

**SHELVIS PONDS:** In this episode, we sit with Adam Rosenblatt, professor in the International Comparative Studies Department at Duke University, to discuss the importance of space, particularly his work with analyzing graveyards to better understand how such spaces can indicate economic disparities among different social groups.

Well, Adam, it is good to see you. I want to, you know, I'm here today to talk more about your thoughts on just space as it pertains to, you know, thinking about the work that you do surrounding cemeteries and learning how to read and using cemeteries as spaces to read and think critically about the lives they're in, the voices they're in and thinking about those spaces from a social justice mindset.

**ADAM ROSENBLATT:** Yeah, so one thing I'd say is that you're absolutely right that my work is partly about understanding the history's that cemeteries embody, reflect, and also sort of perpetuate and keep going in some cases. But, it's always a very passive way to construct the cemeteries: it's like history happens and then it's written on the cemeteries and we can read it. Right? It's like cemeteries as text. But, my book is tentatively called *Cemetery Citizens* and part of the point of it is that cemeteries also create new kinds of communities. So my book is sort of about cemeteries, but much more than that is about the people who come and work in cemeteries, especially volunteers who are trying to reclaim cemeteries that are sort of neglected, marginalized, etc. So I don't only see cemeteries as these passive spaces that reflect our history, but I also see them as spaces where history's made or, you know, new kinds of communities of care and resistance are coming together, sometimes where people are arguing with each other about how to remember the dead and how to use a space. Should there be nature trails and a kind of very accessible colorblind outdoorsy reclamation project or should there be Black Lives Matter/Blacks Death Matter resistance-oriented lense? You know? These things, it's not only, the projects

I'm studying, whether they're around race or disability or whatever, it's not only people coming together and being like, "Let's clean up the litter, and have a barbeque! We all love each other!". It's also like these are contested spaces.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** You mentioned neglected and marginalized cemeteries. Could you define what, is there a difference between a neglected and a marginalized cemetery? Because when I think of neglect, I think of care and upkeep. But, when I, I've never heard of a marginalized cemetery. What is the distinction between neglected and marginalized, if there is any?

**ADAM ROSENBLATT:** Yeah, it's a great question because I've been really struggling with these vocabularies a lot and I've been in dialogue with the folks that I'm working with who've worked in the cemeteries about it. The words neglected and especially abandoned, to me, are really loaded and it indicates, for example, the African-American cemeteries in Richmond, and for all I know, the case of Geer Cemetery here in Durham as well, you can spin that neglect or abandonment a lot of ways. But, it's precisely that it's a description that doesn't immediately point to a responsible party that allows for a bunch of narratives not all of them, you know, are really fair or accurate. So, in Richmond at least a lot of the storyline goes like: How did this cemetery get to this point? You know, these kind of overgrown African-American cemeteries that have vandalism, they have illegal dumping. How did they get to this point? And then you look and you compare to just right across the street to like Oakwood Cemetery which has this beautifully mowed and has this Confederate section that's like, you know, covered in flags and perfectly clean. And anyway, long story short, it's easy for people to tell this story like basically why aren't people here? Why don't they care? And often that means why doesn't the Black community care for their dead? Right? So abandonment, the people responsible for abandoning comes to seem like the community of descendants and the people directly connected to that cemetery. A lot of the story I'm trying to tell

is about how as with anything else – as with housing, as with education or whatever – cemeteries are part of structural forces. Right? So, in Virginia there has been basically since the Civil War, annual earmarked state funds from taxpayers and also some federal money for not just for federal monuments, which we've heard talked about a lot lately, but for Confederate graves. So like the United Daughters of the Confederacy have gotten like money annually to care for Confederate graves. East End and Evergreen, the two cemeteries in Richmond, that I'm spending time in are amazing historical properties for lack of a better term. They have people who started banks, they have the first woman in America to start a bank, Maggie Walker, the editor of the "Richmond Planet", which was a radical, pro-Civil Rights, anti-lynching newspaper. Anyways, I could go on and on about the history that's there, but they have received zero dollars of funding ever for their upkeep.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** Zero dollars? Wow, okay.

**ADAM ROSENBLATT:** So, there's spaces defined not just by segregation, but also by structural neglect. And, so the abandonment and neglect vocabulary gets dangerous when you're not saying, 'well, where does this neglect come from?' and when you're not having that structural conversation.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** Could you say more about the structural lack of support?

**ADAM ROSENBLATT:** Yeah, so I mean, at the most sort of like empirical and easy to pin down it's just like you can follow the money. And one of the things Brian's doing as a journalist is doing a project called "The Cost of the Confederacy". We're just trying to total up how much do we spend, actually, as U.S. taxpayers how much do we spend a year in the U.S. on Confederate memory. Right? So there is that funding discrepancy, but of course there's all these other complex factors that are harder to measure but definitely present.

So like so many cities, Durham included, Richmond is a place where strong place-based African-American communities have been fragmented, split apart by “urban development”, by highways getting plowed right through the middle of what was the thriving “Black Wall Street” was the term used by both Durham and Richmond. People have been moved from dignified housing and then pushed out into sort of housing projects that were a form of containment. Schools- Brown v. Board of Education didn’t necessarily actually create integrated schools. You have communities, in addition to the Great Migration of people going up North, you had communities that had subsequent waves of either being both fragmented within the Richmond area, but also people just leaving. Right? Leaving the Richmond area altogether. So, you combine that with funding, I don’t live near where my grandparents are buried, but I’m not up at night thinking about how their tombstones are sinking under the ground or being covered up with weeds because I am in the privileged position that my grandparents are buried somewhere that has a perpetual care fund. But, if you combine the same kinds of history of diaspora and fragmentation that you could tell about my family with a cemetery that has never had a perpetual care fund suddenly you put those two things together and you get a space that looks overgrown and “abandoned”.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** I think this notion of looking at cemeteries relates to the idea of how we remember and treat our dead is how we currently treat our living. Would you say that that is a fair term (how we remember and treat our dead is how we treat our living)?

**ADAM ROSENBLATT:** I would say, I am a professor so I’m going to complicate everything right, I would say it’s absolutely fair to say that the logics of exclusion that we live by amongst the living often continue to play out after death. So, Brian and Erin (my partners in Richmond) refer to the cemeteries they work in as being shaped by the afterlife of Jim Crow. The other work I’m

doing on mental asylum cemeteries also reflects a logic of exclusion. Why are these graves altogether in this space that's out in the woods? Because these were people that were considered, I may not get the words right, there's a quote I like from the anthropologist Jason De León, he says something like, "These are the symbolic edges of humanity". So, these are people who are placed at the edge or past the edge of humanity in life and you see that again in how they're treated as they die. But then they are unique things, just as they are unique things about how they're treated in life, scientific experiments conducted on people without their consent, or all the many different things that form the texture of living under Jim Crow for African-Americans in the U.S., they're also things that are distinct and different about treatment of the dead. So you asked earlier what I meant about marginalization, and in some cases I straight up mean for example at this cemetery in Wellfleet, Mass. that's outside a former mental institution, I mean that people were just buried under numbers. Catholics on one side, Protestants on the other. They had names in life, but in some ways they're erased even more in death because it's like just put them over there; figure out if they're Catholic or Protestant and put them there.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** I find that really really interesting, Adam and really insightful. I think I have the same question as everyone else does and it's: How does a professor of International Comparative Studies at Duke University come to be someone interested in this type of work? And reading the space of graveyards, how did you enter into this work and how did you begin to use graveyards as your space of reading?

**ADAM ROSENBLATT:** Yeah, it's a great question. So it's probably relevant for you to know that I spent about ten years or a little more researching the teams of forensic scientists who exhume mass graves after genocides and other atrocities and that's what my first book is about. So there's an important throughline of continuity, which is that all my research has been about how

caring for the dead is a political practice. With that said, I think after those ten years and after getting that book and some other projects related to that out the door, I think I was tired of only analyzing spaces that are really defined by this highly specialized scientific expertise and this international response to atrocity you kind of marked off by all these boundaries between the space of human rights and the space of everyday life. I happened to become connected, actually through my wife who went to grade school with Erin who I've mentioned a few times, I sort of heard about the project they were doing and read an op-ed that Brian had in the "New York Times" and then really once I finally got interested enough to go down and actually visit East End and Evergreen, it was like I think it's been a really long time, probably since I was in my adolescents, that you've had a day or two to change your life completely, but it was life-changing in the end of the cemeteries and I think I realized that there was work to be done that was outdoor, that was physical, that you build friendships and become part of a community and there's endless work to be done and anybody who is willing there's something to do. Really it just also intellectually made me start thinking that it was time to look at that same thing, caring for the dead as a political practice, but outside of the space that's like defined by this specialized expertise. Instead, you look at some people who have to make themselves experts. When we were at Geer Cemetery a few weeks ago with Erin and students from Durham Tech and Eddie Davis and all these folks for a work day, I mean Erin has extraordinary expertise: she found three gravestones that were completely covered over, showed people how to clean them and get them propped back up, but that's all completely self-taught, there isn't a degree in that. There's a much more different way in which people become invested in this work and make themselves into experts.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** That's very very insightful. And I can't help but to go back to the quote that you just said, "caring for the dead is a political practice".

What does your work, your scholarship do in light of this statement in order to, perhaps, create just space? In terms of what are the hopes of your work?

**ADAM ROSENBLATT:** I mean to some extent it's to support these projects as much, I'm in this sort of interesting position on one hand delineating the complexity of each of them and they're not uncontentious and they are kind of divisions in each of the sites I'm studying. But, in some fundamental level, I do think that all of these projects are worthy, that all of these cemeteries should be public spaces, so I've been thinking a lot, and I think I actually sent Jeff Nelson a reading about this, I've been thinking about the public and how little public space we have left or really how much pseudo-public space we have now. I don't remember the name of the apartment development, but there's development right in downtown Durham not far from here where you can literally walk by a gate that's chained and locked and then you look inside and there's this little courtyard where the bench has all this stuff painted about community on it. So it's like this BS public space that we now have in shopping malls that say Main Street and stuff. A lot of what the folks I'm studying are doing is trying to find different ways not just to remember the dead, but to call people back to be in that space as a public space together, whether it's through work days or commemoration ceremonies or whatever. I think that's particularly charged in a place like Richmond where so much public space is Confederate space, like Richmond's monument avenue is basically this long tribute to Confederacy and the Jefferson Davis and stuff with Arthur Ashe put as an afterthought down at the end of the avenue. So bringing people together in the cemetery is an attempt to make a new public space for people without a new set of meaning.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** Well, Adam thank you for your time today. Thank you for allowing us to think more critically about public space, to think more critically about remembering as an act of social justice and caring for the dead is a political practice. So thank you once again.

**The creative director for this episode is Shelvin Ponds. The technical editing for this episode has been done by Kyle Kubovic. In addition, this production is made possible by the division of Student Affairs at Duke University.**

**Today's story has been told by Adam Rosenblatt. The Program coordinator is Shelvis Ponds and production is by Kyle Kubovic. Our outreach coordinator is Esra Uzun Mason. Today's music is called "Graveyards" by Trailer Ride, a local Chapel Hill music group.**

**Just Space is a production of the Division of Student Affairs at Duke University**