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The Allure of Material Objects

Fetishization Reconsidered

for James Young

AUTHOR NOTE:

IN MAY OF 2016, I traveled to Berlin and, for the first time, went to visit a concentration camp. My partner and I boarded a train that brought us to a station within walking distance of Sachsenhausen. This was my first and my only visit to a concentration camp, belated and fraught. I was obsessed with travel arrangements, unusually taking charge of these matters. The train was, I thought, strangely running late.

As we arrived at the stop I was struck by the beauty of the town, the pristine gardens and well-appointed homes along the pilgrimage route. Once at the camp complex I spent a great deal of time fiddling with the audio device, unable to get it to play without returning to the opening segment over and over again. It seemed everything was frustrating and uneasy. Once we slowly wound our way toward the official entrance, I was already stressed and exhausted. I remember vividly just outside the gates, in a cemetery across from the Sachsenhausen Museum, an East German construction where in the lobby the first thing visitors see is a stained-glass window, a triptych reverentially honoring the liberating Red Army. I became especially uncomfortable. In the museum the soldiers are depicted in the central panel—a place one might expect to see Jesus or Mary—with their red flag waving.

We did not make it farther inside the museum, since we were eager to enter the gates of the camp. Yet already in that cemetery I had found myself clinging to all that I had learned about monuments and memorials from James Young.¹ And, despite my critical knowledge of this work, I realized that deep down, what I most wanted at that very moment, poised outside the official gates of the camp, was to believe that James Young knew how to do memorials and that all this was, already,

not quite right. I wanted certainty and was overwhelmed by what I found instead. In this horrible place what I discovered were traces of so many layers, so many versions of what this place was, what it meant, and what it continues to mean. Seeing and appreciating these layers did not feel like enough, and the idea of any one of them serving as the official story I did not find particularly satisfying. The irony in all of this was that I wanted certitude, a definitive position, and I looked for this by appealing to the very scholar who had taught me that such desires are impossible. In that moment entering that place, I came to appreciate that I too had harbored this desire.

Being in these places is difficult. The challenges are visceral and even those of us who think we know better are not immune to their allures. In what follows, I resist certitude and ask what happens when we reconsider the power of material objects and their fetishization in sites of Holocaust memory.

COLLECTED EVIDENCE

A sudden death is one way—a terrible way, I suppose—of freezing the details of a life. While writing *Jane* I became amazed by the way one act of violence had transformed an array of everyday items—a raincoat, a pair of pantyhose, a paperback book, a wool jumper—into numbered pieces of evidence, into talismans that threatened at every turn to take on allegorical proportions.²

THE POET MAGGIE NELSON asks what happens to everyday objects—a raincoat, a paperback book, a pair of pantyhose—when an act of violence turns them into something else entirely? How does the arresting of once ordinary possessions make them into both numbered pieces of criminal evidence and talismans? What does it mean to appreciate these doubled qualities of once ordinary belongings?

Nelson's aunt Jane Mixer's case is both exceptional and strangely familiar—a story about criminal evidence collected, stored, retrieved, and eventually brought to court. It is the exception that proves the rule. Most of the time such cases never make it to court. Evidence is rarely retrieved or deployed in this manner. This is the stuff of police procedurals, televised dreams, the fantasy of juridical justice. Most criminal evidence lingers often unprocessed. And it also goes missing. But even when juridical justice presumably works, as in this case, justice remains elusive.

SITTING IN A NEWLY created off-site storage facility, an extension of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), there is an archival costume box that holds a small green sweater. This hand-made child's top is a piece of what the museum calls "rescued evidence." Too fragile to be on display, this delicate artifact is carefully packaged and held in this temperature-controlled storage facility. The sweater was a precious bequest given to the museum by Kristine Keren, a survivor.³ It was made for her by her grandmother before the war, and before the Holocaust. Keren wore this garment during the fourteen months she spent in hiding in the sewers of Lvov, Poland, trying to escape from the Nazis. Kristine Keren survived wearing this sweater. It was on her body, protecting her during those horrific months. Keren's sweater is but one "rescued" piece of Holocaust evidence preserved by the USHMM and its devoted staff of conservators, curators, librarians, archivists, and collections managers. It is an intimate reminder of all that transpired, a witness to Kristine Keren's survival, a tactile trace that connected her life before to what happened during, as well as after.

In a quite different storage facility in a state police barrack in Ypsilanti, Michigan, Maggie Nelson describes seeing for the first time the cardboard criminal evidence boxes that held her Aunt Jane's clothing, material evidence from the night Mixer was murdered. Nelson saw these boxes almost thirty years after that crime was committed. They were arranged on a high shelf in the office of Detective-Sergeant Eric Schroeder of the Michigan State Police, the officer in charge of this cold case. Out of storage, they sat alongside other similar boxes, each labeled with the individual names of the various young women who had been killed as part of what were known as "the Michigan Murders" (circa 1969). As Maggie Nelson explains, "the girls' names appear on the side of each box writ large in Magic Marker" (Nelson, 184). In her memoir about this case, *The Red Parts*, Nelson describes the intimate content of her aunt's boxes. She also makes clear the role of these numbered pieces of evidence in that belated murder trial, focusing our attention on a pair of pantyhose that held vital DNA evidence that would break open this cold case.

I turn to questions about these kinds of holdings here from the perspective of the USHMM. But in order to appreciate how the objects in that august collection are cared for we need to consider as well how these two pieces of evidence—the rescued child's sweater, a Holocaust artifact, and Mixer's pantyhose—are both similar to and different from

each other. And these are precisely the kinds of intimate connections that James Young's work on traumatic memory and its memorialization call to mind. As we see in his most recent book, his career bridges a range of communal and intimate legacies of violence and loss from the Holocaust to the horrific murder of Norwegian teens at Utoya. James Young's work has asked us to draw these connections and to notice how and in what ways these horrible legacies are both similar to and also different from each other. And more than this, Young challenges us to consider how, in thinking about different losses together, we learn so much more about each. And finally, he shows us how this comparative process can enable a different form of intimacy and community. It is in this spirit that I consider the relationship between that green sweater and the clothing Jane Mixer wore fifty years ago on the night when she was brutally murdered.

THE WORK OF RESCUING and conserving Holocaust evidence is like and unlike the police property management of Jane Mixer's clothing. Although in both instances empirical data, physical evidence, is collected in order to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that terrible crimes really happened, these efforts are quite different. Keren's sweater will never make its way to any courtroom. And yet we often engage juridical notions of justice in relation to rescued Holocaust evidence. We do this even when there is no legal redress. And so, I want to consider how rescuing and holding objects like Keren's sweater do a different kind of justice to this horrific past.

In order to better get at this taken-for-granted presumption about the legal rationale for rescuing and holding Holocaust evidence, I also want to complicate this analogy.⁴ Although we often presume that Holocaust objects are like criminal evidence, what happens if we try to reverse this analogy? How is criminal evidence like a rescued Holocaust artifact?

ON THE ONE HAND, it becomes clear that Holocaust collections operate outside the framework of the law. The USHMM is not a legal repository. As such, the evidence gathered there is neither restricted to the care of criminal justice professionals, nor was it procured using the techniques required to secure criminal evidence. The sweater was a gift. There is no chain of custody, and provenance is not quite the same thing. The determination of value in this case is difficult pre-

cisely because provenance is tied to monetary value and the history of ownership, and here money is often beside the point.⁵ And to be clear, as an archival repository, the USHMM is by design open to the public. Its collection is meant to circulate, while criminal evidence must be restricted. It cannot be accessed.

Strangely, because much of the material in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's possession constitutes a form of evidence, criminal and historic, some of the work the chief conservator Jane Klinger does resembles the labors of those in criminal justice. But, unlike the FBI, here the integrity of the object is central. In order to preserve what Klinger refers to as "material objects of trauma,"⁶ the integrity of the object is crucial. As Klinger explained to me, in criminal cases, the FBI generally relies on photographic evidence of the objects it holds. They often take large samples of this evidence to run their various tests. As such their efforts are often destructive of the integrity of those very objects of material evidence. By contrast, Klinger and her team carefully attend to the artifacts in their possession and engage in explicitly nondestructive forms of analysis. As much as possible, they would like to *not* take any samples at all, and they do their work in order to prevent further destruction of these fragile holdings.

When I first began to describe my interests in these practices to one of the librarians at the museum's research center, he used the term "mitigation" as a way of describing these labors.⁷ This is not the term preferred by the conservators, but nonetheless, his description was compelling. It helped explain for me the broader problem with keeping any of these objects from deteriorating. He told me to think about sewing as a violent act that automatically works to disintegrate the very fabric it punctures and stitches together again. Everything in this museum's collection must be carefully attended to just to keep them all from deteriorating. They come to the museum already compromised, and so the labors of conservators is to, as much as possible, slow down "inherent vice," or the agents of deterioration, in the best ways possible.

TOUCHING THE PAST

CLOSE PROXIMITY to material evidence does not offer unmediated access to the Holocaust, to that place and that time. As James Young suggests in *The Texture of Memory*, even the huge display of shoes at the Majdanek camp cannot take the place of the dead. Although these remnants of the past have, in Young's words, "long come to stand in for

the whole of events,” all too often they are mistaken “for the events from which they have been torn.”⁸ As Young makes clear, there is a danger in this logic, that

in coming to stand for the whole, a fragment is confused for it. Authentic historical artifacts are used not only to gesture toward the past, to move us toward its examination, but also to naturalize particular versions of the past (127).

It is the naturalization of a narrative that is far from natural that Young worries about. In other words, despite our desire to imagine such objects offering us unmediated access to such pasts, they never come to us unfettered. Their stories are always already mediated. They are conveyed to us through the narratives of historians and curators who bring these materials into view. As Young goes on to suggest, “museums and archives, and ruins may not house our memory-work so much as displace it with claims of material evidence and proof” (127). But here I am getting ahead of myself.

For Young, “Modern memory may indeed be archival. . . relying entirely on the trace,”⁹ but even such appeals to a kind of empiricism are not without mediation. So, although archival evidence is crucial to how we understand the past and what constitutes history, the logic behind the allure of such objects and the work they seem to be able to perform is not self-evident. In this case, the status of such objects comes to us via nineteenth-century ideas, antiquated ideas that share more with the kind of allegorical logic Maggie Nelson warns against than scientific proof. In Young’s eloquent words,

The fragment presents itself not only as natural knowledge, but as a piece of the event itself. At least part of our veneration of ruins and artifacts stems from the nineteenth-century belief that such objects embody the spirit of the people who made and used them. In this view, museum objects are not only remnants of the people they once belonged to, but also traces of the values, ideas and character of the time. In the subsequent fetishization of artifacts by curators, and of ruins by “memory-tourists,” however, we risk mistaking the piece for the whole, the implied whole for the unmediated history (127).

We risk fetishizing artifacts, granting them magical power to invoke the pasts for which they are only a trace. And even when we know that all we have are traces, this longing seems to linger.

The archivists' traditional veneration of the trace is tied directly to their need for proof and evidence of a particular past. But in this they too often confuse proof that something existed with proof that it existed in a particular way, for seemingly self-evident reasons (127).¹⁰

Here most clearly, James Young the literary scholar and author of *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* speaks directly to issues of representation.¹¹ The past always already comes to us through all kinds of narratives. And although I am less concerned about the challenge of fetishization as Young describes it and will return to this issue, what strikes me about his account is how much this nineteenth-century legacy insists on a kind of empirical logic that is supposed to contain and perhaps tame and control these charged objects. And yet the palpable allure of such artifacts exceeds the logic of what Jacques Derrida has called "the laws of common usage" or the stories we tell about them.¹² These are always only our stories.

But Young's appeal to nineteenth-century beliefs, and then his quick turn to the problem of fetishization, point to a much longer history. The power of objects and how we engage with them is a part of numerous religious rites and practices over a much longer period of time. And "fetishization" also suggests something else, the transitive nature of the verb, to fetishize. Fetishization is a process that we participate in. We make these objects into fetishes through our engagement with them. And, in these ways, these rituals give power to them. And, so again I wonder if, perhaps, fetishization might be, in fact, a more fruitful way of thinking about the more unruly and uncontainable quality of Holocaust objects and their allure. And here I want to be clear about my sense that such ritual engagement, the work of fetishization, is not the same as allegory. In these enactments, the objects remain quite specific and material.

According to historian of material culture Leora Auslander,

Even the objects used in everyday, repetitive embodied activities, such as eating or grooming (to say nothing of ritual objects) are not simply functional; they are always also modes of communication, or memory cues, or expressions of the psyche or extensions of the body, as well as sites of aesthetic investment, involving pleasure, distress, or conscious indifference. Their makers and users understand them to have special attributes not only because of their contact with the human body, but because they themselves mirror two crucial characteristics of human existence. They, like the people that use them, are embodied. That embodiment means

that objects occupy space and cannot be in two places at once, and they are mortal, although their life-spans may be much longer or shorter than those of the people who use them.¹³

Clearly the material remains held and carefully displayed at the USHMM are deeply compelling. They are, in fact, crucial to the logic of the museum and its mandate to “rescue evidence” and accumulate as many objects as possible. Such evidence is proof that the Holocaust happened and keeps the memory of these atrocities alive. Like the objects Auslander describes, these artifacts are not simply functional. These once everyday objects caught up in this horrific history operate as “modes of communication, or memory cues.” The law of common usage shifts. Not only do “their makers and users understand them to have special attributes,” those who see them on display and those who seek them out through the museum’s research center, its archive and library, also appreciate their “special attributes.”

Moreover, the fragility of all these holdings also complicate their deployment as juridical or historical evidence. They must be attended to, cared for, conserved. The delicacy of these enactments, their tender care, is more akin to the sacred labors of those early conservators whose job it was to attend to sacred objects, relics, and reliquaries. As religious studies scholar Jennifer S. Hughes explains, such object-entities become animate through these kinds of ritual enactments of care, and this, I believe, is part of what makes Young nervous, what he more decidedly and dismissively characterizes as fetishization.

IN AN ESSAY for a forum on the question of “evidence”¹⁴ in the study of North American religion, Hughes writes, “Many of the Mesoamerican traditions that I study, share a common religion-affective posture of tender regard for mundane objects imbued with life: maize plants, mountains, stones, divine effigies and ‘idols,’ ancestral bundles, and (since the colonial period) saints’ images. All of these objects are engaged as sacred persons; as ‘beings’ not ‘things’” (16). She continues: “The religious objects under consideration here are better 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’” (16). Following Hughes, I want to suggest that the rescued Holocaust artifacts are similarly made animate through the ways they are engaged by

both the public and by museum professionals, especially the conservators who attend to them.

Even acknowledging some of the reasons why many scholars bristle at these kinds of claims,¹⁵ Hughes nevertheless insists that such sacred objects are not passive vessels to be used for some other purpose, as the terms “fetish” and “animism” often presume; “object-entities” are not narrowly, and certainly not exclusively, “evidence”—they are “active participants in the complex religion-social networks that ethnographers of religion observe and describe.” She continues, “Objects performing as evidence do so through the ‘prerogative of power’” (17).¹⁶ I too am interested in deploying “vital materialist ontologies” in order to “better attend to these dynamic actors” (18).¹⁷ I want to appreciate the ways Holocaust objects are also not exclusively “evidence” but rather vital actors in the work of commemoration, and how, in a different way, in the poet’s hand, Jane Mixer’s clothing is also made animate in works like Nelson’s book of narrative poems, *Jane: A Murder*, or in her memoir, *The Red Parts*.

PROMPTS FOR ENGAGEMENT

AT THE USHMM visitors stare numbly at a display of hundreds and hundreds of shoes. The individual stories of their owners, though lost, collectively yet quietly cry out. Individual objects, like Kristine Keren’s green sweater, draw us into the presence of the personal horror of the Holocaust. A single shoe from that collective exhibit, likewise, can grip us with a vicelike awareness that a real person wore it.¹⁸ The power of such objects both collectively and individually to move us toward understanding recalls Liliane Weissberg’s observation that a single shoe can point to the promise and impossibility of this kind of intimate contact with the Holocaust.¹⁹

Piles of shoes and hundreds of pictures of a prewar shtetl near Vilnius are able to speak, in their silence, more powerfully than any historic marker could. These objects were used, looked at, and touched by persons no longer alive. This is the Holocaust’s residue, a metonymic evidence for people about whom little is known today (62).

Weissberg tells this story about how, in one of his fund-raising letters,

Miles Lerman, national campaign chairman for the museum, recalls the transfer of artifacts from Poland.... "I was asked to pose for a photograph with one of these items—a child's shoe. Let me tell you, when this little shoe was handed to me, I froze. Bear in mind that I am a former partisan. I was hardened in battle and I deal with the Holocaust story almost on a daily basis. But when I held in my hand that shoe—the shoe of a little girl who could have been my own granddaughter—it just devastated me" (Weissberg, citing Spring 1993 letter. (62)

The museum wants to repeat this kind of encounter. It hopes that shoes like this might "aid identification and bridge the time" (62). But in the museum, visitors do not encounter a single shoe. They are confronted by thousands of shoes, an amassed collection, as Weissberg explains, the "sheer number of shoes, a fraction of the surviving pairs found in Auschwitz that give evidence of the enormity of the crime. These were shoes sorted by prisoners once their owners had been selected for the gas chambers, but they were not used again: sandals, walking shoes, children's slippers" (63). Given this, the shoes on exhibit have become something else entirely. Like art, on display, they do and they do not actually offer visitors access to those who once wore them, touched them, or tied them.²⁰

The shoes in the Holocaust museum offer and resist to give such information. They have turned into a uniform gray, a color that masks their individual shapes. Once worn by living human beings, they are now evidence of their deaths. Unique and homogenized into a pile. (63)

And yet it is this tension that haunts the logic of the museum, its permanent exhibition and its vast collection, unique and homogenized. On the one hand, a single shoe or a child's green sweater might pierce us, touching us deeply, especially if we could in fact hold it in our hands. On the other hand, the vastness of the display of so many now graying shoes prohibits such intimate identification. Despite this, the museum continues now, even more urgently than when it first opened and Liliane Weissberg wrote these words, to look for these individual tales as a way of keeping the power of such object-entities alive. They are the touchstones, the prompts for ongoing engagement.

As time continues to pass and the Holocaust grows more distant, the work of the museum's curators is increasingly involved in the collecting of artifacts: "In 50 countries across six continents, the Museum is aggres-

sively collecting evidence of the Holocaust before it is too late—before fragile documents and artifacts disintegrate and while those who can bear witness are still able to do so.”²¹ The webpage for the Collections, Conservation, and Research Center goes on to explain, “The Museum collection is the foundation for ensuring the permanence of Holocaust remembrance, research, and education.”²² Moreover, this mission is directly connected to resisting Holocaust denial. The statement concludes: “With the rise of Holocaust denial, the power and authenticity of our collection assumes ever greater urgency.”²³ The museum is especially interested in preserving those precious objects that have remained with individual survivors, witnesses who can still tell their stories. The museum encourages donors to consider placing these freighted, deeply personal possessions in the museum’s collection for safekeeping, for posterity.²⁴

These efforts are vividly on display in the museum’s online art and artifacts exhibition, “Curators Corner”; a sample of such stories are now a part of the video about the new storage and research facility, aptly entitled “Safeguarding Truth Forever.”²⁵ “Curators Corner,” the museum’s open-access video, narrative, and photographic exhibition, offers the public access to these often profoundly vulnerable objects, their owners, and their individual stories. This is how I first learned about Kristine Keren and her sweater. Online, the museum can do this virtually, without tampering with the integrity of these artifacts. By allowing the objects to remain carefully in storage, this virtual display transpires with little actual handling. The museum can safeguard rescued pieces of evidence from the wear and tear of physical display.²⁶ This is part of the allure of this technology. Individual objects and their stories circulate, but not in the physical site of the museum.

In a sense, they function in virtual space, in sharp contrast to the vast array of shoes on display in the museum, where there is little by way of specificity. It is the vastness that speaks to a collective trauma and not to the individual lives lost that the permanent exhibit enacts. These amassed artifacts teeter on the edge of abstraction and allegory, or, in Liliane Weissberg’s terms, as “art” that stands in for the whole of the Holocaust and its destruction.

While a single shoe or a fragile green sweater might be able to draw us in, such intimate encounters are more an ideal, an aspiration, and not the rule in the permanent exhibition, where artifacts in their specificity are the exception. We know very little about so many of the objects held by the USHMM.

The “Curators Corner” points us to the vast holdings of the museum and what they might portend for future engagement. By telling the stories, the individual tales of some of the artifacts held in the museum’s collection, objects that may never be on display, we get a glimpse at the promise of holding—the labors that go into the authenticating, dating, securing, and conserving of such objects. These accounts offer traces of their provenance, including the stories of how they came to the museum in the first place, the extralegal chain of their custody.

The invisible labors of holding offer another way into the tales that can be told. We learn how such evidence was rescued and what it has and what it will continue to take to conserve such items. In this respect, it is in the hands of conservators to see to the needs of these mortal artifacts. They are among the only people who can continue to actually touch such items, albeit in carefully gloved hands. These are the kinds of tender labors Jennifer Hughes describes as sacred acts.

As we more fully appreciate these labors alongside those of the museum’s curators, archivists, librarians, and collections managers, we see, in a different way, the kinds of mystification that surround such objects in their fragility. In the new collections’ facility, we will more fully experience the extraordinary human labors involved in maintaining these holdings. Like the old woman in Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, these professionals are doing the work of preserving and sustaining this vulnerable collection. This new facility shows us these engagements alongside the curated product that is on display in the permanent exhibition. This is work that has to be done by hand, with special care. These are not easy undertakings. But without such efforts there would be no collection.

THESE TALISMANIC PIECES of evidence seem to have a great deal in common with religious relics. They are all strangely alive. As relics embody and animate saints and martyrs, keeping their presence palpable and compelling, so too do these tainted objects bristle. Although these evidentiary relics, the artifacts held in the USHMM and other Holocaust collections, are not in any simple way animate, they carry this potential. They do not necessarily bring back those who died, but they do teach us something about those lives and that past. They are, in Jennifer Hughes’s terms, “agential object-entities,” whose meaning and allure exceed the stories we tell and many of the logics we deploy. Even as they seem to serve more rational ends as proof positive

that horrific crimes were committed or that Holocaust deniers are wrong, they also hold those “special attributes” Leora Auslander describes. They cannot be contained. And it is these strange, out-of-place qualities, perhaps sparked by the process of what Young describes as fetishization, that I now turn to briefly.

THE COLLECTED SHARDS held in all kinds of storage facilities have many stories yet to be told. This telling is a part of what it means to do justice to these pasts and keep these legacies alive. This form of sacred engagement is a kind of doing justice that happens beside or alongside the law. By sharing these stories in all kinds of ways, we begin to participate in what literary scholar and artist Svetlana Boym describes as a kind of diasporic intimacy; we form different kinds of connections and communities.

In the process of figuring out the afterlives of material artifacts, how their preservation—their presence in an ever-changing present—informs how we live with such violent legacies, I am also attempting to perform a different form of critical engagement. Like James Young, I too am insisting upon making connections between different losses through the sharing of stories while, at the same time *not* turning all of these tales into versions of some one thing. Rather I want to allow disparate stories to touch, to brush up against each other in their similarities and in their differences in order to show what such contact might enable. Through this form of comparative engagement, doing justice becomes an animating process of telling and holding that can include many stories and many everyday practices. Together these efforts continue to breathe new life into otherwise lifeless artifacts.²⁷

ALTHOUGH JANE MIXER did not bequeath her pantyhose to the Michigan State Police, they, like Kristin Keren’s sweater, tell a story. In her niece’s hands, Mixer’s pantyhose help Maggie Nelson give new life to the story of Jane Mixer’s life and her death. Taken as legal evidence and kept in storage for the purpose of going to court, they performed in one way, but in Nelson’s texts they became part of a different form of justice making. They helped Nelson tell a more complicated story. By contrast, Kristin Keren placed her childhood sweater in the collection of the USHMM for safekeeping. This sweater will never make its way to court. But, at the museum, it has enabled Keren to tell part of her harrowing story of survival. Through the “Curators Corner”

Keren offers a different kind of testimony. In her own words, she breathed new life into that tattered sweater. This is something Jane Mixer was never able to do.

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NOTES

¹ Works by James Young that were especially powerful to me include: *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994; *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); *The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016). James Young, ed., *Holocaust Memorials in History* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 1994)

² Maggie Nelson, *The Red Parts: A Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2007) 120. See also Maggie Nelson, *Jane: A Murder* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2005).

³ Kristine Keren changed her name when she came to the United States. Her name was Krystyna Chiger and she published her story under that name, see below. For more on this sweater and its story see <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/the-museums-collections/curators-corner/a-cherished-object-kristie-kerens-green-sweater>, accessed May 22, 2018; Krystyna Chiger and Daniel Paisner, *The Girl in the Green Sweater: A Life in Holocaust's Shadow* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2008), and the motion picture directed by Agnieszka Holland, *In Darkness*, Sony Pictures Classic Release, 2011.

⁴ On the logic of analogy see Janet Jakobsen, "Queers are Like Jews, Aren't They? Analogy and Alliance Politics," in Ann Pellegrini, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Daniel Boyarin, eds., *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003,) pp. 64–89. I offer a sustained account of the challenge of analogy in "Rescued Evidence: Juridical Justice, Analogy, and the Work of Holocaust Collecting," paper on panel Archiving the Holocaust and Other Atrocities, Association for Jewish Studies (AJS), San Diego, December 2016.

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/provenance>, accessed April 5, 2017.

⁶ Klinger's own research is on such objects, both individual and communal, building on work on disaster research and questions of vulnerability. She is currently completing her dissertation in conservation at the University of Delaware. See also Jane E. Klinger, "Objects of Trauma, Finding the Balance," in

Pamela Hatchfield, ed., *Ethics and Critical Thinking in Conservation* (Washington, DC: American Institute for Historic and Artistic Conservation (AIC), 2013), pp. 79–90.

⁷ Conversation with Vincent E. Slatt, Librarian, USHMM, August 2014.

⁸ James Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 127.

⁹ Here Young builds on the work of Nora on archives and collective memory (127). For a more radical critique of these matters see Marc Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). This challenge is also evident in the labor of forensics, and the deployment of “forensic evidence”—those objects, traces, must also be explained; they too never speak for themselves. See Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele’s Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetic* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012). I am grateful to Stephenie Young for her work on forensic photography. I am also grateful to Stephenie Young for her role as co-convener of the USHMM summer workshop, “Literary Responses to Genocide in the Post-Holocaust Era,” Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Summer Research Workshop, August 4–15, 2014. This workshop enabled much of the work I was able to do for this paper.

¹⁰ Nichanian offers a brutal critique of these enactments as they are tied to the discourse of the perpetrators. He is especially skeptical about the logic of the archive and the labor of witnessing; see *The Historiographic Perversion*, Chapter 3, “Refutation,” pp. 59–90 and Chapter 4, “Testimony: From Document to Monument,” pp. 91–116.

¹¹ James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*.

¹² For more on these matters, see Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, “Fetishizing the Glove in Renaissance Europe,” in Bill Brown, ed., *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 174–192, especially 180.

¹³ Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words,” *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (October 2005): 1015–1045, 1016.

¹⁴ “Mysterium Materiae: Vital Matter and the Object as Evidence in the Study of Religion,” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (November 2012): 16–24.

¹⁵ Hughes writes: “To date, religious studies has not crafted an interpretive language capable of encompassing these objects. The Protestant-normative, Reformationist, Western, and utterly ‘American’ ethos of religious studies—its preoccupation with belief over practice, with the invisible *mysterium* over the material *tremendum*, its reverence for the interior and disdain for the exterior—these have hindered the development of a theoretical apparatus capable of approximating and interpreting the complex role of living matter in diverse religious practices” (16).

¹⁶ For Hughes, this demand is “haunted by colonial power” (17).

¹⁷ For Hughes, these issues are also a challenge to the discourse of the new materialism and its similarly allergic reaction to religious language. She writes, “The consecrated host—arguably another manifestation of vital matter” (19), only to turn her attention to this new literature that should be more closely aligned with religious studies. In so doing, she calls for ontological revisions, critiquing beautifully and powerfully this trend in anthropological theory since 2000, a trend that places vital objects at the center of scholarly analysis. Turning to a key work in this area, Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: Political Ecology of*

Things: A Political Economy of Things (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), Hughes writes, “Bennett calls for a radical ontological shift, asking us to ‘elide the question of the human’ in order to grapple with what *things* do: with the way that the objects and materials that we commonly understand as dead (common refuse, metal, chemicals, food, etc.) impact and impinge upon human lives” (20). What Hughes finds missing in this amazing text is an abiding engagement with religious practice. As she explains, the book is “replete with religious imagery and language; Bennett even concludes her text with a ‘litany,’ a creed, for the vital materialist” (2010, 122). But at the same time, she explicitly excludes religious perceptions of matter from her analysis, warning against understanding material vibrancy as a “spiritual supplement” or “life force”: matter slivery, she explains, “but not ensouled” (2010, xvii) (20). Hughes explains that Bennett rejects “consistently and thoroughly,” “the spiritualization of the vibrant materiality she identifies” (20).

¹⁸ On a pair of red children’s shoes among other object stories from the USHMM collection, see <https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/museum-publications/the-last-witnesses>. Accessed July 1, 2017. This link describes a 2017 museum publication that includes a number of these stories, *The Last Witnesses*, published in April of 2017.

¹⁹ See Liliane Weissberg, “Memory Confined,” in *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, edited by Dan Ben-Amos and Liliane Weissberg (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999). pp. 45–76. All subsequent references will be in the text.

²⁰ When I presented a version of this material at the University of Pennsylvania during the fall of 2018, Weissberg explained that having written about these matters in aesthetic terms was itself deeply controversial. On the power and allure of such objects, see Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words.”

²¹ <https://www.ushmm.org/support/why-support/collections-and-conservation-center>. Accessed April 1, 2017.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jeffrey Shandler offers a compelling account of the power of objects in the memory of Holocaust survivors in the final chapter of *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age: Survivors’ Stories and New Media Practices* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 125–166.

²⁵ <https://www.ushmm.org/why-support/collections-and-conservation-center/safeguarding-truth-forever>. Accessed April 1, 2017.

²⁶ I write in more detail about these efforts and the kinds of possibilities opened up by such online displays, in Laura S. Levitt, “Revisiting the Property Room: A Humanist Perspective on Doing Justice and Telling Stories,” in *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion* (2015), <http://mavcor.yale.edu/conversations/essays/revisiting-property-room-hum>.

Curators Corner can be accessed at <http://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitors/curators-corner>. Accessed June 24, 2015.

²⁷ On this issue of doing justice otherwise via objects and their stories, see <http://mavor.yale.edu/conversations/essays/revisiting-property-room-humanist-perspective-doing-justice-and-telling-stories>