Military dictatorships and armed conflicts delineate the history of Latin America over the last four decades. Dead bodies were produced *en masse* before being confiscated, concealed or destroyed by those who carried out the crimes. Today, some of these corpses are being exhumed and identified. This special issue aims to specify and understand the challenges this process of exhumation represents for Latin American states, namely, the social and political life of these exhumed corpses in democratic post-conflict societies,¹ the possible performance of sovereignty that these dead bodies can activate² and, in a broader context, the impact that the presence of corpses may have on the community of the living.³

Exhumations in Latin America gathers five different contributions, each enlightening particular aspects of the exhumation process in Guatemala, Argentina, Peru, Uruguay and Colombia, respectively. In the case of Guatemala, Clara Duterme explores this process as an element of 'transitional justice' in which tensions between different social actors arise. If community associations, governmental actors and victims all share the pursuit of justice as a common goal, their understanding of what compensation and reparation mean is not uniform. Departing from the discourse of local actors, Duterme focuses on concrete forms of compensation, showing how 'local justice' is sometimes more effective than legal justice.

Exploring a distinct form of tensions occurring in Argentina, Laura Panizo analyses the impact of the exhumed corpses of the disappeared on the living bodies of the families and of the scientific investigators. The article analyses different conflicts that emerge when people cohabit with the 'reappeared' corpses. Moreover, digging into her personal experience, Panizo reflects on the extent to which her own body was, and is, affected by cohabitation with the exhumed corpses of the victims.

The impact of corpses and human remains in the post-excavation phase is also at the core of Valérie Robin Azevedo's examination of the Peruvian experience. Based on the observation that the vast majority of those affected by the armed conflict are indigenous and poor people, this article contemplates whether the restitution of human remains participates in modifying certain social inequalities and in erasing ethnic and racial discrimination. While the process of exhumation can open the possibility of social and economic compensation for the affected communities,

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it does not bring an end to mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination against those segregated populations.

Turning more specifically to the work of forensic anthropology teams, and taking as a point of departure the work of the Uruguayan Forensic Anthropology Research Group (GIAF), Jose López Mazz addresses issues such as the reasons behind exhumations, the practical modalities of excavations, the techniques to be used, the spaces to be investigated. The article offers new and innovative insight into both the identity of those conducting diggings and the possible impact that such excavations may have on the transformation of a regular space into a crime scene.

Adopting an ethnographic approach, Anne Marie Losonczy explores how rituals of death have been altered since violent crimes devastated the Emeberá community during the 1990s in Colombia. She retraces how the modifications in the causes of death, and the subsequent discovery of victims' corpses, produce unprecedented reconfigurations in the relationship between this community and its dead, thereby generating a new economy of death. She also highlights the on-going aspect of this circle of violence in which the exhumation and identification of the corpses of the victims is followed by an 'epidemic' of suicides in the Emberá community.

In several states in Latin America, sites where unspeakable atrocities occurred are being investigated and excavated in the search for the corpses of the victims. These investigations and exhumations have an impact not only on the practicalities of how they are – or should be – conducted but also on the investigators, the families of the victims and society at large. Exploring different cases and adopting specific perspectives, all of the following contributions shed new light on the current process of exhumations in Latin America, the challenges it faces, the obstacles it will have to overcome and the transformative changes it may generate.

Pamela Colombo

Guest Editor

Marie Sk-Curie Fellow at the EHESS-IRIS (Paris)

Notes

- 1 K. Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1999).
- 2 F. Stepputat (ed.), *Governing the Dead: Sovereignty and the Politics of Dead Bodies* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2014).
- 3 F. Ferrándiz and A. C. G. M. Robben (eds), *Necropolitics: Mass Graves and Exhumations in the Age of Human Rights* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); E. Anstett and J. M. Dreyfus (eds), *Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015).