

Ewa Domanska

Dehumanisation Through Decomposition

The Force of Law¹

“[C]arbon is the key element of living substance. [T]his instantaneous work *a tre* – of the carbon dioxide, the light, and the vegetal greenery – has not yet been described in definitive terms [...]. [A]nd yet this refined, minute, and quick-witted chemistry was ‘invented’ two or three billion years ago by our silent sisters, the plants [...]. ‘Such is life,’ although rarely is it described in this manner: an inserting itself, a drawing off to its advantage, a parasitizing of the downward course of energy, from its noble solar form to the degraded one of low temperature heat. In this downward course, which leads to equilibrium and thus death, life draws a bend and nests in it.

Our atom is again carbon dioxide [...].”

Primo Levi, Carbon²

“Soil systems process cadavers as ‘just’ another form of organic matter; it is the human perspective that makes them a particularly special form of such material.”

David Barclay, Lorna A. Dawson, et al., Soils in Forensic Science³

In this article, I will argue that the forensic turn in contemporary humanities has contributed to the shift towards a more ontological and empirical approach to the pasts and realities that constitute its objects of research. The lexicon of forensics, however, offers a prescriptive rather than neutral set of descriptive concepts. It thus constructs a particular vision of reality, namely a dystopia ruled by the force (or rather violence) of law.

1 This article is part of the forthcoming book *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała* [Necros: Introduction to an Ontology of the Dead Body]. The project is funded by the Polish National Science Centre (NCN: Narodowe Centrum Nauki), funding award number DEC-2013/11IB/HS3/02075.

2 Primo Levi, Carbon, in: Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, Raymond Rosenthal, New York 1994, 227 and 230..

3 A. David Barclay/Lorna A. Dawson/et al., *Soils in Forensic Science. Underground Meets Underworld*, in: Karl Ritz/Lorna Dawson/David Miller (ed.), *Criminal and Environmental Soil Forensics*, Berlin 2009, 501-513, here 507.

Despite the negative impact that the popularisation of knowledge of investigative techniques has had on social awareness (through the TV series *CSI*, for example), the understanding of human remains (*corpus delicti*) that taphonomy (the study of the posthumous experience of organic remains) offers can prove inspiring. The ecology of decomposition enables an approach to the ontological status of the dead body that differs from the humanistic/hermeneutic tradition, seeing it instead as a multispecies form of life and an organic habitat, which in turn leads to questions of what it means to be human in a non-human or post-human (neco)environment. I draw on these insights here to explore one of the fundamental questions in research on genocide and mass killings – the matter of dehumanisation as an essential element in such murders. I will show how our understanding of dehumanisation can be transformed if the focus of the question is shifted away from the sphere of culture to the biological processes occurring at burial sites, thus exploring the problem in the context of relations between human and non-human actors. Caroline Sturdy Colls' book *Holocaust Archaeologies* is just one example of how genocide studies can benefit from approaches that combine humanities and forensic science.

Outlining her approach in *Holocaust Archaeologies: Approaches and Future Directions*, a book that is exceptionally important and potentially transformative for Holocaust studies, Caroline Sturdy Colls writes:

“Drawing on the latest developments in archaeology, in particular forensic archaeology, it is now possible to locate, record, analyse and (re-)present the above- and below-ground evidence that lies within Holocaust landscapes. [...] This book will explore how new approaches to forensic and archaeological investigation will help to reveal this evidence.”⁴

For Sturdy Colls, the archaeology of the Holocaust is principally an investigative discipline where all the traces of the past are considered as evidence of a crime. It thus follows the well-known principle introduced by Dr Edmond Locard (1877–1966) in his classic work in forensic science, whereby “every contact leaves a trace”. The role of the archaeologist is to locate, identify and interpret such traces. This remains the case in Colls' work, with its central premise that “the Holocaust [...] was, and still is, a crime as well as a historical event”.⁵ *Holocaust Archaeologies* repeats regularly, almost as if it were a mantra, the statement that “the sites of the Holocaust are also crime scenes”.⁶ It is for this reason that “[e]xcavation of mass or individual graves is not just about finding human remains but rather it is about examining the scene of a crime”.⁷ In this context, according to Sturdy Colls, the archaeologist becomes an expert not only in the field of

material objects but also on the subject of the landscape and its anthropogenic transformations.⁸ The landscape, understood as both a site and also a crime scene, becomes an essential research concept, with the focus of such investigations being the changes that have affected the landscape as a result of the construction of roads, camps and brick-works, forest clearances and the establishment of gardens, as well as the changes affecting the soil and flora following the decomposition of organic remains. The landscape is thus understood as an assemblage comprising various traces that reveal the complexity of the crimes, the preparations involved, and how they were carried out and effaced.⁹

Forensic archaeology, coupled with the newest methods in forensic science, has become an essential (if not *the* fundamental) element of Holocaust studies. Since, however, the sites of mass killing are also sacred spaces, Sturdy Colls respects religious rules and promotes non-invasive methods of investigating such locations.¹⁰ “In the author's opinion,” she writes, “it is imperative that these beliefs are respected.”¹¹ (She is referring here to the Jewish *Halacha*; E. D.) Sturdy Colls also strongly emphasises the legitimacy and importance of conducting research linking the humanities with natural sciences, as forensic science does. Information acquired in the course of archaeological investigation into the transformation of the landscape as a result of the crimes committed and their subsequent effects, the remnants of camp buildings and graves, all supplement and at the same time challenge historical narratives and witness testimonies. Archaeology, in Sturdy Colls' view, should both complement and supplement the history of this period.¹²

I will treat these extracts from Caroline Sturdy Colls' study as a basis for further investigation, since her work enables the exploration of some fundamental issues, namely:

1. the influence of the current forensic turn in the humanities on research, including the potentials and dangers that emerge from the “forensicisation” (and “criminalisation”) of research (and also of social life);
2. the related shift in focus away from witness testimony to evidence;
3. the place of human remains in taphonomy and the inspiration that can be drawn from this particular approach, which considers human remains as organic material within nature's carbon cycle; and
4. the transformation of the concept of dehumanisation that results from such investigations.

As a researcher interested in various ways of understanding the past and multiple modes of knowledge about the past (please note that I am deliberately avoiding the term

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4 and 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 78. Further on in the book she writes: “In the future, as technology continues to develop, it is also hoped that more efforts will be made to identify Holocaust victims” (193). This, however, seems to contradict the declaration cited above.

¹² *Ibid.*, 326 and 343.

⁴ Caroline Sturdy Colls, *Holocaust Archaeologies. Approaches and Future Directions*, New York 2015, 5.

⁵ Sturdy Colls, *Holocaust Archaeologies*, 10; see also 149.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 199; see also 265 and 266.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 189; see also 228.

'history'), I locate my current investigations in the context of processes related to the 'naturalisation' and ecologisation of the humanities and social sciences that began in the 1990s. These processes have become evident, on the one hand, in the growing popularity of the natural sciences (particularly biology and the life sciences), based on 'solid' empirical data and also big data, in the return to applying model-based thinking, and in the tendency to formulate rules. On the other hand, this shift from culture to nature is also evident in the non-dualistic approach to relations between culture and nature, the human and non-human, the living and the dead, the humanistic and the natural, as well as between the West and 'the rest'. As a researcher positioned in the 'here and now', I am concerned by new cases of mass killing, terrorist attacks and growing poverty, as well as by the ecological crisis, the effects of climate change and the extinction of species.

Observing these phenomena, at a certain point I realised that the humanities and social sciences offered me neither answers nor the adequate heuristic tools for exploring these questions in a satisfactory manner. As a historian trained in the climate of post-modern culturalism, I am now trying to unlearn cultural determinism. When constructing knowledge of the past, I try to reconceive the role of the human being as an element of the natural environment, affected by changes, while at the same time causing them. In doing so, I try to explore in my research questions that will enable (and indeed demand) the combination of humanities-based reflection with the life sciences and natural sciences. My research thus aims to contribute to a future-oriented knowledge of the past that is post- or non-anthropocentric, post-Eurocentric, and post-secular.

Humanitas comes from the Latin *humando*, meaning "burying"

In his 1744 work *New Science*, Giambattista Vico wrote that there are three principle customs upon which human civilisation is based – religion, marriage and burial of the dead. He argued that adherence to these customs protected humanity from becoming animals. Following the Italian thinker's ideas, the well-known African-American philosopher, writer and activist Cornel West considered the role of intellectuals in the humanities, writing:

"I take quite seriously paragraph twelve of Vico's *The New Science*, where he says that 'humanities' is derived from *humanitas*. That comes from the Latin *humando*, meaning 'burying'. Thus, to be in the humanities means to begin with the mass bodies, buried, that we have to come to terms with."¹³

¹³ Cornel West, Chekhov, Coltrane and Democracy, in: *The Cornel West Reader*, New York 1999, 551-563, here 551.

This article has no intention of considering the politics of the dead body and the rights of the dead in relation to the law, with these rights being a result of recognising that the dead either are or are not the property of the living. I will consider West's statement literally but place it in a different context and – as a researcher operating principally in the realm of the humanities – will attempt to come to terms with the ubiquity of remains. We live in a world in which death, after all, faces discrimination. By discrimination I mean the particular privilege granted living beings while at the same time marginalising that which we consider non-living or dead. In light of this, I am particularly interested in the status of non-humans, and especially the condition of those forms of existence that were once human but are now non-human remains.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold noted that:

"[What] we know [...] from ethnography, is that people do not always agree about what is alive and what is not, and that even when they do agree it might be for entirely different reasons. I am also sure, again because we know it from ethnography, that people do not universally discriminate between the categories of living and non-living things. This is because for many people, life is not an attribute of things at all. That is to say, it does not emanate from a world that already exists, populated by objects-as-such, but is rather immanent in the very process of that world's continual generation or coming-into-being."¹⁴

With reference to Ingold's remarks, which reflect the contemporary interest in new animism, new materialism, and new vitalism, I believe that the forensic turn should be considered alongside other turns occurring in humanities today, such as the ontological, empirical, practical turn, relational turn, ecological turn, planetary (or/and cosmic), geologic turn, the turn to the posthuman or/and non-human, the species turn, animal turn, turn to plants, (re)turn to things, animic and animistic turn, complexity turn, cognitive turn, neurological turn (turn to affect), and the postsecular turn. Given the sheer number of turns in the humanities over the course of the past two decades, the very concept of the turn has lost its critical edge and become inoperative. It seems that both the humanities and natural sciences are facing a common "turning point" in the history of their development, and because of this I would rather speak of a paradigm shift than of turns. Each time we encounter a concept featuring one of the prefixes *bio-*, *neuro-*, *eco-*, *geo-*, *techno-*, or *zoo-*, we are given a signal that we are entering the realm of a new paradigm. I would also add *necro-* to this list of prefixes. Some of the central questions I explore in this regard are: When humanities scholars make a turn towards the forensic (and indeed towards research that is accompanied by the above-mentioned prefixes), what are they actually turning towards and what constitutes the basis of such turns (i.e.

¹⁴ Tim Ingold, Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought, in: *Ethnos. Journal of Anthropology*, (2006) 1, 9-20, here 10.

what are they turning away from)? What are they looking for? I am particularly interested in how the forensic turn (and the other turns listed above) influence research in the humanities and social sciences. How can Holocaust and genocide studies be transformed? How does this turn change our understanding of academic research as a particular way of organising, constructing and transmitting knowledge?

In this article, I consider forensic science as a discursive laboratory in which exploration of the ontology of the dead body will enable me to speculate on the subject of the 'near future' while considering the question of multispecies collectives, relations between human and nonhuman life forms, the issue of necrosymbiosis¹⁵ and necrosymbiotic relations.

Dehumanisation through decomposition

Many years ago, when I first became interested in 'dead body studies', I focused primarily on the question of the 'politics of the dead body'. Over the course of many years' work on the ontology of the dead body, I came to understand that with its hermeneutic approach and mistrust of 'hard science', the humanities restricts the research potential generated by considering the status and various forms of remains. I thus began positioning my thought in the context of a broadly understood eco-humanities that invites investigations in the realm of 'radical interdisciplinarity', linking the humanities and natural sciences.

The interpretive framework offered by radical interdisciplinarity, combined with inspiration drawn from the forensic turn, shifted my interest to two related processes that maintain life in different ecosystems, namely photosynthesis and decomposition. A term familiar to all forensic scientists, decomposition is used here in a positive sense to mean an essential process that generates energy and nutrients crucial to sustaining life. Nonorganic matter would be useless without decomposition, and the effectiveness of photosynthesis would also be disrupted, meaning the system would cease to exist. Thus, the continued balance of an ecosystem depends on its ability to decompose dead fragments. As a result of decomposition, carbon compounds (the element that serves as the foundation for all forms of life on Earth) are reused as building materials for new forms of life (this is the natural carbon cycle).¹⁶ I became aware of this when considering the works of biologists and life scientists, along with various texts by forensic scientists.

¹⁵ Unlike Christopher W. Smithmyer, who writes about necrosymbiosis in the context of political conflicts, I am interested not in the collapse of symbiotic relations but rather in the fact that, from the perspective of organic life, remains are a linking element that mixes species and enables the formation of symbiotic relations between organisms. Christopher W. Smithmyer, Necrosymbiosis, in: *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* (2009) 3, 527-543.

¹⁶ See Kathiann Kowalski, Recycling the Dead, in: *Science News for Students*, 27 September 2014, <https://student.societyforscience.org/article/recycling-dead> (6 June 2015).

For me, as a historian and humanities scholar accustomed to speaking of human beings in socio-cultural terms, publications on the decomposition of the human body in forensic terms are at once shocking and inspiring. A quote from the 2013 article *Human Decomposition Ecology and Postmortem Microbiology* by Franklin E. Damann and David O. Carter illustrates the difference between the two discourses:

"In general terms of organic decomposition, biological modification in the terrestrial landscape is accomplished primarily by edaphic fungi and bacteria. Their activity accounts for approximately 90% of the mobilization of carbon and nitrogen in an ecosystem (Swift et al. 1979); in fact, *decomposition is second only to photosynthesis for the cycling of nutrients and energy* (McGuire and Treseder 2010). It is no wonder that 'microbes are essential in the decay and recycling of materials important to life (e.g., carbon and nitrogen) by transforming the detritus of human society' (Prostgate 2000:244).

Carter et al. (2007) explored the notion of a corpse as a rich source of nutrients and energy. In doing so, they reported on the contribution that carcass decomposition has on the terrestrial landscape by creating a heterogeneous hub of activity marked by an increase in carbon, nitrogen, and water (Carter et al. 2007). They suggested that this hub of activity is its own localized ecosystem that is bound in both time and space. [emphasis added; E. D.]"¹⁷

I admit that such texts freed me of my humanistic naivety. The more taphonomy textbooks I read (particularly forensic taphonomy), the more I understood that the forensic turn offers contemporary humanities an exceptionally useful (and indeed essential) research perspective. Further, it provides a conceptual platform that enables the construction of a complementary, biohumanities-based approach, both to the phenomenon that is the human being and to the non-human, which is to say the life and death of both the organic and inorganic, the environment and the collective.

It might be worth asking at this juncture why, in considering the "forensic turn in Holocaust studies", I choose to engage in the *affirmation* of natural decomposition processes of human remains rather than explore the typical questions in this context involving the discovery and identification of mass graves. The answer is that the shift in perspective proposed here is connected to the question of dehumanisation.

In the case of the Holocaust (and other genocides and mass killings), dehumanisation and depersonalisation are considered essential preconditions for mass murder to occur. It is indeed significantly easier to kill a human being who has been stripped of dignity, a name, and property, who has been termed a rat, louse or cockroach, and turned into an animal guided exclusively by a survival instinct. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of human-

¹⁷ Franklin E. Damann/David O. Carter, *Human Decomposition Ecology and Postmortem Microbiology*, in: James Pokines/Steven A. Symes (ed.), *Forensic Taphonomy*, Boca Raton/Florida 2013, 37-50, here 38.

ity is its refusal to submit the body of the dead to the natural order. However, it is almost ironic that when a dead body is incorporated into the underground realm of a multispecies collective, yet another process of dehumanisation transpires – namely the body’s reduction to matter of organic origins. In such cases, dehumanisation becomes an essential condition of existence in a new environment. While dehumanisation in the symbolic world of culture denotes exclusion from the dominant, human collective, in an organic multispecies environment it means inclusion into a much broader collective of beings, of which only some are post-human in the sense that they were once human. The dehumanisation of the dead body (when considered as a post-human existence) is, I repeat, the *sine qua non* of its incorporation into a multispecies collective. This enables an understanding of community (and the social) as an organic and symbiotic collective comprising not only living human beings and nonhumans, but also dead beings that exist not only in various spheres (some on or above the ground, some below it), but also continuously co-mingle with each other. Following soil scientists, we could call this form of existence humus, understood as the soil element that emerges from the decomposition of organic matter and which “has been used and transformed by many different soil organisms”.¹⁸ We should also remember that “the origins of the materials after formation of humus cannot be recognised”.¹⁹ Whether we are able to treat humus as a specific figuration of a collective form of subjectivity (and how to do so) remains a question for future research. It cannot be ruled out that this would enable the emergence of an alternative to the very concept of the subject/person. Nevertheless, processes of transhumanation (becoming *humus*) provide me with a certain foundation for further research.²⁰

I would like to repeat the findings of the argument so far: while above-ground dehumanisation of one human being by representatives of the same species is unambiguously negative and requires the transformation of humans into non-humans, underground dehumanisation, which transforms humans into post-humans, is a positive process from the ecological and post-anthropocentric perspective, since it enables thinking about humanity and multispecies collectives based upon and dependent upon a degree of organic commingling that takes a completely different form. In this context, dehu-

18 Alexandra Bot/José Benites, The Importance of Soil Organic Matter. Key to Drought-Resistant Soil and Sustained Food Production (=FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations] Soil Bulletin 80), Rome 2005, 8.

19 Bot/Benites, The Importance, 75.

20 Transhumanation comes from the Latin *trans-* + *humus* (meaning soil, country, and also dust), whereas here it is employed to mean a form of “biotransformation”, i.e. a shift in the subjectivity of remains and their ontological status, which occurs as a result of the decomposition processes affecting organic remains. This gives the dead body a different ontological status, ranging from the neomort through the corpse (a body that has undergone some degree of rotting), as well as various forms of preserving the dead body (plastinated bodies, mummies and bog-bodies), to the skeleton, bones, ashes, and cinders, as well as the preservation of remains in the form of biopresence (transplanting human DNA into a tree), for example, or LifeGem (a synthetic diamond made of human ashes).

manisation is not equivalent to degradation or reduction. Dehumanisation through decomposition can become a site for developing new ways of thinking about the future of multispecies collectives where dehumanisation becomes an essential condition of the process of inclusion described here.

In light of the above, forensic science – and taphonomy in particular – that focuses strictly on processes of decomposition becomes central to the latest research in human and social sciences. It is also an essential element of the complementary biohumanities-based approach to research into the question of the dead body and human remains. Taphonomy (from *taphos*, meaning grave, and *nomos*, meaning law) is the study of laws governing the behaviour of organic remains and was defined in the 1940s by Russian scientist Ivan Efremov. “It is the study of the transition of organic remains from the biosphere into the lithosphere or the process of ‘fossilisation’ from death to diagnosis.”²¹ As a transdisciplinary field of knowledge connected to such related disciplines as paleoecology, stratigraphy and geology, taphonomy is a natural science classed as a branch of palaeontology and ecology. Since it also began exploring “the history of Earth and its Life as they are recorded in the rocks”,²² it could also be argued, as taphonomists would agree, that it is a historical science in a very strict sense of the term. Historians tend to have a rather narrow understanding of what constitutes history, restricting themselves to a definition centred on events primarily connected to a broadly understood sphere of culture and recorded in documentary sources. However, given historians’ growing interest in Big History, planetary history, deep history and multispecies history, taphonomy (understood as a historical science) seems a useful approach to researching human remains (preserved in various forms) as traces of the past. Furthermore, since the taphonomic framework creates models, formulates laws, and searches for patterns (such as typical modes of decomposition of the human body or “patterns of mortuary practice associated with genocide”²³), perhaps this field could also help rehabilitate the natural sciences (in the eyes of the “soft” interpretative humanities) while also forming what might be an important component of contemporary research on the past. The search for information from sources proceeds in a similar manner in both cases, based as it is on tracing history backwards – from the source, i.e. human remains (which are an outcome of a past event), to the cause of that event, i.e. the moment of death.

I would therefore argue that taphonomy, as a discipline of the forensic sciences, is particularly important in identifying mass graves, while it could also be essential to

21 Ronald E. Martin, *Taphonomy. A Process Approach*, Oxford 1999, 1.

22 Martin, *Taphonomy*, 5.

23 Debra Komar, Patterns of Mortuary Practice Associated with Genocide. Implications for Archaeological Research, in: *Current Anthropology*, (2008) 1, 123-133. Sturdy Colls also writes of “patterns of disposal,” 283. Such research is becoming particularly important in comparative perspectives on genocide and mass killings.

research conducted in the spheres of environmental and multispecies Holocaust history. New fields of research – such as forensic entomology, gravesoil ecology,²⁴ thanatomicrobiome and necrobiome studies,²⁵ and forensic mycology²⁶ – could prove useful in constructing a new conceptual apparatus, while extending and reconceptualising the interpretive frameworks in Holocaust studies.

“There is nothing outside the law”

Even before I began discussing the forensic turn, I already considered myself a potential suspect. This unpleasant sensation led to me becoming even more interested in the consequences of this turn than in exploring what it actually is. Does the forensic turn transform space into potential crime scenes and citizens into potential criminals? I believe that the particular jargon of forensic science – murder, crime scene, evidence (clues, traces and exhibits), trace evidence, autopsies, *corpus delicti*, genetic material, DNA analysis, contamination, pathology, ballistics, toxicology, serology, expert witnesses, witnesses, criminal law, etc. – cannot be considered as a set of neutral descriptive terms. As I argue, they concern ontology rather than epistemology. They are normative, prescriptive concepts that constitute categories of behaviour rather than knowledge. Furthermore, they create a particular vision of reality – that of a dystopia governed by the force (or, rather, violence) of law.

I cannot avoid citing at this point Giorgio Agamben who, I believe, has accurately diagnosed the situation in his observation that:

24 “Gravesoil ecology and the ecology of other ephemeral resource patches (Blaustein and Schwartz 2001; Finn 2001; De Meester et al. 2005) has the potential to become a key area of study in terms of the cycling of carbon and nutrients, soil organic matter formation and the relationship between biodiversity and ecosystem function.” David O. Carter/David Yellowlees/Mark Tibbett, *Cadaver Decomposition in Terrestrial Ecosystems*, in: *Naturwissenschaften* (2007) 1, 12-24, here 20. “A dead mammal (i.e. cadaver) is a high quality resource (narrow carbon:nitrogen ratio, high water content) that releases an intense, localised pulse of carbon and nutrients into the soil upon decomposition. [...] Cadaveric materials are rapidly introduced to below-ground floral and faunal communities, which results in the formation of a highly concentrated island of fertility, or cadaver decomposition island (CDI). CDIs are associated with increased soil microbial biomass, microbial activity (C mineralisation), and nematode abundance. Each CDI is an ephemeral natural disturbance that, in addition to releasing energy and nutrients to the wider ecosystem, acts as a hub by receiving these materials in the form of dead insects, exuvia, and puparia, fecal matter (from scavengers, grazers and predators), and feathers (from avian scavengers and predators). As such, CDIs contribute to landscape heterogeneity. Furthermore, CDIs are a specialised habitat for a number of flies, beetles, and pioneer vegetation, which enhances biodiversity in terrestrial ecosystems.” Fragments from the abstract, *Ibid.*, 12.

25 In August 2014, the criminologist Gulnaz Javan of Alabama State University in Montgomery and his collaborators published the first study of the microbiome of a grave (*thanatomicrobiome*).

26 For more on mushrooms as useful tools in forensic investigation, see D.L. Hawksworth/P.E. Wiltshire, *Forensic mycology. The use of fungi in criminal investigations*, in: *Forensic Science International*, (2011) 206, 1-11, 2; Masahito Hitosugia/Kiyoshi Ishiib/Takashi Yaguchic/et al., *Fungi can be a useful forensic tool*, in: *Legal Medicine* (2006) 4, 240-242.

“One of the theses of the present inquiry is that in our age, the state of exception comes more and more to the foreground as the fundamental political structure and ultimately begins to become the rule. When our age tried to grant the unlocalizable a permanent and visible localization, the result was the concentration camp. The camp – and not the prison – is the space that corresponds to this ordinary structure of the *nomos*. This is shown, among other things, by the fact that while prison law only constitutes a particular sphere of penal law and is not outside the normal order, the juridical constellation that guides the camp is (as we shall see) martial law and the state of siege. [...] [W]hat is happening in ex-Yugoslavia and, more generally, what is happening in the processes of dissolution of traditional State organisms in Eastern Europe should be viewed not as a reemergence of the natural state of struggle of all against all – which functions as a prelude to new social contracts and new national and State localizations but rather as *the coming to light of the state of exception as the permanent structure of juridico-political de-localization and dis-location*. Political organization is not regressing toward outdated forms; rather, premonitory events are, like bloody masses, announcing the new *nomos* of the earth, which (if its grounding principle is not called into question) will soon extend itself over the entire planet.”²⁷

These considerations led Agamben to the oft-cited statement that “The camp [...] is the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet”.²⁸ Taken together with the forensic turn that accompanies us today, his diagnoses lead us into the realm of legal determinism. It would indeed seem that “there is nothing outside the law”.²⁹ Violence and the law: science based on the one hand on law and on religion on the other (if we add the “post-secular turn”) forms the contours of the new global order.

Jakub Muchowski has recently shown that the realism employed in historical narratives provides a certain system of safeguards. Furthermore, “the opinion that historical representations constitute a realistic image of reality and show us the limits of its potential to be transformed makes history one criterion of projects for social change.”³⁰ It could therefore be claimed that history defines the potential of changes. It follows that

27 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford 1998, 20 and 38.

28 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 176. Chapter 7 of *Homo Sacer* is titled “The Camp as the ‘nomos’ of the Modern”.

29 *Ibid.*, 29.

30 Jakub Muchowski, *Polityka pisarstwa historycznego. Refleksja teoretyczna Haydena White’a [The Politics of Historical Writing. Hayden White’s Theoretical Reflections]*, Warsaw/Toruń 2015, 165-166. Muchowski draws inspiration from Roland Barthes’s essay *Writing and the Novel* in which Barthes reflects upon using the simple past tense or third person as characteristics of novel writing. This representational strategy is also proper to history. It creates an effect of familiarity and credibility of represented events while at the same time giving readers a sense of security as it shows the past as somehow closed and well-defined. Barthes writes that “The narrative past is therefore a part of a security system for Belles-Lettres.” Roland Barthes, *Writing and the Novel*, in: *Barthes, Writing Degree Zero*, New York 1981, 29-40, here 32.

modification of the modes of representing the past can expand the potential of future transformations. Traditional representations of the past (the realist narrative typical of nineteenth-century novels) was not capable of constructing a responsible utopia (the collectively-imagined social “horizon of expectations”). It is for this reason that the construction and practice of unconventional representations of the past – those that contravene the rules governing traditional modes of researching and depicting it – are so important.

When, however, we observe the forensic turn – which is attracting the attention of scholars in both the human and the social sciences – and note the increasing occurrence of the specific terminology of this discipline’s discourse in historical narratives, we become aware of the fact that it is not the old realist discourse that is shaping worldviews and the frames of potential social changes, but a particular fantasy of science and technology (the forensic imaginary being one component of this) presented both by academic discourse and by popular culture in the form of “sci-fi forensic realism”. Today’s science-fiction literature does not offer fictional, non-realistic visions of the future but is instead increasingly becoming a field of knowledge complementing science and technology studies (STS) and the sciences themselves. As Tom Idema has recently noted, it is becoming more and more common for “science fiction, and by extension literature and arts [to] be read not merely as a critical commentary on biotechnoscience, but as a mode of thinking with science about the future of (human) life”.³¹

Consequently, my observation is this: before we enthusiastically embrace the forensic turn in the humanities and social sciences, let us first foresee its potential consequences. Undoubtedly, forensics offers a conceptual platform for considering, for example, what it means to be human, the meaning of life and the meaning of collectivity. It also allows us to construct a bridge between the (natural) sciences and the humanities. We should, however, be aware that for many researchers, the forensic turn constitutes “a turn away from the human witness and towards objects that speak and testify”³² and/or “normalising exhumations as a method of dealing with human remains en masse”.³³ Such state-

31 Tom Idema, *Toward a Minor Science Fiction. Literature, Science, and the Shock of the Biophysical*, in: *Configurations*, (2015) 1, 35-59, here 38.

32 “Critics speak of a forensic aesthetic and some even go so far as to announce a ‘forensic turn’, meaning a turn away from the human witness and towards objects that speak and testify.” Passage from the abstract of the lecture series titled *Regarding Objects: A Survey of the Forensic Turn*. Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2015, <http://matteopasquinelli.com/forensic-turn/> (14 May 2015). “It is better to have one piece of forensic evidence than ten eye witnesses.” *CSI*, episode titled: *Sex, Lies and Larvae* (2000).

33 “The book argues that the emergence of new technologies to facilitate the identification of dead bodies has led to a ‘forensic turn’, normalising exhumations as a method of dealing with human remains en masse.” Description of: Elisabeth Anstett/Jean-Marc Dreyfus (ed.), *Human Remains and Identification. Mass Violence, Genocide and the ‘Forensic Turn’*, Manchester 2015. <http://www.bookendsandbeginnings.com/book/9780719097560> (14 May 2015). Lore Colaert, *Excavating a Hidden Past. The Forensic Turn in Spain’s Collective Memory*, in: Maria Theresia Starzmann/John Roby (ed.), *Excavating Memory. Sites of Remembering and Forgetting*, Gainesville 2016, 336-356.

ments suggest that it is worth viewing this turn from a broader perspective, so that it is perceived as a particular vision of the future. It is only then that we will see that there is also a dark side to it.

The CSI Effect

“Contemporary popular culture is experiencing a forensic turn.” This is the opening statement in Lindsay Steenberg’s interesting book *Forensic Science in Contemporary American Popular Culture*.³⁴ Indeed, popular culture is saturated with various images of places and gadgets linked to forensics: crime scenes, interrogation rooms, witnesses, investigators, corpses, clinics, mortuaries, prosectoria, post-mortems (including futuristic virtual autopsies), medical instruments used in autopsies, DNA testing, and analyses of microslides carried out in modern laboratories using equipment that seems to have come from another world. Steenberg is right when she argues that audiences watching television series such as *CSI* or *Bones* experience not only the voyeuristic pleasure of the forensic spectacle: they are also seduced by the illusion of participating in what they are watching and thus are of the impression that they are leading the investigation, as if unintentionally becoming an expert in this highly ‘attractive’ field.³⁵

Such series are, however, far removed from typical entertainment. Intentionally or not, they reproduce a reactionary ‘politics of fear’ and danger. The citizen is made aware that s/he is constantly under threat, surrounded by various crimes and criminal offences, with only law and justice capable of providing protection. The citizen also becomes a potential criminal who is consistently told that the advanced technologies used to collect and analyse criminal evidence will sooner or later lead investigative authorities to uncover the crime that s/he has committed, while any attempt to escape will not prevent her/him from being caught and sentenced. As Mark Seltzer rightly notes:

“The forensic way of seeing pathologizes, or criminalizes, public space. [...] Forensic realism couples publicness and crime in a generalized fantasy of surveillance. It posits the everyday openness of every body to detection and places every area of urban life under suspicion. It operates, that is to say, in the film noir idiom of an ‘ecology of fear’: the urban scene as crime scene.”³⁶

34 Lindsay Steenberg, *Forensic Science in Contemporary American Popular Culture. Gender, Crime and Science*, New York 2013, 1.

35 Steenberg also declares that the phenomenon is exhausted (which is not to say that it is disappearing from American culture), noting that “we are living in a post-forensic mediascape.”; see Steenberg, *Forensic Science*, 6 and 20.

36 Mark Seltzer, *True Crime. Observations on Violence and Modernity*, New York 2011, 151.

The influence of both television series on the public understanding of what constitutes forensic evidence has been so strong that it has been the subject of serious academic research for many years already. Scholars working on this problem have analysed the ways in which such television series influence our perception of justice and how they create faith in technology and science (which ultimately also teaches us that evidence can be deceptive). What is essential to my research here is that *CSI* has contributed to the “geneticisation of contemporary life”, while also contributing to the popularisation of genetic essentialism. The television series have also contributed to the growing interest in human DNA analysis, and to the rising numbers of students taking forensic science courses. The representation of DNA testing on screen is particularly interesting, since it is usually depicted as routine, quick, easy, and highly effective. This perpetuates the stereotypical image of science as objective and rational, while scientists appear as coolly reserved, distant laboratory workers. What thus emerges is a far-reaching phenomenon that researchers have termed “the CSI effect” and the “DNA mystique”.³⁷ It could thus be argued that *CSI* has contributed to the development and dissemination of a dystopian, sci-fi-inspired vision of the future where “there is nothing outside the law”.

In her analysis of *CSI* as an example of what she calls “forensic fiction”, Liv Hausken claims that it represents “a certain normalization of surveillance to everyday life”. *CSI* depicts surveillance “like a second nature, unfelt and unquestioned”.³⁸ Further, Hausken argues that “forensic fiction is fictional forensic science. It is not forensic science fiction: The time is not set in the future, but in contemporary life. Technology is not futuristic, but existing or just-to-be-invented.”³⁹ The techniques applied by forensic science are in fact the technologies of surveillance and, as Hausken argues, emerge as “the main method with which to restore social order”.⁴⁰

37 Barbara L. Ley/Natalie Jankowski/Paul R. Brewer, Investigating CSI. Portrayals of DNA Testing on a Forensic Crime Show and their Potential Effects, in: *Public Understanding of Science* (2012) 1, 51-67, here 52, 59 and 63. The myth of the effectiveness of identification through DNA analyses becomes particularly dangerous in light of researchers’ growing scepticism towards the method; see Daniel Cressey, Forensics specialist discusses a discipline in crisis, in: *Nature* 12 February 2015, doi:10.1038/nature.2015.16870 (14 May 2015).

38 Liv Hausken, Forensic Fiction and the Normalization of Surveillance, in: *Nordicom Review* (2014) 25, 3-16, here 10.

39 *Ibid.*, 3-16, here 6.

40 *Ibid.*, 7 and 9.

Conclusion: Toward Necrosymbiosis

Janet Asimov provided me with much food for thought by stating: “I am NOT going to write about there being too many people alive on planet Earth. [...] There is, however, a teensy problem that is going to get worse. There are also too many DEAD people. Cemeteries are filling up.”⁴¹ On the other hand, however, human and nonhuman remains provide the organic foundations of our planet. According to recent calculations, the total number of people born since the beginning of the human race is estimated to be around 108 billion, of whom almost seven billion are alive today, meaning some 100 billion have died.⁴² These figures highlight the fact that the world we inhabit is built on humic foundations.⁴³ As the taphonomists would of course argue, “the vast majority of bones do not survive [...], or the surface of Earth would be covered in bone”.⁴⁴

Society comprises three components: the dead, the living, and the yet-to-be-born. Looking towards the future of humanity in the context of the boom in technological development, we ought to try to imagine that what is dead could in future become both useful organic and genetic material for those yet to be born, as well as a source of organs, tissues, and bones for the living. The boundaries between what is living and what is dead are thus blurred. Humanity is becoming increasingly dependent upon the dead (bodies) in a way that is rarely considered by historians when they debate (often in metaphorical categories) the relations between past and present generations. In his handbook on historiography *What is History?*, E.H. Carr stated:

“Sir Charles Snow recently wrote of Rutherford that ‘like all scientists he had, almost without thinking what it meant, the future in his bones.’ Good historians, I suspect, whether they think about it or not, have the future in their bones. Besides the question ‘Why?’ the historian also asks the question ‘Whither?’”⁴⁵

41 Janet Asimov, The Dead Body Problem. Humanist Network News, <http://americanhumanist.org/HNN/details/2012-05-the-dead-body-problem> (6 June 2015).

42 Carl Haub, How Many People Have Ever Lived on Earth?, in: *Population Today* (2002) 8. Updated figures available at Haub, How Many People Have Ever Lived on Earth? <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2002/HowManyPeopleHaveEverLivedonEarth.aspx> (7 December 2015). This fact was pointed out by Antoon de Baets, A Declaration of the Responsibilities of Present Generations Toward Past Generations, in: *History and Theory* (2004) 4, 130-164, here 131.

43 See: Robert Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*. Chicago and London 2003, X.

44 James T. Pokines, Introduction, in: Pokines/Symes (ed.), *Manual of Forensic Taphonomy*, 1-17, here 5.

45 Edward H. Carr, *What is history?*, Harmondsworth 1987, 108. Carr paraphrases the words of Charles Percy Snow, making references to his famous 1959 lecture, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. Snow claimed that in his contacts with both physical scientists and literary intellectuals he discovered that they represent two completely different cultures that have almost nothing in common. Troubled by this situation, he attempted to find the causes behind it, noting that the natural sciences were developing more quickly than the humanities, with the reasons for this including the fact that “scientists have the future in their bones”. Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Cultural Revolution*, Cambridge 1959, 11 and 12.

Let us try to connect the ‘two cultures’ (the humanities and the natural sciences) by analysing Carr’s intriguing statement, which in its simplest rendition reads: “historians have the future in their bones”. Of course, a metaphorical reading of this sentence hardly makes it appear illuminating, since it simply suggests that historians possess intuition, as in the English idiom “to feel something in your bones”. Should we attempt a literal reading of the metaphor, however, then we can read the statement thus: the future is located in historians’ bones or bones are historians’ future, or even that bones show historians the future. Reducing the phrase even further, we are left with what is perhaps an even more intriguing idea: “the future is in bones”.

To sum up: bones (and also various other kinds of remains, in the broadest sense of the term – in this case, organic remains) constitute the research material that links the humanities to the natural sciences. They constitute the empirical foundations that integrate various research fields. Were we to prove capable of constructing an integrated ontology of (broadly understood) remains on the basis of philosophical and biological thought, then a completely different dimension in debates both on relations between species and on the future of life on Earth would be opened up. In light of ongoing debates on biopower, biometry, coexistence, and mutual relations of humans and nonhumans, and also on the identification of species, the questions outlined above are of crucial significance. It is for this reason that I argue that it is necessary to problematise the status of the dead body and its posthumous existence not only in relation to the past but also – and indeed above all – in relation to the future.

The forensic turn, which introduces into the humanities ideas stemming from forensic pathology and taphonomy, is of fundamental significance when it comes to the reconceptualisation of the status and condition of human remains. Remaining aware, however, of the historical precedents of the matter of the “industrial” significance and potential use of remains, the idea of the forensic turn, which sanctions and normalises exhumations as a research method, becomes highly problematic for any researcher with an imagination. The naturalisation of thinking about the dead body (in its various forms) and the introduction of the perspective outlined above, which perceives the dead body as organic biomass, is intended to contribute to discussions on the sacralisation of remains, ensuring their protection against desacralisation and utilisation.

Translated by Paul Vickers

Zuzanna Dziuban (ed.)

Mapping the 'Forensic Turn'

Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust
Studies and Beyond

Beiträge des VWI zur Holocaustforschung

Band 5

Herausgegeben vom Wiener Wiesenthal Institut für Holocaust-Studien (VWI)

new academic press, Vienna 2017

Editorial Board des wissenschaftlichen Beirats
Peter Black/Gustavo Corni/Irina Scherbakowa

Gefördert von:



ZukunftsFonds
der Republik Österreich

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

© 2017

new academic press

www.academicpress.at

www.vwi.ac.at

Lektorat: Tim Corbett/Miha Tavcar

Cover: Trial plaster cast of a part of the plan of Crematorium 4 in Auschwitz made for *The Evidence Room*, shown at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale. Based on the book *The Case for Auschwitz* (2002) by Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Evidence Room* was designed by Donald McKay, with Anne Bordeleau conceiving and overseeing the creation of 70 plaster casts of blueprints, drawings, minutes of meetings and letters attesting to the genocidal intention of the Auschwitz gas chambers and crematoria.

Cast: Siobhan Allman, Anna Beznogova, Anne Bordeleau, Anna Longrigg, and Alexander Vilcu.

Photo: Fred Hunsberger.

Special thanks to Robert Jan van Pelt.

Druck und Bindung: Prime Rate, Budapest

Gestaltung: Hans Ljung

ISBN 978-3-7003-2072-2

Zuzanna Dziuban

Introduction. Forensics in the Expanded Field 7

Forensic Fields

Robert Jan van Pelt

A Jack-of-all-Trades in the Witness-Box 39

Eyal Weizman

Violence at the Threshold of Detectability 63

Ewa Domanska

Dehumanisation Through Decomposition and the Force of Law 89

History Making/Memory Making

Claudia Theune

Archaeology at the Sites of National Socialist Terror 107
Research Questions – Sources – Methodology – Insights

Caroline Sturdy Colls

The Archaeology of Cultural Genocide 119
A Forensic Turn in Holocaust Studies?

Rob van der Laarse

Bones Never Lie? 143
Unearthing Europe's Age of Terror in the Age of Memory

Francesco Mazzucchelli

From the "Era of the Witness" to an Era of Traces 169
Memorialisation as a Process of Iconisation?

Politics and the Agency of Dead Bodies

Admir Jugo/Sarah Wagner

Memory Politics and Forensic Practices 195
Exhuming Bosnia and Herzegovina's Missing Persons

Layla Renshaw

The Forensic Gaze 215
Reconstituting Bodies and Objects as Evidence

Małgorzata Wosińska

Turning to the Present

237

A Practical Approach to Human Remains in Comparative Genocide Studies

Zuzanna Dziuban

Between Subjectification and Objectification

261

Theorising Ashes

Beyond the Scientific/Legal Notion of Forensics

Roma Sendyka

Posthuman Memorialisations

291

Memorials After the Forensic Turn

Stephenie Young

The Forensic Imagination

309

Evidence, Art and the Post-Yugoslav Document

Johanne Helbo Bøndergaard

Forensics and Literature After Testimony

329

Bibliography

347

Short Biographies of the Authors

365