

Archaeology is a practice concerning time. Layer upon layer of earth condenses to become the ground on which generation after generation lives and dies. Human remains are among the many objects that fill the soil, and some of them get 'discovered', exhumed, researched and displayed by archaeologists across the world. For the edited volume, *Archaeologists and the Dead*, editors Howard Williams and Melanie Giles convened a collection of authors who take seriously the scientific, metaphoric, historical and political implications of the work of digging.

With the exception of a study from the island of Saint Helena, the authors write exclusively about sites in the United Kingdom, northern and western Europe and North America, using these as a base from which to evaluate contemporary archaeological and museum practices regarding human remains. Their perspectives could certainly have been enriched and challenged by authors and case studies from the global South. Reading the book from a South African context, one cannot but think of local examples where the politics surrounding human remains speak directly to colonial, slave and apartheid histories.<sup>1</sup> Voices from the global South would have added instructive methodologies and theories for thinking through the current moment in the discipline of archaeology.

The book has three parts. The first, 'Investigating the Dead', explores archaeological processes. Written mostly by practicing archaeologists, it centres on their methodological concerns. The second, 'Displaying the Dead', examines the politics of the dead body in the context of museums. The third, 'Public Mortuary Archaeology', presents 'wider accounts of interactions between society, media, and mortuary archaeology' (13). This third part considers the social meanings produced by archaeological excavations of human remains in contemporary society. My own interests lie in three themes that arc across the book's three sections, and it is through these that I offer some observations on this wide-ranging collection. My review traverses the tensions between 'science' and 'fiction', 'the individual' and 'the collective', as well as the 'recent' and 'ancient' dead. Just as, over time, bodies become indivisible from the soil in which they are buried, so too do these categories become ever more porous and entangled.

The categories of science and fiction are held in tension throughout the book. Indeed, the editors, Giles and Williams flag this in their introduction, where they

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1 See N. Shepherd, 'Digging Deep: A Hauntology of Cape Town' in John Cherry and Felipe Rojas (eds), *Archaeology for the People: Joukowsky Institute Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 96–107.

refer to archaeologists as ‘deathworkers: mediators who construct narratives about the dead’. Archaeologists, they say, are

public intellectuals as well as field workers and heritage practitioners, narrating stories about the dead but also critically exploring the uses and abuses of mortuary archaeology in present-day mortuary and commemorative cultures. (12)

By contrast, several of the authors in Part 1 seem to hold steadfastly to the idea of the neutrality of science.<sup>2</sup> Their conception of themselves as scientists does not allow for the ever-pressing forces of narrative and fiction to leak into their practices and outputs. And when leaks occur, as they inevitably do, these are met with mistrust and scepticism.

For example, Andrew Pearson and Ben Jeffs directed a project in which British archaeologists were tasked with excavating a mass burial ground uncovered in 2007 and 2008 during the process of planning for an airport on the island of Saint Helena.<sup>3</sup> Here, approximately 5,000 victims of the transatlantic slave trade, who were liberated from slave ships by the Royal Navy during the mid-nineteenth century, were interred (99). Pearson and Jeffs note that their aim in writing the chapter was to gain insight into the social and political implications of the project in Saint Helena, and they explain that they decided to conduct interviews with local islanders towards this end. Their findings are presented as data that, as archaeologists, they do not feel equipped to analyse (leaving this to social anthropologists who they deem better qualified).

Pearson and Jeffs also provide the following caveat to their chapter: ‘this examination of the cultural aspects of the project inevitably represents our narrow, personal, and White [sic] European view of events and outcomes.’ (99–100).<sup>4</sup> However, their refusal to do the work of analysis begs the question: what are the politics of absolving oneself of this task? To simply say, ‘this is not my discipline’ is to disavow your discipline’s complicity in creating the kinds of data that supposedly anthropologists can analyse better. Data collection processes are far from neutral, and fundamentally shape the bounds of possible analyses. Thus, while attempting to go beyond the knowledge produced by the archaeological dig for its own sake, Pearson and Jeffs perpetuate the separation they perceive between the so-called natural sciences and the apparently more abstract meaning-making that they assign to the social sciences, even in the context of an event as highly emotionally charged and viscerally violent as the Middle Passage.

In a chapter titled, ‘Writing About Death, Mourning and Emotion: Archaeology, Imagination, and Creativity’, Trevor Kirk reminds us that all academic history is narrative based on, ‘power and politics, emotion and bereavement, action and

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2 See, for instance, Chapter 6 by Martin Brown at p. 134.

3 The title of the chapter is ‘Slave Trade Archaeology and the Public: The Excavation of a “Liberated African” Graveyard on Saint Helena.’

4 Authors’ capitalisation.

performance, material culture and identity'. Kirk points to the tendency towards empirical study in the mid-twentieth century that 'squeezed imagination to the margins ... of processual archaeology' (396–397). He advocates for an interdisciplinary approach where archaeologists and creative writers or poets convene on themes of death, mourning and emotion.

Kirk notes that digging is an especially appropriate metaphor for memory. Digging itself is memory work. He cites Seamus Heaney's poem 'The Tollund Man' (1972), in which a photograph of a bog body (a naturally mummified body) helped Heaney articulate his feelings about the atrocities of the 'Irish Troubles' (398). Kirk notes that some critics expressed concern over the aestheticisation of death, the universalisation of the specific, and the collapsing of time and space in the poem. In their introductory chapter, Giles and Williams take up this critique of the convolution of the specific with the universal, noting that, 'Often, the interplay between individual biographies and broader narratives of life and death in the human past provide the most powerful narratives of all' (7). The processes of burial, excavation and repatriation transform individualised biographies into collective imaginaries.

John McClland and Jessica Cerezo-Román, authors of a chapter titled, 'Personhood and Re-Embodiment in Osteological Practice', note that perceptions of individual personhood are culturally constructed as contained by the outer contours of the body (although this notion is challenged by the use of prosthetics, jewellery and even smart phones, as physical extensions of the self beyond the 'natural' body) (39). In death, bodies along with grave goods, become fragmented, forming parts of collections, in time, becoming indistinguishable from the earth beneath the ground or dispersed as ashes above. In death, the outer membrane that delineates a body from other bodies, or that which is not body, is eliminated. In addition, this physical merging of one body with multiple species of bodies is mirrored in the social and political processes of the mythologising of the dead as instruments for the creation of collective identities, be they national, ethnic, ideological or other.

McCllland and Cerezo-Román discuss some of these themes in relation to a project they worked on in 2010 as consultants for the excavation of Alameda-Stone Cemetery, a large historic cemetery that once existed in downtown Tucson, Arizona. They use the project to 'show how individual and community identities are formed, neglected, transformed, and reconstructed in a large multicultural burial assemblage' (40). The cemetery was in use between 1862 and 1875 and, housed the remains of Native American, Hispanic, African American and Euro-American bodies;<sup>5</sup> it also had a special military section.

The period in which the cemetery was operational was characterised by social change. Military garrisons moved into an area previously occupied predominantly by Hispanic residents. By 1860, despite being a minority of the population, white military personnel owned 90 per cent of the land in the area, and the Hispanic

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5 Categories as named by the authors.

community were pushed out to the southern edges of the city. In 1875, in anticipation of the construction of a railroad, the cemetery was closed to new burials and fell into disrepair. Many tombstones were destroyed, with reports of open graves containing visibly decomposing bodies. Despite petitions from residents, the city later sold the land to private landowners, signifying disregard for those who founded the city and a will to erase the traces of their displacement.

In the early 2000s, when a large construction was planned for the site, exhumations were undertaken. In discussion with stakeholders from different racial/cultural groups representing the descendants of the deceased, it was agreed that reburials would take place according to the customs of the different groups involved. The lack of cemetery records meant that osteologists had to be brought in to determine the ethnicity and ancestry of the remains.

It was possible to estimate the cultural affinity of about half of the skeletons, and these were assigned as Native American, Hispanic, African American or Euro-American. Some skeletons were categorised as having 'multiple affinities' and others as 'culturally unidentifiable'. The authors cite two cases where individual personhood was osteologically constructed through markers that went beyond purely ethnic categories, but these were not taken to be of primacy in the investigations.

Most of the remains were then reinterred at the All Faiths Memorial Park, on the outskirts of Tucson,<sup>6</sup> an expansive landscape filled with white pebbles and no gravestones. Despite the work done to construct collective identities based on ethnic distinctions, the Memorial Park redoes the work of subsuming individuals into a national identity, imagined as a melting pot of the nation's founders, thus flattening the historical specificities of land dispossession.

Thus, by following the story of a single cemetery, McClelland and Cerezo-Román show how the intricate political machinations of a place can be traced through time and how human remains come to embody socialities of the living. Categories of individual and collective have long been used to further nefarious political agendas that in traditional Western ideologies tend to exist in a hierarchical relationship. As McClelland and Cerezo-Román point out, in the West, conceptions of the *individual* as egocentric, bounded and autonomous are ascribed to personhood, while non-Western people are constructed as *dividual*: sociocentric, 'indivisible units; who are more relational and interdependent (41)'.

In Chapter 10 of the volume, Nina Nordström continues this discussion of the individual and the collective through the lens of time, explaining how the bodies of the ancient dead are ascribed meanings related to collectives, whereas the recent dead are afforded individual identities. The ancient dead are thus more easily mobilised as tools in the deployment of political ideologies. Only in the cases where ancient bodies are exceptionally well preserved do they become individualised through narrations in museums. Nordström shows that, by tracking the histories of the display, scientific

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6 Importantly, those identified as Native American were sent to ancestral land for burial, while those identified as members of the military were reburied in a historical Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Sierra Vista, Arizona, regardless of race, class, etc.

analysis and interpretation of such bodies, one can map political shifts through time and space. As she puts it, 'the authenticity of human remains ... may be of more importance in affirming modern senses of identity, place and ontological security rather than simply as a means of presenting the past' (208).

Nordström cites the example of a Mesolithic skeleton discovered in Sweden in 1939. Because the skeleton was found with hunting tools, the remains were believed to be of a male (despite its small frame). In 1969, scientists revisited the remains and found that the skeleton was in fact that of a woman. At first it was suggested that she had been murdered and that the tools were murder weapons. But, later it was discovered that she was actually a fisherwoman who had borne many children. In the 1970s, she became a strong role model for Swedish women, symbolising the status of women through the ages (210).

Rather than offer summaries of all 20 chapters in this densely populated volume, I zoomed in on debates to which I am most keenly drawn. Another reviewer might take a completely different route through the chapters, focusing, for example, on notions of museum display and public perception. I leave this to readers to explore for themselves. The vignettes cited illustrate that the practice of digging up dead bodies (and reburying, displaying or researching them) elicits contemplations on some of the most human of concerns: time, memory, mortality and the stories we develop to make sense of our place in the world.

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