

**Necrolife. Necropsies, Dead Bodies, and Cadaveric
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ción Cadavérica en Colombia**

**Necrovida. Necropsias, Mortos, e Decomposição
Cadavérica na Colômbia**

Julia Alejandra Morales Fontanilla**

Ph.D. Candidate ABD, Graduate Group Cultural Studies, University of California Davis
Correo electrónico: jmoralesfontanilla@ucdavis.edu

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***Artículo de investigación:** Based in two years of ethnographic work at the morgues the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences in Colombia (INML), I describe a specific case of a necropsy to suggest that they as practice are an entanglement of relations between human and more-than-human actors.

Con base en dos años de trabajo etnográfico en las morgues del Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses (INML), en este escrito sugiero que en tanto que prácticas las necropsias son un entramado de relaciones complejas entre actores humanos y más-que-humanos.

**A Ph.D. candidate in the Cultural Studies Graduate Group, University of California Davis, holds a BA in Cultural Studies and Literature from Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá Colombia. Before arriving at UC Davis she held an adjunct position in the School of Social Sciences of Universidad de los Andes. Her dissertation research is an ethnographic study of the public morgues of the cities of Villavicencio, Medellín and Bogotá, of the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences of Colombia. Drawing from two years of empirical research she proposes the concept of *necrolife* to think the modes in which medico scientific practices inside the morgue make both the materiality of the dead and death – and, in this way find an attunement with the modes the life of dead bodies emerges in inside the morgues.



Abstract

Biological human life materializes conceptually, and beyond, through a differential exercise with death: That which is dead is not alive. In this, death is a definitive event that allows for the difference to hold. With that difference as a generative tension, my work here and elsewhere interrogates what happens to human bodies after they die. This concern has allowed me to put forward the notion of *necrolife*, which speaks of the medico forensic everyday practices that make the dead and death. I aim to disarrange commons understandings of what it is to both be dead and be a dead body inside a morgue and within the practice of postmortem examinations –necropsies. Based in two years of ethnographic work at the morgues the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences in Colombia (INML), I describe a specific case of a necropsy to suggest that they as practice are an entanglement of relations between human and more-than-human actors. And, I propose decomposition is one of these actors, which dismantles material arrangements and composes ever-new ones as it enacts the process of decomposition itself. Necropsies as an entanglement of relational practice speak of this. The death of a dead body is also the beginning of new ways of life, and decomposition, thus, allows for the composition of multiple possibilities of both life and death – *necrolife*.

Keywords: Colombia; decomposition; forensic sciences; materiality.

Resumen

La vida humana se materializa tanto conceptualmente como en otros ámbitos a través de un ejercicio diferencial con la muerte: lo que está muerto no está vivo. La muerte es, en este escenario, el evento contundente que permite que la diferencia se sostenga. Tomando como punto de partida esta tensión, mi trabajo se pregunta por lo que sucede con los cuerpos humanos después de muertos. Esta pregunta me ha permitido sugerir la noción *necrovida* para pensar en las prácticas médico forenses de la vida cotidiana que hacen a los muertos y a la muerte. Mi propósito es dislocar los modos usuales de pensar qué es ser un muerto y un cuerpo muerto en las morgues y en las prácticas de hacer necropsias médico legales. Con base en dos años de trabajo etnográfico en las morgues del Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses (INML), en este escrito sugiero que en tanto que prácticas las necropsias son un entramado de relaciones complejas entre actores humanos y más-que-humanos. Conceptualizo la descomposición cadavérica como uno de estos actores, y sugiero, además, que ésta desmantela y a la par genera arreglos materiales mientras enactúa el proceso mismo de la descomposición. Así, la muerte de un cuerpo muerto es el inicio de nuevas formas de vida, y la descomposición por lo tanto permite la composición de posibilidades múltiples de vida y muerte: *necrovida*.

Palabras clave: Colombia; descomposición; ciencias forenses; materialidad.

Resumo

A vida humana se materializa conceitualmente e em outras áreas através de um exercício diferencial com a morte: o que está morto não está vivo. A morte é, nesse cenário, o evento contundente que permite que a diferença seja sustentada. Tomando essa tensão como ponto de partida, meu trabalho pergunta sobre o que acontece com os corpos humanos após a morte. Essa questão me permitiu sugerir a noção *necrovida* de pensar nas práticas médicas forenses da vida cotidiana que tornam os mortos e a morte. Meu propósito é desalojar as maneiras usuais de pensar o que é ser um morto e um corpo morto em necrotérios e na prática de fazer necropsias médicas legais. Com base em dois anos de trabalho etnográfico nas morgues do Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal e Ciências Forenses (INML), neste artigo eu sugiro que enquanto as práticas necropsias são uma rede de relações complexas entre atores humanos e mais-que-humano. Eu conceituo a decomposição cadavérica como um desses atores, e sugiro, também, que ela desmonte e ao mesmo tempo gere arranjos materiais ao mesmo tempo enactua o próprio processo de decomposição. Assim, a morte de um corpo morto é o começo de novas formas de vida, e a decomposição, portanto, permite a composição de múltiplas possibilidades de vida e morte: *necrovida*.

Palavras-chave: Colômbia; decomposição; ciências forenses; materialidade.

The National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences of Colombia –*Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses* or INML – is a centralized state institution equivalent in some of its services, and in its incarnation as state technology, to the Anglo-American figure of the medical examiner¹. Widely known by Colombian lay citizenry and highly covered in mass-media news, it is not unusual to hear people talk about the INML and the services they provide in everyday life –for the most part in regards to particular high profile deaths. In a country with significant numbers of reported extreme civil violence and that has been immersed for more than five decades in an internal armed conflict, services provided at the INML ensure, or at least appear to, a sense of “management of life” at the hands of the State (Foucault 1978, 137) and of an active fulfillment of the state’s mandate to guarantee legal justice for its population. This is so, mainly, because the INML is in charge of performing medico-legal necropsies² of deaths that are deemed violent by the legal authorities. This perception does not come without its tensions – as I elaborate elsewhere the relation between the INML as a state institution that engages with bodies through objective science and the Colombian state use of the legitimate right to violence is an extremely complex and contradictory one – but is strong enough to sustain the known relevance of the institution. It is within that context that the morgues at the INML and the medico-forensic practices that take place in them became a site of interest for me. With the tools afforded to me by a material-semiotics disposition and attunement (Law, 2002, 2005; Mol, 2002; Mol & Law 2002; Latour, 1987, 2005), I dug into the INML morgues to wonder about the materiality of the dead and death in the performance of postmortem examinations. My wondering led to a key recognition: morgues house an entanglement of scientific and medico-forensic practices in which distinctions between life and death are uncertain and hazy. Cadaveric decomposition is one of the material presences at the morgue that speak of this uncertainty.

My broader ethnographic work at the Colombian morgues has led to a notion I call *necrolife* – which calls attention to think the life of dead bodies and death, and how inexorably alive their materiality is. Here I draw empirically from my ethnographic fieldwork at the INML to conceptualize cadaveric decomposition as a material disruptor that by the force of its unavoidable presence challenges conceptual boundaries of death/life and the dead/the living. As it thinks the socio-material relational practices that constitute the dead within the morgues, *necrolife* challenges common

1 Here I make symmetry with the anglo-american medical examiner system, but the INML does not really equate to it. By its official definition the INML is an institution that “supports technically and scientifically the administration of justice” (Decree 2699 of 1991, Title XI, Chapter 1, Article 160 of the Republic of Colombia), which in the morgues emerges and is embodied as the practice of necropsies. The institution itself also carries out multiple other forensic practices –rape kits get taken and processed by it, for instance – and it is not in charge of any judicial investigation about them – as the coroner system would call for.

2 In contrast with the word Autopsy, here I use the English translation of the Spanish word “necropsia” to refer to postmortem examinations of human remains. I’ll use the word necropsy going further. The distinction between the two terms that sustains at large in the English language – autopsy for humans and necropsy for animals – does not exist in the Spanish language, and so necropsy is the word used in the INML by doctors and other morgue workers. My decision to use its an ethnographical and conceptual gesture. I want to take conceptually serious the terms that make the worlds of my friends at the morgue, and let my work emerge from them.

conceptualizations of the dead as not alive –and thus lacking any potential for action. The practice of necropsies of violent deaths performed at the INML is an encounter and entanglement of practices (Barad, 2003, 2007; Pickering, 1995) in relations among humans and more-than-humans (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 1) that partake of constituting all that engages in the encounter itself. Within that entanglement the dead are the socio-materiality from which forensic practices take place, but they are so only as they are part of an encounter with other actors – that is, complex relations between the dead and others at the morgue are necessary for the dead to emerge as co-constitutive of all that engages relationally with them. Doctors make the dead and death. Death and the death make doctors. All actors in a constant becoming (Barad, 2003; Biehl & Locke, 2017). Diagnoses of death are made of and from these actors, which is what necropsies do. Cadaveric decomposition is one of these actors. Decomposition dismantles material arrangements, anatomies, and composes new ones as it enacts the process of decomposition itself³. Hence, the socio-materiality of a dead body is also the beginning of new ways of life. And decomposition, in this way, allows for the composition of surprising new and multiple possible diagnoses of death. For this conceptualization I draw inspiration from the work of Marilyn Strathern on decomposition as analysis among the people of Mount Hagen in Papua New Guinea.

As Strathern states, “[...] what we might call analysis in Hagen takes the form of decomposition, taking apart an image to see/make visible what insides it contains; that this is a process that gives the elicitors of those insides, the decomposers, power as witnesses to their own efforts of elucidation; that the elicitor/witness is in a crucial sense the “creator” of the image, and his/her presence thus necessary to its appearance [...]” (Strathern, 1992, 245). It is this relation between decomposed and decomposer what calls my attention. To make diagnoses of death, a sort of elucidation, requires that dead bodies and those who work on them in the morgue, human and more-than-human, embody their roles of creators, as Strathern puts it, of the material arrangements they are giving an account of, the dead and death as diagnosis. I take the notion of decomposition quite literally – it is in fact the decomposition of human biological matter what I am referring to here – and to so help me illustrates that both death and the dead are non-stable at the morgues and their relation with each individual performance of a necropsy. And thus illustrates *necrolife*, as I hope the following story will elucidate.

³ For another conceptualization within anthropology and Latin American STS to think decomposition in Colombia see Lyons, 2016.

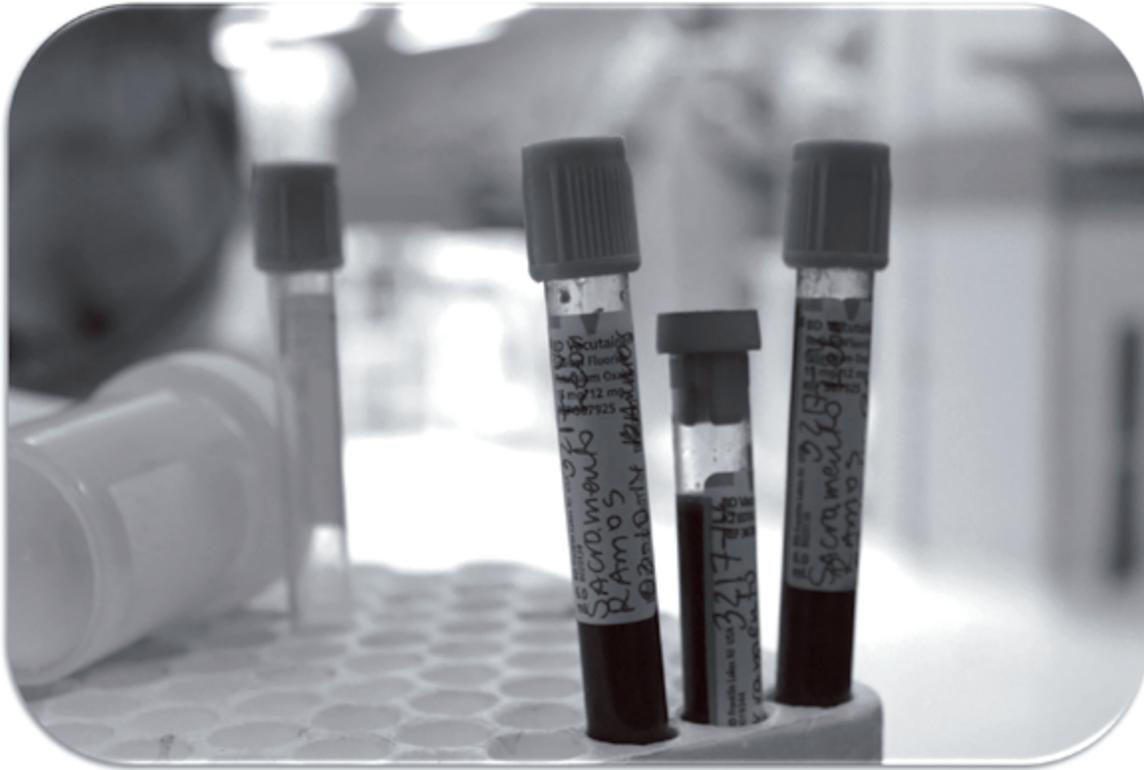


Figure 29. Morgue remains. Photo: courtesy of Julia Morales Fontanilla. 2014.

The Drowned Woman

In the Colombian morgues the dead are all a different socio-materiality. As they become actors through the practice of necropsies their singularity emerges. As such, and as I suggested above, they have the potential of constantly igniting action (Latour, 1987). Because medico forensic sciences are stabilized in their objectivity by means of textbooks and handbooks used by doctors and other morgue workers during their years of training, it could be presumed that many necropsies that conclude in the same diagnosis are similar to each other. Nonetheless necropsies at the INML show us that this is not the case: Necropsies of the same diagnosis can be and are different among each other. A first instance of that difference seems like an obvious one –although it is not: How could necropsies of different dead bodies ever be the same? But, the difference goes further: A single dead can also be entangled in many different necropsies and these can all arrive to many different diagnoses. And so, even from a single dead body multiple possible diagnoses of death may emerge. Such was the case of the drowned woman:

It is a July morning in the morgue of Medellín – twenty years ago the most dangerous city in the world. During “after morgue” – the leftover time of the morning shift after all necropsies have been done – I talk with Dr. B. – I have a hunch about decomposed dead bodies. Are they the same kind of body than a fresh body? I ask her. She tells me they are not, and in reference to a necropsy we had been working on together earlier in the morning she says: – in this case the diagnosis was easier for us to see because decomposition helped us (a heart attack what was easier to see at bare eye because an advance decomposing process was already taking place for the dead body had not been found until around four days after the person died). Then Dr. B tells me about a case she had years before. The dead person was a young woman that had apparently died by drowning. All the forensic tests that would confirm a diagnosis of death by drowning were positive during the necropsy and so she could with certainty certify that as the cause of death – a text book drowning: the body showed signs of having been a long time on water and the skin looked like a “washer woman’s skin”; froth, foam, had formed on the airwaves, particularly evident in mouth and nostrils; the lungs had water on their airwaves and water flowed down from them when cut for dissection; and there were bilateral hemorrhages of the petrous bridge of the temporal bones. Nonetheless, the circumstances of death described in the police reports were suspicious for her. The documents stated the woman had drowned in a shallow puddle of water; something that was very improbable for Dr. B. – **How can a grown adult woman drown on such a shallow puddle Julia?** she asked. It was clear for her that something else had happened to the young woman, and so she asked the district attorney for the permission necessary to retain the body in the morgue for two weeks. – I was hoping that if I waited some time the body was going to show me something else. After the two weeks passed Dr. B when back to the body to “finish” the necropsy, which is actually doing the whole necropsy protocol all over again. When she revised the body to state its condition, lesions and so forth – the earlier stages of an necropsy protocol – she saw a work-boot shoe print between the scapulae muscles on the back of the woman. – And then we had a tenable explanation of how her drowning was possible! Decomposition was necessary for the shoe print to be visible. Two weeks earlier the shoe print was not there nor was the fact of somebody having drowned the young woman. – There are some things that you cannot see in a fresh dead body. When decomposition is already advanced you cannot longer see some things that were visible when the body was still ‘fresh’, but only then you can see some others. So yes Julia, fresh bodies are different than decomposed ones.

As Dr. B reminded us, a more advanced stage on the process of cadaveric decomposition was necessary for the footprint to emerge as a material reality –that carries a heavy load of legal implications and beyond to the outside of the morgues. Nevertheless, decomposition was not the only necessary presence for the footprint to emerge. It is in the entanglement of practice that the necropsy is that a footprint as a trace of a manner of death can become itself. Dr. B knew this, *“I was hoping that if I waited some time the body was going to show me something else”* she says as a way to indicate her recognition of the fact that only as part of complex relations among those that are taking part of the necropsy can the diagnosis be a scientific legal fact. The dead body, doctors and other morgue workers, refrigerators, time, scalpels, a dissection table, the file that came with the body, the file from the first necropsy, and more are all necessary for the footprint to be. Her conclusion about decomposed cadavers being different than “fresh” dead bodies opens the recognition of this fact.

Necrolife. Cadaveric Decomposition as Composition

The case of the drowned woman tells us of cadaveric decomposition at the morgues of the INML. A dead body there is, the dead are, constantly always at change –becoming dead and allowing the becoming of death. Important here are the moments of practice that destabilize what is known about the dead and diagnoses of death, and make up new conceptualizations. Decomposition. Composition. The dead at the morgue are always at change – more evidently so when cadaveric decomposition has ensued-, and so are also always composing – themselves as different materiality but also much more than that. Cadaveric decomposition. In the same manner are death and morgue workers always being composed. Always making. Always alive. Necroliving.



Figure 30. Morgue materials.

Photo: courtesy of Julia Morales Fontanilla. 2014.

In the same moment the death of a person takes place, numerous forms of other life that are present at the time ignite the process of decomposition –either because they inhabit the human body or because they are in the environment that a body is in. Decomposition is the decay of organic matter. Human cadaveric decomposition at the morgues is the process that results from the sequential death of cells in a human organism (Di Maio, 2001). Dying cells imply the subsequent decomposition of all that they are the makeup of. For instance, if as consequence of a lethal injury a human heart stops beating and blood circulation gets interrupted, cells stop receiving oxygen and thus start to die –on account of damages that affect severely their parts and/or their functions (membrane, organelle, nucleic acids, synthesis of proteins or cellular division –) either individually or collectively. It is a scaling process – from scale – from the molecular, to the cellular, to the tissular, to the organs, to the whole organism. Symptoms of this process start to materialize gradually in the different stages of the decomposition of a cadaver as defined by forensic science texts books and necropsy protocols. Enzymatic breakdown of cells and tissue, metabolic production of gasses that cause the body to inflate and swell, production of foul odors, liquefaction and disintegration of tissue, loss of mass, skeletonization, adipocere, dryness. These stages are an indication of an encounter between a dead body, the passing of time, and their environment. As a forensic material reality they take place in the entanglement of practice that a necropsy is.

Dead bodies left to their own devices in an environment for a given extension of time engage in relations of co-production with that environment –one again humans and more-than-humans actors and actions in action. A complex system that enacts the dead and death. As complex relations start to unravel into an individual process of decomposition – over the passing of minutes, hours, days and/or months – anatomies that once were, and made up the person’s body when alive and the fresh cadaver, appear as other material manifestations of themselves. They are still the anatomies that they were but not only that –the shoe print required the passing of time in order to be as part of the young woman’s skin and muscle in their dead body form. These constantly emergent and ever changing material manifestations, anatomies, are what makes up a dead body. It in itself continuously changing within the complexity that its own decomposition is. Additionally, dead bodies are not only the materiality of decomposition and thus the object of analysis at the hands of decomposers, in Starbarn’s terms, but they are also, by the force of their materiality as I stated above, also manufacturers of the actors that engage with them as decomposers. In this way, necropsies are here practices that disrupt conceptual boundaries between life and death.

To finish, these stories tell tales of how at the hands of forensic workers at the INML, and their technologies and expertise, necropsies as a disconcerting encounter make decomposition into a powerful forensic presence that allows for a relation between decomposed and decomposers as described by Strathern. Or in terms of Deleuze and Guattari, the tracing of traces that do not preexist the trace (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In the case of Dr. B and the young drowned woman, the encounter of Dr. B, the dead, and decomposition composed material arrangements that revealed acts of violence –it must be said that the cause of death was drowning and the manner of death was homicide. In the INML morgues, necropsies are performed, diagnoses produced, and documents written to the fullest capacity of the expertise the INML has to offer. The state does in this way serve science to the service of justice to the young woman and those who care, or at least it appears to do so.

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