Literalised vulnerability: Holocaust ashes in and beyond memorial sites and museums

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Abstract
This article focuses on ongoing contestations around burned human remains originating from the Holocaust, their changing meanings and dynamics, and their presence/absence in Holocaust-related debates, museums and memorial sites. It argues that ashes challenge but also expand the notion of what constitutes human remains, rendering them irreducible to merely bones and fleshed bodies, and proposes that incinerated remains need to be seen not as a ‘second rate’ corporeality of the dead but as a different one, equally important to engage with – analytically, ethically and politically. Challenging the perception of ashes as unable to carry traces of the personhood of the dead, and as not capable of yielding evidence, I posit that, regardless of their fragile corporality, incinerated human remains should be considered abjectual and evidential, as testifying to the violence from which they originated and to which they were subjected. Moreover, in this article I consider incinerated human remains through the prism of the notion of vulnerability, meant to convey their susceptibility to violence – violence through misuse, destruction, objectification, instrumentalisation and/or museum display. I argue that the consequences of the constantly negotiated status of ashes as a ‘second rate’ corporeality of human remains include their very presence in museum exhibitions – where they, as human remains, do not necessarily belong.

Key words: ashes, Holocaust, memorial museums, memorial sites, violence, vulnerability

As if bodies
In his 2016 article ‘Firing the Imagination: Cremation in Museums’, mortuary archaeologist Howard Williams poses a direct question about the uneasy position of cremated remains in the European museal landscape. His text centres on early medieval practices and architectures of cremation in Britain and Ireland and in Scandinavia, and so it must be noted that the display of human remains is not
(yet) contested in the archaeological and historical museums Williams examines. This differs from the context discussed later in this article, which revolves around incinerated remains from the Holocaust. Nevertheless, what Williams observes is that cremated or burned remains are virtually absent from an unfolding debate as to how, and why, human remains should be presented and represented in museums. While cremated human remains were often on display in the museums he explores (although rarely afforded centre stage), they have hardly ever, Williams writes, been subject to critical conversation and are ‘systematically overlooked in discussions of human remains in museums’.¹

Williams considers this a result of a culturally specific and well-entrenched, though problematic, valorisation of ‘corporeal wholeness’ or ‘corporeal integrity’ by both museum visitors and the museums themselves. ‘The fixation with visuality and materiality resurrecting a corporeal integrity for the dead reflects the long-established ambivalence in Western tradition towards the disarticulation and fragmentation of the corpse. It also reflects the commodification of the body as an entity, readily objectified as a substance to be treated and traded and consumed as image and art’² – and, one could add, as a displayable museum object. What this translates to is the construction of cremated or burned remains as less effective anchors of imagination, affective engagement and knowledge production. Whole bodies prompt imagination, make past individuals palpable, establish indexical links to past lives. They are the embodiment of the uncanny abjectuality of the corpse affording strong affective responses – as once living human beings carrying traces of the personhood of the dead, and unsettling reminders of our own mortality.³ Corporeal integrity, too, institutes the cadaver as ‘evidential’, as able to store and yield scientific data, rendering cremains ‘second rate’. In contemporary society, so the argument goes, cremated or disarticulated remains are considered ‘less evidential and less abject’, they are regarded as ‘more intractable as objects of scientific scrutiny, less knowable, less human, as less individual as persons’, and ‘this has ramifications for how museums display the dead’.⁴

Williams is certainly right to claim that fragmentary, burned or cremated remains have received little academic attention and are yet to become a subject of critical discussion – but this is changing steadily.⁵ I also second Williams on the point that incinerated remains need to be seen not as a ‘second rate’ corporeality of the dead but as a different one, equally important to engage with – analytically, ethically and politically. This is especially the case when the fire-transformed remains do not result from cremation but, instead, are an outcome of a violent and purposeful destruction of the corpse. This is the case, too, when exhibited remains result from misappropriation during the colonial period – as we were reminded by the debates surrounding the repatriation of Tasmanian cremation bundles to Australia from European museum collections.⁶ What is needed is a shift of attention to the uneasy materiality of burned remains, indeed, distinct from articulated, unburned and fleshe d dead bodies, their ethics, politics and affordances – beyond or below the dominant paradigm of ‘wholeness and integrity’.
In this article, I centre my analysis on incinerated remains and argue that ashes challenge but also expand the notion of what constitutes human remains, rendering them irreducible to merely bones and fleshed bodies. This can be seen, to an extent, as a critical engagement with the ‘ambivalence in Western tradition’ towards fragmentary remains that Williams discusses. But it also speaks to more recent and historically specific shifts in sensitivities around burned remains, still conspicuously riddled by ambiguity. In *The Work of the Dead*, Thomas Laqueur writes about the moment when cremation (re)entered the Western world at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, first in Christianity and later also in Judaism. This shifted the common views on cremation, which had, for centuries, been relegated to the realities of the culturally/geographically/religiously othered (be it the ‘infidels’ or the witches). At least to a certain extent, it also transformed the perception of the incinerated remains. In Laqueur’s words, ‘[a]shes came to be treated as if they were bodies’. In this article I argue that the conditionality of the *as if* has, nevertheless, lingered on until the present day, including in secularised practices and discourses around burned remains. But it is also exactly in this *as if* that I locate my analysis of the ashes resulting from the Holocaust – not cremated but violently burned and disposed of by the Nazis.

In the following discussion, I focus on ongoing contestations around burned human remains, their changing meanings and dynamics, their presence/absence in museums and at memorial sites and in debates triggered, time and again, by the material presence of the incinerated remains. I posit that it is the constantly negotiated conditionality of the *as if* that translates into the presence of burned remains at exhibitions – where they, as human remains, do not necessarily belong. At the same time, I show how the ontological complexity of ash is negotiated and renegotiated by various actors assuming power and authority over incinerated remains from the Holocaust: artists, scholars, memory activists, religious authorities, state institutions, the media, memorial sites and museums. Taking as a vantage point two recent instances in which the *as if* of incinerated remains came to the fore and became a subject of heated debate, I move on to analyse the presence of burned remains in a museum setting, and the historical, cultural and material dynamics behind their being there.

Drawing on Williams in my analysis, I think through the abject and evidential value of burned remains. I consider ashes as abjectual, as affectively charged carriers of personhood of the dead – of the victims of the Holocaust – which are, regardless of their fragile corporeality, irreducible to mere material objects. I contend, too, that incinerated human remains yield evidence, that they are able to store and give data, that they can be a read as a rich source of knowledge. I argue, nevertheless, that in the case of remains originating from political violence, abjectuality and evidentiality convey a somewhat different set of meanings than in the context analysed by Williams. I also argue that they comprise only part of the reality of human remains in (and outside) the museum. Moreover, instead of centring on the question that animated Williams’s text – namely, how incinerated remains
human remains – I move one step further and look beyond the objects on display. What I am interested in are the sensitivities, processes and practices behind their being there, the movements of burned human remains in and out of museums, their complex ‘life cycles’ in a variety of material, institutional and political realms. I consider this as an incentive to tie the question of the challenging materiality of ash with another, more fundamental one: how ashes, in the first place, are constituted (and undone) as museum objects and, more importantly, how ashes are constituted and undone as human remains. How is the presence of dead bodies perceived and (de)materilised in the fragile corporeality of incinerated human remains? Looking beyond the object fixed in the museum, its meaning hegemonically closed, I attend to transformations undergone by incinerated human remains. But I also focus attention in this article on the forms of violence to which they are subjected in the process.

It is here that I decisively part ways with Williams and his take on incinerated human remains in museums. My perspective is largely shaped by the deaccession and repatriation debates pertaining to the material presence of human remains that were violently collected during the colonial period for racial research and are still deposited or exhibited in Western institutions. In this context, and as a result of debates unfolding in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States, Australia and New Zealand and since the 2000s in Europe, the Indigenous and Aboriginal human remains assembled over the course of the nineteenth century for anthropological and archaeological collections and museums in the western hemisphere have been taken off display and/or repatriated to contemporary communities of interest.9 Those debates strongly affirmed the necessity to retain the (corporeal) dignity of the dead, but also challenged their identity as museum objects, decisively questioning the ethics and politics of their display. This has led, in turn, to the interrogation of violence inherent to the very institution of the museum. The presence of human remains, posits Ciraj Rassool, ‘lay at the centre of the emergence of the modern museum as an institution of order, classification and knowledge’,10 and the perpetuation of this presence perpetuates the violence.11

Those debates have also, therefore, recast the instrumentalisation and museum display as a form of post-mortem violence against human remains, complementing other forms of violence to which they were subjected in the course of colonial misappropriation, collection and racial ‘research’. But, most importantly, they have granted the violence against human remains the status of violence, made it perceptible and thinkable as such.12 In my article, I follow this path and foreground the violence against human remains and the various modalities it can take. Locating this violence in the context of the Holocaust, I nevertheless move beyond its first and most extreme instance, the transformation of whole bodies into ash carried out during the Second World War by the Nazis. This transformation, as the Nazis were well aware, constituted a dramatic interference with the material register of human remains, rendering formerly living beings indistinguishable and almost intangible as subjects. Deployed to obliterate traces of the crimes in the concentration and extermination camps and at the mass execution sites, the burning instantiated a radical and violent intervention into the body’s wholeness and evidentiality – but
not a complete one. The ashes remained, themselves a product of violence, and in their residual presence perpetually susceptible to it. It is this susceptibility to violence that I frame in this article in terms of the vulnerability of incinerated human remains.

In other words, I define vulnerability of human remains as susceptibility to violence and harm, actualised by various practices and discourses around dead bodies: their destruction, objectification, instrumentalisation, misuse or display. This susceptibility to violence, I posit, rests in the corporeal vulnerability of human remains and in their identity as racialised victims of the Holocaust. In doing so, I draw from, and expand upon, the notion of vulnerability constructed by Judith Butler in Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence. In their book, Butler distinguishes between two modalities of vulnerability – that of precariousness and of precarity. The former names an ontologically generalisable condition of corporeal vulnerability, which rests in the intrinsic dependency of human beings, in their being social, in being implicated with and exposed to others, rendering violence an inherent potentiality of such exposure. The latter speaks to a particular kind of vulnerability conferred upon normative categories of the living subjected to marginalisation and exclusion, upon those deemed expandable and/or killable (the poor, the racialised or ethicised others, the migrants, the refugees, the victims of political violence) and in whose lives the ontological potentiality of violence is a part of lived reality. Precariousness is shared; precarity, by contrast, is unequally distributed. And yet Butler considers this generalisable precariousness a precondition for ethical and political practice. The recognition of, and responsiveness to, shared vulnerability, the acknowledgement of the pervasive susceptibility to violence and harm, call for a reconfiguration of frames that reprieve some categories of subjects but impose precarity on others.

In my article this vulnerability expands further to include human remains – being, as dead bodies, at once the ultimate articulation of vulnerability and its subjects, also posthumously exposed to potentialities of violence. To concede that violence against human remains is indeed violence, making it perceptible and thinkable as such, means to appreciate, too, the vulnerability of human remains, perhaps weakened in its sociality but, nonetheless, shared across the life and death divide. Moreover, in my article I construct the incinerated human remains at the intersection of both modalities of vulnerability borrowed from Butler: in their precariousness as formerly living human beings liable to harm; but also in their precarity as dead bodies, as materially challenging remains from the Holocaust, upon which the harm is, indeed, inflicted time and again, through a myriad of practices undoing them as (as if) human remains. This pertains, too, to the cultural frames and the practices of knowledge production revolving and evolving around ashes that construct them as worthless or ‘second rate’ corporeality of the dead, and the ethical and political implications thereof. To reference Williams’s ‘Firing the Imagination’ again, ‘to regard cremation as non-evidence has powerful and disturbing ramifications, which, if taken to extremes, implies that those whose bodies are subject to cremation, from murder victims to victims of the Holocaust, are denied an historical identity and corporeality’. In this article, I follow
contestations around burned human remains, their changing trajectories, meanings and dynamics, in order to imagine otherwise, to reconsider and re-literalise the corporeality of incinerated human remains as human remains of the victims of the Holocaust, in their vulnerability, and move beyond the conditionality of the as if.

**Unsettled/unsettling evidentiality: Holocaust ashes in Berlin**

It might seem puzzling, at first, that I locate my geographical and temporal starting point in Berlin, which did not house major extermination camps or execution sites that resulted in the presence of incinerated remains. But the German capital has been the stage for two separate events in which ashes from the Holocaust figured prominently, and their variously mediated presence incited a heated and consequential debate. They unfolded between 2014 and 2019, and I was living in the city at the time. They both affected me considerably as a person and as a scholar, due to their physical and conceptual closeness to my work – research on the post-Holocaust politics of dead bodies in Poland, where most ashes from the Holocaust still ‘rest’. The first debate was triggered by an accidental discovery of human remains on the Dahlem campus of the Free University of Berlin just two years prior to my temporary employment at an institution directly neighbouring the location at which the remains were found. In July 2014, human skeletal remains of around fifteen individuals were uncovered by workers tasked with replacing a pipe under a pavement; they unearthed 250 litres of bones cached deep underground. According to a standard procedure, the police and the university administration were informed, and the discovered remains were sent to be investigated at the Institute of Forensic Medicine at the city’s Charité university hospital.16

The Institute of Forensic Medicine compiled a report, issued in November 2014, with the intention of establishing the provenance of the bones and associated objects and serving as a basis for a potential police investigation. The report stated that the remains had been buried at the Dahlem campus for several decades, that the sample included bones of adults and children, but that their condition – as a result of long-term exposure to the elements and decay – did not allow for further conclusions. The objects associated with the bones were provisionally identified as medical samples, among them an ampoule with a local anaesthetic in use since the First World War. No further police investigation was launched, but the University was informed. The remains were handed over to the Federal Institute of Forensic and Social Medicine to be cremated and anonymously buried in December 2014 at Berlin’s Ruhleben cemetery. There would perhaps be nothing remarkable about this sequence of events – human remains are uncovered quite regularly during urban construction works in Berlin – if it had not been for the particular spatial context of the unexpected discovery: the bones were deposited close to the former Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics (KWI).

Established in 1927, the Institute played a crucial role in racial ‘research’ and National Socialist eugenic policies after 1933. Under the leadership of Eugen Fischer and, from 1942, of Ottmar von Verschuer, it accumulated a significant
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collection of remains originating from the colonial period and from the time of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. Between 1943 and 1944, the physician working at the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, Josef Mengele, was employed at the Institute and regularly delivered human materials to be investigated at KWI. What should have been immediately clear – if not to the police or the employees of the Forensic Medicine Institute at the Charité (who, indeed, admitted to their ignorance on the matter) – but to the authorities of the Free University (FU) and Max Planck Institute (MPI), the successor of the KWI, was the potentially troubling provenance of the human remains discovered in the summer of 2014 in Dahlem. The fact that they could have originated from the KWI’s collections, perhaps hastily buried after the war, that they could belong to victims of the Holocaust. Yet both institutions failed to address the issue in good time and to act, and the human remains ended up being incinerated, without any consultation with Jewish organisations and/or religious authorities. Even though, since the 1980s, there had been a body of critical research on anthropological collections in Germany and guidelines about desirable conduct were therefore supposed to be in place, the potential historic roots of these remains were not communicated, and the bones were cremated without an attempt at a possible identification and appropriate burial, summarised Sabine Hildebrandt in The Anatomy of Murder.

The news about the fate of the human remains – about their routinised anonymous burial but, first and foremost, about their transformation into ash – scandalised many and provoked a fierce debate, which unfolded in the German press in the winter months of 2015. It was in particular the public exchange between two scholars, the historian of National Socialism Goetz Aly and the archaeologist of the Nazi terror Reinhard Bernbeck, that captured my attention. Both of them are prominent researchers of the Nazi period and its afterlives in Germany. Aly is a vocal and widely known critic of German memory culture, often publicly speaking of its shortcomings, who, in the course of his research, has uncovered several German anthropological collections housing human remains from the Second World War. Bernbeck, in turn, has done extensive research on the material legacy of the Nazi terror in Berlin, unearthing the remains of concentration and forced labour camps in the city. It was not at all surprising that they took clear positions in respect of the human remains discovered in Dahlem. The exchange was initiated by Aly’s strong and accusatory statement directed at the FU and the MPI, suggesting that the institutions purposefully allowed the ‘destruction’ of the discovered remains but also fiercely defending the position that the skeletal remains should have been forensically investigated. A DNA analysis, Aly argued, could have provided valuable information about kinship relationships between the dead and anthropological investigation could have yielded insights into (medical) processes to which the remains were subjected before and after death. Bernbeck’s response did not challenge the assumption that the remains (could have) originated from the Holocaust. Instead, he rejected the very postulate of subjecting discovered human remains to forensic/anatomical investigation as a means to establish their identity and assure their evidentiary value (their provenance in and evidence of the Nazi crimes). In his view, an invasive forensic investigation would have led to yet
another posthumous objectification of these remains. It would translate into their reduction to mere objects of knowledge and carriers of evidentiality and would, moreover, be performed without the consent of the dead and against Jewish religious law (which prohibits invasive research). It would also, uncannily, resemble the practice to which the remains had been subjected as anthropological specimens at the KWI during the war. Aly dismissed Bernbeck’s argument as ‘pseudo-ethical and thoughtless’, and framed it as an excuse not to deliver proof of the crimes of the Nazi regime – somewhat paradoxically, given that Bernbeck did extensive archaeology of the Nazi crimes in Berlin and was subsequently involved in further investigations at Dahlem, carried out in 2015 and 2016 with Susan Pollock.

What fascinated me most in this discussion was not so much the fact that Aly and Bernbeck entered into it. Rather, it was the spontaneity with which these scholars adopted and defended the same positions that have dictated the trajectories of the repatriation and deaccession debates pertaining to human remains from colonial collections. They articulate, on the one hand, an insistence on the continuous scientific/evidentiary value of remains stored at institutions in the western hemisphere, and, on the other, the imperative to deaccession and to return them to their communities of origin as a way of putting an end to the violence to which they had been subjected due to and through this very scientific research. This debate (re)articulated, moreover, in oppositional terms, the ontological duality of human remains – the ambivalent and liminal status of human remains both as things (objects) and as extensions of once living human beings (subjects) theorised in terms of their uneasy (abjectual) subjection/objectification. While Aly positioned himself on the side of objecthood of human remains, constructing them primarily as corpus delicti and researchable evidence of the crimes committed by the Nazis, Bernbeck foregrounded their identity as subjects – violated and vulnerable – even posthumously – to the violence of objectification and to infringement of their ‘right to lack of transparency’ (das Recht auf Intransparenz). Yet, interestingly, both of them advanced their arguments in purely theoretical terms of what if – what could have been thinkable, possible and permissible had the bones not been turned into ashes – as if the cremation, once and for all, foreclosed any further debate or decisions pertaining to these remains, mostly because it rendered further research impossible. ‘In the Ruhleben crematory the bones were destroyed as a potential evidence of the genocide,’ ascertained Bernbeck.

What emerged from this debate, therefore, was that ashes were at the very least established as non-evidentiary, if not completely reduced to their assumed non-evidentiary value. Consequently, little interest was shown in the actual incinerated human remains, their material trajectory as ashes and subsequent fate – for instance, in their place of burial/disposal. Paradoxically, their very fate became evidence of devaluation as a ‘second rate’ corporeality in line with the paradigm of ‘wholeness and integrity’ discussed by Williams. And yet the scandal resulted in a conference held in 2017 at Yad Vashem, Israel, and the production of Recommendations/Guidelines for the Handling of Future Discoveries of Remains of Human Victims of Nazi Terror and the Vienna Protocol for when Jewish or Possibly-Jewish Human Remains are Discovered, written by Rabbi Josef A. Polack. These...
documents included a categorical prohibition against cremation of human remains (potentially) resulting from the Holocaust, (contentious) permission to have them forensically investigated and a command to always bury remains incinerated against the will of the deceased in a Jewish cemetery.

The scandal also resulted in further research and the discovery of more human remains at the Dahlem campus, carried out under supervision of rabbinical authorities and in the presence of representatives of the Sinti and Roma communities, to ensure that the work was carried out in line with religious prohibitions pertaining to the handling of the dead. The analysis of human remains was limited to non-invasive osteological investigation (no DNA sampling). Susan Pollack, who led the research, admitted the virtual impossibility of (individually) identifying these remains and establishing their collectivised identity as ‘Jewish’ or ‘Possibly-Jewish’ victims of the Nazi regime. Interestingly, she proposed relocating the question of evidentiality from the identity of the dead to the context of their posthumous dispossession. This at least would be analysable and demonstrable through the archaeological investigation. What the archaeology in Dahlem was able to confirm was that the remains were stored and investigated at the KWI and were subsequently (quite certainly intentionally) deposited underground. In the absence of a conclusive indication as to their provenance, the human remains became, in this sense, evidence of a posthumous sequence of events effectuating their objectification and vulnerability to violence, from misappropriation as objects of racial research, to hasty disposal with the intention of concealing this misappropriation, and, in the case of the bones discovered and incinerated in 2014, to their (almost) complete destruction by crematory fire. This is the evidence put forth by the cremated remains anonymously buried in Ruhleben.

The second event that involved the presence of incinerated human remains from the Holocaust in Berlin was, in my view, motivated by the need to reassert the evidentiality of ash, if only in its capacity to speak to the violence from which it originated and which it later endured, and to reinstate the question of accountability for it. I am referring here to the highly publicised and highly contentious action by the art/activist collective Das Zentrum für politische Schönheit (ZSP, Centre for Political Beauty), Sucht nach uns! (Search for Us!). On 1 December 2019, the group unveiled a series of more or less makeshift monuments in front of the Bundestag, at the centre of which was a pillar with a semi-transparent, glowing urn, which the ZSP said contained ashes it had collected in the vicinity of the former extermination camp Birkenau, Poland, and at other places in Ukraine and Germany (Figure 1). The action was conceived as a call for Germany – the German state with its willingness to accommodate the far right, anti-Semitic and Islamophobic party, Alternative für Deutschland – to recognise the threat of the gradual turn to the right in conventional politics and daily life. But another aim was to urge the same politicians and society at large to finally engage with the lingering material legacy of the Nazi crimes: the very real and tangible presence at the former extermination camps and mass execution sites, mostly in Germany and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, of unmarked, unprotected and uncommemorated disposal pits filled with incinerated human remains, the ashes from the Holocaust.
The urban installation was therefore meant to instantiate the remains placed in the urn and exposed to public view as both indictment and evidence of, on the one hand, the crime of genocide carried out by the Nazis during the Second World War, including the en masse burning of the bodies of their victims, and, on the other, the post-war neglect to which their remains were (and still are) subjected by the German state (and other implicated countries). Based on two years of research, the installation was discursively and visually framed by a video that included footage of the members of the ZSP ‘in the field’ in search of incinerated human remains, as well as two online publications. One of them, titled *To Posterity*, contained excerpts from diaries and letters written during the Holocaust by the persecuted — and included the writings of Zalman Gradowski, a member of the Birkenau Sonderkommando, which he hid among the ashes at the camp when it was still operational, and which were discovered in 1945 after the camp was liberated. It is a quote from Gradowski, an invocation at an anticipated discovery of the texts, that interpretively frames the project and is the source of its eponymous idiom:

> I have buried this under the ashes deeming it the safest place, where people will certainly dig to find the traces of millions of men who were exterminated. Dear finder, search every part of the ground. Buried in it are dozens of documents of others, and mine, which shed light on everything that happened here.\(^{36}\)
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Sucht nach uns! was, thus, cast as an unfulfilled ethical and political imperative coming from the very victims of the Holocaust. The second publication, The Pathways of Ashes, based on survivors’ accounts and historical research, described in detail the practices by which the victims of the camp were burned, and their remains’ posthumous trajectories and forms of disposal in the neighbouring rivers, fields and the marshes.37

It is unquestionable that indignation over the fate of incinerated remains from the Holocaust, their vulnerability to violence and neglect, and the lack of accountability for this fate, affectively and politically fuelled the project. It was intended to unsettle the frames of the debate about the Holocaust in Germany by administering a shock resulting from a direct confrontation with the unsettling evidentiality of ash. Yet, when I read in the press about the pillar with ashes being unveiled – and I did so on the first day of its being there – I could not believe that this was really happening. I remember being determined to take the first train from Vienna to Berlin to see the monument and to document it, and being sure that it would disappear in a matter of days if not hours. I arrived in Berlin on 2 December, and visited the site again the next day. Shortly afterwards (on 4 or 5 December), the part of the pillar said to contain incinerated human remains was already covered with translucent plastic. After a week the whole pillar was removed. This was a result of heavy criticism directed at the project and coming from private individuals (mostly Jews living in Berlin), German intellectuals, journalists and Jewish organisations, including the international Auschwitz Committee.38

As could be expected, the strongest condemnation was grounded in the fact that the action constituted an obvious violation of Jewish religious law, which prohibits such treatment of human remains, their displacement from the site of burial (even if it cannot really be considered as such in this context) and their placing on public view. The project was accused, too, of instrumentalising human remains for the purpose of political provocation, of making use of the remains without any attempt at securing consent from either the (potential) relatives of the dead or Jewish religious authorities. Finally, it was criticised for (mis)appropriating human remains, a step made all the more problematic since it was performed by non-Jewish Germans on what were constructed as mortal remains of the Jewish dead of the Nazi Holocaust, even if the objective of this appropriation was to raise awareness about, and claim accountability for, this very event (it was perhaps for this reason that the project was praised and welcomed by Goetz Aly, the historian introduced above).39

In terms operationalised in my article, Sucht nach uns! not only exposed but also increased the vulnerability of the incinerated human remains, rendering them manipulable and, unwittingly, exposing them to further violence. In this case too, the evidentiality of human remains took precedence over their precarious subjecthood. Their ability to speak to the violence from which they originated and which they endured prevailed over their right to lack of transparency. The criticism to which the project was exposed, nevertheless, strongly reinstated this dimension to the incinerated human remains exhibited in the centre of Berlin. On 4 December the ZPS collective issued public apologies and admitted that a mistake had been made. Later on, the contents were removed from the urn and handed over to the...
Orthodox Rabbinical Conference in Germany, which assured their burial in line with Jewish religious tradition.⁴⁰

Although there remains an unsettling uncertainty pertaining both to the question of the actual content of the glowing urn (whether, in fact, it contained human remains or not) and to the identity of the people whose remains it was said to house, who might have been Jewish or might not have been, the action and the response to it strongly asserted the frames of what is thinkable, possible and permissible in relation to incinerated remains. The website of the action, indeed, quoted from an analysis of several pieces of fragmented and cremated bones in a forensic report commissioned by the ZSP, but the report did not provide details on the context of their discovery or provenance, nor was it able to establish the identity of the dead.⁴¹ The incinerated remains could have been collected anywhere. But the very fact of their being possibly-there and being possibly-Jewish (to refer, again, to Rabbi Pollack’s frame) mobilised a strong response that was affective and ethically, religiously and politically charged – a response, I argue, to the unsettled and unsettling evidentiality of the incinerated human remains, which as ash also carry the post-mortem subjecthood of the dead.

**Tamed abjectuality: ashes in museums**

The subjecthood of incinerated human remains, and their resulting abjectuality, have also been recently reasserted in the context of their presence in a Holocaust museum. In the summer of 2019, during renovation works at the Holocaust Museum and Center for Tolerance and Education in the US town of Suffern, staff discovered several objects in the archives, among them a box with incinerated human remains, which had been there since the 1980s. It was a donation from a Holocaust survivor, who had probably collected the ashes at the extermination camp in Chelmno, located in contemporary Poland, where his family perished during the Holocaust.⁴² The box presented a challenge to the museum employees, who were unsure, at first, how to approach the unexpected find. After engaging with the family of the late donor, who admitted that the box could house ashes from the camp, the object was examined at a funeral home to establish whether it did, in fact, contain human remains. It was confirmed that it did, and the contents were relocated into an urn, to ‘be housed in a more respectful way’.⁴³ Afterwards, the museum engaged in a series of consultations with rabbinical authorities, lawyers and Polish authorities, to clear all legal issues and make the best-informed decision about handling the ashes. One thing was clear from the outset: as with all other human remains, the ashes from the Chelmno camp should not stay in the possession of the museum either as an object to be displayed in the exhibition or as a holding to remain in the archives. As strongly asserted by Ziporah Reich, the director of litigation for The LawFare Project, who also advised in this case, ‘These are human remains, they deserve a burial.’⁴⁴ This was perhaps the first case in which such a strong assertion about the obligation towards ashes was made and, more importantly, acted upon by a contemporary Holocaust museum housing incinerated human remains in its collections.
After securing permission from the Polish consul general and the memorial museum in Chełmno – which could claim the rights to these remains on the basis that they were found on, and taken from, Polish soil\textsuperscript{45} – the ashes were buried at a local Jewish cemetery, with the endorsement of the chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich.\textsuperscript{46} According to Jewish religious law, ashes do not necessarily belong in a cemetery, due to their ostensible unidentifiability and unrecognisability as human remains, but those cremated against the will and wishes of the dead, especially in the Nazi camps in the Third Reich and the Holocaust, have been and are (sometimes) exempted from this exclusionary treatment – a notion recounted above with reference to Rabbi Polack.\textsuperscript{47} The discourse and practice revolving and evolving around the incinerated remains discovered at the Holocaust Museum in Suffern were particularly and movingly inclusive towards the vulnerable corporeality of the burned dead, the victims of the Holocaust, framing their burial as a restoration of dignity and re-establishing of the identity of the ‘unidentifiable’ remains as ‘people’. Commenting on the burial ceremony, the museum curator Julie Golding stated assertively: ‘What I witnessed were people of all backgrounds, Jews and non-Jews, Jews of all backgrounds … coming together for the sole purpose of giving these people a dignified burial.’\textsuperscript{48} Perhaps it was exactly the same intention – to extend care on to, and restore the dignity of, the incinerated human remains – that had guided the actions of the Holocaust survivor who donated the box of ashes to the museum. One can only imagine how the encounter with the unprotected and uncommemorated site of the former extermination camp at Chełmno, littered with charred pieces of cremated bone, must have impacted upon a person aware that this was the place where his family was exterminated, their bodies violently burned – the fierce indignation over both the death and the posthumous dehumanisation to which they had been subjected, and the lack of burial and/or effective protection in the post-war period.\textsuperscript{49} The sheer neglect of those incinerated remains could have driven the Holocaust survivor to collect them, pack them in a box, take them with him to the US and, finally, after several decades, donate the box to the Suffern Holocaust Museum.

As indicated by a growing body of research into the dynamics of travel of ashes in the post-war period, this decision was by no means unique to this one situation. I am referring here specifically to historical studies carried out by Doron Bar, Jean-Marc Dreyfus and myself on states’ politics towards ashes after 1945, and on the widespread bottom-up practice of collection and transfer of incinerated human remains through the Jewish diasporic world in the late 1940s and the 1950s.\textsuperscript{50} In my view, the latter constituted an expressive, although often purely instinctive, act of protection and care, one that responded to, and performatively (re)established, the abjectuality of incinerated human remains as human remains. In fact, this practice often first materialised them as such – at the time it was happening, there were hardly any forensic means available to establish the actual content of the material collected by survivors at the former extermination camps. The line separating ash from soil and dirt was, and remains, thin. It was the very practice of collecting that reconstituted the inorganic matter, chunks of unidentifiable, desiccated bone,
soil and debris, into human ash.\textsuperscript{51} Only afterward were the remains donated to the memorial institutions in Israel, such as Mount Zion or Yad Vashem, where they were ceremoniously buried in the 1950s and the 1960s. Others were still being handed to museums worldwide over the following decades by memorial institutions established at the sites of the former extermination camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek – for the sole purpose of their display in exhibitions. There they ended up in storage rooms or in the archives or, indeed, entered the exhibitions, as was the case with the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights museum analysed by Tim Cole in \textit{Selling the Holocaust} and, in fact, many others.\textsuperscript{52}

I remember being genuinely surprised several years ago when reading Cole’s book, which recounted the presence of ‘Charred bones from Treblinka’ and ‘Human bones from Majdanek’ displayed in the exhibition rooms of the Dallas Holocaust Museum. Most of them had a clearly established provenance and named donors, framed by information that they were collected not in the immediate post-war period, as an articulation of protection and care, but in the 1980s and the 1990s, apparently for the sole purpose of display in the museum.\textsuperscript{53} I was reminded of this feeling upon visiting, for the first time, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington and its Hall of Remembrance, said to house ‘the earth gathered from death camps, concentration camps, sites of mass execution, and ghettos in Nazi occupied Europe’. In a strangely disturbing and deeply politically charged gesture, this ‘earth’ is comingled with soil ‘from cemeteries of American soldiers who fought and died to defeat Nazi Germany’ (Figure 2). In fact, the ‘earth’ from concentration and extermination camps had already played a crucial role at the official ground-breaking of the Museum in 1985, when the earth of the Mall (‘the nation’s most sacred soil’) was mixed with what the historian of the USHMM, Edward Linenthal, framed as the ‘holy soils’:\textsuperscript{54} soils brought, again, solely for this purpose, from Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, Theresienstadt and Warsaw.\textsuperscript{55} After the completion of the Museum and its opening in 1993, the ‘earth’ became a focal point of the final experience of the museum visit, concluding in the memorial chamber of the Hall of Remembrance: invisible to visitors but made present through the inscription quoted above, it rests under the eternal flame, framed by biblical quotes and names of the most notorious sites of the Holocaust. This constitutes a powerful coda to the exhibition, which commences with a photo mural depicting burned bodies on a pyre discovered by US soldiers upon liberation of the camp of Ohrdruf in April 1945. Interestingly, this image was chosen precisely because it is a ‘second rate’ corporeality of the dead, representing, according to Linenthal, ‘remains … [that were] certainly visually less human – therefore perhaps less threatening – than … fleshed-coloured corpses and faces’;\textsuperscript{56} their abjectuality (ostensibly) tamed.

In the majority of existing interpretations of the Hall of Remembrance, the presence of human remains, or of the earth, from the locations of the Holocaust has been framed as a kind of sacralisation that is meant to grant legitimisation to this off-site museum, increase its ‘cult value’,\textsuperscript{57} transform it into a site ‘of sacred space’\textsuperscript{58} or a ‘holy site’.\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, this speaks well to the projected function of the memorial chamber as contemplative space, essentially secular, but with important religious
undertones, belonging to, and yet separated from, the remaining museum space; one in which the visitors are meant to pause to remember and venerate the dead, and light a candle in their memory. In this reading, the incinerated remains assume the role of relics, of objects invested with sacrality due to their provenance in violence and origins at the locations of the Holocaust. Paradoxically, and in essential discord with Jewish religious tradition, in which bodily remains of the dead are not to be preserved and circulated, this is closer to Catholic traditions around bodily remains of martyrs and saints. In a way, however, this handling of incinerated human remains is reminiscent, too, of the global and secularised genre of the tomb of the unknown soldier, casting ashes as ‘vessels of sacredness’, concretised in the Hall of Remembrance by the presence of the soil from the Arlington military cemetery. It adds a significant political dimension to the space, overlooked in many interpretations, as a locus of national sacral and ‘ghostly national imaginings’, to quote Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, in which the genre is cast as integral, if not quintessential, to the project of nation building. The ‘Jewishness’ of the chamber becomes subtly but decisively overwritten by abstracted ‘Americanness’, grounded in the projected ‘exceptional, essential and enforced unknowability of the remains’, mobilised in the service of a specific narrative of the Second World War. Rather than being venerated, the remains from the Holocaust are instrumentalised and objectified, their subjecthood and abjectuality as human remains effectively tamed.
Literalised vulnerability

But, even putting this political dimension to one side, taming the abjectuality of incinerated human remains becomes inherent to the very practice of making them into museum objects, paired here with their discursive reconstitution as ‘earth’. This case again shows that once human remains cross the threshold of the museum – wrested from their original context and meant to symbolise as exhibits – they assume the role of semaphores: that is, museum objects whose role is to communicate a specific meaning imposed by the museum setting, which references something beyond the objects themselves. In this context, even human remains are transformed into signs whose meanings are guided and guarded by the museum, which claims ownership and authority over human remains, objectifying them as a substance to be displayed and consumed through its own prism. The process of instrumentalising human remains into unnamed and disembodied symbols of lives lost to the genocide goes hand in hand with their metaphorisation into soil. This is perhaps particularly striking – and particularly understandable – in the USHMM, whose creators openly and decisively (albeit after lengthy debates) objected to any form of direct display of human remains at the exhibition. These debates centred primarily on the many kilograms of human hair brought to Washington from the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau. Ultimately, the museum decided to keep the hair in storage rather than putting it on display, but the debates also extended to the bones and incinerated human remains collected from the ground at the sites of the Holocaust. It was decided that, as bodily remains of Holocaust victims, these ‘do not belong in the American setting’, that they would be ‘out of place’ in the Museum – and rightly so. It was, therefore, both the geographical distance from the spaces and places in which the Holocaust unfolded, and the very abjectuality of human remains as human remains that translated into their absence in museum rooms. And yet, in (and under) the Hall of Remembrance they were symbolically ‘buried’.

I am well aware of the risk associated with the claim that the ‘soil’ or ‘earth’ from the extermination and concentration camps and execution sites necessarily contains incinerated human remains, but the chance that it would not is relatively slim – in places such as Chełmno or Auschwitz-Birkenau incinerated human remains are virtually everywhere. This uncertainty is, in fact, inscribed in the very framing of the substance as sacralised or ‘holy’ (because symbolically, and very materially, ‘touched’ by the remains), but also in the discursive shifts surrounding the material. This was documented by Oren Baruch Stier in an article on Jewish relics in the USHMM. On the one hand, Stier recounts the halachic distinction between bones and ashes (mentioned above), framing ashes as ‘unproblematic’ because of their unrecognisability as human remains. On the other, he indicates that as late as the summer of 1992, when a museum delegation from the USHMM was to travel to Eastern Europe to visit the locations of the Holocaust, it was the ‘ashes and bones’ that they were to collect. But ‘museum planners quickly adjusted the language of subsequent public statements to make no mention of mass graves, bones, ashes’, and by the time of the later account of the “‘consecration” of the Hall of Remembrance, the language referred exclusively to “soil”’. As with the controversial urn located in the centre of Berlin, here, too, there is the lingering presence...
of the possibly-there and the possibly-Jewish until, if ever, the material is forensically investigated and the existence of human remains confirmed and literalised, their abjectuality reasserted. It is this abjectuality that challenges their identity as museum objects and could, perhaps, translate into a more dignified burial.67

It is exactly through the prism of the notion of literalisation that one can try to articulate the difference in the way incinerated human remains are constructed as human remains against the conditionality of the as if, and their undoing as incinerated bodies of the dead. The undoing and objectification takes place when human ashes are made into museum objects, instrumented, subjected to various modalities of violence, constructed as ‘second rate’, ‘denied a historical identity and corporeality’.68 ‘The difference between the objectifying, and thus violent, practices around burned human remains, and those that materialised them in the present-day memorial landscape – in the Suffern museum or (indirectly) in contemporary Berlin – rests in the attentiveness to their material presence as human remains. This attentiveness literalises ashes as incinerated bodies of the victims of the Holocaust, and reaffirms their material and affective presence in the fragile corporeality of ash. This is also an important move beyond the merely performative materialisations of incinerated human remains, which accompanied, for instance, the early post-war practices of collecting ash, or their (somewhat) problematic metaphorisation as the ‘soil’ in museums. The literalisation of ashes as human remains is unquestionably driven by the broader debates on the presence of human remains in museums, but also by the advent of forensic sensibilities and the development of forensic sciences – which now make it possible to investigate even incinerated human remains. But literalisation does not only imply a decisive departure from notions of the non-abjectuality and non-evidentiality of ash. More importantly, it also propounds new ethics and politics in response to the vulnerability to violence to which human remains are, and can, be subjected – whatever corporeality they possess.

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Notes

14 Although I will take a look, too, at transformations of religious framings of Holocaust ashes, particularly in the Jewish religious law, they are by no means the defining interpretation of vulnerability of human remains.
15 Williams, ‘Firing the Imagination’, p. 312.
Zuzanna Dziuban


18 Spohd, ‘Das Rätsel von Dahlem.’


26 Krmpoitch, Fontein and Harries, ‘The Substance of Bones’.


28 Bernbeck, ‘Die Opfer’.


31 Pollack, ‘Zeugenschaft’.

32 Ibid., 282–3.


Literalised vulnerability

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my private collection. Similar uncertainty surrounded another project of the ZPS,
The Dead Are Coming, which claimed to have brought for burial in Berlin human
remains of two victims of the European border regime. See Z. Dziuban,
‘Forensic Turn’: Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies

42 J. Palmer, ‘Burying the Ashes’, Jewish Standard, 14 August 2019,
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43 Palmer, ‘Burying the Ashes’.

44 R. Goldblatt, ‘Remains of Unknown Victims of the Holocaust Buried in Monsey
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46 Goldblatt, ‘Remains of Unknown Victims’.

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Rabbinical Responsas’, in J-M. Dreyfus and E. Anstett (eds), Human Remains in
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48 Goldblatt, 'Remains'.
49 This sense of indignation is expressed particularly poignantly in the writings of two other survivors, Rachela Auerbach and Mordechaj Canin. Rachela Auerbach, 'Treblinka. Reportaż', in D. Lis, Wokół 'Złotych żniw.' Debata o książce Jana Tomaszka Grossa i Ireny Grudzińskiej-Gross (Kraków, Znak, 2011); Mordechaj Canin, Przez ruiny i zgliszcz. Podróż po stu zgladzonych gminach żydowskich w Polsce (Warszawa, Znak, 2018).
51 Author’s information.
52 Due to the outbreak of the COVID pandemic and resulting travel restrictions, I did not have a chance to visit this museum myself. T. Cole, Selling the Holocaust from Auschwitz to Schindler: How History Is Bought, Packaged and Sold (New York, Routledge, 1999), pp. 166–170. The omnipresence of incinerated human remains from the Holocaust in museums worldwide, especially those donated to those museums by institutions in Europe is a practice described by my colleague Ran Zwigenberg in terms of ‘death diplomacy’, and deserves a separate article – a project towards which we are currently working collaboratively. R. Zwigenberg, 'Never Again: Hiroshima, Auschwitz and the Politics of Commemoration’, Asia-Pacific Journal, 13:3 (2015), https://apjjf.org/2015/13/3/Ran-Zwigenberg/4252.html (accessed 30 August 2022).
53 Cole, Selling the Holocaust, pp. 166–70.
55 A visual documentation of this is included in the museum’s publication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, A National Commitment to Remembrance (Washington, DC, 1986).
56 Linenthal, Preserving Memory, p. 194.
59 Eschenbach, 'Soil, Ashes, Commemoration', 2011, 139.
66 Ibid., 531.
67 Contrary to the common perception of the scale of destruction of human remains carried out by the Nazis, the burned human remains discovered by archaeologists at the sites of former extermination camps were not completely turned into ashes. It is still possible to uncover at the former extermination camps small fragments of charred bone, which are recognisable as human remains. This was probably also the case in the periods when human remains were collected from those sites by survivors or memorial institutions.
68 Williams, ‘Firing the Imagination’, p. 312.