

**EWA DOMAŃSKA, *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała* [*Nekros. An Introduction to the Ontology of the Dead Body*], Warsaw 2017, PWN, 370 pp. ISBN 978-83-01-19462-8**

One of the most urgent and disturbing aspects of contemporary global environmental crisis is the current rapid extinction of species. The loss of species is so serious and dramatic that it's now estimated that the rate of extinction is between 100 and 1000 times higher than the normally occurring one. Unlike the previous five great extinction events this one is driven almost entirely by human activity: through fragmenting habitats, overfishing, introducing pathogens and non-native species, hunting, and climate change.<sup>1</sup> Such crisis prompts a recognition of a profound inter-dependency between various types of bodies: human, animal, plant, dead and alive, as well as bodies of land and water and puts questions of extinction and survival, risk and shared vulnerability, responsibility and care on the agenda. In face of all this, many recognize a need for new modes of theorizing that would abandon human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism and instead focus on thinking through and with multispecies communities of which human is only a part.<sup>2</sup> It is against this background that I suggest to read Ewa Domańska's book *Nekros. An Introduction to The Ontology of The Dead Body*. Published in Polish in 2017 by PWN – Polish Scientific Publishers, *Nekros* is an attempt to reflect on the material and environmental aspects of death and dead matter. When mass dying appears to be a condition of living under the Anthropocene – our contemporary planetary status in which humans cause irreversible damage to biodiversity – Domańska asks in a posthumanist fashion about the impact of that which, literarily, remains after the death of the human, namely, human remains. While inquiring into the ontological status, cultural meaning, and environmental impact of human remains, her book makes a timely inter-

- 1 ANTHONY BARNOSKY, *Has the Earth's Sixth Mass Extinction Already Arrived?*, *Nature* 471/2001, pp. 51–57.
- 2 VAL PLUMWOOD, *Nature in the Active Voice*, *Australian Humanities Review* 46/2009, pp. 113–29; STACY ALAIMO, *Bodily Natures. Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Bloomington 2010; ASTRIDA NEIMANIS, CECILIA ÅSBERG, JOHAN HEDRÉN, *Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities. Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene*, *Ethics and the Environment* 20/2015, pp. 67–97.

vention offering new insights into fundamental questions about life and death, the human and the non-human, and our responsibility in times of the ongoing human-made extinction.

In studies looking at the material aspects of human remains taken from the perspective of human and social sciences, the concept of a deathscape is used to denote special spaces such as cemeteries and morgues where dead bodies are taken care of, managed, and disposed of. These spaces are typically separated from the living and the daily flow of life.<sup>3</sup> But the question of dead human bodies – dead matter, corpses, human remains – can hardly be relegated to these separated and enclosed enclaves. It has always been a deeply political, ethical, and spiritual one. In the 70s, Indigenous activists from North America, Hawaii, and Australia organised movements to reclaim and repatriate remains of their ancestors sequestered in natural history museums and anatomic collections all over the world, forcing museum experts and anthropologists to revisit their approach to racialized dead human bodies as objects of study and/or artifacts.<sup>4</sup> In other contexts, open-casket processions and public funerals were used in protests against military violence, discrimination, and injustice – one among many such examples were political funerals organised by AIDS activists from Act up. In a protest against American government's failure to respond to AIDS crisis, activists would, e.g., scatter ashes of the victims of the AIDS pandemic on the White House lawn in Washington. Human remains not only penetrate the world of the living but also form part of multiple struggles to reclaim the value and meaning of those lives and bodies that are deemed “ungrievable” or “*unburiable*”.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, the political meaning of dead bodies, and on the other, environmental concerns and the scale of today's mass death due to ecological crisis together call for new ways of approaching the questions of death, dead matter, human remains and their treatment. Dead bodies bring forth questions that are simultaneously political, ontological, environment-related, existential, ethical, and pragmatic. Against this backdrop, *Nekros* challenges the idea of a separation between the living and the dead by taking a political, material vitalist, and ecological perspective towards human remains. This approach encourages the

3 AVRLI MADDRELL, JAMES D. SIDAWAY, *Deathscapes. Spaces for Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance*, Farnham 2010.

4 *Repatriation Reader. Who Owns American Indian Remains*, (ed.) DEVON A. MIHESUAH, Lincoln 2000; WINONA LADUKE, *Recovering the Sacred. The Power of Naming and Claiming*, Cambridge 2005.

5 JUDITH BUTLER, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, New York 2004.

reader to think about death and dead matter in terms of relations, enmeshment, transformation, and a constant creation of new forms of life.<sup>6</sup>

It took Ewa Domańska over fifteen years to complete this book. She travelled from Poland to Japan, to Argentina and the United States, to conduct archival research, visit museums and necropolises, interview funeral homes' directors, forensic experts, and relatives mourning their loved ones. Ewa Domańska is a Polish historian whose work fosters "radically interdisciplinary", postconventional approaches to historical narrativity. She authored, among others, *Existential History* (2012, in Polish)<sup>7</sup> and *Unconventional Histories: Reflections on the Past in the New Humanities* (2006, in Polish)<sup>8</sup>, along with multiple edited collections and articles about methodology, history, posthumanism, and the nonhuman life. In *Nekros*, Domańska is interested in uncovering the manifold meanings and aspects of *nekros* – *nekros* being dead body, but also a body in a process of necrotic transformation, the "becoming-dead". Domańska summarizes that the aim of her book is "to endow human corpses and remains with subjectivity, to show their agency that rests beyond their solely cultural or symbolical meaning, and to de-objectify the corpse – to accept the dead body as it is. This may help us answer the questions of what to do with dead bodies".<sup>9</sup> She situates this study in dialogue with life sciences, bringing the perspectives of biology, ecology, geography, forensic science, and experiments within emerging theoretical trends such as planetary humanities, posthumanities, and biohumanities. From these perspectives, Domańska looks at human remains as organic matter undergoing metamorphosis: matter on its way to become soil, a crystal, or a tree. Such approach allows her to discuss environmental aspects of management and disposal of human corpses, such as environmental impact of toxins contained by bodies deposited in the ground or *environmentally friendly body disposal practices like* flameless cremation, mushroom burial suits, or biodegradable burials. In *Nekros*, these discussions go hand in hand with philosophical reflections on the status of the dead body and its role in troubling and upsetting the human/nonhuman, life/death dichotomies. This way of thinking about dead matter is rooted

6 EWA DOMAŃSKA, *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała* [*Nekros. An Introduction to the Ontology of the Dead Body*], Warsaw 2017, p. 379.

7 EWA DOMAŃSKA, *Historia egzystencjalna. Krytyczne studium narratywizmu i humanistyki zaangażowanej* [*Existential History. Critical Approach to Narrativism and Emancipatory Humanities*], Warsaw 2012.

8 EWA DOMAŃSKA, *Historie niekonwencjonalne: refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce* [*Unconventional Histories. Reflections on the Past in the New Humanities*], Poznań 2006.

9 E. DOMAŃSKA, *Nekros*, p. 227.

in author's vitalist and ecological understanding of death as an integral part of life processes. On the one hand, Domańska takes a posthumanist perspective in which human body and its parts are understood as, simply put, matter. On the other, dead human body is seen as agential: capable of forming and affecting its environment, it takes part in larger terramorphic processes.

*Nekros* is divided into two parts. The first one, entitled "Necro-politics", concerns dead body politics. It analyses how dead bodies are used in service of political interests, specifically when they are co-opted by nationalist discourses. While some readers may be familiar with, e.g., a study by Young and Light<sup>10</sup> in which they describe how moving and repeated reburials of the body of a Romanian politician Petru Groza was used to either highlight or forget the country's socialist past, *Nekros* offers other interesting case studies that reveal how exhumation and/or moving bodies has been used to re-inscribe space with political meanings and how bodies of the dead are used in the name of ideology. Domańska calls out the kind of violence that is inflicted on bodies typically understood as devoid of interests, will, or rights of their own. While in "Necro-politics" Domańska discusses an array of topics: the case of near-to-death inmates of the Nazi concentration camps, the role of forensics in understanding history, controversies around politically-motivated exhumations, I see her reflections as, at least partly, a way to grapple with the experience of living in a post-genocidal space. Poland as a space of mass graves, abandoned cemeteries, and former death camps turns out to be in itself a peculiar deathscape prompting the scholar to ask about both material presence and political uses of dead human bodies.

The second part of the book, called "Eko-nekro," examines the properties of (dead) matter, its ability to enter other material states and constellations, to morph and create. Here, Ewa Domańska explores a phenomenon of necro-metamorphosis: a transformation of human remains occurring under natural or technological factors. She focuses on two forms of natural metamorphosis: becoming soil, in which bodies deposited in the earth undergo biological processes of decomposition that create cemetery as a complex ecology, and becoming a tree (discussion around organic *burial pods* through which the *human* body transforms into nutrients for a *tree* to help it grow). These discussions are complemented with an analysis of two technological metamorphoses: adherence – illustrated by the case "nuclear shadows" of Hiroshima, a result of the atomic bomb explosion

10 CRAIG YOUNG, DUNCAN LIGHT, *Corpses, Dead Body Politics and Agency in Human Geography. Following the Corpse of Dr Petru Groza*, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 38/2013, pp. 135–148.

in a wake of which victims' bodies were pressed onto the ground and left a dark spot on the surface – and crystallization, a chemical process that results in creating synthetic diamonds from human ashes (so called memorial diamonds). These metamorphoses are seen by the author as seedlings potentially capable of giving birth to new cyborgs – new forms of posthuman life. For in *Nekros*, the process of un-becoming human opens towards other forms of being and different forms of environmental co-existence. While describing material metamorphosis enabled by death, Domańska's voice resonates with the work of feminist vitalist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, for whom death is a “creative synthesis of flows, energies and perpetual becoming”<sup>11</sup> or Jane Bennett's materialism with her idea of vibrancy and agency attributed to matter.<sup>12</sup> While Ewa Domańska's *Nekros* clearly articulates its political, ethical, and environmental stakes, it would be fascinating to see her reflection further supported by a feminist intersectional approach to flesh out the human (dead) body as transient and interconnected with other life forms, and, simultaneously, as a racialized and gendered body.

There are more fascinating connections that run between Ewa Domańska's theorizing in *Nekros* and contemporary feminist environmental thought. In “Eko-nekro” Domańska develops an ecological perspective towards dead matter in which dead bodies are seen as participants in a multispecies community – she calls such a community a Necro-Ecumene (from Greek *ecumene*: the inhabited world). Her ideas reverberate with other projects of multispecies coexistence offered by e.g. Isabelle Stengers (cosmopolis), Donna Haraway (companion species), or Deborah Bird Rose (entangled multispecies communities). Necro-Ecumene is a community of humans and non-humans embedded in humus: humus is soil rich in organic matter but it's also an idea, developed by Donna Haraway, that imagines posthuman enmeshment and conviviality with different forms of life. To dismantle human exceptionalism and create multispecies kinships and communities, Haraway suggests taking the human “in the direction of humus, into the soil, into the multispecies, biotic and abiotic working of the Earth, the earthly ones, those who are in and of the Earth, and for the Earth. Humus is what is made in soils and in compost, for those who would nurture the Earth”<sup>13</sup> (Haraway, Franklin 2017: 2). Humus or compost is a posthuman condition that nurtures earthy interconnections, accounting for their complexity

11 ROSI BRAIDOTTI, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge 2013, p. 131.

12 JANE BENNETT, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham 2010.

13 DONNA HARAWAY, SARAH FRANKLIN, *Staying with the Manifesto. An Interview with Donna Haraway*, *Theory, Culture & Society* 28/2017, pp. 1–15, see p. 2.

and a process of becoming other, so compellingly made apparent in necrotic transformations described by Domańska.

*Nekros* is an important and fascinating study that develops a posthuman, ecological, and multispecies approach to matter. While taking seriously the question of dead human matter, Domańska's book repositions humans' central place in the hierarchy of being and laughs off the anthropocentric hubris – for in the end we all end up as soil or a tree, or, like it or not, as compost.

*Olga Cielemecka*