

# Bodies in the tip: deaths and politicised deaths in Buenos Aires's refuse

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## Abstract

The appearance of corpses in rubbish tips is not a recent phenomenon. In Argentina, tips have served not only as sites for the disposal of bodies but also as murder scenes. Many of these other bodies found in such places belong to individuals who have suffered violent deaths, which go on to become public issues, or else are 'politicised deaths'. Focusing on two cases that have received differing degrees of social, political and media attention – Diego Duarte, a 15-year-old boy from a poor background who went waste-picking on an open dump and never came back, and Ángeles Rawson, a girl of 16 murdered in the middle-class neighbourhood of Colegiales, whose body was found in the same tip – this article deals with the social meanings of bodies that appear in landfills. In each case, there followed a series of events that placed a certain construction on the death – and, more importantly, the life – of the victim. Corpses, once recognised, become people, and through this process they are given new life. It is my contention that bodies in rubbish tips express – and configure – not only the limits of the social but also, in some cases, the limits of the human itself.

**Key words:** Bodies, landfill, deaths, politics, Buenos Aires

## Introduction

The appearance of corpses in rubbish tips is not a recent phenomenon. In Argentina, tips have served not only as sites for the disposal of bodies but also as murder scenes. Today, a landfill site run by the Private-State Company for Ecological Coordination in the Metropolitan Area (CEAMSE) occupies this place. The CEAMSE was created in 1977.

Until that point, the city's waste-collection system was based on open-air tips and incinerators in residential buildings. Under the civil-military dictatorship (1976–83) the tips were closed and the new company was established to manage the compaction, transport and disposal of waste in sanitary landfill sites. To this end, two locations were earmarked for levelling, ultimately intended to serve as a green belt. Today the CEAMSE manages three landfill sites.

Over the course of my fieldwork, conducted between 2002 and 2015, I heard dozens of stories from people living in ‘La Quema’ in Bajo Flores, the largest tip in Buenos Aires (and one of the largest in the world), about bodies that had materialised among the rubbish. La Quema was located on what was once an area of wetland covering more than 950 hectares (more than 4 per cent of the city’s total area) on the southernmost edge of the city, in the neighbourhoods of Villa Soldati and Villa Lugano. As well as the rubbish tip, the area contained shanty settlements, warehouses and a waste-incineration furnace. It was the setting for a social world sustained by refuse from the city, transported and dumped there on a daily basis. Interviewees also raised the prospect of dying in the tip, as a consequence either of geography or of La Quema’s distinct composition as a site of violence.<sup>1</sup> Fights in tips were a means of resolving conflicts or of claiming and controlling scavenging territories.

Such deaths were regarded as natural facts of life: this was a slum, the ‘underworld’, and everybody in it was there ‘for a reason.’<sup>2</sup> Many of the victims had led political lives, in the sense of being involved in political resistance.<sup>3</sup>

Tips have also served as places for discarding human remains. Many of these other bodies found in such places belong to individuals who have suffered violent deaths, which go on to become public issues,<sup>4</sup> or else are politicised deaths.<sup>5</sup>

This article draws on fieldwork conducted with those who live or used to live in rubbish tips and the settlements that surround them, and on an analysis of historical, newspaper and literary sources. The fieldwork took place between 2002 and 2015 and included several meetings with collectors of different ages, genders and trajectories who lived in the Greater Buenos Aires region. Ethnography (simultaneously understood as a method, a perspective and a text) was the route to understanding *natives’* universes. My research, then, focused on collectors’ everyday lives. The use of the ethnographic approach was not limited to first-hand data collection. Secondary sources – statistics, census, newspapers, legislation, etc. – were also included in the research.

I hope that this article, focusing on two cases that have received differing degrees of social, political and media attention – Diego Duarte,<sup>6</sup> a 15-year-old boy from a poor background who went waste-picking and never came back, and Ángeles Rawson, a girl of 16 murdered in the middle-class neighbourhood of Colegiales, whose body was found in the same tip – can make a contribution to the social meanings of bodies that appear in these places.

In each case, there followed a series of events that placed a certain construction on the death – and, more importantly, the life – of the victim. Corpses, once recognised, become people, and through this process they are given new life.

It is my contention that bodies in rubbish tips express – and configure – not only the limits of the social (as Agamben would say<sup>7</sup>) but also, in some cases, the limits of the human itself. Latour posits that the word *modern* ‘designates two sets of entirely different practices which must remain distinct if they are to remain effective but have recently begun to be confused. The first set of practices, by “translation”, creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by “purification”, creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of

human beings on the one hand; that of non-humans on the other.<sup>8</sup> Thus, we might be said to live in a kind of naturalistic ontology, following Descola, in which human beings set ourselves apart from nature: '[T]he opposition between nature and culture is not as universal as it is claimed to be.' To Descola, '[n]ot only does it make no sense to anyone except the Moderns, but moreover it appeared only at a late date in the course of the development of Western thought itself.'<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, rather than regarding them only as factual incidents, we can look at bodies in tips and the way they are treated as a starting point for rethinking the distinctions surrounding 'the human' in the discourse of 'the Moderns' from a different angle.

In order to adopt this viewpoint, we must embark on a reconstruction of the remains that were dumped among the rubbish. With respect to the identification of the body of a victim of mass violence, Anstett and Dreyfus have proposed three (chrono)logical phases: destruction, identification and (re)conciliation.<sup>10</sup> I would like to point out the logical phases in these cases too. I will argue that while throwing bodies away as waste can create a dehumanising effect (being dumped in the rubbish), the *re*humanisation of that body (being recognised as human) does not always humanise it. Rather, it can give rise to a differentiating effect. This is because this process is not only dependent on the body in itself, but also on who performs it, how it unfolds and, above all, the chances of the corpse in question being socially humanisable – in other words, who the person once was.

The destination of bodies – their final 'resting place' – is an important matter that relates to how we make sense of and understand situated processes. While, in Argentina, consigning bodies to the cemetery<sup>11</sup> – and, more recently, the crematorium – has come to be seen as the most natural arrangement, in many cases human remains are 'thrown away', hidden and obscured.

'Mass' political violence and genocide have featured prominently in studies on bodies or the absence thereof,<sup>12</sup> demonstrating the need to think about how bodies are treated as a means of reconstructing historical processes. Not so many years ago, Anstett and colleagues<sup>13</sup> stated that

[t]he fate of the body, and particularly that of the corpse [a discomfiting object, but also a piece of evidence, an imprint and a relict], in our view constitutes a fundamental key to understanding genocidal processes and the impact of mass violence on contemporary societies. The study of how the dead body is treated can lead us to an understanding of the impact of mass violence on contemporary societies – from the moment of the infliction of death until the stage when the bodies of the victims are reinstated in a peaceful society.

As I will demonstrate, bodies in rubbish tips (which have received less academic attention, at least in Argentina) can also be understood as a political and ontological aid to understanding the world of the living and the violence of the state, as well as other forms like misogynist violence (which is itself a kind of state violence).

In Argentina these remains attest to both state violence and ways of separating out and categorising human beings. In this respect, this article aims to contribute to our understanding of mass violence (violence on a massive scale, whether or not it

results in massive loss of life) and of the ways in which social imaginaries are shaped by rubbish-tip deaths.

## Death and rubbish tips in Argentina

### Diego

As I said, today the CEAMSE manages three landfill sites. It is estimated that the amount of waste produced by the city and surrounding municipalities covered by these sites (with a total population of almost fifteen million people) is around 18,500 tonnes per day. Between them, the three landfill sites receive more than 17,000 tonnes of solid waste every day. The Norte III Environmental Complex has an area of over 300 hectares and receives waste from twenty-seven municipalities. Unlike La Quema, where scavengers would flock to pick through the waste, the CEAMSE site was designed as an enclosed space located at a distance from the city.<sup>14</sup>

March 2004: As is common practice among residents of the neighbourhoods adjoining the Norte III Environmental Complex of the CEAMSE – the place where much of the city's waste is deposited – two young men, Diego and his brother Federico, had sneaked inside the site to look for items they could sell to buy trainers.<sup>15</sup> The gates to the landfill site are typically opened for one hour each day, allowing a thousand or so people to clamber over the great heaps of rubbish, picking up anything they can sell or use. Local people call this place *la montaña* (the mountain) or *el shopping* – the irony of which must be acknowledged. In Buenos Aires, a *shopping* is a large shopping centre or mall – a space of mass consumption. They used it to draw an analogy, depicting a place where 'you can get anything you want' by raking through the rubbish.

Diego and his brother entered the site in the early hours of the morning, when it was forbidden to do so. The two boys had been living in a slum that faced onto the landfill site for just a short time. Recently orphaned, they had come to Buenos Aires from Formosa, one of the poorest provinces in Argentina, to live with their sister. Diego's life was marked by an accumulation of disadvantage, poverty and marginalisation – so much so that he and Federico needed trainers so they could go to school. Their plan was to look for scrap that they could later sell, using the proceeds to buy some shoes. On entering the site, they were spotted by two police officers who began to chase them, pursuing them with dogs and spotlights. Afraid of the police's notorious mistreatment of young people in the neighbourhood, the boys tried to flee, then attempted to evade the officers by hiding in the mounds of rubbish.<sup>16</sup>

Young people from marginalised backgrounds are routinely mistreated, beaten, detained and killed by the police. At the very least, arrest would mean harsh punishment. At that point, one of the police officers had a lorry driver empty his load right on the place where the boys had hidden. Perhaps they wanted to frighten them and drive them off; perhaps they just wanted to throw rubbish on them; perhaps they intended to kill them. Diego was trapped. His remains stayed hidden for a number of years, until recently, when the discovery of a skull prompted tests to establish whether or not it belonged to him. This was problematic for the investigation, since

the public prosecutor's office, siding with the police, had pointed to the fact that there was no corpse to substantiate the crime.

Without a doubt, in a context such as that of Argentina, and given the conduct of the police and certain elements of the judiciary, these events have the potential to evoke a dictatorial discourse, in reference to people who have 'disappeared'. This is all the more patent because the various military dictatorships repeatedly used rubbish tips to carry out killings or dispose of bodies.<sup>17</sup>

Almost a decade and a half later there has been little advance in the case brought against the police officers in relation to Diego's death. After the skull was found by local residents in 2014 the case was reopened, but progress remains slow and still no one has been convicted. Every now and then some new development is reported in the newspaper.

### *A political death, a depoliticised life*

Diego Duarte's death was a political one as defined by Pita: 'To the extent that it is police power, the outward face of the power of the state, that brought [it] about. Police power and the violence of this power are the clearest manifestation of the sovereign power and its ability to mete out life and death (Agamben, 1998; Foucault, 1992 and 1998).<sup>18</sup> For certain social groups, Diego Duarte's life, like the lives (and deaths) of thousands of young people, was worthless. Such lives can be extinguished; they are expressions of *bare life*.<sup>19</sup> The figure of *Homo sacer* refers to a person whom it is acceptable to kill, but who at the same time may not be sacrificed: he is included through his very exclusion. For Agamben,<sup>20</sup> *Homo sacer* is a conceptual figure that belongs to the margins of the social order: a being who can be killed with total impunity. In Diego's case, this quality of being 'killable' without the killer facing punishment is also expressed in the lack of progress in the prosecution. Picking up on Agamben's idea that the value of life is the central, constitutive expression of society's fundamental biopolitics, we might reflect upon the value ascribed to those who not only 'die like dogs' but are also thrown into the rubbish.<sup>21</sup>

My interviewees, who lived in La Quema or supported themselves through *cirujeo*<sup>22</sup> (waste picking), spoke of the methods employed by security forces during the dictatorship.<sup>23</sup> 'The *milicos* would come over and make you face away from them, all in a row.<sup>24</sup> They'd make us throw away everything we had collected and then they'd pretend to shoot us,' recalls Valentín. As mentioned earlier, throughout the dictatorship rubbish tips seem to have functioned as places where the bodies of murder victims could be discarded.<sup>25</sup> In the collective imagination of the neighbourhood the tip came to be constructed as a space governed by its own rules, where society's refuse (including bodies) was deposited.

My intention here is not to consider the *utility* or otherwise of individuals, nor capitalism's need to produce waste, which encompasses those who work with that waste. Capitalism's perverse effects have been thoroughly studied and need not be rehearsed here. What strikes me as important is not the economic perspective (in fact, by 2004, 98 per cent of all recycled materials in Buenos Aires derived from *cirujeo*) but, to return to Agamben's notion, to consider how the social order is constructed with reference to the margins of the social itself, rather than of the

state.<sup>26</sup> My interest lies in pointing out the existence of ‘killable beings’, allowing ways of classifying and defining human life to be developed. It is in the margins of the social/spatial (the rubbish tip representing a kind of threshold), in the moments when social worlds interact, that the full force of these processes can be observed. The differentiation of human and non-human is constructed and reinforced.

In certain spaces and places the definition of a rubbish tip is not all that straightforward; the ambiguity extends to the bodies that materialise in these spaces. For example, unofficial dumps close to shanty towns are an established part of the landscape in the southern reaches of the city of Buenos Aires. Although prohibited, a variety of ‘illegal’ or ‘irregular’ spaces are used for dumping waste, mostly to be found in marginal areas of the city like the Riachuelo Basin, where shanty towns and informal settlements abound. This lack of a clear demarcation between spaces, people and objects plays a not insignificant role in the construction of boundaries in relation to waste.<sup>27</sup>

It is always helpful to remember that identities are contrastive. In other words, any given form of identification is constructed in response to an ‘other’ from which it distinguishes itself.

Naming is an act of inclusion and of exclusion. The human exists only because there is a non-human; ‘normal’ depends on the existence of things that are abnormal. The way we divide up the world and give it meaning reflects not only what we include but – even more so – what we exclude. In this respect, following Lévi-Strauss, bodies in rubbish tips are ‘good to think’.<sup>28</sup> Lévi-Strauss writes, ‘The animals in totemism cease to be solely or principally creatures which are feared, admired, or envied: their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations. We can understand, too, that natural species are chosen not because they are “good to eat” but because they are “good to think”’.<sup>29</sup>

Rubbish is that which is out of place. Many studies have drawn on Douglas’s concept of pollution to discuss the understanding of waste as a form of dirt that is polluting and so must be kept apart.<sup>30</sup> By analogy, those who work with waste are not only contaminated themselves but are also liable to contaminate others. Dirt is ‘matter out of place’, and it poses a threat to order.<sup>31</sup>

However, as Dimarco rightly warns us, referring to how waste and those whose livelihoods depend on it were conceptualised in Buenos Aires, ‘there is nothing that can be considered “dirty” (or, we might add, “waste”) based on its intrinsic qualities (impurity, uselessness, etc.); rather, things come to occupy this position as a result of a social and historical process of classification and separation.’<sup>32</sup> Diego, like thousands of young people, lived in rubbish and off rubbish. Metonymically speaking, such lives seem to be dehumanised for certain sectors of the population, occupying a liminal space in the margins of the social.

If dirt, which is matter out of place, must be eliminated, something that is a priori completely different seems to happen with certain corpses found in tips. Each death tells us about how the victim lived. In cases where bodies appear in tips, once these remains have turned into individuals we can see that the way society treats them

is based on who they were in life. It is in this way that death is another part of life. Again, here we can see the importance of the rubbish-tip element.

Consequently, we must also consider the social dimension of human remains as transformed into flesh-and-blood people. From this perspective, the relationship with the tip – as the final destination of waste – takes on a set of social meanings derived not from the bodies themselves, but from the deceased as individuals. For this to come about, the remains must be humanised – and paradoxically, in becoming humanised, some of them are transformed into rubbish.

In an ethnographic study on Rio de Janeiro's Medical-Legal Institute, Medeiros<sup>33</sup> refers to the idea of *matar al morto* ('killing the corpse') as a native category for understanding who it was who died and how. With regard to bodies that have appeared in rubbish tips, paradoxically, by giving life to these remains we risk dehumanising the people they were. That is why some of the bodies left among rubbish as rubbish are less disruptive than others.

Systems of classification – just as for Lévi-Strauss animals were 'good to think' – allow us to think from a positive standpoint (ascribing value) or a negative one (lack of value). Thus, bodies in tips and the way they are classified are useful for thinking about the boundaries of the human and the classification systems used by certain social groups. Carman writes: 'If humanity is not an abstract quality of individuals, but rather is constructed and delimited through a person's interaction with other humans (Turner, 2010, p. 59), this quality is also displayed in his or her material activities and everyday interactions with a set of non-human beings and an environment.'<sup>34</sup>

Through opposition, Diego's body and Diego himself as a moral person forming part of a group of killable beings (in being dead and regarded as waste) construct – as we will see with the case of Ángeles Rawson – a complete human being who does not deserve to be dumped like rubbish. Before we move on, however, I would like to highlight something of a constitutive paradox illustrated by Diego's case: bodies in tips, having been dehumanised, must be humanised so that they can be dehumanised anew.<sup>35</sup>

The place where a body is deposited is significant not as a discrete event, determined by the motives of the killer, but as a means of thinking about certain social cues.<sup>36</sup> The environment in which bodies appear not only conveys information; it also shapes a set of geographies in which certain remains are *normal* and others are not. Treated like rubbish, killed in the rubbish, thrown in the rubbish: the act of dumping a body in the rubbish cannot only be considered in terms of the motivation behind it; we must also think about the social impacts that it creates.

### Ángeles

10 June 2013: A 16-year-old girl named Ángeles disappears. Ángeles lived in the neighbourhood of Colegiales in the city of Buenos Aires. One morning she sets out for a gymnastics class she was taking for school. She was never seen alive again. The following day, a body appeared on the premises of the CEAMSE site in José León Suárez, Buenos Aires Province, where refuse from the Colegiales area is taken for disposal. An employee whose job it was to separate waste in a mechanical biological

treatment facility (where non-biodegradable waste is sorted so that anything recyclable is separated out) was checking bags as they passed by on the conveyor belt. Inside one of them, he discovered a body tied at the feet, with a noose around the neck and a bag over the head.

Ángeles was killed by the manager of the building where she lived. Convicting him of the murder, the judge described how this man had tried to abuse his victim and how, when she defended herself:

he strangled her, then tied her at the feet, hands and thighs, placed a green nylon bag with 'Día%' printed on it over her head and tied a rope with several knots around her neck. In this state, he put the victim into a black bin bag before smuggling her into the CEAMSE waste collection and processing system. The compaction machines inflicted bodily injuries consistent with multiple trauma resulting from progressive anterior-posterior crushing of the chest, neck and head. These injuries consisted primarily of fractures to the right collarbone, lower jaw, cervical spine and the base of the skull, which was the cause of death.<sup>37</sup>

If Diego was killable because he was poor, Ángeles' vulnerability derived from the fact that she was a woman, which, for certain men, also placed her in the category of *killable*.

We can only speculate as to the killer's state of mind when he threw the body into the rubbish. Why did he do it? Did he hope that the body would never be found? Did he think it had no further purpose? Was he *taken prisoner* by panic? (An unfortunate phrase often heard in Argentina, which serves to abrogate the perpetrator's agency and guilt.) In this case, the killer was the building manager, who was familiar with the waste-collection system.

Women are the victims of misogynist violence. According to the *Argentina National Register of Femicides*, produced by the Supreme Court of Argentina, in 2016 (the most recent dataset available) there were 254 femicides. In other words, women are dying at a rate of almost one per day (one every thirty-five hours).<sup>38</sup> Almost 50 per cent of female murder victims were aged between 21 and 40, and 13 per cent between 16 and 20. More than 60 per cent were killed by their partners or former partners, 14 per cent by family members, 11 per cent by persons known to them and 8 per cent by strangers (no information is available for the remaining 6 per cent). These figures do not include non-fatal violent attacks or persistent violence against women.

To move from speculation to fact, thousands of women die at the hands of men, and many of them end up in the rubbish. In its report entitled *Analysis of the First 50 Convictions for Femicide in Argentina*, the Special Prosecution Unit for Violence Against Women (UFEM) reports: 'A significant 22% relate to incidents in which the assailant disposed of the victim's body with contempt, by concealing it among rubbish or with the intention of throwing it away. There were cases where the body was wrapped in carrier bags and thrown in a ditch or sewer, dismembered and fed into the waste collection system to make it disappear, or where the body has never been found.'<sup>39</sup>



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### Lives that matter

The landfill site was part of Diego's everyday reality, but Ángeles lived tens of kilometres away. While Diego went there to scavenge for scrap, Ángeles' body made the journey in a bin bag, thereby becoming a piece of refuse. It was thrown into a container before being taken by lorry to a compacting facility, where it was loaded onto the larger lorry which deposited it at the CEAMSE site. The bag ended up in a separation and classification plant worked by waste pickers, like Diego was before he died. It was one of them (a former *cartonero*) who discovered the girl's body on opening the bag.

The case received a great deal of media attention. For example, Ángeles' death was the main story on the front page of the country's best-selling daily newspaper, *Clarín*, on 12 June. The headline read: 'Story of the Day: Shock at a Brutal Crime. Ángeles was found in a rubbish tip and her killers are now being sought'. From then on, the story was featured on six successive front pages, four as the main headline. At the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, the daily *Página 12* put the case on its front page for eight days running (on two days as the main headline). Furthermore, on 19 June it printed a discussion on how the case was being handled by the media. Reporters staked out the family home, and the story was much talked about on social media.

Ángeles' death gradually dropped off the front page but continued to crop up in the capital's newspapers. The trial of the accused was followed closely by the written press, which reported on the progress of the court case and the details that emerged of the crime itself and of how the body had ended up in the rubbish. On 16 July 2015 the headline of daily paper *La Nación* read: 'Ángeles: the maximum sentence for a killing that shocked the country'. It is impossible to ascertain how the public perceived the case. In the days following Ángeles' death, hours of television and radio coverage were undoubtedly given to the murder and the discovery of the body in a landfill site, and newspapers devoted multiple pages to the story. The case was also a frequent topic of conversation among the people of Buenos Aires, many of whom, if asked, will tell you that they remember it even today.

Several studies have examined these kinds of cases – or those with greater social impact – from the idea of 'public outrage', or the effects of the deaths in shaping legislation or perceptions.<sup>40</sup> To do so with this case would be pure speculation. On 12 June *La Nación* published statements from the victim's grandmother, under the headline 'She was treated like garbage'.<sup>41</sup>

The term 'outrage' is fitting, insofar as through the media the story was able to reach and construct a political and media-influenced public.<sup>42</sup> In other words, certain deaths can be elevated to public issues that demand resolution. On social media, the disappearance and subsequent discovery of the body provoked strong reactions, often linking this case of femicide (although it was not framed as such at the time) with high crime rates (in an election year).<sup>43</sup> The point I would like to make is that, while it is impossible to know how the 'public' reacted, we can identify attempts to frame the incident as a problem to be solved, forcing us to at least ask why this was possible.

It is likely that the case sparked the public interest also due to the way the events unfolded. A middle-class girl disappears on her way to school. Maybe it was an abduction or a case of ‘criminality’; the next day her body appears in a landfill site. From this point on, a number of imaginaries come into play. Now that there is a body, there can be no more suggestion that she might have escaped. The speculation continues: was she raped? Did she know her killer? How could such a thing happen? Next, the search for suspects begins. At first, suspicion falls on the stepfather, then the half-brother. However, as Pereyra<sup>44</sup> points out in his study of corruption in Argentina, an ‘incident’ does not necessarily have to grow into a phenomenon to constitute a (public) issue. By the same token, an event (a death, the discovery of a body) is a construction that has no existence outside of the processes through which it is constructed. Indeed, even if it was judged to be a femicide, the case was not treated as such at the time. Instead, it was seen as being linked to ‘criminality’, a topical issue in Argentina. The place where the body was discarded, and the ideas of the ‘tip’ and ‘rubbish’ dominated discussions on social media and in the newspapers.

‘We deserve a country with no more cases like Ángeles’, declared a headline in *Clarín* on 12 June 2013.<sup>45</sup> While some deaths demand a solution, others, in contrast, do not. Pita suggests that ‘the actions of the relatives’ of young people (from low-income backgrounds) murdered by the police

are aimed at a post facto restoration of the humanity of these victims, who give the impression, due to the circumstances of their deaths, of being killable. Such actions form the organising axis for the politicisation of these deaths through protest (...) driven by the desire to rewrite the deaths. If, as [Octavio] Paz (1994) suggests, we die as we live, and if an individual *dies like a dog*, it becomes necessary to change the meaning of that death, with a story about the event that takes the form of an allegation, denouncing the circumstances that led to it and thereby allowing the corpse to be presented as a person (Agamben, 1998).<sup>46</sup>

There is no question that violence inflicted on women by men is a social issue associated with hierarchies and ways of understanding equality. The death of a woman, then, should be treated as such: as a femicide, not a consequence of ‘criminality’.

The problem with gender-based violence is that, while the issue exists, it occupies a different moral position to violence affecting young people with no future.

If the default condition of the Diegos of this world is that of being ‘killable’, the reverse is true of young people like Ángeles. It was the fact that she died and was discovered in a landfill site that was so horrifying, allowing the media to talk about an ‘outrage’.

Elias writes that ‘The way a person dies depends not least on whether and how far he or she has been able to set goals and to reach them, to set tasks and perform them.’<sup>47</sup> Ángeles’ death was a meaningless one, but not only because of her youth. Diego was also very young, just like the dozens of other young people killed by the police. The horror lies in the fact of a life ending before it should.

Here we return to the core of the argument about what is human, and about rubbish tips as spaces where bodies are discarded and discovered. Ángeles had her whole life ahead of her; she had potential. ‘She had the best average grade in her school. Her life was cut short, and her family’s lives were shattered. I’m asking you to join us in taking action to prevent any more cases like Ángeles,’ said the girl’s grandmother to the press.<sup>48</sup> Murdered women, killable women, young people with their lives ahead of them: the arguments and discourses are not always linear, nor uncontested.

The polar opposite of rubbish is purity, and if dirt is out of place in society, purity is out of place among things that are impure. Ángeles was out of place in the tip, in being ‘treated like garbage.’ Her body did not belong in this space, because her life did not. If, in Diego’s case, the lack of a body furnished a means of erasing his existence, the humanisation of Ángeles’ body contributed to the sense of horror expressed by the public and the media. We must recognise Ángeles in that body.

### **On bodies and bodies in rubbish tips: by way of conclusion**

Beyond any speculation that we might engage in with respect to an assailant’s motives in discarding a victim’s body in a tip, there are a number of questions we might consider.

My intention was to explore the implications of bodies in rubbish dumps from the perspective of modernity, and how the reinscription of victims’ bodies in pacified societies helps us to comprehend not only mass violence but violence on a massive scale, which can be understood only by looking at the victims’ lives.

The humanist vision of equality has always been a utopia, a conviction held by certain social groups or a field of action. In practice the boundaries between beings that are more and less human find expression on a daily basis, and the way their deaths are portrayed is revealing. Lomnitz takes issue with the idea found in European studies of ‘death as a leveller’, arguing that while it may have helped to shape a sense of spiritual and political community where enemies were eliminated or kept out, it also masked the different degrees of vulnerability to the causes of death among the European social classes. As Lomnitz notes, there is usually a disjunction between how people react to the death of a group member, on the one hand, and to the demise of a stranger or enemy, on the other.<sup>49</sup>

Human remains discovered in rubbish tips become socially differentiated from the moment they are recognised as people. This is what I have identified as the process of (de)humanisation–recognition–(de)humanisation through recognition.

Inequalities in life lead to inequalities in death, because each death is associated with a life. Inequalities in life are not erased by death; on the contrary, they are often reinforced by it. While rubbish tips have repeatedly emerged as places where human remains can be discarded, they do not form part of the geography of the state of exception. It is precisely the social dimension of the body and the life it represents (the lives of certain killable beings) that gives these bodies their identity.

Millar<sup>50</sup> has argued that Douglas’s famous conceptualisation of dirt as that which is out of place (and whereby ‘dirt is what gets eliminated in the human effort to

create meaningful order out of what is an inherently chaotic world. Dirt offends and disgusts us precisely because its presence threatens the integrity of the order we have produced') frequently explains the placement (physical, social and symbolic) of rubbish tips – in Millar's work, in the context of Rio de Janeiro – but tells us little about what happens once the rubbish has been deposited. Douglas refers to dirt in a symbolic, rather than material, sense. Dirt and waste, for their part, are not synonymous. It is possible for waste to be clean or for dirty objects to remain in use. A great deal of moral work must go into the process of classification, and it is the act of disqualification that makes something waste.<sup>51</sup>

In this way, for example, certain objects have a 'second life', with this cycle governed by moral, political and power-based economies.<sup>52</sup> If waste is, both physically and metaphorically, the stuff of politics and morality,<sup>53</sup> based on how waste is managed, then bodies that appear in rubbish tips instigate a new, second life for the people they once were. In this context, we need to return to Douglas's work on how order is constructed.

As Descola<sup>54</sup> argues, the opposition between nature and culture is not as 'natural' as it appears, nor is our ontology as naturalistic as we think. Diego's death was the death of a killable being. The lives of such individuals, although dehumanised, are simultaneously rehumanised in a collective way, and they persist in the collective imagination.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, 'hybrid' bodies undergo a kind of purification<sup>56</sup> when thrown in the rubbish, which allows us to perpetuate the idea of a 'modern' order.

In Ángeles' case we see a different reality. On the one hand, the body was that of a young woman with her whole life ahead of her. She was not 'garbage', and so her body was out of place in the tip. On the other hand, the case illustrates how violence against women also renders them killable. The current political struggle over gender-based violence seeks to problematise violence against women and to break away from the notion of 'criminality', instead positioning this violence as a social issue driven by unequal gender relations. Ángeles' death, then, must be understood in this context.

The deaths of people like Diego are not understandable outside Argentina's long – and especially its recent – authoritarian history. I would thus argue that these cases show different sides violence. On the one hand, the case shows the history of the recent Argentinean state. But, on the other hand, and this is my point here, the state violence is combined not only with usual 'political ideals' but with a conception of 'lives worth living' that are remaking the frontiers of humanity. In Argentina many young men and women from marginalised classes are killed. The attention that these deaths receive, or not, represents an interesting point for understanding notions of human being.

It is necessary, then, to have an intersectional perspective in order to have a full understanding of these deaths. In this sense, a comparison with other cases of femicide in Argentina and how they were treated could give some further clues. Many cases of murdered young people from the lower classes were built as if the victims deserved their death.

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By unmasking violence and moving beyond the idea of criminality – the angle from which Ángeles' death was portrayed – and placing it in the context of social processes – like the idea of *bare life*, in Diego's case – we can see the stark opposition between these two cases. The idea of criminality corresponds to a sentiment similar to the one Castel describes.<sup>57</sup> By socially inscribing bodies that materialise in the rubbish, we can approach an explanation of how today's inequalities operate, to the extent of creating distinctions between beings that are more and less human – between those that are killable and those with a right to a future, to a life.

## Notes

Translated from Spanish by Cadenza Academic Translations

- 1 M. Perelman, 'Viejos y nuevos cirujas. Construcciones temporales y espaciales en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires', *Cuadernos de antropología social*, 42 (2015), 125–41.
- 2 The relationship between criminality, marginality and the ability to subsist on waste has been a recurring discourse for at least two centuries. M. Perelman, 'La construcción de la idea de trabajo digno en cirujas de la ciudad de Buenos Aires', *Intersecciones en Antropología*, 12 (2011), 69–81. S. Gayol and G. Kessler, 'Introducción. Violencias, delitos y justicias: una aproximación histórica', in S. Gayol and G. Kessler (eds), *Violencias, delitos y justicias en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, Manantial-UNGS, 2002), pp. 13–38.
- 3 M. Pita, *Formas de morir y formas de vivir. El activismo contra la violencia policial* (Buenos Aires, Editores del Puerto y CELS, 2010), p. 22.
- 4 S. Gayol and G. Kessler (eds), *Muerte, política y sociedad en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, Edhasa, 2015).
- 5 Here I take up Pita's (*Formas de morir y formas de vivir*) idea that deaths become politicised through an active process on the part of certain social groups who engage in a negotiation over these individuals, who, having been stripped of their humanity, are consequently eligible to be killed.
- 6 For a more in-depth account of events surrounding the death of Diego Duarte, see A. D. Ortiz, *Quién mató a Diego Duarte? [Who Killed Diego Duarte?]* (Buenos Aires, Aguilar, 2010).
- 7 G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1995).
- 8 B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 10.
- 9 P. Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. xviii.
- 10 E. Anstett, J. M. Dreyfus and S. Garibian, 'Introduction', in E. Anstett and J. M. Dreyfus (eds), *Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), pp. 11–16.
- 11 C. Del Cueto and J. I. Piovani, 'El mercado de la muerte: cementerios, memoriales y jardines de paz en Buenos Aires', in S. Gayol and G. Kessler (eds), *Muerte, política y sociedad en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, Edhasa, 2015), pp. 301–32.

- 12 E. Anstett and J. M. Dreyfus (eds), *Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014); E. Anstett and J. M. Dreyfus (eds), *Destruction and Human Remains: Disposal and Concealment in Genocide and Mass Violence* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014); E. Anstett and J.-M. Dreyfus (eds), *Human Remains and Identification. Mass Violence, Genocide, and the 'Forensic Turn'* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015).
- 13 E. Anstett, J. M. Dreyfus and S. Garibian, 'Introducción', in E. Anstett, J. M. Dreyfus and S. Garibian (eds), *Cadáveres impensables, cadáveres impensados: el tratamiento de los cuerpos en las violencias de masa y los genocidios* (Buenos Aires, Miño y Dávila, 2013), p. 12.
- 14 The creation of the CEAMSE was part of an attempt to radically transform the city. The last civic dictatorship not only closed the dumps but also prohibited the informal collection of waste. The *cirujas* were part of dual process of stigmatisation: as collectors and as poor. O. Oszlak, *Merecer la ciudad* (Buenos Aires: CENDES, 1992); M. Perelman, 'Caracterizando la recolección informal en buenos aires, 2001–2007', *Latin American Research Review*, 47, Special Issue (2012), 49–69.
- 15 This article refers to the CEAMSE landfill site known as the Norte III Environmental Complex, located in the José León Suárez district in the *partido* of San Martín.
- 16 [www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/sociedad/3-241967-2014-03-17.html](http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/sociedad/3-241967-2014-03-17.html). See also Ortíz, *Quién mató a Diego Duarte?*
- 17 For an understanding of the disappearing power of the dictatorship see P. Clavier, *Powder y desaparición* (Buenos Aires, Colihue, 1998). For an analysis of the different forms of repression and disappearing technologies at the regional, national and local level see G. Ágila, S. Garaño and P. Scatizza (eds), *Represioin estatal y violencia paraestatal en la historia reciente argentina* (La Plata, UNLR, 2016).
- 18 Pita, *Formas de morir y formas de vivir*, p. 21.
- 19 I refer here to Pita's work, from whom this idea is borrowed. In his study of activism against police violence, Pita describes how young people have died at the hands of the police: shot, tortured or beaten; treated with brutality, they 'died like dogs': 'like you would kill an animal'. In Pita's (*Formas de morir y formas de vivir*, p. 114) words: 'to "die like a dog" alludes to *bare life* in an almost metonymic way, in the sense that the dog represents the locus of the asocial, the inhuman, that which (not who) can be struck, beaten, slain in the street, finished off in a patch of field, without – at least initially – this act having any more meaning than the snuffing out of a life that is biological and not social. The dehumanisation of the victim, the body exposed to violent death, stripped of all rights, abandoned, killed *like a dog*, testifies to the existence of a pure violence that can be delivered on *killable beings*.'
- 20 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 71.
- 21 Following Agamben, Bauman has gone further, declaring that '*homo sacer* is the principal category of human waste laid out in the course of the production of orderly (law abiding, rule governed) sovereign realms'. Z. Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge, Polity, 2013), p. 32.

- 22 *Cirujeo* is the term used to describe informal rubbish collecting in the city of Buenos Aires. It is likely that *cirujeo* derives from the word *cirujano* (surgeon) and that the term *cirujas* was initially used for those who used hooks and knives to butcher animal carcasses left in open waste dumps in nineteenth-century Buenos Aires. This usage persisted up until the twentieth century. Following the 2001 economic crisis, *cirujeo* began to be used alongside *cartoneros*, also describing those who gather rubbish, predominantly cardboard (*cartón*). Later, the term ‘*recuperadores urbanos*’ (urban reclaimers) made its appearance, acknowledging the environmental aspect of this work. More information is available (in Spanish) on the website *ABCDario de la segunda vida de los objetos* (<https://dvo.hypotheses.org/2176>).
- 23 The civil-military dictatorship conducted a systematic programme of murder and ‘disappearance’. Some of the victims were buried in mass graves or in cemeteries; others were thrown into the sea or river from aeroplanes (in what have come to be known as the ‘death flights’). The judicial morgue was also used for processing the bodies of murder victims. M. J. Sarraibayrouse Oliveira, *Poder judicial y dictadura: el caso de la morgue* (Buenos Aires, Editores del Puerto – CELS, 2011).
- 24 A pejorative term for ‘soldier’ in Argentina.
- 25 Other researchers have collected similar accounts, including Emilia Schijman, who carried out fieldwork with residents of housing complexes in the Villa Soldati neighbourhood, bordering La Quema.
- 26 V. Das and D. Poole (eds), *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (Oxford, School for American Research Press, 2004).
- 27 In her study of measures implemented as part of an ‘environmental initiative’, the clean-up of the Matanza–Riachuelo Basin – which entailed the relocation of populations living along the banks of the polluted river – Carman illustrates the process of dehumanisation by looking at how people were valued by others (and by themselves); they were, among other things, ‘treated like garbage’. According to Carman, human life has less value in certain social groups (i.e. the poor). M. Carman, *Las fronteras de lo humano. Cuando la vida humana pierde valor y la vida animal se dignifica* (Buenos Aires, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2017), p. 64.
- 28 I have borrowed this idea from Guyer, who adapts it as part of a bricolage approach to the study of money. J. Guyer, ‘Money is Good to Think: From “Wants of the Mind” to Conversations, Stories, and Accounts’, in K. Hart (ed.), *Money in a Human Economy* (New York, Berghahn Books, 2017), pp. 43–60.
- 29 C. Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 2016).
- 30 For an analysis of rubbish as ‘out of place’ in the city of Buenos Aires, see R. Whitson, ‘Negotiating Place and Value: Geographies of Waste and Scavenging in Buenos Aires’, *Antipode*, 43:4 (2011), 1404–33.
- 31 M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, Routledge, 2010).
- 32 S. Dimarco, ‘De lo patógeno a lo ambiental: disputas de sentido en torno a la clasificación de residuos’, *Revista mexicana de sociología*, 74:2 (2012), p. 188.
- 33 F. Medeiros, ‘“Matar o morto”. A construção institucional de mortos no Instituto Médico-Legal do Rio de Janeiro’, Master’s thesis, Programa de Pós-Graduação

- em Antropologia, do ICHeF (Niterói, Universidade Federal Fluminense, 2012).
- 34 Carman, *Las fronteras de lo humano*, p. 27.
- 35 I have not discussed the efforts and actions to rehumanise bodies. See Pita, *Formas de morir y formas de vivir*. In any case, if something must be humanised it is because it is not, a priori, regarded as human (or else it is a 'hybrid', after Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*).
- 36 In my view, it is possible to consider the social character of individual events, but not only in terms of the motives behind, say, misogynist violence and the ways that violence is expressed, but also in terms of the 'social response' that such cases elicit. The cases described in this article fall within the context of a variety of actions in relation to lower-income sectors of the population, who have been regarded as 'killable' (Pita, *Formas de morir y formas de vivir*). From another perspective, a similar conception can be found in Carman, *Las fronteras de lo humano*, as the loss of value of certain human lives.
- 37 Sentencia, Buenos Aires 24 de Agosto de 2015. Poder Judicial de la Nación. TRIBUNAL ORAL EN LO CRIMINAL NRO. 9 DE LA CAPITAL FEDERAL CCC 29907/2013/TO2, pp. 1–2.
- 38 [www.csjn.gov.ar/om/docs/femicidios\\_2016.pdf](http://www.csjn.gov.ar/om/docs/femicidios_2016.pdf) (accessed 13 June 2018).
- 39 Unidad Fiscal Especializada en Violencia contra las Mujeres (UFEM), *Análisis de las primeras 50 sentencias por femicidio del país. Artículo 80 inciso 11 del Código Penal. A 5 años de la Ley 26.791.*, p. 26. Available (in Spanish) at: [www.fiscales.gob.ar/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/UFEM-Analisis\\_50\\_primeras\\_sentencias\\_femicidio.pdf](http://www.fiscales.gob.ar/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/UFEM-Analisis_50_primeras_sentencias_femicidio.pdf) (accessed 19 February 2018).
- 40 M. F. Gentile and M. C. Zapiola, 'Cuando matan los chicos "Monstruos", "salvajes" y "menores"', in S. Gayol and G. Kessler (eds), *Violencias, delitos y justicias en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, Manantial-UNGS, 2002), pp. 135–56; G. Kessler and S. Galar, 'El caso Píparo: muerte, conmoción y cambios', in S. Gayol and G. Kessler (eds), *Violencias, delitos y justicias en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, Manantial-UNGS, 2002), pp. 179–202; C. Schillagi, 'La muerte como causa pública. Denuncia y construcción de la legitimidad en dos casos paradigmáticos', in S. Gayol and G. Kessler (eds), *Violencias, delitos y justicias en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, Manantial-UNGS, 2002), pp. 157–78.
- 41 [www.lanacion.com.ar/1591099-la-trataron-como-un-desperdicio](http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1591099-la-trataron-como-un-desperdicio) (accessed 13 June 2018).
- 42 D. Cefaï and D. Pasquier, 'Introduction', in D. Cefaï and D. Pasquier (eds), *Les sens du public: publics politiques, publics médiatiques* (Paris, PUF, 2003), pp. 13–59.
- 43 [https://elpais.com/internacional/2013/06/12/actualidad/1371066892\\_000593.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2013/06/12/actualidad/1371066892_000593.html) (accessed 13 June 2018); [www.infonews.com/nota/81601/la-inseguridad-como-coartada](http://www.infonews.com/nota/81601/la-inseguridad-como-coartada) (accessed 13 June 2018). According to survey data, the greatest public concern in Argentina in 2013 was *inseguridad* ('criminality'), a rather difficult concept to pin down ([www.infobae.com/2013/11/02/1520861-la-inseguridad-y-la-inflacion-son-las-principales-preocupaciones-los-argentinos/](http://www.infobae.com/2013/11/02/1520861-la-inseguridad-y-la-inflacion-son-las-principales-preocupaciones-los-argentinos/)). For a discussion of perceptions of crime in Argentina, see G. Kessler, *El sentimiento*



- de inseguridad. Sociología del temor al delito* (Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI Editores, 2009). Furthermore, young people are often viewed as being a fundamental part of the problem of high crime rates as the perpetrators of crime. It must be stressed, however, that this is a mental construct rather than an accurate assessment, given that the number of 'offences' committed by young people is very small. On the other hand, it is possible to point to certain forms of police control exercised over groups and populations of young people. See S. Tiscornia, *Activismo de los derechos humanos y burocracias estatales. El caso Walter Bulacio* (Buenos Aires, Editores del Puerto – CELS, 2008).
- 44 S. Pereyra, 'Critique de la politique, expertise et transparence. La corruption en tant que problème public en Argentine (1989–2001)', Ph.D. dissertation in Sociology, Paris, EHESS, 2010.
- 45 [www.clarin.com/policiales/merecemos-pais-Angeles\\_0\\_rkAeoHwiPXx.html](http://www.clarin.com/policiales/merecemos-pais-Angeles_0_rkAeoHwiPXx.html) (accessed 13 June 2018).
- 46 M. Pita, *Formas de morir y formas de vivir*, p. 109.
- 47 N. Elias, *The Loneliness of the Dying* (New York, Continuum, 2001), p. 62.
- 48 This particular quotation was picked up by *La Nación* and *Clarín*.
- 49 C. Lomnitz, *Idea de la muerte en México* (México, DF: FCE, 2006).
- 50 K. Millar, *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press 2018), p. 30.
- 51 I am grateful to Élisabeth Anstett for this observation.
- 52 E. Anstett and N. Ortar, 'Introduction. Qu'est-ce que récupérer?' in E. Anstett and N. Ortar (eds), *La deuxième vie des objets. Recyclage et récupération dans les sociétés contemporaines* (Paris, Petra, 2015), pp. 7–14.
- 53 G. Hawkins, 'Repenser le déchet: de l'éthique au matériau politique', in N. Ortar and E. Anstett (eds), *Jeux de pouvoir dans nos poubelles. Économies morales et politiques du recyclage au tournant du XXIe siècle* (Paris, Petra, 2017), pp. 43–60.
- 54 Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*.
- 55 I refer not only to the forms of activism studied by Pita, which I mentioned earlier, but to a series of social and spatial markers that serve to bring the dead into the world of the living. As part of the discourse of modernity we tend to forget that the dead live on in the living in multiple ways – kinship being the most obvious.
- 56 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.
- 57 R. Castel, *La montée des incertitudes. Travail, protections, statut de l'individu* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2009).