



What Lies Beneath: Exploring the Affective Presence & Emotive Materiality of Human Bones

Research Workshop
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Introduction

This two day workshop (4-5/12/2008) will consider the complex relationship between living people and human bones: a relationship which is at once cultural, social, political and, fundamentally, phenomenological, embedded in the sensual, tactile encounter with the material remains of the dead. The workshop is the second stage of a longer-term project being developed by a research group ('the bones collective') based at the University of Edinburgh on the significance of human bones.

What lies beneath

Social scientists have long taken an interest in human bones. They have done so in a variety of ways. Archaeologists and forensic/physical anthropologists have been interested in the form and materiality of bones: their composition, the marks upon them and their emplacement in the earth. Past lives somehow dwell in the substance of these bones and, if they are properly studied, these past lives may become known, right down to the details how people looked, what they ate, what diseases they suffered and injuries they sustained, and even how they, themselves, related to their dead. Social anthropologists, in contrast, have been more interested in the significance that different peoples give to bones and how the significance of the dead relates to the meaningful existence of the living. In this case, the substance of the bones, beyond the mere fact of their material presence (and perhaps not even that), is less important. What is important is how we, the living, interact with, and so give meaning to, the remains of the dead. In proposing a workshop under the name 'What Lies Beneath', we are interested in the meaning of bones and how this meaning varies cross-culturally and through time. Yet in saying this, we also acknowledge that human bones are things-in-themselves, and any study of the social/cultural significance of bones must encompass their physical

being, their affective quality of presence and their emotive materiality. In other words, if the bones of the dead are "richly filled with meaning" (Weingrod 1995: 12), this meaning is not simply bestowed upon them, but also relates intricately to something that inheres in them, and exists, therefore, in the relationship between bones and those who handle, talk or write about them. In recognising bones, and the significance of the materiality of bones, we highlight that they possess a curious quality of presence, for they are, as Howard Williams argues, "intrinsically situated as being both 'person' and 'object'" (2004: 264). So even as we consider bones as things that have meaning only as they are caught up in human transactions and endeavours, this consideration is haunted by the animate personhood, which is imminent within the thing, held in its very form and substance.

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in human remains in academic, public and policy discourses. This has been inspired by two intertwined developments. Firstly, and more theoretically, recent years have witnessed a "material" turn in social and cultural studies. Partly in response to an excess of social constructivism and deconstruction, scholars have been exploring the ways in which socio-cultural understandings of the world are grounded in experiential engagement with the substance of that world, be it our bodies, landscapes or the bones of the dead. This scholarship is exploring notions of presence, affect, memory and agency that work between human subjects and the world of objects, thereby blurring that very distinction. Secondly, within the public sphere, bones have become objects of local and national significance and, accordingly, political contest. From rituals of commemoration in the post-socialist states of Europe, to aboriginal groups in Australia and North America petitioning for the recovery of ancestral remains from museums, to exhumations of mass-graves in the Balkans and Latin America, the remains of the dead have a lively and disquieting presence in modern social and political life. Bones mediate between the present and the past, whether this is a past that is celebrated as national or ethnic heritage, sited in the landscape as ancestors, or repressed and recovered as traumatic histories of violence. This workshop will explore these theoretical questions in a way that is mindful of the current political and social significance of bones. In particular, we wish to focus on the "bones themselves" which are often somewhat overlooked in more deconstructive discussions of the politics of memory and, in so doing, situate this encounter, as well as our own scholarly practice, as a response to the affective presence and emotive materiality of human remains.

The workshop

This approach to the study of human remains is necessarily interdisciplinary. Accordingly, the workshop will be a 'round-the-table' forum for anthropologists, sociologists, artists, archaeologists and museologists to enter into a theoretical conversation, grounded in a close appreciation of specific, empirical, social/cultural histories, across the divisions which normally order our understanding of materiality, memory and affect. The form of the workshop is designed to facilitate this interdisciplinary conversation; promoting an appreciation of the significance of human remains that encompasses both their meanings and materiality. Over two days invited speakers will present their material and ideas allowing ample time for discussions. These presentations will be ordered around two broad themes; "**affective presence**" and "**emotive materiality**". The emphasis will be upon how the living respond to, feel about, make sense of and somehow accommodate (or not) the material presence of the dead. Two eminent academics, Prof. Timothy Ingold, (Aberdeen), and Dr. Dimitri Tsintjilonis (Edinburgh) have agreed to act as discussants to conclude the workshop in the final session. This workshop will be innovative not only in its thematic focus and interdisciplinary nature, but also in its form. Rather than present "papers" the participants will be invited to present "think pieces" which incorporate not only scholarly analysis, but also material artefacts, images and artistic responses to these artefacts. In so doing one of the aims of the workshop is to consider our own responses to the traces of the dead through ongoing processes of engagement, discussion and reflection. Again, the aim is to blur the boundary between subject and object, between things and the ways in which we know and feel things as meaningful, not only theoretically but also in our scholarly practice.

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