolic, actively resisting the tendency for symbolic erasure of personhood.<sup>66</sup> There remains the opportunity for friends and family to visit the collective memorial or grave to honor that person. The personal element is essential to prevent a crime of anonymity from dehumanizing the person intended for honor: “making death itself anonymous [...] rob[s] death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life.”<sup>67</sup> SPRR’s response to this puzzle shows that the preservation of a survivor’s lived experience in a narrative story and their “known-ness” may avoid serious ethical concerns.

To be clear, these subsections present intuition pumps based on a possible taboo in reconciling two types of funeral remembrances and on a tendency towards unethical remembrance in strictly archetypal symbolic remembrance. I have not proven SPRR from definitive moral obligations. However, I think these puzzles show that viewing the phenomenon of recognized last known survivorship as possessing symbolic features is plausible and may resolve some inconsistencies that may result otherwise. Also, emphasizing the known aspects of the survivor and their survivor may avoid collective appropriation for purposes that dehumanize the survivor and prevent personal remembrance, recognition, and mourning.

#### 6. Loss of All Persons Possessing First-Hand Memory or Knowledge from an Event of Interest

One common explanation of last known survivorship is the collective’s new-found loss of all first-hand experience, memory, and knowledge from the event. After the last survivor passes, there is no

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<sup>66</sup> Even if the “known” characteristic could be satisfied by only the name of the survivor, that detail will allow for interested persons to research that person’s fuller story, maintaining both symbol and person.

<sup>67</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 452.

one left alive to ask about their testimony to that tragedy or witnessing that great invention. The collective can no longer solicit any first-person testimony or garner any new facts that are not recorded in some artifact or passed through secondary sources. Concerning Marion Eichholz's passing, the last survivor of the 1915 *Eastland* disaster, Ted Wachholz, the director of the *Eastland* preservation group, was quoted as saying, "There is no more first-hand testimony to be heard except whatever's documented in writing."<sup>68</sup> Collectives may respect non-survivors who catalog, analyze, record, and preserve these events, but they do not seem to be bestowed the same kind of memorialization and respect as those who were directly involved. Ken Burns may produce quality documentaries, but the respect he is owed differs from that owed to the person who experienced the event first-hand. Additionally, Burns may possess greater, less biased, and more accurate historical knowledge than the survivor, but he does not directly remember the event. New first-hand memory is irretrievable once all involved have died, marking the loss of any novel unexpected, unrecorded knowledge, opinion, or memory with the death of the last survivor.

However, this explanation does not hold up well when some recognized last known survivors are more closely considered. Marion Eichholz of the *Eastland* was only three years old at the time of the incident.<sup>69</sup> She would have (or at least would be able to have) some memories from the event at that point in her psychological development, but the quality and quantity of those memories likely pale in comparison to other survivors. Millvina Dean was only 2 months old when she was aboard the *Titanic* and possesses "no memories of the disaster."<sup>70</sup> In *The Last Leaf*, there are multiple people too young to possess significant first-hand testimony: Adella Wotherspoon (6 months, *General Slocum*) and Barbara Anderson McDermott (3, last American on the *Lusitania*). These survivors' memories are likely to be, at best, learned from other survivors and historical accounts

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<sup>68</sup> Manchir Michelle, "Last known survivor of 1915 Eastland disaster dies," *Chicago Tribune*, December 13, 2014. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-eastland-last-survivor-met-20141212-story.html>

<sup>69</sup> Manchir Michelle, "Last known survivor of 1915 Eastland disaster dies," *Chicago Tribune*, December 13, 2014. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-eastland-last-survivor-met-20141212-story.html>

<sup>70</sup> "Last Titanic survivor dies at 97," *BBC News*. Last updated on June 1, 2009. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/hampshire/8070095.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/hampshire/8070095.stm)

and, at worst, unintentionally fabricated or manipulated. The privileging of these individuals over others seems inappropriate if done because of direct memory conditions.

Even an adult survivor may be disqualified from the role of a reliable testifier of a first-hand experience. The survivor may develop Alzheimer's or another neurological disorder that affects their ability to recall their memories of the event. Others may have developed PTSD, or they may feel uncomfortable discussing the event, making the memories that they do possess inaccessible to others and possibly themselves. Others may testify to the experience but be seen as unreliable narrators, whether by character or psychologically. The collective may need to continuously verify these unreliable narrators' testimonies according to other sources, making their accepted testimony only redundant and disqualifying the broad acceptance of any novel testimony. Finally, the condition of being a testifier, or even simply possessing the ability to testify, would disqualify individuals who were not consciously present or coherent in the event.

Roman Fritz's life serves as a possible example of these concerns. Fritz was the last known subject of the VA's lobotomizing of war veterans suffering from trauma and psychological distress.<sup>71</sup> His claim to last known survivorship concerns an event that centers around factors that would cloud or impair any dependable memory. Also, when questioned about his experience in WWII and even his lobotomy, he was generally reliable, especially about the events in his military career, excepting one testimony regarding a war injury that is undocumented.<sup>72</sup> However, this reliability had to be verified by comparing his testimony to his service records or the testimony of his comrades because the lobotomy affected other doxastic states. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that he believed he had been a diplomat and a Secret Service member, had two (never existent) marriages broken up by the FBI, met Osama bin Laden, and served in Vietnam.<sup>73</sup> The possession of memory traces or the ability

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<sup>71</sup> Michael M. Phillips, "Roman Fritz, Last Surviving Veteran Lobotomized by the U.S., Dies at 97" *The Wall Street Journal*. Last updated July 31, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/roman-tritz-last-surviving-veteran-lobotomized-by-the-u-s-dies-at-97-11596227158>

<sup>72</sup> Michael M. Phillips, "When America Lobotomized Its Vets," *The Wall Street Journal*. December 12, 2013. <https://s.wsj.net/public/resources/documents/LobotomyFilesPart1.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

to communicate them to others does not seem to be the central justification regarding why *The Wall Street Journal* chose to or should remember him.<sup>74</sup>

The final category of cases includes events or circumstances that are correlated with the memory of some first-hand experience but feature an individual who would have no lived experience of the complete context they are being recognized for, even if the requirement is as basic as having lived during the time the event occurred. These could involve people such as those who were the last to live or be born in a particular century. Such events have great significance to collectives looking backward; however, the persons likely to meet these conditions—living longer than other persons alive during that period—will be those who were children born at the tail end of the period, making them again too young to have first-hand memories preserved. Even assuming that the last survivor had some memory, the uniqueness of epistemic factors is secondary in these contexts to the symbolic representation of the greater era. Unlike the other survivors considered in this paper, that context being represented includes events that occurred decades before they were born and may not include any event of interest during their lived moments. What distinct epistemic characteristic is there in selecting a person born on September 19, 1996, over one born on October 14, 1906, to symbolically represent the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Both could possess knowledge and experience of different events but not the entirety of the context being attributed to them, unlike the earlier children who truly experienced the entire event but lacked strong memory formation and preservation.<sup>75</sup> However, if one emphasizes the symbolic aspects, the last survivor—in this case, likely the former person—serves as the last symbolic anchor to receive a memorial or funeral to have lived; then one can still value the last survivor without having to commit to a strong necessary condition of first-hand experience and memory, which few could meet.

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<sup>74</sup> Also see David Stoliar, the last and only survivor of the *Struma*'s torpedoing off Turkish waters, who was only conscious of the events after the ship's torpedoing or significantly before it. He had been sleeping, and the explosion blasted him into the water near debris. (Lutz, *The Last Leaf*, 222).

<sup>75</sup> These dates are also fairly arbitrary. There is no natural January 1, 0001 to base human calendars, and there are many vastly different calendars. So, the significance seems to further depend upon symbolic or external factors.

Ultimately, an explanation based on solely first-hand memory fails to better explain the phenomenon. If a person forgot their experience of the event, they can still be honored through SPRR. The same can be said for those who did not technically experience the event consciously. I do not see any of the honor given to these persons as diminishing in light of that. These survivors can still generally be regarded as a primary epistemic authority. Yet, this explanation's strengths are compatible with SPRR. The collective can prioritize valuing individuals who possess a unique, direct memory of the event separately from last known survivorship. SPRR allows for an adaptable view that can better explain recognized last known survivors.

## 7. Ethical Implications & Further Engagement

Assuming the last known survivor phenomenon is not a natural kind with obvious instantiations and much of the significance of recognized last known survivors comes from remembrances by others, then I foresee several ethical problems or questions regarding collective recognition of the last known survivor, regardless of any view of understanding the phenomenon. I will consider four of these concerns here.

### 7.1 Honoring Controversial or Immoral Persons

First, one may ask whether someone ought to remember an immoral or controversial character. The recognized last known survivors listed in this paper have tended to be either virtuous or at least not obviously morally controversial. Extensive normative consideration is beyond the scope of this more descriptive paper. However, I will consider two prominent controversial last survivors that can motivate the normative concern after considering why these persons may be the exception: Rochus Misch, Hitler's last bodyguard present in Hitler's bunker, and Rudolf Hess, the last of Hitler's cabinet.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> For two other examples, the violent mobster Reggie Kray, the last prisoner of the Tower of London, news articles emphasized his conversion to "born-again" Christianity ("Kray's 'born-again Christian' letters up for auction," *BBC News*. Last updated on January 18, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-12219612>).

The collective's avoidance of moral dissonance stems from the difficulty in recognizing a person while trying to avoid any praise of factors that are generally morally disapproved. Pennebaker and Gonzales note that events that are "embarrassing, shameful, or in some way reflect negatively on people are more likely to be forgotten than more self-affirming events."<sup>77</sup> This principle seems to hold for survivors as well. Though history is often complicated, full of nuance and contradiction, how one remembers or tells a collective narrative is often less so. I find James Wertsch's conception of collective memory as a "schematic narrative template" to be of value. Wertsch's conception is concerned with "abstract generalized functions," organized as a narrative, and "can underlie an entire set of [multiple] specific narratives" with different "setting[s], cast[s] of characters, dates."<sup>78</sup> Wertsch posits collective, often unacknowledged templates or national narratives that organize or frame memory of events, and each collective may perceive the same basic facts from different, deep-rooted templates. One criterion for selection by the collective might be the minimization of the dissonance, favoring individuals that fit the collective narrative template regarding civic, ethical, ideological, cultural, or socio-political values over those who tend to diverge from this template. This condition does not have to be incredibly rigid as I mentioned that Buckles died to enlist, but these minor ethical concerns may be handled by favoring the civic virtues displayed over strict moral ones: e.g., Buckles was eager to serve.

Rochus Misch was featured in the film *Downfall*, a memoir, and several newspaper interviews. His death was recognized in several newspapers, but he "has not received quite the level of media attention one would expect."<sup>79</sup> These sources did not affirm or accept his wartime history or lasting anti-Semitic views; however, there is some dissonance in his portrayal. In Martin Henry's interview,

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Rafael Cancel Miranda, the last survivor of the 1954 U.S. Capitol shooting, articles emphasized that "[s]ome saw him as a terrorist, others as a hero" (Neil Genzlinger, "Rafael Cancel Miranda, Gunman in '54 Attack on Congress, Dies at 89," *The New York Times*. Last updated March 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/us/rafael-cancel-miranda-dead.html>).

<sup>77</sup> Pennebaker and Gonzales, "Making History", 174.

<sup>78</sup> James V. Wertsch, "Collective Memory", 129.

<sup>79</sup> Ida Hattemer-Higgins. "Hitler's bodyguard," *Salon*. Last updated February 21, 2005.

[https://web.archive.org/web/20120223215218/http://www.salon.com/2005/02/21/nazi\\_3/](https://web.archive.org/web/20120223215218/http://www.salon.com/2005/02/21/nazi_3/)

he emphasized the ordinariness of the man: “sweet old man. He was quiet, gentle and unassuming”; “moral torpor can coexist with personal likeability.”<sup>80</sup> These sources emphasize Misch’s denial of Nazi’s real regime and his personal etiquette. The example of Rochus Misch suggests that controversial figures must be softened—a soldier following orders without real awareness—to achieve a bare minimum of last survivor recognition. This response may be an intentional or unintentional instance of “sanitizing” a survivor to reduce narrative dissonance.

Rudolf Hess meets the conditions for a recognized survivor—the last individual connected to a particular association of people from an event that has continued to be recognized as significant—whose recognition is not just softened but actively resisted. After Hess committed suicide, he was buried “temporarily in a secret location, to avoid attention from the media or any demonstrations from members of the public with residual Nazi sympathies.” In keeping with Hess’s wishes, Hess was exhumed and reinterred in a private family ceremony ten years after his death.<sup>81</sup> Hess’s grave still attracted enough of a following that a 2005 court order was imposed to prevent gatherings. The church terminated the lease on the grave in 2011, and the family exhumed his remains.<sup>82</sup> With Hess, there is intentional coordination to prevent any recognition of this last known survivor. The collective was motivated to prevent any recognition from neo-Nazi sympathizers. The act of burying him in an undisclosed location for ten years, blocking media or press coverage that is normally correlated with a last survivor’s death, shows that some survivors’ recognitions are resisted based on their biographical narratives being contrary to civic virtues, despite intentions by others to recognize him.

These examples consider controversial survivors who are controversial *because of* the reason they are last survivors and not survivors who are controversial *despite* why they are last survivors, which

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<sup>80</sup> Martin Henry. “Europe’s Dark Past: The Case of Rochus Misch” in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*. (Vol. 105, No. 419, 2016).

<sup>81</sup> Roy Conyers Nesbit and Georges van Acker, “The Flight of Rudolf Hess: Myths and Reality,” (Stroud: The History Press, 2011), 103.

<sup>82</sup> “Top Nazi Rudolf Hess exhumed from 'pilgrimage' grave,” *BBC News*. Last updated on July 21, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-14232768>

may justify these strong reactions. However, how far would these behaviors extend to the example of an event that cannot be forgotten or deemed insignificant with controversial survivors of a different type? I will assume a massive nuclear disaster, which was not caused by any human negligence or intent, that kills thousands with long-term health and environmental impact. The last survivor is as close to objectively immoral as possible (e.g. mass murderer, pedophile, rapist); however, his immorality developed *after* and *independently* of the event. His life and actions during the event were moral, helpful, or neutral. How will or ought the collective remember this survivor: as solely a symbol, sanitized like Misch, as a historical footnote, or with active resistance like Hess?

A strong response by the collective would fits the account detailed, but this thought experiment has a variant that introduces the normative antithesis to my phenomenological thesis. I will assume the same event as the previous paragraph but tweak one characteristic of the survivor. This survivor is not necessarily immoral; he simply diverges from the collective in some controversial way. The person may be immoral, but the collective lacks the epistemic position to be certain that he is. The controversy may be a difference of ideology, religion, or culture that is neither moral nor immoral. More significantly, the person may be moral but living in a context that collectively disagrees or disapproves of that moral belief: e.g., an abolitionist in a pro-slavery collective. From the collective's perspective, this person poses narrative dissonance like the objectively immoral survivor, justifying not prioritizing the survivor's remembrance and recognition, maybe even silencing or resisting it. However, when considered from outside the collective's subjective position, one may disagree and say that the survivor ought to have been recognized as these features fail certain normative conditions or obligations that the collective has to the individual.<sup>83</sup> The following ethical implications concern pragmatic applications that are derived from this concern. This particular ethical concern also indicates that, though this paper is necessary for explaining the historical and present practice

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<sup>83</sup> About obligations to deceased persons, see Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and James W. Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

and framing the conceptual space, there may need to be a reassessment of the phenomenon's future applications on normative grounds.<sup>84</sup>

## 7.2 Concern of Marginalizing Survivors of Certain Demographics

The first pragmatic concern involves the possibility that, since the collective plays a crucial role in moving a person to recognized last known survivor status, that certain demographics will be overrepresented while others are underrepresented. The full term “last known survivor of [Event X]” can be reframed, picking out different individuals for different characteristics, with no one usage being more apt than another based on some objective criterion. Some framings may pick out certain individuals that help encourage virtue, serve as symbolic representations to honor other worthy persons, or call to mind important events and causes for remembrance. Honoring recently deceased or still living survivors helps remind a collective that certain events are much closer to the present—by implication, their effects or trauma—than historical facts may lead us to believe. Returning to Helen Viola Jackson, the American Civil War still happened in the same position on the timeline, nearly 160 years ago, and not even Ms. Jackson was alive then.<sup>85</sup> Yet, the news headline of the recent death of a person with a near-immediate connection to the event may help reorient the subjective perception of time by a person in 2021, perceiving the issues associated with that historical event—racial inequality, racial injustices, and political division—to also be more present and needing to be addressed.

Despite its beneficial applications, there is the possibility for problematic instances.

Collectives may, intentionally or unintentionally, frame the descriptor to favor certain types of

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<sup>84</sup> This normative consideration must also address the view that those who are immoral or controversial ought to be recognized as well: states have “granted the slain enemy the right to be remembered as a self-evident acknowledgment of the fact that we are all men [...] only because the Romans allowed the Christians to write their martyrologies, only because the Church kept its heretics alive in the memory of men, that all was not lost and never could be lost” (Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: A Harvest Book, 1994), 452.

<sup>85</sup> Meilan Solly, “The Last Surviving Widow of a Civil War Veteran Dies at 101,” *Smithsonian Magazine*. Last updated on January 7, 2021. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/last-surviving-widow-civil-war-veteran-dies-101-180976702/>

persons over others. It is one thing for the last survivor of a particular event to happen to be a person of the majority's (or plurality's) ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc. simply because the person possessed those characteristics. However, assume the case of a Caucasian person A and a person of color B. Person B is the last veteran to serve in a particular war in any capacity, and person A is the last person to serve in a very narrow capacity. There would seem to be an injustice if a descriptor emphasized the person of Caucasian descent over a person of color for reasons that were not deemed relevant. At the same time, this "relevance" is more or less subject to the collective's discretion, which may further introduce unacknowledged injustices of favoring certain persons for honor as the event's last survivor over marginalized demographics.<sup>86</sup>

### 7.3 Concern of a Collective (Malicious) Appropriation of an Individual

There is the potential for a collective or institution to encourage the honor of an individual to sidestep unresolved issues by presenting an account that emphasizes historicity, neglecting complicated and conflicting narratives that extend into the present. Jenny Edkins wrote about the eager and rushed commemorations of WWI and Vietnam as containing the potential to neglect the unresolved trauma of these events. "Dominant powers can use commemoration as a means of *forgetting* past struggles. For example, they can use accounts of heroism and sacrifice that tell a story of the founding of the state, a narrative of glorious origin. This obscures trauma."<sup>87</sup> These commemorations seem to be hybrids of memory and history. They take the finality, resolved, and spatiotemporal distance of history while committing to the unnuanced, narrative, and subjective nature of memory. In the case of Roman Tritz, one is presented with a very sympathetic figure from America's past that calls to mind the horrid medical conditions following wars in the mid-late 1900s. Intentionally or unintentionally, this story may overemphasize the impression that poor treatment of veterans and

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<sup>86</sup> Zarakov levied this critique against *The Last Leaf*: "Lutz did incorporate some stories with social and political implications [...] the book as a whole suffers from a lack of racial and ethnic diversity among its interviewees." (Zarakov, "The Last Leaf," 95).

<sup>87</sup> Jenny Edkins. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 54.

mental health was in the past, despite the existence of significant systemic problems and needed reform. Tritz's story helps reclaim a most important part of America's dark past; however, rushing to memorialize, using past-tense language, before the trauma, injustice, or unresolved critiques have been addressed may allow minor injustices to persist and develop into larger, long-lasting problems.

#### 7.4 Concern of (Non-Maliciously) Deemphasizing the Personhood of the Survivor

There is a less maliciously or conspiratorially connoted concern; the survivor may be entirely reduced to a symbol in a way that drastically deemphasizes their humanity or personhood. To be clear, such a result will likely happen with time and distance as Pennebaker and Gonzales had mentioned regarding myths. However, there is the concern that this happens too soon and during the period in which they should be honored. I addressed this to some degree in my SPRR thought puzzles, but I want to consider another example of some who is unlikely to be seen as being misappropriated for an ideological purpose in bad faith.

Otto Frank was the last person of Anne Frank's immediate family to survive the Holocaust. His narrative and obituary have tended to revolve around his daughter more than the other survivors cited here. His obituary in *The Washington Post* contained the pertinent private biographical details of his place of birth, place of death, possible cause, and vocation. The rest of the obituary was about Anne's diary, her life, his attempt to publish it, and his quotations about its importance. Even those earlier details were supplemented with adding that Anne was also born in Frankfurt.<sup>88</sup> His honoring on the Anne Frank House website is a fuller story; however, the page does begin with "Otto Frank is best known as Anne's Father [...] But of course, Otto Frank was much more than Anne's father: you can read his story here."<sup>89</sup> Even if this is a playfully ironic statement, this wording highlights the concern that a survivor might have their personhood entirely dissolved into the symbolic. The two

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<sup>88</sup> J.Y. Smith, "Otto Frank, Father of Anne Frank, Dies at Age 91," *The Washington Post*. Published on August 21, 1980. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1980/08/21/otto-frank-father-of-anne-frank-dies-at-age-91/d48d6afb-8226-4fe1-b002-4b6f2ca6c52c/>

<sup>89</sup> Anne Frank House, "Otto Frank." Accessed on March 18, 2021. <https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/main-characters/otto-frank/>

are not divorced; rather, the biographical details become tightly intertwined with what they are supposed to symbolize until they are all but forgotten. Otto's case is particularly vulnerable to this as the only named familial survivor in his obituary is his second wife, reducing the population concerned with remembering his person independent of this symbolic role. I am emphasizing the personhood distortion as opposed to an ideological misappropriation because he is symbolically being recognized in the way that he acted and presented while alive, which is compatible to some degree with Arendt's understanding of appearance recognition. He made every effort to publish Anne's story and give it honor, dedicating his life to her memory. So, the collective is not using him as a strawman for an ideology, but there is the risk that survivors like Frank may not receive the full extent of recognition due to them.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

I will consider this paper successful if it has sparked new interest in considering the phenomenon of the last known survivor from a historical and philosophical perspective while presenting an orientation point for future critique and expansion. Even failing that goal, I find this paper intrinsically valuable as I believe it to have brought a greater population of last known survivors closer to the class of recognized last known survivors (or has revived their faded recognition). This thesis has been my months-long act of Symbolic-Personal Remembrance & Recognition: honoring the survivors' characters by telling their stories while also highlighting their symbolic roles as survivors of particular events. This act will be preserved in written text to serve as a meta-anchor for interested readers hoping to emulate or share in such remembrance.

Intentional consideration of last known survivorship will be crucial in the coming decades, and I hope to encourage the phenomenon's consideration in anticipation of a century dominated by last known survivor recognition: survivors of the Great Depression, WWII, the Holocaust, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Civil Rights, national independences from colonial powers, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Moon landing, the

American Civil Rights movement, Apartheid, the 2nd millennium C.E., 9/11, the COVID-19 pandemic, and several technological developments. There is not yet a last known survivor for these events. Several events will reach that point, roughly in the next few decades if not earlier. I anticipate that collectives will not have the resource capacity to honor all of them to the same degree and may have to make judgments and preparations regarding how they are honored equitably. This century will also be crucial for longitudinal empirical research chronicling how and which recognized last known survivors are selected now that persons are primed to notice the phenomenon.

The phenomenon of the last known survivor is not simply a pursuit of reading meaning back into history. Studying the phenomenon also involves consciously wrestling with how collectives honor, remember, mourn, and memorialize the soon-to-be-last survivors and what obligations govern these activities. This paper started at the fulcrum of last known survivorship—their deaths, obituaries, and memorials—but the phenomenon’s implications and future engagement lie in looking unto the moment of death and recognition.

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