

Bodily circulation and the measure of a life: Forensic identification and valuation after the *Titanic* disaster

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Abstract

This article analyzes the process of body recovery that took place after the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912. Focusing on how identification was intertwined with valuation, I show how notions of economic class informed decisions about which human bodies were fit for preservation as human bodies. The *RMS Titanic* steamship was a microcosm of social circulation in the early 20th-century Atlantic, and life on board was systematically stratified according to economic class. During the recovery that following the sinking, 114 bodies, or one-third of the total recovered, were buried at sea, most of them crewmembers or immigrant passengers who had held third-class tickets. Sea burial exposed the bodies to rapid and inaccessible decomposition, thereby selectively excluding those bodies from the archival and forensic record even as those victims' names and personal artefacts were recorded for posterity. The recovery process thus demonstrates that the material existence of those passengers' remains was not a given, but instead emerged in varied ways through identification and recovery practices. Such practices drew on notions of economic value and identifiability to shape bodily materials, which were selectively preserved, transformed, and/or put out of reach. As such, I argue that identification and valuation are thoroughly enmeshed with what I call *instantiation*, or determinations of how and whether something exists.

Keywords

bodies, disaster, forensics, identification, materiality, shipping, valuation

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Probably the first thing you would notice if you were dropped into freezing water would be the sheer shock of it, which would lead to hyperventilation. The second might be an intense, throbbing pain that shoots up the extremities. Cold water immersion is actually used as a test for tolerance to pain. Even with just one hand immersed in circulating water at just above freezing, the average tolerance time is only a few minutes (Kowalczyk et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 2004).

On the night that the *Titanic* sank in April 1912, the water temperature was estimated at one-half to two degrees below zero degrees Celsius, and the victims were in the water for two hours. People immersed in water that cold are only expected to survive for about forty-five minutes, and almost nobody in the water survived long enough to be rescued. Even many of those in the waterlogged lifeboats, often in clothes that were soaked through, succumbed to the cold. More than 1,500 people perished in the disaster, and well over 1,000 of them were never found, many likely trapped in the ship as it went down.

The bodies that stayed on the ocean surface floated there for another six days after the sinking, until the *Mackay-Bennett*, the first of four recovery ships, arrived to begin retrieving them from the sea. Upon reaching the site, the crewmembers described the debris field as ‘a flock of seagulls in the fog’, because of the white life vests that many of the bodies still wore (Mowbray, 1912: 259; *The Washington Times*, 1912). Although partially preserved by the cold, the bodies were bleached by the sun and otherwise damaged, both from the sinking itself, as well as from knocking against each other and the wreckage of the ship. Over time, the bodies had drifted from the site of the sinking and had spread out across a wide expanse of sea.

The frigid ocean water was a key material element that shaped both the *Titanic* disaster and the recovery. As they searched for and retrieved victims’ bodies, the recovery workers were intensely aware of the perils of freezing water, through their contact with the bodies and the water itself. During the *Mackay-Bennet* recovery, the crew worked under arduous conditions, on rowboats enveloped in a dense fog, surrounded by lurching waves and intermittent icebergs of the kind that sank the much larger *Titanic*. In calmer seas, they were able to pile seven or eight bodies at a time in each of the ship’s boats. Throughout, the clothes of the recovery workers, like those of the victims, became saturated with sea water, leaving them thoroughly soggy and cold.

The four recovery ships together would account for 337 bodies. The *Mackay-Bennett*’s body retrieval process alone took five days, not counting the total of eight days spent traveling to and from the site, including a return journey on a ship loaded down with the dead. During the recovery, once it became clear that the *Mackay-Bennett* could not preserve all of the bodies long enough to take them to shore, roughly one-third of the bodies on board were hastily buried at sea (RMS *Titanic* Resource Guide, 2006; Wormstedt, 2011).

Bodies as materials

The practice of burial at sea shows how the continued existence of the victims’ bodies was neither singular nor given, but instead was made possible through a variety of practices. In this article, I explore the implications of the decision of which bodies to keep

and which to return to the water. I argue that processes of identification and valuation are thoroughly entangled with what I call *instantiation*, or social and material practices of determining whether something exists. In what follows, I examine the context and significance of the *Titanic* in relation to the history of forensic practice. I explore Ingold's (2011) notion of *materials*, whose concrete and responsive specificities he favors over the study of abstract materiality, in relation to two relevant literatures: valuation studies and research on erasure and the archive. Conceiving of bodies as combinations of materials allows for an examination of the ways bodies were transformed through interaction with the freezing water, notably through decomposition in the deep sea. Finally, I examine burial at sea in the broader contexts of the valuation of bodies in the early 20th century Atlantic, including the expanding practice of life insurance, which attributed precise monetary values to specific bodies and individual deaths (Zelizer, 2010).

Turning away from the study of abstract materiality, Ingold (2011) argues for 'engaging directly with the materials themselves, following what happens to them as they circulate, mix with one another, solidify and dissolve in the formation of more or less enduring things' (p. 16). This call to move from abstract theories and towards specific, material engagement resonates strongly with the focus on situated practices in much contemporary research in science and technology studies (STS). Here I combine and expand upon Ingold's work through engagement with two literatures that deal with efforts to enable or erase different modes of existence: first, the emerging literature in valuation studies on the valuation of the body, and second, research on erasure and the archive.

Combining valuation studies and the archive allows for a multi-faceted perspective on the ways that human bodies are valued, preserved and, at times, destroyed. Research in valuation studies deals with the valuation of bodies in fields like life insurance, and as such it is explicitly concerned with how economic, social and political motivations are intertwined. With notable exceptions (e.g. Toom, 2015), to date the valuation studies literature has dealt less explicitly with the material constitution of the things being valued. Studies of erasure and the archive have expanded considerably on the work of Foucault and Derrida, and they deal explicitly with how archival material is constituted and preserved (Butler, 2006, 2010; Stoler, 1995, 2010) Yet although theorizations of the archive incorporate analyses of economic concerns, with the exception of work that came initially from subaltern studies (Chakrabarty, 2000; Guha, 1997; Spivak, 1999) they tend to focus on the political and cultural aspects of erasure over and above motivations related to economic class. In combination, these two literatures allow for attention to the specificity of the material constitution of a bodily archive together with a sensitivity to the particular roles of economic power in that constitution.

Decisions about which bodies to bury at sea were made largely according to the perceived economic class of the recovered victims, and those with third-class tickets were far more likely to be returned to the water. With this in mind, I explore the relationship between the material process of decomposition, which was arguably accelerated for victims with third-class tickets, and a related social practice of valuation: the purchasing of life insurance, which was conceived of as a means to pay for burial. Through the work of Zelizer (2010), the history of life insurance allows for an examination of what bodies were deemed to be worth, simultaneously in terms of someone's class position, such that

their body might be preserved, and in terms of the monetary values attributed to human life via life insurance policies (e.g. Lutter et al., 1999).

Analyzing the role of life insurance shows how burial at sea served to reinforce economic injustice in the form of rapid decomposition. In most cases, an identifiable body had to be recovered before the family of the deceased could receive a life insurance payout. Yet because burial at sea was predicated on class, the families of victims from third class were less likely to be presented with such a body. The surviving relatives of passengers from third class, arguably those most in need of a life insurance payout for their own economic survival, were least likely to be provided with a body that was necessary to redeem a claim. The underwater decomposition of bodies thus helped to determine the value of both victims and those around them, and in turn it helped to shape the material existences of both bodies and surviving relatives along perceived class lines.

The existence of the victims' bodies thus emerges as mediated through practices that are informed by societal conceptions of what constitutes an identifiable body, and a valuable human being. Such conceptions don't simply classify existing materials, but they transform those materials in a variety of ways that respond to, and at times reinforce, existing classifications (see M'charek, 2000, 2018). Examining the ways in which objects are instantiated as recognizable human bodies thus allows for an understanding of how practices of engaging with the world can serve to mold material realities in a variety of ways, whose legacies reach into the present day.

Throughout this account, I draw on the relatively sparse sources for the *Titanic* body recovery, which are far less numerous than the sources for the sinking itself. The available primary sources include the brief diaries of the recovery workers, the lists of bodies recovered, extant death certificates and records of testimony, as well as historical published accounts and the newspaper reports of the time. Although *Titanic* accounts tend to be quite sensationalized, given the fame of the sinking there are greater instances of eyewitness testimony and reporting than there are for other disasters in this period, and this allows for cross-comparison across sources.¹

The *Titanic* and the history of forensic practice

Titanic identification took place during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spread of methods of forensic identification through such means as passports, mug shots, and fingerprinting. Although fingerprints weren't used during the *Titanic* recovery, the practices employed demonstrated a related care for attributing individual identities to specific bodies, both believed to be unique (Cole, 2002). On board the *Mackay-Bennett*, all of the recovered bodies were assigned a number, and any objects or currency found on those bodies were put in a bag that had the same number on it (*The Washington Times*, 1912). These efforts at creating identity records and linking them to material objects were likely intended both to assist surviving family members in identifying the dead, and also to avoid accusations that personal effects had been stolen, lost or damaged in the recovery itself.

In time, the increasing turn towards practices of identification, and the related attribution of economic value to individual bodies, would come to affect the treatment of bodily remains far beyond the *Titanic*. The systematic recovery of mass casualties at sea was

relatively new at the time; the development of the wireless radio in the 1890s allowed for boats to be found before victims had decomposed, although coastal watch and lifeguard crews had set an important precedent for rescues from shipwrecks that occurred near the shore. Before radio, most ships lost at sea simply vanished. The sea was so vast and the options for communication were so limited, that unless another ship happened upon them, or unless the ship's boats somehow survived long enough to drift or be guided to shore, there was little anyone could do. Often it was confirmed that a ship had been lost only when it didn't arrive in port after several months. The *Titanic* is known for the enormity of the disaster, given that it had been billed as the largest steam ship in the world at the time it sank. But even so, the very presence of, or access to, the casualties of such a sinking is almost as notable as the scale of the disaster itself (Kurlansky, 1998: 116; Thompson, 2000: 22–23).

During the *Titanic* recovery, bodies weren't simply discovered and carried to shore. Instead, the act of recovery involved decisions about whether there were bodies in the sea, which bodies were reachable and which were still bodily *enough* (in terms of injuries or mutilation) to be brought to shore. Bodies were kept for land burial if they met one of two criteria. First, they were seen as being readily identifiable, whether as individuals or even as human bodies. Second, they were presumed to have economic value even after death, to be the bodies of passengers whose families and friends were believed to have a high social and economic worth. Therefore, it is important to delve further into the implications of the recovery and identification, which took place through efforts to scrutinize a casualty's belongings and physical appearance not just to identify and preserve the remains, but also to determine which remains were worthy of being identified and preserved at all.

The *Titanic* is well known as an encapsulation of multiple social worlds in the Atlantic in the early 20th century, and it is also notorious for the rigid class distinctions that shaped the chances of survival for passengers and crew. From the allegations that some steerage passengers were locked below decks, to the overwhelmingly better chances of survival for first-class passengers, such distinctions were assumed to be a natural part of society. For many, these distinctions would continue after death, particularly through the differing treatment that the bodies received (*The Washington Times*, 1912; Trebay, 2012).

Because social and economic notions of class worked in tandem with assumptions about legibility, the *Titanic* recovery is of broad interest to critical studies of valuation, identification, disaster response and forensics. But by drawing attention to these conceptions and their associated practices, I am not looking primarily to pass judgment on past body recovery or on the decisions made by those working under extreme conditions. The recovery workers were not formally trained, and several of them claimed to be deeply and indelibly changed by what they went through in that frozen field of floating corpses in the North Atlantic. But the workers were accompanied by trained professionals, in the form of the chaplain and the embalmer, who later helped to justify and formalize the kinds of practices that were carried out during the *Titanic* recovery. Biases with respect to economic class were arguably enhanced, rather than mitigated by, professionals' knowledge. Revisiting the *Titanic* recovery process is thus important in terms of furthering more reflexive and socially situated methods of identification in the future, methods which have not been able to eradicate bias through technical professionalization alone.

The *Titanic* is also related to later mass casualty disasters. Visual identification methods like those developed after the *Titanic* continue to be used alongside, or even instead of, forensic identification through, for example, fingerprints and DNA (Scanlon et al., 2011; Scanlon and Hunsberger, 2011; Stoney et al., 2011). In addition, the identification methods developed by the embalmer in Halifax, John Henry Barnstead – apparently in concert with John R Snow, Jr, the embalmer who traveled aboard the *Mackay-Bennett* – were applied and further developed in subsequent disasters such as the 1917 Halifax explosion. As such, the *Titanic* recovery played a role in future practices of forensic identification, which only began to be standardized much later, beginning after World War II (Scanlon, 1998; Stoney et al., 2011; University of Virginia, 2007).²

Bodily materials: Instantiation, identification and valuation

The *Titanic* recovery is particularly interesting because bodies were both identified and effaced at the same time, both noted in the recovery lists and committed to the sea. As the recovery workers separated bodies according to perceived economic class, they effectively decided which bodies were valued enough to be preserved, and which would be allowed to rapidly decompose underwater. Identification was part of the process of deciding over the transformation and obliteration of bodily material.

Ingold (2011) contends that that '[t]he abstract concept of materiality ... has actually hindered the proper understanding of materials' (p. 16). Ingold's work is particularly relevant for discussions of varieties of ways to exist. In fields such as STS, geography and anthropology, scholars draw on feminist theory to conceptualize materiality as something that is processual and in flux (e.g. Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1988; Massey, 2005; Tsing, 2000). Ingold (2011) contributes to contemporary debates by attending to the specificities of particular materials, including their experiential qualities, such as touch and smell, and transformations they undergo in particular conditions.

Here I take up his call. To his attentiveness to the flux and change of specific materials, I contribute an analysis of how those materials are brought into existence in ways that intertwine both social and empirical recognition. I thus approach the body as material – or more precisely, a composite of diverse materials. This builds upon the vast literature on the body, which includes studies that focus on the social role of the treatment of corpses. But to extend studies of the corpse as a symbol that develops in relation to material constraints (e.g. Hart and Timmermans, 2012), I consider the shaping of the body as an agentic material. I thus analyze the role of social selection in the transformations of materials, including which materials are allowed to persist, circulate and, by existing, exert their agency in the future.

Ingold's notion of materials is also relevant to understanding the particularities of the decomposition of variously preserved and buried bodies. This is pertinent in terms of the effects that freezing water and, at lower depths, water pressure would have had on bodies in the deep. Although much is unknown even today about underwater decomposition, bodies buried at sea were widely expected, at the time of the disaster, to decay more quickly in comparison with those on land, and at the very least, were effectively out of reach and thus erased from the accessible material record. Similarly, unembalmed bodies were expected to decompose more quickly than embalmed ones. As a result, the decision

to bury one-third of the recovered bodies at sea served to reshape the bodily archive for the disaster, allowing the record for different casualties to exist in a variety of material forms that came to differently shape what could be known for specific victims.

The expanding literature on valuation (Kjellberg et al., 2013) is particularly helpful for studying the ways bodies are recorded and given value. This includes in particular Fourcade and Healy's (2013) work on changing practices of valuation in 'classification situations', such as the credit scores that 'may have become the engine of modern class situations' (p. 570), as well as Fourcade's (2011) account of the valuing of nature, which focuses on the 'practices and institutions and their material consequences' (p. 1726). To this and earlier work on the circulation of commodities (e.g. Appadurai, 1988), I contribute an analysis of the practices that help to determine which materials and beings will continue to exist in order to be classified, to circulate, and to be valued. It also expands upon Hacking's (2004) notion of feedback loops, or how people and their bodies respond to, and selectively incorporate or contest, the categories that are attributed to them. Bodies cannot respond in cases where they have been expunged from the material record.

Recent work in valuation studies has emphasized the entanglement of different regimes of value. These include studies of the 'productive friction' (as cited in Beckert and Aspers, 2011: 25; Stark, 2009) among different regimes (e.g. Beckert and Aspers, 2011; Heuts and Mol, 2013), as well as changes within and between regimes of quantification (Hood, 2017), and the incorporation of bodies into economic valuation through the use of social norms (Fourcade, 2011; Fourcade and Healy, 2013; Rieppel, 2015). My analysis complements and extends these studies by analyzing how material and ontological concerns, in the sense of the materials and things that are allowed to continue existing in the world, are thoroughly bound up in social and economic valuations.

The determinations of which bodies counted is also related to which bodies were forgotten, and thus can be productively viewed in terms of the active forgetting that takes place during the formation of an archive. Bowker (2005) has noted that forgetting is an inherent part of attempts to classify and catalogue the past: 'By remembering all and only a certain set of facts/discoveries/observations', the archive 'consistently and actively engages in the forgetting of other sets.' (p. 12) Bowker thus shows that making an archive requires selecting what will be remembered and what will not.

Lehman (2017) has helpfully conceptualized the ocean as an archive that itself has been forgotten, and whose methods of preservation are unpredictable and little understood. Yet in the *Titanic* recovery the ocean served more as a repository of forgetting than an archive proper, a way to put bodily material at once out of mind and out of reach.

Even so, burial at sea led to the creation of two different archives that were taken out of a sea of bodily and textual remains. The first, a textual archive, involved new sources, such as compiled lists of victims, and the reorganization of existing textual remains – namely, the victims' belongings found among their clothes – which were kept and catalogued. The second, a bodily archive (including textiles in the form of the victims' clothing), involved a heavy selection among the bodies, some of whom were preserved and others that were buried at sea.

The *Titanic* recovery workers themselves distinguished these two archives according to the kinds of materials that comprised them, namely whether they were seen as bodily or textual in form, and these differences had long term consequences. For example, DNA

identification depends on the presence and accessibility of bodily material and, as recently as 2011, DNA analysis was performed on the remains of a *Titanic* victim. In that case, the samples came from the disinterred body of a young victim who was only kept from burial at sea by the actions of the *Mackay-Bennett* crew, who sponsored his burial on land (Tittley et al., 2004).

It is necessary to explore this process of selection, this 'exclusionary principle' as Bowker calls it, that not only distinguished among existing bodies, but also instantiated some bodies as material that mattered enough to continue to exist. A body that is preserved, that is not obliterated, has a certain force in the world. It is something that must be dealt with – if nothing else, by being left to decay, which might be seen as a willful act of abandonment. In contrast, those bodies that were buried at sea were forgotten in the very selective sense of being subject to an exceedingly rapid decomposition, ceasing to exist as human bodies and to be known as such. As Pollard (1999) indicates, 'loss at sea and burial at sea represent an obvious but rarely considered means by which the dead are removed physically not just from the realm of the living but also from the scrutiny of the archaeologist' (p. 48).

Butler (2006) has looked at the ways that people can be made to no longer exist, which she terms their *radical effacement*, which is the discursive and material act of 'providing no image, no name, no narrative, so that there never was a life, and there never was a death'. Instead of collecting bodies, of counting and marking death, effacement suggests that the deaths of some are viewed as non-events, a way of removing all knowledge of people whose lives didn't count from the perspective of those doing the effacement. The presumption is that if there is no record of a person's life, then their death never happened, because it's not possible to murder someone who does not exist.

Butler (2006) considers effacement a way of 'deciding what will and will not be publicly recognizable as reality' (pp. 146–147). This takes the concept of *erasure* one step further, because it involves not just erasing the person or thing in question, but also effacing all knowledge that it ever existed. Yet both erasure and effacement risk implying an *a priori* existence: You can only erase or efface someone or something that was already there. This underplays the extent to which such decisions are not only about what is 'publicly recognizable' about reality, but also involve making the desired reality come into being. For, as Butler (1990) shows elsewhere, decisions about reality are often accompanied by efforts to remake reality so that it conforms to what has been decided. Thus, such decisions require an extensive and complex background of practices for making and remaking reality, including institutional frameworks, infrastructures and social conceptions.

In her work on effacement, Butler concentrates less on the practices that inform the effacement of bodies than on its impact once it has been achieved. In part, this stems from her initial concern, in her book *Precarious Lives*, to understand the lack of attention within the US to the innumerable Iraqi and Afghani victims of the War on Terror, where US military practices were largely hidden from public view in the name of security. Yet the result is that effacement risks being solely a dichotomous action, as a result of which something either exists or not, is known to exist or is not.

In contrast, I propose studying effacement as a process with varied outcomes, an effect of practices in specific cases, including those cases where greater evidence is

available for how decisions about and practices for molding material reality occurred. Burial at sea in this instance can thus be seen as a selective form of effacement, a way of making sure that specific bodies are not known and do not count, in the sense of being effective in the world. Given that lists of names and effects were kept for all of the bodies recovered, the burial at sea was not aimed at effacing the entire existence of those who had died. However, and possibly even unintentionally, the recovery did serve to selectively efface some corpses by creating a public reality that did not include those bodies. As such, the recovery practices precluded their potential land burial, made impossible any media photographs of cavalcades of more than 300 coffins, precluding any later forensic-based identification attempts, and possibly shaped the financial futures of families whose loved ones' deaths, without identifiable bodies, could not be sufficiently proven for the purpose of collecting insurance.

It is thus necessary to extend Butler's notion of effacement by increasing the focus on the specific practices that are necessary to make effacement happen in particular instances. I call these practices of *instantiation*, or the determinations of how and whether something exists and might continue to exist. The study of instantiation explores the situated, tactile and often tacit practices that reshape worldly materials and thus inform decisions about what exists in and of the world. As Aronson (2016) shows in his work on the massive efforts to identify the remains of 9/11 victims, identification practices can be fraught with contestation over which materials are present in the world, which materials matter. This leads to debate over the potential and actual empirical states of the world, such as whether something is there or not, whether an event occurred, and whether a body or a person exists.

Instantiation is related to what Toom (2015), in his study of identification practices, has called the 'technolegal materialization' of bodies (p. 4). The processing of human remains after 9/11 focused on accomplishing the enormous feat of attributing individual personal identities to even tiny samples, in part to justify the US's military retaliation for the attacks (Aronson, 2016). In his work, Toom analyzes how partial remains were materialized differently – produced and handled differently in ways that are at once both technical and legal – depending on whether they were classified as human remains, dust or garbage. Remains might be declared to be garbage, for example, if it was decided that they were not human remains, but rather fragments of chicken bone from one of the restaurants in the Windows on the World complex in the top floors of the World Trade Center.

Toom thus contributes to Bowker's work on archival forgetting an examination of how the constitution of archival samples, here as samples of human remains, involves distinguishing them from background noise, such as dust and garbage, which is marked to be discarded and forgotten. Materialization is thus a process of selecting and identifying some remains as ones that count, and effacing others by purposefully forgetting them. But before such remains can even be classified, such matter first has to be seen as empirically existing and worthy of classification, as something at all, and this occurs differently in different contexts. As such, instantiation can be seen as one aspect of technolegal materialization and, beyond the legal, as part of heterogeneous ways of engaging with worldly materials more broadly.

Instantiation practices are both discursive and material, given that it would be unhelpful to separate the existence or non-existence of a particular body from the (simultaneously

discursive and material) practices that have produced and maintained it. The notion of instantiation thus resonates with Faber-Jonker's (2015) contention, in her review of critical literature on bodies, that 'the body is neither "biological fact" nor "social construction" but instead something that becomes and exists in practices' (p. 20). To explore these resonances, I now turn to the role of life insurance and bodily valuation, including an investigation of burial at sea, both in terms of how it was practiced after the *Titanic*, and its perception in a broader historical context.

Bodily valuation and the *Titanic* recovery process: What a corpse is worth

Judgments about the values of different passengers' bodies came to the fore under the recovery's arduous conditions. The cold water wasn't the only challenge faced by the recovery crew, which also had insufficient supplies and training. The crew found many more bodies than were expected, so even though they reportedly brought all of the embalming fluid in the city of Halifax (*The Washington Times*, 1912), they had too few coffins and fluid, even after further supplies were brought by other ships. The recovery process took emotional and physical tolls on the crew members, whose lives were at risk and who likely had little experience with the sight of so many corpses at once. They were literally cable repair men: The *Mackay-Bennett*, or the 'Macky-Bennett' as the ship was known to the crew, was a cable repair ship, which meant it was charged with laying and repairing the transatlantic telegraph lines that then ran along the bottom of the ocean (Müller and Tworek, 2015; Starosielski, 2015).

The ship had been hastily refitted to recover *Titanic* victims, and an embalmer and extensive supplies were brought on board. However, nothing had prepared the crew for what they encountered. One crewmember, Frederick A Hamilton (1912), described the crew as 'cold, wet, miserable, and comfortless'. As they steamed towards the site, he pointed out that 'the embalmer is the only man to whom the work is pleasant', and noted that 'the embalmer becomes more and more cheerful as we approach the scene of his future professional activities, to-morrow will be a good day for him'. Amid such strain, the crew's normalized assumptions about economic class and potential life insurance policies emerged all the more starkly.

During the recovery, all bodies that were retrieved were numbered in the order that they were taken on board. The number, the relevant body's physical characteristics, clothing, identifying marks and personal effects were then recorded on a list. While clothes were largely left on the bodies, the personal effects of each body, for example items found in the clothing pockets, were placed in bags that were given the same numbers as the bodies themselves, before the purser, whose job it was to secure any movable items, locked them in the 'hospital' (most likely, the sick bay) for security. They then were transported to Halifax at the end of the journey (Medical Examiner, 1912; *The Washington Times*, 1912).

Yet this is where the differential treatment began: The bodies of passengers from first and second class, to the extent that they could be determined, were embalmed on board, with each of the first-class passengers' bodies then placed in a wooden coffin.

Second-class passengers' bodies were wrapped in canvas and stored separately. In contrast, the bodies of passengers with third-class tickets, and many among the *Titanic's* crew, were wrapped in canvas, stacked on deck and then buried at sea. Three burial ceremonies were held. Each ceremony began when the ship's bell tolled and saw thirty bodies buried, sent overboard three at a time while the reverend read a psalm and said a prayer (Hamilton, 1912; Hind, 1912; *The Washington Times*, 1912). Amid the recovery work and burials, lists of victims were also radioed to shore to alert families who were anxiously awaiting news (Bier, 2009).

Those bodies that were not buried at sea were brought to Halifax, where they were embalmed further before being laid out on an ice rink used for the sport of curling to await identification by relatives or their agents (Hamilton, 1912; Scanlon and Hunsberger, 2011). Some bodies that arrived in Halifax were shipped out to families by train (RMS *Titanic* Resource Guide, 2006), and those that went unclaimed were buried together in Halifax (Scanlon, 1998).

The decision to bury some bodies at sea was made largely for practical reasons. According to the *Maritime Museum of the Atlantic* (2017), which houses documents and artifacts from the *Titanic*, bodies were required by Canadian law to be embalmed if they were to be brought ashore and, as mentioned, the amount of embalming fluid carried on board did not suffice for all.³ However political considerations likely also played a part. There are few to no documented accounts of the backdoor meetings that happened after the sinking, and even so it is likely that the White Star Line officials would have been worried about the additional public relations nightmare of hundreds of frigid corpses arriving in port, a physical reminder of the company's failure to bring them to shore still breathing.⁴

The process of burial at sea was justified as being socially and religiously acceptable to many of the deceased. For some, burial at sea may even have romantic connotation, a way to be quickly and seamlessly sent on one's way, out of sight and out of mind. Yet the significance of sea burial should not be taken at face value. For whereas a respectful burial on land in this context generally involved some form of preservation and protection from scavenging animals, at least in the form of a sturdy coffin, for burial at sea this was not present – or was only present in the form of a canvas shroud.

If death initiates processes of transformation for the body, burial methods mediate these transformations and can transform them in turn. The historical sources reveal popular unease about how different burial methods, such as burial at sea, served to shape the decomposition of the body and the material existence of the deceased. Burial at sea played a notorious role in the Atlantic from the 16th to the 19th centuries, given its regular use during the horrendous middle passage journeys between West Africa and the Americas (Armstrong, 2004; Rediker, 2007; Sharpe, 2016). In this enduring context of Atlantic slavery, by the early 1900s burial at sea was treated with a certain broader ambivalence that manifested itself in the distinction between a funeral, or what was considered a proper ceremony, and burial, or one of the proper ways to physically deal with a human body (Weiss-Krejci, 2013). On the one hand, many burials at sea were accompanied by a standard funeral that was intended to show respect, and that differed from its land-based equivalent only through the references to the sea. On the other hand, given

that it took place in water, rather than land, there were disagreements over whether burial at sea could properly be considered burial at all.

In literature, this ambivalence was sometimes expressed in the treatment of sea burials as a source of both attraction and revulsion (Reid, 2011). This is evident in literature of the period, such as Marianne Moore's (1994) poem 'A Grave' (pp. 49–50), first written in 1917 and also published as 'A Graveyard'. In it, Moore develops a metaphor of the sea as an enormous graveyard. She thereby explores the tension between the emotive pull of the sea and the estrangement of the poet, who knows that it has been used for the disposal of countless bodies.

In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville dramatizes the cultural specificity of sea burial by describing how the (heavily orientalized) character Queequeg, a sailor from a fictional island in the South Pacific, 'shuddered at the thought of being buried in his hammock, according to the usual [European and North American] sea-custom, tossed like something vile to the death-devouring sharks' (Melville, 1988: 478; cited in Pollard, 1999: 30). Rather than revealing much about the South Pacific, here as elsewhere in the novel, Melville uses Queequeg to express the author's disapproval of his own (white, North American) culture and its sea burial practices.

Notwithstanding the reservations, burial at sea was nonetheless common in the North Atlantic. It was widely viewed as being an appropriate expedient for any who died at sea, as long as no other options were available – such as in cases where a ship was a long way from port and there was no way to preserve a human body. Newspapers in New York, the *Titanic's* original destination, refer to burial at sea only as a final recourse (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1911) and describe the search for technologies so that ships 'need not to resort' (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1895) to burial at sea any longer. In a 1910 article on cremation, Julius P Meyer, described as an 'agent' of the Hamburg-American Line, was quoted as speaking of the 'old custom' of burial at sea that was only used under 'unusual circumstances', and he claimed that their steamers carried sealed caskets on board to prevent the practice. In the same article, a representative of the Cunard Line, the direct competitor of the White Star Line that launched the *Titanic*, also claimed: 'We bring our dead bodies to port' (*The New York Times*, 1910a). So at least from the perspective of the steamship companies, burial at sea was for use only in emergencies.

The steamship agents' statements were likely made in part to soothe public worries over burial at sea. Burial at sea was the subject of some debate in the New York press in the years prior to World War I (*The New York Times*, 1909a, 1909b), and in at least one instance, a society was even formed to end the practice (*The New York Times*, 1910b). Yet attitudes towards burial at sea differed among those who made their lives at sea and those who lived on land. In the newspapers, as in more recent years, there were reports of sailors or other seafarers who died on shore and had asked to be buried at sea (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1890; *The New York Times*, 1907, 1912a). However, such attitudes were mostly restricted to those whose careers were made on ships. This can be seen by the fact that one land-based couple from Brooklyn refused to go on a cruise unless coffins and embalming fluids for both of them could also be carried aboard, specifically to ensure that they wouldn't be buried at sea in the event that they passed away during the voyage.

Despite assurances from the agents that at least some steamship liners regularly carried sealed coffins aboard, it is possible that only one or two were routinely carried. Passengers who worried that their ship didn't have coffins, or enough coffins, could be assured of one if they paid for it themselves. Although no evidence is available, it is possible that the article, though it may well have represented an actual traveling couple whose demands for a coffin were met for a small fee, was publicized at the behest of representatives of the liners who wished to quell public fears (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1907). There are indications that funeral homes on land may have stoked public sentiment against free sea burial (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1908, 1911). All of this suggests that, at the time, burial at sea was viewed as an expedient; those who worked at sea were used to the practice, sometimes even preferring it, but it was at least occasionally rejected by others.

Yet the agents' contention that burial at sea was only practiced in extreme circumstances shouldn't be taken at face value. Indeed, the representative of the Hamburg-America line, mentioned above, spoke of steerage, or third-class ticket holding, passengers. He noted that 'of course, when a steerage passenger dies, the body is sent to the bottom of the ocean if the person's friends do not desire it brought to port' (*The New York Times*, 1910a). And the sources suggest that burial at sea was not always voluntary on the part of surviving friends and relatives. One article records a passenger's outrage when her mother, who died of natural causes while they were both on a steamship voyage, was summarily buried at sea, despite the presence of sealed coffins on board, and the vocal protests of the daughter and several of her mother's friends (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1908). In another case, it was claimed that passengers from China hid a body in the cargo hold to prevent its being buried at sea (*The New York Times*, 1897). So, surviving friends and family, often fellow passengers, didn't always accept sea burial, even when there were practical concerns about decomposition. Instead of burial in the deep, they preferred for the body of the deceased to continue to exist as accessible and identifiable human remains.

Insuring the body

The value attributed to bodies in relation to social class, as suggested by the class of their ticket, was compounded by the attribution of economic value to bodies through life insurance policies. After the *Titanic* sank, the decision to save most of the first-class passengers' bodies, even as bodies of crew and third-class ticket holders were consigned to the water, was in part due to assumptions that wealthier passengers would almost certainly have life insurance policies that would pay for their burial or cremation, in addition to family wealth that might finance a burial in the absence of life insurance. The religious official on board the recovery ship, Reverend Canon Cameron Hind (1912), felt the need to justify the peacefulness of burials at sea in light of the 'common impression of the awfulness of a grave in the mighty deep', which indicates that there was popular unease with the practice. Hind also presented burial at sea as an act of compassion: By ritually throwing the bodies overboard, the recovery crew prevented the families of third-class passengers from facing the undue burden of having to bear the costs of burying their loves ones.⁵

The presumption that first- and second-class passengers would have insurance to cover burial costs was borne out of the historical context of life insurance in the USA. Although its roots stretched at least as far back as the mid-18th century, life insurance was long frowned upon because it involved attributing economic value to an individual life (Lavine, 2012; Zelizer, 2010). Life insurance became more popular in the late 19th century, accompanying changing attitudes towards the economic valuation of human life (Zelizer, 2010: 21–22).

A life insurance policy generally holds that, if the policy holder dies, the insurance company pays a specific sum to their surviving family. That sum attaches a monetary value to the deceased person. Moreover, it links that value to the body, since life insurance often is not paid out unless the corpse of the policy holder can be found and identified. This practice was long seen as distasteful, but not because life was assumed to be priceless. Indeed, value has long been attributed to individuals, including children, in the context of labor. Employers certainly knew what workers were economically worth to them. For many manual laborers and indentured servants, their worth was assumed to be limited to their meager wages. Particularly for slaves in the chattel system, who themselves were seen as commodities, one's economic value was excruciatingly evident. In at least one especially horrific case, African slaves on a ship at sea were thrown overboard, so that insurance could be collected (Armstrong, 2004).

Because they were familiar with the economic value attributed to their own lives, members of the working and middle classes sometimes shunned life insurance because it laid bare the everyday, practical valuation of life, in terms of their personal or family wealth. It was viewed as an airing of dirty laundry, as highlighting the precise economic value that was already attributed to the lives of many workers. As Zelizer shows in her groundbreaking work on life insurance and valuation, life insurance only became acceptable as part of a broad social shift whereby the everyday valuation of labor, and child labor in particular, became less complete – as some peoples' lives began, at least in principle, to be viewed as invaluable and unquantifiable. Thus, 'far from "profaning" life and death, money became ritualized by its association with them' (Zelizer, 2010: 41).

This social and ritualistic treatment of money is interesting in light of the burials at sea that took place during the *Titanic* recovery, where the reverse occurred. Instead of a human life needing to be at least potentially invaluable, in order to justify attributing a monetary value to it through life insurance, presumptions about the monetary value of a body, such as possible life insurance, were integral to the decision to preserve a body whose land burial was potentially invaluable to any relatives who might be waiting on shore.

For example, upon returning from the recovery trip, the captain of the *Mackay-Bennett*, Frederick Larnder, apparently responded to the questions from members of the press waiting on the dock, who then reported the information in the dramatic journalistic style common at the time. One account mentions that, 'with a pained expression', the captain said that bodies were buried at sea because either they were either 'crew', for whom burial at sea would have been the expected outcome, or simply for practical reasons, because 'we couldn't care for them' given the length of time at sea and the quantities of embalming fluid (*The Washington Times*, 1912). In another, he is reported to have said the following to reporters with respect to burial at sea of *Titanic* victims:

No prominent man was recommitted to the deep. It seemed best to embalm as quickly as possible in those cases where large property might be involved. It seemed best to be sure to bring back to land the dead where the death might give rise to such questions as large insurance and inheritance and all the litigation. (Mowbray, 1912: 261–262)

He thus indicates that the main reason for the decision to bury third-class passengers at sea involved the potential financial property of victims and their families, including both insurance and inheritance, as well as possible litigation that may arise from the lack of a body.

However, the book from which this quotation is taken, *Sinking of the Titanic*, is a complicated source. It was first published only a month after the disaster and is sensationalistic throughout (Katz, 2017). The author was apparently a journalist and his quotations corroborate newspaper reports well enough to suggest that he was either present at the press conferences that were held, or that he culled and compiled accurate quotations from different sources at the time. Either way, any additions that may have been made, and which are now likely impossible to trace, would have been made in such a way that they attempted to appeal to public sentiment at the time.

Mowbray's attribution to the *Mackay-Bennett's* captain that bodies were selected by class confirms what is known of the procedure aboard from a variety of sources, including newspapers and formal inquisitions. For example, in the lists of victims compiled aboard the *Mackay-Bennett*, the class of ticket is the most consistent descriptor used to distinguish bodies. Among those buried at sea, there is only one known first-class passenger, compared with 33 bodies listed as first-class passengers among those who were brought to shore.

According to my rough count based on the Nova Scotia Archives list (RMS Titanic Resource Guide, 2006), crew were 36% more likely, and third-class passengers were 46% more likely, to be buried at sea than the average across all of the recovered bodies. With first and second-class passengers, it was the reverse. Second-class passengers were 69% more likely to be brought to shore. For first-class passengers, the single body buried at sea means that their bodies were overwhelmingly more likely to be brought to shore. In addition to this, there were almost twice as many third-class passengers than first-class passengers on the ship, and according to one count, 86% of the bodies of third-class passengers were never found (Wormstedt, 2011).⁶ In contrast, the bodies of first-class ticket holders were far more likely to be found and this, in combination with differences by class among those bodies that were kept, indicates that class played a significant role in the treatment of bodies throughout the process of recovery.

Conceptualizing decomposition

During the *Titanic* recovery, social assumptions about class were derived from presumptions about both the class of one's ticket and related access to life insurance. Such assumptions not only shaped the attachment of identity to bodies that were preserved, but they also were decisive in the decision about whether or not a body was allowed to continue to physically exist as a human body. What occurred was not a simple recognizing of first- and second-class passengers, on the one hand, in comparison with third-class

passengers and crew on the other. Instead, it was an attribution of value and an effort to retain the potential for identification and insurance valuation of some bodies, while others were left for likely obliteration.

Burial at sea served as a means of selecting and, through contact with the circulating ocean water, materially transforming the bodies that were sent into the deep. Underwater decomposition was crucial to this transformation. The characterization of burial at sea may be somewhat romantic, but the physical process of underwater decomposition is less so. There are just as many scavengers in the sea as there are on land, although their numbers vary with the conditions on the sea floor. Sending a body into the water was less like land-based Judeo-Christian burials at the time, which increasingly showed concern for the preservation of the body, than a form of careful abandonment. The land-based equivalent to burial at sea is not burial underground. Instead, it's like placing a body deep in a remote forest and leaving it for the scavengers.⁷

Underwater decomposition is unique, and seawater decomposition differs from freshwater, although the exact rates depend on multiple factors. By comparison with those buried on land, a body left in the sea would be subject to innumerable large predators and scavengers, followed by a far more rapid decomposition on the sea floor, to the point where, at a depth of 300 meters, a pig carcass was reduced to a skeleton in as little as 4 days (Anderson and Bell, 2016). Although the rate of the deposition of sediment (Bell and Elkerton, 2008) and level of oxygen in the water both affect the rate of decomposition, in this case the carcasses were scavenged by crustaceans even before they could decompose (Anderson and Bell, 2014). Human remains have been known to dearticulate underwater in as little as two weeks (Bell and Elkerton, 2008), and to fully decompose within one to three months (Blanco Pampín and López-Abajo Rodríguez, 2001; Dumser and Türkay, 2008). There is also evidence of scavenging in the deep Arctic at over 18,000 feet, deeper than the approximately 13,000 feet of the *Titanic* wreck (Klages et al., 2001). Even the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which has argued for the present *Titanic* wreckage site to be considered a graveyard on account of bodies trapped in the wreck, acknowledges that 'human bone dissolves into seawater at the depth at which the wreck lies' (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 2001: 18907).

These studies are recent, but burial at sea was already associated with decomposition during the *Titanic* era. There are innumerable reports of sailors coming upon poorly preserved remains of decomposed bodies from recent sinkings, whether submerged in wrecks or floating (e.g. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1880). These include three bodies from the *Titanic* disaster that had been left behind, apparently already deceased, in a lifeboat when survivors were taken on board the *Carpathia* in the early morning after the disaster. The three were found roughly one month later, and 200 miles away, floating in a lifeboat, 'unrecognizable' according to one of the crewmembers of the *Oceanic* who recovered them (Saleroom, 2016) – and these were kept out of the water (*The New York Times*, 1912c). They, too, were buried at sea after being discovered, and this again demonstrates the relationship between decisions about identifiability (or recognizeability) and bodily preservation, although the presence or absence of embalming fluid on board the ship that found them may also have played a role.

Decomposition was also part of the psalm read by the Reverend Cameron Hind (1912), who traveled aboard the *Mackay-Bennett*, before the sea burials: 'We therefore commit his body to the deep *to be turned to corruption*' (emphasis added).

Of course, decomposition is also part of burial on land, but as Faust's (2009) study of the treatment of the dead from the United States Civil War shows, a deep burial on land both protects the body from large predators, while also serving as a site of remembrance and offering the potential that the unidentified dead may in the future be dug up and identified. In addition, the advent of technologies like embalming and refrigeration over the course of the 19th century allowed some who died far from home to be preserved long enough to be shipped to their families and buried (Faust, 2009). Related concerns are revealed in the uproar following the *Titanic* disaster (Bier, 2009), as the protection, memorial, and promise of future recognition were foreclosed for those buried at sea. Concerns such as these are precisely what Hind and the *Mackay-Bennett's* captain attempt to address in their statements to the press (Hind, 1912; Mowbray, 1912; *The Washington Times*, 1912).

Thus, in addition to notions of class identity informing bodily identification, they also figured into decisions about which bodies were worthy enough to continue to exist as human bodies to begin with, at least for the several weeks it might take them to return to shore and be buried in the ground. The criteria used were both assumptions about economic class and what might be called 'bodily integrity' or 'identifiability'.⁸ Among such other factors as nationality and ancestry, class also figures into who is more likely to be identifiable to the recovery workers, perhaps by having a business card or initials sewn into their clothing. According to one journalist writing at the time, the *Mackay-Bennett's* Captain explained the procedure by noting that, among those buried at sea, 'the unidentified *seemed unidentifiable*, the identified were too mutilated to bring to shore' (Mowbray, 1912: 260, emphasis added).

This incorporation of class into identifiability is significant, because the recovery workers weren't just identifying available bodies; they were also shaping the identifiable population, marking some of them to be kept, embalmed and preserved, while relegating others to physical non-existence – namely, the denial of embalming, exposure to large sea predators, and an incredibly rapid decomposition at the bottom of the sea. Published accounts indicate that the crew demonstrated considerable respect for the victims' bodies, despite the arduous conditions of the recovery work. Yet ultimately the crew became the arbiters of which bodies would be allowed to continue to exist and be visible as human bodies.⁹

No exhumation possible: The legacies of sea burial

Given that insurance companies often required an identified body, burial at sea complicated the efforts of victims' families to receive a life insurance payout. In one instance, a delay in the identification of one body owing to a mix-up between two bodies meant the temporary impoverishment of Adele Nasrallah, a teenaged survivor from what is now Lebanon (then Syria), whose husband Niqula perished in the sinking (Bier, 2009). After the disaster, her husband's family helped her to secure a lawyer, who wrote to the Halifax provincial secretary, noting, 'The widow is a very young woman and is left absolutely destitute. ... I am, therefore, anxious to obtain this money for her as soon as possible'

(Gilbert, 1912). In the end, the money was secured, but only once her husband's body had been found: He had been wearing a money belt around his waist (RMS Titanic Resource Guide, 2006: Body 43).¹⁰ In the reports of the medical examiner, made after the *Mackay-Bennett* brought the recovered bodies to the port of Halifax, Niqula Nasrallah is listed as 'previously unidentified'. This suggests that his body was only identified by the medical examiner after the body was brought to Halifax, using both the body's effects, including a business card, as well as distinguishing marks, such as a tattoo of a lion with a sword on his arm (perhaps indicative of the fact that he was an Orthodox Christian), which may not have been apparent when the body was first recovered, given the fog and necessary haste of the recovery. This indicates that the fact that the body was retained, and not buried at sea, improved his chances of being identified, and thus the chances of his teenaged widow to secure her financial future.

There were isolated cases where claims were made without a body or certificate of death (not issued without a body), but the difficulties encountered in passing these exceptions helped to prove the rule. In reference to one claim of a wealthy victim that was granted without a recovered body, James W. Stevens, the president of the Illinois Life Insurance company, noted how unique it was: 'the company had to strain several points [of procedure] in allowing the claim' (*Chicago Tribune*, 1912).¹¹ Of interest here is the fact that, among the few first-class bodies not recovered, the family nonetheless had the connections and funds to hire a lawyer who could find a way for them to receive the claim, whereas for passengers in third class bending the rules in such a manner would have been far more difficult.

In addition to informing the payouts to affected families, burial at sea also affected much later attempts at identification, some of them decades in the future. For example, recently attempts have been made to use DNA from the body of one victim buried in Halifax, who became known simply as the 'Unknown Child' (Just et al., 2011; Parry, 2011).¹² The Unknown Child was a toddler at the time of the sinking and had no known surviving relatives and no effects. He might have been a candidate for burial at sea, but the sight of him brought 'tears to the eye' of the recovery crew, who collectively paid for his burial (Titley et al., 2004).

Of course, the recovery crew could in no way have anticipated the later development of DNA identification, but they were well aware of the importance of bodies to identification. The crew's willingness to pay for the child's burial, in the event that no surviving family members were found, indicates both a hope that the child might be identified after being brought to port, and a sense that a land burial was preferable to burial at sea. In the end, their efforts paid off, but only almost 100 years later when the DNA identification took place. It also may indicate an effort to memorialize the numerous *Titanic* crewmembers who perished in the sinking, many of them upwardly-mobile professionals with working class backgrounds who were buried at sea because of their seagoing occupations.

Additional consequences of the sea burial can be seen in the subsequent treatment of the objects found on those bodies not brought to shore. Because the effects of all passengers were kept, burial at sea can be seen as a point where organic material, in the sense of nonliving human bodies, was transformed into a paper archive, including the lists of victims and collections of the passenger's effects. Yet even those effects that belonged to passengers were treated differently than were other objects, such as the ship itself.

Although the possessions of those buried at sea were initially catalogued and brought to Halifax, this did not guarantee their preservation. In the end, many of the unclaimed objects were burned. As with the bodies that were buried at sea, the act of relegating the artefacts to nonexistence was presented as an act of compassion, for the authorities feared they might ultimately be stolen and used as souvenirs. The only known exception are the unknown child's shoes. Clarence Northover, one Halifax police sergeant, recounted that, as the objects began to be burned, he secreted away the child's shoes, and kept them in his desk drawer for the rest of his career (Parry, 2011). The fears of the sale of effects weren't entirely unfounded. In recent years artifacts from the *Titanic*, including passenger effects, have been sold at auction for incredible amounts. In 2015, one individual biscuit that survived the *Titanic* sold for 23,000 US dollars at auction (*ABC News*, 2015; *The Guardian*, 2015).

The ultimate destruction of the effects of unclaimed passengers is also interesting in comparison to the preferential treatment for the ship, which was more readily economically valued than were the heterogeneous bodies and their belongings. Indeed, the ship's US \$5 million policy was paid within 30 days of the sinking (Duell, 2013). As noted earlier, debates over life insurance hinged in part on whether or not humans could be compared to nonliving objects. Yet the reason the issue was even raised was because insurance was traditionally associated with inanimate objects.

Although life insurance was relatively new at the time, there were centuries-old procedures for insuring non-human artefacts, such as the *Titanic* ship. Similarly, although there were few formal procedures for body recovery in 1912, salvage law, for the recovery of nonhuman material, had existed since the middle ages. There was even a speculation bubble that focused on the physical *Titanic* ship as conflicting reports circulated in the first two days after the sinking, with some claiming the ship had sank, and others contending that it was limping to port (About Lloyd's, 2017).

By comparison with the insurance for the ship, *The New York Times* (1912b) noted that, 'life and accident insurance ... is more difficult to estimate because of the many inaccuracies in names of the missing and the difficulty of identifying individual names with those on the books'. Those involved were concerned that value might be misattributed to remains that had been misidentified, or that people might make false claims – for example, that someone had been on board when they weren't, or that someone had died in the sinking who hadn't died – in order to receive an insurance payout.

My account of the recovery shows that, rather than attempts to fabricate bodies that weren't there, the bodies that *were* found were removed from their existence as human bodies, and transformed into collections of texts and artefacts. And more than later manipulations of the economic value of a body for insurance purposes, what emerges instead is that notions of economic value were intrinsic to the process of identification, and determinations of existence, from the beginning of the recovery process.¹³

Sovereignty underwater: Instantiation and the price of effacement

The *Titanic* recovery thus demonstrates that existence itself can be viewed as processual, in flux, and as something that is maintained, if not created, through material practices. In

the process of recovery, different passengers' bodies were instantiated as different kinds of archival records along perceived lines of economic class. The result was that, through their exposure to rapid decomposition, some bodies were effaced from their existence as human bodies. This demonstrates the entanglement of identification and valuation. It also indicates that effacement need not be total to be formative, in terms of its ability to shape the material world and knowledge of it.

In recent years, the *Titanic* sinking site on the Atlantic seabed has provided an additional example of how identified and valued bodies continue to play an important role in questions of forensic identification.¹⁴ The *Titanic* wreck came to rest in two pieces spread across a larger field of rubble on the ocean floor. Presently, the wreck site is still scattered with debris, and there is an ongoing controversy over whether that debris includes bodies or other human remains.¹⁵ In 2012, officials for the US's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration apparently sought to extend its authority over the wreckage site, and thus strengthen its underwater sovereignty, by highlighting that the *Titanic* site was a graveyard, and that there were indeed numerous remains. This was countered by private explorers who have visited the site, like the filmmaker James Cameron. They claimed they had seen no bodies, although they likely were worried about their own access to the site if the US government exerts greater control (Broad, 2012). Furthermore, one reason for the discussion was that both the government and private explorers were well aware of the economic value of the site, for example as a source of revenue for tourism or filmmaking.¹⁶

The debate over whether bodies can still be found in the wreck also has a forensic component. Whether or not the bodies have been fully consumed by marine life depends on several factors, including pressure and temperature. However, even if most of the bodies have already decomposed, it is possible that bodies might still be trapped in a sealed compartment in the wreck itself, in a place where it might be difficult for scavengers to reach them. Most relevant for determinations of existence, the disagreement also depends on what one considers a *body*, so whether the definition of a body includes personal artifacts or partial human remains. Certainly, numerous shoes have been found, but it is a complicated process to determine how much of the sand and organic mixture that now likely fills those shoes should be defined as a 'corpse'. Significantly, a belief that partial remains might count as a body is tied up with the question of whether or not those remains are present enough to be able to be identified, both as human and in terms of their DNA profile.

This demonstrates that identification and valuation continue to be interwoven, and that they continue to depend upon determinations of whether a body exists. The wreckage site is kilometers away from where the recovery of the floating bodies took place, since they had drifted during the days before the recovery ships arrived. So there is no chance that those buried at sea are among the remains near the sunken *Titanic* wreck. The bodies that were buried at sea are likely long gone in the form that they were then known – either fully decomposed, or at least undiscoverable without considerable effort.

By comparison with the bodies at the surface, in many ways any bodies still trapped in the wreck are the penultimate form of nonexistence through burial at sea. Third-class passengers were housed in the more dangerous lower decks of the ship. From before the

wreck and on through the recovery, there was a politics of existence at play through identification and valuation, in the form of identifying some bodies as more valuable than others. It was a politics of literal submersion under water. The bodies that perished in the sea, whether in the wreck itself or during the recovery, were precisely those less likely to be identified or considered economically valuable. Those deemed less worthy were less likely to be allowed to exist even after death. As such, they are likely lost to the bodily, if not the documentary record. Nonetheless, like the *Titanic's* victims more broadly, it is possible to engage with the ongoing effects of their absence.

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Notes

1. Although fascinating, the ultimate legal and regulatory ramifications of the *Titanic* disaster for body recovery, including the impacts of the litigation and liability claims that followed the disaster, are outside the scope of this article. They deserve more extensive attention than it is possible to provide here.
2. According to the website *Dignity Memorial* (2017), the Snow funeral home is still in operation.
3. As of 2000, the US Army regulations for the deceased aboard ship appear to have been changed to include either embalming or being held at temperatures cold enough to prevent decomposition, but this requires reliable mechanical refrigeration of a sort that was unavailable in 1912.
4. On the political life of corpses, see Verdery (2013) and Young and Light (2013).
5. There were other alternatives to sea burial. The White Star Line, which financed the recovery and some of the eventual burials in Halifax, might have paid for the interment of all of the bodies that were eventually found. Alternatively, donations might themselves have financed the burials for those who could not afford them. Due to the *Titanic's* notoriety numerous relief funds had been set up to assist victims in the aftermath of the disaster.
6. Even when using the same list of bodies, counting is complicated due to different ways of categorizing the casualties. I derived my statistics from the lists offered by the Nova Scotia Archives (RMS *Titanic* Resource Guide, 2006) and compared these to those from Wormstedt (2011). In cases where no names were given, I used descriptions to group the recovered bodies: If a body was described, as in one instance, as 'probably a fireman', I grouped it under 'crew'. Using that method, less than 1% of those buried at sea were first-class passengers, but they represented 15.6% of those bodies brought to shore. Crew were overwhelmingly represented among both categories of recovered bodies. According to my rough count, among those bodies that were recovered by the *Mackay-Bennet*, Crew represented 43.6% of the

recovered bodies brought to shore, and 59.6% of those buried at sea. Third-class passengers were 13.2% of those brought to shore and 19.3% of those buried at sea. Second-class passengers were 11.3% of those brought to shore and 6.7% of those buried at sea. First-class passengers were only 0.8% of those buried at sea.

7. The sea-based equivalent to burial on land would be burial in the seafloor (i.e. burial under the ground that is at the bottom of the sea). On the difficult process of identifying remains that were summarily dumped on land, see Steadman et al. (2008).
8. The recovery work took place in international waters. Boesten (2005) contends, in a discussion of the recovery of the *MS Estonia* disaster, that the treatment of human remains in international waters continues to be unclear. This is in contrast to late 20th international regulations that require attempts to save human lives that are in distress, as well as the longstanding tradition of 'prize law', dating back at least to the 15th century, regarding voluntary salvage of wrecks for reward. Prize law, and the salvage law that superseded it, focused on cargo and other property that now excludes humans and human remains. However during the horrendous history of chattel slavery it would have included slaves, albeit as a form of (human) 'property'.
9. Taken to an extreme, genocide is perhaps one of the most well-known and devastatingly forceful methods of instantiation, given that the intention is said to be to erase a particular social group of people from living existence through targeted killings, and attempts at erasure may also extend to the victims' bodies, for example in cases where they are placed in mass graves. As in the *Titanic*, at times the erasure does not extend to paper records. Some regimes, such as the Nazis and the Khmer Rouge, attentively catalogued their victims' identities through photographs, standardized forms, and paper files.
10. Given that theft from the dead is a recurring problem, often heightened in disaster, it is also notable that large sums of money are routinely mentioned in the list of effects, and this speaks to the intense scrutiny the recovery was under, albeit from afar. So far I have not come across any accounts of accused theft from the bodies, although this would have been difficult to judge in cases where no friends or relatives survived who were aware of what a particular passenger might have carried on board.
11. Class differences were also apparent in the diverging sums requested by different passengers for loss of property and liability, from several hundred pounds up to several million for an individual passenger. These were based in part on income, in part on assets, and in part on outside considerations that differed on a case-by-case basis (Gavin and Zarr, 2012).
12. On the later use of personal belongings and DNA in combination to reconstruct the identity of victims of past atrocity, see Wagner (2008) on Srebrenica.
13. In contrast to the erasures with respect to class, where the most wealthy and privileged passengers were the focus, the *Titanic's* crew repeatedly stressed the role of gender, in the sense of 'women and children first', to indicate their concern for those (supposedly) disadvantaged by gender, but the statistics suggest that class was a far better predictor of survival than gender. The attention, at the time, to both meticulous cataloguing and paternalistic care of women can be seen as an effort to maintain social norms. It is particularly notable in light of an earlier disaster, the 1898 sinking of *La Bourgogne*, where crewmembers allegedly murdered passengers, and especially women, in order to take their place on lifeboats. See Ward (2012).
14. Burial at sea continues to be used in practices of bodily effacement. Osama Bin Laden's body is reported to have been buried at sea, in theory to prevent the alternating desecration of, and commemoration of, his remains by different groups.
15. See also Toom (2017) on the controversy over the remains of 9/11 victims at the former Fresh Kills landfill in New York.

16. Arguably the most famous *Titanic* movie, James Cameron's 1997 film, doesn't follow the body recovery at all. Incredibly, much earlier during World War II, the *Titanic* also became the subject of a blockbuster propaganda film produced by the Nazis, who attempted to show that capitalism – namely, the valuing of speed and profit over human life – was the cause of the disaster. However, one of the main props in the film would also become crucial in the destruction of human life. Near the end of the war, the German warship that appears in the film, the *SS Cap Arcona*, was sunk by a British aerial bombardment, with a death toll more than three times that of the *Titanic* disaster. The British were apparently unaware that Nazi forces had imprisoned former concentration camp inmates on the ship. See Watson (2016).

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