

Report of the 'Bones Collective' workshop, 4-5 December 2008

What Lies Beneath: Exploring the affective presence & emotive materiality of human bones

The workshop began with Jeanne Cannizzo and Joan Smith's experiential introduction appropriately entitled *Feeling our way forward*. All the workshop participants were invited to take part in various group exercises involving examining, touching and drawing two specimens of human remains (kindly loaned from Edinburgh School of Art's collections) that were put on display at the centre of two large tables in the sunlit surroundings of the oak-panelled room of the conference centre. It was a particularly appropriate way of beginning our interdisciplinary conversation about the emotive materiality and affective presence of human bones because it challenged all the participants on unexpected emotive, intellectual and practical levels. Grim and sometimes shocked responses to the specimens as the 'remains of dead people' soon turned, under the kindly but firm insistence of the presenters, into critical yet practical demands that we interrogate and complicate our practical and intellectual understandings of what is encompassed by vision and representation, unpacking what seeing and drawing bones really involves. In this process our reflexive engagement with the bones was both sensual and intellectual, emotive yet material, practical yet thoughtful, as we became more deeply sensitised not only to the bones as ambiguous subject/objects, but also as forms, lines, shadows, tones and materials. In turn, we became more aware of the complex entanglement of the practical, emotive and conceptual ways in which we ourselves engage with objects, and bones in particular. Representation became an embodied practice and, in the works of 'art' we created, a collective one, effectively 'breaking the ice' and forging the conceptual and sensual space, and setting an appropriately sensitive yet self-critical tone, for the proceedings of the following two days.

Paola Filippucci's paper 'Mute witnesses: words, things and the dead on the western front' focused on attempts to make the dead 'speak', or to 'speak for' the dead in the case of soldiers fallen in the Great War. It compared such attempts during the war and in its immediate aftermath with aspects of today's engagement with the war dead in the areas of the former Western Front. This engagement has increasingly turned away from the monumentalism of commemoration towards sensual engagement with the detritus of war, emergent in the experiences offered by movement in the war scarred landscape, and tactile engagement with the material objects recovered from it. Filippucci's paper highlighting how the 'mute' quality of objects can trigger imaginations,

experiences and emotions about the dead, particularly in contexts where there is an absence of human remains obliterated by war and materially dispersed within the landscape.

In the following session Christel Mattheeuws's paper also explored connections between the living and the dead by discussing material practices of burial in Central-East Madagascar. Evocatively describing what she offered as the 'affective presence of emotive materials', she outlined how amongst Central-East Malagasy people, ancestors are created and shaped by the wrapping and periodic unwrapping of decomposing, leaking bodies until the dry bones of the deceased remain carefully wrapped in shrouds that catch the spirits of the dead persons during famadihana rituals. This series of second (re) burials – a ritual process that has emerged relatively recently – allows ancestral bodies to be created or become, as spirits are drawn (back) to the shrouded bones by the smells of the foods and feasts captured in the material of the shrouds.

The theme of ancestors was continued after lunch on the first day in Cara Krmpotich's paper "Ancestral bones: creating proximity and familiarity, erasing distance and anonymity", based on ethnographic research on the repatriation and reburial of Haida remains on the Northwest Coast of Canada. Focusing on the affective presence and 'humanness' of bones, Krmpotich explored how encounters between ancestral remains and the Haida, reveal ideas about time, kinship, personhood and Haida ontology. Drawing upon their knowledge of reincarnation, their sense of identity and historical continuity, Haida used these encounters to reinforce the proximity of themselves with their ancestors, and the continued integration of their ancestors within social and familial relationships. Krmpotich's paper showed that the repatriation of human remains from museums around Canada allowed Haida to take care of their families, illustrating how peoples' differing senses of self and personhood contribute to the affective presence of skeletal remains.

The following paper by Martin Brown, "All quiet on the western front? Excavating human remains from the Great War 1914-1918", returned to the theme of the WWI war dead, by discussing the complexity of political and emotive issues that can surround the discovery and recovery of human remains by archaeologists excavating on the western front. Like Fillipucci's paper, the intensely contested politics of excavation/exhumation turns around the evocative issue of the remains of 'The Missing' who number up to 560,000; bodies, people and human remains obliterated by shells, sunk into mud; human materials lost or turned into the landscape. Brown's paper used examples from excavations at Ploegsteert and Fromelles to show how politics, emotion

and national pride can converge and sometimes collide in these troubled archaeological contexts, where mass graves can be hotly contested.

As Joceyln Parot was, at the last minute, unable to attend, the time available during the last session of the first day was used to return to some of the reflexive and participatory themes with which we had begun the workshop. Jeanne Cannizzo chaired a session in which all participants (speakers and attendees) were invited to reflect upon and discuss their own experiences and memories of encounters with bones and human remains. It was a chance well taken to unpretentiously and critically examine our own encounters with the affective presence and emotive materiality of human remains in the light of the earlier discussions. It was a fitting way to close the intellectual work of the day and was followed by a spirited and enjoyable dinner at the Scotsman Hotel.

The next day began with Tiffany Jenkins's paper, which discussed contemporary controversies over human remains in museum collections in Britain. Exploring shifting pagan claims over human remains in UK collections, from demands for reburial to demands for a more elusive 'respect', and the reaction of museum professionals to these claims, Jenkins argued that a central influence in such contestations is a changing conception of the purpose of museums, which has questioned the legitimacy of housing such material. Museum professionals can appear as central agents in these controversies, through the ways in which the problem of human remains is used to add weight to their attempts to re-legitimise museum institutions.

Jenkin's paper provoked an important debate, which had resonances with all the previous papers. Noting that Jenkins had pointed to how such contemporary controversies raised questions of authority, legitimacy, ownership and authenticity in relation to human remains, Susan Warren (a representative of HAD – Honouring the Ancient Dead - one of the groups discussed in the paper) queried why questions of responsibility, caring and duty for or to the dead were not considered, as these, she suggested, were among the motivations of pagans involved in these debates. Clearly resonating with early discussions about Haida concerns about caring for individual ancestors, as well as the processes by which Madagascan ancestors become or are created, and the role played by material objects and human remains in the commemoration of war dead, this prompted further questions about the relationship between bones and the needs of the living to respond to 'the dead', and, in turn, how authority to respond to, care or indeed speak for 'the dead' is constructed and contested in differing contexts. Suggesting that 'respect' may centre more on the sensual handling of human remains rather than simply on the identity of the different people involved

(dead or alive), Harries suggested that the notion of 'the dead' itself, as deployed in such contexts, can be deeply problematic. He finished the session by asking a series of pertinent questions: Who are 'the dead'? Where are they? When and how do they appear and disappear? How long do ancestors exist - as long as they are remembered or indeed respected? What does 'respect' mean or amount to? As we went for coffee break on the second day, the room resounded with an uneasy conundrum: 'the dead' may be those we remember (or respect), yet 'the dead' are also those who demand to be remembered.

After coffee, Howard Williams returned us from our concerns about identifying what is meant by 'the dead' to a discussion of the ways in which early archaeologists and diggers engaged with the stuff of bones in the course of excavations of early medieval burial sites during the mid 19th century. In revising standard accounts of how the extraction of bones for scientific study were linked to early Victorian ideas of race, Howard's paper showed how racialised discourses predated the emergence of 'craniology', tracing them back to the romanticism of early antiquarians and barrow diggers, and the particular political circumstances of that time. Yet in emphasising the continuities across time in mortuary archaeology, going back even beyond the barrow diggers of the 18th century to early Saxon post-burial mortuary practices of opening graves to re-arrange bones and grave goods therein, the larger implication of William's work is that the history of archaeology, as written through its engagements with bones, was not simply a move towards 'science' but rather represents a broad congruence of different attitudes and sometimes older mortuary practices. This congruence was situated not only in differing ideologies of time, the past and 'the dead' but also relates intimately with individual experiences of death, which Williams unearthed by playing close attention to the biographies of individual diggers and archaeologists. One implicit point here is that while archaeology's excavation practices often involve digging up or 'unburying' the remains of the dead, and so can appear to undo the ritual and material processes of transformation associated with burial, historically at least, archaeological processes may be far closer to the mortuary practices they may ostensibly take as their subject, and against which they are often set as opposed.

In the next session John Harries took us from the barrow diggers of the 19th century to an uneasy, melancholic car journey that he took, and filmed, on his way to see two Beothuk skulls held by National Museum of Scotland. Relating the sad story of these two Beothuk skulls, from the extinction of Beothuk people in Newfoundland, and the deaths of this man and woman, to the voyage of their skulls to Scotland, Harries asked himself why he had wanted to see these skulls, and why he had waited so long to do so.

The answer, he argued, lay in the anxious relationship between substance and representation, between the affective, uncanny presence inherent in the emotive materiality of the thing and the sad stories of loss, violence and belonging weaved around them. In Verdery's work on bodies, the 'thereness', the material presence, is critical only to the symbolic efficacy of human remains - in the way they make the past present. But this ignores the stuff of corpses in themselves – material presence merely reinforces layers of cultural meanings. In this view the human quality of skullness in itself, their 'stuffness', is ignored. For Harries to see the skulls was to return to their tangible material form, to get under the meanings and faces layered onto them through stories, images and reconstructions. Indeed very few people have seen the skulls in the 180 years they have been in Edinburgh, but many, many have stories to tell about them. For forensic anthropologists, in contrast, the stories bones tell lie not in the meanings ascribed to them but in the qualities of their substance, revealed through tactile engagement with them. So viewing and touching the skulls themselves would be a way to re-engage with their material humanness, much as the visitors to western front that Filippucci described, try to engage with the past through sensual engagements with the material detritus of war. But this visual and tactile engagement, in the final count, does not render these skulls stable – like the layers of representation constructed around them, writings inscribed on their surface, images reconstructed in clay, flesh 'and many tiny points of colour' - tactile, sensual and visual experience maybe an attempt to render stable what is inherently unstable. On the journey home it was the normally familiar landscape of Edinburgh that was now rendered uncanny. The identities of the people these skulls once were, a man called Nonsabasut and a woman called Demasduit, both resides in the bones and yet is effaced by them. Something uncanny about these skulls defies the completeness of narration, and repatriation to Newfoundland won't heal the violence they or other Beothuk suffered, nor will it bring together their stories with those that others have weaved around them.

In the following paper, Maja Petrovic-Steger deployed three very different ethnographic case studies, from post-conflict Serbia, Aboriginal Tasmania and the Swiss art group Etoy, to discuss a range of material practices and rhetorical strategies constructed around dead bodies. Central to the presentation was a question about the apparent Euro-American obsession with the material integrity of 'the body', and the different 're-piecing' practices that can be employed in differing contexts in order to re-compose, materially and representationally, the 'wholeness' of the body. Both in the case of postwar Serbian exhumations of graves by forensic scientists, and in the processes of

repatriating human remains to Tasmania, a central notion is the emphasis on the return of disparate body parts, back to the soil and to the living, and to the reconstructed body. Yet in both cases body fragments are fragments of knowledge as well as fragments of relations. The third example focused the Swiss art group Etoy and their artefact, Mission Eternity Project's Sarcophagus, a mobile sepulchre displaying composite portraits of those who consented to have their 'informational remnants' cross over into a digital afterlife. The contrast between the examples illustrated how the disparate remnants of humans, 'what the dead leave behind', take many forms that easily cross the divide between the material and the representational, or as Ingold later put it in his concluding comments, between bones and artefacts. The key point here is less that in the 'digital age' new forms of materials and memories, substances and images, technologies and practices for dealing with death and human remains have emerged, but more that human remnants, and ways of dealing with them, have always been more complex and more disparate and much less stable, then conventional distinctions between persons and bodies, knowledge and feeling, parts and wholes have accommodated.

In the last paper of the workshop, Joost Fontein turned away from the entanglement of human substance and human artefacts towards an exploration of the distinction between dry bones and fleshy bodies, through the motifs of affective presence and emotive materiality around which the workshop was initiated. Focusing on the complex place of bones in Zimbabwe's troubled postcolonial milieu of unresolved legacies of violence, of unsettled and unsettling spirits, and resurfacing human remains, Fontein discussed their ambivalent agency as both extensions of the dead (that is spirit 'subjects' that make demands on the living), and as unconscious 'objects' or 'things' (that retort to and provoke responses from the living), suggesting that bones in Zimbabwe not only challenge normalising processes of state commemoration and heritage, but also animate a myriad of personal, kin, clan, class and political loyalties and struggles. But if Zimbabwe's postcolonial milieu is haunted by resurfacing bones and troubling, unsettled spirits, then recent political violence indicates that it is not only dry bones but also the fleshy materiality and leaking materials of tortured bodies (still living and recently dead) that are entangled in the troubled politics of this postcolony. Illustrating his presentation with disturbing images, widely circulated by human rights organisations, of the maimed and tortured bodies of recent victims of ZANU PF violence, Fontein explored how the emotive materiality of broken bodies can be easily manipulated for ulterior motives. The purpose of the contrast between what bones do and what fleshy, leaky, maimed bodies do was to further explore the complexity of agencies and affordances entangled in both

the affective presence and emotive materiality of human remains in Zimbabwe. This led Fontein to ask a series of questions: if bodies inscribed with torturous performances of sovereignty do have substantial, if duplicitous, political affects, how does this contrast with the unsettling presence of the longer dead? What does the passage of time - both the material and leaky decomposition of flesh, but equally the transformative processes of burial - do to the affective presence and emotive materiality of the dead? How do broken bodies become bones? How, in short, do bodies and bones differ? The implications of the ensuing discussions was that while both bones and bodies in Zimbabwe can point towards the affective presence of the dead people and spirits they once were, it is in the differing flows of their materials that their 'emotive materiality' becomes most apparent. As Ingold forcefully insisted, there is a need to move away from the notion of composed and contained bodies, towards an understanding of the flows of materials that link people, artefacts and landscape. Images and encounters with the maimed and fleshy bodies of victims of violence are perhaps more disturbing, and more emotive exactly because they transgress normal procedures of containing and /or transforming the leaky flow of materials from bodies, into the affective presence of dry bones.

In the closing session of the workshop, the discussants gave their commentaries on the discussions of the previous two days. Magnus Course pointed to several themes emergent from the discussions. Uncontrolled empathy provoked by human remains and efforts to control it, or to speak, care or respond to the dead, was a theme that united all the papers. Many of the discussions had turned on and questioned conventional distinctions between living people as controlled and contained, and the unconstrained dead. If human remains are often seen as blank canvases upon which the living inscribe their ideas, emotions and demands, then the papers clearly demonstrated that 'the dead' can also make their presence felt through their materiality and flowing materials, the stories they tell and are told about them, and their uncanny quality of presence. The material presence of 'the dead', their social significance and the representations inscribed into or layered around them by the living are finely entangled. Bones do speak to us but not eloquently enough, and their emotive and affective force derives from the tensions between their stability and instability, their determinacy and indeterminacy.

But if many of the papers turned on this question of uncontrolled empathy, then most of the examples cited were extraordinary events, not normal examples of funerals and mortuary rites, where empathy is successfully contained and controlled. This linked directly to another recurring theme identified by Course, which was the tension between

the humanising and dehumanising of human remains, which also turned on the issue of empathy. DNA profiling and facial reconstructions may indeed be about re-humanising remains, but funeral rites across the world are often as much about dehumanising the dead, and their removal from sight or encounter or their transformation into something else. This linked to a central problematic raised by Harries on the first day, about the notion of ‘the dead’. Central to many discussions about material engagements with the remains of the dead, inclusive of but clearly not limited to funeral rites, is a tension between the singular individual and the generic ‘dead’ – between ‘mission eternity’ and retaining the humanity of bones and human remains. In cases of traumatic or violent deaths or post-deaths, like many of the examples discussed by the speakers, humanising efforts may a form of compensation for what Hertz long ago identified as ‘bad death’.

Another theme highlighted by Course was the relationship between human remains and notions of the composed or ‘whole body’. How many human remains are needed for a body he asked incisively. Relics are but a tiny portion of a body yet can implicate the whole, while sets of bones recovered from mass graves fail to satiate the demands of relatives because they usually do not amount to a complete body. A contrast with societies of the Pacific, where bones are dispersed amongst patri and matrilineal relations, might be productive, he suggested.

Course finished with a stern but important warning. The examples discussed in the workshop were maybe too limited in scope because they all revolved around contexts in which there is a desire or need to respect or respond to ‘the dead’. This, Course urged, is far from universal, citing South American societies where profoundly different ontologies dictate that the dead are not respected but denigrated, often because they are seen to have failed. Here practices of funerary cannibalism are sometimes used to demonstrate to consanguinal kin (and anthropologists) that human remains are merely flesh, and not persons (although of course it could be argued that such rituals in themselves suggest there is an unsettling quality about human flesh and corpses which requires to be dealt with or transformed in some way). Returning closer to home Course asserted that even in early Christian theology there was little that emphasises respect for the human remains, and in early Christianity the post mortem denigration of bones and human substance was sometimes used to demonstrate the impermanence of our existence. Our respect for the dead may indeed be a continuation of pre-Christian beliefs. Magnus Course concluded by urging all present to broaden our ethnographic spread to include more counter examples in our explorations into the affective presence and emotive materiality of bones.

Tim Ingold began his commentary by highlighting that our discussions had been more about death than about bones per se. In the history of anthropology, the discipline had become separated into three fields of study – physical anthropology focusing on bones; archaeology on objects and artefacts; and social anthropology emphasising the comparative method. Ingold suggested that the papers presented and the discussions that had ensued illustrated that the distinction between bones and artefacts was not so clear cut. In deeper history, he suggested, hand held tools that exuded from the body often had the same status as the skeleton. We could ask the same question today of artificial limbs. How has it come about that artefacts are treated differently to bones? Are artefacts somehow more processual? But perhaps artefacts are, in reality, not so much made but rather grow, like a skeleton? As with artefacts, the activities of past people can be read off bones, and importantly we can see how flows of materials emerge out and through both them. In past, for example, blacksmiths sometimes used animal bones to temper the blades of swords. If ancestral bones were used to temper swords would they not become artefacts? Swords and bones would be both symbolically and materially linked.

Ingold also returned to the title of the workshop ‘What lies beneath’. Beneath what? he asked. The earth or soil? How then are the dead present in the world? If living people spend much of their time standing ‘upright’, what does the world look like from the point of view of the dead? Lying in a grave, looking up not at a landscape but at the permeable boundary between earth and sky? And indeed, Ingold mused, burial mounds themselves are like growths that break the boundary surface between earth and sky. If death is a mode of being, how different is it from being alive, and is this a question of agency? Living people spend a lot of time asleep, in deep sleep and at rest. If sleeping is important to being and place making, yet is defined by a lack of activity, perhaps we can try to understand how the dead can be present without being active, and thereby bypass the problematic notion of agency which all too easily assumes the presence of an active subject.

Ingold finished by making three other observations. He made a link between bones and the history of writing. If in the past writings were a form of memory aid, like relics of the dead may once have been, and if this purpose changed with the shift towards a more ‘modern’ notion of writing records, then perhaps this change had repercussions for how we think about relics and bones, particularly as witnessed in way relics are presented and narrated in contemporary museum displays. Then Ingold turned to what had been an implicit theme in several of the papers, which was the distinction between bones as objects, and bone as material. This may be, it was suggested, another way to get

beyond the recurring distinction between ‘dead’ and ‘living’ around which debates over human remains often circulate. In terms of flows of organic materials, the substance of ‘dead’ bones is very much alive. It is only the person that is dead – different complex flows and processes are still going on with the materials of bones. As with all things, seen less as objects and more as materials, mediums and surfaces enables a perspective that foregrounds the continual leakages and interchanges of materials and substances. Applied to bones and human remains, this suggests that often a great deal of work has to be done to stop these flows and exchanges of materials. Sensual and tactile involvements with bone, through smell, taste and touch inevitably involve such interchanges of substances.

Finally, Ingold asked himself and the participants what would happen if humans were entirely flesh? What, in other words, does having bones make possible? Ingold suggested, citing the example of elephants gathering around the bones of other long dead but remembered elephants, that bones enable or afford the existence of genealogies. If bones are linked to genealogical connections, then why do humans bury bones? Referring to Course’s example of Amazonian peoples who demonstrate their disdain for the dead through funerary cannibalism, Ingold suggested that perhaps Amazonians do not have bones. Perhaps the Amazonian person is a soul surrounded by a bodily coating, unstable and subject to change. It was a fine way to finish an enlightening and thought provoking (not to mention materially emotive, affectively present, and engagingly sensual and tactile) two days.

Joost Fontein & John Harries

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