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BOOK REVIEW

Ferrándiz, Francisco and Antonius C. G. M. Robben (eds.), *Necropolitics: Mass Graves and Exhumations in the Age of Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), pp.270, \$59.95, hb.

The edited volume, *Necropolitics: Mass Graves and Exhumations in the Age of Human Rights*, is a important and welcome addition to the growing literatures on human rights, memory, and transitional justice. The processes of opening mass graves and conducting exhumations in the aftermath of serious human rights violations tackled in this book span a variety of geographical as well as political and social contexts, with country cases studies ranging from Chile and Argentina, Spain and the Balkans, and even further beyond, to Korea, Cambodia, and Rwanda. The most significant contribution of this volume lies in clearly showing how dealing with the past through the exhumation of human remains of victims of human rights violations is simultaneously both a deeply local and a transnational process. This is a key point worth underscoring: this duality and interdependence of the local and the transnational often gets sidelined by scholars and practitioners who are particularly keen to emphasise only one aspect -- either the national or the transnational element -- in their analysis and theorising of transitional justice processes and dynamics. In contrast, the book editors crucially underscore the importance of the local setting in which exhumations take place and, at the same time, the need to analyse these processes 'in a much wider context' (page 2), systematising the different cases and linking them to broader developments unfolding in the global discourses and practices surrounding human rights and memory.

The book is divided into two Parts. In Part I, *Exhumations as Practice*, attention focuses on mass graves as sites of ethnography, tackling the specific dynamics involved during exhumations processes and forensic practices. For instance, in chapter 4, Francisco Ferrándiz recounts the different cycles of exhumations that have taken place in Spain during the twentieth century. The latest wave of exhumations occurred in the twenty-first century within the context of an explosion of memory relating to the Spanish Civil War and, in particular, the role played by several associations -- national, regional and local -- that have emerged lately and have dedicated their efforts to the recovery of memory and to carrying out exhumations. The chapter specifically focuses on the search for the bodies of five women murdered in 1936 by a paramilitary group supporting Franco's rebellion in the municipality of Villanueva de la Vera. The description highlights the events surrounding the exhumations, and the various attempts to locate the exact site of the graves. Despite its ultimately unsuccessful outcome, since not a single trace of the five women was eventually

found, the mere undertaking of the excavation nonetheless allowed for the memory of the crimes to be disseminated and transmitted.

Bridging between Part I and Part II is Francesc Torres' photo essay on 9/11, entitled *Absence, Sediment and Memory*. The author took photographs of objects taken from Ground Zero of the World Trade Center, objects that had been identified as 'historically and testimonially relevant for preservation,' and later housed in Hangar 17 of John F. Kennedy Airport in New York (page 143). In creating this 'archaeology of the present,' Torres highlights the evocative power of unfiltered and unedited images and objects linked to traumatic events: these images and remnants allow the past to exist in the present and, thus, persist into the future.

In Part II, *Exhumations as Memory*, the chapters situate mass graves and exhumations within the bereaved societies in which they take place, taking into account the political and social processes and contexts in which exhumations are embedded. The texts tackle processes of mobilisation and resistance surrounding exhumation practices and consider these sites of memory as 'a source of political contestation about who owns the human remains and how their violent death should be remembered' (page 24). For example, in chapter 7, Isaias Rojas-Perez underlines the work of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) in terms of exhumations and the discovery of the truth, as well as the 'broader project of political reburial of forgotten victims of violence (page 185). In acknowledging how the vast majority of the victims of violence in Peru had been Quechua-speaking peasants, the CVR simultaneously recognised the failure of Peruvian's society at large to perceive the fate and be sympathetic to the suffering of their fellow citizens while violence was unfolding. The truth revealed by the CVR, thus, allowed for the remaking of the political community, reintegrating these neglected victims into society, while also restoring their dignity.

The varied contexts and experiences surrounding exhumation processes across the globe as highlighted in the cases studies tackled in this volume highlight the heterogeneity of existing practices and the different ways in which societies have dealt with difficult pasts. Nonetheless, despite the existence of diverse practices, exhumations however contribute to broader and widely shared objectives of justice, truth and reparation, in providing evidence for judicial proceedings, returning the remains of loved one to family members, and disseminating knowledge of past atrocities to society. The chapters importantly show how, despite the various ways in which exhumations have unfolded across cases, there are numerous common experiences and shared problems faced by relatives, survivors, and forensic experts, as well as shared goals and objectives that underpin the opening of mass graves. Exhumations are profoundly linked to local realities that are deeply tied to political, social and cultural contexts, while simultaneously they also constitute global mechanisms that sustain broader truth, justice and reparations goals in societies struggling to come to terms with difficult pasts across the world. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of exhumations, that include forensic medicine, anthropology, history, law, and psychology, this volume reminds us of the importance of comparative and multidisciplinary research that brings together the personal with the public, the local with the transnational, as well as

the tensions that exist among these realms. The book will especially be of interest to advanced graduate students as well as scholars and practitioners.

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