In(ani)mate Objects: Between the Sacred and the Everyday

Dan Stone

1 "There's nothing so ill-advised as attributing a metonymic value to inanimate things. If you think the condition of a plant in a pot is a reflection of the condition of your soul, or worse, that of a loved one, you'll be condemned to disillusion or perpetual paranoia."

2

Valeria Luiselli[1]

3 "[Eyal] Weizman argued that forensics is 'the practice and skill of presenting an argument,' and since 'objects cannot actually speak, there is a need for a "translator" or an "interpreter"' to give voice to the inanimate objects . . . now the role of the scientist as expert witness."

4 Admir Jugo[2]

Introduction: Why Objects?

5 Ewa Domańska argues that "The anthropocentric character of history as 'the science of people in time' (Marc Bloch) and the constructivist view of the world prevailing in recent history have resulted in the neglect of things. Today, with the development of 'counter-history,' the history of victims, and insurrectional and repossession history, things should also be incorporated into history as something other than passive recipients of human actions."[3] Objects shape and legitimate human identity, especially in terms of interpersonal relations.

6 One way in which the history of things is becoming visible is through the ways in which they are treated by museums and archives. In this article, I compare and contrast how the Arolsen Archives (AA, Bad Arolsen, Germany) and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM, Washington, DC) treat the objects in their possession. Since most of the objects in Arolsen are wristwatches or jewelry, I will use similar objects in the USHMM collection. I want to pick up Domańska's claims about how things should be incorporated into history and consider how the ways in which USHMM and AA treat objects leads to different sorts of knowledge about the past, and what this treatment of objects tells us about contemporary understandings of Holocaust museum curatorship and Holocaust memory.

7 The Arolsen Archives began life in 1948 as the International Tracing Service, a body set up under the control of the occupation authorities to help people trace their missing loved ones in the wake of World War II. Administered by the International Committee of the Red Cross from 1955 until 2008, it has since been opened to the public for genealogical and scholarly research. Holding over 30 million documents, it is the largest archive pertaining to Nazi persecution in the world. The institution changed its name

from the International Tracing Service to the Arolsen Archives, referring to the town in which it is located, in 2019, although it retains the name International Tracing Service to refer to the archive in the strict sense.[4] In 2016, AA, as part of the process of reinventing itself as a "memory institution" (that is, one focused on commemorating and mobilizing the past for present goals), initiated the #StolenMemory campaign, which aims to return the approximately 2,500 objects (from an original 4,700) still in its collection to their owners."[5] The objects are mostly from inmates held at Neuengamme, with some from Dachau, Belsen and elsewhere.[6] Although it holds over 30 million documents, AA has made these objects into one of the centpieces of its public-facing campaign, with traveling and digital exhibitions (see here). The traveling version has been shown at the European Parliament in Brussels and across Europe. This focus speaks to a very recent turn to consciously focus on the objects (for many years they sat in the archives, receiving very little attention), even while the institution seems to have allowed its attention to slip from historical research. This is a project aimed as much at raising the profile of the AA as it is of righting a past wrong—responding to intergovernmental initiatives across Europe and the United States mandating provenance research and the return of illegally acquired objects in museums—since, in many cases, the owners or their descendants will never be found.[7] Nevertheless, a surprisingly large number of items have been handed back to the original owners or, in most cases, their heirs. And of course, although they make up a minuscule part of the collection, the objects are visually compelling and the stories surrounding them not only highlight AA's work but shed light on the rest of the (paper) archive.[8]

8 In both institutions, when it comes to watches and jewelry, we are talking about everyday objects that are, with possibly a few exceptions, neither financially nor aesthetically valuable. One can argue, however, that the ways both institutions care for these objects, by virtue of the fact that they stem from the period of and in many cases belonged to victims of the Holocaust, render them sacred, in the sense of being something like holy relics. The difference in the institutions' approaches lies partly in provenance—most of those objects in the USHMM have a known owner and were donated to the Museum—but mainly in how they are employed. At the USHMM, these objects are kept in storage for display in exhibitions and for scholarly research; their presence—even if they are never seen by the public—in the Museum's vast collections functions primarily as material "proof" of the Holocaust, concrete things that accompany written and oral sources.[9] By contrast, the objects held in Arolsen arrived there only in 1963, having no other potential home because no owner could be found, despite the fact that the objects have a provenance in the shape of an inmate's recorded name.

9 Comparing these two very different institutions—one an archive, the other a public-facing museum—might seem quixotic. Yet, as a historian of the Arolsen Archives who has worked in the archives of both institutions, I argue that this intervention on the use of material culture at AA and USHMM is worth making, not least, following Marc Bloch's dictum, because comparing "oranges and apples" can reveal differences as well as similarities.[10] The USHMM does not have a program to return stolen objects, for the simple reason that the objects in its possession were acquired or donated legally. And

although the two institutions began life very differently—AA as a body established by the Allies at the end of the war and not, until the twenty-first century, publicly accessible, and USHMM as a major Federal museum on the National Mall—the fact is that both hold numerous items formerly belonging to victims of Nazi persecution, many of which are never shown to the public. AA and USHMM are, furthermore, engaged in a long-term partnership to promote the use of the ITS archive. This essay investigates the ways in which ordinary objects ended up in these institutions and how they are mobilized for different purposes: scholarship, museology, questions of preservation, public campaigns, "memory work." I will consider the objects themselves in their materiality and then analyze how inanimate objects are given a new lease on life and used to provide different understandings of the past, through the ways in which they are curated and presented to the public. I want to focus on the latter question—that is, how the objects are used—because it is in the different ways in which the two institutions use the objects for "memory campaigning" that we can understand how, as Carolyn Steedman puts it, "a little piece of flotsam" can be used to imagine "a whole world, a social order."[11]

Fig. 1 Examples of objects held by the Arolsen Archives. Images from Henning Borggräfe, Christian Höschler, and Isabel Panek, eds., A Paper Monument: The History of the Arolsen Archives (Bad Arolsen: Arolsen Archives, 2019), 29, 30.

Fig. 2 Examples of objects held by the Arolsen Archives. Images from Henning Borggräfe, Christian Höschler, and Isabel Panek, eds., A Paper Monument: The History of the Arolsen Archives (Bad Arolsen: Arolsen Archives, 2019), 29, 30.

Objects' Agency?

10 Laura Levitt writes that "The collected shards held in all kinds of storage facilities have many stories yet to be told."[12] This is unquestionably true of the objects held at the USHMM's Shapell Center in Bowie, Maryland, about 40 minutes from downtown Washington, DC. Most of these objects in storage are never seen by the public. Uncovering the stories of these objects, Levitt suggests, is "a form of sacred engagement."[13] She goes on to cite religion scholar Jennifer Hughes to the effect that religious objects should be comprehended, "first and foremost, as vital, dynamic, and even agentive members of the communities that we study. They are material manifestations of the sacred, to whom devotees and practitioners attribute animus—

existence, being, desire, and potency. They possess a 'vital materiality.' . . . I want to suggest that the rescued Holocaust artifacts in the USHMM collection are similarly animate."[14] Could something similar be said about "Holocaust objects," that is, objects that are mostly not religious ones (although some are) but which might be regarded, because of their provenance, as having the same "vital materiality"? The question is interesting because neither Levitt nor Hughes are talking primarily about religious artifacts.

11 By contrast, archeologist Yvonne Marshall notes the seemingly common-sense argument that objects do not have agency but are only the instruments of human agency. "However," she writes, "the 'power' of an archeological object to produce—or to affect—the archeologist who regards and measures it depends on the terms of their engagement. Do we merely seek to know about the object, or do we aspire to know the object, to experience and be subject to its regard, open to its transforming agency?"[15] This is also what Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall mean when they talk about the agency of objects, that is to say, the ways in which objects affect people.[16] Or as Domańska puts it, "the notion of the agency of things does not mean that things have intentions but that things enjoy a particular status in their relations with people."[17] Marshall argues that this turn to ontology renders the archeologist open to "the provocation to difference."[18]

12 Neither Marshall nor Levitt are claiming that objects have agency; rather, theirs are claims about being open to alterity—about the objects' being and becoming—and not thinking of objects "as end points colored by the light of events that intervene between an object's becoming and our encounter with it," which is what accounts for "the functionalist accounts that dominate archeology."[19] It is a claim similar to Jeffrey Wallen and Aubrey Pomerance's argument, that we should think about objects in light of the history of migration, for it is the journeys they make and the people to whom they are important that matter.[20] And it openly acknowledges that scholars, whether archeologists, historians, or conservators, are moved by the objects they study.

13 One of the key differences between museum displays such as those at the USHMM and objects such as those held by AA, I suggest, is that the former are *presented* as having reached the end of their journey—they are, thanks to their positioning (and following Oren Stier's work), "relics" being preserved in a "sacred" space—whereas the #StolenMemory objects are objects in the process of becoming: their ontological status is both clearer—their materiality is what renders them susceptible to AA's special program, which does not apply to any of its paper documents—and at the same time less clear—they have not yet attained the stable status of belonging.[21] That is to say, the visual and haptic qualities of the objects held by AA allow them to be used for social media campaigns in ways that are more immediately attractive than can ordinarily be achieved by the written word alone. It is precisely the sense of agency that is given to objects by the human relationships with them, and the journeys they make between human beings, that makes them accessible in this way.

14 In both cases, however, the descriptions of the objects *as objects* in AA's and USHMM's catalogs matter less than their survival, or their having belonged to someone who was a victim of Nazi persecution. As Daniel Miller notes, "People exist for us in and through their material presence. . . . sometimes these apparently mute forms can be made to speak more easily and eloquently to the nature of relationships than can those with persons."[22] It is through the objects' survival, even where their owners did not survive, that we gain a sense of the people and what was important to them. And thus, we turn to the concept of the "object biography," not only to learn about the objects themselves but, primarily, in order to understand the people who owned these objects and what happened to them as victims of Nazi persecution.

Object Biography

15 Much has been written about "object biography" in recent years, particularly in disciplines that take for granted a focus on material culture, such as archeology. Rather than survey this literature, which is familiar to scholars in Museum Studies, archeology, and anthropology, I want to use some representative citations that are good to think with from a historian's perspective, specifically with reference to the objects at USHMM and AA.

16 One of the most recent and thought-provoking theories of objects is anthropologist Chip Colwell's "palimpsest" theory, which describes how changes in an object's settings (as opposed to its materiality) allow us to pursue changes in meaning. Colwell writes that "it is through the study of things that scholars can see how humans become enmeshed in the physical world that surrounds us."[23] Colwell's approach is akin to the life history approach often employed by archeologists for objects about which little is known, especially prehistoric objects.[24] "By tracing the life history of the thing itself," Colwell writes:

> one can examine how it crosses different political, economic, and social intersections and thus takes on different meanings at each stage. In this mode, an object is a "culturally constituted entity endowed with culturally specific meanings." A palimpsest can build on this view by zeroing in on when, why, and how an object's meaning is interrupted, re-formed, and remade anew.
> A palimpsest method entails considering meanings through time and space, a multitemporal and multisited ethnography, a form of inquiry that takes as its locus multiple but interconnected places—research that moves out from the single sites and local situations . . . to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities. . . . This proposed approach ensures that sight of the thing is not lost because the analysis is structured by the thing's own movement.[25]

17 The various sorts of multiplicity to which Colwell refers here are especially important. His stress on circulation and recirculation; and on the different meanings that objects acquire as they pass from person to person and from one context to another: these are crucial for this essay, because I want to stress the ways in which objects are given

meaning by their relationships with people and how objects acquire new meanings when they are transferred from one setting to another.

18 Finally (for our purposes), Colwell says that: "An advantage of the palimpsest approach is how it emphasizes and prioritizes the ways in which material culture comes to have conflicting claims and values. Specifically, we can look at how sacred objects have been transformed into global commodities and reframed as art or museological treasures."[26] If we substitute "Holocaust objects" for Colwell's "sacred objects," his approach becomes especially helpful here, since it makes clear that the history of material culture is primarily of use insofar as it sheds light on human beings' values and experiences.

19 When dealing with the ordinary objects such as watches and jewelry held by USHMM and the Arolsen Archives (I use the word "ordinary" although by no means all of the objects held by USHMM fall into this category), we see that Colwell's palimpsest approach can be extremely useful, even if we see the opposite trajectory to the one he describes: rather than sacred objects being musealized, in this case we see everyday objects being sacralized by being placed in the museum setting. Instead of one form of treasure (religious) being refigured as another (museological), here we see the quotidian objects—albeit including ones that held sentimental value—repurposed as museum treasures because of their "biography." The museum setting contributes to this process insofar as it is a Holocaust museum; but what is crucial is the fact that the objects belonged to people who were victims of Nazi persecution, some of whom survived the Holocaust and most of whom did not. In that sense, they are "ordinary objects brushed by violence," as Levitt nicely puts it.[27]

20 Rather than remain at a general level of description, then, we need to think more specifically about objects that have taken on significance because they come from or are associated with violent or traumatic events. In their discussion of "objects from the missing," which looks at objects found in the exhumations of mass graves of victims of political repression, such as in Pinochet's Chile, Sophie Baby and François-Xavier Nérard argue that "an object is at once a source of knowledge about the past, the material proof of a massacre, and the sign of a memory reactivation charged with emotion, whose subsequent fate reveals the varying symbolic loads that present-day societies decide to accord to it."[28] Under these circumstances, the "object biography" acquires heightened significance because, as Baby and Nérard write: "The object thus becomes a sign, a sign of the disappeared person, of the loved one, of the person the family has been looking for, or quite simply of the existence of a human being. The object, as a metonymy for the man or woman who owned it, thus has considerable evocative, emotional power."[29]

21 To give a specific example: Admir Jugo discusses the case of a woman who claimed to identify her brother's body by recognizing his sweatpants, when the body was discovered in the Perućac Lake exhumations in Bosnia. In this case, Admir writes, "it was the object and its interpreted link to the woman's brother rather than the as yet unidentified bones that gave materiality and physicality to her memory of him. Such exhumed objects also serve as potential evidence in the judicial process, where they

may be used to prove the identity of a missing person, the crime and/or the identity of the perpetrator. Through these interpreted links to loved ones as well as through their evidentiary role, the exhumed objects move from being inanimate objects to artifacts, or objects with a certain agency."[30] In another case, a man recognized his brother thanks to the brown sweater on the body. Jugo writes that "the artefact conceptually embodies or becomes the person for the surviving family members and those closely connected to the exhumation process. It is no longer just a source of judicial evidence but rather a mnemonic device. The signification of the sign has shifted so that it is the dead person."[31] In Jugo's terms, we see the object transformed first into an artifact and then into a relic.[32] This is not dissimilar to what has happened to the objects in USHMM's and AA's collections.

USHMM and Arolsen Archives Compared

22 The AA's artifacts have the potential to have a "social life" in a way that many of the USHMM artifacts, especially those kept in storage, and those without known provenance, do not. "The tobacco case, the rusted key, and the hand-knitted sweater had become relics that represented those they had lost, but they were also a testament that their loved ones had once lived," as Jugo puts it.[33] "The authenticity and the hope that families place on these objects that belonged to their loved ones allows them to become relics," he concludes.[34]

Fig. 2 Examples of objects held by the Arolsen Archives. Images from Henning Borggräfe, Christian Höschler, and Isabel Panek, eds., A Paper Monument: The History of the Arolsen Archives (Bad Arolsen: Arolsen Archives, 2019), 29, 30.

23 The objects held by AA are relics in need of pilgrims. That is to say, they are in the process of being turned into relics; they are not relics yet but, thanks to AA's campaigns and insistence that these objects are potentially relics attached to specific people, they are in the state of ontological flux. Holocaust scholar Carol Kidron talks about objects that retain private memories, such as in her example of a man who occasionally got out his childhood toys that took him back to his pre-Holocaust childhood, as having been "protected from exposure to surrounding objects in the present that would have created a progressive linear temporal reality culminating in their 'pastness' or 'flat death.'"[35] Kidron's example seems to me to speak to one difference between the treatment of the objects held by the USHMM and of those held by AA. The objects in the USHMM cannot—for the most part—illustrate the significance of "person-object relations" in the sense that Kidron means; although some have a known provenance, for many objects the personal element of the equation is missing, and they have no known owner, even if where they were found might be known. This is the case, for example, for the ring in the image above, found at the site of a mass shooting near Busk (Poland, now Bus'k, Ukraine) where 1,700 Jews were murdered in the context of the "Holocaust by Bullets" at the start of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.[36]

24 Even objects with a known provenance might not be able to enter into "person-object relations" if there are no relatives or other people with a personal connection to the objects. Nevertheless, many of the USHMM objects do meet this criterion, such as the "V" pendant in the image above, which was made for inmate-physician Arthur Kessler in the Vapniarka camp in the area of occupied Ukraine that the Romanians called Transnistria.[37] Kidron suggests of those objects that do retain private memories that they "constitute descendant selves as virtually immersed in the Holocaust past as it is phenomenologically co-present in the survivor home," and goes on: "Thus, these objects trigger descendant vicarious identification, intersubjectivity and intercorporeality despite the 'historical narrative withheld.'"[38] The fact that Kidron stresses the setting of the home is interesting, since AA's #StolenMemory campaign aims to return objects to people's homes, as their natural place of residence. If Kidron is right, this suggests that objects in museums cannot, or cannot without great difficulty, partake of such object-person relations, since the museum setting is not akin to a home setting. As a result, one might wonder whether it might not be better for objects to remain in the possession of families than to be kept in storage at USHMM and never be seen. However, the stories of AA's objects provide a sort of halfway house—that of the "historical narrative restored," something that speaks to the value of the object biography approach (which places more emphasis on the journey made by the object) and the person-object relationship (which places more emphasis on the people than the objects) at the same time—and that speaks against Kidron's thought that it is necessary to ascertain whether "agendas of intervention and enlistment of survivor tales and objects are not at odds with families' perceptions of their own best interest."[39] That said, when objects held by USHMM are shown, they then enter into the kind of "memory economy" that is also being promoted by AA. In other words, irrespective of the uses to which the objects are put by the two institutions or the ways in which they generate historical knowledge, their affective power is very similar in each case.

25 Indeed, the fact that objects in storage at the USHMM's Shapell Center can be and are moved into exhibition space as and when required, indicates that for the USHMM, as for most large museums, acquisition and accession does not in fact necessarily mark the end of an object's journey or biography. In fact, there is a difference between acquisition and accession that is worth considering in terms of an object's biography, since one marks an object's arrival at the museum and the other marks a kind of initiation ceremony as an object is formally incorporated into the collection. Besides, not all objects are accessioned at the USHMM; some are kept in storage and used for demonstrations and other purposes, especially if they are objects that replicate ones already in the museum's collection. And these two different stages have different implications for the ways in which objects can be understood and used. Furthermore, these two stages—acquisition and accession—can also be seen as summing up AA and USHMM respectively, with regard to the ways in which their objects are treated. At AA, the objects have been acquired, and are sitting in a state of limbo, waiting until such time as an appropriate new/old owner can be found; at the USHMM, the objects are, after a certain period, accessioned and are therefore ethically and legally bound to be cared for by the museum.[40] Accession, however, despite what I provisionally suggested above, is not necessarily the end of an object's biography. At the USHMM, an object stored in the Shapell Center for years might suddenly be requested by a researcher, selected for display in an exhibition in the museum, or be made available to family members. Mobilizing objects in this way adds further stages to their biographies, which can therefore never be said to have concluded.

Beyond Objects?

26 As Ewa Domańska argues, the biographical approach to objects is characterized first, "by the personification of things that results from anthropocentrism and provides a way of neutralising the threats posed by nonhuman entities; and secondly, by a kind of genealogical and genetic thinking, which by no means helps us create an alternative epistemology of history but, on the contrary, revives in a different context the fetish of origin."[41] It is questionable whether object biographies aim to produce an alternative epistemology of history, but even if Domańska is right about the tendency to personify things, it is nevertheless worth concluding by considering the ways in which a focus on objects makes us rethink how we engage with the past and thus how we construct the present.

27 Referring explicitly to studies such as those I have cited, as well as other familiar ones by Kopytoff, Gosden, and others, Domańska claims that the "object biography" approach "involves an ineluctable anthropomorphization of objects" and is thus based on "a rather conventional epistemology," as she puts it.[42] That is to say, unless one argues that objects really do have agency—which few if any of these scholars do except in the sense set out above—then object biography is innovative only insofar as it "shifts attention from subjects who create relations to the relations created by subjects," for it otherwise maintains the hierarchical relationship between human beings and things.[43] USHMM and AA variously treat objects as proof of the past, as scholarly resources, as facilitators

of family history, and as agents of human interaction. The emphasis on objects' trajectories, circulation and recirculation, provides new ways of thinking about human beings' relationships not just with things, but with each other.

28 If a focus on objects can indeed shed light on human beings' relationships with each other, then I suggest that, at least insofar as this comparison between USHMM and AA suggests, the focus should be less the objects themselves than the ways in which they are transformed into "source evidence," that is, to consider "an object in process."[44] Domańska is troubled by the question as to whether there is a way of discussing objects such as those held at USHMM or those that AA are trying to restitute, without anthropomorphizing them. She concludes by arguing that "a discourse in defense of things (and in general of non-humans) is in the end a discourse in defense of the human being." For her, that is a critical problem. But perhaps in this context, we might decide that that is not a bad place to end up, given that the objects I am discussing are of interest insofar as they speak to a history of genocidal persecution that rested on and was driven by the exact opposite of the "defense of the human being."[45] By contrast to history as *res gestae* (what happened in the past), history as *historia rerum gestorum* (history as writing about the past) is an act in defense of the human being, showing that something of the victims' humanity can be recovered and reclaimed through the objects they owned. Indeed, in seeking to understand how objects are treated in different institutions, trying to pay attention to their "thingness" in a way that does not resort instinctively to anthropomorphism might help us to grasp why objects continue to play so important a role in Holocaust memory, archives, and museums, and why everyday objects might be considered as "relics."

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Notes

1. Valeria Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, trans. Christina MacSweeney (London: Granta, 2012), 13.

2. Admir Jugo, "Artifacts and Personal Effects from Mass Graves in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Symbols of Persons, Forensic Evidence or Public Relics?" *Les Cahiers Sirice* 19, no. 2 (2017): 39, citing Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2019), 8-9.

3. Ewa Domańska, "The Return to Things," *Archaeologia Polona* 44 (2006): 171.

4. On the history of ITS, from its predecessor organisations in 1943-48 (when it went through various permutations and had a complicated institutional history) up to the present, and for the uses to which the material held by the archive can be put, see Dan Stone, *Fate Unknown: Tracing the Missing after World War II and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

5. For the inventory, see here; and for the #stolenmemory website, see here.

6. On the concentration camps, see Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (London: Little, Brown, 2015). The camps mentioned were among those liberated by Allied forces in April 1945.

7. In particular, since the Washington Conference on Holocaust-era Assets of 1998; see Jacques Schumacher, *Nazi-Era Provenance of Museum Collections: A Research Guide* (London: UCL Press, 2024).

8. For examples of stories of returned objects, see here and here.

9. Laura Levitt and Oren Stier have both written about USHMM's perceived need to display authentic objects as a way of proving that the Holocaust happened - a response to claims made by Holocaust deniers as the museum was being created in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

10. See Stone, Fate Unknown; Stone, "The Memory of the Archive: The International Tracing Service and the Construction of the Past as History," Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust 31, no. 2 (2017), 69-88; Stone, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of the Arolsen Archives for History," in *Tracing and Documenting Nazi Victims Past and Present*, ed.

Henning Borggräfe, Christian Höschler, and Isabel Panek (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 13-33.

11. Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 81.

12. Laura Levitt, *The Objects that Remain* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), 115.

13. Ibid.

14. Levitt, The Objects that Remain, 113, citing Jennifer Hughes, "Mysterium Materiae: Vital Matter and the Object as Evidence in the Study of Religion," *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 41 (2012): 16.

15. Yvonne Marshall in Benjamin Alberti, Severin Fowles, Martin Holbraad, Yvonne Marshall, and Christopher Whitmore, "'Worlds Otherwise': Archeology, Anthropology, and Ontological Difference," *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 6 (2011): 900.

16. Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects," *World Archeology* 31, no. 2 (1999): 169-178.

17. Domańska, "The Return to Things," 173.

18. Marshall in Alberti et al, "'Worlds Otherwise,'" 900.

19. Marshall in Alberti, et al, "'Worlds Otherwise,'" 900.

20. Jeffrey Wallen and Aubrey Pomerance, "Circuitous Journeys: The Migration of Objects and the Trusteeship of Memory," in *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement*, eds. Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 248-276.

21. Oren Baruch Stier, "Torah and Taboo: Containing Jewish Relics and Jewish Identity at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," *Numen* 57, nos. 3&4 (2010) 505-536. It is important to note that Stier's article is about the extent to which objects, including ritual objects, have a Jewish character.

22. Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), 286-287.

23. Chip Colwell, "A Palimpsest Theory of Objects," *Current Anthropology* 63, no. 2 (2022): 130.

24. As Jody Joy points out; see "Reinvigorating Object Biography: Reproducing the Drama of Object Lives," *World Archeology* 41, no. 4 (2009): 540-556.

25. Colwell, "Palimpsest Theory," 135. Here Colwell cites Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-91, and refers to George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95-117.

26. Colwell, “Palimpsest Theory,” 144.

27. Levitt, *The Objects that Remain*.

28. Sophie Baby and François-Xavier Nérard, “Objects from the Missing: Exhumations and Uses of the Material Traces of Mass Violence,” *Les Cahiers Sirices* 19, no. 2 (2017): np.

29. Baby and Nérard, “Objects from the Missing,” np.

30. Jugo, “Artifacts and Personal Effects,” 22.

31. Jugo, “Artifacts and Personal Effects,” 34.

32. As the workshop group experienced when we visited conservator Julia Brennan’s studio in Washington, DC, and saw how she and her team were working to preserve bloody clothes from a well-known murder case.

33. Jugo, “Artifacts and Personal Effects,” 36.

34. Ibid., 39. See also Lea David, “A Shoe, a Broken Watch, and Marbles: How Objects Shape Our Memory and Our Future,” *SIMON* 9, no. 2 (2022): 90-114.

35. Carol A. Kidron, “Breaching the Wall of Traumatic Silence: Holocaust Survivor and Descendant Person-Object Relations and The Material Transmission of the Genocidal Past,” *Sage Journal of Material Culture* 17, no. 1 (2021): 15. The reference is to Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida.

36. The ring was found in 2006 and donated to USHMM by Father Patrick Desbois and Yahad in Unum in 2008. See here for more info.

37. See Arthur Kessler, A Doctor’s Memoir of the Romanian Holocaust: Survival in Lager Vapniarka and the Ghettos of Transnistria, ed. Leo Spitzer (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2024); and Paul A. Shapiro, “Vapniarka: The Archive of the International Tracing Service and the Holocaust in the East,” Holocaust and Genocide Studies 27, no. 1 (2013): 114-137. The Dr Arthur Kessler Papers, donated by his son David Kessler in 2019 and 2020, are held at USHMM (2019.183.16); see here.

38. Kidron, “Breaching the Wall of Traumatic Silence,” 17.

39. Kidron, “Breaching the Wall of Traumatic Silence,” 18.

40. I’m grateful to Oren Stier for making this distinction and to colleagues at the above-mentioned seminar for developing it.

41. Domańska, “The Return to Things,” 171 (abstract).

42. Ibid., 180.

43. Ibid.

44. As Domańska notes of Holtorf’s work in “The Return to Things,” 181. “Source

evidence" is also Holtorf's formulation.

45. Domańska, "The Return to Things," 184.

Suggestions for Further Reading

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum object ring; accession no. 2008.76.2

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum object pendant; accession no. 2005.209.1

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum object necklace; accession no. 2004.721/6

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum object brooch; accession no. 2016.353.1

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum object pendant; accession no. 2019.183.8

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