

Human Remains: Everest and the Ontological Afterlives of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine.

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In September 2024 the National Geographic explorer Jimmy Chin revealed to the world that the partial human remains of the Everest mountaineer Andrew ‘Sandy’ Irvine had been discovered on the Central Rongbuk Glacier in Tibet.¹ The remains comprised of one mountaineering boot containing a sock and the skeletal remains of a foot. The announcement came just over one hundred years since Irvine and George Mallory had last been seen on Everest on 8 June 1924, setting out to reach the summit of Everest as part of the British Mount Everest Expedition. The mystery surrounding their disappearance has led to endless speculation and a process of mythologization and heroization as Mallory and Irvine became implicated in late-imperial meta-narratives of heroic white masculinity, narratives that have tended to dominate Western accounts of Everest.

The discovery of Sandy Irvine’s partial human remains presents an opportunity to ask a series of questions about the post-mortal status of human remains preserved in the high-altitude cryosphere, those frozen mountain regions characterized by permafrost, snowfields and glaciers. In this chapter I pay particular attention to ideas of postmortal personhood attributed to these highly valorised human remains, as well to the ways in which their disappearance and eventual re-materialization within the cryosphere have impacted on these bodies’ transition from the status of human subject to that of post-mortal object. Sandy Irvine’s partial human remains present a particular ontological challenge to Western conceptions of postmortal personhood based on ideas of the discrete and bounded individual person as the primary locus of agency and subjectivity.

This chapter deploys both new materialism theory and archaeological assemblage theory to interpret these partial human remains belonging to Sandy Irvine as a complex, relational and emergent historical object, an assemblage that operates at multi-scalar levels which is not confined to one

geographically delimited space. Critically, 'an assemblage is a multiplicity, neither exclusively a part nor a whole'² that actively configures and reconfigures under historically contingent processes. Assemblage theory can therefore help us think about the contingent nature of objects and the ways in which they assemble and disassemble depending on our frame of reference, an important point that I will come back to.

Absent presence, haunted ice

In a recent book on the absent human subject, the comparative literary scholar Daniel Heller-Roazen notes that

Amid the seeming confusions of our mysterious world, the event of absencing ...is one of uncovering. The removal clears a space. Vanishing gives way to visitation.³

The mythopoeic disappearance of Mallory and Irvine instituted just such an absence, the disappearance of the absentee subject enabling a process of mythologization and heroization that has filled the evidential and narrative void for one hundred years. As the classically trained Mallory would have understood it, 'to become a hero [...] is to continue to exist beyond death' in both memory and narrative.⁴ In Derridean terms, the Mallory and Irvine mythos has constituted a spectral presence on Everest, a haunting in which their post-mortal personhood resembles the figure of the ghost, 'neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive.'⁵ In recent reflections on the Gothic Anthropocene Jeffrey Weinstock notes that Derridean haunting has, at its core, to do with incompleteness and that 'spectrality can be considered as that which does not materialize fully.'⁶ This chapter therefore explores the implications of the re-materialization after absence of George Mallory's largely complete human remains and Sandy Irving's partial human remains, paying particular attention to the complex ways in which the human subject is transformed into an object within the contemporary cryosphere.

On Everest, the ambiguity of post-mortal personhood is exacerbated by the extended preservation of human remains in liminal states in the mountain cryosphere. Human remains on Everest enter new ontic (that is actual, concrete) states of existence as they slowly transition from human subject to physical object. They become embedded in new spatio-temporal regimes that render these corpses uncanny. They are encountered within the mountain cryosphere as both fixed features in a landscape and as mobile entities in glacial systems. Extreme environments at altitude reduce human agency and disrupt the normal cultural approaches to disposing of human remains. The persistence of these corpses in these frozen mountain spaces and their post-mortal (im)mobilities raises important questions about the ways in which fixity and prolongation of bodies in the cryosphere extends and alters both their post-mortal personhood and the transition of human remains from subject to object. In his recent work on cryo-histories the intellectual historian Sverker Sörlin claims that ice has become historical, 'that ice is an element of change and thus something that can be considered as part of society and of societal concern'.⁷ This chapter further historicizes ice and its critical agency in the preservation, transformation and transportation of George Mallory's and Andrew Irvine's human remains. It also extends the notion of the cryo-historical, attributing agency and affect to human remains frozen within the high-altitude cryosphere.

Since their disappearance in 1924, the quest to ascertain what happened to Mallory and Irvine and the question of whether they reached the summit of Everest has focused on both the recovery of their bodies but also on the possibility of recovering a complex assemblage of material objects that were said to hold the key to unlocking the mystery of their disappearance. For example, George Mallory was believed to have been carrying a photograph of his wife Ruth. When his body was discovered in 1999 the photograph was not found on him. Did this then mean, some asked, that he had placed the photograph on the summit? Mallory and Irvine were known to have carried Howard Somervell's Kodak VPK camera on their summit bid. If it could be found, would it contain photographs that would prove they had reached the summit?⁸ To date, neither the photograph of Ruth Mallory nor the Kodak VPK camera have ever been found.

In 1933 Percy Wyn Harris, a member of the 4th British Mount Everest Expedition, found the first material evidence of the missing pair, recovering Sandy Irvine's ice axe. In July 1935 the Everest Reconnaissance Expedition had the first encounter with human remains on Everest that we might categorize as uncanny in Freudian terms (the familiar returned in an eerie and unfamiliar context). Expedition members came across the body of Maurice Wilson, who had tried to climb the mountain alone in 1934. He was discovered outside what was left of his tent. His remains were described as 'little more than a skeleton covered with dry, frozen skin.' He was:

bent over in a curious, stiff way, as if he had died while trying to take off his boots. In fact, one boot was already off and he was holding the lace of the other in his hand bones.⁹

In 1936 the mountaineer Frank Smythe confidentially reported identifying a body that he assumed was either Mallory or Irvine via a high-powered telescope, lying below the Yellow Band rock formation on Everest, a position that was subsequently confirmed as the position of Mallory's body in 1999.¹⁰ Knowledge that a body had possibly been sighted high on the mountain thus circulated in elite mountaineering circles, reinforcing the spectral presence of the absent Mallory and Irvine. This was reinforced in the 1970s by rumoured accounts that filtered out from the Tibet Autonomous Region of China from Chinese expeditions claiming to have encountered 'English dead' high on the mountain.¹¹

Specters of Orientalism

Everest as a space conducive to the development of spectral imaginaries has historically been reinforced by Tibet's longstanding status as the focus of Western Orientalist fantasies that consistently misrepresented and reinterpreted Tibetan Buddhists beliefs and practices, incorporating them into Western esoteric and Theosophical doctrines.¹² The consistent reporting of alleged post-

mortal contact with both Mallory and Irvine by spiritualist mediums started in 1924 and formed an ongoing part of the popular cultural narrative surrounding the story of Mallory and Irvine. To give one early example, Sybil Noel, the wife of the expedition photographer and filmmaker John Noel, was a psychic who travelled with the 1924 Mount Everest Expedition as far as Yatung in Tibet, where she was accommodated by the British Trade Agent David MacDonald for the duration of the expedition. Macdonald related that she not only correctly sensed that there had been a suicide in the rooms where she was staying in the Yatung bazaar, but that she also sensed that 'some tragedy had occurred on the mountain' on the same day that Mallory and Irvine disappeared.¹³

John Noel's 1924 film *The Epic of Everest* is also strongly inflected with Orientalist tropes about malevolent mountain deities that imbue the Everest mountain landscapes he encountered with notions of sentience and agency. Western explorers in Tibet consistently misrepresented *Vajrayana* tantric Buddhist beliefs and practices, often dismissing them as 'lamaism' and devil worship.¹⁴ For example, Charles Howard-Bury, the leader of the 1921 Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition expressed the widespread Western belief that the Buddhism of Tibet was somehow degraded and decadent:

The old simple creed of the Buddhists can scarcely be recognised nowadays and is overlaid with devil-worship in all its forms, supernatural agencies abounding everywhere. The top of a pass, a mountain, a river, a bridge, a storm: each will have its own particular god who is to be worshipped and propitiated.¹⁵

Whilst the 1922 Everest Expedition was at the Rongbuk Monastery in Tibet, the head lama Dzatrul Ngawang Tenzin Rinpoche, informed the expedition via translators that the mountain was the home of the goddess Miyo Lang Sangma.¹⁶ We know from a translation of his spiritual autobiography that he warned the members of the 1922 Mount Everest Expedition to be careful on the mountain, stating that:

Our country is a very cold one, only those who are there for the religious purpose can live here, it is difficult for the others. Moreover the deity of the place is a very terrible [one] so please take care of yourselves as much as possible and [] be very careful.¹⁷

In both his film *The Epic of Everest* (1924) and in his book *Through Tibet to Everest* (1927), John Noel, whether through mistranslation or misunderstanding, transformed Dzatrul Rinpoche's concern and compassion for the lives of Western, Nepalese and Tibetan expedition members expressed in 1922 into a malevolent threat that further contributed to the othering of Tibetan relational and religious perspectives of the mountain in the West. Towards the end of the 1924 film the written intertitles ask the question of whether 'something more than the physical had opposed us in this battle where human strength and western science had broken and failed?'¹⁸ The intertitles continue:

Strangely to memory the words of the Rongbuk Lama come: "The gods of the Lamas shall deny you White Men the object of your search."

Could it be possible that we fought something beyond our knowledge? Could it be, as these mystic people say, that this terrible mountain LIVES and is SPIRIT GUARDED?¹⁹

In *Through Tibet to Everest* Noel claimed that in 1922, prior to the ascent of the mountain, the monks at the Rongbuk monastery had said that 'The mountain will destroy you',²⁰ and claimed that they had painted a new mural on the walls of the monastery showing 'the angered Deity of the Mountain surrounded by weird, wildly dancing demons' and at the foot of the mountain 'the naked body of the white man who dared to violate the ice bound tempest-guarded sanctuary of Chomolungma.'²¹ Again in 1924 Noel recorded that the monks at Rongbuk said to the expedition members that 'Chomolungma, the awful and mighty Goddess Mother, will never allow any white man to climb her sacred heights. The demons of the snows will destroy you utterly.'²²

The lurid and sensational suggestions made in the film intertitles undoubtedly formed part of Noel's commercialisation strategies. Noel was an entrepreneur and showman who had bought the

exclusive rights to the film of the expedition. He also caused great offence to the Tibetan government and Tibetan religious sensibilities by touring the film in Europe accompanied by seven individuals who he claimed were Tibetan lamas who performed pastiches of Tibetan religious rituals.²³ Thus, from the very start of Western encounters with Everest, a process of othering and intercultural misrepresentation has coloured perspectives, situating the search for Mallory and Irvine's human remains in a wider Orientalist and esoteric discourse. Sensationalized Western accounts of Tibet and the emergence of Western esoteric doctrines about Tibet have acted as a counterpoint to the search for their human remains. The West has been haunted by an imaginary Tibet, one in which, in the absence of concrete evidence about the fate of the absent Mallory and Irvine, it became possible for some people to imagine that mediumistic contact with their spirits could fill the evidential void.

Reliquary expeditions

The first full scale (and ultimately unsuccessful) expedition to attempt to discover the remains of Mallory and Irvine was the Mount Everest North Face Research Expedition launched in 1986. George Mallory's remains were eventually discovered on the 1 May 1999 by the Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition. Mallory's body was found in the prone position and was identified by name labels, items of clothing and personal letters. The body had effectively been mummified by high-altitude abiotic processes and was frozen to the mountain scree. The expedition team hacked the body from the mountain, recovered identifying items from the body and undertook an archaeological and photographic survey. Team member Andy Politz recalled

There was an intense feeling of reverence [...] At one point, I thought about how proud I was of my partners. We were walking a very fine line, trying to do a responsible job archaeologically while still treating the body itself with the dignity it deserved. This was one of our great heroes, after all.²⁴

With the full permission of Mallory's descendants, the climbers collected DNA samples, reburied the body under stones, (a process that took 45 minutes) and performed an Anglican committal service.²⁵

A second Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition began the search for Irvine's body in 2001.²⁶ Two small scale search expeditions were undertaken in 2004.²⁷ In 2006 Graham Hoyland, who had led the 1999 expedition that found Mallory's body, climbed to 6,400m on Everest in replica clothing produced by the Mallory Clothing Replica Project.²⁸ The project blended historical reenactment and experimental archaeology techniques to determine whether the clothing at the time was capable of functioning at altitude.²⁹ Similarly, in 2007 the Altitude Everest Expedition, tried to retrace Mallory and Irvine's last steps, addressing the question of whether Mallory and Irvine could have climbed the Second Step on the Northeast Ridge of Everest.³⁰ Jochem Hemmleb led another expedition looking for clues in 2010.³¹

In September 2024 the partial human remains of the Everest mountaineer Andrew Irvine were discovered on the Central Rongbuk Glacier in Tibet by a National Geographic funded expedition. Whilst Mallory's body had been frozen in-situ high on the mountain and was characterised by its immobility within the high-altitude cryosphere and by its high levels of preservation, Irving's body had fallen to the base of the North Face of Everest and entered an active glacial system. Irving's corpse can be characterised by its post-mortal mobility and by its extreme mechanical transformation via the physical trauma it sustained in the fall from the summit ridge and its eventual incorporation within the ice of the Central Rongbuk Glacier. Irving's partial human remains comprised of a boot, a sock with a name label identifying it as his property and a skeletal human foot. On the day the news was announced, Julie Summers, Sandy Irving's grandniece and biographer spoke movingly on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme about the importance of the discovery for the family, who had been distressed by a recent book that speculated that the Chinese authorities had secretly disposed of or removed the bodies of Mallory and Irvine from the mountain.³² In a recent Alpine Club film Julie Summers expressed the family's wish that if any further human remains

belonging to Irvine were recovered, they should be reinterred on the Central Rongbuk Glacier.³³

Post-mortual rites of incorporation that leave the bodies of Western mountaineers in-situ in the mountains after death frequently feature in the wishes of contemporary mountaineers and their families and any eventual reincorporation of Irving's remains will undoubtedly reinforce his enduring mythopoeic identification with the mountain.

The spatio-temporal uncanny

One striking aspect of the discovery of Irving's partial remains is exactly that, their fragmentary nature. The failure of Irvine's remains to rematerialize as a complete human corpse is just one aspect of the uncanny nature of human remains found in the mountain cryosphere, reinforcing the spectral register that still clings to the Mallory and Irvine mythos. Encountering corpses as body parts presents us with a rupture, forcing us to consider the exact nature of personhood and its extension post-mortem. The high levels of preservation, transformation and prolongation of bodies in the high-altitude cryosphere engender what I term the spatio-temporal uncanny. These weird temporalities disobey 'expectations of temporal qualities such as sequence, span, speed, synchronization, rhythm, orientation, causality, coherence, or intensity.'³⁴ Bodies like Mallory's have remained fixed on the mountain, desiccated and mummified by abiotic processes but still recognizably human, remaining ontically, socially and culturally 'present' in the world far longer than we would consider normal. High on the North Face of Everest, Time itself seems to have slowed down. Another aspect of the spatio-temporal uncanny is the post-mortual mobility of corpses like Andrew Irvine's, slowly moving beneath the ice and being transformed in the process.

Thus, within the high-altitude cryosphere, normal post-mortual cultural processes relating to human remains are disrupted and in abeyance. In the early Twentieth Century the ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep identified three stages of post-mortual liminality linked to the disposal of human remains in his book *Rites of Passage* (1909), namely rites of separation (or *preliminal* rites) that detach the

individual from their former social identity, rites of transition (or *liminal* rites) where the person is no longer their old self but not yet their new self, and rites of incorporation (or *postliminal* rites) that reintegrate the person into society but with a new status.³⁵ These cultural rites are intended to ease the passage of the dead from one state to the next and to ensure that the deceased don't become stuck in liminal states. In the cases of Mallory and Irvine, this 'getting stuck' is exactly what has happened. As bodies of ice, frozen to the mountain and trapped within glaciers, they have remained in highly liminal states. They have been subject to an extended absence from human society. This absence has circumvented sequential cultural processes designed to dispose of the dead. The bodies remained, in effect, socially living but absent. During this absence, their post-mortals personhood was reaffirmed in multiple ways, not least by expeditions that valorised their human remains as important historical relics. Physically their bodies became either mummified and fixed in place high on the mountain or continued to be mobilized, de-fleshed and disarticulated in glacial systems after they have died. Their dematerialization and eventual re-materialization are perhaps the most striking aspect of this spatio-temporal disturbance of the normal cultural approaches to death. Post-mortals rites of passage form a cultural repertoire of techniques designed to address the human need to socially incorporate the dead, enabling them finally to leave the world of the living. Liminal rites have also traditionally acknowledged the problem of 'the troublesome dead', the dead who refuse to remain dead, the dead who return to haunt the living.³⁶ Mallory and Irvine's status as absentees disrupted normal rites of separation and transition, delaying their eventual incorporation. The reburial service performed for Mallory in 1999, and the Irvine family's wishes for reburial on the glacier represent these much-delayed rites of incorporation, both physical and social.

Assembling the invisible infrastructure of things

The emergence of Irvine's partial human remains present a challenge to our conception of the body as the locus of post-mortals personhood. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger suggests an object can

only truly be known as an object when it breaks. He uses the example of the hammer, which in use becomes an extension of human agency, technicity and subjectivity but when broken is revealed to be an assemblage of constituent objects that are no longer fit for the task at hand.³⁷ Heidegger's insight was to understand that we have different modes of being in relation to objects. For most of the time we use objects for a purpose: 'When we look at a hammer, our initial reaction is not to deconstruct it and break it down into what it is made of. We simply look at it as equipment to carry out tasks.'³⁸ Heidegger termed this mode the "ready-to-hand". In this mode we don't find subjects contemplating objects but rather human-object symbiosis:

The things that we use and that surround us extend and delimit our perceptual-cognitive-bodily capabilities, essentially making humans into extended "human-object hybrids".³⁹

According to Heidegger, when the hammer breaks, the object enters a new mode he termed the "present-at-hand". Without a purpose the broken tool is revealed as simply "there", an assemblage of objects that has lost its ability to hybridise with the human. Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star in the book *Sorting Things Out* (1999) demonstrate 'how the taken-for-granted gets constructed', existing as invisible infrastructure. It is only when an object is broken that we suddenly realise that 'ordinary objects such as compact disks and pencils conceal "decades of negotiation"'.⁴⁰ The media theorist John Durham Peters notes that the invisible, "taken-for-grantedness" of objects operates at multiple scales, from the hammer, to sewage systems, transport links and telecommunications systems: 'ontology, whatever else it is, is usually just forgotten infrastructure.'⁴¹

Similarly, encountering partial human remains presents us with an ontological challenge. In its broken and disarticulated state, the human body is revealed as invisible infrastructure. As the Anthropologist Timothy Taylor notes in his book *The Buried Soul: How Humans Invented Death*, even children 'sense that time somehow turns people into things'⁴², that the human subject is eventually transformed into an object, broken down into its constituent parts, although how this happens and

the sensitivities around the process differ markedly between human cultures. This difference in approaches to human remains would have been all too apparent to the members of the 1924 Mount Everest Expedition as they travelled through Tibet. Tibetan cultural and religious approaches to both the disposal of human remains and the use of human remains in religious rituals differ markedly from contemporary Western Christian approaches. In contradistinction to the pervasive Western practice of sequestration of the dead that has distanced Western subjects from the process of death and from the disposal of human remains,⁴³ Tibetan post-mortem rites of separation, transition and incorporation include the practice of sky burial and the deliberate excarnation and disarticulation of human remains. Within the tantric practices of Tibetan *Vajrayana* Buddhism, some tantric adepts practice forms of charnel asceticism, a form of transgressive religious practice that involves close contact with human remains that would normally be considered polluting and conveying social marginality.⁴⁴ These tantric practitioners will sometimes leave their body parts to lamas and monasteries to be turned into ritual musical instruments such as thigh-bone trumpets and drums made of human skulls. Thigh-bone trumpets are associated with

The tradition of *gcod*, or cutting, in which the ritual practitioner makes an offering of her/his own body in order to engage and subdue or neutralize adversities characterized as obstacles to enlightenment or the realization of Buddhist religious knowledge.⁴⁵

The practitioner invites 'volatile entities and deities as guests to a feast (Tbt. *tshogs*) prepared from the ritual dismemberment of the practitioner's body.'⁴⁶

Underpinning this practice is the Buddhist belief in non-duality, the impermanence of the human body and the rejection of the idea of the fixed self.⁴⁷ In artistic iconography and religious practice, Tibetan tantric Buddhism emphasises both death and severed human body parts (particularly skulls) as a way of helping religious adepts to encounter and overcome their fear of death and to 'sever and dismember all ties to the idea of the fixed self.'⁴⁸ Before he set sail for India, Sandy Irvine may have

had time to watch John Noel's film of the 1922 Mount Everest Expedition, *Climbing Mount Everest*. The film features Tibetan Buddhist *cham* dances in the courtyard at the Rongbuk monastery, often referred to dismissively by Western explorers as 'devil dances'. The film uses intertitles to draw attention to the use of drums made of human skulls, and in a scene entitled 'The Dance of the God of Anger' it shows monastic performers wearing elaborate aprons made of human bones.⁴⁹ The incorporation of human remains into Buddhist and Bön religious practice continues up to the present day throughout the Himalaya and the Tibetan cultural regions of Central Asia.⁵⁰

Clearly there was a huge intercultural gulf in attitudes towards human remains between the Western members of the 1924 Mount Everest Expedition and the Tibetans they encountered. However, mountaineering and the risks associated with it mean that mountains are one of the few places in the world today outside of war zones where human remains can still be encountered in the landscape. Due to the huge popularity of Everest as a globalized destination for the adventure tourism industry there are estimated to be over two hundred bodies still located on Everest. Many of these have been informally disposed of over the decades by being pushed into crevasses or down into glacial basins. Everest has in effect become a mortuary landscape and accelerated climate change in the region means that human body parts are now increasingly being encountered as they emerge from the melting cryosphere.

Remaining human, becoming things

Sandy Irvine's partial human remains represent only the most famous example of this broader mortuary assemblage within the Everest cryosphere. Irvine's partial remains can therefore help us think critically about how people turn into things within the high-altitude cryosphere. Daniel Heller-Roazen's work on the jurisprudential and ethical status of the absent human person is helpful here, introducing the useful concept of the Semblant Body, a special class of objects to which only former human beings give rise. He notes that 'that a corpse is no human being seems obvious, yet it is

equally certain that it is no ordinary thing',⁵¹ maintaining that a 'human cadaver is neither a person nor not a person. It is a nonperson in a special sense, which requires commentary and elucidation.'⁵²

He suggests that the category 'nonperson' is

Not external to the category of person, but internal to it. This "nonperson" names the depletion of the notion to which it is bound...In the concept of the person, the perilous possibility of the nonperson will lie enclosed. Of any "nonperson" it will be impossible to state either of these contradictory propositions: "It is a person" or "It is not a person."⁵³

This, Heller-Roazen argues, leads to a third possible ontological state, that 'of an intensely "personal" nonperson: that of someone - or some-thing - nonhuman to which human beings alone, in absenting themselves, give rise.'⁵⁴

In thinking about Sandy Irvine's partial human remains it is indeed hard to say either that 'It is a person' or 'it is not a person', particularly given the ongoing social and relational nature of Irvine's post-mortal personhood. Heller-Roazen's formulation of the category of the intensely personal non-person, a category that exhibits a constant phase shift between 'someone' and 'something', seems to me to capture the unique properties of these human remains. They operate as both abject subject and relic object. Following Kristeva, the abject subject indicates degraded personhood.⁵⁵ But in these bodies the process of abjection is in tension with their status as highly valorised human remains that have assumed the properties of relic objects. Far from being objects of revulsion they have become objects of veneration.

It is also highly significant that this 'intensely personal non-person' has agency. The non-human turn and new materialism theory have taught us to 'reconceptualize agency and recognize the ways in which agentic capacities are distributed across both animate and inanimate entities.'⁵⁶ The flattened ontological landscapes of assemblage theories like actor network theory (ANT) and object-oriented ontology (OOO) enables us to conceptualise agentic subjecthood beyond the human,

extended into the non-human and post-human world. It is a world characterised by Jane Bennett's idea of 'thing-power', defined as 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle,'⁵⁷ an interpretive framework in which humans become cognate with things, and 'things acquire uncanny animacy.'⁵⁸ Speculative realism and OOO as articulated by Graham Harman often emphasizes the uncanny and even horrific qualities of these private lives of objects-as-objects, which exist entirely outside the conventional human perceptual world.⁵⁹ Harman's concept of *Weird Realism* and his articulation of OOO provides a theoretical perspective to think about the utterly withdrawn and unknowable nature of Irving's partial human remains, particularly during its journey within the glacial ice.⁶⁰

Things in assemblage

Having determined that the partial human remains of Sandy Irvine represent a special category of mountain object, the intensely personal non-person, we also have to be attentive to its composite nature, being comprised of both human remains and human-made artefacts in assemblage. As Heidegger indicated, all objects reveal themselves to be assemblages, particularly when broken. Things we think of as discrete entities can be broken down into their constituent parts; indeed, the word 'Thing' itself originally meant 'a coming together in assembly.'⁶¹ Archaeological assemblage theory is particularly useful in helping us think about the Sandy Irvine 'boot/sock/foot assemblage' as a mountain object that is both historically contingent and agentic.

As used in the discipline of archaeology, the term 'assemblage' contains two distinct but related meanings: firstly, 'the aggregation of objects of the same material or which share typological or stylistic similarities.' An example would be a Mesolithic scatter of flints. Secondly 'the aggregation of diverse objects that share a distinct or defined context of variable scale.'⁶² The Sandy Irvine assemblage falls into this second category. Importantly, 'an assemblage is a multiplicity, neither exclusively a part nor a whole.'⁶³ Assemblages are also multi-scalar phenomena that nevertheless

don't 'compromise the specificity of local relations.'⁶⁴ The anthropological archaeologist Sara Ann Knutson defines assemblage as 'a cluster of emergent, relational phenomena' that can comprise of 'materials, human actants, forces, and other matter [that] need not be confined to any one geographically delineated space in order to constitute an assemblage.'⁶⁵ Critically, assemblages 'actively configure and reconfigure under historically contingent processes.'⁶⁶ They 'are always in the emergent process of becoming, aggregating, and disassembling'.⁶⁷

In a recent work edited by Katharina Rebay-Salisbury, Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Jessica Hughes entitled *Body Parts and Bodies Whole: changing relations and meanings* (2010) the editors draw attention to the theoretical perspectives on the relationships between parts and wholes of both human-made objects and human remains in archaeology, in particular the work of John Chapman and Bisserka Gaydarska in their monograph *Parts and Wholes: Fragmentation in Prehistoric Context* (2006).⁶⁸ Chapman's theories suggest that 'the breaking of an object does not automatically entail its loss; on the contrary, the parts of the broken object can become independently meaningful.'⁶⁹ The editors of the volume note that 'the relationship between body parts and body wholes seems to introduce new dimensions to the ways people and things may be enchaind' in assemblages. Crucially they indicate we have extensive evidence of the ways in which the body part may be related to the whole:

From history and ethnography we have a wide range of examples showing how the body can be physically partitioned and transformed, how body parts may stand metonymically for whole bodies, or how parts may still be symbolically linked even when they are separated, or alternatively, how parts may be differentiated and their links to the whole severed. In all cases body parts lose their original function when disarticulated from the whole, but at the same time they can acquire new meanings and significances.⁷⁰

Thus, Sandy Irvine's partial human remains emerge from the ice at a historically contingent moment, a mountain object characterised by its multiplicity. It is neither exclusively a part nor a whole. It is in the process of acquiring new meanings and significances. As with all objects, its status as a discrete thing depends on how we chose to define it. The historian of science Lorraine Daston, in thinking about the emergence of objects of scientific attention, has indicated the sometimes contingent and arbitrary way in which scientific objects have historically been configured, asking:

Why don't we have a science of dust wreaths on windy days? Why do we have a science of the interior of animal bodies, or of the shapes of crystals, or of the genealogy of languages? What ontological, epistemological, methodological, functional, symbolical, and/or aesthetic features qualify or disqualify the motion of projectiles, dreams, the waxing and waning of the Gross National Product, monstrous births, or electron valences as scientific objects?⁷¹

It is, therefore, an important principle of assemblage theory that assemblages do not contain predetermined boundaries. 'Our perception of [...] assemblages as bounded entities requires us to make an agential cut, a [...] position of observing phenomena that is provisional, temporal, and unstable.'⁷² However, it is important to note that 'although the boundaries of assemblages are fluid, assemblages are real historical entities that exist and have ontological reality.'⁷³ Thus the existence of Sandy Irvine's partial human remains as a discrete mountain object are constituted by 'its relationality, as well as the primacy of affectivity, the ability to affect and be affected'.⁷⁴ It is part of a multi-scalar assemblage that includes things as diverse as archives, mountains, expeditions, family memories, as well as the ongoing narratives of mythologization and heroization that constitute his own enduring post-mortal personhood.

Ontological afterlives, ontological other lives

The persistence of Cartesian dualistic thinking in Western cultures casts a long shadow over our ability to think clearly about human remains and the transition of the human subject to the status of an object. If we assume that only humans have agency and subjectivity, then the transition to object status seems to strip us of much that makes us human. Heller-Roazen's conceptualization of the 'intensely personal non-person' is in part a recognition that, for many cultures, the absent human being remains inherent somehow in the surviving object. Western concepts of selfhood as 'individual' also present us with problems when we come to contemplate the possibility that there is personhood connected to partial human remains. The anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has drawn attention to the partible nature of the self in many non-Western cultures.⁷⁵ In contradistinction to the conception of the individual as a bounded entity, Strathern developed the theory of the dividual self, where persons are composed of social relations. In relational conceptions of personhood, selfhood is an assemblage that is constantly in flux. It is then perhaps easier for cultures that subscribe to notions of partible and relational personhood to conceptualise partial human remains as retaining a relational personhood post-mortem.

The persistence of Western dualistic ontologies has underpinned culture/nature, subject/object, human/non-human binaries that we have imposed on the world, perhaps making it hard for us to seriously engage with the implications of the flatter ontological worlds outlined by types of assemblage theory like actor network theory and object-oriented ontology. These recent theoretical attempts to decentre the human however, far from being radical departures from human ways of being in the world, bear striking similarities to the dominant mode of thinking about the world throughout human history, exemplified in the immanentist belief systems of animist cultures. Animism according to the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins

refers to cultural schemes of subjective presences in empirical entities. Within the physical bodies of things, whether animate or inanimate (by our lights), are indwelling somethings with more or less the same subjective capacities as human persons.⁷⁶

Within animist systems of thinking and being, 'personhood is virtually everywhere and in almost everything.'⁷⁷ Within these immanentist systems 'virtually anything and almost everything may be a nonhuman person: not only animals and plants, but stones, streams, winds, fire, sun, stars, cliffs.'⁷⁸ Drawing on Amerindian perspectivism, scholars like Mario Blaser, Arturo Escobar and Marisol de la Cardena have asked us to consider another way of perceiving and being in the world that takes indigenous thought seriously.⁷⁹ Rather than there being only one Nature that we all conceptualise through different cultures, they suggest we exist in a world of many worlds, an ontological pluriverse. In this more-than-human world animals, plants, rivers and mountains exist as earth-beings with their own subjectivity and personhood.

What we call "environment" is for [Amerindians] a society of societies, an international arena, a *cosmopoliteia*. There is, therefore, no absolute difference in status between society and environment, as if the first were the "subject", the second the "object". Every object is another subject, and is more than *one*.⁸⁰

Animism is ultimately the personhood of things,⁸¹ a way of thinking and being in the world that suffuses everything with subjectivity and calls into question the very idea of "things" at all. In this immanentist world, the problems associated with conceptualising Sandy Irvine's partial human remains largely recede. As an object it nevertheless retains agency and personhood. Its brief historical instantiation as a discrete object/subject of attention in its current form may, however, be short lived. Depending on the wishes of the Irving family these partial human remains may be reinterred in the Central Rongbuk Glacier to be further transformed. Equally they could be disaggregated, with the human-made artefacts being transferred to an archive or museum, as happened with objects associated with Mallory's corpse.

Objects undoubtedly ‘problematize the boundaries of the human’,⁸² never more so than when we encounter the human corpse post-mortem. In an extended reflection on how the human body has been shaped as an instrument by evolution and environment, the media theorist John Durham Peters reflects on the persistent Western habit of dualism in thinking about the human body:

By isolating acute parts of our world as technology that we should control, it effaces the existential fact that we live environmentally, dependently, in apparatuses not of our own making, starting with the womb itself.⁸³

Peters would have us understand the body as infrastructure. In response to Bruno Latour’s saying, ‘Things are people too’, Peters suggests the corollary: ‘People are things too’.⁸⁴

The nearness of things

As I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter, acknowledging that ‘people become things’ does not necessarily imply a denial of post-mortal personhood and agency to human remains. Sandy Irvine’s human remains are a complex, relational and emergent historical object, an assemblage that operates at multi-scalar levels, neither exclusively a part nor a whole. Despite their remote geographical location and their seeming incompleteness they remain intimately connected with family memories and historical narratives, retaining the power to affect us and evoke complex emotions and feelings. Ultimately, Sandy Irvine’s human remains will be transformed again, becoming other things. Having emerged, revenant like, at a critical historical moment in our coming to terms with the consequences of anthropogenic climate change and its impact on the high-altitude cryosphere, they bear witness to a greater truth. It is a truth it seems that as a species we are unwilling to hear. Climate change is threatening the glaciers of the Hindu Kush-Himalaya region, the water towers of the Indian subcontinent, on which the lives of millions of people depend. In Nepal, the South Col Glacier on Everest is losing ice roughly 80 times faster than it took for the ice to

accumulate on the glacier's surface. A report from 2022 indicates that 2,000 years of ice accumulation have disappeared from the glacier since the 1990s.⁸⁵ Accelerating global heating is destroying ice as an archive⁸⁶, an archive that, on Everest, is increasingly giving up its dead. On Everest, informally disposed of human remains are increasingly being recovered as part of waste removal efforts on the mountain, presenting the Nepalese authorities with immense problems of decontaminating water courses and ensuring that human remains are identified, repatriated and disposed of appropriately. In conclusion then, let us consider the emergence of Sandy Irvine's human remains within the wider mortuary landscape on Everest as an opportunity to be in dialogue with the past, a dialogue in which human remains still retain personhood, dignity and agency. As objects, I would argue, these human remains released from the ice are only the local manifestations of something irreducibly withdrawn and largely unknowable in its totality; what the environmental philosopher Tim Morton has called the global hyperobject of climate change. For Morton, hyperobjects are characterised by their non-locality, operating at temporalities and scales that humans find difficult to comprehend. For Morton we 'only sees pieces of a hyperobject at any one moment. Thinking them is intrinsically tricky.'⁸⁷ As local manifestations then of the global hyperobject that is climate change, the presence of human remains emerging from the mountain cryosphere on Everest assumes a greater significance. These bodies have returned with a message for us. We would do well to consider what it is they are telling us.

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