

Cemetery Citizens

*Reclaiming the Past and Working for Justice
in American Burial Grounds*

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Beauty in Dirt

Some of you will have fine monuments by which the living may remember the evil done to you. Some of you will have only crude wooden crosses or painted rocks, while yet others of you must remain hidden in the shadows of history. You are in any case part of an ancient procession. . . .

KAZUO ISHIGURO, *The Buried Giant*, 267

. . . sharing what we love, what we find beautiful, which is an ethics.

ROSS GAY, *The Book of Delights*, 128

East End Cemetery is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen. Not spectacle-beautiful like the Atacama Desert or the Northern California coastline. It's beautiful for the many kinds of green that pile up over one another and climb up the trees, as if they're all racing to be highest; beautiful for the slightly irregular rectangles of sunken soil—sometimes all that's left to mark a grave.¹

It's beautiful for the moments when someone, usually Erin, finds a grave marker hidden under a layer of dirt. We dig the stone out from the ground, place it upright, and wash it until we see the person's name emerge. The names themselves can be strikingly beautiful: Zephaninah Cooper, Luvenia Lewis. Like someone was trying to find new, better words for what we mean when we say "dignity."

As soon as a name becomes visible, we say it aloud, each to ourselves. It's like we're passing along a secret or a song.

East End is beautiful for tossing balls to Teacake the dog or eating pizza out of a box on a car's hood in the evening. It was beautiful on that Saturday in spring

when we were hard at work and thirty-odd motorcycles came squalling through the cemetery. We all stopped what we were doing. I was frightened, and then angry. When they left, droning into the distance, East End was beautiful again. It endured motorcycle noise and dust as it has endured dumped tires, vandals, trash, all the seasons and all the kinds of violence.

The buggy and bedraggled cemeteries I write about in this book—East End, Geer, and Mount Moriah—are beautiful. It's the hardest part to explain in words, even in photos or drawings. I'll tell you about how these cemeteries were founded, and how they gradually became the kinds of places where someone pulls up in a truck and drops their trash right on a person's grave. I'll tell you about how they came to be called "abandoned" even when people are still visiting, still caring about them. I'll tell you about the volunteers who pull vines, gather fallen branches, sweat, joke, snack, and sigh in all these cemeteries.

These cemetery citizens are reclaiming burial grounds while also trying to figure out what it really means to do so, what a reclaimed cemetery looks like and how it should be used. Sometimes they agree with one another about the answers, and often they don't. Many of them have become my friends. I can't tell you enough about the beauty of the places where they're weeding and cleaning headstones. You might have to go there yourself. Remember them so you can.



FIGURE FM.1. Black-and-white sketch of a tall, thin man from the Groove Phi Groove social fraternity raking during a workday at Geer Cemetery in Durham, North Carolina, October 31, 2020. He wears black pants, a long-sleeved shirt, a face mask, and a ball cap. There is a rake in his hands, pointed outward toward his left-hand side. Drawing by the author, November 2022.

Introduction

The Dead and Their Emergencies

The first time I went to East End Cemetery, in Richmond, Virginia, I rode in the back of Erin Hollaway Palmer and Brian Palmer's hatchback, next to Teacake, their ball-obsessed black dog. I wasn't prepared for the size of the place; I had only seen photographs. Walking into Evergreen, the cemetery adjacent to East End—also overgrown, also the final home of thousands of African Americans from Richmond and beyond—I was struck by one man's grave. It was almost in the bushes, at the edge of the cemetery. The headstone was shaped like a heart, and carved into it on each side were hands clasped together in prayer. It belonged to a man who died in 1984, at age thirty.

Erin, who does much of the research for the Friends of East End, said the man had died by suicide. Later, his death certificate told me he was found in his apartment, early in the morning, with a gunshot wound in his chest. His high school yearbook, which I found afterward—discovering pieces of his life in reverse chronology—showed him young, in a bow tie, looking sideways at something that was making him grin. He was a member of the Library Club and Student Council, and very handsome. He played on the basketball team. I thought of his parents picking out the heart headstone (he never married, so I assume it was them), wanting him to be buried beneath something whose very shape was a symbol of their love.

The first time I went to Mount Moriah, I was with students from a seminar I was teaching, called "Human Rights and the Dead." On a beautiful day, we toured the vast cemetery with a member of the Friends of Mount Moriah. He

shepherded us past graves that sparked our curiosity: fancy family tombs, the graves of small children, and Mount Moriah's Muslim sections, their headstones carved with crescents and stars.¹ We spent most of our time at the various plots where soldiers and sailors were buried. The guide complained bitterly to my students about what he saw as the comparative neglect of Confederate graves in this northern cemetery. It was hot, and uncomfortable. The students and I left with the sense that there were many more stories to tell about this urban wilderness of graves.

The first time I visited Geer Cemetery, I was in Durham, North Carolina, for a job interview at Duke. I had read a bit about the cemetery before coming and told the department administrator that I hoped to get there during my visit. Robin Kirk, the codirector of the Duke Human Rights Center, picked me up at my hotel right when I arrived and brought me to the cemetery. Geer was smaller than East End or Evergreen, and closer to the heart of the city. Yet it was also quieter, showing fewer signs of activity.

The research you do beforehand prepares you only so much for what you'll see. When you set foot in these burial grounds, they become real, specific, beautiful, fragile, enraging. Your body reacts to all these things at once: a confusion of feelings. Sometimes there's an awkwardness or even fear that the dead are watching you, and that you can't find the right way to move, to act respectfully. That your presence might be another form of intrusion, a violence.

"Hidden histories,"² neglected graves, places of the dead: they might make you think this is a book about the past, about endings. It is not. It is a book about revisions. Revising is a way of relating to the past. You revise an earlier draft, tell an old story in a new way. But revision is ultimately oriented toward the future. We revise our writing so that the revised manuscript, the new story, can go out and have its own relationship with the world—impossible to arrive at without its previous versions, but also meeting them on its own terms. Cemetery citizens are people who found themselves in a place where the dead seemed abandoned—maybe not by the people who loved them, but by the surrounding world. They asked questions and got curious. They got angry. That's a beginning too.

Soon their questions became projects. Every grave a cemetery citizen finds in the weeds, or uncovers beneath the soil, leads to another story. Every new section of a cemetery they clear makes new demands on them: to keep at this work, tell more of the stories, craft more kinds of memory.

To walk, weed, and work with these people is to see our cities and neighborhoods in a new light. To think and talk about justice differently. To let the dead back in.

Cemetery Citizens is a book about these people and their work. It is not a history of cemeteries, though I do offer some historical background to show what drives and shapes the activities taking place at Geer, East End, and Mount Moriah today. Nor is this a manual on how to protect and preserve cemeteries. Rather, it is an exploration of why people are working in these burial grounds, what they think the work means, and where it is headed. It is a book about the *now* in these cemeteries, the things that are still beginning—the questions that are more alive than ever in these places of the dead.

Revising Cemeteries

A marginalized cemetery is never really an accident of fate. Rather, it is a document of structural violence written onto the landscape.³ Structural violence is any constraint on people's opportunities, well-being, and sense of dignity that works through multiple institutions and channels. It may appear that no one is responsible for the violence, that it just "happens"; yet it always happens in patterned ways.⁴ Marginalized burial grounds are places of structural violence and systemic vandalism, impacting both the dead and the living communities connected with them.

What looks like overgrowth and slow decay in historic Black cemeteries would in most cases be better understood as evidence of theft.⁵ The theft started with the dispossession of land that African Americans owned or labored on, whether they were enslaved or free. It continued from there, with grave robbers targeting African American graves to provide bodies for medical schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The "urban renewal" that destroyed many Black neighborhoods in the 1950s through the 1970s, emptying out the communities that once cared for their local cemeteries, was a theft of wealth, space, social ties, and sense of belonging.⁶

Analysis of structural violence strives to be "historically deep and geographically broad."⁷ It can help us make connections between seemingly disparate things, such as histories of enslavement and segregation, environmental racism, and graffiti painted on headstones. These things actually work in tandem, af-

fecting the same communities across generations and producing cemeteries that people call “overgrown” or “abandoned.”

It’s fair to worry that when we link so many forms of violence together, we make it harder to be specific about any one of them—and to assign responsibility clearly.⁸ In many cases, part of the labor cemetery citizens do is to document damage and demand action from those who are at least partially responsible for it.⁹ In this book, I try to gather and amplify those voices.

Volunteers arrive in cemeteries with different ways of understanding what they see and thinking about why they are doing this work. Among the possibilities are reasserting the dignity of mourners and descendants, rebuilding a sense of the sacred in desecrated places, and revising the memory landscapes of our towns and cities to address legacies of violence and erasure.¹⁰ In many cases, these cemetery citizens also revise their own relationships with living communities and the dead, crafting new ideas about belonging and kinship. Finally, they revise the ways that cemeteries serve as public space. An overgrown cemetery filled with the bustle of volunteers feels more vibrant and more meaningfully public than the well-maintained but sterile acres of lawn where many Americans are buried.¹¹

The work cemetery citizens are doing in Geer, East End, Mount Moriah, and other marginalized cemeteries is often described as preservation, restoration, or reclamation. Reclamation might be the best of these terms. While many things can be preserved (homes, textiles, foods, human remains), people only seek to reclaim what has been stolen or silenced—or both. The cemeteries described in this book can be thought of as places of stolen dignity and silenced histories, which are now being reclaimed.

The notions of preservation, restoration, and reclamation all look backward, toward the past, asking what can be rescued.¹² That question can lead to constructive, if painful, conversations about the impossibility of fully preserving, restoring, or reclaiming anything. At every cemetery, even those that are well maintained, erasure and loss are central features of the landscape. They may even be part of how the memory landscape can and must function over time. Generations pass, along with their memories of the dead. Younger people might show dutiful respect and care without the same intimacy. Or they might move away, eventually losing track of which relatives are buried where. The inscriptions on older headstones slowly fade.

Progress in reclamation efforts at one cemetery can make you more aware of the many lost or precarious burial grounds all around it. I've spent the past few years working alongside friends at Geer Cemetery, celebrating the transformation of the space, while also learning about the city's other African American burial grounds, some of which are impossible to reclaim.¹³

Cemetery citizens grapple with these and many other limitations of their work. But their goals also go beyond reassembling fragments of the past. Caring for a cemetery is a beginning, a place where relationships start and where people are asking new questions.

Preservation, restoration, and reclamation are all noble ideas. If I had to pull together the various ways they are invoked on behalf of marginalized cemeteries, it would look something like this:

Preserving history is important because knowledge of the past enriches all of us and helps us understand our present. Reclaiming the past that has been erased and/or defaced is also about justice for living communities, especially those who still experience structural violence and marginalization in the present moment. We also restore burial grounds to recover the dignity of the dead—for their sake and for their descendants.

I believe these statements. They fuel me in the work I do at Geer Cemetery and elsewhere; and I know they do the same for many others who have been involved for much longer. But sometimes nobleness can fill up your field of vision; there is no room for other things you should be seeing. Noble statements like the one above don't do justice to how difficult the work will be, how human. They don't help us anticipate the struggles ahead: over how the stories of a cemetery should be told, who should tell them, who should steer a cemetery's transformation or get the funding to do it.

For this reason and others, I think of these projects in cemeteries as forms of *revision*. The term may seem more appropriate for my office hours with students than a workday pulling vines off of headstones. But not all revisions happen with pen and paper or on a computer screen.

Philosopher Jill Stauffer uses the term "revisionary practices" to describe courtrooms, truth commissions, and other collective efforts bound together by "the hope of opening up a future not fully determined by past harms."¹⁴ Envisioning a future "not fully determined by past harms" is very different from forgetting, putting the past behind us, and moving on. It is about possibility—starting

something new *without* forgetting. Revisionary practices are not the same thing as what we call revisionist history; they don't attempt to replace one grand narrative with another, competing one. But neither do they treat the past, or the dead, as static: as resources to be utilized, or lost property to reclaim.

Revision carries with it a sense of messiness. For the writer, revision can look like crumpled pieces of paper, pencil marks in the margins, words that must be rewritten or retyped so that they're legible. Even when using digital writing tools that leave fewer material traces of revision, you delete something, write a new version, then write it again—or realize you should go back a few steps to something you deleted too quickly. Work in cemeteries is more like this—messy, iterative, frustrating, and sometimes momentarily miraculous—than words like “preservation,” “reclamation,” or “restoration” capture.

Overgrowth or perpetual care, desecration or sacredness are not the only possibilities for marginalized cemeteries. These spaces can also become investments, sources of potential capital, for people seeking relevance, a moral high ground, a stage to stand upon. Big, noble ideas—like honoring the dead, preserving heritage, or educating the public—are not going to help you much at a meeting where everyone already believes in those things, and yet everyone is angry at each other.

If you have ever sat down with a piece of your own writing, intent on revising it, you know how daunting it is. You know that the word “revision” implies difficulty, but also seemingly endless possibilities. Revision is never complete; it just reaches a point where you have taken it as far as you can go. It is a process that combines humility about outcomes—an acceptance of the imperfectability of the world, perhaps even its fundamental brokenness—with tremendous creative power. This combination of brokenness and creativity, above all, is what makes grassroots work in marginalized cemeteries a project of revision.¹⁵

Cemetery citizens are concerned with righting wrongs that impact both the living and the dead, with restoring places and dignity. But they also make the dead matter in new ways. They offer new, challenging ideas about the lineages and linkages between the living and the marginalized dead, and they are fashioning marginalized burial grounds into new forms of public space. They are creators, and collaborators with the dead.

Citizen, Descendant, Researcher, Tourist

Revisionary practices such as cleaning up a cemetery and putting flowers on graves “open up a future not fully determined by past harms,” as Stauffer says, but not cleansed of them either. It is a future given richness and power through connections to the dead and the harms they suffered.

While I was writing this book, I was also delving into my own family’s Holocaust history. I came to see this, too, as a kind of revision. The more I confronted the impossibility of rescuing all the names, dates, and details about my ancestors, the more I realized that wasn’t what it was about. I have been trying to know my grandparents in a way I didn’t while they were alive, to “open up a future” where I could ask them the things I didn’t.¹⁶ Though they are dead, I am still revising my relationship with them. I’m also trying to understand *their* revisionary practices: how they moved on after the destruction of their families, the degradations of the camps, the hunger (which dominates my grandmother’s published recollections from less than a year after she was liberated from Ravensbrück concentration camp, far more than firing squads or gas chambers).¹⁷ Were their dead present at the long tables crowded with food where we celebrated Passover, in the basement where I made boats and swords out of wood with my grandfather? If so, how?

People can be connected to a cemetery in many ways. But in recent decades activists and their allies have argued that descendants—“folks with people in the ground,” as Brian Palmer describes them—have unique moral authority over the places where their ancestors are buried, and should be granted corresponding control over any research, interpretation, or revisions there.¹⁸ Researching grassroots work in cemeteries and my own family history in parallel, I’ve thought about who I am as a descendant. In Łódź, Radom, Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, Malchow, Sachsenhausen, and Ebensee, my grandparents were confined in ghettos, beaten, forced to work while starving and terrified. They lost spouses, parents, and siblings. My grandfather’s nine-year-old daughter, Mira, was taken from him and killed—I don’t know where or how.¹⁹ Some of these places now have museums and memorials where I might learn about and even mourn what happened to my family. But I have no place—not a mass grave, not a cemetery—to associate with my forever-missing, graveless ancestors. As Menachem Kaiser, a fellow

grandchild of Holocaust survivors, puts it, “You do all this memory-work, and you hunger for the unabstract, for place person object noun.”²⁰

The degradation and vandalism inflicted on the cemeteries in this book have outraged me, overwhelmed me, gotten under my skin. But sometimes I feel something bordering on envy when I gather with groups of volunteers in a real place where you can work for a few hours, in good company, and feel like you’ve done something for the dead.

This book also has been a chance for me to revise my ways of being a scholar and a citizen. I don’t mean “citizen” in the legal sense. The word originally meant the inhabitant of a city, a city dweller. For the first ten years of my academic career, while I was moving my family from place to place and seeking secure employment, I pursued projects that I could do from anywhere, so long as I had access to a library and could travel occasionally. I was not doing much dwelling. Now I am doing research that changes how I move through the world. In Durham, cemetery work makes me feel more like I really live *here*, and not just amid a pile of books, clothes, and coffee gadgets that follow me around. I track the changes in cemeteries with my eyes, my camera, my sketchbook, and with successive groups of students that accompany me. Cemetery work has introduced me to Durham neighbors, and to Durham’s dead.

In marginalized cemeteries I am a researcher, activist, professor, and sometimes a tourist. It has taken me years to admit that last one. But I always look up local cemeteries before I travel, visiting them even on trips where I don’t see the other, better-known historical attractions. I usually skip the well-maintained cemeteries in the heart of town. I look for the overgrown cemeteries, the ones tucked away near hospitals or unmarked sites of enslavement, the ones that aren’t listed on web pages with titles like “Ten Things to Do in . . .” I traverse these out-of-the-way places in my White and male-presenting body, with the confidence and sense of safety it provides—the luxury of knowing that anyone I encounter will likely take me for an eccentric tourist or history buff, not a trespasser or threat. When I do visit cemeteries that are well marked and maintained, I move toward the edges, to the less tended places. Though I sometimes criticize the “dark tourists” who document and share their forays into shuttered asylums and other sites of pain and ruin, I wonder how different I really am.

While working on this book, I was organizing events and exhibits, getting to

know cemeteries and the species of plants that grow in them, finding out who was buried where. I was learning many of their stories from public historians, genealogists, and descendants. Then I forgot many of these stories again, as they multiplied beyond the capacities of my memory. The words in here are mostly mine, but the world of the book is a shared one: shared with living friends and collaborators, some of whom you will meet in these pages. And shared with the dead. You will meet some of them too.

What a Cemetery Does

Cemeteries then

Cemetery citizens try to make headstones visible again after they have sunk into the soil or been covered by weeds. They research the individual stories of the dead, sharing what they can of lives that were often recorded only in fragments. The idea that this is how we dignify the dead—by carving names in stone and recounting details of an individual biography—is itself a relatively recent invention in human history, and one that does not have equal prominence in all cultures.²¹ Nevertheless, in most towns and cities today, “it is no longer easy to separate an attempt to understand the past and its meaning from agonizing about which bits of it to protect and keep . . .”—including cemeteries.²²

If burial customs change, and ideas about dignity after death along with them, then describing a particular cemetery as “in decline” or “degraded” is also contingent. Old cemeteries have markers with inscriptions that fade to illegibility, that fall from their bases or go missing. Not all of these are places of marginalization; not all of them were *made to disappear*.²³

Every summer I take walks in the Lanes Cove Cemetery (also called Cove Hill Cemetery) near my parents’ house in Gloucester, Massachusetts. The tiny seaside burial ground was created in the early 1700s by White settlers who founded the hamlet of Lanesville.²⁴ A place of slow, profound erasure, its headstones sink a little bit deeper each year, the lichen making them illegible, though ever more picturesque. There is preservation work to be done there, undoubtedly.²⁵ Conditions in Lanes Cove Cemetery feel like a reminder of the brevity of our lives and the scale of history, as well as how nonhuman forces, whether in the form of powerful storms or slow-growing lichen, overtake our efforts to establish permanent signs of our presence. But they don’t feel like acts of violence—at least,

not in the same way that toppled headstones, piles of trash, and tangles of vines do in a place such as Geer, East End, or Mount Moriah.

An underlying assumption of this book is that cemeteries are degraded when people care that they are, when it causes them pain. This pain is particularly acute among people who already experience the public space of our cities, and the ways we talk about history, as forms of erasure, indignities against their ancestors, and attacks on their own living bodies.

When people were marginalized in life, their cemeteries sometimes offered them one last chance to write their visions of justice into the landscape. Cemeteries can embody ideas about eternal dignity and redemption, but they can also serve a more practical purpose: they can make an argument about the status of the dead who are buried there, their fundamental equality with people who held more power in life and whose cemeteries were more lavish.²⁶ Today's cemetery citizens extend that argument into the present by pouring their labor into burial grounds that public institutions have ignored or abandoned.

In asserting their equality with contemporaries, the people who founded these cemeteries were keenly attuned to national (and sometimes international) burial trends. Mount Moriah was created near the height of the rural cemetery movement in the United States, marketed to a more middle-class customer than its predecessors such as Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts (the first American rural cemetery), and nearby Laurel Hill in Philadelphia. Rural cemeteries embodied nineteenth-century ideas about communing with the dead in green, wooded landscapes and learning virtue from their "exemplary lives."²⁷ They also answered the practical problem of the increasing value, and scarcity, of land in growing cities; Mount Moriah is home to graves that were removed from churchyards in Philadelphia to its quieter (at the time) and more idyllic location.²⁸ Last but not least, an often overlooked impetus behind the rural cemeteries, with their gates and gatekeepers, was that grave-robbing was common in the nineteenth century. While marginalized and institutionalized people were often the targets of this hunger for corpses to dissect in medical schools, the upper and middle classes were not immune.²⁹

In the United States, rural cemeteries were designed to be "leafier, wilder, and more untamed" than their European counterparts.³⁰ Architecture historian Keith Eggener writes:

Cemeteries we built for ourselves, increasingly after 1830, were places with winding roads and picturesque vistas. The idea being that you leave behind the mercantile world outside the gates and enter into the space where you can meditate, where you can come into contact with spirituality and concentrate. They were quite important spaces for recreation as well. Keep in mind, the great rural cemeteries were built at a time when there weren't public parks, or art museums, or botanical gardens in American cities. You suddenly had large pieces of ground, filled with beautiful sculptures and horticultural art. People flocked to cemeteries for picnics, for hunting and shooting and carriage racing.³¹

Cemeteries were “America’s first public art museums and parks.”³² They inspired the great public parks developed afterward; in fact, the country’s most famous public park, New York’s Central Park, is built atop graves that were never moved.³³ Ultimately, parks largely replaced cemeteries as places where families sought to gather outside in their leisure time—laying the groundwork for the contemporary notion that cemeteries are spaces only for grief and remembrance.³⁴

Wealthy White Americans were generally the only people in the nineteenth-century United States who had access to “large pieces of ground,” groundskeepers to care for their horticultural art, or carriages to race. Yet the paradigm of the rural cemetery—the wish to bury one’s dead in a place that was a peaceful respite from the dust, noise, and smells of the city—also influenced African Americans, Jews, and other marginalized groups. While Jim Crow and other logics of segregation were often forced on them in both life and death, these people also sought to create cemeteries where they could be buried among other members of their communities, and where their monuments and markers could reflect unique cultural aesthetics.

These differences aside, they designed their cemeteries to match the dignity, and status, of the rural cemeteries where White Protestants were increasingly burying their dead—even when they had to do so on less desirable land and with far less support or capital.³⁵ This included the pastoral, Romantic naming conventions of rural cemeteries, which partly explains why many post-Emancipation African American cemeteries have names like Woodland and Evergreen in Richmond, or Beechwood in Durham.³⁶ Others are named after African American churches, or have more intimate origins. Violet Park, an African American cemetery in Durham, was named after the mother of one of its founders, the entrepre-

neur John Merrick (both were enslaved in Clinton, North Carolina, at the time of his birth). Later, when a man took up residence in the cemetery with a pack of dogs, it was nicknamed Wolf Den. The names tell a story about the changing status of the cemetery, whose graves—many of them, at least—were eventually exhumed and relocated so that a parking lot could be put in their place.³⁷

The rural cemeteries of the nineteenth century eventually gave way to more uniform, suburban lawn cemeteries. On the winding paths of rural cemeteries, graves were grouped together by family or congregation, and monuments differed wildly in size and style—often competing with one another to demonstrate the status of the dead and provide edifying lessons to the living. The newer cemeteries emphasized a collective national identity and central planning. Often featuring grave markers that lie flat on the ground, mapped out in orderly grids, they are also much easier to mow and maintain than their predecessors.³⁸ Though cemeteries in the United States number in the hundreds of thousands, more plentiful than McDonald's and Starbucks restaurants, many of us avoid them, only setting foot inside when we've lost someone close to us.³⁹ Or not even then, since cremation and other non-burial practices have steadily been overtaking the traditional funeral and burial plot.⁴⁰

But the story of a lost connection between Americans and their cemeteries also reflects a mostly White, upper- and middle-class American experience.⁴¹ African American homegoings are joyful celebrations of the dead, rooted in some enslaved Africans' belief that death would bring them home to the African continent, to freedom.⁴² These are still major communal events in many African American communities, as is gathering around loved ones' graves to sing and celebrate.⁴³

Some of the most lovingly tended graves I've ever seen, festooned with ribbons and plastic flowers, were in the majority Spanish-speaking southern borderlands of the United States. While living in Rio Grande City, Texas, I often heard stories about how the local Burger King was haunted by children buried in the cemetery across the street. These stories were not told in front of a campfire to scare people. They were delivered as a matter of fact, like someone was giving you directions to their friend's ranch. And they certainly didn't stop anyone from eating at Burger King, in the company of the dead.

Cemeteries now

A quiet, aloof respect mingles with a sense of creepiness, of intruding in a place where we're not supposed to be—and maybe exposing ourselves to some danger or contamination we can't quite articulate. My students cringe when they step into a depression in the soil, knowing that there is a body somewhere underneath. Have we disturbed the peace of the dead? A boundary has been crossed, and we're not sure what it means. When my friend Jenn O'Donnell takes my students and me on a tour of Mount Moriah, I ask if it's OK to share the cookies I have brought for everyone. Lying dormant in some corner of my mind is the idea that it's not appropriate to eat in cemeteries, to sustain our lives in the presence of the dead.⁴⁴ Through whatever mysterious process of transmission brought my kids the same knock-knock jokes and hand-clapping games that I remember from my own childhood, they, too, hold their breath when we pass a cemetery in the car (though I regularly drag them on foot through cemeteries where we stay far too long to avoid breathing).

Visiting Woodlawn, an overgrown African American cemetery in Washington, DC, writer and environmental scientist Lauret Savoy wonders, "At what point does a burial ground lose its sanctity?"⁴⁵ It's a question that has no single answer. To some, there is nothing sacred about soil where lifeless bodies lie, and nothing to lose but superstition. To others, a burial ground is always sacred, regardless of its condition.

I'm somewhere in between. Savoy's question makes me think about what degrades a cemetery. There are things anyone might guess if you asked them, like trash on the graves or graffiti on the headstones. But there are other degradations whose impact you only absorb when you've spent a lot of time in places of the marginalized dead. Cars and trucks, rushing by with speed and wailing noise—noise that has been planned, mapped out, authorized to be near some people's dead and not others. A speed that is its own form of forgetting. Even when the boundaries of a cemetery itself are well drawn and protected, a nearby road or highway overpass can make a mockery of the idea of preservation. Weeds and cracked headstones cause anguish; they remind us of the work that must be done, of inscriptions and signs of care that are lost, possibly forever. But to me, nothing degrades or desecrates like a busy road running alongside or even right through a cemetery.⁴⁶

Cemeteries record flashes of hatred and slow, entrenched inequities

Cemeteries are bordered, bounded, crafted as the ultimate “space apart,” timeless and sacred.⁴⁷ They also register changes in their surroundings in nuanced and surprisingly rapid ways. Right after Donald Trump’s election in 2016, Jewish cemeteries that had been sleepy places for decades were suddenly noticed again—first by people who came out to tip tombstones and paint swastikas, and then by a wider public that reacted in horror. At family gatherings, we talked about paying more frequent visits to the graves of my Holocaust survivor grandparents: not because we were newly embracing Jewish customs or a call to commune with ancestors, but to check for vandalism.⁴⁸

Cemeteries bear signs of hate, economic decline, displacement, and gentrification. They show the small victories that keep some spaces of the dead from being paved over or overgrown entirely, even as they may remain “shoehorned between a Home Depot and a Target”⁴⁹—nominally “preserved” but, as places meant to be dignified and sacred, undone.

Marginalized cemeteries are places of slow-motion structural violence. Their decline happens at a pace and in settings that allow it to seem natural.⁵⁰ The trash that people dump at East End Cemetery in Richmond is a direct product of over a century of racialized exclusion of the African American living and dead; and yet it bears no obvious symbol, like the swastikas painted on Jewish graves, to trigger reports of a hate crime.⁵¹ I have stood in the Springfield/Hayti Cemetery in Marple Township, Pennsylvania, where Black soldiers who fought to end slavery are buried on an overgrown hillside. Their disappearing graves, and those of other congregants of an African American church that stood on the site until the early 1900s, are squeezed between a concrete supply facility and a cacophonous highway overpass. When I visited, only a poster board hand-drawn in colored marker identified the place as a cemetery. Rain had penetrated the plastic wrapped over the sign, and the letters were starting to drip. What one experiences at a place like this is not the dramatic horror of the massacre site or mass grave. It is the quiet, grinding indignity of the marginalized dead. (In February 2023, my former colleague Eric Hartman texted me a picture of the cemetery with a bright, freshly installed marker explaining its history. A new wooden staircase led up the hillside, and rows of flags marked the graves.)

Cemeteries tell us about continuity between generations, the connections

between a place and its history: whose histories are carved into stone, kept clear of overgrowth, protected from trash and vandalism, and whose aren't. Knowing that one's family members and ancestors are buried with dignity—knowing deep down without having to think about it, without the question even coming to mind—is one of the least discussed forms of privilege: death privilege. “[T]he extent to which relatives, friends or colleagues can impose their own perception of a particular corpse on a wider circle of society is in itself a measure of social power,” writes Vanessa Harding.⁵²

Cemeteries are governed, or ungoverned by design

Dead bodies left out in the open, dead bodies that are buried. Buried under clean rows of markers, buried in fields full of weeds. The bodies, and the places where they wind up, tell us about our systems of governance, and about our human rights.⁵³ A person buried in a cemetery with perpetual care funds, maybe even maintained by the public purse, is someone able to make claims of citizenship, to extract resources from the collective, even after death. A person whose body is left in the desert to be torn at by vultures (as Antigone's brother Polyneices was in Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, and as migrants in the Sonoran Desert are at this moment) has been denied access to all those things: the claims and obligations, the visibility, the belonging. As the anthropologist Jason De León argues, this “necroviolence” can be made to look like an unfortunate accident, or an act of nature. But it never occurs without a careful architecture of violence that was put in place to make the “accidental” happen.⁵⁴

A cemetery can serve as one final place where a society takes internally inconsistent, morally repugnant ideologies and writes them onto bodies, into the landscape.⁵⁵ Fences, walls, and highways have long been used to separate the White and Black dead, resulting in what Jill Lepore calls “an apartheid of the departed.”⁵⁶ In his historical study of cemeteries in Richmond, Virginia, Ryan K. Smith says, “While customs surrounding death, burial, and memorialization have changed dramatically . . . one element has remained stubbornly the same: the color line.”⁵⁷

The mechanisms driving this racial necroviolence have not disappeared, but they have become more complex. Journalist Seth Freed Wessler reports that, in 2014, archaeologists colluded with Microsoft, the Army Corps of Engineers, and county authorities to keep an African American cemetery in Mecklenburg

County, Virginia, from being listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Eventually, under the noses of local descendants who were kept in the dark, the archaeologists dug up the burial ground for the expansion of a Microsoft data center. “[I]n Virginia, as in most of the country, the power over what ultimately happens to these sites often belongs to whoever owns the land. And the labor of investigating what could make the site historic is often outsourced to for-profit archaeological firms working for property owners who have a financial stake in finding as little as possible,” Wessler writes.⁵⁸

Cemeteries are archives of love

Debra Taylor Gonzalez-Garcia is the president of the Friends of Geer Cemetery, the organization working to reclaim and revise one of Durham’s historic African American burial grounds. On October 10, 2022, she put a “Day of Honor” post on the organization’s website, commemorating the birthday of Annice Glenn. She wrote:

Today, we celebrate the birthday of Annice Lunsford Glenn. She was born 201 years ago, and so much has changed. . . . Some portions of her life are difficult to piece together and some we will probably never know. Most likely, Annice spent the first forty plus years enslaved. . . .

By 1880, she was living in Durham with sons Floyd (19, spelled as Floid in earlier census), Crockett (14), and daughters Aggie (25), Indiana (23). She would live in Durham the rest of her life. She made her living as a sack stringer. Women were often employed in making these tobacco bags. . . .

Her daughter, Catherine “Katie” Louise married Riley Gilmore, who was one of the caretakers of Geer Cemetery. They all lived on Glenn Street, and Annice at different times in her life shared a home with them.

Annice died on Christmas Eve 1904. She was buried in Geer Cemetery next to what would become her daughter, Katie Gilmer’s final resting place years later.⁵⁹

I visit Ms. Glenn’s headstone every time I’m at Geer. Its inscription reads, “Her life was beauty, truth, goodness and love.” As if inspired by the headstone to keep adding more beauty to the area around her grave, some friends of the cem-

etery held a small ceremony for her exactly two hundred years after her birth; a burst of color from plastic flowers sticks out in the green, brown, and gray of the cemetery.

Following Jewish tradition, I am named after dead relatives. My middle name, Richard, comes from my maternal grandfather's little brother who died in 1932 of scarlet fever. I've never felt particularly attached to the name. I probably noticed it most during the early years of adolescence when friends thought making "dick" jokes about it was funny.

While I was working on this book, my mother and I found a photograph of Richard's headstone in Mount Hebron Cemetery, in Queens, New York. According to her, the headstone was placed there by my grandfather's other brother, Milton Regenbogen. My great-grandfather and great-grandmother never purchased one, perhaps because my great-grandfather Saul, who worked as a window-washer, could not afford anything he felt would be adequate. The headstone reads:

**RICHARD
 FREDERICK
 REGENBOGEN
 MAY 22, 1930
 APRIL 18, 1932
 "DITTIE DOLL"**

"Dittie Doll." Carved on a headstone I have not yet seen in person, photographed by a stranger who walked through the cemetery and posted the picture on the Find a Grave website. After forty-five years, I am no longer indifferent to my middle name, and have begun to use it again wherever I can. Cemeteries are archives of love.

At the Margins, at the Brink

I have struggled with what terminology to use in describing these cemeteries. Some cemetery citizens have heated feelings about this issue themselves. Here's a weedy glossary of terms I've encountered, what they clear up for us, and what they leave obscured from view.

Abandoned cemeteries: Jarene Fleming, whose ancestors are buried at East End and Evergreen in Richmond, told me:

I really resent the narrative of these “abandoned cemeteries,” because the families have always, at least in my short lifetime, been involved, you know, paid people every year to keep the graves cleared. But with migration, with families dying out, with people not being able to get to their plots, I can see how quickly things can get lost.⁶⁰

Stay for a while at any of these cemeteries: you’ll see walkers, cyclists, someone visiting a relative’s grave, rabbits, deer. And of course, depending on the day, you might see cemetery citizens at work. So “abandoned” is both misleading and imprecise. It’s misleading because it sounds like “empty,” and that’s not true. It’s imprecise, as Jarene makes clear, because it suggests so little about who it was that abandoned these cemeteries.

Overgrown cemeteries: “Overgrown” is a slightly more ambivalent term than “abandoned.” It can encompass the heartbreak of cemeteries so covered by weeds that they are impassible, swallowing even tall grave markers and preventing generations of descendants from finding their dead—sometimes even keeping passersby from recognizing there’s a cemetery there at all. It also has room for some of the unexpected beauty and even awe one can find among the carpets of weeds and twisting vines. Yet “overgrown” tells us even less than “abandoned” about the story behind the story, how this growth came to exceed what had once been envisioned by the people who crafted a cemetery and buried their dead in its soil.

Neglected cemeteries: “Neglected” is at least slightly more accurate than “abandoned.” Defined as treated with “disrespect or without proper attention or care,” neglect implies a responsibility that someone did not fulfill.⁶¹ But Jarene’s objection still holds. It’s far too easy to turn the knife of “neglect” around and cut the very people who fought the decline of these cemeteries—“the aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, pastors, elders, who have been stewarding these spaces for generations.”⁶² At a minimum, the term should usually have a qualifier: “systemic neglect,” used by city officials in Washington, DC, helps to clarify what kind of neglect we’re talking about.⁶³

Unmaintained cemeteries: When cemeteries are maintained, there is some institution or mechanism taking responsibility for upkeep out of the hands of descendants, mourners, neighbors, or volunteers. In fact, the key difference between maintenance, care, and revision is sometimes more a *who* than a *what*, since all three of these things may involve the same tasks. Cemetery maintenance is generally performed by paid staff. “Perpetual care funds”—the fees people pay into a fund for cemetery upkeep—are, in a way, a misnomer. They generally cover regular mowing, debris removal, fixing roads and clearing pathways, and other things we should refer to as “maintenance.”⁶⁴ Depending on the cemetery, this may or may not include responsibility for the appearance and upkeep of individual graves.⁶⁵ Care is something more intimate.⁶⁶ It’s the kinds of things family members and mourners do at and around the graves of their ancestors or other people they knew and loved.

Leaving a keepsake at a loved one’s grave is one form of care. Offerings of various kinds—glass bottles, dishes, shells, figurines, and more—are common finds at historic African American cemeteries.⁶⁷ This tradition continues, with adaptations. At Geer we have found a Hallmark card wrapped in a plastic bag, a bar of soap, beer and liquor bottles of many shapes and sizes. At Beechwood, another African American cemetery in Durham, I once caught sight of someone placing a balloon at a grave, kneeling over it and weeping.

Care might also involve tasks that seem impersonal, but which become intimate when family members and friends take them on. At East End, I once saw someone pull up in their car and remove an old lawn mower from the trunk. They began to mow the area around a few graves while their passenger looked on from the car. We call this “tending” a grave, a word that shares its root with tenderness.⁶⁸

The work of cemetery citizens, which I’m calling revision, occupies an interesting place between maintenance and care. Cemetery citizens are not paid maintenance staff. But they do often clear, mow, weed, and tend the graves of people they never knew, and with whom they may have no connection. The work can be very intimate; cemetery citizens sometimes come to feel deep connections to the people they research, or whose graves they worked beside. But when there are years of damage to undo, acres and acres of cemetery to clear, the work can also be less intimate in the scale of its concerns, and perhaps less tender.

Degraded cemeteries: I owe this term to a conversation with Lisa Y. Henderson, founder of the Lane Street Project, who is leading the revisions in three historic Black cemeteries in Wilson, North Carolina. Lisa described these places as “degraded landscapes.”⁶⁹

One definition of degraded is “deprived of dignity.”⁷⁰ I think this is the simplest, most accurate description of what’s been done to these burial grounds. It feels even more fitting once you have gotten to know post-Emancipation Black cemeteries as places that were exquisitely crafted to enshrine and project dignity.

The concept of degradation also helps explain why revising these places requires more than simply mowing and clearing. Reestablishing dignity takes physical labor, but also research, storytelling, gathering people to listen and to care.

Marginalized cemeteries or places of the marginalized dead: The word “marginalized” makes clear it’s no accident that African American cemeteries, cemeteries of people housed in institutions, and burial grounds of poor and Indigenous people wind up abandoned, neglected, overgrown. It implies *doing*, action—people and institutions pushing the dead out to the “edge, brink, border, margin.”⁷¹

Pushing them from where? For someone to be marginalized implies that their starting point, their rightful position, was always in the center too: that they are as much at the core of a place and its history as anyone else. To be marginalized—as a person, or as a cemetery—means to be at the *brink*: excluded, pushed to the edges, but also *about to happen*. Places of the marginalized dead, places of revision, stand at the brink of something new.

Landscapes of Memory and Forgetting

Racism, both openly expressed and quietly institutionalized, has often driven African American graves out of sight and official memory, more likely to be degraded or destroyed by public institutions than to benefit from their investments. Geer and East End are both artifacts of segregation: all-Black cemeteries carved out of their cities by people without access to nearby Whites-only burial grounds.

Mount Moriah is different. After Margaret Jones, a Black woman, successfully fought attempts to institutionalize segregation there, it came to be heralded as a space inclusive of all races and creeds.⁷² But the current conditions at Mount Moriah, and the story of reclamation efforts there, are inextricably bound up with race and racism. The cemetery, once a rural retreat, is now situated in a mostly Black, low-income part of Southwest Philadelphia. Its degraded conditions reflect a larger pattern of deep inequities in this city where *de facto* segregation is the norm.⁷³

The more stories I heard of people buried in the predominantly Muslim sections of Mount Moriah Cemetery, the more it became clear that race was also part of the story of their deaths and the politics around their burial sites. Anyone reading inscriptions in the Springfield Avenue section can see that it is home to a disproportionate number of dead young Black men. This is the legacy of racialized patterns in gun deaths, fueled by decades of housing discrimination, high rates of incarceration, and police violence (I researched the history of one young man buried in this section who died in police custody).⁷⁴ Some of these men's families, and the families of other Muslims buried in Mount Moriah, have come to feel that no one outside of their community is really concerned for their loved ones' graves. This story is not about race alone; but race is always present in it.

Intertwined with race, other forms of social exclusion influence the physical and social landscapes of the cemeteries in this book. Gender, class, mental illness, disability, religious affiliation, and ethnicity all leave their distinct imprints. People who fought for dignified burial grounds did not necessarily distribute that dignity equally within them. All three cemeteries are full of women whose lives were barely recorded, their ideas and accomplishments forgotten. Some headstones leave out their first names, subordinating these women to the men they married by recording them only as "wife of . . ." Sometimes, their inscriptions extol their roles as mothers and nothing else.

While researching these three cemeteries, I was also learning about the anonymous burials of people labeled mentally ill and disabled, and confined to institutions, in the United States from the nineteenth century onward.⁷⁵ I did additional fieldwork at MetFern Cemetery in Waltham, Massachusetts, near my childhood home.⁷⁶ The name MetFern refers to two institutions: Metropolitan State Hospital and the Walter E. Fernald State School. "Met State" was part of a massive infrastructure of state hospitals built in the nineteenth century, where

people labeled mentally ill often lived in horrific conditions of overcrowding and abuse. The Fernald School, a residential facility for young people with social and intellectual disabilities, has a complex history of care, neglect, and violence experienced by those who lived on-site.⁷⁷ From 1947 to 1979, two hundred ninety-eight people were buried in a clearing in the woods, under small stone markers bearing only a number and a “C” or a “P,” indicating if the person was Catholic or Protestant (though some were neither; their markers obscure not only their names but also their religious and cultural backgrounds).⁷⁸ This cemetery, like many others at state institutions, perpetuates stigma around mental illness and disability, as well as the removal and erasure of people from their families, neighborhoods, and the broader social world.⁷⁹

MetFERN, like other cemeteries around state hospitals, has been the site of important efforts to honor the dead and rethink the histories of psychiatry, mental illness, disability, and American eugenics.⁸⁰ The contributions of these cemetery citizens deserve wider and more sustained attention than I can offer here.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, the virus tore through nursing homes and congregate living facilities for disabled people. Once vaccines were developed, many states deprioritized at-risk disabled people; or they focused on older Americans in nursing homes while remaining reluctant to address the vulnerable people in psychiatric care facilities and group homes.⁸¹ Though the casualties of this indifference were not buried in a field of numbered graves, our society still puts real work into making the deaths of disabled people invisible and anonymous.

Here in the South, I visited the cemeteries and open fields used for



FIGURE INTRO.1. Black-and-white sketch of the small stone grave marker for Effie Bernice Higgins (1890–1970) at MetFERN Cemetery in Waltham, Massachusetts, where two hundred

ninety-eight inmates from the Metropolitan State Hospital and the Fernald School were buried from 1947 to 1979. The marker reads P-178, the “P” short for Protestant. It is partially covered by grass, with clover and small flowers growing around it. Drawing by the author, November 2022.

burying people who died at Central State Hospital in Petersburg, Virginia, and Cherry Hospital in Goldsboro, North Carolina (originally named simply the “Asylum for Colored Insane”). Both institutions had only Black inmates from their openings in the late 1800s until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation in health care facilities.⁸² Nineteenth-century racial pseudoscience claimed that Black people were suited for hard labor and subservience, not for freedom; these state institutions, their design and function closely intertwined with prisons, helped separate out individuals whose labor could still be exploited from those deemed too ill or dependent to be of use.⁸³ Sometimes people simply had no other place to go than the institutions—no land, no job, no place safe from racialized violence.⁸⁴

Conditions at state hospitals for African Americans were significantly worse than at counterpart hospitals for Whites, as bad as those often were. From the late nineteenth century onward, eugenicists promoted the idea that public policy should protect the gene pool from “deviant” tendencies; these ideas quickly “melded with Jim Crow norms.”⁸⁵ Blackness and disability, separately and together, fed into ideas of predatory, “animalistic” threats to society. Both Central State and the Goldsboro hospital carried out forced sterilizations on their inmates.⁸⁶

Individual and family histories connect different anonymous and degraded burial grounds, reflecting the complex systems and institutions that incarcerated, exploited, and surveilled people in life. The headstone for Jeff Bass (1905–1923), with a lamb carved into it, is still visible at Geer Cemetery. He died at the hospital in Goldsboro; then his body was brought to Geer. His younger sister, Henrietta, died at the same hospital in 1927. She was buried in the cemetery there and left nameless. One of their other siblings, Harold Bass, is described on his death certificate as “born an imbecile.” When he died at age twenty-one, of heart failure, he was buried at Violet Park, the Durham cemetery that became a parking lot.⁸⁷ These three Bass siblings traversed a landscape of race, illness, and disability, and ultimately of precarious burial grounds.

There are many other places where the dead are subject to the violence of abandonment, overgrowth, and erasure. Among the best known is Hart Island, on the Long Island Sound in the northeast Bronx, New York.⁸⁸ Originally inhabited by the Indigenous Siwanoy, it subsequently housed a training camp for United States Colored Troops, a psychiatric institution, a tuberculosis sanito-

rium, and a prison. Since 1869, the island has also served as a “potter’s field” for the city’s unclaimed and indigent dead. It is home to over a million burials, many of them infants and stillborn babies. Until 2020, incarcerated people from nearby Riker’s Island carried out the duties of digging graves and stacking coffins in them.⁸⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, thousands of people who died of AIDS were buried on Hart Island. The first seventeen victims were buried in a separate section by corrections officers wearing special protective jumpsuits due to a misplaced fear of contagion.⁹⁰ In spring 2020, New York morgues became overwhelmed with the number of people dying of COVID-19, and burials spiked at Hart Island. The island served as a temporary home for some of the pandemic dead, who would later be moved to a more permanent resting place, and as a final destination for unclaimed bodies.⁹¹

After decades of efforts by the Hart Island Project and other activists to gain access to the site and tell its stories, the New York Department of Corrections—which managed the site at the time—began allowing the general public to visit a small gazebo area on the island on a monthly basis. In November 2019, again thanks to sustained activism, the New York City Council passed legislation transferring jurisdiction of Hart Island from Corrections to Parks and Recreation. The new legislation was intended to “end . . . 150 years of penal control over city burials” and “create a public park where citizens can freely visit graves,” though burials would continue at the site.⁹² The parks department is still working out how to balance respect for Hart Island’s history, and its dead, with visions of it as a scenic public space.⁹³

Hart Island is an important reminder that mass burials of various kinds continue today as a common practice. In November 2022, I visited three historic psychiatric hospital cemeteries in New Castle, Delaware. At the “Spiral Cemetery” near the old hospital building, local activists Faith Kuehn and Kathy Dettwyler showed me newly dug graves and numbered markers for people whose bodies were unclaimed or who had no resources for burial elsewhere. In North Carolina, where I live, unclaimed remains are cremated after ten days, and stored for three more years awaiting someone to come looking for them. If this doesn’t happen, they are “scattered at sea.”⁹⁴

The burial grounds of Indigenous peoples throughout the United States are still under threat, despite the landmark Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. As anthropologist Chip Colwell writes, when archae-

ological reviews are conducted before the construction of pipelines or other projects, Indigenous voices and knowledge are often excluded from the process: “Archaeologists serve an important role in documenting historic properties. But they tend to view the world through the lens of science and history. They search out buried villages, pottery shards, bones, broken stone tools. Yet in my experience, they rarely have the expertise and knowledge to identify traditional cultural properties, which are grounded in identity, culture, spirituality and the land’s living memory.”⁹⁵

Recent investigations in Canada have uncovered the remains of thousands of Indigenous children who were forced into the country’s system of residential schools. They were abused, neglected, systematically stripped of their language and culture, and then buried in unmarked graves. In June 2021, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland announced that the United States would begin similar investigations into its own federal boarding schools for Native American children, which was likely to uncover burial grounds and lead to new repatriation projects.⁹⁶ At the time of this writing, the Department of the Interior had documented marked or unmarked burials at fifty-three different residential school sites.⁹⁷

These schools should be seen as part of a broader project of pulling Indigenous families apart and placing their members in custodial institutions such as the Canton Asylum for Insane Indians, a federal facility in South Dakota.⁹⁸ One hundred twenty-one people are known to be buried in the cemetery there, though it is suspected there are more beneath the ground. Families often had multiple loved ones taken from their homes; some were shuttled between one type of institution and another. Susan Burch describes these processes as “sustained containment, surveillance, and slow erasure.”⁹⁹ The Lakota journalist Harold Iron Shield, a survivor of federal boarding schools, organized ceremonies at the Canton Asylum cemetery from 1987 until 2007, making him a pioneer in the work that would continue at state hospital cemeteries a decade later.¹⁰⁰

While researching this book, I also traveled to the Sonoran Desert, where I hiked with the artist Alvaro Enciso and other members of the Tucson Samaritans. As part of a project he calls “Donde mueren los sueños,” or “Where Dreams Die,” Alvaro makes wooden crosses, then paints them in vibrant colors and marks them with red dots resembling points on the maps of migrant deaths created by the organization Humane Borders. Alvaro and his companions place

these crosses in the precise locations where bodies have been found, memorializing the individual dead and serving as a form of witness to the “killing field” that U.S. immigration policy has crafted at our southern border.¹⁰¹ I also traveled from Tucson west through the Tohono O’odham Nation to Ajo, Arizona, where I joined a group of activists and college students, inspired by Alvaro, who were placing commemorative crosses in the desert. I witnessed how these people, many of them brought together by their Christian faith, were working to make lonely places of dying into sacred sites—a kind of substitute cemetery (I also visited the portion of Tucson’s Evergreen Cemetery—not to be confused with Richmond’s Evergreen Cemetery—where some unidentified migrants are interred). These places were stunningly beautiful when I visited in the daytime, with a group of hikers around me and plenty of water in my backpack. Yet it was easy to see how quickly they could become disorienting in the dark, or if you were hungry, thirsty, and overheated. How you could die wondering if anyone would ever find you there.

My analysis can’t possibly encompass, or do justice to, all of these places—places of the marginalized dead, and of projects to mark, honor, and remember them.¹⁰² The cemeteries I focus on in this book are just a few of many that have cemetery citizens actively working in and around them. In both my research and teaching, I kept to cemeteries I had been invited into, and where I could contribute in some way to the ongoing work. I didn’t want to be an intruder. But sometimes figuring out where to draw that line wasn’t simple, since at each burial ground there were multiple groups who might have something to say on the question. With students, I have puzzled through whether stepping into people’s graves—a nearly unavoidable experience in cemeteries carpeted with weeds—was justified by the fact that our intentions were respectful. When we took photographs, we wondered which ones to share: Do images of disrepair and broken headstones contribute to people seeing the cemeteries only as injured, abject places?¹⁰³ Should we show the names written on damaged headstones, or is this another indignity visited upon the dead?

Over the course of my research, tremendous momentum and energy was building up around African American cemeteries.¹⁰⁴ Their physical state often remained precarious, and they continued to be subject to outrages and encroachment; people across the country were still fighting plans that would put pavement or buildings over burial grounds.¹⁰⁵ But other signs pointed toward a

major shift. Some of this new energy was likely fueled by the reaction to Donald Trump's election to the U.S. presidency, and his embrace of racist and xenophobic rhetoric and policies. Then came the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, and ensuing global protests for racial justice. While demanding that towns and cities throughout the South take down Confederate flags, monuments, and homages to enslavers, more people began to ask not only what needed to be removed, but what should be saved. Fragile African American heritage sites, including cemeteries, were increasingly in the public eye.¹⁰⁶

Angela Thorpe is the executive director of the Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice in Durham and former director of the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission. Her family has a historic cemetery in Tarboro, North Carolina, that her aunt still cleans up with “a mop and bucket.”¹⁰⁷ In an interview, she reflected on the developments of the past few years:

There was a lot of energy around calling out harm that had been done to Black people and Black communities. . . . I think there's an opposite side of that coin, though, and that looks like: rather than calling out harm, how do we preserve and keep places? Black spaces . . . that are important touchpoints to our history, that are critical touchpoints to our culture, that are not necessarily spaces of violence and terror? How do we do repair work? . . . Rather than lifting up and leveraging harm, how do we move in spaces of repair?¹⁰⁸

In 2022, the U.S. Congress passed the African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act, creating a \$3 million grant program for preservation and research in African American burial grounds. At the time of this writing, however, the funds for the program had not yet been appropriated.¹⁰⁹

As the bill was working its way through Congress, cemetery citizens such as Brian Palmer, Peighton Young, and Adrienne Fikes raised alarms about its language, which requires consent from property owners for a group to receive funds for cemetery work. In the case of African American cemeteries, these landowners are often people or entities with little concern for the dignity of the dead. The legislation also allows groups to receive funding without demonstrating connections to descendants or the local community—in fact, the word “descendants” does not appear in its text.¹¹⁰

After years of fielding inquiries about African American cemeteries “with zero dollars to support grassroots folks,” Thorpe supported the bill and testified

on its behalf before Congress. She called it a “starting point” that establishes at least some federal support for these sites. “A piece of legislation cannot do it all,” she said, but she also warned:

[I]t is going to be critical that folks are thoughtful about how and where funds are disbursed, and how and where, and with whom, technical assistance programs are established. . . . There are multiple, state-based African American heritage commissions that are working hand in hand with grassroots practitioners [and] that have the capacity to move programs and funds forward in a different way. I think this is an opportunity to create new models and new infrastructures, particularly for Black-led organizations . . . [where] there’s built-in knowledge, there’s built-in expertise, and, though it might look and feel different, there’s built-in infrastructure. . . . Our folks know what they’re doing.

Anthropologists Justin Dunnavant, Delande Justinvil, and Chip Colwell called for expanding the legislation into an African American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, modeled after the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. They wanted this broader framework to address not only cemeteries but also the remains of African American people that are held in museum and university collections, as well as African Americans’ genetic material.¹¹¹ As I was writing this book, activists and their allies were forming new interstate support networks for people working in African American cemeteries, including the Black Cemetery Network based at the University of South Florida and the African American Cemetery Coalition.

Still, the most common format for local and national news stories was to focus on one cemetery, one volunteer project at a time. Few people were tracking how the cemetery citizens behind these projects were watching and influencing one another: how revisions at African American cemeteries and other sites—state hospital cemeteries, Hart Island, residential schools and other Indigenous burial grounds, and more—formed an emerging national dialogue about our landscapes of memory, our places of the marginalized dead.¹¹²

The Whole City

According to political theorist Benjamin Barber, “Public space is not merely the passive residue of a decision to ban cars or a tacit invitation to the public to step into the street. It must be actively created and self-consciously sustained against the grain of an architecture built as much for machines as people, more for commercial than common use.”¹¹³ Cemetery citizens are doing this work. They are seeking to create meaning and invite people into spaces that don’t have obvious commercial uses—spaces vulnerable to development, or treated as dumps precisely because they couldn’t be developed for commercial use.

I have always been drawn to public spaces, and yet uncomfortable in crowds. So for me cemeteries are the ideal public space. Generally easy to access, they have a beauty and wildness unseen by passersby who think of them only as places for grieving and ghosts. Cemeteries allow you to engage with history in its broad sweep—to see the wars that have been fought, the uptick in deaths during a pandemic, how the demographics in a city changed as new immigrants came. Yet the history is also intimate, spoken in snippets via individual birth and death dates, and the few phrases that a family chose to inscribe on their loved one’s headstone—windows into the particularity of each life that was lived, or the ideals that mattered most to the person’s community.

Unlike most museum exhibits or monuments, a cemetery has no linear paths or explanatory captions telling you where to go next, or how to interpret what you see. You read one headstone, walk past another. You wander, you linger. To me, that rich mix of information and beauty—and that freedom from “scriptedness”—is magical, even in a space marked by loss.¹¹⁴ We can never recapture the whole of a person’s life from their headstone—or from the archives where cemetery citizens do their research. This loss is echoed in the way I move through cemeteries, pausing at some grave markers while passing over others, unable to take in the whole space at once. Every cemetery, whether it is well cared for or not, is a landscape of memory and forgetting—and anyone who steps into it becomes a participant in both of these things.

In this book, you’ll meet some people who keep very, very busy in cemeteries. But cemeteries can also be great places to do nothing.¹¹⁵

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, public space underwent a crisis; death, and the fear of death, entered every space where people gathered. A hush sank

over the world: at first gradually, and then like bricks. Duke's East Campus, near my home, emptied of students during a spring break that stretched into months of lockdown. A few students without a place to go, or a way to get there safely, stuck around. They played frisbee on the quad and ate outside in small groups. Then they got moved to West Campus, two miles away. East Campus was close to empty much of the time. Kids appeared on bikes as the day wore on, families picnicked on the grass. One day someone was wearing headphones and practicing what looked to me like Irish step dance. There were more dogs than before, fewer people. We spread apart to avoid contagion, creating big pockets of silence. It became a place where anyone could be present, but no one assembled, a place where crowds were impossible. The quad, the whole city, like a cemetery.

Doubts and Emergencies

People will inevitably question the justification for work that involves pouring money, time, and expertise into dead bodies and their burial grounds. The famous forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow once told me he questioned the resources spent exhuming mass graves after genocides and other atrocities—a field of human rights science that he pioneered—in places where people desperately needed food, schools for their kids, and other basic things.¹¹⁶ The cities surrounding every cemetery in this book are places of urgent needs and stark injustices. Are these projects in cemeteries claiming scarce resources from people and causes that need it more? Would the volunteer hours be better spent somewhere else, like tutoring kids, or advocating for more affordable housing?

Jarene Fleming described her own struggles to juggle her responsibilities as a descendant, cemetery volunteer, and busy professional:

Even though this [work in cemeteries] is really important to me, sometimes I feel like I spend too much time on it because the living really need some attention. And, you know, I work in maternal-child health, right? So I'm like: *every minute that I'm not—that I'm using to try and preserve this legacy in these cemeteries, I'm not trying to save a baby's life, you know?* Sometimes I really get exasperated myself, like: *Am I too, you know . . . do I spend too much energy into this?* I'm so passionate about it, but even I get like: *I only have X number of hours a day, a week, a year.*¹¹⁷

Katrina Spade is the founder of Recompose, a public benefit corporation developing ecological alternatives to traditional burial and cremation. She repeats a phrase that hospice workers use: “Death is not an emergency.”¹¹⁸ It’s meant as a reminder to mourners that a loved one’s death can be an occasion for slow and reflective action, rather than panicked attempts to “solve” the problem of our mortality or our discomfort with the bodies of the dead and dying. If death isn’t an emergency, then the dead aren’t either. But the indignities of the dead cause real pain, even in cemeteries where the burials stopped long ago. Despite her struggles over how to budget her time, Jarene is among the people who first showed me how much a cemetery can mean to descendants, and how much its degradation and misuse can hurt.

Feminist scholar Carol J. Adams points out that often we “separate caring into deserving/undeserving or now/later or first those like us/then those unlike us.” All these boundaries, she says, promote “a conservative economy of compassion”: a scarcity mentality about the consideration we can offer others and the availability of our care.¹¹⁹ I wrote this book at a time when talk of crisis was everywhere, in the form of our unfolding global climate emergency, police violence, a pandemic, and explicit attempts to undermine the democratic process. Every few months an article would appear analyzing the efficiency of protests, or what it takes for a “moment to become a movement.” My students always wanted to know, by the end of the semester, how we could fix the problems we studied.

The more these conversations repeated themselves, the more I felt pulled to places where care and activism seemed stubbornly inefficient. Cemeteries are not places for “effective altruism,” for measuring the good produced by every action we take and figuring out how to maximize it. The weeds keep growing back, the graves remain where they are. And as if care existed in endless supply—far more than one lifetime’s worth, at least—cemetery citizens lavish it on people who are already dead.

But not only the dead. The person you worked alongside on a Saturday at the cemetery, unearthing a grave marker hidden in the soil, might become over many such Saturdays the person who brings you homemade soup when you are recovering from surgery, or the person who texts you the meeting time and place for the protest downtown. Care begets care. More community creates more opportunities to act on the world in thoughtful and concerted ways.

In fact, maybe there is something special about caring for things when we're *not* certain what they mean, not sure about their urgency. Caring for them, despite the doubts, is the only way to keep the question of value open. Revisions are sometimes about discovering new value in something that was right in front of you all along, hidden in plain sight. Something like a cemetery.

Cemetery Citizens

The people buried in marginalized cemeteries suffered overlapping forms of oppression in life. The conditions of their burials extend that violence further. Yet, in some way, they make a claim on the land that their graves occupy. Through labor and learning, volunteers work to reinforce this claim and make these people grievable again.¹²⁰ They reimagine the dead as full citizens.

I use the term “cemetery citizens” to describe the living volunteers working in cemeteries.¹²¹ Their work is often mundane: searching public records, organizing workdays, raising funds, entering information into databases. But it is also an imaginative political act, widening our circles of belonging and altering our stories. In creating the term, I was influenced by families of the missing and disappeared, and the scholars who write about them. In places where disappearances are common, authorities cannot be trusted as partners in the search for missing people; they may even be complicit in massacres and cover-ups. In response, grieving loved ones establish networks of mutual support and their own forensic procedures. Scholars such as Arely Cruz-Santiago and Robin Reineke refer to these efforts as “citizen-led forensics” or “forensic citizenship.”¹²²

While a clandestine mass grave is different from a cemetery, and produces different kinds of desperation, cemetery citizens resemble forensic citizens in their insistence on attending to the dead whom society has abandoned. They insist on keeping the dead public through political speech and acts of care. Both groups also wind up acquiring many forms of expertise, some of it quite technical, with little outside support.

The word “citizens” is one I use cautiously. The people buried in marginalized cemeteries may not have been granted legal citizenship; some may have been citizens in the formal sense while in practice they were denied many of the rights and privileges accorded to other citizens.¹²³ Measuring civic engagement or pride by the attachment local people feel to their cemeteries can reinforce a

dangerous sense that there are “real” locals, rooted in a place for generations, and that migration and multiculturalism dilute these sorts of ties. Poet Jean Sprackland writes, “What does it mean, anyway, to belong somewhere? During the Industrial Revolution, in that period of mass migration from countryside to town, it was sometimes said that the new immigrants did not belong because they had no dead in the churchyard. The right of belonging in a place could only be earned by dying there.”¹²⁴ Stories of displacement and migration are part of the history of every cemetery I describe in this book. Sometimes even the dead themselves have migrated. Mount Moriah is home to dead people who were exhumed from little church graveyards as Philadelphia expanded; some families moved their dead out of both Geer and East End as they became overgrown.

Cemetery Citizens is not driven by nostalgia for a world where people all tend to the graves of their own ancestors, where there are no migrations, where “rootedness” is considered a good in and of itself, or where professional cemetery management gives way entirely to some idealized model of community care.¹²⁵ People should be free to choose *not* to spend their time or labor in cemeteries. I don’t often visit the graves of my own grandparents, in their sprawling and tidy lawn cemeteries in New Jersey.

As I listened to my interlocutors and became involved in this work myself, I realized that the people I admired most, and learned the most from, shared some approaches in common. The term “cemetery citizens” started as a descriptor and slowly became an ideal—even more so as a crisis in Richmond’s cemeteries deepened. The story of East End, Evergreen, and the Enrichmond Foundation showed me that it is possible for people to claim responsibility for a marginalized cemetery without embracing the core practices of cemetery citizens, or asking enough of the hard questions they ask.

Cemetery citizens practice arts of noticing in cemeteries, looking not merely for master plans or best practices but for direct responses to the cemetery’s landscape. They are conscious of the many kinds of life within it, its history, its dead, and the context in which it is situated. They don’t merely maintain a cemetery, mowing and weeding. They also offer it things that go beyond simple maintenance: getting a duplicate grave marker made after one was stolen, helping family members locate the graves of their ancestors and connect with their dead, leaving origami cranes on an altar. I have begun to think of these acts as “scrappy care”: low-budget, improvised ways of relating to the cemetery, and to the dead.

More like tending a garden than historic preservation as most people would understand that term. Sometimes, scrappy care involves cemetery citizens plumbing the depths of their own grief, which they brought along with them when they started volunteer work.

I found people who embody this rich model of cemetery citizenship in Geer, East End, Mount Moriah, and many cemeteries beyond these main research sites. Cemetery citizens such as Alex Green, Lisa Y. Henderson, and Yamona Pierce spoke so beautifully about the possibilities and challenges of cemetery revisions that I include them in this book, even as their work takes place in cemeteries that are not its focus.

Many of the people I interviewed, and worked alongside, as I researched this book have no familial relation to those whose graves they tend. They have fashioned their own links to a particular cemetery, and to the dead, through shared identities, political commitments, or the wish to carve out new forms of belonging in a place where they are still relative newcomers. They are teachers, genealogists, students, journalists, history and archaeology enthusiasts, and weekend volunteers. They are making new kinds of kinship with the dead, based not on biological ties but on understanding local history, addressing an overlooked injustice, and embracing a call to care.

These people never asked to be the subjects of a book. They are hard at work telling the stories of the people buried in the cemeteries, and the communities to which they remain connected. When cemetery citizens bring too much attention to themselves, or too much ego into the cemetery, it makes the work harder. It risks becoming a new form of exploitation, another way of degrading these places. That risk is present in these pages. But focusing on these volunteers—not in a newspaper profile about cemetery “heroes,” but with patience, honesty, and nuance—allows us to see the full complexity of cemetery revisions, especially when they involve caring for “other people’s” dead.

Writing about cemetery citizens, and not simply about cemeteries, allowed me to ask why people do this work. How does this seemingly strange pastime, pulling up weeds and cleaning headstones in an overgrown burial ground, move into the center of someone’s life? Underneath that question is a universal one: how do we come to care about specific places, to invest part of our lives in them?

So much of the loss in these cemeteries is permanent: grave markers are

gone, records are lost, the archives are fragmentary. Cemetery citizens are experts in “broken world thinking,” innovators in finding meaningful forms of partial repair, and of honoring that which can’t be repaired.¹²⁶ In their research, they often highlight the histories of forgotten “ordinary” people, who have always interested me more than the relatively few well-known, celebrated figures buried at these cemeteries. During our Friends of Geer Cemetery meetings, we sometimes talk about descendants who contact us, or visit our website, looking for information about an ancestor’s grave. What kind of experience should they have when the answer is that we know that the person is buried in Geer (usually based on a death certificate), but also that the grave is either unmarked or buried beneath the soil? This is a question about web design and communication, but also a question of ethics. How do you give someone a gift that is also a broken thing?

Most of the time, we think of cemeteries as places to mark the end of a life, or of lives in the aggregate. In telling the stories of people who come together in cemeteries, this book is less about grief or the past than it is about the “attentive practices of thought, love, rage, and care” happening right now in places of the marginalized dead.¹²⁷

Words and Pictures

Part I of this book, “The Fields Full of Weeds,” gives an overview of each of the three cemeteries where I did most of the research for this book. The order of the chapters evokes the route I often took between the three burial grounds: starting at my home in Durham, near Geer Cemetery, and driving north through Richmond to visit East End. Then on to Philadelphia, and Mount Moriah. These introductory chapters begin with a found poem or life history about the dead and their graves—an intimate view of the burial ground I’m describing. I then move on to the cemetery’s history. In nearly every case I am drawing from published histories that are more detailed than I can be here. Instead, I have sought to combine important elements of each cemetery’s past with stories of the work happening there now—the real focus of *Cemetery Citizens*.

Each chapter follows a similar timeline. It starts with a cemetery’s founding and early burials, then moves through a long period when conditions deteriorated. Eventually, efforts to preserve and reclaim the cemetery begin. But the details of this timeline differ immensely, starting with why these cemeteries were

founded—in response to what needs, or what lack of other burial places—and what drove them into decline.

The chapters in Part II, “Revisions (‘It Will Never End, That Work’),” weave together scenes and issues from across the cemeteries, rather than following the cemetery-by-cemetery approach of the book’s first half. Cemetery citizens, more than the cemeteries they work in, move into focus. What brings these people to put their time and labor into places of the dead? What identities and purposes do they share, and where do some of them—such as descendants of the people buried in the cemetery—have a different kind of relationship, a different kind of moral authority?

Volunteers arrive at a cemetery with different skills and motivations, but also with different ways of knowing the cemetery itself. In Part II, I examine these differences, and how they create tensions over what it really means “to have the work done right,” as cemetery citizen Melissa Pocock puts it. There are best practices for *preserving* a cemetery, and right ways and wrong ways to do something like repair a broken headstone; but *revising* a cemetery is a different thing. It is political, even spiritual, work with soil and stories amid irreparable loss. Places of the dead—which are also, in the case of these cemeteries, wild and green plots of land surrounded by growing, gentrifying cities—can serve as public spaces where mourning, reckoning, enjoyment, and learning are all possible. But finding the balance between these different things is painfully difficult.

Throughout the book, I use line breaks and careful edits to make some portions of my interviews with cemetery citizens into poems. Working with my interview transcripts in this way, spending meditative time with the profound words of my interlocutors, was my favorite part of writing this book. The technique I used is sometimes called “found poetry”; and using poems to identify and emphasize themes in academic research, as I do here, is a form of “poetic inquiry.”¹²⁸ I shared each poem with the person whose interview transcript I was working with, inviting them to comment and suggest edits, or to express their preference for a more traditional prose quotation.

People use poetic inquiry for many reasons. I like how sharing my interviews in this way slows everything down, asking both writer and reader to pay more attention to the particular words people are using. In a book where I have the privilege of deciding whose voice goes where, in what frame of analysis—a book where my own voice occupies many more pages of the text than my interviews—

poetic inquiry does something subtle but important with my interlocutors' voices. Visually, it gives them space on the page. Their words stand out, demanding a different kind of attention. Things that may appear, in prose, like odd grammar or verbal tics—such as the way we circle back on ourselves when speaking, or repeat phrases—instead become moments of added meaning. Why did the person stop at that particular point, leaving the rest of the sentence unfinished? How did they wind up somewhere so distant from where their sentence seemed to be headed? Why did they reach out to the listener at just this moment (“you know?”), or feel the need to repeat this particular word so many times? The more I worked with the voices of cemetery citizens on the page, the more I appreciated how poetic inquiry allowed the looping, mid-sentence revisions of their speech to come forward.

Some of the poems open doorways to issues I barely analyze at all, such as Jenn O'Donnell's references to burnout in cemetery reclamation work (appearing in the poem “I Don't Know If There Is a Fix”). The book provides space for the experiences cemetery citizens wanted to talk about, and issues they raised, without accompanying commentary on each of them.¹²⁹ Though I chose which interview excerpts would be featured in the book, and how to reshape them into poems, I didn't want to loom over everything my interlocutors said, connecting and interpreting. Often their words are enough.

After learning about poetic inquiry from writing studies scholar Collie Fulford, I unexpectedly found myself writing poems of my own, which had no direct relation to other sources. I have included a few here. To me, these are the real “found poems” (the ones I constructed from interview transcripts seem more like “heard poems”). Poet Marilyn Nelson says, “Poetry consists of words and phrases and sentences that emerge like something coming out of water. They emerge before us, and they call up something in us. But then they turn us back into our own silence.”¹³⁰

It's common to think of poetry as more complex than prose, or at least requiring more interpretation to find the hidden threads of meaning in metaphors, line breaks, and other techniques. Writing this book, I experienced poetry as the opposite. My poems often came out of moments when I was stuck, and in them I have expressed my thoughts in as direct and unfiltered a way as I could.¹³¹ All the footnotes, the qualifiers, and the work of separating different kinds of truth—especially the scholarly and the personal—fell away.

Cemetery Citizens also includes drawings. When I first started this project, I thought I'd take my sketchpad along on cemetery workdays and draw the things I was seeing there. I wanted a way to capture not just the grave markers and landscapes, but also the activity of volunteers: the way people crouch when they are digging at the roots of a vine; how they gather around a marker they've just discovered underneath the dirt, watching with quiet reverence as someone washes it with water.

A few of those drawings are in my sketchbooks. But for the most part I haven't made them. Usually, I am just too busy at the cemeteries. When I go to workdays, I'm not comfortable sitting and sketching while other people work. I join in the weeding and brush-clearing, trying to be of use while occasionally scribbling some notes. Anthropologist Andrew Causey describes this dilemma well: "How can one, after all, join in on the dynamism of life while also being in the state of reserve required of careful watching?"¹³² I often felt overwhelmed by all the things that might be in my compositions: the plants, graves, people, dogs, and more.

When I do draw in cemeteries, I am usually alone. At Geer Cemetery, in the early days of the pandemic, I found myself drawing the cemetery when it felt empty, lonely, unnoticed: the opposite of the workdays where I had struggled to step out of the action and make a sketch. Suddenly I was writing a book about cemeteries as vibrant places of public life and political dialogue, while drawing a reality that contradicted it.

Eventually, I found a compromise: snapping photos on busy workdays and then sketching them, or parts of them,

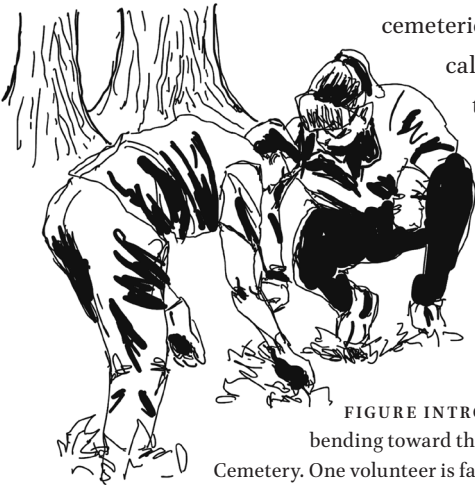


FIGURE INTRO.2. Black-and-white sketch of two volunteers bending toward the ground, from a March 2023 workday at Geer Cemetery. One volunteer is facing the viewer, with bangs, glasses, a ponytail, and gardening gloves. She crouches low with one arm resting on a knee and the other reaching down. The other volunteer has short hair and glasses; she faces away from the viewer, reaching with two gloved hands toward weeds on the ground. Drawing by the author, March 2023.

afterward. The drawings wind up somewhere in the gray zone between documentary and a more imaginative response. They are less complete and less detailed than photographs. They emphasize the movement that I saw, the interactions between living bodies and spaces of the dead. How “we move in spaces of repair,” as Angela Thorpe put it.

Cemetery citizens teach themselves new skills, operating forever at the edge of their own expertise. My drawings—done in the hand of a lifelong doodler under no illusions about his formal skills—are similar. They are my own form of scrappy care: full of imperfection and effort, in excess of any obvious need. The time and effort I’ve spent drawing, like the poems, is a way to bear witness, to *love* these places and these people beyond the limits of academic prose. A drawing, “good” or not, is a way of caressing things with lines.

NOTES

Beauty in Dirt

1. The title of this section comes from Modest Mouse, “So Much Beauty in Dirt,” track 6 on *Everywhere and His Nasty Parlor Tricks*, Epic Records, 2001.

Introduction

1. On the terminology of headstones versus gravestones (or tombstones), see Lynn Rainville, *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), 23.

2. Rainville, *Hidden History*.

3. See Ryan M. Seidemann and Christine L. Halling, “Landscape Structural Violence: A View from New Orleans’s Cemeteries,” *American Antiquity* 84, no. 4 (2019): 669–683, <https://doi.org/10.1017/aaq.2019.49>.

4. For influential definitions and discussions of structural violence, see Paul Farmer, “An Anthropology of Structural Violence,” *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 3 (2004): 305–325, <https://doi.org/10.1086/382250>; Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–191, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>.

5. In his well-known essay “The Case for Reparations,” Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, “When we think of white supremacy, we picture COLORED ONLY signs, but we should picture pirate flags.” *The Atlantic*, June 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

6. See Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, And What We Can Do About It* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

7. “Historically deep and geographically broad” is from Farmer, “An Anthropology of Structural Violence,” 309.

8. Sociologist Loïc Wacquant worries that the notion of structural violence “threatens to stop inquiry just where it should begin, that is, with distinguishing various species of violence and different structures of domination. . . .” Wacquant response essay in Farmer, “An Anthropology of Structural Violence,” 322. Any attempt to distinguish between types of violence must also confront the fact that they tend to accompany and

flow into one another: as anthropologist Alexa Hagerty says, “The marks of structural violence often accompany the marks of apocalyptic violence.” Alexa Hagerty, *Still Life with Bones: Genocide, Forensics, and What Remains* (New York: Crown, 2023), 29.

9. For example, in an open letter to residents of Durham that they disseminated widely, scholar Kim Smith and descendant Stephanie Davis offer a granular account of how “a network of historical preservation entities, city planners, civil engineers, and the real property industry” have each played a part in the overgrowth and indignities inflicted on two of Durham’s historic African American cemeteries. See Kim Smith and Stephanie Davis, “An Open Letter: The Fitzgerald Family Cemetery and Henderson Cemetery,” November 4, 2021, updated January 27, 2022, https://drive.google.com/file/d/149knrJL_IRDxyNsBv3KKdiuOulqeNTqQ/view.

10. By “memory landscape,” I mean how the natural and built environments around us, from individual structures to entire cities, tell stories about our past and present. Tim Cole, describing Holocaust survivors’ visits to Auschwitz in similar terms, writes that the former concentration camp “is an active landscape in memory making. It is a place that ‘solicits and provokes, initiates and connects . . . [and] engenders its own effects and affects.” Tim Cole, “Crematoria, Barracks, Gateway: Survivors’ Return Visits to the Memory Landscapes of Auschwitz,” *History and Memory* 25, no. 2 (2013): 102–31, <https://doi.org/10.2979/histmemo.25.2.102>. The phrase “landscapes of memory” appears throughout Blanche Linden-Ward’s history of Mount Auburn Cemetery, *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston’s Mount Auburn Cemetery* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989).

11. Caitlin DeSilvey writes, “It may be that in some circumstances a state of gradual decay provides more opportunities for memory making, and more potential points of engagement and interpretation, than the alternative.” *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 14–15.

12. Architecture historian Max Page offers a vision of historic preservation that is not “fetishistic” about the past but rather explicitly oriented toward social justice in the present and future. *Why Preservation Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016). “Almost all of the terms that are used to describe attitudes of care, toward both cultural artifacts and natural environments, assume the desirability of a return to a prior state,” geographer Caitlin DeSilvey writes. Her work explores an emerging alternative to traditional preservation frameworks—a “postpreservation” paradigm that accepts, and makes meaning out of, inevitable decay and the blurring of boundaries between nature and culture. *Curated Decay*, 20.

13. See Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Even in the Grave, Black People Can’t Rest in Durham,” *INDY Week*, February 25, 2020, <https://indyweek.com/news/voices/even-in-the-grave-black-people-cant-rest-in-durham/>.

14. Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 112–13. Stauffer gets the term “revisionary practices”

from Meir Dan-Cohen, “Revising the Past: On the Metaphysics of Repentance, Forgiveness, and Pardon,” in *Forgiveness, Mercy, and Clemency*, ed. Austin Sarat and Nasser Hussain (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 117–37.

15. In Jewish thought, especially post-Holocaust, the idea of *tikkun olam* is often used to capture a similar notion: the necessity of working to repair a world that is beautiful, sacred, and damaged. See Jonathan Krasner, “The Place of Tikkun Olam in American Jewish Life,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 25, no. 3–4 (November 1, 2014), <https://jcpa.org/article/place-tikkun-olam-american-jewish-life/>.

16. See Adam Richard Rosenblatt, “Engraved: A Family Forensics,” *Fieldsights*, Society for Cultural Anthropology, February 9, 2023, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/engraved-a-family-forensics>.

17. In an interview my grandmother, Jean Bialer, gave my sister in the late 1980s, she said, “It’s like unreal. I can’t believe that I actually went through all of that, that I could withstand all the pain and all the suffering and be able still to give love to others. It’s so unbelievable what you could endure. It’s just not real. I sit often and I think about it.”

The testimony where she discusses hunger with such great frequency is in the archives of the Polish Research Institute at the University of Lund, Sweden, where it is tagged with keywords such as:

Deportations	Manufactory work (Textile)
Jews	Trade
Children	Sabotage
Humiliation	Sexual abuse
Ghetto	Supervisors (German)
Round up	Weapons industry
Authorities	Psychological abuse
Guards (Ukrainian)	

See Genia Rotman [later Jean Bialer], Record of Witness Testimony 194, interview by Luba Melchior, March 2, 1946, The Polish Research Institute, <http://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record%3A102719&dswid=-8778>.

18. “Folks with people in the ground” is from Brian Palmer, “Friends of East End Cemetery,” interview by Bret Payne, *Burning Bright*, July 2020, audio, 41:29, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/1wMTOoJW11ayBXDyzA6Jpk>.

For canonical statements on descendant authority over burial grounds and sites of enslavement, see Michael L. Blakey, “African Burial Ground Project: Paradigm for Cooperation?” *Museum International* 62, no. 1/2 (May 2010): 61–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0033.2010.01716.x>; National Trust for Historic Preservation and African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, *Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*, Version 1.0 (Montpelier Station, VA: Montpelier Descendants Committee, 2018), <https://montpelierdescendants.org/rubric/>.

19. Rosenblatt, "Engraved: A Family Forensics."

20. Menachem Kaiser, *Plunder: A Memoir of Family Property and Nazi Treasure* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), 2021, 194.

21. See Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Hagerty, *Still Life with Bones*, 159; *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, ed. Antonius C. G. M. Robben (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017).

22. Graham Fairclough, "Conservation and the British," 158, quoted in DeSilvey, *Curated Decay*, 4. See also DeSilvey on how dominant preservation paradigms ignore or exclude cultural traditions that embrace "intangible and transient" relationships with the past. *Ibid.*, 8.

23. "I learned, you don't lose a cemetery. A state hospital cemetery has to be disappeared." Patricia E. Deegan, "Remember My Name: Reflections on Spirituality in Individual and Collective Recovery," shared via email to the author, April 16, 2021, 1.

24. I capitalize both Black and White throughout *Cemetery Citizens* when they are used as racial identifications. "Blackness and many other cultural identities are labels bestowed upon us and carried from birth. It is an indicator of personhood, culture, and history. The lower case 'b' fails to honor the weight of this identity appropriately. . . . Choosing to not capitalize White while capitalizing other racial and ethnic identifiers would implicitly affirm Whiteness as the standard and norm. Keeping White lower-case ignores the way Whiteness functions in institutions and communities." Kristen Mack and John Palfrey, "Capitalizing Black and White: Grammatical Justice and Equity," MacArthur Foundation, August 26, 2020, <https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/capitalizing-black-and-white-grammatical-justice-and-equity>.

25. For over two decades, a Gloucester man living close to the cemetery, Walter McGrath, mowed its grasses and tended its graves. He has only recently given up the work due to his age.

26. On death as "the great leveler," see Robert Kastenbaum and Christopher Moreman, *Death, Society, and Human Experience*, 12th ed. (Routledge, 2018), 60–62. On Evergreen Cemetery in Richmond as a site where African Americans were striving for posthumous parity, see Ray Bonis and Selden Richardson, "The Shame of Evergreen Cemetery—What Do You Think?" *The Shockoe Examiner: Blogging the History of Richmond, Virginia*, August 10, 2015, <https://theshockoeexaminer.blogspot.com/2015/08/the-shame-of-evergreen-cemetery-what-do.html>.

27. Linden-Ward, *Silent City on a Hill*, 295, 301, 310.

28. Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799–1883* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 44; First Baptist Church (Philadelphia), "Lists of burials for removal to Mount Moriah Cemetery, 1860," *Philadelphia Congregations Early Records*, <https://philadelphiacongregations.org/records/item/ABHS.FBCGravesForRemovalToMtMoriah1860>.

29. Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 81–85.

30. Greg Melville, *Over My Dead Body: Unearthing the Hidden History of America's Cemeteries* (New York: Abrams, 2022), 65; see also Linden-Ward, *Silent City on a Hill*, 341.

31. Keith Eggener, "Our First Public Parks: The Forgotten History of Cemeteries," interview by Rebecca Greenfield, *The Atlantic*, March 16, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/03/our-first-public-parks-the-forgotten-history-of-cemeteries/71818/>. See also Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 69; Linden-Ward, *Silent City on a Hill*, 295–320.

32. Melville, *Over My Dead Body*, 5.

33. *Ibid.*, 107–112.

34. See Louise Harmon, "Honoring Our Silent Neighbors to the South: The Problem of Abandoned or Forgotten Asylum Cemeteries," *Touro Law Review* 34, no. 4 (2018): 901–82; Jonathan Kendall, "Remembering When Americans Picnicked in Cemeteries," *Atlas Obscura*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/picnic-in-cemeteries-america>; Linden-Ward, *Silent City on a Hill*, 319.

35. Judaic Studies scholar Allan Amanik captures this complexity in his analysis of New York's Jewish rural cemeteries: "The city and the nation's first Jewish rural cemeteries therefore embodied an important duality. On the one hand, Jews touted them as symbols of mobility and integration, marking their embrace of American material culture and religiosity in death. Lush Jewish landscapes that neighbored Protestant cemeteries stood as testaments to Jewish inclusion, nearly unprecedented on either side of the Atlantic. On the other hand, Jewish New Yorkers sought to temper that very integration into American life by doubling down on physical and ritual borders in death." Allan Amanik, "A Beautiful Garden Consecrated to the Lord: Marriage, Death, and Local Constructions of Citizenship in New York's Nineteenth-Century Jewish Rural Cemeteries," in *Till Death Do Us Part*, ed. Allan Amanik and Kami Fletcher (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 16.

36. On the naming conventions of rural cemeteries, see James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 111.

37. See Violet Park Cemetery Correspondence (NCC.0250), North Carolina Collection, Durham County Library, NC, donated by R. Kelly Bryant, <https://archive.durhamcountylibrary.org/repositories/2/resources/54>.

38. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 118–20.

39. On the number of cemeteries in the U.S. compared to chain restaurants, see Melville, *Over My Dead Body*, 5.

40. See Sandee LaMotte, "Cremation Has Replaced Traditional Burials in Popularity in America and People Are Getting Creative with Those Ashes," CNN, January 23, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/22/health/cremation-trends-wellness/index.html>.

41. For accounts of American death as an event increasingly managed by paid professionals and removed from the visible urban landscape, see Philippe Ariès, *The Hour*

of *Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981); Joseph Bottum, "Death & Politics," *First Things*, June 2007, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/06/001-death-politics>; Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).

42. Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 17–18, 85–86.

43. Kami Fletcher, "Race and the Funeral Profession: What Jessica Mitford Missed," *TalkDeath*, December 2, 2018, <https://www.talkdeath.com/race-funeral-profession-what-jessica-mitford-missed/>.

44. It turns out that Americans have long debated the appropriateness of eating in cemeteries. See Kendall, "Remembering When Americans Picnicked in Cemeteries."

45. Lauret Edith Savoy, *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2015), 180.

46. In Louisiana, a "petrochemical corridor" of oil and plastics companies, occupying land that once housed plantations where enslaved people harvested sugarcane, has destroyed many Black burial grounds and constitutes an ongoing threat to others. See Forensic Architecture and RISE St. James, "Environmental Racism in Death Alley, Louisiana," *Forensic Architecture*, June 28, 2021, <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/environmental-racism-in-death-alley-louisiana>.

47. See Amanik and Fletcher, *Till Death Do Us Part*.

48. In 1993, swastikas and Nazi slogans were painted on ninety-eight headstones in a Workmen's Circle Cemetery in Saddle Brook, New Jersey. My biological grandfather, Arthur Rosenblatt, is buried there. He survived the Holocaust, though his early death from heart failure, at age forty-eight, was likely the result of the conditions he endured as a concentration camp prisoner. See Robert Hanley, "Tombstones Defaced with Pro-Nazi Slogans in North Jersey Jewish Cemetery," *The New York Times*, September 22, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/09/22/nyregion/tombstones-defaced-with-pro-nazi-slogans-in-north-jersey-jewish-cemetery.html>.

49. Harmon, "Honoring Our Silent Neighbors to the South," 959.

50. Ryan M. Seidemann and Christine L. Halling argue that whenever cemeteries are damaged and destroyed in ways that "reinforce . . . preexisting social prejudices," we should think of it as "landscape structural violence." Seidemann and Halling, "Landscape Structural Violence," 669–83, 670.

51. , Chris Suarez, "Maggie L. Walker's Grave Site Among Those Vandalized at Historic Cemeteries," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 3, 2020, https://richmond.com/news/local/maggie-l-walkers-grave-site-among-those-vandalized-at-historic-cemeteries/article_aef50403-bc87-5c77-b1db-7095db70c896.html.

52. Vanessa Harding, "Whose Body? A Study of Attitudes Towards the Dead Body in Early Modern Paris," in *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 172.

53. “A government that cannot maintain its cemeteries has failed as a government,” Joseph Bottum argues. Joseph Bottum, “The Unhaunted Graveyard,” review of *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, by Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Washington Free Beacon*, January 2, 2016, <https://freebeacon.com/culture/the-unhaunted-graveyard/>. Anthropologist Jason De León, in his study of migrant deaths on the U.S.-Mexico border, writes, “Looking at the bodies left in the desert reveals what the physical boundary of sovereignty and the symbolic edge of humanity look like.” Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 84.

54. For a variety of perspectives on structural violence and the dead, see Jennifer F. Byrnes and Iván Sandoval-Cervantes, eds., *The Marginalized in Death: A Forensic Anthropology of Intersectional Identity in the Modern Era* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022).

55. In an essay on racially segregated cemeteries, David Sherman writes, “To conjugate the idea of whiteness with a fetus or corpse—let alone with a zygote or cremains—is to reveal it for what it is, a desperate and incoherent claim for an exclusive social prestige that can be passed down through generational lineage, from one mortal body to another.” David Sherman, “Grave Matters: Segregation and Racism in U.S. Cemeteries,” *The Order of the Good Death*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/article/grave-matters-segregation-and-racism-in-u-s-cemeteries/>.

56. Jill Lepore, “When Black History Is Unearthed, Who Gets to Speak for the Dead?” *The New Yorker*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/04/when-black-history-is-unearthed-who-gets-to-speak-for-the-dead>.

57. Ryan K. Smith, *Death and Rebirth in a Southern City: Richmond’s Historic Cemeteries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 3.

58. Seth Freed Wessler, “Developers Found Graves in the Virginia Woods. Authorities Then Helped Erase the Historic Black Cemetery,” *ProPublica*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-authorities-erased-historic-black-cemetery-virginia>.

59. Friends of Geer Cemetery, Facebook post, October 10, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/friendsofgeer/posts/pfbid0CngkNMRxNSiyJ2FtrZXgTXSFDcZn6eXSpS6NnwrBtBrxkkBvq6YvxKT7aqyDQ7W2l>.

60. Jarene Fleming, interview with the author, January 24, 2021; see also Daniel Figueroa IV, “Abandoned Cemeteries Task Force Adds ‘Teeth’ and New Category to Policy Framework,” *Florida Politics*, November 30, 2021, <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/476555-abandoned-cemeteries-task-force-adds-teeth-and-new-category-to-policy-framework/>.

61. “Neglect,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=neglect>.

62. Angela Thorpe, interview with the author, July 6, 2023.

63. See Elizabeth Williamson, “America’s Black Cemeteries and Three Women

Trying to Save Them," *The New York Times*, September 27, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/27/us/black-cemeteries.html>.

64. Thanks to Maurice Hamington for suggesting I investigate this distinction. Maintenance can, in fact, be *careless*. When activists pushed for the State of Massachusetts to take responsibility for maintaining the burial grounds at a former state mental hospital in Danvers, "[t]he contractor simply ran a bobcat type bulldozer through the cemetery to clear out the brush," reports the Danvers State Memorial Committee. "When we went out to see the work, members of our committee wept. It was an awful sight: some markers were pulled out, tractor tire marks marred the hillside, and roots and stumps remained two inches above the ground making it difficult to walk about." Danvers State Memorial Committee, "History of Our Work" (November 4, 1998 entry), 2001, <http://dsmc.info/work.shtml>.

65. See Gravetender, "Perpetual Care Isn't What You Think It Is," *Gravewords*, January 31, 2021, <https://gravewords.wordpress.com/2012/01/31/perpetual-care-isnt-what-you-think-it-is/>.

66. On care ethics, feminist theories of care, and caring for the dead, see Adam Richard Rosenblatt, *Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity*, Stanford Studies in Human Rights (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 167–198.

67. See Rainville, *Hidden History*, 61.

68. "Tender," Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=tender>.

69. Lisa Y. Henderson, interview with the author, February 9, 2021.

70. "Degrade," Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=degrade>.

71. "Margin," Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=margin>.

72. Margaret Jones's story appears in chapter 2 of this book. On Mount Moriah's inclusive, "democratic" spirit, see Christopher Doherty, "Confederates, Catholics, Muslims and Masons: The Mount Moriah Cemetery Tour," *The Necessity for Ruins*, December 1, 2007, <https://ruins.wordpress.com/2007/12/01/mount-moriah-cemetery/>.

73. See Chad Pradelli, Cheryl Mettendorf, and Maia Rosenfeld, "Data Investigation: Philadelphia Metro Area Among Most Racially Segregated in Country," 6abc Philadelphia, July 22, 2021, <https://6abc.com/philadelphia-metro-housing-equality-segregation-census-bureau-data/10901948/>.

74. See Sammy Caiola, "57 Blocks in Philly Are Prone to Shootings. Community Groups Are Mobilizing to Curb the Gun Violence," *The Philadelphia Tribune*, December 23, 2022, https://www.phillytrib.com/news/local_news/57-blocks-in-philly-are-prone-to-shootings-community-groups-are-mobilizing-to-curb-the/article_c50ef3a5-2967-50f9-838c-9c9dc725bef9.html; on incarceration rates in Philadelphia neighborhoods, see "Philadelphia Prison Population Report: July 2015–July 2023," Prison Policy Institute, <https://www.phila.gov/media/2023081114011/July-2023-Full-Public-Prison>

-Report.pdf; on police violence in Philadelphia, see George Fachner and Steven Carter, *An Assessment of Deadly Force in the Philadelphia Police Department*, Collaborative Reform Initiative (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015), <https://www.phillypolice.com/assets/directives/cops-w0753-pub.pdf>.

75. See Liat Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Laura I. Appleman, “Deviancy, Dependency, and Disability: The Forgotten History of Eugenics and Mass Incarceration,” *Duke Law Journal* 68, no. 3 (December 2018): 417–78, <https://dlj.law.duke.edu/article/deviancy-dependency-and-disability-appleman-vol68-iss3/>.

76. For more on MetFern Cemetery, see Jaymelee Kim and Adam Richard Rosenblatt, “Whose Humanitarianism? Whose Forensic Anthropology?” in *Anthropology of Violent Death: Theoretical Foundations for Forensic Humanitarian Action*, ed. Roberto C. Parra and Douglas H. Ubelaker (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2023), 153–176.

77. Alex Green et al., “The MetFern Cemetery,” 2017, MetFern Cemetery, accessed September 29, 2023, <http://www.metfern.org>; Asia London Palomba and Szu Yu Chen, “Below the Surface: A Special Report,” accessed May 31, 2023, <https://below-the-surface.github.io/main.html>.

78. Ibid.

79. See Jennifer Natalya Fink, *All Our Families: Disability Lineage and the Future of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022).

80. See Susan Burch, *Committed: Remembering Native Kinship in and Beyond Institutions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2021; Danvers State Memorial Committee, “History of Our Work”; Patricia E. Deegan, *From Numbers to Names*, coproduced by Laurie Block and Bestor Cram, Northern Light Productions, 2010, video, 13:52, <https://www.commongroundprogram.com/blog/from-numbers-to-names>; Green et al., “The MetFern Cemetery”; Nathan Flis and David Wright. “‘A Grave Injustice’: The Mental Hospital and Shifting Sites of Memory,” in *Exhibiting Madness in Museums*, ed. Catharine Coleborne and Dolly MacKinnon (London: Routledge, 2011), 101–15; David Mack-Hardiman, *Of Grave Importance: The Restoration of Institutional Cemeteries* (Buffalo, NY: Museum of disABILITY History and People Ink Press, 2014); Asia Palomba, “The Quest to Honor Disabled Patients Buried in Anonymous Graves,” *Atlas Obscura*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/metfern-cemetery>; Pemina Yellow Bird, “Wild Indians: Native Perspectives on the Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians,” National Empowerment Center, <https://power2u.org/wild-indians-native-perspectives-on-the-hiawatha-asylum-for-insane-indians-by-pemina-yellow-bird/>.

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82. On using the term “inmates” for people held in state hospitals and disability institutions, see Alex Green, “Process: Editor’s Note,” 2017, MetFern Cemetery, accessed September 29, 2023, <http://metfern.org/process>.

83. See Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner, *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 38–50; Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Caitlin Doucette Foltz, “Race and Mental Illness at a Virginia Hospital: A Case Study of Central Lunatic Asylum for the Colored Insane, 1869–1885” (master’s thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015), 4–44, <https://doi.org/10.25772/RRJX-NN19>.

84. King Davis, who leads a research project on the archives of Central State Hospital in Petersburg, says: “Poverty was a key factor in admissions then [from the hospital’s founding in 1868 until it was integrated in the mid-1960s] and now and blacks were more likely to have been involuntarily admitted through the court system.” “A Treasure Trove of Historical Data on the History of Mental Illness Among African Americans,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, February 6, 2014, <https://www.jbhe.com/2014/02/treasure-trove-of-historical-data-on-the-history-of-mental-illness-among-african-americans/>.

85. Burch and Joyner, *Unspeakable*, 49–50.

86. On sterilization at these two institutions, see Burch and Joyner, *Unspeakable*, 44–50; Grace M. Gordon, “‘For the Best Interest of the Patient and of Society’; Sterilization in Virginia’s Mental Institutions in the 20th Century” (Senior Honors Projects, James Madison University, May 13, 2022), <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1159&context=honors202029>.

87. Information on the Bass siblings from Friends of Geer Cemetery, Instagram post, January 16, 2023 (research by Tim Foley), <https://www.instagram.com/p/CnepgdMrjcr>; Henrietta Bass entry on Find a Grave (research by Suzannah McCuen), <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/117859535/henrietta-bass>.

88. “Best known” for now, that is. As anthropologist Sally Raudon points out, “Reiterations of public exposure, shock, disquiet and forgetting have marked New Yorkers’ relationships with Hart Island since the cemetery opened in 1869.” Sally Raudon, “Huddled Masses: The Shock of Hart Island, New York,” *Human Remains and Violence: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 8, no. 1 (2022): 87, <https://doi.org/10.7227/hrv.8.1.6>.

89. Ryan Grim, “Rikers Island Prisoners Are Being Offered PPE and \$6 an Hour to Dig Mass Graves,” *The Intercept*, March 31, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/31/rikers-island-coronavirus-mass-graves/>.

90. Corey Kilgannon, “Dead of AIDS and Forgotten in Potter’s Field,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/03/nyregion/hart-island-aids-new-york.html>.

91. In April 2020, drone footage from the island showed workers in protective gear stacking simple wooden coffins into trenches. Many reacted with horror. But as Jody Rosen wrote in the *New York Times*, “The deeper shock of the Hart Island videos may be the realization that they reveal a workaday event. A mass burial on Hart Island is business as usual, a thing that happens all the time, every week. . . . Hart Island is the

domain of the dispossessed, where the poorest and most marginalized citizens are laid to rest in unmarked graves by a work force drawn from the country's second-oldest prison system." Jody Rosen, "How Covid-19 Has Forced Us to Look at the Unthinkable," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/29/magazine/covid-hart-island.html>. See also Raudon, "Huddled Masses."

92. "About the Hart Island Project," Hart Island Project, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.hartisland.net/about>; Raudon, "Huddled Masses," 97.

93. See Corey Kilgannon, "A Million Bodies Are Buried Here. Now It's Becoming a Park," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/24/nyregion/hart-island-cemetery-park.html>.

94. See "When Remains Unclaimed, NC's Dead Scattered at Sea," WRAL News, August 8, 2014, <https://www.wral.com/story/when-remains-unclaimed-nc-s-dead-scattered-at-sea/13876971/>.

95. Chip Colwell, "How the Archaeological Review Behind the Dakota Access Pipeline Went Wrong," *The Conversation*, November 20, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/how-the-archaeological-review-behind-the-dakota-access-pipeline-went-wrong-67815>.

96. Christine Hauser and Isabella Grullón Paz, "U.S. to Search Former Native American Schools for Children's Remains," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/23/us/indigenous-children-indian-civilization-act-1819.html>.

97. "Department of the Interior Releases Investigative Report, Outlines Next Steps in Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative," U.S. Department of the Interior, May 11, 2022, <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/departement-interior-releases-investigative-report-outlines-next-steps-federal-indian>.

98. See Yellow Bird, "Wild Indians"; Burch, *Committed*.

99. Burch, *Committed*, 16.

100. Burch, *Committed*, 17, 102–3; Yellow Bird, "Wild Indians," 7; Tim Giago, "Paying Tribute to Harold Iron Shield," *Indiansz.Com*, February 27, 2008, <https://www.indiansz.com/News/2008/007334.asp>; Steve Young, "S.D. Revisits Past at Native American Insane Asylum," *USA Today*, May 5, 2013, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/05/05/sd-native-american-insane-asylum/2137011/>.

101. On Alvaro Enciso's work, see Barbara Sostaita, "Making Crosses, Crossing Borders: The Performance of Mourning, the Power of Ghosts, and the Politics of Counter-memory in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands," *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion*, August 18, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.22332/con.med.2016.3>. On immigration policy, the weaponization of the Sonoran Desert, and the border as a "killing field," see De León, *The Land of Open Graves*; Robin Reineke and Bruce E. Anderson, "Missing in the US-Mexico Borderlands," in *Missing Persons: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Disappeared*, ed. Derek Congram (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2016), 249–68.

102. While researching this book I also visited the Har Hasetim Cemetery in Glad-

wyne, Pennsylvania, used by Jewish burial societies from 1890 to 1945 and just barely saved from destruction. The Friends of the Gladwyne Jewish Memorial Cemetery now tend the site and mobilize local congregations, schools, and other volunteers. See Paul Jablow, “After Decades of Neglect, Volunteers Work to Save a Historic Main Line Jewish Cemetery,” *The Inquirer*, December 28, 2022, <https://www.inquirer.com/real-estate/gladwyne-jewish-memorial-cemetery-har-hasetim-beth-david-20221228.html>.

103. On the perils of “damage-centered research” on people and places, see Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (October 6, 2009): 409–28, <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>.

104. See, e.g., Char Adams, “The Growing Movement to Save Black Cemeteries,” NBC News, February 10, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/growing-movement-black-cemeteries-rcna15566>.

105. See Matt Blitz, “The Second Desecration of Our Ancestors: Activists Fight Construction Near Historic Cemetery in Bethesda,” DCist, July 8, 2020, <https://dcist.com/story/20/07/08/moses-african-cemetery-bethesda-preservation-protests/>; Forensic Architecture and RISE St. James, “Environmental Racism in Death Alley, Louisiana.”

106. See William Sturkey, “The Geer Cemetery: A Lesson in Black History,” *The Herald Sun*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.heraldsun.com/opinion/article225427335.html>.

107. Angela Thorpe, interview with the author, July 6, 2023.

108. *Ibid.*

109. See Williamson, “America’s Black Cemeteries and Three Women Trying to Save Them”; “Support Preservation of African American Burial Grounds,” National Trust for Historic Preservation, June 16, 2023, <https://savingplaces.org/african-american-cultural-heritage/updates/support-preservation-of-african-american-burial-grounds>.

110. Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-328 (2022), <http://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/2617>. On the language of the African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act, see Brian Palmer, “Historic Black Cemeteries Need Substance from Lawmakers, Not Symbolism,” Medium, July 15, 2022, <https://medium.com/@bxpnyc/historic-black-cemeteries-need-substance-from-lawmakers-not-symbolism-aab2bfb93826>.

111. Justin Dunnivant, Delande Justinvil, and Chip Colwell, “Craft an African American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act,” *Nature* 593, no. 7859 (May 2021): 337–40, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01320-4>.

112. One exception is Simon Romero’s article about the Indigenous burial ground under the contemporary tourist site at the Alamo, in San Antonio, Texas. Tâp Pilam elder Raymond Hernandez compares his people’s desire to protect these graves to reclamation efforts in Sugar Land, Texas, where African Americans who had been worked to death via the system of convict leasing were buried in anonymous graves. Simon Romero, “Burial Ground Under the Alamo Stirs a Texas Feud,” *The New York Times*,

November 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/25/us/alamo-burial-native-americans.html>.

113. Benjamin R. Barber, "The Art of Public Space," *The Nation*, August 12, 2009, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/art-public-space/>.

114. See Eric Chaplin and Sarah Holding, "Addressing the Post-Urban: Los Angeles, Las Vegas, New York," in *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 2001), 185–200; Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2019).

115. Odell, *How to Do Nothing*.

116. Rosenblatt, *Digging for the Disappeared*, 153–54.

117. Jarene Fleming, interview with the author, January 24, 2021.

118. See Katrina Spade, "Death Is Not an Emergency: How Recompose Is Redesigning the End of Life," interview by Michael Zakaras, *Forbes*, October 18, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashoka/2018/10/19/death-is-not-an-emergency-how-recompose-is-redesigning-the-end-of-life/>.

119. Carol J. Adams, "The War on Compassion," *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* (Autumn 2010): 5–11.

120. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

121. There are burial grounds called "Citizens Cemetery" located in North Carolina, Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma, and many other states.

122. See Arely Cruz-Santiago, "Lists, Maps, and Bones: The Untold Journeys of Citizen-Led Forensics in Mexico," *Victims & Offenders* 15, no. 3 (April 2, 2020): 350–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2020.1718046>; Robin C. Reineke, "Forensic Citizenship Among Families of Missing Migrants Along the U.S.-Mexico Border," *Citizenship Studies* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 21–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2021.2018675>.

123. In "Forensic Citizenship Among Families of Missing Migrants Along the U.S.-Mexico Border," Reineke surveys alternative definitions of citizenship, describing how undocumented migrants often engage deeply in practices of citizenship even as they lack access to its legal dimension.

124. Sprackland, *These Silent Mansions*, 28.

125. Geographer Doreen Massey tries to describe a sense of place that is "progressive"—awakened to how political struggle often centers on claims to physical space—while also avoiding making a fetish of rootedness. "A Global Sense of Place," in *The Cultural Geography Reader*, ed. Timothy S. Oakes and Patricia L. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 152.

126. Steven J. Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 221–40.

127. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 56.

128. See Lynn Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Informed Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018), 95–113.

129. Lauren Rosenberg adopts a similar strategy: “This book features the participants speaking for themselves, often without my intrusion. Understanding their accounts relies on readers to interpret their words not simply as uncomplicated stories . . . but as narratives that carry a significance that I did not wish to appropriate.” Lauren Rosenberg, *The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners* (Urbana, IL: Conference on College Composition and Communication/National Council of Teachers of English, 2015), 12.

130. Marilyn Nelson, “Communal Pondering in a Noisy World,” interview by Krista Tippet, *On Being*, February 23, 2017, audio, 51:02, <https://onbeing.org/programs/marilyn-nelson-communal-pondering-in-a-noisy-world/>.

131. I was inspired by Peter Elbow’s case for “Poetry as No Big Deal,” in *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 101–119, and Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences About Writing* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

132. Andrew Causey, *Drawn to See: Drawing as an Ethnographic Method* (North York, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 122.

Chapter 1: “When Summer Comes Again, the Cemetery Disappears”

1. Jessica T. Eustice, “The Geer Cemetery” (master’s thesis, North Carolina Central University, June 8, 2002), courtesy of the Friends of Geer Cemetery.

2. See Tia Hall et al., “Uneven Ground: Dismantling Hayti,” Bull City 150, 2017, accessed May 29, 2023, https://www.bullcity150.org/uneven_ground/dismantling_hayti/; Mark Robinson, “Battered by Demolition and Displacement, Jackson Ward Stands Strong at 150th Anniversary,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 17, 2021, https://richmond.com/news/local/battered-by-demolition-and-displacement-jackson-ward-stands-strong-at-150th-anniversary/article_4d064300-4d2c-56cf-b73d-4956b43b26ea.html; Drew Sisk, “Jackson Ward: Displacement and Buried History,” GDES Workshop, September 12, 2016, <https://drewsisk.com/workshop/jackson-ward-displacement-and-buried-history/>.

3. It is possible that, as has been the case at East End Cemetery, continuing archaeological work at Geer will reveal a more grid-like and planned layout of burials. See “East End Cemetery Map,” East End Cemetery Collaboratory, accessed May 26, 2023, <https://cemeterycollaboratory.org/east-end-cemetery-map/>.

4. Thanks to Alicia Jiménez for suggesting I situate Geer historically in terms of the timeline of Emancipation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and beyond.

5. Smith and Davis, “The Fitzgerald Family Cemetery and Henderson Cemetery.”

6. See Pauli Murray, *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 27–32, 274–76; Smith and Davis, “The Fitzgerald Family Cemetery and Henderson Cemetery.”