

Atopic Objects: The Afterlives of Gold Teeth Stolen from Holocaust Dead

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Abstract:	<p>Transfers of property are an integral part of armed conflicts and instances of mass political violence. Not just the state and the military, but also civilians confiscate, dispossess, loot, and redistribute wealth across ethnic, national, class, or religious lines, in the process reenacting and sustaining the boundaries of othering and belonging that stand behind the conflict. In this way, economic violence takes on an essentially political dimension. Although to date rarely conceptualized as such, even grave robbery perpetrated at the burial sites of a defeated enemy or a member of othered minority constitutes a practice of alterity and dehumanization. And while in the aftermath of violence this very fact has the ability to invest things taken from mass graves with a particularly disturbing potential, this article reflects on the practices and affective dynamics surrounding objects of a distinctively unsettling status: golden teeth and dental bridges in their ambivalent condition between material objects (valuables) and bodily remains of the dead. They are considered in this paper through the conceptual lens of 'atopic objects', a notion designed to bring to the fore both the out-of-place quality and the at once as-well-as/neither-nor character of those things, suspended on the threshold between human remains and material objects, private possessions and body parts of othered and violently dispossessed people. In this article, I ask how this uneasy ontological status is experienced, acted upon and negotiated by the new (and rarely rightful) 'owners' and offer insight into the practical, affective, political and also legal framings through which 'atopic objects' are being constructed and reconstructed either as things or as body parts and, at the cost of their unsettling quality, become embedded in the postwar orders, both in the intimate order of the body and in the political-economic order of the state.</p>

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There are things whose trajectories are difficult to trace. They emerge fleetingly from the historical accounts and the stories surrounding mass violence only to disappear again, leaving little, or no, mark. The discursive existence of such objects, often revealed at the margins of historical narratives, and tainted with disturbance and indignation, is short-lived; only rarely does it coincide with their physical travels through the various material/cultural/political realms and regimes of value. Their fate is at best only partially or fragmentarily understood, the rest being left to an unsettling imagination and surmise: ‘we’ are aware that they are ‘out there’, that they circulate, and swap hands, undergo material transformations that perpetuate or obliterate their provenance, that they become embedded in new material, social and economic orders; they are domesticated and reused, their history and historical specificity eradicated. But the details, the actual *how*, *why* and *to what effect* of the process remain uncharted. From an analytical and ethical point of view, it is precisely this scarcity of data that renders these objects and their afterlives a salient topic of investigation. Whenever possible and however partial it might be, their trajectories necessitate inquiry in order to shed light on an underexplored dimension of mass violence and its aftereffects, both tangible and intangible.

This article seeks to trace and interpretively unpack the afterlives of several such objects. It examines the fates of gold teeth taken from the dead, and from body disposal pits, by the non-Jewish local populace in several areas of Eastern Europe, during and after the Holocaust.¹ The paper focuses on two case studies pertaining to the afterlives of objects acquired through grave robbery in wartime Lithuania and postwar Poland. The first case revolves around a golden tooth dug up from a burial site in the immediate aftermath of a mass execution and thereafter sold to a private person, who, fully aware of its disturbing provenance, had it implanted in her own mouth. In the second case, dental bridges and gold mined after the war from a body disposal pit at the site of the former extermination camp swapped hands between grave robbers, police officers and other state functionaries, ultimately appearing in the Treasury of the state. Although different and reconstructed from distinct source material (oral history in the first instance and criminal trial records in the second), both stories offer an important insight into the practical, affective, political and legal framings through which objects stolen from mass graves are being constructed and reconstructed either as things or as body

¹ Following recent developments in the discursive field of Holocaust studies (Sendyka, 2019), I restrain from framing the locations of human remains resulting from the Holocaust as mass graves and construct them, instead, as body disposal pits. This is to acknowledge that to deny the victims the right to burial was an additional, posthumously dehumanizing, form of violence perpetrated by the Nazis.

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3 parts and, at the cost of their unsettling quality, become embedded in the postwar orders, both
4 in the intimate order of the body and in the political-economic order of the state. Building upon
5 the available source material, scarce though it is, the article asks about the
6 material/affective/political dynamics surrounding looted dental gold. How do gold teeth stolen
7 from the dead become incorporated into postwar or post-conflict orders and economies? How
8 do they enter and travel through various regimes of meaning and worth? How are they
9 experienced, interpreted, acted upon by their new and rarely rightful 'owners'? How do their
10 afterlives speak to (and about) historical and cultural specificities?

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17 Attending analytically to the trajectories of gold teeth beyond the immediate context of
18 the robbery of the dead, the article also seeks to address a significant lack in the academic
19 literature of theoretically informed approaches to the material/affective/political particularity
20 of looted gold teeth and the trajectories they travel. Gold teeth differ, and resonate differently,
21 from other objects looted from the Holocaust dead, and their transgressiveness is explored in
22 the article through the notion of ontologically and epistemologically troubling *atopic objects*,
23 suspended between material things and human remains of the dead. Against the renewed and
24 constantly growing academic interest in material culture and the material legacies of the
25 Holocaust (cf. for instance, Shallcross, 2011; Klinger, 2017; Benninga, 2018), gold teeth
26 continue to generate an unease, even when they are mediated by archival documents and
27 eyewitness accounts. All too often, this translates into their affectively and normatively charged
28 (un)framing. When those scholars who do address the phenomena refer to cases of looted dental
29 gold merely as moments of moral inadequacy, they forfeit interpretative exploration and
30 occlude insight into the very frames and sensibilities that enable the circulation of these objects
31 and ensure their continuous, if unobtrusive, presence. Cutting across empirical and theoretical
32 realms, this article explores the dynamics that render the ties between objects and the violence
33 through which they originated discernible and undone, thereby seeking to expose the cultural
34 and political implications of this process, including for our understanding of the Holocaust and
35 its aftereffects in Eastern Europe.

51 **Things Looted from the Dead**

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53 The practice of scavenging from the bodies and graves of the dead during and following periods
54 of armed conflict and political violence is a universal phenomenon, present across cultures and
55 geographies. It adds yet another layer to the dynamics of political and economic violence of
56 which confiscations, dispossession, looting and the transfer of wealth from one population to
57 another are an integral part. Even more so for grave robbery that unfolds along 'racial', ethnic,
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3 national, religious, or class lines; here, it is the grave of a racialized subject, of an enemy
4 combatant, of a member of an excluded minority, of the dehumanized Other, that is being
5 looted. A growing body of research provides evidence of such practices in contexts as disparate
6 as the colonial conquest, intimately linked to the greed-driven and ‘scientific’ looting of
7 Aboriginal and Indigenous burial sites; the American Civil War; the Armenian genocide; the
8 Spanish Civil War of 1936-9; the Second World War; and the Vietnam War, to name only a
9 few (Fforde et al., 2002; Harrison, 2012; Renshaw, 2011; Wagner, 2015). While the
10 commonality of the practice is well established, our knowledge and understanding of those
11 objects looted from the dead and of their subsequent afterlives varies greatly depending on
12 context. While the fates of things looted from some historically- and conflict-specific graves
13 are known and well documented, others remain obscure. Often it is a temporal distance from
14 the events and taboo-breaching practices (and sensitivities behind them) that first enables
15 research.

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17 An extensive record exists, for instance, of the objects that were stolen from the dead in
18 the colonial period and for decades exhibited and deposited at various research institutions and
19 museums in the Western Hemisphere. Only in the wake of debates (re)constructing their status
20 as looted possessions of the dead, and not merely as objects of scientific inquiry and/or tokens
21 of foreign cultures, did these objects begin to disappear from public spaces in order to be
22 repatriated to descendant communities and/or subjected to critical provenience research
23 (Förster et. al, 2018). Thanks to a study conducted by Harrison (2012), much more is now
24 known about the different trajectories of the human remains and personal effects of the dead
25 acquired through the practice of trophy-taking in modern war: their celebratory circulation as
26 gifts, their exhibition as mementos during and in the immediate aftermath of armed conflict,
27 and the unease (and amnesia) that increasingly builds around them with the passage of time. In
28 her book on the Spanish Civil War, and in her contribution to this issue, Renshaw (2011) looks
29 at the narratives of theft surrounding the looting of Republican graves. In this case, the
30 trajectories of a few objects can be reconstructed through accounts provided by relatives of the
31 dead: it was often through encounters with killers dressed in victims’ clothes and personal
32 effects that people learned of the death of a loved one. Such incidents were also a reminder of
33 the perpetrators’ uncontested power and impunity during and in the aftermath of the war. The
34 openly displayed loot came to encode the continuity of violence and was experienced as such.
35 Drawing from various historical and geographical contexts, these scholarly works map the
36 overlapping and divergent trajectories of grave-robbery and scavenging from the dead, enabling
37 their inceptive classification. Widespread at historical mausoleums and tombs, the practice –
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3 conditioned by the transient circumstances of war, violence and impunity – remains rife in
4 relation to objects found on the unburied dead and is recurrent, though much less systematic,
5 with regards to things buried in graves and to human remains themselves. When it comes to the
6 gold teeth often violently extracted from the bodies of victim of the Holocaust, however, still
7 not much is known.
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11 The looting of the dead by local non-German and non-Jewish populations during and
12 following the Holocaust in Eastern Europe was first subject to academic research in 2011, when
13 Gross and Grudzińska Gross published *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the*
14 *Holocaust*, first in Polish, then in English (2012). This was long after the Nazi dispossession of
15 the victims of concentration and extermination camps, which had already been thoroughly
16 covered by historians (Strzelecki, 1998; Perz, 2012).² This inquiry followed, too, a pioneering
17 engagement with the scale and scope of Polish involvement in the Holocaust, offered by Gross
18 in *Neighbours: The Destruction of Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (2001). *Neighbours*
19 challenged the common framing of those populations as ‘bystanders’ or ‘witnesses’ to the
20 Holocaust, which portrays wartime violence as the sole responsibility of the Germans; it cast
21 Poles as perpetrators. *Golden Harvest*, in turn, interpretively engaged with the plunder of
22 Jewish property by non-Jewish Poles during the Second World War. Structured around a
23 photograph of looters resting among human remains at the former extermination camp of
24 Treblinka, the book’s narrative addresses the fact that the Holocaust was from the outset a
25 source of considerable material benefits for local non-Jewish communities, many of whom were
26 complicit in its implementation and also profited from its outcomes. Exposing the extent to
27 which the efficacy of Nazi expropriation and extermination policies were conditional on
28 assistance from indigenous populations, *Golden Harvest* shows that non-Germans, too, actively
29 participated in economic violence. Once the Nazis had taken what they could (Kreuzmüller
30 and Zatlin, 2020), non-Jewish Poles continued with the practice of dispossession – robbing
31 Jewish stores and houses after the outbreak of war, plundering vacated ghettos, taking
32 possession of the property and personal valuables left behind by deported Jews, blackmailing,
33 and committing economically motivated murder (Grabowski and Libionka, 2014). This process
34 continued long into the postwar period, with substantial state involvement. By means of legal
35 regulations which served to legitimize wartime property transfers, businesses and estates
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57 ² The grave robberies performed by Poles at the sites of the former Nazi extermination camps were occasionally
58 covered by the press in the postwar period. As recently argued by Buryła (2013), they have also found their way
59 into Polish literature. What I am arguing here is that they have, nevertheless, remained relatively unknown to both
60 the wider public and researchers, and still await an exhaustive interpretive engagement. This pertains, especially,
to the trajectories of objects acquired through the practice.

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3 confiscated by the Nazis (and the Soviets) were taken over by the Polish state (Cieślińska
4 Lobkowicz, 2014). Also private houses, buildings and land, defined by postwar law as
5 “abandoned” or “ownerless”,³ were seized and nationalized, and objects were confiscated on
6 behalf of the State Treasury. The restitution claimed by Jewish survivors in the early postwar
7 years, although legally secured, was increasingly constrained by the authorities, and resented
8 by the population at large (Skibińska, 2014; Krzyżanowski, 2014). Individual attempts at
9 recovering property from private hands could be, and often were, life threatening (Gross 2007).
10 Indeed, the issue of the restitution of Jewish property still remains contentious and largely
11 unresolved in Poland: thus far no countrywide law has been introduced to enable it. While in
12 1997 a bill was passed to allow the reclamation of community ownership, both proposed
13 reprivatization bills, in 2001 and 2017, effectively excluded the vast majority of Polish Jews
14 from retrieving prewar properties.⁴ Since the war, then, the question of wartime and postwar
15 economic violence, its outcomes and the ownership of Jewish things is charged as a source, and
16 enactment, of anti-Jewish sentiment (Krawczyk 2012), and troubling as a subject of historical
17 research.

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19 Among the various forms of violent dispossession perpetrated by the Poles, the practice
20 of looting corpses and body disposal pits was, it could be said, not the most severe – it did not
21 result in death but merely benefited from it; perhaps for this reason, it is often dismissed by
22 critics of Gross and Grudzińska Gross’ book (Lis, 2011). But the norm and taboo-breaching
23 nature of this practice renders it a powerful emblem not only of greed of the looters, but also of
24 the dehumanization to which the Jewish Other, both living and dead, was subjected during the
25 war and in its aftermath by non-Jewish Poles. In this context, the looting of the dead was not
26 merely a gain-oriented act; it also constituted an exercise of alterity and dehumanization,
27 enacting the boundaries of othering and exclusion (Dziuban, 2015).

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29 Alongside a growing scholarly interest in the looting of the dead, the objects acquired
30 through the practice have begun to (re)emerge – most often in the form of indignant and partial
31 historical accounts mentioned earlier. They can be found, for instance, in the developing
32 scholarship on local realities of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, which documents the practice

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³ This is how those properties were framed by several Decrees, passed between 1945-6, on formerly German properties which were abandoned and left behind. Every decree narrowed down the category of people eligible for individual claims to property (establishing, at the end, only direct heirs of the deceased as eligible for repatriation), and imposed various bureaucratic obstacles (high costs, short deadlines), rendering restitution *de facto* very unprofitable.

⁴ The first reprivatization bill from 2001, which granted the right of restitution exclusively to previous owners holding Polish citizenship before the war and in 1999, was vetoed by the president, Andrzej Kwaśniewski (under pressure from the European Commission and NATO); the latest project of the bill on restitution of prewar properties, proposed in 2017, is equally exclusionary.

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3 of scavenging from the dead as it unfolded at the former camps, at the killing sites, and
4 following individual deaths in Poland (Engelking/Grabowski, 2018) and in other Eastern
5 European countries such as Lithuania (Vanagaite/Zuroff, 2017) or Ukraine (Desbois, 2008).
6 Quoting from witness testimonies and archival documents, this research builds a small-scale
7 and fragmentary archive of objects that were looted from the dead and the body disposal pits
8 by local populations. The looting took place at the former killing centres during the war and
9 immediately after liberation and it accompanied mass executions in liquidated ghettos and at
10 Jewish cemeteries, the non-Jewish residents of towns and cities being ordered to bury the dead.
11 Escapees from trains to extermination camps or from the ghettos were also killed and
12 posthumously deprived of their possessions. The dead were robbed of their clothes, shoes, and
13 watches. Their orifices were searched for hidden valuables. And many were violently deprived
14 of their gold teeth.
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16 This last practice figures prominently as the most disturbing and, perhaps also for this
17 reason, often remains interpretively unframed – its gruesomeness is left to speak for itself. To
18 quote some of the Polish accounts: in the town of Wysokie Litewskie, a primary school
19 custodian attended to the site of execution of around fifteen people, “stripped the dead of their
20 clothes and knocked out their teeth as well” (quoted in Engelking, 2018: 123). In Biłgoraj, after
21 thirty Jews hiding in a basement of a house were hunted down and killed, a Pole who
22 participated in the search “removed gold teeth from the corpses” (Skibińska, 2018: 314). After
23 the extermination camp at Belżec ceased to operate and the Nazis left, many representatives of
24 the local population visited the site and “dug up single corpses, or sometimes mass graves
25 containing several people [...]. They looked for golden teeth in the jaws.” (Niedłużak, 1945:
26 185). In Bolesław, “the peasant selected by the Germans to the burial detail first knocked out
27 [Mendel] Kogel’s teeth with a shovel, and later buried his body in nearby woods.” (Grabowki,
28 2013: 15) In another town, the members of the local fire brigade volunteered to work on burial
29 details, hoping for an easy gain. An eyewitness recounted:
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50 They fervently joined the work in order to strip the corpses of shoes and clothes. They also hoped to find
51 money. Even dental gold was extracted with different tools. It is for this reason that, in Węgrów, they were
52 nicknamed the ‘dentists’. The ‘dentists’ would sell their goods through various intermediaries. When one
53 of those intermediaries, who was a [postwar] officer of the court [...], was told that there was human blood
54 on this gold, he responded: ‘No, not at all, I thoroughly cleaned them myself.’ (Quoted in Grabowski, 2018:
55 436)⁵
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60 ⁵ Similar burial/‘dentist’ details operated in other Polish towns. The involvement of the local fire brigades in the
extermination and burial of the dead is meticulously documented by Grabowski (2013, 2018).

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5 The last quote, taken from the testimony deposited by Władysław Okulus at the Warsaw Jewish
6 Historical Institute (ŻIH, 301/60430), is left interpretively unexplored by Grabowski. Yet it
7 offers an initial glimpse into the source of unease so easily detectable in historical research
8 surrounding the practice of robbing the dead of their gold teeth. The metaphorical reference to
9 “human blood”, taken literally by the ‘intermediary’ (probably responsible for recasting the
10 gold and selling it on), establishes gold teeth as distinct from other things looted from the dead
11 – a distinction effectively undone by the grave robbers themselves. Unlike watches or clothes,
12 gold teeth are an integral part of the bodies of the dead and are, therefore, figuratively – and,
13 indeed, often literally – ‘bloodstained’. Until they are melted and recast, their shape and
14 structure bear traces of their provenance as prosthetic human body parts, sometimes also of the
15 violence through which they were acquired. And it is precisely this ambivalent ontological
16 condition of dental gold, somewhere between material object and bodily remains of the dead,
17 and its resulting troubling ethical and epistemic status, that I explore in this paper. I do so
18 through the conceptual lens of *atopic objects*, a framing that will be explained and developed
19 below. Following the trajectories of several gold teeth beyond the context of their immediate
20 seizure from the dead, I ask if and how this atopic character translates into their afterlives and
21 material journeys. Do these afterlives differ from those of other objects stolen from the dead
22 during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust? How is the unsettling status of gold teeth being
23 done or undone, negotiated and acted upon? What are the cultural, ethical and political
24 implications of this process?
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41 **Atopic Objects: Things Ontologically In-Between**

42 The concept of *atopia* was introduced by Plato in his dialogues to describe Socrates (1997:
43 117b). Socrates was atopic because he simultaneously belonged and did not belong to the *polis*,
44 he did not fit into established notions of ordinariness and ‘normalcy’; he was disturbing,
45 excessive and unsettling. The ancient Greek word is etymologically derived from a privative, a
46 negation of *topos*. A ‘place’ and a ‘discourse’, it refers back to the out-of-placeness of a person
47 or a thing, to their unthinkability or unintelligibility, to their position outside of the
48 discursive/normative order; but also to their role as the point from which the order of a discourse
49 takes its root and, paradoxically, from which it begins to crumble and dissolve (Dziuban, 2009).
50 In contemporary cultural theory, the semantic field of *atopia* encompasses a further set of
51 meanings. The atopic stands for the unfamiliar and uncanny, it names the unexpected, absurd,
52 and alien; it conveys the quality of being shocking and disquieting, of being unsettled and
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3 unsettling (Di Cesare, 2012; Barthes, 1977; Dziuban, 2009). I see *atopic objects* as
4 epistemologically and ontologically troubling: their condition defies clear-cut categorization,
5 they evade easy ordering, their ontological status remains ambivalent. The notion serves,
6 therefore, to bring to the fore both the out-of-place quality and the at once as-well-as/neither-
7 nor character of objects, which invests them with the ability to disturb and cause unease. And
8 it is through this conceptual frame that I read the phenomenon of stolen gold teeth: as objects
9 with specific historicity, which were once part of the body, they remain suspended on the
10 threshold between human remains and (valuable) material objects, both the private possessions
11 and the body parts of othered and violently dispossessed people.

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19 This atopic quality of gold teeth could, in fact, be seen to take its root in the ambivalent
20 and liminal status of human remains, which also oscillate ontologically between the status of
21 object/subject. Keenan and Weizman refer to human remains as “the kind of objects from which
22 the trace of the subjects cannot be fully removed” (2012: 13). This notion is further developed
23 by Fontein and Harries (2013), who capture this ontological duality in terms of the uneasy
24 subjecthood/objecthood of dead bodies. “Being neither one nor quite the other”, human
25 remains, paradoxically, act and affect as both: as tokens of deferred human agency and as *things*
26 in their idiosyncratic and specific physicality.⁶ This ontological in-betweenness, established
27 and explored at the level of theory, is often experienced empirically as excessive and troubling.
28 The urge arises to arrest or eliminate the uneasy ambivalence and the at once as-well-as/neither-
29 nor character of human remains, by constructing them either as objects or as subjects, at the
30 cost of their inherent atopic quality. While they are not clearly defined as human remains, and
31 their classifications vary across geographies and cultures, gold teeth, too, are subject to
32 processes of hegemonic closure of meaning through “techniques of subjectification and
33 objectification” (Fontein and Harries, 2013: 120). Their objecthood or subjecthood is
34 established performatively and contextually as they travel through various regimes of meaning
35 and value (Wagner, 2014). In this way, too, their atopic quality is obscured.

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53 ⁶An avenue further strengthening the notion of gold teeth as body parts can be derived from studies on bodily
54 integrity as developed in Grosz’s writing on *prosthetic objects* (2005) or Haraway’s conceptualizations of
55 *prosthesis* (1999). For both, subjectivity and bodily integrity are extended to include artificially, technologically
56 or culturally acquired objects considered not an appendage but a constitutive element of the body, both of which
57 are invariably transformed by their interaction. While Grosz and Haraway expand their analyses to include
58 machines and technologies, social and architectural spaces and other living beings to radically destabilize the
59 nature-culture divide (and that of inside/outside, human/inhuman) and to call for techno-hybridity, a gold tooth as
60 a prosthetic body part replacing and restoring the function of a missing organ literalizes the concept of *prosthesis*.
It is an indispensable and integral part of the body and, as such, blurs the division between natural and artificial
organs, complicating – rendering atopic – bodily boundaries.

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3 In her publication on the Peruvian mass graves, Delacroix (2017) tells the story of an
4 indigenous girl who recovered a gold tooth from the mouth of her murdered relative, with the
5 aim of providing a proper burial. In doing so, the girl performatively established a distinction
6 between objecthood/subjecthood of the thing as fixed. A 2018 FBI investigation into the
7 practices of a Colorado mortuary home, whose owner had been accused of pulling gold teeth
8 from corpses and selling them for personal profit, suggested, in turn, that the issue is not a
9 simple one. From a legal point of view, the trade in such objects was considered permissible;
10 but the extensive publicity and immediate outcry surrounding the case shows how ethically
11 charged the subject remains, and points to the need to revisit, time and again, the question of
12 what is considered permissible and impermissible, thinkable and unthinkable with respect to
13 former gold body parts (Woods, 2018). Similarly, the subject/object status of gold teeth might
14 be reasserted or undone by religious framing. The rabbinical authorities supervising
15 archaeological research at Holocaust sites often – but not always – request “that prosthetic body
16 parts, teeth, fillings and hair are treated the same as bones or soft tissue in terms of their handling
17 and interment” (Sturdy Colls, 2018: 39). Also in the context of Holocaust-related grave
18 robberies, the liminality of gold teeth has been a subject of (re)negotiation and (often
19 temporary) arrest as these objects moved from the immediate context of the grave to and
20 through other physical/normative/political realms, where they were shaped, among other
21 things, by the legal, cultural and religious prohibition against the desecration of corpses and
22 burial sites – a practice from which they obviously originated⁷ – by the persistent othering of
23 and violence against the Jew,⁸ and by the uneasy legal status of Jewish properties, the teeth
24 included.

Arrested Atopicity

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26 One such journey is documented in criminal trial records from 1960 and pertains to the former
27 Nazi extermination camp in Sobibór, Poland. In 1942-3, around 200,000 Jews were
28 exterminated in gas chambers at the site, their bodies cremated and disposed of in the pits.
29 Immediately after the camp ceased to operate, the landscape was extensively scavenged: the
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⁷ Under prewar Polish law, grave robbery carried severe penalties. In the “Decree on Crimes Particularly Dangerous during the Reconstruction of the State,” passed on 13 June 1946, the communist authorities increased the maximum sentence for desecrating graves from two years to five or, in the case of particularly aggravating circumstances, to ten years of imprisonment. Art. 26, 27, Dziennik Ustaw z dnia 12.07.1946. Nr 30, poz. 192.

⁸ This violence, I argue, does not exhaust but, indeed, significantly adds to the atopicity of the gold teeth on an ethical and political plane. Gold teeth not acquired through grave robbery also carry liminality. For instance, it was a tooth extracted voluntarily by a person that materialized into a ring for the famous rescuer Oskar Schindler, bearing the inscription “He who saves a single life saves the world entire” (I am very grateful to Jay Winter for reminding me about this).

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3 residents of surrounding villages repeatedly visited the site, opened the graves in search of
4 valuables and gold, dug in the ground and sifted through the ashes (Dziuban, 2015). The corpses
5 had been meticulously searched when the camp was still operational, and gold teeth were
6 systematically pulled out from the corpses and collected by the Nazis, or put into circulation
7 outside the confines of the camp as currency by the camp guards (Rusiniak, 2008). Nonetheless,
8 there exists enough empirical evidence to support the claim that searches carried out by local
9 people developed into a largely normalized social practice (Gross and Grudzińska Gross 2012)
10 and produced results, as much in Sobibor as at other sites of former extermination camps in
11 Poland.
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19 This evidence can be drawn from police and court records of cases of people who were
20 caught red-handed and others who had bought up and traded in dental gold. Further evidence
21 has been uncovered by researchers working on the afterlives of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka,
22 or Belżec (Zawodna, 2011; Rusiniak, 2008; the Author 2015; 2016; forthcoming) – from
23 indignant press coverage addressing the scale and scope of the practice, its widespread character
24 and virtual ‘normalisation’ in the communities around the camps,⁹ and from a (still
25 underresearched and undertheorized) corpus of testimonies, collected by the memorials
26 established at the former extermination centres (cf. BMM), or acquired through investigative
27 journalism (Olszewski and Litka, 2011; Reszka, 2019). These include testimonies of Poles who
28 (they claim) merely witnessed, or indeed participated in the lootings, and who testify to the
29 mass character and durability of the practice, which at once resulted in and enacted the
30 dehumanization of the remains of the Jewish Other and the objectification of the atopic things,
31 the gold teeth, into mere items of financial gain.
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41 The stories told in these reports are disturbing: the former extermination camps were
42 systematically searched by people equipped with spades and sieves; the areas were divided
43 among groups, sometimes families, rivalling for profit; it not was not uncommon that, in order
44 to avoid capture by the police, the looters would transfer human remains *en masse* to the nearby
45 woods, houses, barns, and examine them there; men, women, children would participate in the
46 searches hand in hand; in some cases, armed gangs would protect the sites from the intervention
47 of law enforcement agencies (Rusiniak, 2008; Zawodna, 2011; Olszewski and Litka, 2011; Jan,
48 2014). The gold teeth were sold and bought, melted and recast to be traded off in nearby urban
49 centres (Sztandar Ludu, 1946; Dziuban, 2015). The looting continued deep into the postwar
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58 ⁹ An extreme example of this normalization is described in a 1946 article in *Sztandar Ludu*: a land owner from a
59 village near Treblinka made a fortune on valuables and dental gold that he and his wife bought from local children
60 digging at the camp, selling it in Warsaw (Sztandar Ludu, 1946). I delve in more detail into the social context and
cultural sensitivities which enabled this normalisation in Author (2015; 2016; 2019).

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3 period, resulting in few arrests, and significantly boosting local economies, a fact evidenced by
4 recent research (Charnysh and Finkel, 2017). Yet very little is known about the ways in which
5 dental gold appropriated at the sites was ‘processed’, how it was subjected to circulation and
6 exchange, experienced and acted upon. The documents from the 1960 investigation and trial
7 constitute, therefore, a very rare source material that allows us to trace the trajectories and
8 afterlives of gold teeth looted from the Holocaust dead, and to better understand not only their
9 practical but also their discursive and legal framings and reframings.¹⁰

15 The investigation, which resulted in a trial before the Provincial Court in Lublin,
16 revolved around the actions of four men who, in the winter of 1960, were caught in the act at
17 Sobibór by local policemen – digging in the pits, and sifting through the ashes in search of gold
18 teeth hidden in the soil and among human remains. Teeth had also been extracted from corpses
19 disposed of at the site (APL IVk 90/60 05/711: 2-19). The men were equipped with a shovel
20 and a sieve, and a bag filled with burned human bones was also found at the former camp
21 (probably with the intention of searching through it later on). It was a forester living in the
22 vicinity of the site who informed the police about the practice, which he had witnessed on
23 several occasions and tried to put an end to – but even gunshots fired in the air would not scare
24 the looters off. The forester was able to identify some of the robbers as inhabitants of a nearby
25 village and he confirmed their repeated presence at the site. One of them, arrested on site and
26 tried by the Lublin court under Article 26 of the “Decree on crimes particularly dangerous
27 during the reconstruction of the State”, was sentenced to two years of imprisonment for
28 desecration of the burial site and human remains of “victims of Hitlerite occupation” (APL
29 90/60 7/712: 1-76). The sentence was ratified by the Supreme Court in Warsaw.

41 During the trial, the accused admitted that he had been aware that he was looting a
42 “Jewish burial ground” but did not realize that the site was “legally protected”: it was not
43 marked and he was not the first to search the area for gold and valuables (APL 90/60 7/712:
44 35).¹¹ The man’s (surprised) justification and belated realization that a “Jewish burial ground”
45 could be subject to the same (legal and ethical) rules as non-Jewish graves, and that the terrain

51 ¹⁰ I am well aware of the limitations resulting from work with trial records, especially those originating from the
52 state socialist period, and dealing with the Holocaust, as sole historical sources: they are selective, partial and
53 biased. The statements and testimonies which they contain, too, should be considered from a critical standpoint
54 due to the context in which they were acquired. I nonetheless acknowledge the fact that they provide a unique gaze
55 into the role of gold teeth objects as evidence in court and their post-trial fate. As far as possible, I also complement
56 and contextualize my analysis by drawing from oral history accounts, other archival documents, interviews I
57 conducted, press coverage and historical studies.

58 ¹¹ Two other men, arrested later, were investigated by a prosecutor’s office in Włodawa. Following a change in
59 privacy laws, I could not access the files documenting this investigation and trial proceedings. Their testimonies
60 were, nevertheless, collected in the course of police investigations serving the evidentiary basis for the Lublin trial.
Their accounts contain a similar justification: they did not recognise the problematic nature of the practice.

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3 was not a ‘gold mine’, or a source of profit, but a meadow filled with human remains, echoes
4 the excuses offered by other looters interrogated in the immediate postwar period, and
5 interviewed in the last decades by memorials and researchers. Responses such as “I didn’t know
6 that [it was] prohibited” (quoted in Rusiniak 2008: 32), and “everybody was looking for gold”
7 (Jan, 2014) have been reiterated time and again. Performatively and interpretively undone as
8 atopic (prosthetic) body parts, gold teeth were seized as a mere source of financial gain in a
9 practice stripped of any moral evaluation by its immediate participants. This framing could be
10 legitimized and strengthened, too, by local moral authorities, grounding it in the othering of the
11 Jew, as was the case in a village near Treblinka where a priest encouraged the activity in the
12 following terms: “Since these were Jewish graves, dental gold and jewellery should not be left
13 lying in the soil.” (quoted in Rusiniak, 2008: 32) This dehumanizing and objectifying frame
14 surrounding the Jewish dead and their prosthetic body parts apparently remained uncontested
15 for the looters involved in the Lublin trial, too.¹² But, perhaps more importantly, the atopic
16 quality of the golden teeth, as loot and body part, was a subject of negotiation, of making and
17 undoing, during the court proceedings themselves: it was there that their liminal status was
18 again arrested.

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31 The trial was based on eyewitness accounts but also on material evidence secured during
32 the investigation. It is for this reason that the gold teeth stolen from the dead found their way
33 into the court archives. During the police roundup and arrest, ten pieces of dental gold were
34 found on the man sentenced in Lublin. A further piece of evidence was collected in the course
35 of the investigation: a dental bridge with several gold teeth. A couple of days after the arrest,
36 the police arrived at the house of the two other suspects and confiscated the bridge – which had
37 been found, allegedly, by the man who was tried in Lublin and then hidden in a cupboard (APL
38 IVk 90/60 05/711: 14; 16). All confiscated teeth served as *corpus delicti*, material evidence, for
39 the crime of profanation of human remains, framed by the judge as “particularly socially
40 noxious” (APL IVk 90/60 05/712: 49).

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48 The teeth were, therefore, constructed as body parts of the dead who fell victim to
49 desecration: the police and the court performatively and discursively located them on both ends
50 of the ontological subject/object divide, giving justice to their atopic quality. And yet, the
51 material practices revolving and evolving around the gold teeth exposed this framing as short-
52 lived and normatively superficial. The teeth were not exhibited during the trial and/or reburied

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58 ¹² In a 2019 publication, based on interviews with the representatives of the local populace, both those who
59 participated in the events and their descendants, who were fully aware of their relatives’ involvement in the
60 robberies, Paweł Reszka demonstrates that the practice has, in fact, still not been subject to delegitimization and
condemnation in those local communities and is consequently normalized (Reszka, 2019).

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3 at Sobibór but, instead, deposited in the Lublin branch of the National Bank of Poland.
4 Immediately after the passing of the sentence, as noted in the documentation, “the evidence in
5 the case” (APL IVk 90/60 05/712: 76) was confiscated on behalf of the State Treasury. Without
6 further ado, the gold teeth, (re)constructed as mere things or objects of material worth, become
7 embedded in the economic order of the state.
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11 In their trajectory from the mass graves of Sobibór to the Treasury of the Polish state,
12 the teeth passed through several regimes of meaning and value in which their ontological status
13 likewise became open to negotiation: subjectified and constructed as prosthetic body parts of
14 Jewish victims of the Holocaust, then invested with evidentiary value, their unsettling quality
15 of being both object/subjects was first enhanced but then arrested. Ultimately, the particular
16 historicity and troubled ontological status of gold teeth as body parts of murdered Jews was
17 denied in a logic uncannily resembling that which stood behind the grave robbery itself. Most
18 probably melted and recast, they journey onwards.
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27 **From Mouth to Mouth**

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29 The gold teeth of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust have also circulated through less official
30 channels and along routes that more closely and, perhaps also more disturbingly, adhere to their
31 initial function as prosthetic body parts – from the mouths of the dead to the mouths of the
32 living as dental gold, fillings, and crowns. It is virtually impossible to assess the scope and scale
33 of this phenomenon. In their book on the Holocaust in Lithuania, Vanagaite and Zuroff (2017)
34 quote from the testimony of a man who, as a member of a Lithuanian Auxiliary Police Battalion,
35 was actively involved in the mass executions of Jews at the Seventh Fort of the Kaunas Fortress
36 in the summer of 1941. He recounts:
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44 ‘After the execution, I saw [Pranas] Matiukas [another Lithuanian perpetrator] carrying several teeth. He
45 showed them to us himself, they were laying in his hand. I asked what did he need the teeth for, and he
46 explained that he was a dental technician, and his wife was a dentist. I saw around four teeth in Matiukas’
47 hand, they were cleaned and polished.’ All in all, Matiukas took part in the executions of 18000 people.
48 (Vanagaite and Zuroff, 2017: 108)
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53 That gold teeth were collected for reuse by local dentists – and that this practice extended
54 beyond Kaunas and the surgery of Matiukas’ wife, and, most probably, also beyond Lithuania
55 – is confirmed by other historical records. According to an interview given in 2000 by a
56 Lithuanian woman, Regina Prudnikowa, to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
57 (USHMM: RG-50.473*0076), it was the local dentist that directed her clients to brokers in gold
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3 teeth, who would sell the loot they had often personally appropriated during and/or after
4 executions. “In fact, many had them”, asserted the interviewee, further contributing to the
5 notion that trade in gold teeth for dental purposes was widespread and largely normalized. As
6 must have been, too, the unsettled and unsettling status of the dental gold as former body parts
7 of violently dispossessed people for those who had such teeth implanted in their mouth.
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11 The interview with Prudnikowa offers an exceptional glimpse into how the practice
12 could have been framed and justified by those benefiting from the availability and material
13 circulation of gold teeth during and after the Holocaust. Prudnikowa herself, fully aware of their
14 provenance, had a gold tooth and a crown looted from a corpse inserted in her mouth.¹³ The
15 teeth originated from the executions of the 1000 Jewish residents of her hometown, the central
16 Lithuanian village of Pliviskai, which took place in August and September of 1941.
17 Lithuanians, too, participated in the killings. Prudnikowa’s perspective on the collaboration and
18 complicity of the locals in the genocidal violence and dispossession of the Jews is critical and
19 constructed against the background of her memories of prewar “friendly coexistence” between
20 the groups (delegitimized, however, by her own admission of her fear of working in a Jewish
21 house based on a belief in the antisemitic myth of blood libel). She openly addresses the
22 violence and violent dispossession perpetrated by the local non-Jewish population throughout
23 the German occupation – the looting of Jewish stores, houses, corpses. It is in this context that
24 she is asked by the interviewer, Nathan Beyrak: “Well, but the Jews – they must have had all
25 kinds of golden rings.” She responds, focusing on the execution: “Well yeah, they did. They
26 probably were searched on the spot, because they were forced to undress until they were naked
27 there, you see. Some of them, the richer ones, were naked and their teeth were extracted too.
28 Even I bought one, because I needed an implant.” (USHMM: RG-50.473*0076)
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43 This declaration catches the interviewer off guard. For the next ten minutes the
44 interview focuses solely on the tooth – two teeth, in fact, but Beyrak is probably too unsettled
45 to realize this. I quote more extensively from this conversation:
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49 Nathan Beyrak: You bought a tooth!

50 Regina Prudnikowa: Yeah. Yes.

51 NB: Oh, so one could buy a tooth?

52 RP: Yes, a gold one. I don’t know how much I paid, but not much.
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58 ¹³ I first heard about the interview at a 2015 conference in Marseille, *Material Traces of Mass Death: The Exhumed*
59 *Object*. It was mentioned in the presentation by Jane E. Klinger but left interpretively unpacked (Klinger, 2017:
60 100-101). Also Vanagaite and Zuroff quote from the interview but do not frame it in any way (2017: 274-275). In
my recounting of it here, I insist that the interview does not ‘speak for itself’ and requires an interpretation.

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3 Prudnikowa shows off the tooth to the camera which zooms in on it for several minutes, while
4 the interviewee continues talking. She recalls how she bought the tooth after the German
5 occupation, and had it recast and implanted. Then she moves on to mention another one, this
6 time a crown. It was her dentist who advised her where she could find it:
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11 RP: She told me that she knew some woman [...] – her husband had shot the Jews – who had a tooth, and
12 so I bought it. I just cannot remember how much I paid for it.

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14 NB: So when you went to A. to buy it, you could choose the tooth you wanted?

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16 RP: No, I say, ‘Do you have a tooth?’ So she brought me one and said, ‘I do.’ And she gave me the crown.

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18 NB: The crown? Was there a tooth inside?

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20 RP: There was, there was. It was coated [in gold].
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22 Prudnikowa opens her mouth and shows the interviewer where the other tooth – or the crown
23 – has been implanted. The interviewer asks further: were there other people who would sell
24 teeth? There were. Did the Lithuanian killers get rich selling “Jewish teeth”? She responds that
25 this was not the case because “[...] other people’s wealth does not last, you don’t get to use it
26 for long”. And it is then that the troubling status of the golden tooth, its atopic quality, is finally
27 addressed and negotiated by the unsettled interviewer:
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34 NB: Well, but you also have another person’s tooth.

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36 RP: Yeah, but I bought it [laughs]. I bought it for money.

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38 NB: Well, but it was cheap, so that means you benefitted from it.

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40 RP: Well, it was cheap, cheap. [...]

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42 NB: Weren’t you afraid to put that tooth in?

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44 RP: Who knows. It was recast. They did not put the same one in. It was recast, you know, it was melted
45 down and cast again.

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47 NB: [pause] But still, I can imagine, the person from whom the tooth was taken, must have been tortured.
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49 Prudnikowa agrees but refuses to acknowledge the connection between the suffering of the
50 person killed and posthumously robbed of their teeth and their presence in her mouth. The
51 interviewer pushes further:
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55 NB: So that tooth-

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57 RP: There is plenty of gold buried under ground in Pliviskai.¹⁴
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¹⁴ On the phantasm of the ‘Jewish gold’ as a powerful marker of antisemitism, see Buryła (2013).

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3 The interviewer gives up and moves on to another topic.
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5 This conversation, as disturbing as it is fascinating, vividly conveys the disparity
6 between the interviewer's and interviewee's perspective of what is considered permissible and
7 impermissible, thinkable and unthinkable with respect to the gold tooth, a disparity grounded
8 in the way both construct (or undo) the ontological status of the object/subject and its atopic
9 quality. But it also provides an insight into the dynamics of objectification, in which the tooth
10 is effectively stripped of its specific historicity and (reductively) made into a thing – one that
11 allows for its unproblematic transfer from the intimate order of one body to that of another,
12 where it becomes, again, a (prosthetic) body part of a living human being. The recasting of both
13 teeth, their material transformation – the melting down in the case of the first, and separation
14 from the human tissue in case of the other – is not enough to do the job, however, as much as
15 Prudnikowa may attempt to put forward as a reasoned argument to suggest the opposite. In a
16 similar vein, the normalization of the practice – further legitimized by a local dentist, who was
17 clearly informed about the origin of the teeth and their brokers – underpins but does not
18 complete the performative work done in order to arrest their atopic quality. The objectification
19 unfolds, rather, when the tooth travels through yet another regime of meaning where it is
20 constructed and acted upon as an object of material worth and monetary gain, as a commodity
21 subjected to processes of circulation and exchange. The tooth was cheap, perhaps, but the
22 bottom line is that she paid for it. The economic transaction constitutes a cut on the
23 subject/object continuum.
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37 This shift of meaning allows Prudnikowa to erase her own relationality to the subjects
38 from whose death she (and others in the community) repeatedly benefitted – the othered and
39 violently dispossessed Jews. It also enables her to maintain an unproblematic perception of her
40 own positionality as an outsider to the violence towards, and the dehumanization of, the Jewish
41 Other, who in her account is reduced merely to the “Jewish gold” (buried under the ground in
42 Pliviskai). The reconfiguration of the tooth into an ordinary object of exchange neutralizes both
43 its historical specificity as a (prosthetic) body part of a murdered human being and its troubled
44 ontology as an atopic object/subject. This takes place regardless of Prudnikowa's knowledge
45 about their provenance in violence, manifesting in the very materiality of the teeth (an actual
46 tooth still coated in the crown). The line separating Prudnikowa from the ‘real’ perpetrators –
47 the killers who, after the executions, moved to Jewish houses and traded in “Jewish teeth” – is
48 affixed to the notion that the ties between objects and the violence through which they
49 originated can be undone when they are relocated to the realm of economic exchange. A cut,
50 therefore, is also made through vulnerable social bonds, the bonds of empathy but also those of
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3 accountability, binding the victims with those who reaped benefits from their suffering and
4 death. Those ties are effectively undone, the violence externalized and condemned; the
5 economic transaction, structured around the mere economy of “need”, is suspended in a moral
6 and historical vacuum. “I needed an implant”, Prudnikowa offers as an honest explanation,
7 establishing her own purchase as ethically unproblematic, as if it did not carry any moral
8 weight, as if it unfolds beyond or below its historical/ethical context, detached from events
9 serving at its condition of possibility. And so, abstracted from the dense web of social relations,
10 the teeth travel from the intimacy of one body to that of another, where they remain for decades,
11 objectified, domesticated, own(ed), until the gaze of the camera, and of the interviewer,
12 (re)constitutes them as disturbing evidence of the violent practice of robbing the dead, and of
13 the enduring naturalization of its outcomes, as much material as ethical and political.
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24 **Unsettling/Unsettled Ownership**

25 In the dedication to *Golden Harvest*, Gross and Grudzińska Gross quote a sentence from
26 Wyka’s *As if Life*: “A golden tooth ripped from a corpse will always bleed” (Gross and
27 Grudzińska Gross, 2012). Even when taken metaphorically, the statement does not seem to
28 hold. In fact, at the cost of their unsettling quality as subject/objects, the teeth looted from the
29 Jewish dead and from their graves became embedded into postwar orders, both the intimate
30 order of the body of individuals and the political-economic order of the state. As if there was
31 no blood, no troubling out-of-placeness. And yet, even a fragmentary and partial investigation
32 into the afterlives of these objects allows us to realize to what extent those orders were founded
33 on genocidal violence and the dispossession of the Jewish other; a ‘truth’ that those orders
34 disavow and refuse to recognize. This could be yet another way of conveying the atopic quality
35 of things, this time in strictly political terms: as they expose the violence upon which the order
36 has been predicated, they also expose the cracks in its foundation, acting as a reminder of its
37 conditionality, contingency and fragility.
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48 Revolving and evolving around the question of (un)rightful ownership and the various
49 forms of violence through which it was acquired, this fragility/atopicity remains (potentially)
50 proportional to the scale and scope of the dispossession of the Jews during the Holocaust and
51 in its aftermath, and to the multitude of assets, objects, and properties embedded in the postwar
52 material/social/economic (and bodily) orders across Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, it hardly
53 ever finds its way into dominant discourses and sensitivities surrounding objects looted from
54 the Jews, their travels and their continuous, unobtrusive presence. The naturalization, de-
55 historicisation and objectification of misappropriated goods, and their interpretive (un)framing
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3 by researchers, hold in check unsettling questions about the past but even more so about the
4 footing of the current reality, about the status quo, about a present funded on exclusion,
5 dispossession, and murder, about the vulnerability of ownership seized by violent means. When
6 this fragility/atopicity sets in, it is articulated primarily in the sense of threat, present since the
7 democratic transition of the 1980-90s, associated with the possibility of Jews returning to their
8 Eastern European hometowns to reclaim their property. This sense of threat is rarely welcomed;
9 rather, it feeds anti-Jewish sentiment, and almost inevitably results in the denial of the extent
10 of economic violence that accompanied the Holocaust, perpetuating its continuity by other
11 means (Krawczyk, 2014; Matyjaszek 2019). Instead of revising the frames and sensibilities that
12 underpinned this (economic) violence, they are sustained – the fragility/atopicity of orders, and
13 of objects, is, again, arrested and rendered invisible.

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15 Here lies the pertinence, cultural, political but also ethical, of rendering ownership
16 unsettled and unsettling, of restoring the atopic quality to things, sometimes even by letting
17 them metaphorically and/or literally bleed. This involves (re)tracing their ties to the violence
18 through which they originated, making their specific historicity discernible, following their
19 travels in the past and into the present, whenever possible and however disturbing they may be,
20 in order to understand and acknowledge their entanglements in the violence, its troubling
21 continuity, and its tangible and intangible aftereffects. Vanagaite, whose words informed my
22 work, formulated the meaning of this task in the following terms: “We need to ask where the
23 gold in the teeth of our grandmothers came from. We have to ask questions – we owe it to the
24 victims of the Holocaust.” (Quoted in Kaplan Sommer, 2018) But I think there is more at stake:
25 ‘we’ owe it to ‘ourselves’, too.

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