

# Human Remains in University Collections - Comparison and Entanglements

WORKSHOP REPORT

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Published July 31st, 2024

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for Transregional  
Research

**Human Remains in University Collections - Comparison and Entanglements  
(Freiburg, 15 July 2024)**

Participants from *France, (Southwest) Germany, Switzerland, the United States of America and Tanzania* gathered for an informal exchange on both “collections” of human remains dating back over 100 years (morning session) and current challenges related to the commemoration and rectification of injustices represented by these collections (afternoon session). Organised primarily by three FRIAS fellows (Jenny Reardon, Anika Walke, Andreas Mehler) with the support of the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (ABI), the Africa Centre for Transregional Research (ACT) and the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS), workshop participants explored avenues of research identified in the title— comparison and entanglements—by sharing knowledge and practical experience. The opportunity to hold such a workshop was clearly linked to the visit by Evelyn Hammonds (Harvard University), an eminent researcher in the fields of the history of science and medicine and Chair of Harvard University’s Committee on Human Remains in University Museum Collections.

I.

It was striking to see both similarities and differences in the collections in (in alphabetical order) Basel, Freiburg, Harvard, Strasbourg or Tübingen pertaining to the scope and size of the collection, the background of collectors, the associated scientific and ideological ambitions, and the “political economy” of collections etc.. A more detailed inquiry revealed entwined epistemic, ethical and political questions that shape the current work in and with the collections. Collections include skeletal remains, tissue or organ samples of living individuals and members of communities who never consented to the use of their body parts for research or public display, their storage in cardboard boxes, or their classification according to categories that they did not choose, with numbers instead of names as identifiers etc. All workshop participants identified the objectification and dehumanization of these individuals as a key problematic of these collections. One particular concern is the appropriate handling of human remains, which in some cases include particularly delicate soft tissues, human hair, or human skin used to create book covers, and adequate storage conditions. Despite the significant efforts and achievements of provenance research, essential parts of the information needed to enable restitution and repair may remain elusive, calling on the museum and scholarly community to develop unique strategies that entail at least the possibility of repair, however incomplete.

The existence and use of human remains collections is closely linked to broader systems of violence and injustice such as (settler) colonialism, slavery, racial terror, and the Holocaust, among others. German, French, Swiss, and US universities, research institutes, and museums that are attempting to address the responsibility arising from having participated in the creation of such collections are therefore faced with cultures of memory and remembrance writ large that reflect distinct political, social, and cultural systems of power and, in various and often insufficient ways, grapple with the legacies of racialized injustice. In recent years, efforts to rectify such forms of violence and abuse have gained traction, especially within civil society and the community of cultural producers and activists. Simultaneously, progress in this regard is being thwarted by political and institutional resistance.

Workshop discussions addressed the efforts of various stakeholders, noting that alongside the impact of broader debates about historical injustice and violence on individual and institutional willingness and ability to act, there is also an inherent challenge in identifying legitimate and recognized interlocutors for, and recipients of, efforts of restitution and repair. Further collaborative research and analysis of temporal dynamics that link the different systems of violence—e.g., colonialism, slavery, Holocaust—may be helpful in solving these and other systematic problems. The recent and increasing public attention can only be productive for further work on the local and global implications of university and museum’s engagement with human remains collections.

## II.

A more critical approach to existing forms of remembrance and commemoration is needed to facilitate a more meaningful engagement with the problematic past that shapes our universities and museums. So far, only very general statements on a problematic past have been issued by many institutions – without detailing what exactly constitutes an ethical transgression of even a crime. The Harvard initiative can serve as a motivation to consider actions and forms of communication that avoid retraumatization but that publicly acknowledge institutional, communal, and individual responsibility, offer symbolic acts of recognition, and create spaces of commemoration or memorials. Clear expressions of empathy with the victims of an arrogant, extractive, violent scientific apparatus must replace our institutions’ deafening silence. It is an uphill struggle to counter entrenched beliefs built upon university-based forms of knowledge production that are canonized by publication in the “best” Western journals and ignore oral transmission and memory cultures of those once colonized and enslaved. Indeed, the scientific “pioneers” in the fields of anatomy and bio-anthropology who oversaw human remains collections were frequently directly involved in the science of race and in science that justified white supremacy, and were for a long time openly venerated (e.g., Alexander Ecker at University of Freiburg). Universities only very slowly have begun to acknowledge these connections, and to recognize that a direct line can be drawn between these “forefathers” on the one hand, and what is still considered true science today on the other. Members of the workshop frequently argued that reckoning with human remains means also reckoning with the violent, Eurocentric epistemologies they helped to build, and that in too many cases still shape research cultures and practices.

The workshop revealed stark differences in how Universities are addressing this implication and responsibility. In particular, there is a major distinction between private US based Universities and largely state-funded Universities in the European Union (by the central state in France, by federal counties in the case of Germany).<sup>1</sup> US universities depend on private donors, some of which draw their wealth from historical investments in the slave trade (or even built on the ground of former plantations), and therefore find it hard to address the issues raised by human remains without alienating their funders. By contrast, state-funded Universities are facing tough decisions when state subsidies are barely sufficient to maintain their basic functioning and so prioritizing funding on appropriate memory culture is equally challenging. However, as one participant noted, “everything is political”. Universities and

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<sup>1</sup> We were speculating whether the relative importance of private sponsorship for Swiss academic institutions could be an in-between case.

museums on either sides of the Atlantic Ocean are facing difficulties in trying to escape the pressure originating from various stakeholders:

- international partners from the Global South – including students that should be attracted to European Universities that face declining numbers of domestic students;
- private and public donors that expect ethically correct behavior; and
- citizens and civil society more broadly

Overall, workshop participants shared a few common insights. First, it will be hard and it would be wrong to depoliticize the dossier of Human Remains in University collections. Second, navigating the growing public attention requires proactive behavior by University decision-makers such as, attributing clear roles of responsibility, inventing new governance practices including the establishment of (international) committees with representatives of victimized groups), frank and open discussion within and between relevant disciplines, and the development of pedagogical resources.<sup>2</sup>In this context, working in separation and regularly “reinventing the wheel” due to lacking exchange and communication was seen as ineffective and unnecessary. Instead, the workshop demonstrated the need and desire for creating an overarching framework and sharing resources via a working group or another collective mechanism. An appropriate handling of University-based collections can serve to promote a new and attractive narrative of a caring, empathetic and self-critical University.

Participants of the workshop acknowledged that they could only scratch the surface of such deep discussions on a single day and noted the utility of further encounters. Future connections and meetings can build on a strong foundation and promise to develop a joint frame of research and analysis that is of use to all participants. Proposals to increase greater visibility for human remains collections and their problematic role include a follow-up meeting that is open to other scholars and activists, the publication of either a special issue or an edited volume, and the creation of teaching modules that can be employed in the various institutions

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<sup>2</sup> Participants agreed that it would be particularly fruitful to work together across the cases to create teaching modules.

## Workshop Report: Human Remains in University Collections

### Annex: List of participants

Anika Becher - Freiburg

Tricia Close-König – Strasbourg

Nadja Germann - Freiburg

Evelynn Hammonds - Harvard

Dag Henrichsen – Basel

Ralf von den Hoff - Freiburg

Sophie Kassel – Freiburg

Richard Legay - Freiburg

Andreas Mehler - Freiburg

Jenny Reardon – Santa Cruz

Julia Rensing – Basel

Valence Silayo – Dar es Salaam

Sébastien Soubiran – Strasbourg

Hanetha Vété-Congolo - Brunswick

Annika Vosseler – Tübingen

Anika Walke – St. Louis

Heiko Wegmann - Freiburg