

Conclusion

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“Individual identification is a primary goal for forensic anthropologists who work in medicolegal and humanitarian contexts,” Palmiotto et al. set out in the opening of their technical note on methods of estimating the minimum number of individuals among commingled remains. No doubt they are right, but their claim has context, as does the more general practice of disentangling and piecing back together bodies—more precisely, their skeletal elements, however partial or fragmented—that the eight contributions to this special issue address. Simply put, individually identifying war dead, or victims of violent conflict, natural disaster, or whatever incident of mass fatality, is a relatively modern phenomenon. As historian Thomas Laqueur argues, “We live in an age of necronominalism; we record and gather the names of the dead in ways, and in places, and in numbers as never before. We demand to know who the dead are. *We find unnamed bodies and bodiless names—those of the disappeared—unbearable*” (2015:366; emphasis added).

There was a time, before this age of heightened “necronominalism,” when neither science nor society required or could accomplish the painstaking act of naming the masses of dead and especially their disarticulated and commingled remains.

In many ways, this collection of research articles, case studies, and technical notes bears witness to the social value increasingly ascribed to individuated postmortem identification and the forensic scientific efforts both driven by and enabling that value—a prime example of what science and technology studies scholar Sheila Jasanoff calls the “co-production” of science and society (2004). Across these analyses of commingled cases and methods, technologies, and techniques applied to resolve them, we recognize the common aim of restoring individual identity to remains, no matter their state or how many generations removed their

primary next of kin. While there is not room here to delve too deeply into how such a value emerged, this special issue invites us to consider some of its implications. I’ll start with one of the most important dynamics affected by efforts to untangle and name the commingled: the relationship between the individual and the collective.

Individual versus Collective

We tend to think of commingling in terms of the dead, the individual dead whose remains must be separated out from an aggregate. How many people are buried in a mass grave, or which bones belong to which body? We might give thought to how the individuals ended up as a collective or in a common burial site to begin with: their social identities (fellow combatants buried together, or victims targeted because they were perceived to belong to a common group and thus were killed and disposed of en masse); the nature of the violence, so forceful that it decimated identity and perhaps jumbled bodies; or, as becomes clear from the U.S. military’s World War II recovery efforts, well-intentioned but unsuccessful attempts to exhume and name them. In their posthumous lives, these recovered remains become collectives of a different sort: the Tarawa Project, the Cabanatuan Project, and the USS *Oklahoma* Project. The dead populate spreadsheets and shortlists; they become central objects in a world of sorting and reordering.

But what of the living, especially those most closely tied to the deceased? We see their traces in some of these chapters. Family reference samples are requested; relatives may be notified of potential re-exhumations. Just as the commingled dead have become enmeshed in a collective not of their own making—first in mass burial, next in recovery and identification efforts—the social networks of those individuals likewise become entangled. Take Pfc Alpha from the Cabanatuan Project, for example (Megyesi, this issue). Buried in a common grave in the Philippines, his remains were exhumed and identified by the American Graves Registration Service and, in 1949, sent home and buried again in a family

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plot in the United States. Or so his family and community of mourners thought. Presumably, some among them tended that plot, visiting it from time to time and on special occasions. Fast-forward to the 2014 disinterment, when the present-day efforts to account for the unresolved Cabanatuan losses exposed past errors, including the misidentification of Pfc Alpha, whose actual remains were found among three separate caskets. And so the casket holding the erroneously buried Alpha had to come out of the ground, and its contents shipped to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency's (DPAA) Central Identification Laboratory in Hawai'i for examination. In that moment, we see how the Alpha family belongs to a larger collective—that of war dead relatives, in particular those whose missing have not yet been recovered and identified; in some respects, they had a duty to those other families. The proper restoration of identity to the remains mistakenly buried in their family plot could only be possible if that casket was unearthed. We are left to wonder: How much of the “real” Pfc Alpha will finally return home? Who has survived to bury him anew/for the first time? Will the other next of kin—we learn that there are the remains of at least two individuals in his former casket—feel a sense of gratitude toward the Alpha family for tending the grave where their missing were mistakenly buried?

A strange sociality, putative or realized, arises among the relatives of these commingled dead. For some, the disinterments forge ties of reciprocity hitherto unimagined. In this regard, the Alpha case presents a fairly straightforward example, but other World War II disinterments, including some from the Manila American Cemetery in the Philippines, have proved more fraught terrain for the DPAA. Making headlines beginning in 2014 and continuing to this day, a set of families whose missing war dead they believe to be buried as unknowns in the Manila Cemetery have banded together to sue the U.S. government: they seek to force the disinterment of the graves of their (presumed) relatives' remains.¹ The lawsuit exposes an underlying tension between individual wants and needs and collective values. In insisting that the DPAA focus resources on their particular missing, namely, seven cases from among the 72,000 unaccounted-for from World War II, the plaintiffs argue for individuated attention. They separate out their missing fallen from the collective, seeking to jump the queue as it were, by seizing the levers of the courts to demand that attention.

But, as we can intuit from the three major disinterment/group projects outlined in this special issue—Cabanatuan, Tarawa, and *Oklahoma*—there is a strong possibility that the seven cases are bound up—literally, physically commingled—with multiple other unknowns. Though perhaps not as

extreme as the *Oklahoma* “bundles” of mixed-up remains interred in individual caskets (see Brown, this issue), the minimum number of individuals will hardly be seven. Disinterments unearth more than just coffins and bones. They simultaneously raise new and challenge old obligations. We know that approximately 40% of World War II war dead were buried overseas, the majority of them at their families' wish, in the national cemeteries created in the war's aftermath, including in the Philippines (Edwards 2015:70; Piehler 1995:129–130). By default, unknowns comprised some part of that figure. Does the court have an obligation to consider a choice which hypothetically families of the other commingled unknowns might have made? Or to broach a corollary question: What if there are no descendants to respect the wishes of primary next of kin that their loved one's grave, no matter if unknown and unmarked, be left undisturbed? Two and three generations removed, it is difficult to know what unnamed relatives of the still unknown would have wanted. That uncertainty reminds us that biological inheritance (DNA samples) can neither capture nor convey the stuff of social memory, and that neither science nor the law offers any quick and easy fix to the complexities inherent in projects that seek to “untangle the effects of commingling and account for past misidentifications” (Megyesi, this issue).

Social Demands

A second important implication raised by the various contributions to this special issue centers on the extraordinary lengths to which societies go to desegregate and individually identify commingled remains. Why take such pains? Having previously studied the example of postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina (Wagner 2008), I was struck by how the U.S. military's efforts to account for its missing in action (MIA) overlap in certain aspects of scientific approach (e.g., the prominent role of forensic genetics within a multidisciplinary approach) and material obstacles faced (e.g., non-experts introducing errors, even causing commingling, in early attempts at identification), but also how they differ in significant ways. In part, the differences stem from the missing or unaccounted for themselves and their symbolic weight within their respective societies.

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, efforts to identify the missing persons of the 1992–1995 war, victims of violent conflict whose mortal remains went unrecovered and/or unnamed for years after arms were laid to rest, represent a form of sociopolitical intervention—an attempt at social repair—spearheaded by the International Commission on Missing Persons. The majority of the forty thousand individuals missing at the end of the conflict were civilians, and thus their recovery and individuated identification were explicitly tied to larger discourses of human rights and

1. Dave Philipps, “War hero's family suing in its decades-long fight to identify remains,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/29/us/veterans-graves-alexander-nininger.html>, accessed January 22, 2019.

humanitarianism, transitional justice, and post-conflict social reconstruction (Kovras 2017; Rosenblatt 2015; Wagner 2008). Ignoring their absence would tacitly condone the violence that produced it. Thus, the international community responded to the demands of surviving kin and rallied around the work of locating the bodies of their missing and developing the infrastructure and expertise to identify them—that of two entity-level commissions and eventually the Missing Persons Institute, as well as of the International Commission on Missing Persons. Piecing back together the remains of victims of state-sponsored violence on some level became a synecdoche for the attempts at stitching back together the social fabric of a wartorn society.

The example of the U.S. military's efforts to recover, repatriate, and identify remains of the unaccounted for from World War II speaks to a different set of sociopolitical aims. Though often labeled a "humanitarian" mission, the project of MIA accounting is, at its core, about a state demonstrating its capacity to care for those who died fighting on its behalf.² The missing are, overwhelmingly, combatants—not civilian victims—to whom the United States owes the singular debt of repatriation and individuated care. It is a tradition that stretches back to the Civil War. "We still live in the world of the dead the Civil War created," historian Drew Gilpin Faust explains. "We take for granted the obligation of the state to account for the lives it claims in its service" (2008:271). The projects of disentangling the commingled remains from Cabanatuan, Tarawa, and *Oklahoma* fulfill a long-delayed obligation to those unrecovered and unnamed war dead. At the same time, they do important work for the state in terms of contemporary audiences. On the one hand, they telegraph to current service members that these are the lengths to which the government will go to bring their fallen back and care for their remains. On the other, using the most sophisticated forensic tools available to parse out the commingled allows the state to insist to the broader American public that it spares no resource to honor its fallen, even when faced with challenging circumstances of recovery or complicated conditions of remains.

Limitations and Lessons

A final implication discernible in the contributions to this special issue is a point that often gets glossed over in contemporary popular representations of forensic science—namely, that identifying commingled remains is a highly complex process that requires significant time, resources,

expertise, and often innovations in methods. No one set of cases or one project is the same, though lessons can be learned from one to the next, and "no one scientist works in a vacuum" (Taylor et al., this issue). There are whole networks of actors that make identifications possible—not the least of which are families who provide DNA reference samples—and scientific knowledge and practice continually evolve. Across these articles we hear repeatedly that extensive commingling within large-scale populations of unidentified/unknown dead requires multidisciplinary approaches and "multiple lines of evidence" (Scott et al.)—that is, the interplay between fields, from a "prioritization strategy" that marshals antemortem data (Brown & Lynch) to visual pair-matching (LeGarde), inventory procedures using the zonation method (Palmiotto et al.), and the Bayesian approach (McCormick). Trying to tackle the puzzle from different angles and with multiple, complementary tools is necessary, because at the end of the day, as Brown and Lynch argue in their technical note on the *Oklahoma* project, "identifications become a race against time." Families of the missing and unaccounted for have waited years, if not decades, and their own looming mortality adds to the urgency of the task at hand.

But sometimes in our impatience for resolution we forget two related points that this collection of essays makes clear. First, violent conflict sows chaos, even and especially on the corporeal level. Bodies and body parts get jumbled. Second, errors and limitations in knowledge can compound that initial violence. There's a reason why the bundles recovered in the first casket of the "pre-project" period for *Oklahoma* (Brown, this issue) represented a minimum of 25% of the ship's casualties—not because Mildred Trotter did not *want* to identify the remains, but because her ability to do so was limited by the state of the field at the time. She and her colleagues erred on the side of caution. At the same time, as we saw with the World War II processing in the 1950s, human error can introduce complications that have far-reaching consequences, some of which hamstring contemporary identification efforts because of their inadvertent effects of commingling and even mistakenly identified remains.

In rare instances, families of the missing pay yet another price of war when, decades after they have laid their loved one to rest, they learn that those remains must be re-exhumed and re-examined.

Taken together, these essays speak to a moment in time, both in terms of the state of the field and the social values underwriting the enterprise of individuated postmortem identification. They are snapshots themselves of this era of "necronominalism." As I read them, I couldn't help but wonder what the scientists of the future—possibly those charged with reviewing, maybe even correcting, the work

2. For example, despite their obvious political overtones, recovery efforts in North Korea (currently suspended) have been characterized by DPAA as a "humanitarian endeavor," and MIA accounting for losses in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War as part of shared "humanitarian goals."

of contemporary forensic anthropologists, archaeologists, odontologists, and geneticists—will say about such efforts to address commingled remains. Perhaps they will have sharper tools at their disposal; perhaps there won't be the same demand for extracting the individual from the collective; perhaps future warfare will render even that task impossible. Just as the World War II commingled cases provide “insight into historical forensic anthropological investigations” (Brown, this issue), this collection may offer a road map for the decisions taken and strategies honed to disentangle the commingled of wars long past, as well as the significant challenges these discrete projects faced.

However they read to future audiences, these essays throw into relief the contemporary interplay between forensic science and social values. Whether the nameless are civilian victims of violent conflict or combatants sacrificed on behalf of a nation, efforts to identify the commingled are predicated on the insistence that names count and bodies belong. They belong in some place and to some set of surviving kin. The scientific endeavor to restore them to that place and to those kin is an inherently social act. That is to say, recovering, reassembling, and naming individuals who

died as a result of war or violent conflict are themselves a form of honoring and remembering.

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