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Research article

Rethinking New York's 'dark shadow': managing the unclaimed dead on Hart Island, 1869 to the present day

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Abstract

Approximately 11 miles from the bright lights of Manhattan, a barren, windswept island sits in the Long Island Sound. The landscape is punctuated by crumbling buildings, trees snaking through broken windows after decades of neglect. There are no people here, save for the incarcerated men brought over from Rikers Island to dig endless wide trenches, muddy and dark. Under the ground, the remains of over one million of New York's most unloved citizens lie stacked in mass, unmarked graves. Or so the dominant narrative goes. This 131-acre island is better known as Hart Island, New York's public cemetery where the unclaimed dead have been buried since the mid-nineteenth century. The site has long been positioned as the city's 'dark shadow', the final resting place of the unwanted, the lonely, the forgotten and the marginalised. Elements of this narrative are undeniably grounded in truth – the stories of those who have ended up here, many

of which have been carefully collected by renowned non-profit The Hart Island Project, offer up endless shades of heartbreak, loss and pain. However, the enduring public perception that a city burial here inevitably means a deeply shameful and degrading end to an unfulfilled, unhappy life is not only inaccurate, but it also severely limits the ways in which we can imagine a possible future for this site. This article aims to bring a historical perspective to the complex issues surrounding the public perception of, and possible future uses for, Hart Island, in order to offer an alternative view on how we can better understand sites of death and contemporary approaches to mourning going forward.

Keywords Hart Island; New York; Covid-19; cemetery; prison; heritage; memory; potter's field; Green-Wood Cemetery; The Hart Island Project

Introduction

The story of Hart Island is much more than the story of the 'abandoned' dead;¹ it's the story of New York, of cycles of immigration, expansion, changing fortunes and epidemics. The latter came into sharp relief in April 2020, when news outlets around the world published aerial footage of temporary graves being excavated on the island for victims of the Covid-19 pandemic, a situation described by Mayor Bill de Blasio as a 'tragic reality' as the city sought to manage the death toll.² This footage served as a jarring reminder – or perhaps, for some, an unexpected introduction – to the management of unclaimed bodies and the reality of a city burial. Despite a growing body of reporting and activism since the 1980s, most notably by Melinda Hunt of The Hart Island Project, the geographic isolation, complex historical legacy and socio-economic shame associated with the site has kept Hart Island largely out of sight and out of mind for the majority of New Yorkers since burials began.³ This is compounded by the fact that, despite being the largest public cemetery in the United States, it remains unmarked on a number of official Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) or NYC Department of Transport maps (Figure 1).

The management and processing of the unclaimed dead on Hart Island was established in the nineteenth century, a period when life and death looked vastly different to how it does today. Nevertheless, these practices have continued relatively unchanged into the present day, from the use of incarcerated labour from Rikers Island to bury the bodies until 2020, to the stigma that surrounds a city burial. But with management of Hart Island finally transferred from the Department of Corrections to the Department of Parks in July 2021, a real opportunity has arisen for the city to reconfigure current approaches to the management of the unclaimed dead, from a historical, sociocultural and spatial perspective.⁴

Understood within a wider historical context, the current isolationist and singular approach to Hart Island is an anomaly. From the churchyards of medieval France to the current uses of Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, cemeteries and sites of the dead have long performed multiple social functions, and continue to exist as community centres alongside their practical role for the interment of the dead. In addition, the lack of available burial space is a growing practical concern in twenty-first-century urban centres, as are the often-prohibitive costs of burial, while advancements in attitudes to alternative burials and what constitutes a 'good death' in the modern world are transforming the ways we approach death and mourning.⁵

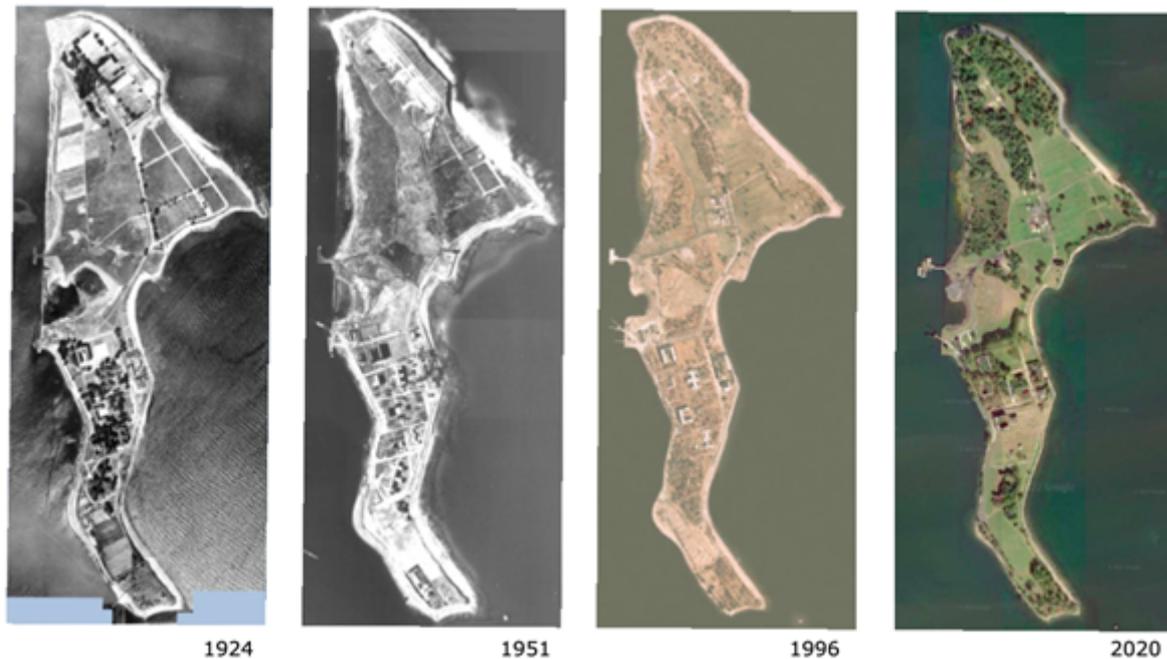
Furthermore, the legislative transfer of Hart Island has occurred in the midst of wider movements campaigning for ways in which burial spaces can and should be reconfigured; a movement that incorporates how we rethink the concept of legacy, and how to honour the dead while offering reconciliation for the living. These legacies are particularly complex when they involve historic systems of oppression, exploitation and marginalisation – systems which, in many cases, endure in contemporary society, albeit in more insidious ways. This is particularly apparent within the Black community, where activists, legislators and community organisations have been campaigning to reclaim Black cemeteries and burial grounds across the USA for decades.⁶ While a transfer to the Department of Parks will not immediately eradicate many of the issues associated with the island, if the complex legacy, lingering social stigma and practical obstacles can be addressed, this could be an incredible opportunity to

transform Hart Island into a multifunctional, modern burial site. By rethinking our relationship with the dead, we are then able to create a space that offers genuine healing, reconciliation, connection and community for the living (Figure 2).

Figure 1. A cropped map from Walk NYC, which does indicate the location of Hart Island (Source: City of New York)



Figure 2. Aerial mapping of Hart Island's evolution (Source: NYC DoITT)



The origins of the city cemetery

Broadly speaking, the management of the dead in the metropolis has always posed problems for the living. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rapid population growth in cities intensified pre-existing concerns around space, sanitation and changing sensibilities towards the management and visibility of death. In major Western centres such as London, Paris and New York, this led to the closure of many inner-city churchyards and the establishment of cemeteries outside city boundaries.⁷

As these cities grew, so did their transient, immigrant and impoverished populations – and their subsequent pauper and 'unclaimed' dead. The term 'unclaimed' was and continues to be a relatively broad term, encompassing both the unidentified dead and the identified dead whose next of kin could not afford the costs required to claim them.⁸ During this period, changing cultural approaches to funerary rites and the consistent threat of bodysnatching also led to pauper burials becoming even more intensely associated with social indignity, moral degradation and enduring shame.⁹ Death, it was considered, 'still provided a final occasion for the expression of popular character'.¹⁰ In New York, even the most impoverished citizens attempted to adhere to the contemporary trend for opulent funerary rituals of parades, coaches, mourners and floral displays, despite the potentially ruinous financial consequences.¹¹ Those who could not afford such pomp, or remained unidentified, ended up in what was known as a 'potter's field', a public city cemetery named after a biblical term from the Gospel of St Matthew and designed for the interment of the unclaimed. In early-nineteenth-century New York, the city cemetery was originally located in what is now Washington Square. As urban growth developed upwards and Manhattan became increasingly crowded, space became a priority for the living rather than the undesired dead, for whom responsibility had fallen to the municipality. The pressing need to develop a system for the management of these bodies also led to the establishment of the earliest modern city morgues, the first of which opened in New York at Bellevue Hospital in 1866.¹²

Throughout the century, officials had already begun the practice of transferring thousands of the city's most marginalised living citizens to newly built institutions on the islands of the East River. Home to almshouses, asylums, workhouses, prisons and other reforming institutions, these islands ensured that the poor, the mad and the criminal could be kept separate from the general population, who would

neither have to see nor contemplate their existence.¹³ Therefore, when it came to choosing yet another new site for a potter's field in the 1860s, the city turned its attention to Hart Island, a small land mass in what is now the north-east Bronx. Formerly used as a civil war training camp, it was purchased by the Department of Charities and Corrections in 1869 for \$75,000.¹⁴ Along with the grid cemetery for mass grave trenches, a number of penitentiary institutions were established here, such as a psychiatric hospital and a workhouse for delinquent boys (Figure 3).

Figure 3. View of the remaining Hart Island buildings from City Island, 2021 (Source: author)



Addressing the myth of burial shame

From its earliest incarnation, Hart Island was understood as an extension of the places where those who existed on the fringes of society were kept. The first body buried there in 1869 was a young woman named Louisa Van Slyke who died of tuberculosis at the hospital on Blackwell's Island.¹⁵ Institutions within this network were utilised throughout the burial process, with inmates at the workhouses put to work building pine coffins and sewing shrouds, and prisoners from the penitentiary burying the bodies.¹⁶ In a time when poverty was largely seen as a personal failing resulting from immorality and inherent criminality, little sympathy was extended to those who ended their days on Hart Island. Instead, contemporary media reinforced existing social and cultural stereotypes about poor, largely immigrant communities. One *New York Times* article from 1878 describes the 'horrors' of a visit to the island, with the journalist claiming to feel 'no sorrow' on seeing the bodies of children, imagining instead that these infants born to 'vile' mothers must be grateful to have died. When describing one burial, he asserts that 'the city must care for him dead, although it received no benefit from him while living'.¹⁷

Other press accounts are similarly derogatory and sensationalist, with hearsay references to remains being eaten by police dogs and inappropriate behaviour towards the bodies of young women. Social reformer Jacob Riis, whose writings and photographs have been credited with transforming public awareness of the 'reality' of poverty and tenement life in New York in the late 1800s, also photographed the island in 1890. He too emphasised the shame of pauper burial, describing it as:

one free excursion [that] awaits young and old, whom bitter poverty has denied the poor privilege of the choice of home in death they were denied in life, the ride up the Sound to the Potter's Field ... but even there they do not escape their fate ... they lie packed three stories deep, shoulder to shoulder, crowded in death as they were in life.¹⁸

Hart Island's reputation as an exile for the unwanted persisted throughout the century, reinforced by Department of Corrections' management that ensured it remained part of the penal network. This scenario led visitor Rosalee Grable to describe it as a 'prison for the dead' in 2015.¹⁹ Bodies were buried by prisoners from Rikers Island until early April 2020, when the role was taken over by outside contractors as a result of negative publicity surrounding the use of incarcerated labour on Hart Island. Prior to Covid-19, prisoners had been paid \$0.50 per hour for the work and were offered an increase of \$6 per hour in March 2020, one month before the work was permanently transferred to outside contractors.²⁰

The island has also existed as a reminder, and a reflection, of other marginalised groups, notably becoming the final resting place of untold numbers of AIDS victims after funeral directors refused to

handle their bodies.²¹ New York's first AIDS fatalities were buried here in 1985, in an isolated area geographically separated from other remains, reinforcing the marginalisation and stigmatisation that victims of this epidemic experienced in life. Given that approximately a quarter of AIDS deaths in the 1980s and 1990s occurred in New York, Hart Island is likely to be the largest cemetery for AIDS victims in the USA.²² A small stone pillar marks the grave of the first child with AIDS who was buried on the island, with the inscription, 'SC-B1, 1985' (an abbreviation of Special Child, Baby), but to date no proper memorial exists for this tragedy, despite Hart Island playing a major role in the history of the AIDS epidemic in New York. The numbers have also still never been officially released, nor are they available to the public, which prompted The Hart Island Project's AIDS initiative.²³ New York City Council now admits that staff acted out of an 'overabundance (and unnecessary level) of caution' regarding the earliest AIDS burials, but the legacy of this historic reputation continues.²⁴ Combined with the island's management within the penal network, this has contributed to creating the enduring myth of Hart Island as a barren hellscape that continues to be perpetuated in both domestic and international media coverage.

The sociocultural legacy of the pauper dead

'Violence done to the living is usually done to their dead,' writes Jill Lepore in her investigation into the reclamation of Black burial grounds across the United States, and as demonstrated by the many stories collected by The Hart Island Project, a significant number of bodies interred on Hart Island belong to those who have disproportionately suffered in life.²⁵ This suffering was then prolonged as their loved ones were made to endure the complicated bureaucracy of having these remains automatically incorporated into the penal system through the administration of the Department of Corrections, necessitating the need to work with this system in order to go to the island on one of the few permitted visits. It is therefore undeniable that many of the deceased, and their families, have been failed by systems that ought to have protected them – failures that have led to a growing number of long-overdue investigations by journalists and advocates focusing on themes such as the use of convict labour and the burial of stillborn infants without consent.²⁶

However, while it is vital that these stories are told – and those responsible for the failings held to account – a damaging, one-dimensional public perception of the island as a deeply shameful and degrading site has persisted, largely as a result of media and cultural analyses that focus almost exclusively on the island's penal management and difficult legacy. This reputation, and associated cultural shame, has then created another layer of suffering for the communities of those interred on the island. Therefore, without unpicking the historic threads of this legacy and the ways in which cultural attitudes to pauper burial have endured, any real transformation of the island will be hindered by this powerful public perception.

The sociocultural stigma and shame that surrounds Hart Island is deeper than poverty, anonymity and marginalisation – it touches upon the problem of wider American attitudes to death, specifically the clash between the deeply embedded cultural ideas of what death involves, and the practical realities of dying. Much like the administration and management that have continued almost unchanged since the nineteenth century, the idea of a pauper burial as the ultimate humiliation is born from cultural, religious and moral fears that emerged almost two centuries ago. The nineteenth century saw a significant shift in the way death was understood and approached, as death rites transitioned from a community event into a commercialised, capitalist-driven endeavour managed by funeral directors.²⁷ A rigid organisational structure was developed which allowed the body to remain hidden from view, dealt with only by professionals. Privacy then became a marker of propriety, but one which only the middle and upper classes could afford. Money allowed for a distinct separation from the body, and for the aesthetics that became popular within the growth of what has been referred to as a 'beautification of death practices', including elaborate funeral rites and paid mourners.²⁸ Death was sentimentalised, monetised and held at a distance, creating a social reluctance to engage with the reality of dying while overemphasising the ways in which a person's death rituals – or lack of – reflected their importance in life.

A pauper burial in the unmarked trenches of a potter's field, with no pomp or ceremony, was the antithesis of the ideal death in the nineteenth century. The potter's field could therefore also act as a 'moral corrective' in the way many institutions did during this period, reminding citizens of the fate that could befall them if they strayed into a life of crime or vice – the life of the 'undeserving' poor, as opposed to the 'deserving' poor who warranted sympathy.²⁹ This division was clearly visible in New York through the contrast with Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, one of the first 'rural cemeteries' built in 1838 and

hailed as a prime example of an appropriately dignified final resting place (Figure 4). As a journalist neatly summarised in 1866, 'it is the ambition of the New Yorker to live upon the Fifth Avenue, to take his airings in the Park, and to sleep with his fathers in Green-Wood'.³⁰ Crucially, in order to reinforce social distinctions; regulations ensured that no citizen who had been convicted of a crime or had died in prison could be buried there, although these rules could be waived through money, influence or politics. This was demonstrated by the approved burial of the powerful Tammany Hall leader, William 'Boss' Tweed, a notorious politician and major landowner who was convicted of financial fraud and died in Ludlow Street Jail in 1878.

Figure 4. Green-Wood Cemetery, 2021 (Source: author)



In contrast to the genteel beauty and dignified appeal of these 'rural cemeteries' such as Green-Wood, pauper cemeteries, and all the associations that came with them, were a horrifying prospect for nineteenth-century New Yorkers. This division between resting places for the rich and the poor also contributed to crystallising class boundaries between what were considered to be acceptable and unacceptable members of society. Boundaries, historian Thomas Bahde has argued, were reinforced even when advocating for reform. The bourgeoisie, including those who protested against the conditions of the potter's field, 'still expected to find the paupers' burial ground disgusting and degrading and terrifying because they expected that its occupants, in life, had been the same.'³¹

Realities of city burial

Modern media discussions of Hart Island retain many elements of these earlier attitudes, although now even more deeply shrouded in sympathy and moral outrage. Readers are likely to be shocked, saddened and appalled by what they discover in these press accounts, which in some cases tread a fine line between necessary investigation and trauma tourism as they describe the 'ultimate indignity' of island burial through tragic personal stories.³² In discovering the island via the *New York Times* rather than personal experience, the stark differences between the readers' own experiences of death processes and mourning, and the reality for those who end up interred here, will be made abundantly clear. This distance then reinforces the emotional, financial and sociocultural gulf between public and private burial, and the individuals and wider communities who predominantly experience one rather than the other.

But public burial does not have to be shameful, nor does it have to perpetuate the popular view that the recipients of a city burial died alone and unloved (Figure 5). To be unclaimed does not necessarily mean to be unidentified, as 62 per cent of the people that end up on Hart Island have an identified next of kin.³³ The majority are those whose loved ones cannot or will not pay the fees necessary for a private burial, which means the city is legally obliged to bury them.³⁴ With total burial and funeral costs in New York often costing up to \$10,000, and only 13 per cent of applications for financial burial assistance

approved in 2021, it is in fact not only merely the poorest and most marginalised members of society who leave their loved ones' remains in the hands of the municipality.³⁵ Their deaths, and their memory, should not be shrouded in shame – nor be emphasised as such in the media.

Figure 5. Hart Island, 2021 (Source: author)



As noted by Gary Lederman, the only periods that have historically exhibited a degree of egalitarianism in burial practices were those seasons of 'severe and brutal epidemics, which produced social chaos, collective misery, and a multitude of corpses'.³⁶ These moments had a levelling effect – privilege was superseded as both the rich and the poor were buried anonymously together in collective graves. The Covid-19 pandemic represents one of those moments, as New Yorkers from every economic class were temporarily interred on Hart Island as the city struggled to cope with the rising death toll. The impact of this tragedy thus offers an opportunity to usher in a new era in the ways we approach death as a society, and the possibility of finally overcoming the legacy of city burial as an inherently shameful endeavour.

The precedent for multifunctional cemeteries

If we are able to move beyond this complex legacy and isolated approach, we can position Hart Island within a broader historical and contemporary context, drawing out the similarities with other distinct sites of death from the fourteenth century to the present day. In doing so, we can then begin to understand some of the possibilities, and indeed the precedents, for multifunctional burial sites that serve the wider community.

The purpose of a cemetery is not static, but rather has shifted throughout history to accommodate the needs of both the living and the dead. Western churchyards in the Middle Ages, such as those found throughout Europe, offer a strong initial model for burial grounds that also served as community hubs. As noted by Philippe Ariès and Thomas Kselman in their studies of France, they provided a wide range of functions alongside both private and public burial, the latter in mass graves, before they were gradually moved out of the city in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³⁷ These cemeteries were effectively social and commercial spaces, where goods were bought and sold, families came together, children played and prostitutes might even be found soliciting. Often located close to commercial marketplaces, they played a key, multifaceted role within the community as a whole, as well as offering both individual and mass burial within the same geographic space.

Although no burials took place here, the Paris morgue is an alternative site of death that can be understood as offering a multifunctional experience, both regarding the multitude of practical functions it served and the opportunity for social and community exchanges. Originally established in 1804 to manage and identify the growing number of anonymous dead found in the city, the Paris morgue

attracted a vast audience due to its public display of the dead. As a result, the space arguably evolved into a form of community hub, with all ages and classes of society present. Evidence suggests that a significant number of visitors may have come to the morgue for reasons other than helping to identify the anonymous dead, such as entertainment or social interaction. Compared by both contemporaries and scholars to a department store, a museum, a theatre and even an art salon, the morgue also acted as a locus for commercial activity as vendors set up stalls outside to sell food, drinks and memorabilia associated with tabloid-famous murders.³⁸ In this way, the morgue can then be understood as an evolution of the cemetery-marketplace, which largely no longer served this function by the nineteenth century.

Despite our cultural discomfort with the open discussion of death, and our common aversion to close proximity to it, numerous examples of cemeteries that act as multifunctional sites – in a way that follows the model established by the medieval cemetery – can still be found in contemporary cities. These sites have found a balance between social function and death management, and incorporated tourism in order to promote public education and support costs. This subsequent adaptation is also a relatively old idea – in London, many small parish cemeteries were partially converted into 'outdoor sitting rooms' for the poor as part of a nineteenth-century movement led by reformer Octavia Hill, creating social spaces that are still used today.³⁹ St George's Gardens in Bloomsbury, for example, is a popular lunchtime picnic spot for nearby office workers and regularly hosts events including outdoor Shakespeare performances.⁴⁰ Although no longer an active burial site, the graves are visible and maintained by the local council. Meanwhile, larger London cemeteries, such as Highgate Cemetery, continue to act as active burial sites while catering to visitors and tourists with historic tours, a visitor centre and even a gift shop.⁴¹ In the USA, this approach is taken even further at sites such as the famous Hollywood Forever cemetery in Los Angeles. The management here have actively cultivated a space where celebration can coexist alongside grief with film screenings and a popular annual *Día de los Muertos* event, while in Washington DC, the active Congressional Cemetery also functions as an official dog park. These cemeteries, among others, serve as excellent models for methods of creative commemoration and the vast possibilities of multifunctional cemetery use. Furthermore, these diverse functions also provide vital income – membership fees for the K9-Corps at the Congressional Cemetery provide approximately 25 per cent of the site's annual operating budget.⁴²

Case study: Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn

Although it has long existed as the antithesis to Hart Island, Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn serves as a valuable model for how to develop a multifunctional cemetery in New York, with both active burial and recreational use. Built in 1838, Green-Wood followed the rural cemetery model, a movement for the creation of cemeteries outside city boundaries and unattached to churchyards that could be designed with reference to the living as well as the dead. This was achieved by creating much-needed green space on the edges of the city that allowed for appropriate recreational activities, in addition to reflection, memorial and burial of the dead. This multifaceted approach has continued into the present, with locals and tourists visiting every day to enjoy the beautiful grounds, the rich architecture and the stunning views towards Manhattan (Figure 6). These visitors are also able to take advantage of regularly scheduled trolley and walking tours, special events and concerts within the walls of the cemetery.

While critics express reservations about expanding the uses of Hart Island to create a more publicly accessible site that can be used as parkland as well as a cemetery, Green-Wood proves that cultural, social and recreational activity can easily be incorporated without veering into the territory of what might be considered disrespectful at a working burial site. The regulations here are clear – no running, no biking and no ball games – while the exhibitions, tours and cultural programming are designed to improve public understanding of the site's history, as well as allowing for semi-permanent exhibitions by relevant artists and creators. These include French artist Sophie Calle's 2017 installation, 'Here Lie the Secrets of the Visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery', an obelisk with a slot through which visitors can deposit a sealed envelope of secrets to be burnt, unopened, by Calle in the same facilities that are used for cremation.⁴³ The Fort Hamilton Gatehouse also hosted Joanna Ebenstein's *Morbid Anatomy Library and Museum* in 2018, a research library specialising in books and materials relating to the histories of death, medicine and anatomical study.⁴⁴

Figure 6. View from Green-Wood Cemetery, 2021 (Source: author)



Unlike Hart Island, Green-Wood is a privately owned cemetery, originally designed along a business model whereby plots could be purchased and owned in perpetuity, at a price that was also intended to fund their upkeep. However, as burial plots become increasingly scarce, paid events and memberships are used to fund the maintenance of the cemetery as operating costs rise beyond the income generated by plot purchases.⁴⁵ Furthermore, although it was utilised in a similar function to park space since its inception, Green-Wood's current educational mission only emerged in 1999, following the establishment of the Green-Wood Cemetery Historic Fund. As a result of its multifunctional, rural cemetery origins, adapting the wider public perception of Green-Wood to allow for mixed recreational activities – although critics do remain – was significantly less challenging than the reputational obstacles faced by Hart Island. However, it can and should be considered as a useful model for a dignified, multifunctional cemetery that can serve both the dead and the living, and one that has successfully utilised public support, membership and heritage tours to fund educational endeavours.

Green-Wood also acts as a significant green space in Brooklyn, occupying a plot of land only slightly smaller than nearby Prospect Park. Only 14 per cent of New York City is classified as green space, and these 2,300 acres are divided unevenly among neighbourhoods, an inequality that has become even more apparent as a result of pandemic restrictions.⁴⁶ A recent study by the *New York Times* found that on average the park size in predominantly White neighbourhoods was almost four times larger than in predominantly Black neighbourhoods.⁴⁷ Therefore, not only do cemeteries offer vital opportunities for the key physical and mental health benefits that outdoor green space provides, they can also act as an underdeveloped resource for providing this green space for communities with more limited access.

Challenges of public access and infrastructure

One of the key features that allowed medieval cemeteries and the Paris morgue to act as community centres, and which facilitated the ongoing multifunctional uses of sites such as Highgate and Green-Wood, is a geographical location and infrastructure that allows for easy, affordable public access. This question of access to Hart Island, which is currently severely limited and strictly regulated, is one of the primary concerns that not only isolates this burial ground geographically, socially and culturally, but also exacerbates its existing reputation of separation and otherness.

The Department of Parks have adopted the Department of Corrections' limited schedule for Hart Island visitation, with graveside visits currently only allowed for those with close ties to the deceased. These occur two weekends a month, with ferries scheduled for 9 a.m. and 12 p.m., and bookings continue to be made through a Department of Corrections' online portal. Up to 15 visitors are permitted per trip, capping the number of visitors at 60 people in any month. These visitations are a relatively recent addition, having only been permitted from 2013 onwards, following a class action lawsuit brought by

a group of mothers of children interred on the island.⁴⁸ Furthermore, access is complex and limited, as visitors must travel to the dock on City Island in order to access the Hart Island ferry (Figure 7). For those using public transport, this usually involves a subway journey to Pelham Park Bay, before taking an infrequent bus to a stop within walking distance of the dock. Following a 5–10-minute ferry ride from nearby City Island, visitors are then taken directly to a bus from the dock and escorted to their specific gravesite. Depending on the schedule and location of the grave they may remain for up to an hour before boarding the bus to return to the ferry.

Figure 7. View of the dock on City Island, looking towards Hart Island, 2021 (Source: author)



Hart Island measures 1 mile by 0.33 miles and occupies a land mass of 131 acres, making it just slightly smaller than Roosevelt Island, and a site that would be easily walkable for visitors without mobility issues. However, the island has been severely neglected for decades and is now in a critical condition. Visitors are currently unable to freely explore the site due to the possible dangers posed, which according to the liability waiver required to visit the island include collapsed building structures, wild animals, spikes in the ground, exposure to dangerous chemicals and large potholes.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, 'Gazebo Visits', which escort the visitor to a viewing gazebo next to the dock rather than to a specific graveside, were permitted for the general public. These occurred on the third Thursday of every month at 9 a.m. but have been discontinued since 2020 with no notice of when they will restart. The formerly twice-yearly 'Media Days' for journalists and researchers have also been discontinued, although photography is now permitted on the island.

Bureaucratic complications brought about by the transfer and lingering restrictions of Covid-19 regulations have undoubtedly impacted public access and slowed down potential progress, but equally pressing challenges of addressing the island's damaged buildings and limited road infrastructure still remain. After almost a decade of debate, the city comptroller recently approved the demolition of nearly all the remaining structures on the island under an emergency order, structures which include a Catholic chapel and a nineteenth-century asylum. This decision, which comes at a cost of \$52 million, is not without its critics – many of whom argue that the historic value of these buildings necessitates restoration rather than destruction.⁴⁹ The majority of these buildings, however, are in a state of disrepair that makes restoration hugely complex and likely expensive (Figure 8). Furthermore, as former workhouses, asylums and reform schools, their continued presence risks reinforcing the site's former functions and perpetuating the existing reputation of the island, a painful legacy that can be acknowledged without insisting that the island retains physical representations of shameful historic practices.

Figure 8. Decaying buildings on Hart Island, 2021 (Source: author)



Flooding and shore erosion are also key environmental concerns, with significant damage caused by intense storms and a lack of adequate protection (Figure 9). Not only does this affect the environment of the island, it has also led to remains being brought to the surface or washed away, and in some cases eventually landing on nearby City Island.⁵⁰ This disinterment by storm damage is not only traumatic for those involved, but also signals a disrespect and lack of adequate care for the proper burial of remains by those tasked with doing so, a lack of care that erodes trust in the city's ability to respectfully and competently manage the burial function of the island. Therefore, it is critical that protections are put in place to ensure that Hart Island is not at risk. For this, there is already an existing model in the environmental restoration project at Jamaica Bay that began in 2021.⁵¹ These methods, which include developing a resilient living shoreline in order to ensure natural erosion control and restoring the native plant community to encourage migrating birds, could be adapted for use on Hart Island.

Figure 9. Shoreline on the north-western tip of Hart Island, 2021 (Source: author)



Implications of wider access

Although only half a mile from the Bronx, the journey to Hart Island is long and relatively complex. Travelling from Brooklyn involves at least two trains, a bus, a ferry ride and another bus to reach the gravesite, with a total journey time of up to three hours depending on bus schedules. As a result, one of the key priorities when discussing the island's future is how to improve this access, with increased public transport via multiple departure locations and more regular ferries allowing both loved ones and members of the public to visit the island. This could be achieved by improving bus routes to City Island and adding an additional stop on the East River Ferry Service, such as expanding the existing route, which was extended to Throgs Neck in the Bronx in December 2021, to either City Island, or to Hart Island directly.⁵² The journey from Wall Street to Throgs Neck currently takes approximately one hour, with a City Island extension likely to add on approximately 15–20 minutes.

Furthermore, given the lack of green space available in New York, improving public access to Hart Island would benefit all citizens, particularly communities in the Bronx and Queens with limited parkland, rather than just those with a personal connection to the island. Along with parkland, the remaining cemeteries in the city offer a rare opportunity for green space and biodiversity, and the physical, psychological and environmental benefits that these spaces provide. The stigma surrounding the island has led to it being overlooked as a beautiful, natural site, with stunning views across the Long Island Sound and an atmosphere of peace and quiet that is almost impossible to find in the modern metropolis. Any development and increased public access will undoubtedly disturb this peace somewhat, but the isolated nature of Hart Island permits the Department of Parks to strictly regulate access in a way that ensures respectful behaviour and restricts visitor levels to limit environmental damage. An example of this can be seen in access to Governor's Island, where ferry transport varies by season and is controlled by ferry capacity.

Paradoxically, making the island more accessible to the wider public could also make it more difficult for loved ones to access their dead. One possible future for Hart Island that has been suggested by advocates is to either stop using the island for burials or limit them severely in order to transform the site into a protected national park with a memorial or museum for victims of Covid-19, as well as other historic mass casualties. Despite initially presenting as a potentially positive development, this initiative could actually contribute to hiding the reality of city burial yet again, something which will always be required, while also adding further practical challenges for those wishing to visit their dead. If not on Hart Island, these burials would likely take place at cemeteries far removed from the city, in places with reduced or limited public transport access.

During a virtual public meeting with the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation on 30 March 2022, representatives outlined the findings of a recent transportation study undertaken to explore ways in which public access to the island could be improved. They confirmed that the remaining buildings would soon be demolished, and that Hart Island would continue to function as an active burial site. Various access options were discussed, including additional parking at Orchard Beach and improved ferry access, although they all remain at the conceptual stage and no plans have been confirmed.

A number of attendees, however, expressed frustration with the process so far, citing concerns with access for the elderly and disabled, as well as what they viewed as the department prioritising the residents of City Island over the loved ones of those buried on Hart Island. It is clear that numerous groups still feel distinctly overlooked by the new proposals, a feeling that only exacerbates the longstanding frustration and anger that exists among many of those with personal connections to the island.

Memorialising the dead

Although no plans have yet been put forward for a memorial on the island, given the media attention around the transfer of the site and the impact of Covid-19, it is likely that some form of collective or cultural memorial may be erected on the island in the near future. Although this memorial – and possible accompanying educational structure – is a necessary addition, particularly as the former institutions will no longer exist to provide historical context, the prospect of memorialising the dead on Hart Island is rife with potential challenges and clashing ideologies. How do you memorialise such a wide scope of experiences and sensitivities without inevitably creating a hierarchy of trauma? Who decides which deaths are most significant? The only memorial that currently exists on Hart Island is for the

Civil War dead, while the island's role in the AIDS crisis as well as its long history as a burial place for cholera, tuberculosis, typhoid and influenza outbreaks throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continues to be overlooked. Meanwhile, the countries of origin listed in the earliest burial records for Hart Island, held at the New York Municipal Archives, reflect the city's historic and continued reliance on immigrant labour. This labour, particularly the contributions of Irish and German immigrants, has already been partially memorialised – and romanticised – within what has been referred to as 'ethnic heritage tourism' of the white ethnic experience that routinely ignores historic non-white experiences in New York.⁵³

Crucially, the demographics of New York's most impoverished populations has shifted throughout the twentieth century, with an investigation by Vox in collaboration with Columbia Journalism School's Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism finding that Black and Latinx residents were now most likely to be buried on Hart Island.⁵⁴ This reflects studies demonstrating that in 2019 more than half of Black and Latinx residents were living in poverty or were considered low-income, a situation that has worsened since the pandemic.⁵⁵ Therefore there is a risk that in attempting to potentially design a memorial for the collective experience, the complex memory of the island will be simplified, and as a result of funding priorities, the communities who currently have the most dominant ties to the island will continue to be marginalised.

Conclusion

The future of Hart Island is laden with practical, spatial and ideological challenges. Some of the most pressing issues include the new infrastructure required to make the site safe, addressing flooding and shore erosion, and implementing better transport links for public access. More than a century of neglect and delays in much-needed improvements in the last few decades have made it abundantly clear that improving the island, and the budget required to do so, has never been a real priority for the City of New York. However, this long-awaited change in jurisdiction to a department much better equipped to address the island's many challenges offers a key opportunity to tackle current issues, while also attempting to heal deep historic wounds. Their commitment to changing the reputation of the island can already be seen in the behaviour of Department of Parks officials, who made significant efforts to offer understanding, support and respectful condolences during a recent visit to a burial site on the island.

Transforming Hart Island into a place of community and reconciliation in both reality and reputation, rather than shame and marginalisation, will require a shift in mindset along with a change in policy. In order to do this, we must move away from the idea of Hart Island as New York's forgotten, unwanted shadow, but openly acknowledge the complex web of policies, prejudices and socio-economic issues that have allowed us to persist in positioning the island this way for so long. Hart Island acts as a touchstone for a myriad of systems, processes and tragedies both within New York and the wider United States, existing simultaneously as a reflection of the country's legacy of immigration, the injustices of the AIDS crisis and the impact of Covid-19. Reconfiguring our approach to the site allows us to re-engage with the varied, complicated reality of New York at a time when singular, polarised narratives are becoming increasingly dominant.

This is not an easy process, and finding a way to use the island as both a burial site and a public space is likely to be met with both practical and ideological resistance, as well as accusations of turning a site of death into a popular destination. However, when understood within the context of multiple historic precedents, that is exactly how many sites of death and mourning previously functioned – and how a number of contemporary cemeteries continue to do so. Hart Island deserves the same respect, reverence and relevance as a cemetery such as Green-Wood, which has been allowed to adapt to the needs of its local and wider community, which include both space to mourn and space for appropriate recreation in a green environment. As a result, rethinking Hart Island as a burial site and social space where communities can come together is both a modern idea and a very old one.

Although they house the dead, cemeteries are ultimately for the living. These unique sites balance individual memory with collective cultural memory, and within an urban environment such as New York, provide much-needed green space that allows for quiet contemplation and reconnection with nature. Not only did our need for these tranquil, natural spaces become even more apparent as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, after over two years of huge loss and intensive mourning on a global scale, there has never been a better time to rethink how we can use cemeteries in a way that benefits the wider public.

Notes

¹Clayton, 'Hart Island'.

²Espinoza, 'Mayor de Blasio'.

³The Hart Island Project is a public charity founded by Melinda Hunt in 1980. They are the leading non-profit organisation advocating for improved public awareness of, and access to, the island, as well as supporting the families of those interred there. Hunt, *The Hart Island Project*.

⁴Hunt, *The Hart Island Project*.

⁵For an overview of changing contemporary approaches to death, see the work of the Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath. Accessed 10 June 2021. <https://www.bath.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-for-death-society/>; The Order of the Good Death. Accessed 10 June 2021, <http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com>; Troyer, *Technologies of the Human Corpse* and Gorer, 'The pornography of death'.

⁶For an overview of the reclamation of Black burial grounds see Lepore, 'When Black history is unearthed'.

⁷For a broader look at the historic movement of cemeteries in Europe, see: Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*; Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death*; Arnold, *Necropolis*; Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*; Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife*.

⁸As defined by Ruth Richardson in her work on pauper bodies, 'claimed' was usually understood as an economic category rather than a reflection of known kin, who were often unable to assume responsibility for funeral costs. Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 121–9.

⁹Lacquer, 'Bodies, death, and pauper funerals'; Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*.

¹⁰Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife*, 5.

¹¹Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*.

¹²Oshinsky, *Bellevue*.

¹³Horn, *Damnation Island*.

¹⁴Gopp, 'Ritualizing with the poor'.

¹⁵Horn, *Damnation Island*.

¹⁶Department of Public Charities and Corrections, *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Corrections of the City of New York*.

¹⁷'In the potter's field'.

¹⁸Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 178.

¹⁹Walshe, 'Like a prison for the dead'.

²⁰Jackson and McDermid, 'New York City hires laborers'; see also Grim, 'Rikers Island prisoners'.

²¹Hunt and Lacquer, 'Jail for the dead'.

²²New York City Council, *Hart Island*.

²³For further information on the Hart Island AIDS Initiative, see Hunt, 'Loneliness in a beautiful place'.

²⁴New York City Council, *Hart Island*.

²⁵Lepore, 'When Black history is unearthed', 36.

²⁶Riski, 'New York City has been releasing burial records'; Grim, 'Rikers Island prisoners'; see also *One Million American Dreams*, directed by Brendan J. Byrne.

²⁷For a broad discussion of nineteenth-century death practices, see Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*; O'Jackson, *Passing*; Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*.

²⁸Zlomke, 'Death became them'.

²⁹Bahde, 'The common dust of potter's field'.

³⁰Goldberger, 'Design notebook'.

³¹Bahde, 'The common dust of potter's field'.

³²Bernstein, 'Unearthing the secrets of New York's mass graves'.

³³New York City Council, *Hart Island*.

³⁴As remains can be reclaimed, cremation is not a possibility.

³⁵Honan, 'Many of New York's Covid-19 dead'.

³⁶Laderman, *Sacred Remains*, 40.

³⁷Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death*; Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife*.

³⁸For a comprehensive overview of the Paris morgue, see Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*.

³⁹For a discussion of Octavia Hill and the cemetery movement, see Arnold, *Necropolis*.

⁴⁰Friends of St George's Gardens. Accessed 15 July 2021. <https://www.friendsofstgeorgesgardens.org.uk>.

⁴¹Doward, 'Exit through the gift shop'.

⁴²Dick, 'Dogs, dearly departed'.

⁴³Cascone, 'Sophie Calle wants you'. Calle's work regularly explores the themes of death, loss and absence, including pieces such as *Couldn't Capture Death*, a conceptual film made while her mother was dying.

⁴⁴The Morbid Anatomy Library has since moved to Industry City, Brooklyn. See Morbid Anatomy, Morbid Anatomy Library and Giftshop. Accessed 2 December 2021. <https://www.morbidanatomy.org/library>.

⁴⁵Rae, 'Cemeteries as public urban green space'.

⁴⁶City of New York Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency, 'Chapter 11: Parks'.

⁴⁷Hu and Schweber, 'New York has 2,300 parks'.

⁴⁸The New York Civil Liberties Union, 'NYCLU sues to allow families'.

⁴⁹Freeman Gill, 'Hart Island's last stand'.

⁵⁰Lewis, 'Erosion on Hart Island exposes human remains'.

⁵¹Yun, 'Living shoreline'.

⁵²See <https://www.ferry.nyc/routes-and-schedules/route/soundview/>.

⁵³For a discussion on white ethnic heritage tourism relating to Jacob Riis and the Tenement Museum in New York, see O'Donnell, 'Pictures vs. words?'.

⁵⁴Elidrissi, 'How this New York Island became a mass grave'.

⁵⁵Poverty Tracker Research Group, *The State of Poverty and Disadvantage in New York City, Volume 3*.

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Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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