

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Special Section: Reckoning with Violence

The violence of collecting

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Abstract

Practices of collecting have been integral to archaeology as well as to anthropology more generally since the inception of the disciplines. From the history of collecting in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is clear that although the degree of coercion varied, the practices of collecting inevitably took place in contexts of starkly unequal power relations and associated forms of violence. More than just the act of collecting, it is also the ways collections are handled, made available (or not), curated, and discarded that are imbued with different kinds of violence. This article draws on the case of human and other remains recovered in excavations on the campus of the Free University of Berlin (Germany) and examines the ways in which the amassing, use, and discard of collections are entwined with violent practices.

KEYWORDS

archive, anthropological collections, epistemic violence, human bones, Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology

Resumen

Las prácticas de recolección han sido integrales a la arqueología, así como a la antropología, más generalmente desde el inicio de las disciplinas. Desde la historia de la recolección a finales de los siglos XIX y XX, es claro que, aunque el grado de coerción varió, las prácticas de recolección inevitablemente se dieron en contextos de relaciones de poder inequívocamente desiguales y se asociaron a formas de violencia. Más que el simple acto de recolectar son también las formas en que las recolecciones fueron manejadas, puestas a disposición (o no), curadas y descartadas que están imbuidas de diferentes tipos de violencia. Este artículo se basa en el caso de los restos humanos y de otros restos recuperados en excavaciones en el campus de la Universidad Libre de Berlín (Alemania) y examina las formas en que la acumulación, el uso y el descarte de recolecciones están entrelazadas con prácticas violentas. [violencia epistémica, huesos humanos, archivo, recolecciones antropológicas, Instituto Kaiser Wilhelm de Antropología]

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Zusammenfassung

Praktiken des Sammelns sind sowohl in der Archäologie als auch in der Anthropologie allgemein ein integraler Bestandteil dieser Disziplinen seit ihren Anfängen. Aus der Geschichte des Sammelns im späten 19. und 20. Jahrhundert wird deutlich, dass die Praktiken des Sammelns unweigerlich in Kontexten mit stark ungleichen Machtverhältnissen und damit verbundenen Formen der Gewalt stattfanden, auch wenn der Grad der Gewalt variierte. Nicht nur die Praxis des Sammelns, sondern auch die Art und Weise, wie Sammlungen betreut, zur Verfügung gestellt (oder nicht), kuratiert und entsorgt werden, ist mit unterschiedlichen Formen von Gewalt verbunden. Dieser Beitrag erörtert den Fall sterblicher menschlicher Überreste und anderer Funde, die bei Ausgrabungen auf dem Campus der Freien Universität Berlin zutage gefördert wurden. Er untersucht, wie das Gründen, die Nutzung und die Entsorgung von Sammlungen mit gewalttätigen Praktiken verwoben sind. [epistemische Gewalt, menschliche Gebeine, Archiv, anthropologische Sammlungen, Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie]

Collecting has been integral to anthropology since the beginnings of the discipline. Although in everyday parlance “collectors” are often deemed to be persons who amass objects or other material remains of various kinds without any underlying intellectual ambitions, scholars are presumed to use the collections they assemble for the pursuit of research. Objects, monuments, documents, and more are collected as pieces of larger puzzles and become archives of knowledge. What exactly is amassed and how it is acquired and stored have changed, with a growing emphasis today on digital collections, but many of the underlying principles and objectives remain similar to earlier collecting practices. This history of anthropological collecting is at the same time closely entwined with various forms of violence, both in the process of acquisition and in the handling of existing collections.

I am primarily interested here in the ways in which practices of scientific knowledge production both today and in the past work to reproduce violence of various kinds. Practices of collecting in anthropology, especially in archaeology and physical/biological anthropology, are central to my inquiry. I argue that they have been and continue to be fundamental to the pursuit of anthropology, even as what is collected and the ways it is carried out have—at least superficially—moved away from cruder and more direct forms of violence over the course of the field’s history.

Following some reflections on anthropology, collecting, and violence, I discuss a case drawn from the history of anthropological collecting in Germany in which the formation of collections, their subsequent use, and their disposal are intricately entwined with forms of violence. Central to this discussion are the trajectories of collections and the histories of violence that they thereby accumulate. The case in question arose out of unexpected finds of human bones on the campus of Freie Universität Berlin (Free University Berlin/FU Berlin), in an area that was previously home to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics (KWIA). Tracing the history of these remains from their acquisition to their disposal to their recent recovery involves following the intertwined elements of collecting practices and forms of violence in physical anthropology and archaeology from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries up through their legacies today. I explore some of the locations and manners in which violence emerges in the context of collecting and pose the question of what happens when the violence that produced collections in the first place precludes the possibility of returning them to the places and/or people from which/whom they were wrested.

COLLECTING AND ANTHROPOLOGY

What Susan Pearce (1994) has called “systematic collecting,” as opposed to accumulating souvenirs or “fetish objects,” is often traced back to the Renaissance, but can also be found, for example, in the creation of zoos by Assyrian kings (Dalley, 1993). Pearce (1994, 201) describes the guiding idea behind systematic collections as one that depends on “principles of organization which are perceived to have external reality beyond the specific material under consideration” (see also Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Schulz, 1994). A collection is meant to demonstrate in an exemplary fashion a set of relationships among its specimens, which thereby stand for others that are not directly part of it. While Renaissance collections may have been intended to reveal an inherent order in the objects they encompassed, subsequent ones, characterized by Foucault’s classical episteme,

turned to tabular-based catalogs highlighting morphological similarities among things. Recent understandings of systems of classification, under the rubric of Foucault's modern episteme, tend instead to view them as exposing the ways a collector or curator perceives the world rather than being solely or primarily intrinsic to the collection. In other words, knowledge production itself is recognized as central and indeed problematic (Brunner, 2020; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, 12–18, 197). Perceptions and knowledge are, in turn, dependent on the previous history of collections, against which new ones are measured, displayed, and understood, and on the broader context in which collections are acquired, maintained, and exhibited (e.g., Bennett et al., 2017; Clifford, 1985; Pearce, 1994, 201–2).

Anthropological practices are rooted in this general history of collecting. My focus here is limited to the history of collecting associated with European colonial ventures, especially those of Germany, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was anthropological collecting in the four-field sense of the word, cross-cutting the boundaries of any single subdiscipline. Although the histories of archaeological and other forms of anthropological collecting are not identical, their interwoven trajectories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries allow a joint consideration of them for my purposes (Stocking, 1985). Indeed, the case I consider in the second half of this article crosscuts subdisciplinary boundaries in a variety of ways.

A consideration of collecting in European contexts is complicated by historically changing vocabularies and classifications that are in turn distinctive to specific academic traditions. In German academia today, archaeology, biological/physical anthropology, and cultural anthropology/ethnology are three fully separate academic disciplines.¹ Confusing for an English-speaking audience, *Anthropologie* refers solely to biological/physical anthropology. The clear separation of the three fields does not, however, characterize the early history of these disciplines: in the late nineteenth century, they were far more closely intertwined, and practitioners of what we would today refer to as “biological anthropology” were often substantially engaged in archaeological and ethnographic pursuits.

Anthropological collecting reached a frenzied peak in the nineteenth century, as large Western European museums competed to fill their exhibit spaces and storerooms with treasures from around the world. Material objects (both old and new), body parts, and languages were all fair game. In Germany, the race to collect was fueled by the establishment of multiple major new museums in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century. These included the Berlin Ethnological Museum (at the time the *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde*), which was founded in 1873 to house burgeoning collections of objects from all around the world—except Europe (König, 2007; Laukötter, 2007). Although precise numbers are often difficult to come by, at the turn of the twentieth century, the skeletal collection in the *Museum für Völkerkunde* was estimated at 4,300 registered items (Kunst and Creutz, 2013, 87; Laukötter, 2013, 32–35). The competitive amassing of things, which had begun much earlier in the form of private collecting, and the institutionalization of collections in newly founded museums took place in the context of travel and exploration, whether for scientific, economic, religious, or political purposes. German museums often funded overseas research trips for the purpose of augmenting their collections, while at the same time acquiring materials through gifts from private collectors as well as through purchases from commercial enterprises (Laukötter, 2007, 32–34, 142–50).

Travelers, diplomats, adventurers, and all-around scholars engaged in the acquisition of ancient and more-recent objects, ranging from sacred items to everyday artifacts, monuments, plants, and animals, but ultimately also people—alive as well as dead (Berner, Hoffmann, and Lange, 2011; Clifford, 1985). The latter included infamous cases of exoticized persons, from Ishi to Sarah Baartman, the derogatorily named “Hottentot Venus,” and the so-called human zoos, or *Völkerschauen*, who were exhibited at world's fairs and in museums in much the same way as inert objects in glass cases (Mitchell, 2002; Scheper-Hughes, 2004; Stanard, 2011). In addition to living persons, skeletal and tissue remains of the dead were acquired, as were impressions in the form of casts of faces, feet, hands, or, rarely, whole bodies (Berner, Hoffmann, and Lange, 2011; Haak, Helfrich, and Tocha, 2019).

Anthropologists engaged in the greedy free-for-alls as a matter of course, with the aim of obtaining ancient treasures—monuments and artifacts of ancient civilizations—but also “human material” of all kinds, not infrequently making use of any means necessary (von Luschan, 1906; Stocking, 1985). Felix von Luschan, a well-known figure in German anthropology, and from 1904 until his death in 1924 head of the African and Oceanian sections and the (physical) anthropological collections of the Berlin Ethnological Museum, was a case in point. He spared no means to enlarge the museum's collections, especially of skulls and other human skeletal remains; at the time of his death, his collection consisted of human skeletal remains, especially skulls, of more than 5,300 individuals (Kunst and Creutz, 2013, 91). His contribution to the manual *Anleitung zu wissenschaftlichen Beobachtungen auf Reisen* (Instructions for scientific observations during travels) was widely distributed (von Luschan, 1906). Although he encouraged would-be collectors to employ goodwill where possible, he did not shy away from making use of the possibilities afforded by situations of confinement and imprisonment to study living people and acquire remains of the dead (Laukötter, 2007, 150, 266–75; Winkelmann, 2013, n43). Equally famous scholars, such as Rudolf Virchow, as well as numerous less-known persons, employed similarly unscrupulous methods and encouraged others to do so in service of acquiring objects and human body parts (Kunst and Creutz, 2013, 92). During Germany's colonial war in southern Africa, skulls of murdered Herero and Nama were removed by medical and other officers, put into formaldehyde to conserve them, and shipped to Berlin (Stoecker, 2013, 447–48).

As well as a competitive race to fill museums—indeed, to build them in order to fill them—the physical act of amassing collections was tied to ideologies of salvage and preservation of “dying” cultures or peoples and of sites and monuments threatened with destruction. It was equally characterized by a sense of self-evident superiority on the part of those engaged in purported acts of preservation. The “salvage ethnology” pursued by nineteenth-century German scholars involved the collection of everything from human hair, tissues, and skeletons to cultural objects, the making of

photographs, casts, and audio recordings, measurements, and more (Lange, 2011, 21). These appropriations of material elements of the Other were often closely connected to, if not actually involved in, the very processes of destruction that led to the perceived need to “save” and to document that which was in danger of being lost forever (e.g., Buckley, 1996).

The rush to build collections was part and parcel—and very much aided by—the acquisition of colonies. Compared to its Western European counterparts, Germany came late to the game. The official establishment of colonies began in 1884, not long after the unification of the German states into a single nation in 1871, and ended in 1919 with the Treaty of Versailles. Most of the colonies were located in Sub-Saharan Africa, but islands in Micronesia and the Western Pacific and several locations in China were also part of Germany’s colonial enterprises. As was the case in most, if not all, colonial contexts, sciences of various kinds were readily instrumentalized for purposes of conquest, control, and exploitation—and practitioners often acceded unhesitatingly to colonial projects in the name of science. The colonies were turned into ideal locations for acquiring collections of objects as well as human remains (Laukötter, 2007, 44–45; Schnalke, 2013, 170). Other major factors that contributed to the shaping of German colonialism and its legacies were the amalgamation of evolutionary thinking, ideas about race, and the “rediscovery” of Mendelian genetics in 1900. Genetics offered a new structure for establishing and interpreting what were considered to be racial differences, thereby contributing to a growing discourse on identity and difference in biologized terms (Lange in Berner, Hoffmann, and Lange, 2011, 21; Laukötter, 2007, 91; Massin, 1996, 121; Schnalke, 2013, 178).

Beyond the physical acquisition of things, people, and body parts, collecting involved the construction as well as the appropriation of knowledge. Collecting was—and is—part and parcel of ordering and classifying things and worlds, and the associated practices and resulting collections shaped the research directions taken (Kakaliouras and Radin, 2014, 147). In the case of a discipline such as anthropology, collecting amounted to a central element in the control of access to the means of knowledge production. The core of archaeology, in particular, has throughout much of its history consisted of the acquisition of new data, primarily material remains. These form the sources from which inferences, analyses, and interpretations are made and elaborated. Without access to “new data,” primarily via excavation, archaeological knowledge production was long regarded as severely hampered, if not impossible. In short, collecting and collections—and the knowledge built upon them—have been historically situated at the nerve center of archaeology as a discipline, and of other subfields of anthropology as well.

Archives and Collecting

Archives have traditionally been viewed as a subset of collecting concerned with written documents, maps, photos, and other “flat materials” (Assmann, 2016, 38). In recent years archives and archival practices have come under critical and creative scrutiny. Together with the extension of the term “archive” to include its metaphorical usage (Assmann, 2018, 346; Foucault, 1972, 128–31), insights from studies of archival practices illuminate elements of collecting practices in general.

Archives have been understood as places—traditionally physical locations but increasingly digital repositories—not only that store and arrange records for future retrieval but also where knowledge claims are produced through systematics of inclusion and exclusion, sorting, and classifying (Stoler, 2002, 87, 90). Archives, like other collections, are invariably selective: only a tiny fragment of all existing records is chosen to be preserved (Trouillot, 1995). They are continually in process, “cultural artifacts of fact production, of taxonomies in the making” (Stoler, 2002, 91) that exist at the intersections of past, present, and future (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, 13).

The choices about what to integrate into an archive—or what can be consigned to the proverbial dustbin of history—are part of a dialectics of memory and forgetting, incorporating judgments about what matters and what does not (Trouillot, 1995). Decisions about how to organize information retrieval involve selection, making them political and ideological matters. The political nature of archival practices is connected to the power to create and/or authorize forms of classification used in establishing archives as well as in training specialists to make, use, and maintain them. This power “mean[s] that some can afford to create and maintain records, and some cannot; that certain voices thus will be heard loudly and some not at all” (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, 14).

A notion of truth, authority, and worth is traditionally conferred on that which is archived. This gives archives “the power to privilege and to marginalize” but also opens up possibilities for resistance (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, 13). The largely invisible and therefore especially potent power of archives and archivists enters at what Margaret Hedstrom refers to as archival interfaces, the partially permeable boundaries between past, present, and future, where decisions are made concerning how users may interact with archival documents: what records will be kept, how access will be designed and regulated (e.g., what can be seen and for how long, what can be copied), and much more. These interfaces both enable and constrain users’ interactions with archival materials (Hedstrom, 2002, 21; see also Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2015).

Similar interfaces can be recognized in anthropological collecting. Up to today, archaeological and bioarchaeological collections police the epistemological gates of the discipline, serving as a means to control the ways that knowledge claims are made, legitimacy conferred upon them, and access to the means of knowledge production regulated. Access to collections—the “raw data” of the traditional archaeologist—translates into the possibility to categorize material remains of the past, turning a set of data into disciplinarily legitimized interpretations about the past. What is collected in the first place—what is retrieved from an excavation, for example—is always a selection, just as it is in the case of archival practice. Even

with new archaeological methods of recovery and analysis that result in keeping “more,” decisions are invariably made about what is and is not important, with an eye to resources of time, money, and the space needed for their retention.

Access to collections is policed by quasi-standard, mostly implicit tenets of appropriate professional behavior, especially prior to publication of “the data.” That which is published is also a selected—that is, an incomplete—presentation of the material recovered. At each of these stages, decisions and selections are made by those who the discipline authorizes to do so about what is and what is not important enough to keep, publish, or otherwise communicate. Archaeologists select which “diagnostic” pottery sherds are worth keeping and what (limited) documentation of the “nondiagnostic” material is adequate before disposing of it. The deaccessioning and discard of previously constituted collections is a common, if largely unpublicized, practice (Hofmann et al., 2016; see also Stocking 1985). As in the case of archives, these practices, silences, and holes in the records exist both within archaeology and at the interface between archaeologists and broader communities (Pollock, 2010).

The Violence of Collecting

The history of anthropological collecting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes clear that although the degree of coercion exercised varied, the practices of collecting inevitably took place in contexts of starkly unequal power relations and involved various forms of violence. These included most strikingly violence associated with colonial and imperial practices, including those of classifying, cataloging, and “making legible” (Scott, 1998; Stoler, 2002, 95). They were—and are—not only about intangible knowledge but also very much about the materiality of knowledge claims and knowledge production via the acquisition and ordering of things and people. Collecting is, simply put, a set of practices involving the extraction of things, people, other living beings, and knowledge from their social contexts and rearranging them in new/foreign regimes of power and knowing. This not infrequently involved some degree of direct, physical violence, even murder; it almost always incorporated other kinds of violence. This combination of materiality and intangibility, of physical and indirect violence, makes it particularly insidious. Perhaps less emphasized but of no less importance are the extended temporalities of collecting and the forms of violence they thereby accumulate. The act of collecting implies that “something is transferred from an original location to a new context, and then put to new uses” (Kakaliouras and Radin, 2014, 150). But it is more than that: collections are rearranged, taken apart, added to, and even discarded. As I suggest in the case of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, an examination of the historical trajectories of collections reveals an accumulation of forms of violence that do not end once artifacts or bones are placed in glass cases or arranged on shelves.

As scholars of the subject have made clear, violence is not understandable solely in terms of its physicality; rather, it “includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004, 1). While direct, physical violence is the most immediately visible form, other kinds work in more indirect ways. Indirect violence often lies at the edge of perceptibility, at least in part because it is anonymous—it is seldom possible to point a finger at the person(s) exercising it (Bernbeck, 2008). Collecting practices were imbued with these other forms of violence, as well, and are sustained by them up to today.

A wide range of colonial practices, including those of collecting, partake of the privileges accorded to colonizers by structural violence. Structural violence as a form of violence is inherent in social hierarchies, differential distributions of power and resources, and forms of social marginalization and discrimination that result in differential life opportunities, suffering, or even death (Bernbeck, 2008; Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969). It normalizes inequalities and discriminatory practices, rendering “natural” the damage these cause to lives.

More closely connected to the academic legacies and continuities of collecting, epistemic violence can occur at the point where knowledge production resides (Brunner, 2020). It is a function of asymmetrical discourses and practices that exclude Others by delegitimizing alternative epistemological possibilities and by essentializing and hierarchizing. It impairs the ability to speak and to be heard, resulting in Spivak’s (1988) famous portrayal of the subaltern. It may also render its effects invisible: “symbolic unseeing is real, brutal violence, as it unmakes one’s very existence” (Sampeck, 2020, 85). Epistemic violence need not be intentional; rather, it comes about via the privileging of specific epistemic practices over local knowledge, thereby eradicating other perspectives and subjectivities by, for example, leaving an unmarked category such as “whiteness” unquestioned (Dotson, 2011, 236, 240; S. Pollack, 2012, 107). And it continues in the ways scholars and institutions such as universities and museums take for granted existing conventions of knowledge production.

In a recent discussion of violence in archaeological practice, Bernbeck (2020) combines and extends elements of these understandings of violence by focusing on intersubjective relations. Drawing on recognition theory as expounded by Axel Honneth, Bernbeck suggests that violence exists in interpersonal relations when there is a lack of recognition of the Other as a subject, a process of reification. This may include cases where one side in the relationship “knows” the other principally or solely as an objectified other. Recognition, in contrast, implies the care and respect that are part of acknowledging the Other as an acting subject. There is also a middle ground that Honneth refers to as objectification. It is here that scientific knowledge production—attempts to know the Other through observation—may reside. Observing scientifically means “seeing in them [Others] more an object than a subject” (Bernbeck, 2020, 23), yet scholarship in its better facets acknowledges the subject status of those with whom it engages and thereby avoids the excess and violence that accompanies reification.

The violence of collecting practices may occur at the most mundane level, with the “implementation of practices and procedures such as collecting, classifying, studying, cataloguing, and indexing” or even simply packing and transporting materials (Azoulay, 2019, 42, 76; Vogel and Bauche,

2016). Similar to the power and authority to create and maintain archives, the establishment of (authoritative) collections with a particular imposed order partakes of structural violence. That some voices and views are heard while others are not and that some people are seen while others are not are forms of epistemic violence.

The continuities and legacies of colonial collecting practices, including the drive to catalog and classify the world, still dominate our academic practice today, perpetuating undercurrents of violence in our work. The violence of collecting not only occurs at the point of the acquisition of collections but is also an integral part of their subsequent trajectories. In the specific case to which I now turn, the urgent questions arise: What happens when collections are no longer wanted by the persons or institutions that acquired or inherited them? How am I implicated in this history of interwoven forms of violence as an archaeologist who recovered these remains of collections and arranged for their study?

THE BONES NEXT TO THE LIBRARY AND THE KWIA

I turn now to the specific case of collections—or rather their discarded remains—discovered on the campus of Freie Universität (FU) Berlin. On July 1, 2014, construction workers digging a long, narrow trench with a backhoe alongside the University Library building cut through a pit containing large quantities of human bones. The work was halted long enough for the police and a staff member of the city coroner's office to reach the scene. The remains of the pit and its contents were removed using hand tools, and a reported seven sacks of bones were taken to the coroner's office for further examination. A cursory analysis established that the bones represented a minimum number of 15 individuals ranging in age from young to old. The appearance of the bones suggested to the coroner's office that they were at least several decades old and hence not the result of a recent crime. Some months later, in circumstances that remain obscure, the bones as well as objects recovered with them were handed over to the city crematorium, where they were cremated and buried anonymously (Kühne, 2015; Pollock, 2016; Schmelcher, 2015).

Two days after the original finding, a local newspaper drew attention to the history of the land on which the bones had been recovered (Anon, 2014). Prior to the establishment of FU in 1948, the property had been home to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics (KWIA). The institute was founded in 1927 as part of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society, an elite research organization designed to provide a place for top scientific research outside the university system (Heim, Sachse, and Walker, 2009a). The first director of the KWIA was the anatomist-turned-anthropologist Eugen Fischer, who was succeeded upon his retirement in 1942 by the medical doctor and human geneticist Otmar von Verschuer. The KWIA continued in operation until the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945. Under Fischer's direction, the institute quickly achieved international renown, a reputation that endured for some time under the Nazis (Heim, Sachse, and Walker, 2009b; Lösch, 1997; Schmuhl, 2005; Weiss, 2010, 2012). Iconic for the KWIA's relationship to the Nazi regime was the close connection of von Verschuer to his former assistant, Josef Mengele, the notorious doctor who made selections on the ramp at Auschwitz and performed experiments of unspeakable cruelty on prisoners.

The conduct of research in the KWIA was part of a trajectory that helped to anchor a racist and ableist mindset in Germany during the Weimar Republic, with a rabid increase under the Nazis. In the foreground was an unshakable commitment to the biological "reality" of human races and the firm conviction that "racial science" should be a form of applied research. The KWIA's scientists studied the genetic basis of human traits and their presumed racial connections through linkages drawn between genetics and evolutionary biology (Heim, Sachse, and Walker, 2009a; Sachse and Massin, 2000; Schmuhl, 2005, 11).

Fischer was already a well-established scholar when he came to the newly founded KWIA in 1927. Although he was one of the early promoters of incorporating genetic research into anthropology, his work at first remained anchored in traditional studies that used morphological-descriptive methods characteristic of late nineteenth-century physical anthropology (Massin, 1996, 122). As was customary at the time, Fischer worked to acquire a broad array of skeletal collections for research and teaching purposes. By the time he moved to Berlin, however, these interests were waning, giving way increasingly to an experimental approach. Accompanying this shift, the human skeletal material that was part of the institute's collections in its early years gradually became of less interest; instead, other collections were acquired that were designed to allow developmental studies on humans and animals (Lösch, 1997; Möller, 2013, 110–12; Schmuhl, 2005, 83).

Especially following the 1933 rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi Party, the "racial science" orientation of the institute became a massive biopolitical engineering experiment to improve the health and well-being of the *Volksgemeinschaft* ("folk community") and ultimately to steer human evolution by means of eugenics (Heim, Sachse, and Walker, 2009a; Massin, 1996; Schmuhl, 2005; Wildt, 2019). The close connection between science and policy was succinctly encapsulated by Fischer's statement in the summer of 1933: "The institute stands fully in the service of the current state" (Henning and Kazemi, 2009, 52; translation by the author). Institute staff helped train SS doctors and prepared assessments of ancestry and paternity, some of which led to sterilization or even death (Lösch, 1997, 339–44; Proctor, 1988, 160). Research on twins was central for a number of institute staff. This included the sinister endeavors of Karen Magnussen, whose interest in heterochromous eyes led to the commissioned murder of Sinti and Roma twins as well as other persons in Auschwitz in order for their eyes to be sent to the KWIA (Sachse and Massin, 2000, 23–27; von Schwerin, 2004, 268–71).

Although the KWIA's research was firmly centered on *human* heredity, some institute scientists conducted their work primarily on laboratory animals. Prominent among them was Hans Nachtsheim, who kept rabbits for this purpose in stalls on the KWIA property (von Schwerin, 2004).

Other researchers made use of rats or embryos of animals such as pigs (Schmuhl, 2005, 322). Animals were generally understood to be adequate proxies for humans, although with the Nazi rise to power many researchers in the institute took advantage of possibilities to acquire human body parts from concentration camps, forced-labor and prisoner-of-war camps, hospitals, and on the occasion of executions (von Schwerin, 2004, 273–76, 312–19).

While the overt violence that produced some of the institute's collections is by now well known, the epistemic violence that underpinned the research of its staff members has received less explicit attention. The KWIA profited from a general climate and specific government-driven policies of racism, abuse, and genocide.² It helped to establish and thereby actively fueled the Nazi program of racism that categorized people along a hierarchical ladder, translating into groups with differential rights to life with dignity—or to life at all. The institute's research objectives and approaches as well as members of its staff were also firmly embedded in the legacy of German colonialism. Fischer's influential study of offspring of "mixed heritage" in Rehoboth in "German Southwest Africa," today Namibia, was only one example of such direct involvement of institute researchers in the former colonies (Laukötter, 2007, 91–99; Lösch, 1997, 53–75). Both the intellectual heritage of colonialism and its associated forms of violence, as well as the more concrete issue of collections housed in the institute, maintained links to colonial practices and mindsets.

A full inventory of the KWIA's collections is impossible to re-create due in part to the deliberate destruction of documents in the prelude to Germany's defeat at the hands of the Allies in 1945 (Schmuhl, 2005, 526–27). Nonetheless, existing records offer some clues. They point to collections ranging from animal embryos to skulls to postcranial elements of nonhuman primates and other mammals, plaster casts of fossil hominids, casts of the heads of persons racialized as "Hottentots" and "Bushmen," mummies, "Hottentot" skeletons, skulls from archaeological excavations in Mesopotamia/Iraq and western Africa, and the more than 5,000 human skulls and postcranial skeletal elements amassed by Felix von Luschan, which were curated for some time in the KWIA following von Luschan's death (Kunst and Creutz, 2013).

The histories of each of these collections would merit a detailed examination that exceeds the scope of this article (see Stoecker, Schnalke, and Winkelmann, 2013). There is little doubt, however, that their acquisition was interwoven with histories that extended well back into the nineteenth century but that were greatly accelerated during the colonial period (Schnalke, 2013; Stoecker, 2013). The growing engagement with genetics in the early twentieth century and the loss of formal colonies led to gradual changes in the aims of collecting. With the rise to power of the Nazis, new "opportunities" arose for nearly unrestrained access to and acquisition of human body parts and other "material." One of the most egregious examples was the murderous violence underpinning Magnussen's acquisition of eyes from twins. Other body parts from persons murdered in Auschwitz were also sent to the institute (Kunst and Creutz, 2013; Sachse and Massin, 2000). The collection of skeletal remains acquired by von Luschan from around the world, especially from colonies but also from other places where the exercise of European domination was strong, was accompanied, if not by direct violence, certainly by threats thereof and concealment of intent, as well as a deeply embedded structural violence (see von Luschan, 1906).

More Bones

Following the cremation of the seven sacks of bones recovered from the construction work next to the library of FU, newspaper publicity and pressure within the university community led to the formation of a working group to address the situation. One outcome was the agreement that any further construction, repair, or garden work on the grounds of the former KWIA would be overseen by archaeologists.

Since then, several such archaeological interventions have taken place, and on two occasions, excavations were conducted specifically to re-investigate portions of the original backhoe trench. These latter interventions aimed to ascertain whether remains of the original pit were preserved and whether bones or other materials were left in the ground. These archaeological accompaniments and excavations took place in three areas (Figure 1): (1) in the garden of the former KWIA director's villa, today the Center for Digital Systems of FU (Pits 1 and 3); (2) in the immediate vicinity of the institute building, today the Otto Suhr Institute for Political Science of FU; and (3) in an open area behind a series of animal stalls that were partly demolished in the 1950s to construct the University Library (Pits 11, 32 and 33).

On the periphery of the garden surrounding the former director's house, excavations revealed shallow pits containing selected animal bones. Pit 3 contained solely the lower foreleg elements of at least 12 young pigs (MNI), still in articulation and tightly packed, as if they had been in a sack. The radii and ulnae were predominantly from the right side, the humeri from the left, a distribution that deviates from the expectation for typical butchery remains. Pit 1, partially disturbed by construction work, yielded sheep and cattle, again specifically from the forelegs, but without any notable preference for right or left side (Eger, 2019). Around the institute building itself, a number of small, shallow, and poorly defined pits were identified. Several contained animal bones, some of which may have come from laboratory animals (see below).³

The overwhelming proportion of the remains that can be associated with the KWIA came from excavations alongside the University Library, in an area that was behind the institute's animal stalls. Human bones were recovered both in the fill of the 2014 backhoe trench and in newly discovered pits in the vicinity of the original one.

Bones, both human and animal, as well as a few small round markers, all of the same size (2.5 cm in diameter) and with a single hole for suspension, were found within the backhoe trench. Some, if not all, of them must have derived from the originally discovered pit, which was itself no longer preserved. Excavations showed clearly that its contents had been dispersed within the backhoe cut when the backdirt was used to refill it.

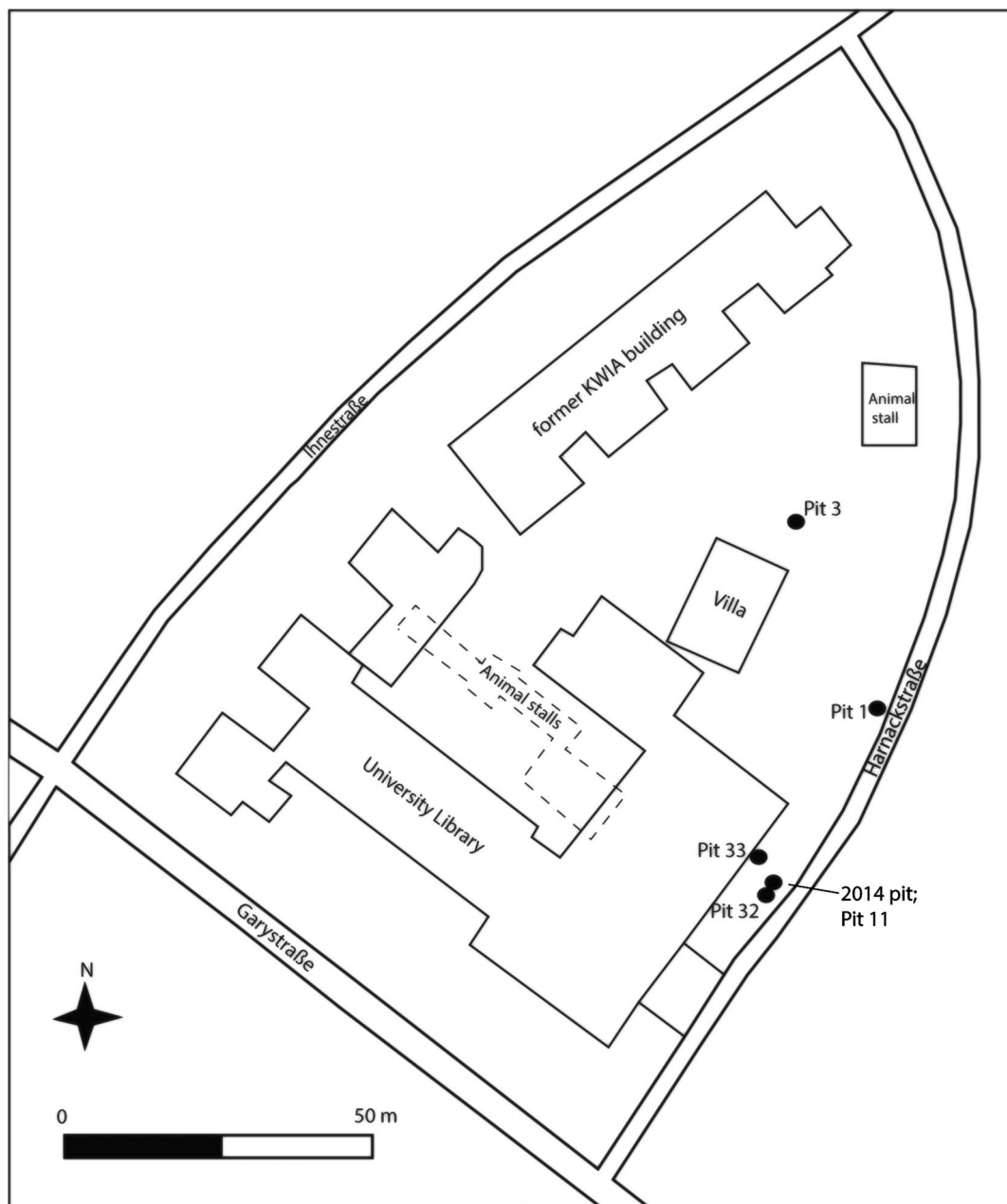


FIGURE 1 The property on which the bones and other remains were found, formerly the location of the KWIA. (Image courtesy of the author)

In reexcavating this trench, we encountered several additional pits that had been only partially, if at all, disturbed by the 2014 construction work. One small, shallow pit (Pit 11) contained only rabbit bones. The others held large quantities of human bones as well as smaller numbers of animal bones, especially rabbits and rats, both of which bear indications of having been bred as laboratory animals. Numerous round markers and pieces of plaster casts were also recovered. Pit 33 contained Styrofoam packing material, which, together with the mixed matrix of the pit, indicates that its contents had been (re)deposited, probably in the early 1970s in the context of construction work to expand the University Library.

All of the human bones, regardless of their find context, were highly fragmented. None could be attributed to a standard burial; rather, they had been disposed in an already fragmented state in the pits. In total, approximately 16,000 pieces of bone were recovered.

The bones were found on property whose history indicates that they were attributable to the KWIA. Thus, the question of what should be done with them was and is a highly sensitive one. Should the full battery of modern science be employed, from osteological to isotopic and genetic analyses, in the effort to identify who these people were? And with what expected outcome? Or would such investigations amount to a repeat of the structural and epistemic violence to which these people had been subjected in the past (Pollock, 2016)?

Discussion of these questions with all potentially interested groups was hampered by the magnitude of the task. While initially the connections to Auschwitz stood at the forefront of suspicion, collections of human remains known to have been housed in the KWIA point—despite their often

poorly defined proveniences—toward sources that are worldwide in scope. After consultation with the Central Council of Jews and the Central Council of Sinti and Roma in Germany, as well as informal discussions with colleagues, the decision was made to limit the initial analysis of the human bones to nondestructive osteological study in order to try to find out more about where they came from and who they were without (further) damaging the integrity of the remains.

Each fragment was recorded individually in terms of its osteological and taphonomic characteristics (Petiti, Pollock, and Gresky, in preparation).⁴ Due to the highly fragmented state of the bones, quantitative assessments are at best approximations or minimal estimates. Nonetheless, it is clear that persons of all age groups, from fetal to old age, as well as both males and females, are represented. Estimations of the minimum number of individuals vary from 54 to 104, depending on the interpretation of the archaeological contexts.⁵ Taphonomically, the bones evince a relatively high proportion of old fractures and indications of a postdepositional phase previous to the one in which they were recovered. In a small but not insignificant number of cases, there are traces of glue, suggesting that the already skeletalized remains were parts of collections used for research, teaching, or display purposes.

The results point to the likelihood that the great majority of the bones did not come from persons who were directly subject to the murderous violence of the Nazis, whether in Auschwitz or elsewhere. Rather, it is likely that they were part of skeletal collections housed in the KWIA that are connected in one way or another to German and other European colonial enterprises. Potential sources include the German colonies themselves, worldwide acquisitions from purchase and gifts, archaeological excavations, or some combination thereof. Radiocarbon dates on one cattle and one sheep/goat bone found in an undisturbed portion of Pit 32 yielded dates of 1193–946 cal BCE and 1737–1530 cal BCE,⁶ clearly pointing to an archaeological context for them and *potentially*, by association, for some of the human remains. However, at least two of the human bones hint at a different provenience. They were recovered at the bottom of Pit 32, some 1.5 meters below the ground surface, and underneath a plaster cast of a person that had been placed at the base of the pit (see below). All other bones were found above the plaster cast. The two bones in question were better preserved than most and their taphonomic characteristics differ.

DISPOSABLE LIVES?

At the close of the osteological analyses, we were left—as expected—with more questions than answers. Most fundamental is whether—and if so, how—the sources of the human remains (should) make a difference in the way we regard and handle them in the present. Does the likelihood—albeit an ultimately uncertain one—that most of them are not related to direct violence on the part of the Nazis make this an “innocent” collection? Surely not. Does it matter if they are archaeological in the standard sense that they were excavated and are “old”?

The bones discarded in deep pits at the back of the institute property were handled with the callous disrespect and casual violence of the dominant, as unwanted and unneeded remains to be unceremoniously done away with. As once-living persons, human remains demand treatment with dignity and respect, to be recognized as once-living subjects rather than objects (Bernbeck, 2020; Zuckerman, Kamnikar, and Mathena, 2014, 513). Can they *no longer be needed* in the same way that archival documents or collections of objects may be judged to be superfluous?

The discard of the bones raises a host of issues concerning structural and epistemic violence surrounding practices of collecting, including those at the time(s) the skeletal remains were first obtained, their acquisition by the KWIA, their disposal, and now, once again, their (temporary) curation and study in a research institution. In what ways do academic/scientific inquiries into their characteristics and identification involve a repetition or continuation of previous practices of violence (Pollock, 2016)?

The rat and rabbit bones are testimonials to other facets of the KWIA's research. That the rabbits were laboratory animals is evident from specific pathologies on the bones as well as the extraordinary size of some of the animals. The rats belong to a breed known to have been raised for experimental purposes. Smaller numbers of other “suspicious” taxa were recovered, including guinea pigs and fetal pigs (Eger, 2019). The discard of laboratory animals together with the human bones offers a further chilling hint as to the lack of regard—the lack of intersubjective recognition—in which the institute's staff held the collections of human remains in their custodianship.⁷

At the base of Pit 32, a badly damaged and only partially preserved plaster cast of a man was recovered. Although no head was found nor any fragments that could be attributed to it, all other parts of the body were represented by at least one side. The cast was made on the naked body of what seems to have been a dead person.

The production of plaster casts was a favored means of “capturing” and displaying the Other in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most were made on individual body parts, especially the face, head, hands, and feet. Full-body casts were rare. And no wonder: the experience of “being cast” was at the very least uncomfortable, and at worst terrifying (Berner, Hoffmann, and Lange, 2011; Haak, Helfrich, and Tocha, 2019). A dead person, however, could neither flinch nor resist.

Where the cast was made remains an unanswered question. Just as unclear is why it was discarded and especially why a separate compartment was carved out for it at the bottommost part of a deep pit. The date of its production can be better specified. A portion of a printed document or newspaper preserved in plaster in the hollow interior of the cast mentions the Russian Revolution, providing a *terminus post quem* of 1917.

Another matter is what should be done with the cast. While it is on the one hand just that—a cast of a human being and not the physical remains of one—it is nonetheless an impression of a person's body, with the visible imprint of body hair in some places, of folds of the skin, of toenails and

fingernails (cf. Didi-Huberman, 1999; Tocha, 2019). Is it any less the discard of a person than the disposal of bones? Indeed, was this person not thereby consigned twice to his death? And is it ethically responsible to retain these remains of a person in an institutional context, once again perpetuating the original violence of the collection practices?

Reckoning with the violence of these collections—in their acquisition, handling, and disposal—means in the first instance finding an ethically appropriate way to treat the human remains, both those that have been excavated and those very likely still remaining in this “contaminated ground” (M. Pollack, 2014). Doing so also means confronting the ultimate paradox: Whose voice is decisive in determining the most appropriate and respectful treatment of the remains if it is unknown whose bones they are? This question reverberated throughout our excavations and the decisions about whether—and if so, how—to conduct further examinations of the fragmented bones. When is it inappropriate—because it amounts to a perpetuation of a violent history—to further study human remains? Does doing so extend that violence, or does it offer a possible way to rectify or compensate for it? At what stage do we have no ethical right to know more? If we take seriously the idea that both the living and the dead deserve respect and recognition, do we owe the dead the right to refuse consent to be examined, classified, and displayed to fulfill the tenets of our disciplinary practice (Bernbeck, 2018; Bernbeck and Pollock, 2018)? When do classification, categorization, and cold scientific neutrality themselves become violent?

Since first drafting this article, the story has moved on. In a public presentation of the analytical results as well as in separate discussion groups, representatives of a diverse array of potential descendant groups have consistently spoken out in favor of a burial of the human remains without any further scientific or other investigations.⁸ Importantly, the central role of solidarity among the potential descendant groups has been reiterated by multiple spokespersons. The message is clear: the persons whose bones we have excavated were subjected to violence, they suffered, and they are owed a dignified resting place without further scientific interventions, no matter who they were.

The question of commemoration remains. Will the laying to rest of the human remains result in a closure, in an end to an engagement with the practices that led to their disposal in the garden of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute?⁹ Some authors have argued that memorial acts, such as the proverbial or actual laying of a wreath at a monument, can too easily bring about a sense of finality, of putting something behind oneself and out of mind (Bernbeck and Pollock, 2007, 225–26; for a counterexample, see Fryer, this section). The intertwining of performative elements and materialization or an emphasis on decentralized memorials can counter this tendency (Nielsen, 2008, 208).¹⁰ So, too, can absence. Absences are politically powerful, because they refuse closure (Renshaw, 2010). In the case of the bones from FU campus, the absence of (full) knowing continually references the lack of finality. So, too, does the impossibility to make amends for what was done. Acts of commemoration must do justice to the unhealed and unhealable wounds for which the archaeological discoveries stand and acknowledge the multiple ways in which violence has impacted the people whose bones were found.¹¹

CONCLUSION

The history of collecting in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes clear that although the degree of coercion varied, practices of collecting inevitably took place in contexts of starkly unequal power relations, associated with structural, epistemic, and not infrequently physical violence. The tendency to catalog and classify the world, which was a driving force behind collecting, continues to dominate our academic practice today, and a recognition of this should encourage us to pose questions about recurring undercurrents of violence in our work. I do not thereby wish to argue that all scholarship—as forms of scientific knowledge production—is suspect on the basis that knowledge is power. Rather, it is the conditions under which knowledge production takes place that must be scrutinized and modified.

We will almost surely never know with certainty the origins of the bones recovered on the FU campus and of the once-living persons behind them. But the archaeological work has yielded insights into practices of handling and disposal of collections that were, at virtually every step of the process, imbued with violence. Nor has the violence associated with these collections reached an end—if indeed that is possible.

What does it mean to reckon with (past) violence? Can violence that has already taken place ever be rectified or compensated? An obvious answer is no; no one can bring back lost or damaged lives. But we can try to extricate ourselves from spirals of violence, from the tendency of violence to perpetuate itself. The power of archaeology to make visible that which has been hidden, lost, or forgotten offers an unparalleled chance to remind us of the painful as well as the pleasant. There is no such thing as an innocent collection, but by confronting the histories and continuities of collecting violence, we may take some steps toward finding ways to center respect and recognition of others within our work.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ I do not refer to linguistic anthropology here, as it plays no direct role in my discussion.
- ² Eugenics and racially-based research were by no means limited to Germany. Their abuse, however, reached an unmatched zenith under the Nazis.
- ³ The identification and interpretation of the animal bones were undertaken by Cornelia Becker, Franka Höppner, and Jana Eger, all of whom I would like to thank.
- ⁴ The osteological study of the human bones was conducted by Emmanuele Petiti in the lab of Julia Gresky at the German Archaeological Institute. I thank them both for their time, hard work, and engagement.
- ⁵ The higher estimate results from calculations for each pit separately, the lower number from a combination of all contexts together.
- ⁶ Dates were run at the Poznan Radiocarbon Laboratory, calibrated using OxCal 4.2.3, and are reported with two standard deviations. I thank Julia Gresky for facilitating the dating.
- ⁷ I do not have the space here to pursue the question of what such findings mean in terms of recent calls to dissolve the boundaries between humans and other animals.
- ⁸ The groups included, among others, representatives of the OvaHerero community in Berlin, the Central Council of African Communities in Germany, the Initiative Black Persons in Germany, Berlin Postcolonial, Association of Victims of Euthanasia and Forced Sterilization, and a network representing Asian-German perspectives and interests.
- ⁹ Time will tell. The burial of the human remains took place on March 23, 2023.
- ¹⁰ See: www.stolpersteine.eu/en/.
- ¹¹ A project to make the history of the KWIA visible in and around the location of the original institute is currently underway: see "Geschichte der Ihnestr. 22" ["History of Ihnestr. 22"] <https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/en/polwiss/gesch-ihne22/index.html>.

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