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Power in James Martel's *Unburied Bodies*

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REVIEWS

Bring Out Your Dead: Corpses and the Limits of Sovereign Power in James Martel's *Unburied Bodies*

Osman Balkan

James R. Martel. *Bodies Unburied: Subversive Corpses and the Authority of the Dead.* Amherst, Mass: Amherst College Press, 2018. E-book.

In a story recounted by Cicero, Diogenes the Cynic, a philosopher known for his eccentric behavior (he supposedly lived in a barrel near the Athenian Agora and roamed the city with a lantern during daylight in search of an honest man), is said to have told his followers to avoid burying him upon his death. He preferred that they toss his corpse over the city walls to let nature take its course. Seeing their horrified reactions, Diogenes advised them to leave a staff near his dead body so that he could drive away the wild beasts that would inevitably consume it. "But how can you do that," they asked, "for you will not perceive them?" "How am I then injured by being torn by those animals," Diogenes replied, "if I have no sensation?"¹

The story is instructive because it illustrates a powerful contradiction regarding the human corpse. As something that is neither person nor thing, the dead body occupies a liminal space between subject and object. In Julia Kristeva's reading, it represents the paradigmatic form of the abject.² Though lifeless and insentient, the corpse maintains some qualities of personhood by virtue of the fact that "it" was once a living, breathing, speaking, thinking, and feeling human being. Being dead, a corpse can hardly be described as a person, yet nonetheless, human communities take great pains to ensure that dead bodies are given care and respect. Proper funerary rites help transition deceased individuals from the world of the living into the world of the dead. If, however, such rites are denied by states or other political actors who treat corpses as if they were mere things, either by desecrating them or by leaving them unburied, the consequences can be momentous. According to James Martel, the unburied dead pose not only a major threat to sovereign authority and power, but can even serve as the catalyst of their undoing.

In his provocative new book, published by Amherst College Press as part of its open-access *Public Works* series, Martel observes that the long and bloody history of sovereignty is marked by a litany of unburied corpses. Over the course of several wide-ranging chapters, he analyzes the political repercussions of unburied bodies from the classical era (Patroclus and Hector in the *Iliad*, Polynices in *Antigone*), to the early modern and modern periods (Machiavelli's account of the assassination of Remirro de Orco and Kafka's "The Hunter Gracchus"), to the recent past and present (James Baldwin's description of a lynching in "Going to Meet the Man" and the murder of Michael Brown). In most of these cases, the act of killing is followed by a second round of violence directed at the corpse itself, in the form of mutilation or public display as a warning to others.

Rather than seeing this violence as the ultimate expression of sovereignty's power over life and death, Martel argues that, to the contrary, "the

unburied body is the place where state projections of power and authority go to die themselves" (5). This is because the dead are able to evade the grip of power and projection in ways that are less readily available to the living. They "embody" something that the state cannot control. "The fact that our bodies have never been "ours" and have never been the subjects we interpellate them to be," writes Martel, "becomes more visible when our bodies cease to serve as active and naturalized vessels for our identities and subjectivities," (140) i.e. when we are dead.

The disruptive power of the dead lies in their ability to avoid interpellation and other mechanisms of projection. In doing so, corpses expose the limits of what Martel calls "archist" authority: a principle of rule that is not usually named because it is supposedly just the way things are. Archism is the opposite of anarchism. It is a hierarchical, centralized, and representative "system of rule and domination based on phantasm and projection" (9).³ Martel juxtaposes the archist power of states and other biopolitical agents to the anarchist authority of the dead. The latter are politically subversive because they are able to block or resist archist projections of authority. In doing so, the dead "untell" or "unspeak" false truths about the nature of sovereign power. Consequently, argues Martel, the dead can serve as a valuable resource for the living in collective struggles against all forms of oppression, domination, and control.

In developing these arguments, Martel builds on the work of Walter Benjamin (in particular, his writings on "mythic violence" and the "authority of the dead"), as well as recent scholarship by Banu Bargu, Stefano Harney, Bonnie Honig, Achille Mbembe, Stuart Murray, and Fred Moten, among others. It is an imaginative, complex, and at times, challenging text that may perplex the uninitiated, but Martel is an intrepid guide through what is admittedly a dense theoretical forest. Readers seeking to better understand the inner workings of biopower and its relation to race will find his close readings of Michel Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France quite valuable, while those who are already well versed in the literature on necropolitics will benefit from Martel's novel interpretations of both well- and lesser-known literary texts that speak to issues around sovereignty and the dead body.

Given the prevalence of dead body politics across the world, some may object to a study of unburied corpses that relies primarily upon literary figures to draw conclusions about political life. Although Martel opens his book with a discussion of recent, high profile examples of unburied bodies (including Michael Brown, to whom an entire chapter is devoted), real world examples of political conflicts over the fate and significance of corpses are largely absent from the text. This isn't a problem per se. As Martel notes, "literature allows us to express complex ideas without the requirement of conformity to norms that usually accompanies 'true' accounts" (43). Yet one may ask whether Martel's arguments about the counterprojective power and anarchist authority of the corpse hold true in the same way in different places. For scholars of mortuary ritual, context is crucial since the dead body conveys considerably different meanings and significations across cultures.

To be fair, Martel is attuned to local circumstances as he considers political struggles over different types of bodies (alive, dead, almost dead, citizen, stateless, etc.) from ancient Greece to the contemporary United States. But one won-

ders to what extent the racism that so unambiguously underpins strategies of bio- and necropolitical governance in the American context makes sense as an operative framework in other parts of the world. Furthermore, in assessing Martel's claims about the (counter)authority of the dead and their ability to unsay and untell hegemonic ideas about political order, it is important to ask whether the dead speak with one voice. Just as states enlist the authority of the dead to endow themselves with legitimacy and a sense of immortality (think of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which Benedict Anderson famously described as the most arresting emblem of the modern cult of nationalism), social actors invoke the dead in the service of wildly disparate goals. How are such struggles shaped by cultural contexts and the materiality of the body, whether we consider Turkish Death Fasters, where corporeal integrity becomes a locus of struggle, or the *desaparecidos* of Argentina, where the absence rather than the presence of unburied bodies structures political conflict, or in Eastern Europe, where the exhumation and reburial of politically significant corpses helped to reorder worlds of meaning and sacralize authority and politics in new ways during the transition from communism?⁴

Nevertheless, such questions are a testament to the generative nature of Martel's work. *Unburied Bodies* is a creative, thought provoking piece of scholarship that makes a valuable contribution to the burgeoning field of necropolitics. Anyone interested in questions concerning sovereignty, authority, and the political work of the dead would be well advised to engage with this text.

Notes

1. For an insightful analysis of Diogenes's request, see Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
2. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
3. Interested readers should consult Martel's 2018 article on archism for a more thorough discussion of the concept. See James Martel, "Why Does the State Keep Coming Back? Neoliberalism, the State and the Archeon," *Law and Critique* 29 (2018): 359-375.
4. On Turkey see Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (New York: Columbia University, 2016). On Argentina, see Antonius C.G.M. Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). On Eastern Europe, see Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).