Huddled Masses: Death and Citizenship in New York City

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

How can citizenship survive death? At Hart Island, New York City's 'massed' grave cemetery for its unclaimed, unknown, and poor, the dead have historically been excluded from the realm of ordinary posthumous citizenship expected by their fellow New Yorkers. However, activists, relatives, and politicians are currently attempting to pull the Hart Island dead back into that realm. Their efforts have been complicated by multiple processes, including trench burials, isolation, penal control, lack of visitor access, and an absence of memorialization, all of which mark those buried on Hart Island as belonging to particular categories of people, less than full citizens. The deliberate nature of these processes indicates that the dead do not simply fall outside the bounds of ordinary posthumous citizenship but must be methodically placed outside them.

This thesis shows how Hart Island's practices have been made ordinary through more than 150 years of systemized bureaucracy, so can appear unremarkable to those most familiar with them. Yet people often react with great discomfort when they learn about Hart Island because it says something powerful about their city and about New Yorkers. I argue that for many, it juxtaposes painfully with their city's compelling mythology of exceptional inclusion and liberal values by recalling a history of brutal disparity. I examine how, motivated by the social anxiety that Hart Island provokes, several projects have begun to recover Hart Island's dead from their non-citizenship and re-embed them into the realm of normal posthumous relations. This includes political moves such as replacing the government department that manages the island (switching from Correction to Parks), pledging to increase public access, and reclaiming the dead rhetorically as New Yorkers, a term locals use as a gloss for citizens.

What do New Yorkers understand as normal posthumous relations, and how are Hart Island's dead excluded from them? What can this exclusion explain about perceptions of normal citizenship for the dead? If massed burial is usually prompted by exceptional circumstances, how does Hart Island's very ordinariness trouble people? To answer these questions, I draw on anthropological literature on citizenship, death, memorialization, stigma, and social memory; and on ethnographic data gathered over fifteen months of fieldwork across New York City's five boroughs, including Hart Island, and online during lockdowns. I argue that it is through memorialization that citizenship survives death, and throughout the thesis, I scrutinize the implications of this claim.

The first two chapters contextualize these questions within the early Covid-19 pandemic and American deathcare, explaining my concepts of 'ordinary posthumous citizenship' and 'normal posthumous relations' and exploring how they are enacted in New York and the US. The following chapters examine stigma within the framework of commemorated citizenship, from talk about the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers to the shock when New Yorkers learn about Hart Island. In the final two chapters, I turn from this broader analysis to focus on two distinctive communities, contrasting views of those who find Hart Island's neglect appropriate with others vigorously pursuing projects of destigmatization. Hart Island's characteristic and mundane neglect, and the destigmatization projects this has prompted both seem to crystallize around how – or whether – to memorialize the Hart Island dead. I conclude by examining what kinds of memorialization are possible here.

Key terms: Hart Island, New York, ordinary posthumous citizenship, massed graves, citizenship, memorialization, stigma.

To Kim

And to those buried on Hart Island, and the people who loved them

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Introduction

Approaching Hart Island: New York City's dead end

One Saturday in winter 2020, I left home in Brooklyn before 6 am, taking the subway into Manhattan followed by the 6 train to Pelham Bay Park in the North Bronx – the end of the line. The only other passengers were shift workers using the travel time to doze with lunch and gear stacked on their laps or heading home from the night before. From the Park depot, I walked through pigeons as I crossed the block to wait for the City Island bus. It would stay below freezing that day, and the shelter provided scant relief, so I waited in a nearby pharmacy. In the municipal garden between the pharmacy and the bus stop, Department of Correction (DOC) staff were supervising four prisoners cleaning up garbage and sweeping the area tidy. All the staff and crew were African American.

I caught the bus over the bridge to City Island, getting off at the City Island Diner. As I was not due at the ferry for thirty minutes, I purchased a hot drink to bolster me against the winter fog. I passed wooden weatherboard sailmakers' cottages and the Nautical Museum before coming to the end of Fordham Street. To my left were boatyards and sailmakers, to my right was a public promenade walkway skirting around a relatively new gated community of condominiums. Without irony, municipal signs proclaimed this as a dead end. In front of me was a wharf secured by a two-metre-high fence. Four signs warned that this property was a DOC Restricted Area and trespassing, fishing, and docking would be prosecuted. To the right of the gates was a portable toilet as Hart Island, my destination, had neither electricity nor plumbing.

Soon about ten people were waiting outside the gate, occasionally stomping to keep out the bitter cold. They included a Latinx family who had come to visit their uncle's grave. He had died several months ago, but they had only just learned that he was buried here. They came as soon as they could arrange the trip. They would, they stressed, have buried him themselves had they been told of his death. One woman carried flowers for her uncle's grave and wept. I offered sympathy as a DOC officer opened the gate and took us onto the wharf for muster.

Another officer emerged from a prefabricated building to inspect each person's identification before admitting us. I was greeted as 'a regular'. We signed a liability form acknowledging that visits to Hart Island were entirely at one's own risk: 'The island has very

uneven land, lots of tripping hazards, and bold wildlife'. I checked the time as I handed in my phone: I had left my apartment three hours ago.

We followed Captain Martin Thompson down to the gangway. The Michael Cosgrove was a DOC vehicle ferry, and we stood on the deck where the prison bus and the deceased were usually parked. The sailing took about seven minutes as Hart Island is only about 500 metres from City Island. Passengers can shelter in the bench-seated cabin at the vessel's side, but despite the bone-chilling temperature, I joined those on deck. The sea was completely flat and the atmosphere quite still, with fog so thick that we could not see the island, only, on the horizon, the hazy curve of the earth where ocean met mist. Suddenly the Hart Island wharf was visible in the haze, distinguished by an enormous osprey nest on the pier, and we watched the landscape materialize: a low-lying, wind-swept, mile-long island with rocky shores, lawns, woodlands, and abandoned buildings. No one had lived here since the mid-1980s,[1] but the crumbling remains of a community were still visible: a factory, administration building, prison, chapel, and hospital. And at regular intervals over much of the landscape, fence post markers, one for every completed burial trench of one hundred and fifty bodies.

Since 1869, New York City's poor, unclaimed, or unidentified have been buried here in massed graves. Until 2020, inmates from nearby Rikers Island prison, themselves marginalized citizens, conducted all the burials here, and DOC restricted public access, making it difficult for mourners to visit. People are buried here unmarked and unmemorialized. Every local government struggles with how best to provide disposals of last resort, and Hart Island's trenches are NYC's unusual solution.

The burials occur without ceremony. The dead are interred three deep in plots holding 150 adults or about 1,000 babies. People commonly describe Hart Island as a mass grave, but this term is misleading, suggesting a pit where bodies are piled. Rather, it is a massed grave, where the dead are carefully and communally stacked in trenches and documented to facilitate disinterment, if needed. Today, people are buried on Hart Island because their families cannot afford New York's $9,000 average funeral cost (NYC Bar), or because the Medical Examiner cannot identify them or find their next of kin. A rare handful choose it for themselves. Most burials are now conducted with family consent, but it seems likely that families are often compelled by a lack of alternatives, specifically financial.

At the time of this visit, few people had ever been able to visit Hart Island. The effort required to do so makes its politics unmistakable. To be buried here was to be placed almost

[1] DOC operated a small prison here between 1982-91 for cemetery labour (Quindlen 1982; McCarthy 2018a).

beyond New York City, geographically and imaginatively. Since settlement, Hart Island has marked the shifting boundaries of New York's community and citizenship. In what follows, I argue that those buried here have been excluded from the realm of ordinary posthumous citizenship of New Yorkers, which in turn has motivated recent efforts to recover this status for them, and I analyse how memorialization and stigma have shaped these processes of exclusion and restoration. This project occurred during major changes for Hart Island, and just as the SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) pandemic began to grip New York City. Consequently, while all ethnography is contingent, I offer an account of Hart Island as it was, in a formation already rapidly passing into history. Hart Island was a boundary marker for the city, both geographically and symbolically defining the limits of belonging. It was difficult to access, and what it represented was difficult to acknowledge – I return to this journey in this chapter's conclusion.

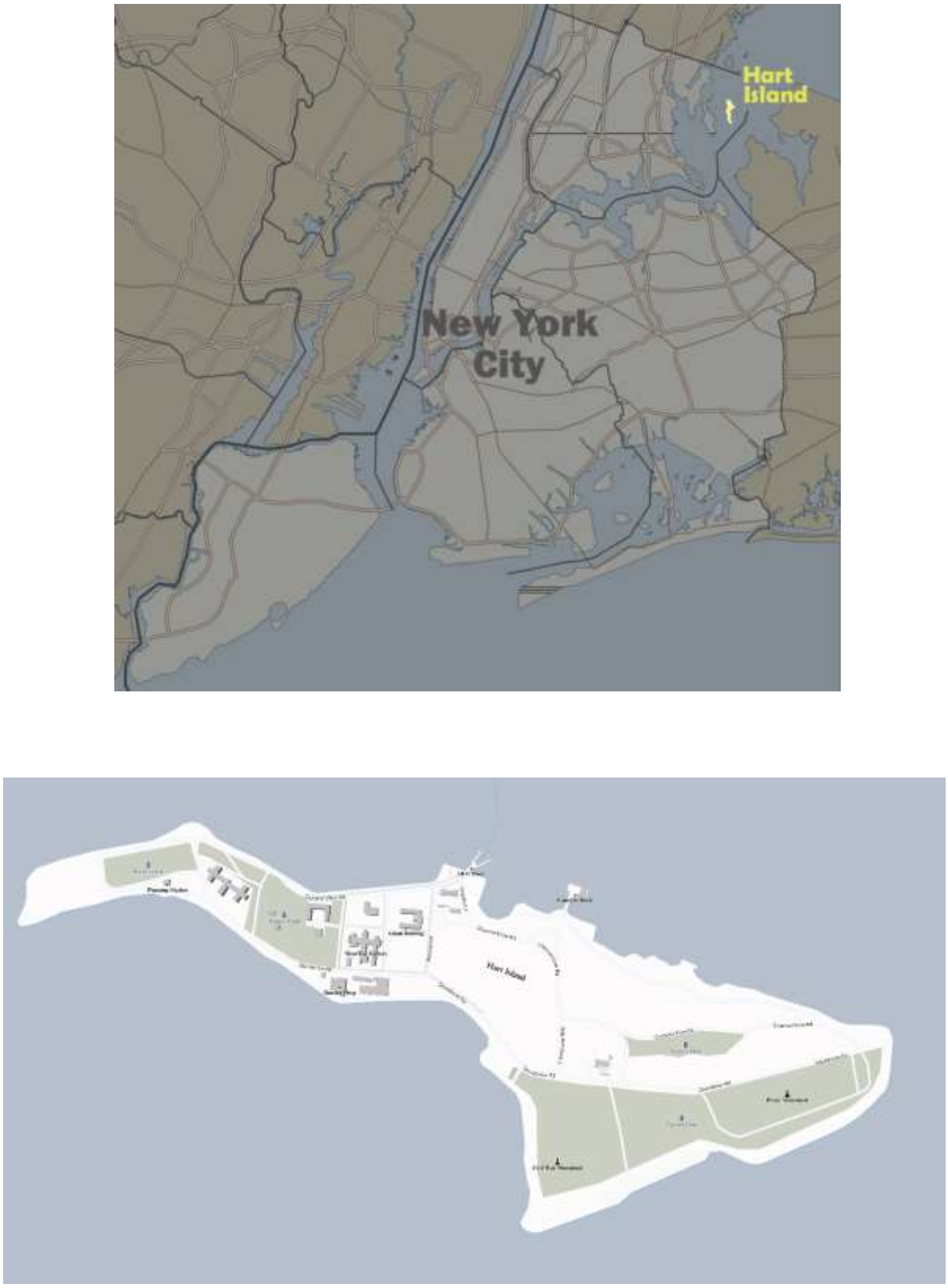

Figure 1. Maps of Hart Island
(Google images, Mapbox)

Introduction: Citizenship in New York's potter's field

Using the curious case of Hart Island, I argue that citizenship can survive death, depending on the claims the living make on the dead. I take memorialization as one way that the living can claim citizenship for the dead. Most deceased New Yorkers are settled into what I describe as ordinary posthumous citizenship: those buried in cemeteries are usually recognized as belonging to neighbourhoods and communities, as well as families, faith groups, and sometimes even vocations. A few New Yorkers are celebrated in death as special citizens, like war heroes, terror victims, or founding fathers. But Hart Island's dead seem to have been excluded from the realm of ordinary posthumous citizenship, as evidenced by the island's trench burials performed by inmates, its isolation, how difficult it was to visit, its penal management, its historically unkempt and abandoned condition, and lack of memorialization. Taken together, these practices seemed to signal deficiencies of care, respect, and dignity, indicating that people buried there have been disregarded, almost discarded, by the city. These burial procedures are not accidental: though open to democratic scrutiny and challenge, they are bureaucratically organized and longstanding. Those buried here have not been accorded ordinary posthumous citizenship. I also detail efforts by activists, relatives, and politicians to reclaim Hart Island's dead from their degraded non-citizenship and restore them to the realm of ordinary posthumous citizenship, as dead belonging to New York City – efforts that suggest pointedly recovering a lost status.

I begin by discussing my approach to examining how citizenship might survive death and explain my concepts of ordinary posthumous burial and normal posthumous relations. I then discuss Hart Island's history. Next, I review literature, thematically focusing on death and burial, citizenship, memorialization, and stigma. I also discuss fieldwork and methods, including summarizing some of Hart Island's demographics and identifying a key interlocutor. I summarize the chapters that follow and conclude by returning to my journey of mine to Hart Island.

The questions this thesis poses are: how does citizenship survive death? What do New Yorkers understand as normal posthumous relations, and are Hart Island's dead excluded from them? What can their exclusion explain about what people perceive as ordinary citizenship for the dead? Further, if massed burial is usually prompted by exceptional circumstances, does Hart Island's ordinariness also trouble people?

The political category of citizenship is relevant to Hart Island because death and political community are intimately connected, co-constituting each other through practices of membership, marginalization, and prohibition (Hertz 1960; Stepputat 2020). Cross-culturally

and historically, societies typically grant appropriate death rites to those they deem members (Malinowski 1955; Hertz 1960; Ariès 1976; Bloch & Parry 1982). Withholding these rites transforms the dead into different types of subjects, symbolically and literally reflecting exclusion from the political or moral community (Hertz 1960), as war grave histories illustrate (Mbembe 2019; Fontein 2010). Robert Hertz (1960) described the inauspicious dead: ill-starred because they are shunned in death, just as the bereaved have their grief compounded by their inability to conduct appropriate rituals, unable to settle the dead properly into posthumous belonging. Indeed, people with relatives buried on Hart Island often expressed frustration to me that the problems of access and lack of memorialization meant they could not care for the deceased as they wanted to, and often worried that their relative might not 'rest easy' there.

By ordinary posthumous citizenship, I simply mean the recognition that most dead receive from the living as being within political community. Most New Yorkers I met, whether native or immigrant, felt a powerful sense of belonging to the city and being a New Yorker. The act of placing the remains of the dead often enacts a summary of the deceased's social relations and political claims on a place: they belonged here, in this community. Other ties, such as to family, faith, or vocation, may be engraved on a headstone. By normal posthumous relations, I mean this network of social relations in which a dead person remains enmeshed after death, of which citizenship is one part, and which may shift over time as I discuss shortly.

Mortuary practices delineate forms of political community, including practices of exclusion. Taking burial as a marker of citizenship demonstrates how the body belongs to both the social and biological worlds (Hertz 1960). The dead may move through various social classifications according to claims from the living in a kind of social afterlife: perhaps initially defined by kinship, then broader claims, and ultimately by a more abstract and communal category such as political belonging.[2] Families and faith groups regularly attempt to exhume relatives buried on Hart Island (Bernstein 2016a), enacting identification and recognition to perform care (Wagner 2008) and restore citizenship. These processes may reinvigorate a dead individual's symbolic value, restore personal identity, and make individual memorialization possible (Wagner 2013: 645–9). Disputes over bodies and remains illustrate how a human body remains entwined in social relations after death (Aronson 2017; Sanford 2003; Wagner 2008; Wilson & Crossland 2015). Such struggles can

[2] An important counter example would be when the state claims the body as a citizen, first and foremost, for state-building purposes, such as after conflict.

arise from the conflicting identities of a body and the competing responsibilities of those who care for it. When relatives contest state projects that commemorate the dead as a group, they can evade efforts to homogenize an individual's posthumous identity. Even so, practices of recognition – material and social, complete and partial, emotional and ideological – may drift through shifting modes of relationality (Fontein 2011; Major 2015; cf. Ingold 2021).

Ordinarily, the dead have a form of citizenship, granted through everyday burial practices, and we notice when this is absent because the omission seems deliberate. Some citizens, such as those who died in the World Trade Center attacks in 2001, are celebrated municipally as exceptional New Yorkers, imbued with the city's best qualities and values. NYC was their home, they belong to the city even in death and, by belonging to it, help define it. Generally, Americans have a strong urge to bury their dead 'at home' even if this means transporting the corpse over long distances, a clear example being the state-funded recovery and repatriation of those killed overseas during war (Wagner 2019). During fieldwork, I saw numerous funeral directors arranging a body's transfer from the place of death back to New York for burial, enacting care by the bereaved and a claim of political community and belonging for the deceased. Such signals of citizenship are so commonplace that they go largely unnoticed, except when absent, as with the Hart Island dead. Across cultures, mass graves during conflict are often designed to erase the deceased's citizenship and identity (Wagner 2008; Sanford 2003). Historically, paupers' burials in Anglo-America have habitually and deliberately indicated degraded citizenship (Laqueur 1983).

Asking how the dead have citizenship and what social processes grant this denaturalizes how New Yorkers construct political belonging and make it endure. Burial on Hart Island is a citizenship marker – most people buried there will be local citizens and Hart Island is still within NYC's boundaries – so city officials might regard burial there as a citizenship claim fulfilled. Yet considering that the US has longstanding commercial funeral practices (Walter 2005) and a Hart Island burial requires the deceased to be bureaucratically categorized as 'abandoned', does a publicly-funded and arranged burial itself signal degraded citizenship?

Not necessarily. Local governments everywhere must arrange funerals for people who have no one to care for them. Across the US, funeral directors and officials told me that cremation was the usual solution for funerals of last resort, with ashes scattered in a memorial garden. Few public burial processes cause as much public distress as Hart Island, which is a highly unusual case. These burials differ from what is considered normal not only in New York City, but in the US and internationally. Hart Island's practices have largely been hidden from public view: burials cannot be witnessed, until 2020 Rikers Island inmates conducted

the burials, visitor access is restricted, and individual memorialization is absent. Hart Island's distinctive practices seem bizarre and even disgraceful to many, marking those buried there as being set apart, due less care than the dead normally receive, as they are less than full citizens.[3]

In comparison, throughout the United Kingdom (UK) local governments offer public health funerals for those who cannot afford a funeral. This may be a 20-minute funeral at the local crematorium at an otherwise unwanted time; the British have a strong cultural preference for cremation (Jupp 2006). In areas without a crematorium or if burial is preferred, the deceased may be buried in designated areas of the local municipal cemetery (as opposed to a cemetery set apart for this exclusive purpose). There, they may be stacked in a grave of double depth with up to a dozen deceased in one grave, their names memorialized in a simple collective gravestone and recorded in the municipal record. In the rare cases of people unidentified or unclaimed, this sometimes prompts collective action and a community funeral for the deceased (ie Kirkham 2017). Saliently, the ritual elements – a funeral that the deceased and bereaved can attend, cremation or burial in a local cemetery that is open for visits, labour provided by community professionals, and a memorial – may not be exactly what the bereaved would have chosen but are recognizably like a normal funeral within that community. Further, the deceased will rest and be commemorated within that community in a mark of ordinary posthumous citizenship.

Usually, ethnographies examining the posthumous citizenship of people in mass graves focus on conditions of violence or disaster (De León 2015; Fontein 2011; Petrović–Šteger 2009; Rygiel 2016; Wagner 2008), rather than practices in ordinary civil society. Hart Island is the only example I have found of massed burials at scale outside disaster or conflict. Advocates such as Melinda Hunt, who campaigned for decades to improve access to Hart Island (introduced later in this chapter), argue that communal burial is actually common in small family cemetery plots, or historically in Europe before the modern cemetery's invention.[4] Hart Island, like so many things about New York, is distinctive for its scale.

[3] Of course, perceptions varied. Some funeral professionals and activists believed that the Hart Island dead were cared for differently but in ways that awarded them special care, such as carefully recorded burial locations to ease disinterment, and detailed identity information to aid identification of the unknown. I examine various perspectives throughout this thesis; however, the everyday perception by New Yorkers of the Hart Island dead was that they were treated disrespectfully.

[4] Communal burial also occurs on a small scale in some NHS burials in the UK, where up to a dozen bodies are interred together.

The ordinary and the normal

Hart Island exists in two categories: as an extreme instance of exclusion from the body of citizens and the usual local rituals of burial; and simultaneously in a zone of ordinariness, a function of its routine, regulated, repetitive operations perceived as unexceptional and banal because they have happened so regularly for so long and at such scale. I take the ordinary as a concept that illuminates the violence and cruddy of the everyday as normal. Specifically, although mass burial is generally a sign of social breakdown following disaster or violence, I argue that it is Hart Island's ordinariness that most distresses people (chap. 4).

This duality and apparent paradox make theories of zones of exception or sovereignty (Agamben 2005; Mbembe 2019; Schmitt 2014) inadequate to address what happens here, because Hart Island is a domesticated civic space, open to public scrutiny and criticism, and socially and politically authorised. Instead, I engage with theories of the ordinary to analyse Hart Island's phenomena (Allison 2012; Berlant 2007; Biehl 2013; Das 1996, 2007, 2020; Povinelli 2011). The ordinary helps attend to the slow rhythms of attritional suffering that can lead to a Hart Island burial, and the legacy of those burials, as both extraordinary and ordinary, for the bereaved, and for other New Yorkers too.

By ordinary, I mean the everyday reproduction of life, the taken-for-granted living of it, domestic, repetitive, banal, quotidian, uneventful, routine, unnoticed, forgettable, boring, humble, diminutive, undramatic, and apparently inconsequential. I follow Povinelli (2011) and Berlant (2007) in setting the ordinary against large-scale spectacular catastrophic events, like NYC's first wave of Covid-19. By disrupting every facet of life, such events reveal the extraordinariness of what is tolerated, understood as necessary, or accepted as ordinary. The pandemic helped make Hart Island visible, but its burials not only followed on from Covid-19, they preceded it.

In considering the relationship between Hart Island and the everyday, an immediate apparent disjuncture is that it was not thought of as ordinary, when people thought of it at all (chap. 4). Even DOC staff who worked there knew it was unusual (City Islanders are a possible exception). Its operations are routine and repetitive, yet New Yorkers I met often responded to it with distress, doubt, even scepticism, indicating that it was unexpected. I argue that it is Hart Island's disarticulations between the ordinary and extraordinary that leave people with an uncanny sense about it, and that this is more than the unease people often express about large cemeteries.

Das explains her politics of the ordinary as 'a stitching together of action and expression in the work of bringing about a different everyday' (2020: 55). Like Povinelli (2011), Das

(2020) describes how life can be shaped not only by critical events but by small incessant corrosions that may go unnoticed, including by those responsible for habitually reproducing them. Das' ethics of the everyday[5] examines a duality of 'routine, reproduction, repetition and habit' together with the 'doubts, despairs, disorders and improvisations' with which people respond (2020: 60). This dual nature, and apparent paradox, makes ordinary life an experience that is both secure and insecure, with potential for an uncanniness.

This sense of uncanniness is evident as Hart Island moves in and out of public memory. This is often prompted by its roles in spectacular and catastrophic events which elide its everyday reality (chap. 4). Again, this recalls the notion that one of the ordinary's defining characteristics is that we cannot recognise it precisely because it is right before us (Das 2007: 71, 2020: 150). Further, descending into the ordinary, to use Das' phrase, takes effort and can be fraught.

Das does not conceptualise the ordinary as possible to separate from state practices. In contrast, Berlant's notion of slow death (2007) and Povinelli's (2011) conception of abandonment and cruddy suffering are understood as the intended outcome of categorizing and colonizing state practices. Berlant's example is American obesity, which often comes freighted with structural violence for particular groups. Povinelli contrasts deliberate everyday abandonment with the discreet time phenomena of crisis events, which can be mediated by technology (as Hart Island's Covid-19 burials became a spectacular symbol thanks to drone footage). Biehl also describes socially authorized abandonment (2013). His account of Catarina's banishment from ordinary life describes an unremarked experience of neglect and people's lack of response to it.

Allison's ethnography of contemporary precarity depicts a disorientating dislocation between how some Japanese expect to live and their experienced reality (2012). Her interlocutors described this as 'refugeeism' because, Allison argues, everyday precarity exists alongside a longing for a 'normative intimacy' (Berlant 2007: 285) of a time and place that no longer exists. Those bereaved I met with relatives buried on Hart Island did not express longing for a middle-class life they had lost. Instead they often articulated how their grief was burdened by the differences between a Hart Island burial and a burial that seemed to them more recognisably conventional and familiar; a burial that they felt they could reasonably

[5] I have deliberately set aside debates about everyday and normative ethics (Das 2020). Such analysis is possible, as interlocutors offered muted concerns about Hart Island's ethics, framed in terms of respect and dignity and a need to 'do better'. However, these themes were less persistent than others, such as affective distress, and talk about the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers.

expect. In other words, they longed for something they felt was more tolerable, within the bounds of normal, that signalled ordinary social membership.

Where I use the term 'normal' or refer to what might count as 'the right kind' of funeral, it is this ethnographic category of the ordinary, or desired, that I mean to recall. I do not mean to infer than funeral norms are objective, neutral, or universal; nor do I mean to minimise the diversity of cultures and preferences across NYC; nor to suggest that funeral norms inevitably support certain moral values (though they may be widely understood as infused with ethics). Indeed, social norms are shaped by political, economic, and technological priorities, just as foundational scientific concepts of biology and medicine are intertwined with the social world (Canguilhem 1989). However, the category of the ordinary or normalised funeral (chap. 2) helps elaborate what distressed people about Hart Island. This study of Hart Island contributes another case to these theories of the ordinary, which provide detailed descriptions of everyday suffering, contextualized by the economic, political, and social forces which have shaped individual lives.

Categorising Hart Island's burials

In this section, I synthesize the literature on mass graves, caused by violence or disaster, and paupers' burials, caused by economic want, to contextualize Hart Island's cemetery and support my claim that memorialization is how citizenship survives death. Without memorialization, citizenship is unlikely to endure. Most analysis of mass graves has either examined European potter's fields in earlier centuries (Laqueur 1983; Richardson 2001; Sappol 2018) or twentieth-century political violence (Wagner 2008; Stepputat 2020; Fontein 2011; Kwon 2006; Wilson & Crossland 2015; Crossland 2000; Denyer Willis 2021), yet the two streams are rarely brought together. Hart Island is popularly referred to as a mass grave, or people use this term interchangeably with potter's field (Bernstein 2016a). Even academic literature lacks analytical precision regarding the category of communal graves. Terms such as mass, massed, pit, communal, collective grave, public burial, potter's field, and pauper's funeral are often glossed or used interchangeably. As Hart Island's burials are arranged in trenches in a grid pattern designed to facilitate disinterment, and their locations and identities are carefully recorded, it is more properly described as a massed grave or a communal trench grave. In both practice and intention, Hart Island differs significantly from, say, the mass graves of Srebrenica (Wagner 2008). Yet it is frequently described as a mass grave, affirming how startlingly different its burials are from normal local practice. In this section, I seek some definitional precision for burials as graves and cemeteries, before examining how Hart Island

both resembles and differs from mass graves and paupers' graves, and the political intentions underpinning these types of burials.

A grave is where a body is buried. Yet not every burial place is a cemetery (Kolbuszewski 1995); some sites are designed to make the dead disappear (Wagner 2008). Municipal cemeteries only started to appear in the early eighteenth century (Laqueur 1983; Rugg 2000, 2008), making them a more recent invention than graveyards consecrated to the religious purposes of the church to which they are attached (Curl & Wilson 2015). Some scholars highlight another distinction: cemeteries contain gravemarkers that state the buried individual's identity and likely dates of birth and death (Meyer, R. 1997). Part of the growing popularity of cemeteries in the nineteenth century was their ability to offer such markers for families to express both grief and status (Cannadine 1981).

Julie Rugg (2000) developed a nuanced definition of a cemetery: a place demarked for burials with an ordered design where families can perform mortuary rituals and assert rights over space, often through material memorials. Unlike graveyards, cemeteries are secular, in that they are usually owned by local authorities or commercial operators who make them publicly available, and pluralist, in that they will acknowledge and separately accommodate faiths and denominations, including upholding taboos and restrictions, and obliging various disposal methods. Generally intended to serve the whole community, though historically frequently practicing various exclusions, cemeteries are often integral to local understandings of identity and civic history. Simultaneously, cemeteries offer transcendence because they are set aside for the bereaved as sites of mourning and pilgrimage, and protected as sacred against certain profane activities. Throughout the Anglophone West, cemeteries are presumed to offer permanent interment from which the remains are seldom removed, unlike in much of Europe where burial plot reuse after 20 or 30 years is normal, although families can extend this (cf. Goody & Poppi 1994). What this definition clarifies is that a cemetery is not simply where a body is interred, but an intentional social site that generates human relations and cultural expression.

Hart Island and the politics of massed burials

In many ways, Hart Island's trenches resemble mass graves. Interlocutors often linked Hart Island with communal interment, potential lack of identification, unwitnessed burial, lack of material memorialization, access difficulties, geographic distance, othering, and shame. Communal burials are associated with war and its crimes, slavery, epidemic contagion, and natural disasters; that is, when exceptional circumstances suspend normal social rules, either because of an urgent need to dispose of overwhelming numbers of bodies after crisis, or

because the dead are perceived as less than full citizens or fully human, and in the case of war, potentially both (Crossland 2009; Kwon 2008; Sanford 2003; Wilson & Crossland 2015). Even in Rugg's exemplary work, there is a glossing of terms referring to collective burial – mass, trench, pit, pauper's grave, potter's fields – which is often present in the literature (cf. Denyer Willis 2018). How can Hart Island's practices, which are perceived to have so much in common with these terms, be reconciled within the ordinary operations of civil society in late capitalist modernity?

As an analytic category, mass graves come freighted with historical narratives and concepts that evoke state and para-state violence, such as in parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe, where millions were massacred or disappeared in the late twentieth century as a consequence of civil war, murderous dictatorships, genocide, or other state-level catastrophe. In such places, 'mass graves and disappearances were about stripping away political resistance *en masse*' (Denyer Willis 2018: 548) and represented 'a terrestrial manifestation of what a politics of abandonment makes possible' (*ibid.*: 559). They are recognizable 'by their location on the edge of the site, a lack of memorials, and limited attention paid to aesthetics and landscaping' (Rugg 2000: 269). By deliberately ensuring that the nameless dead remain anonymous and unmarked, perpetrators prevent the dead from inspiring the living to action, both by direct threat and the chilling absence of the vanished.

One defining characteristic of mass graves is that, unlike other burial sites, they often signal punishment. For instance, the genocidal burials at Srebrenica, where the pit burials were dug over by earthmoving equipment in a second violation, were a shocking practical solution to the need to rapidly dispose of bodies and an intentional insult to faith traditions requiring separate graves and markers for each person, as well as an attempt to frustrate future efforts to recover and identify the dead (Wagner 2008). Mass graves typically deny, either intentionally or through emergency, burial rituals and markers of individual identity. When people are buried unidentified, unmarked, and unmemorialized, the practice is politically deliberate and mostly unchallenged (Denyer Willis 2018). Despite or perhaps because of this, mass graves can accrue sacral qualities over time, attracting pilgrims who wish to remember the atrocities or those who have been forgotten.

As an instructive counterexample, I take New York's extraordinary efforts to identify and memorialize its dead at the World Trade Center,[6] which some bereaved refer to as a mass

[6] These events are usually referred to as the 9/11 terror attacks, or simply as 9/11. I follow other scholars in preferring the less inflammatory description.

grave (Aronson 2017). The dead of Hart Island, with their massed anonymous burials, are treated differently, in significant ways, from those who died in the September 2001 attacks. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) promised that it would confirm the identity of everyone who died at the WTC and strive to identify and return to families every human body part larger than a thumbnail – an extraordinarily open-ended commitment of technology, budget, and time. This promise echoes longstanding US government commitments to recover the war dead (Wagner 2015, 2019), a practice that began with the American Civil War (Faust 2008). Those who died at the World Trade Center and those buried on Hart Island are all New Yorkers, but the different treatment accorded to them in death creates a form of super-citizenship for one group and non-citizenship for the other.

Hart Island and the shaming of the poor

Historical research into the burial of the poor contextualizes Hart Island's practices as deliberate and systemic. Scholars have noted that from the eighteenth century in Anglo-Europe, mass burial was also a common punishment for poverty (Laqueur 1983, 2015; Rugg 2000; Strange 2003), designed to shame the poor for their circumstances. Among the rich and creative variation in mortuary rituals across history and culture, distinctions between the funerals for those of higher and lower status have been cross-culturally common. Following Kroeber's (1927) structuralist understanding, funerals are opportunities for conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1957); though they are shaped by social and historical conditions, 'mortuary practice is … a medium for the competitive expression of status' (Cannon 1989: 437).

Laqueur described how the very poor of sixteenth-century England were buried at parish expense (1983). Only in the late-eighteenth century did this develop any negative significance. No longer a sign of sanctity, a pauper funeral now signalled 'with unrivalled clarity … social worthlessness, earthly failure, and profound anonymity' (*ibid*.: 109). Pauper is an archaic word, rarely used outside legal contexts of indicating someone who is very poor; historically, it referred to someone who received public charity, specifically those purportedly supported under England and Wales' Poor Law Amendment Act (1834). Since then, the meanings of paupers' burials have been clear: victims of capital punishment and racial violence, the mad, and the destitute lie together in communal graves. This shared fate for marginalized groups effectively amalgamated class, ethnicity, and other identities, uniting them as a special category of people who could be excluded from normal posthumous relations.

People particularly feared paupers' burials because, in an act of symbolic violence, municipal authorities explicitly forbade mourning rites or commemoration for the dead, even when the deceased was known – and even in the presence of the bereaved (Strange 2003). The shabby material conditions of the burial – rough cheap pine boxes that often gaped or came undone before burial to reveal decomposition, an absence of decoration or memorial markers to convey sentiment or identity, and the unceremonial massed interment itself – were all designed to shame the poor from seeking burial welfare (Crowther 1983). Hart Island's lack of ceremony and absence of memorialization are not merely the result of cost consciousness by the city or security concerns from DOC, as relatives sometimes speculated. It is grounded in the historically deliberate humiliation of those who failed to provide for the deceased.

The indignity of a pauper's funeral was a powerful catalyst for action in Europe and its colonies, including the US. It prompted a flourishing of cooperative burial societies and was a powerful sales incentive for individual graves in private cemeteries (Laqueur 1983: 110; DiGirolamo 2002; Denyer Willis 2018: 11). The commercialization of funerals and cemeteries prompted new social and economic collectives dedicated to saving people from a pauper's burial. These included newsboys' trade groups (DiGirolamo 2002) and funeral 'friendly societies', which provided rudimentary insurance against the costs of death and sickness to families who could save (Laqueur 1983: 110). Such schemes continue today in life and funeral insurance, and crowdfunded funeral appeals (Kneese 2022). The collectives were designed to provide supplementary solidarity in case the individual's family was either destitute or not present, but were also a concrete rebuke to the moral stigmatization that characterized paupers' funerals, as they insisted on rectitude and self-discipline, often measured by sobriety, regular payments, and other moral measures. Families found the disgrace of a pauper's burial unbearable and remained powerfully motivated to exhume, rebury, and memorialize their dead once they could afford it, even years afterwards (Strange 2003) – just as is the case with the Hart Island dead today (Bernstein 2016a). Further, as recently as 2016, NYT published advice on how people can avoid burial on Hart Island (Bernstein 2016b).

Trading in corpses was central to advancing medical knowledge from the early nineteenth century in Europe and the US (Blakely & Harrington 1997; Richardson 2001; Sappol 2018). Hart Island did not, initially, serve as a source of cadavers: the island only began operating as a pauper's cemetery after the period when paid body snatchers organized access to indigent cemeteries across America (mid-nineteenth century, Sappol 2018), with city officials hoping

that the logistical difficulties of stealing bodies from an island would deter them (interview Tanya Marsh). Yet today, just as in these early modern instances, bodies destined for donation are still overwhelmingly provided by the poor, vulnerable, and dispossessed (Scheper-Hughes 2004) and all bodies released to Hart Island were automatically made available for dissection until 2016 (Bernstein 2016a).

Hart Island's practices – its trenches, geographic and administrative inaccessibility, lack of ritual and memorialization, and, until recently, unconsented dissection – powerfully recall historical forms of paupers' graves, when collective burial meant shameful, silent anonymity. Further, the increasingly insistent efforts of families and fellow New Yorkers to remember and name the Hart Island dead, to resurrect identity and biography, and to reincorporate kinship relations, including quasi-kin such as faith or other community groups, recall projects for memorialization and reconciliation that often mark social efforts in the aftermath of mass graves following disaster or violence.

Hart Island's burials provide a powerful lens through which to examine inequalities. While they clearly troubled some citizens from their inception, it is also true that pauper's burials were then understood as the fate of the indigent, and little attention has been paid to these anonymous, unmemorialized burials over 150 years. In both scholarship and Hart Island's scant historical records, paupers' burials remain a cultural practice of great symbolic and coercive power, not despite but partly because of the consistency with which they have been feared and condemned. Paupers' burials unnervingly illustrate the nexus between inequality and symbolic violence, particularly in American capitalism's valorisation of individualism.

The facts of Hart Island, New York City

Hart Island is in Long Island Sound in the Pelham Islands archipelago, 500 metres off the east coast of City Island, in the Bronx borough of New York City in the United States. New York City has provided burials at Hart Island as a last resort since 1869. The island is only 1.6 kilometres long and 0.4 kilometres wide, but its graveyard is 'purportedly the largest tax funded cemetery in the world' and the largest cemetery in the United States (McSweeney 2013: 11). For decades it has had no permanent population – until 2020, Rikers Island inmates performed all the labour because Hart Island was managed through DOC. Officially, the service is known as a public burial or funeral, or a city burial, and the site is officially called City Cemetery. Interlocutors of all kinds referred to it as a potter's field or paupers' burial – but most simply called it Hart Island.

When a New Yorker dies, they are immediately classified as property of the OCME. Next of kin have had as little as forty-eight hours to claim the body before the OCME can direct

the purportedly unclaimed body for public burial (Bernstein 2016a; NYCC 2022). Those buried on Hart Island have been classified as either unclaimed or unidentified, or unable to afford a funeral (McSweeney 2013; NYCC 2022). Up to one million people are buried there, and approximately 1,000-1,500 more are usually interred annually (NYCC 2022). The burial rate increased significantly during the pandemic: in 2019, 1,129 people were buried there; in 2020, this increased to 2,632, the busiest recorded year since the height of the AIDS epidemic (The City 2020).

Over the past two decades, Hart Island's management has been publicly criticized for keeping substandard burial records, the lack of public access to these records, and for frustrating people's physical access to the island (Bernstein 2016; Hunt 2017). NYC was further criticized for offering bodies as educational cadavers for use by anatomy and mortuary students before interring them; this practice ceased in 2016 after public outcry, unless the deceased was already a registered donor (Bernstein 2016). In 2007, relatives were granted strictly controlled monthly rights to visit Hart Island, and the wider public was given similar access in 2015 (NYCLU 2017). Access for relatives was by a monthly ferry and controlled by DOC. The island had recently become a site of archaeological interest: bodies buried there provide a rich material archive, and bones allegedly surface regularly due to coastal erosion and severe weather (CBS 2018). Activists have also highlighted Hart Island's significance to particular NYC communities, such as those who died of AIDS because it is potentially the world's largest AIDS cemetery (Kilgannon 2018), the homeless (PTH 2011), and mothers (Hunt & Sternfeld 1998) because it has long been the de facto interment site for infants and stillbirths.

In 2018, following two decades of lobbying by activists, relatives and the media that was publicly led by the Hart Island Project's Melinda Hunt, the New York City Council introduced a bill aiming to transfer jurisdiction over Hart Island from DOC to the Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks) (NYCC 2018). Councillors sponsoring the bill believed that it would significantly increase community access to the island, both in terms of loosening transport and visitation restrictions and the difference in policy and attitudinal approaches of Parks compared with DOC. Parks are premised on encouraging and enhancing people's access to and use of public sites, whereas DOC habitually manages risk by restricting or prohibiting individual liberties including communication and movement. Critics including bereaved families have long maintained that DOC is an inappropriate custodian of Hart Island because of its internal culture (Hunt 2022). Further, if New Yorkers gain greater access to the island both for mourning and as a recreation space, this conforms to a common national

and international pattern of city cemeteries being converted to public parks (Schuyler 1986; Thorsheim 2011). There is no suggestion that burials at Hart Island will cease, as some interlocutors speculated, but it does allude to the island's future. Many of the city's previous paupers' graveyards have been transformed into recreational parks, including Fort Greene, Bryant Park, Madison Square, and Washington Square (NYC Parks n.d.; cf. Thorsheim 2011).

In 2019, the New York City Council signed legislation transferring Hart Island from DOC to Parks (December 2019; chap. 6). In March 2020, the island was closed because of Covid-19, and Rikers Island inmates dug Hart Island graves for the final time on 3 April 2020, a change accelerated by the pandemic. The jurisdictional change was enacted in July 2021 during the pandemic. NYC Park Rangers began hosting family visits to Hart Island when it reopened on 3 October 2021. In 2022, the rangers were replaced by Parks Enforcement Patrol (Parks service wardens). Some relatives complained to me that the visitation restrictions were still recognizably similar to those under DOC, including being forbidden from taking photographs and movement being controlled. However, cameras are now allowed, and other relatives described the Parks staff as friendly and accommodating, justifying the restrictions as due to the injury risk from derelict buildings. At the time of writing the public cannot visit, and greater public access remains subject to policy negotiation, advocacy, and potential legal action.

Necronominalism, citizenship, memorialization, and stigma

Throughout this thesis, together with the theories of the ordinary, I draw on anthropological literature on death, citizenship, memorialization, and stigma, and summarize my approach to each of these below. Theoretically, they draw together in Thomas Laqueur's (2015) notion of necronominalism, which I examine shortly, and in Le Guin's (2001) and Povinelli's (2011) logic of abandonment, which each help explain how shame shapes knowledge (chap. 4).

Necronominalism, the urgent need to name the dead

Historian Thomas Laqueur argues that the dead always work for the living (2015). The discontent with Hart Island suggests that these dead may have performed a commendable service: warning citizens of the fate that awaits them if they fail to make adequate provision for death. This discontent recognizes the continuing effectiveness of the dead's exemplary work, and efforts to destigmatize them could be seen as attempts to eradicate the visible symptoms of poverty, rather than the ill itself. Alternatively, the Hart Island dead may now be speaking back to the living in surprising ways. Laqueur's foundations are profoundly anthropological: the dead remain 'social beings' that the living feel compelled to care for,

rather than biological waste (*ibid*. 23). Across time and cultures people seem compelled to live with their dead, and though Laqueur never explicitly says so, this seems to be underpinned by Heidegger's existential ontology. We do not seek to rid ourselves of the dead, Laqueur argues, but to settle them, hold them safe, and use the dead to make our worlds. It is an essential and ethical human compulsion: 'We as a species care for the dead; we live among them; we make of them ciphers of memory … creatures who need to be eased out of this world and settled safely into the next and into memory' (*ibid*. 24-25). Hart Island's dead challenge these ideals, deposited as they are without normal care, complicating the work these dead can perform for the living.

Laqueur argues that, as modern European and American concerns over securing the soul's everlasting life eased, they were supplanted by a powerful preoccupation with remembering the deceased. Naming the dead became central to properly and safely settling them into remembrance: what he has termed modernity's 'age of necronominalism' (*ibid*.: 419). Early examples can be seen in the American Civil War (Faust 2008) when new technologies of railways, body preservation, and administration made it possible to take soldiers home for burial. Laqueur contends that for Britain, the Great War prompted new practices that reconciled the presence and absence of the fallen: the Graves Registration Commission identified the dead and recorded names, and the War Graves Commission engraved these names on monuments and headstones (Laqueur 2015: 461–487). The body and its name, together or apart, came to stand for the person themselves. Missing bodies, of which there were so many, could still be named in a balm to grief. Yet people began to find unnamed bodies unbearable. Bodies recovered but unidentified were then venerated, and unknown soldiers magically transubstantiated from the body of any of us to the body of all of us (Anderson 2006; Quintyn & Wagner 2009; Wagner 2013), endowing the group with political legitimacy.

This exemplifies Kantorovicz's (2016) twinned bodies metaphor, in which modern sovereignty is symbolically founded on a form of mystical thinking shaped by Christian medieval theology. Just as the Christ was wholly god and wholly human, and was both the individual body of Christ (*corpus naturale*) and the collective body of the church (*corpus mysticum*; *ibid*.: 206), political power is legitimated in uniting individuals into a single body, especially when sanctified by sacrifice. Indeed, cross-culturally, the community, like a specific lineage, can be considered a body politic that lives beyond the natural life of its members (Radcliffe-Brown 1922; Radcliffe-Brown 1930; Fortes 1970). Some of Hart Island's symbolic valency lies in the potential for one million dead bodies to come to stand

for New York City's body politic, or at least a section of it. When people said to me of the Hart Island dead, 'That could be any of us' or 'Those are our fellow New Yorkers,' the notion of the body politic and the twinned body metaphor underpinned their statements.

Practices of naming the dead and giving them individual burials were performed at scale for the First and Second World War dead and were adopted across Anglo-American nations. People of all social statuses now sought a 'proper burial', which meant naming, memorializing, and digging individual graves or at least family plots to anchor them in posthumous relations, including citizenship. Laqueur argues that this new equality in death does not run concurrently with the surge in democracy across other social forms, but foreshadows it: 'Naming the dead is thus not a reflection or sign of democracy; it is constitutive of it' (Laqueur 2015: 412). 'Proper burial' had become a sign of political belonging, with the dead acknowledged as citizens who in turn grant legitimacy to the living.

Laqueur's formation contains dualities: memory keeps the dead both safely dead yet actively circulating within society as somewhat alive. With its conceptual inheritance from Aristotelian metaphysics, Laqueur's description of what the dead do and their limited agency underpins this thesis. The dead certainly work for the living, but I argue that what they do depends partly on what the living do for them. For the dead to be alive in memory relies on the living doing their part. Yet the unnamed dead, who are not sustained in memory, may still perform cultural work. When the living disrupt these relationships of obligation and reciprocity – such as failing to provide a 'proper burial' with a name, memorial, and individual grave – the dead continue producing social meaning, but empowered by their polyvocal qualities, they may slip beyond the grasp of the living and emit meanings that the commemorated dead cannot articulate. The Hart Island dead, inauspicious for so long and largely silent, have begun to symbolize something disquieting to New Yorkers, with some of the living striving to get them properly settled.

Citizenship: belonging to New York

Citizenship became a focus of my study because interlocutors so often insisted to me that those buried on Hart Island were also New Yorkers. Politicians also frequently described the Hart Island dead in terms such as 'our fellow New Yorkers' or 'our neighbours'. This seemed like a new rhetorical development, of which I could find little evidence in the historically grey literature. Yet New Yorkers talk constantly about being New Yorkers, and I understand this as a gloss for citizenship. Why did people so often talk about the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers, if not to summon up a social category and place them in it?

Anthropology, like other disciplines, has gone beyond examining citizenship as the legal status of subjects of a nation-state, encompassing relationships between people, bureaucracies, and laws in which a person has certain rights and responsibilities spanning from cradle to grave (Marshall 1992). Citizenship is socially constituted (Arendt 2017), as membership is produced by social recognition. Equally, exclusion from the group is socially produced by denying others, enabling individuals and states to enact belonging, differentiation, and exclusion, practised through relations of reciprocity, solidarity, recognition, and their refusal. More recent interventions have broadened the concept of citizenship to describe the complex practices by which people belong to and participate with others in a political community (Holston 1999), making citizenship a claim of political belonging (Lazar 2013). This expanded understanding encompasses how individuals construct, claim, and contest their own political agency and subjecthood beyond and around the state.

It also considers scales of political community beyond the national (Isin 2007), including transnational, global, and cosmopolitan citizenships, stateless sites, and local, city, and neighbourhood forms (Lazar 2008; Jaffe 2013; Savell 2015; Zeiderman 2013). Individually and collectively, citizens may be recognized by the city or define themselves with it in terms of residence, identity, territoriality, ethnicity, class, community, or life itself. Anthropological studies of citizenship take a broader view, focusing on the nature of belonging to political communities, with its distinctions, exclusions, and limitations. Citizenship includes articulated claims to rights (Isin 2009; Mandel 2008; Petryna 2013; Von Schnitzler 2014), which 'names political belonging' (Lazar 2013: 1), making the lived experience at least as important as the status itself (Lazar & Nuijten 2013).

Constructing citizenship requires ongoing work, which means it can also fail. The opposite of the citizen is the non-citizen or stranger, the original occupants of potters' fields. Consequently, in many ways a Hart Island burial intentionally signals a degraded form of citizenship or a form of non-citizenship. To return to Arendt's notion of citizenship as socially produced, the Hart Island dead are seemingly not recognized as New Yorkers, despite a Hart Island burial being a claim that any New Yorker can make on the city. New Yorkers' rhetorical insistence on the citizenship of the Hart Island dead seemed so deliberate as to be a reclamation of lost status (chap. 3).

I am not claiming that the dead have subjectivity, but that they can still claim rights. An emerging literature examines this issue (Renteln 2001; Rygiel 2016; Smolensky 2009). Though unable to actively make decisions, the dead 'are capable of being legal right-holders'

(Smolensky 2009: 763) whose moral and legal standing can be enforced, such as their potential marriage and reproductive rights, or against the wishes of the living, such as organ donation. Of particular relevance is the phenomenon of refugees who have received posthumous citizenship from the nations they sought to enter, for whom burial has equated to citizenship (Rygiel 2016).

Further, how might a citizen's legibility to the state during life relate to their posthumous recognition? Anthropologists have particularly focused on how individuals make themselves visible to the state, using such conceptual lenses as biological (Petryna 2013), therapeutic (Nguyen 2010), military (Gill 1997; Trundle 2020), and economic citizenship (Dickinson 2016). The latter two forms especially apply to Hart Island. For instance, the city strives to ensure that veterans are never buried on Hart Island (pers. comm. city officials and funeral director). Military citizenship enacts the notion that by radically sacrificing their most basic rights to bodily safety, soldiers become properly entitled to an enduring super-citizenship of privileges beyond those of civilians (Trundle 2020; Wagner 2019), often including special memorialization regardless of class. Militarism and class intersect in myriad ways (Lutz & Gutmann 2010). Ideas of economic citizenship are especially relevant to those buried on Hart Island through welfare because they cannot afford a funeral. As 'only … Americans with real jobs are real citizens' (Katz 2001: 348), being jobless quickly results in degradations to citizenship, including welfare access (Collins & Mayer 2010: 16; Morgen & Maskovsky 2003; Dickinson 2016). Specifically, jobless New Yorkers belong to 'categories of poor who are deemed appropriate to neglect' (Gupta 2012: 63) as 'modern-day paupers' (Dickinson 2016: 276).

The concept of citizenship is also salient for Hart Island because it serves (and sometimes symbolizes) a metropolis. Since the Athenian city-state (Aristotle 1992), citizenship has been linked etymologically and historically with urbanity and the local. The term *civis* (citizen) is cognate with civility, civilization, and *civitas* (city), so that to be civilized is to be citified, and 'only Citizens can make a City' (Rousseau 1991: 51). Urban spaces have been the key location for citizenship to be lived and theorized since Aristotle (Holston 1999, 2008; Isin 2000, 2007; Lazar 2008, 2013), with studies focusing on the local within the multiple regional and national scales of citizenship. While instructive, these heuristics can mask people's experience of multiple, fluid, and intersecting political constituencies, including beyond the state (Isin 2007). Individually and collectively, citizens may be recognized by the city or define themselves in terms of residence, identity, territoriality, ethnicity, class,

community, or life itself. An anonymous Hart Island burial can effectively erase these links to political belonging.

Stigma: suffering and its transformational potential

Stigma is both an ethnographic and analytic term here, as both activists and politicians have often discussed the goal of removing Hart Island's stigma. Analysing what they mean by this requires examining the term and the work it performs at Hart Island, including the symbolic potential for transformation it signals. Recall how Hart Island reiterates earlier forms of paupers' burials, designed to shame through exclusion from the community. Talk of removing Hart Island's stigma often accompanied citizenship talk, suggesting that removing stigma from Hart Island's burials would require recovering ordinary posthumous citizenship for the Hart Island dead.

Mass graves and paupers' burials are both stigmatized. Meaning a mark of disgrace or infamy, stigma signals severe censure or condemnation, and to stigmatize is to mark with a sign of disgrace or infamy (OED 2022a). The plural, stigmata, describes marks resembling the wounds on the crucified body of Christ. Crucifixion was not only an excruciatingly painful and drawn-out form of execution, but it was also a deliberately humiliating and ignoble one, originally reserved for slaves; another meaning is branding of the enslaved by a red-hot iron.

Christian resurrection inverts the meaning of stigma and makes it a transcendent sign of piety and sacrifice (Frazer 1913; Durkheim 1915). Stigmata are understood as having been miraculously impressed on the bodies of certain saints and other devout persons. A secular transformation can be found in Fassin's (2008: 335) attention to the politics of suffering, by which he means the exhibition of corporeal pain and misfortune as merit. The powerful idea that the Hart Island dead have been disgraced by stigma but can and must now be recovered ran throughout my fieldwork, most usually from activists and bereaved relatives, but also from some politicians and officials. It was especially notable when interlocutors talked about those on Hart Island who had died of HIV/AIDS, because the disease had often caused them to be shunned in both life and death.

Goffman's foundational work on stigma described both visible and invisible social distinctions that disqualify people or groups from full social life (Goffman 1990). His social constructivist theory has shaped understandings through the social sciences. Anthropologists in particular have illustrated how the state can exercise power to stigmatize groups (Das et al. 2001) and understanding stigma as the local lived experience of the social dimensions of illness (Kleinman 1988), social suffering (Kleinman et al. 1997), and violence and trauma

(Das et al. 2001). Stigma is historically and culturally located according to different legal and administrative structures (Farmer 1996; Foucault 1995), just as culture shapes understandings of the moral and potentially stigmatized dimensions of illness (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1986; Yang et al. 2007; Jinhua & Kleinman 2011). In China, for instance, stigma is embedded within 'the basic moral common sense of what makes a person' (Jinhua & Kleinman 2011: 198); people with HIV or mental illness are not able to fulfil their obligations to others, so are no longer entitled to the rights of a full person, to the point of social abandonment or even death. Powerful ethnographic case studies of stigma as 'the experience of being discredited and discriminated against because of a particular condition' (*ibid.*: 193) have focused on sex workers (Hammond & Kingston 2014), fat people (Brewis et al. 2011), welfare seekers (Dickinson 2016), and especially people living with disease and illness.

Medical anthropologists advanced an analysis of stigma as essentially a moral issue in which 'stigmatized conditions threaten what is at stake for sufferers … or what is most at stake for actors in a local social world' (Yang et al. 2007: 1524). Analysis of diseases such as leprosy (Kleinman & Ryan 2010), AIDS (Farmer 2006; Parker & Aggleton 2003) and mental illness (Jinhua & Kleinman 2011), both from the perspective of those who have experienced stigma and those stigmatising the ill, demonstrates how disease can be understood to threaten, diminish, or destroy values cherished by those stigmatising. People often stigmatize those suffering from diseases about which it seems nothing can be done (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1986: 137). Consequently, a stigmatizer's dread may contain a deep cultural logic that understands illness as social and biological, for stigmatizing 'can be a highly pragmatic, even tactical response to perceived threats, real dangers, and fear of the unknown. This is what makes stigma so dangerous, durable, and difficult to curb' (Yang et al. 2007: 1528). As the social responses to particular diseases, stigma layers a second illness onto the original affliction (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1986: 137).

Kleinman argues that the concept of stigma should be abandoned as beyond usefulness because it has become a euphemism for the severity of its experience (Kleinman 2012: 121). Too often, he states, theorists interpret stigma as an anodyne result of comparison with norms, 'standards … [which] derive in part from the prevalence of the phenomenon that is being judged' (*ibid.*). What use can this bloodless concept be against the 'catastrophic moral consequences' of 'dehumanization' (*ibid.*)? Kleinman contends that conventional theorising fails to capture stigma's 'failure of humanity [experienced] as social death, moral defeat, and cultural exclusion' and 'nullification of personhood' (*ibid.*: 120).

The term retains ethnographic purpose because my interlocutors used it. Stigma's impact runs throughout this project (chap. 4). I analyse Hart Island as a site for repressing or forgetting and then remembering knowledge, and how collective memory can be shaped by shame, and examine new projects to destigmatize Hart Island (chap 6). I remain mindful of Kleinman's critique as the phenomena I describe are closer to profound social suffering caused by structural violence (Galtung 1969; Farmer 1996) than to deviance from social norms.

Butler has advanced theories of stigma by examining how the 'subjugation of life to the power of death' (Mbembe 2019: 39) can reduce a person to precarious forms of life (Butler 2010). A human life is one recognized by others as one worth having, as full personhood relies on networks of social relations; a precarious life may end in an unnoticeable or ungrievable death. Her theory echoes Agamben's distinction between *zoe*, bare biological life, and *bios*, the full life of social and civil rights (Agamben 1998). Butler argued that for a death to be grievable, it must be understood as the extinguishment of a socially and politically recognized life. Asking whose lives are valued, whose are mourned, and whose are considered ungrievable illuminates how certain precarious lives go unacknowledged because they were not counted as fully living in the first place. Butler's argument centres on how war divides populations into the grievable and ungrievable, but her thesis can be applied more broadly. It describes how death, like life, can be 'bare', that is, unmarked. When interlocutors describe Hart Island as where New York 'buries the bums' or a City Islander likens what happens there to burying animals, they are invoking ungreivablity.

Kleinman's warning notwithstanding, notions of stigma are woven through the citizenship literature, especially in accounts of compromised, limited, unrecognized, or non-citizenship (De León 2015; Dickinson 2016; Rygiel 2016). Stigma is also evident in the thanatological literature, as disgraceful burial practices are common indications of stigmatized citizenship such as for the poor, or enemy dead. Hart Island's AIDS burials during the pandemic are an instructive case. Thirty-one men who died of HIVAIDS, whose families either could not or chose not to care for them, were buried on Hart Island at the isolated southern tip in a separate burial ground. They were the only people buried in individual graves on the island, buried at almost triple depth, in lead-lined coffins, and by inmates wearing protective clothing that was destroyed as contaminated afterwards. A stigmatized death led to a stigmatized grave and compromised posthumous citizenship.

In my analysis, I am guided by Ursula Le Guin's 'The Ones Who Walk Away from the Omelas' (2001). This short story describes a community's well-being as relying on the

suffering of a child held in miserable conditions in a broom closet, a child they know is there and refuse to aid, though some are troubled by her. It is a fictional account of a scapegoat or sin eater, in which an innocent symbolically and literally absorbs moral punishment on behalf of others. The story was theorized by Elizabeth Povinelli in her description of the 'cruddy' inequality (2011) of late liberalism, to explain why some slow-moving, uneventful suffering is less legible to society than other forms. I employ Povinelli's theorization of Le Guin most thoroughly in Chapter 4 when analysing why New Yorkers find Hart Island so shocking and yet so forgettable. I also use Le Guin's fictional device throughout this thesis.

Memorialization: a signpost for citizenship

As Laqueur stated, the modern industrial world is in an age of necronominalism (2015: 365–446), in which each person should be named in death and given a perpetual place of internment. This is far from the case on Hart Island. Some relatives felt this absence of commemoration keenly, and many other New Yorkers believed that the city should do more to memorialize those buried there, as the lack was deeply insulting.

As discussed, only a handful of people buried on Hart Island who died of AIDS have individual gravemarkers, and even these few are known only by numbers or abbreviations[7] – none are named. Grave posts mark every completed trench of approximately 150 persons with a code, and there are five modest monuments to the collective dead. One commemorates the Civil War Union soldiers who are buried there, erected to mark their reinterment in 1941 with military honours at Cypress Hills National Cemetery. Another is 30 feet high, erected by inmates who worked the burial detail at their own request in 1948, on the former site of Civil War era barracks (NYT 1948a). It is made of reinforced concrete, now crumbling. On one side is a cross and on the other, the word 'Peace,' the design a collaboration between warden Edward Dros and planner Robert Moses. There is a Christian cross made of white stones, typical of the island's geology, which is most easily visible from the air. Near the wharf and gazebo, there is a small headstone marking 'The City of New York Potters Field' and engraved with the biblical verse 'Blessed are the poor' (Matthew 5: 3). Nearby, a placard lists selected names of the deceased and their burial locations for approximately 200 people. It is a remarkable dearth of commemoration for the estimated one million people buried here. Further, these monuments are rarely seen as visits to Hart Island remain tightly controlled. The lack of memorialization and visits signal something deliberate and significant about the

[7] Thirty-one individual burials from AIDS and SC-B1 1985, which stands for Special Child 1, a 'crack baby' (exposed to freebase cocaine in utero) from the crack (cocaine) epidemic.

status of those buried here. It actively discourages their presence in public memory and illustrates how burial arrangements embody hierarchies.

Across cultures, people often classify deaths as good or bad, and the dead themselves as happy or unhappy (Bovensiepen 2009; Formoso 1998; Kwon 2008). Such classification almost always turns on how the death occurred and how the person was cared for posthumously: a calm death followed by appropriate rites results in happy dead while a sudden, tragic, violent death or inappropriate or absent rites will produce the opposite. The unhappy dead may be unable to proceed properly to the afterlife or simply do not settle safely into the world of the dead as they are suspended in 'perpetual liminality' (Van Gennep 1960: 164).

Throughout this thesis, I follow Hertz's guidance to follow the corpse, which he theorized as a triangulated relationship between corpse, survivors, and afterlife or posthumous existence (1960; Metcalf & Huntington 1991). The latter is now often conceived of as settled memory rather than the afterlife in contemporary industrial society. For instance, Green (2012) prefigures Laqueur (2015) in arguing that concern for properly remembering the dead has displaced concern for the fate of the soul in contemporary America, as more Americans have become unsure about an afterlife and what form it might take, or specifically how the living may influence it. Of particular importance is how proper remembering of the dead is shaped by memorialization. It is largely and deliberately absent on Hart Island. To fail to remember the Hart Island dead, or to deliberately forget them, implies something significant is at stake for their posthumous relations.

A memorial is usually a material structure, monument, or statue created to remind people of a person or event, to connect them to the past and orient them to the future. When most bereaved people I met talked about memorials, they meant a material thing, marking a place they could visit that represented their relative. Memorials can be public, such as a war memorial for many thousands of dead, or private, like a headstone marking one individual, creating space for mourning both immediate or distant. Further, memorialization can create a compelling, if ephemeral, community of mourners (Quintyn & Wagner 2009; Allen 2011). Physically, memorials offer an 'essential constructedness' (Young 1989: 14). Memorials often gesture to ideals of perpetual memory, sculpted from blocks of rock with words urging remembrance engraved into them. Some public memorials feature an 'eternal' flame as a metaphor for enduring powerful memory.

Memorials help situate the dead within their society. They provide space and a place for constructing collective memories (Szpunar 2010: 391) and often become sites for people to

anchor their memories and bring offerings or gifts. Embodying collective memories often demands physical and cognitive participation (Connerton 1989) such as regular visiting, which has never been easy on Hart Island.

The symbolic potency of memorials lies in their polyvalency. The ability to emit ambivalent signals enables memorials to circulate 'fables of collective identity' as 'spaces where conflicting versions of identity compete, struggle, and attempt to attach historical meaning to material culture' (Bravo 2005). Memorials can absorb and reanimate changing attitudes as artefacts, marking transformations in history, place, ritual practice, and audience (Doss 2010: 53). They are less about accurate recollection than imagination (Hirsch 1992: 28; Halbwachs 2020). Today, Hart Island's lack of memorials signals that these dead are deliberately not remembered. With symbolic efficacy, the people buried here are placed beyond the realm of ordinary posthumous citizenship.

Uncovering Hart Island's past

Hart Island's brief historiography must be pieced together from folk publications, council archives, and personal accounts. Creating a fuller account is beyond my scope. Yet given that many of the people buried there were often marginalized while alive, how is their unremarked or publicly unseen disposal by inmates on the city's behalf, with its almost total absence of memorial rituals, significant within society? Hart Island has, since colonial times, been a place of alterity, marginality, and deliberate obscurity. It has offered both political utility and disjuncture, as shown in its piecemeal histories.

The main historical sources about Hart Island are pamphlets published by DOC, statutes, city and borough council archives, other public archives like the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, and legal documents such as those provided in applications against DOC by the New York Civil Liberties Union and others (Historic Districts Council 2018). Popular perceptions are provided by newspaper articles, opinion columns, letters, and other media, and especially by the NYT. The other crucial sources are accounts provided by advocacy groups such as the Hart Island Project (Hunt 2022) and investigations by independent community historians. All these accounts are positioned and partial: unsurprisingly, the local government accounts are often euphemistic, DOC describes a solemn and difficult duty quietly performed, the media are inclined to controversy, and activists are fiercely critical and more recently proudly protective. All accounts can and should be challenged and extended; none can present a full understanding of what Hart Island's burials represent for those most affected by them, nor do they engage significantly with Hart Island's broader political context. They should also be read carefully against the

grain (Stoler 2009), both for the perspective they can provide as records of how certain positioned actors sought to record events at a particular moment, and for their gaps.

Hart Island and its waters are the traditional territory of the Munsee Lenape. The domain of the Siwanoy (people of the sea breeze) included this narrow island, just over a mile long, at the southern end of Long Island Sound, about a mile northeast of the entrance to Manhasset Bay (Cook 1976: 60). By the mid-seventeenth century, Dutch and British settlers began wrestling over the land, strategically located for their growing colonies, and the Siwanoy's rights were consequently erased. In 1654, Sussex-born doctor Thomas Pell met with Siwanoy leader Anhõõke (also known as Wampage) and four other sachem (chiefs). Pell acquired 9,166 acres of significant Siwanoy lands by treaty, including the island, for which the Siwanoy received compensation variously recorded as 'large sums of money' (Bolton 1848: 516) and 'hogsheads of rum' (Scharf 1886: 707). How it became known as Hart Island is unclear. Perhaps the name refers to introduced game – stags, or harts – or a cartographical misunderstanding and transliteration referring to a heart-shaped topography (Kempton 2006: 4; Seitz & Miller 2011: 140).

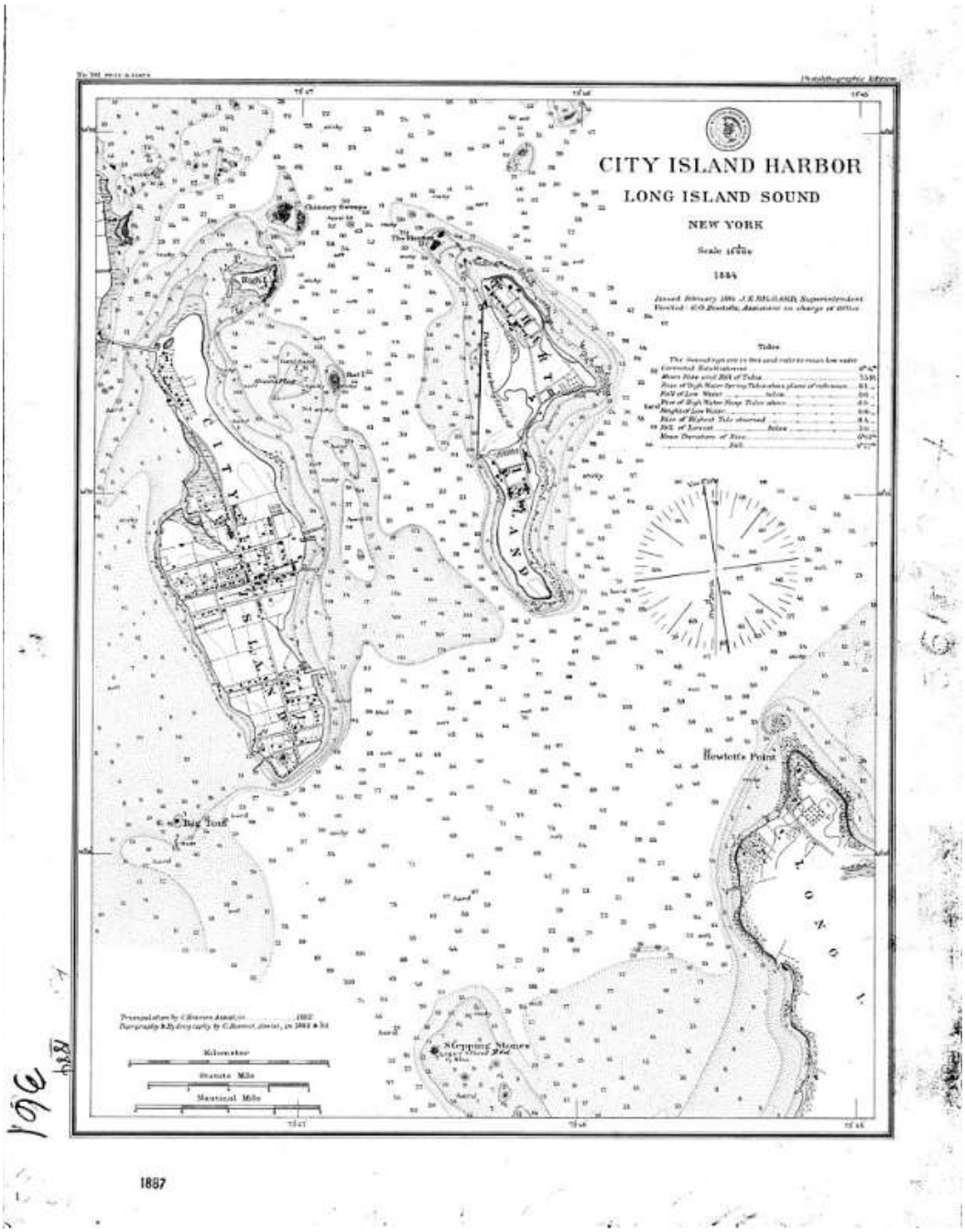

Figure 2. Nautical chart of City Island Harbor, Long Island Sound, New York.
(Published February 1884. Source: NOAA's Office of Coast Survey Historical Map & Chart Collection, http://historicalcharts.noaa.gov. Public domain.)

In the nineteenth century, Hart Island's remoteness made it popular for illegal boxing matches and gambling crowds (Santora 2003; Seitz & Miller 2011). However, by the mid-nineteenth century, public agencies increasingly co-opted it as a place of sequestration. From 1864 until the end of the Civil War, New York's 31st regiment of the United States Colored Troops trained there (McCarthy 2018b). Some 3,413 Confederate soldiers were detained as

prisoners of war on the island during 1864-5 in dire, disease-ridden conditions (Speer 1997: 7). After the war, destitute veterans were buried there (McCarthy 2018c).

After Pell, Hart Island was owned by the Rodman and Haight families, before being purchased by the Bronx's Edward Hunter. In 1869, Hunter sold a significant portion of the island (Twomey 2007) to New York City for $75,000 (NYT 1869), and the city began using Hart Island for public burials – variously known as a 'potter's field'[8] or paupers' burials – for the indigent, unclaimed, or unknown. The needs of the sick, mentally ill, criminal, and very poor were all managed by one municipal organization, the Department of Public Charities and Correction, which was responsible for all hospitals, alms-houses, asylums, and prisons, and so took responsibility for the city's operations on Hart Island. By 1895, the city deemed this combination of responsibilities unsatisfactory and divided the organization into two bodies, the Department of Public Charities and the DOC. DOC's inmate burial labour began for convenience but became an embedded institutional system.

New York's previous public burial grounds, latterly including Randall's and Ward's Islands in Manhattan (Bahde 2006; Sappol 2018), were poorly maintained, like many other American paupers' burial grounds (Sloane 1991). Within nine years of the city acquiring Hart Island, between 30,000 and 40,000 bodies were buried in its cemetery. According to a contemporary NYT report, 'It is impossible to tell just how many, because for the first five years they were buried, helter-skelter, without any record or any system, and their number can only be estimated' (NYT 1878).

Since its purchase, Hart Island has principally been used to contain social problems, partly reflecting the legacy of its early management by the Department of Public Charities and Correction. During the 1870 yellow fever epidemic, people were quarantined on the island (Brady 2006). It was also used as an asylum for the insane (NYT 1878), a women's charity hospital, and a prison for the inmates operating the cemetery (McGrath 1967; NYT 1882). In the early twentieth century, Hart Island housed a boys' and youth reformatory (NYT 1915a), an elderly men's jail, and a tuberculosis prison for the 'decrepit elderly' (NYT 1917). During World War II, the US Navy used it as a disciplinary barracks and a camp for German prisoners of war (McGrath 1967). The men's prison reopened after the war in 1946 but closed in 1950 when the city's Department of Welfare used the island to provide men with

[8] The phrase 'potter's field' recalls the Biblical reference to the cemetery purchased for foreigners near Jerusalem bought with the thirty pieces of silver priests gave Judas for betraying Christ after he had thrown it back at them: 'And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in' (Matthew 27:7). Purchased with rejected coins, the burial ground is for 'strangers', the unknown, outcast, and noncitizens.

emergency housing. This programme ended when the prison was re-established between 1954-1966 (*ibid*.). Between 1955 and 1961, a US Army Nike missile battery was siloed on Hart Island (*ibid*.). In 1967, Phoenix House opened a treatment centre for narcotic addicts there, premised on new understandings that those receiving treatment were medical patients not criminals (Schumach 1968). The burial archives spanning 1961 to 1976 were destroyed in a fire caused by vandals in 1977 (Bernstein 2016a). Between 1982 and 1991, a small prison operated there again for those undertaking its burials (Quindlen 1982; McCarthy 2018a). Today, the estimated number buried by prisoners on Hart Island ranges between 850,000 and a million people (McSweeney 2013; Bernstein 2016a). This imprecise range is due partly to record keeping discrepancies, especially during epidemics, and partly to archival loss.

The city has consistently used Hart Island as a place to segregate the vulnerable – the young, elderly, isolated, and destitute – in life and in death, thereby screening off both individual human suffering and its institutional failures. Occasionally, the federal government has used the island's isolation for strategic military activities, such as enemy internment and missile bases. Its various uses are ostensibly for the public but are not designed to be easily available to citizens as public spaces. The physical barrier provided by water was echoed by the enduring social barriers to access, such as those imposed by DOC until 2021.

Today, though management has been transferred from DOC to Parks, Hart Island remains closed to the public following pandemic restrictions. Transport by ferry remains weather dependent. Relatives looking for deceased family members on the island can face bureaucratic challenges in accessing records held by the city, and record keeping has not always been careful. The basic questions of history – such as who is here, and how they got here – become almost impossible to answer if identities are not officially recorded or are difficult to search for. Perhaps it is hardly surprising that maintaining intact and accessible records of a potter's field, where those conventionally omitted from society are taken, has not traditionally been prioritized by city record keepers. Claims about precise contemporary record keeping and assurances that bodies now buried can be located and identified for disinterment are a late-applied remedy, at odds with Hart Island's long history.

American history conventionally privileges property: we know more about Pell, the first settler-owner of the island, than we do about most of those who are buried there or the indigenous owners of the island and their way of life, illustrates how the written history of Hart Island is enculturated. Hart Island's history is produced by and through normalized social practices, especially those of inequality and power, which have been more broadly shaped, or masked, or denied, by actions of state institutions and of capitalism.

The difficulties created by substantial gaps in evidence and knowledge about Hart Island, caused by haphazard documentation including the loss of 15 years of records, have been exacerbated by DOC's historically conservative, sometimes antagonistic, attitude towards releasing information and permitting access to the island. Advocates and the media have accused DOC of prevaricating about Hart Island for many years (Bernstein 2016c, 2016a). The most significant historiographical issue is that those buried on Hart Island are overwhelmingly politically marginalized. Hidden in plain sight yet normalized as invisible and unexceptional, paupers' graves delineate which lives matter.

Campaigners, relatives, and friends of the deceased have long regarded Hart Island's archives as deeply significant, focusing for decades on the quality of archival information and their ability to easily access these records as critical to their ability to care for the dead. Public pressure and legal action organized by advocates were pivotal in forcing DOC to progressively make Hart Island's records searchable online. Many people search for their missing relatives through the archive.[9] The Hart Island Project maintains a mirror archive, which has additional search fields for certain causes of death, such as AIDS and Covid-19.[10]

In recent decades, local interest in Hart Island has remained organised around civil rights campaigns to archive and publish the names of those buried there (Hunt 2022; Hunt & Sternfeld 1998), to prevent unconsented body donation (Bernstein 2016a), and to increase its profile and accessibility as a historically significant site for New Yorkers (*ibid.*; Walshe 2015; Kearney 2016). Hart Island received high-profile media attention twice during my fieldwork. The legislation transferring its management from DOC to Parks attracted New York media (December 2019), then its role in burying the Covid-19 dead resulted in extraordinary international attention (April 2020). These episodes allowed me to track discourse about Hart Island and public funerals in far broader manifestations and across different sites.

Scholarly interest in Hart Island has been modest, focusing on its significance within landscape architecture (Bowring 2011; Sheppard-Simms 2016), AIDS memorialization (Brouwer & Morris 2021; Kerr 2018), preservation studies (Veneziano 2014), architecture (Buelow 2010), and activists using art to support legal and policy goals (Bray 2004). As discussed, Laqueur described efforts to name Hart Island's anonymous, unmemorialized dead

[9] https://a073-hartisland-web.nyc.gov/hartisland/pages/home/home.jsf
[10] https://www.hartisland.net/burial_records/sear

as evidence of modernity's 'age of necronominalism' in which the unknown dead are a 'moral rebuke' (Laqueur 2015: 419).

Methods: fieldwork, demographics, and a key interlocutor

Fieldwork

I conducted fieldwork for fifteen months during 2019–20 in New York City. I met bereaved relatives, activists, artists, community organizers, funeral directors, policymakers and officials, politicians, former inmates, city councillors, cemetery managers and staff, lawyers, religious leaders, urban planners, historians, journalists, and others. In short, I considered anyone interested or experienced in what happens when a New Yorker needs a funeral but cannot provide one themselves, or invested in Hart's Island's future, as part of Hart Island's epistemic community. I visited Hart Island five times before access closed due to Covid-19; I volunteered with the Hebrew Free Burial Association, which provides burials for Jewish people who cannot afford a funeral (keeping them off Hart Island); I served shifts at a homeless dinner programme at a midtown church; and I spent time with City Islanders in the residential area closest to Hart Island.

I practised snowball sampling so that my sample of Hart Island's epistemic community grew as interlocutors recommended others I should approach. This included a commitment to 'study up' (Nader 1972; Gusterson 1997), to capture the perspectives of politicians and officials from New York City Council, the OCME, the Human Resources Agency, and others who wrestled with Hart Island's present and future, to examine the legal, bureaucratic, material, and ideological frameworks that shape the practices of Hart Island. I complemented ethnographic interviews with participant observation across the city's five boroughs, attending meetings and events, Council committee hearings, onsite visits, funerals, and visits to Hart Island. I enriched this with analyses of documents including statutes and policy texts, legal files, death certificates, activist campaign materials, and contemporary and archival media coverage found in archives, libraries, universities, and museums.

How Covid-19 shaped fieldwork

My 15-month fieldwork plan was seriously impacted by Covid-19. I evacuated from New York in March 2020 during the state of emergency and returned to Cambridge, UK a day before the US-UK borders closed. I planned to return to New York once conditions became safer in May but the US-UK border remained closed, so in July I travelled through a third country to return to New York. When my US visa ended and could not be renewed due to pandemic restrictions, I left the field in late October 2020, months before vaccines became available. Most fieldwork between March and October was conducted online, regardless of

location, as lockdowns and stay-at-home orders remained in place. Many municipal or educational institutions such as archives and libraries remained closed or operated extremely restricted access and limited services. Public transport was restricted. Covid-19 meant that New Yorkers who had never heard of Hart Island – and most had not – were confronted by it, and I suggest that the pandemic revealed a practice that had been hidden in plain sight for 150 years. I am also mindful that, at the time of writing, the pandemic is not over, and as I analyse events that are still very recent, I do not intend to 'anthropologize' them away.

Demographics

People often offered assumptions about the ethnicity and incomes of those on Hart Island, and I wanted to establish what evidence there was on Hart Island's demographics. While this is not a quantitative study, the most salient point of this summary is that there is only modest evidence to support the assumptions my interlocutors often made about the ethnicity of Hart Island's dead. The links between Hart Island and income seem clearer. As both topics are contentious, I conducted a preliminary analysis of recent demographic burial data.

Throughout my fieldwork, interlocutors including funeral directors, activists, and former inmates told me that the majority of those buried on Hart Island were African American and Latinx. This seemed common-sense: life in NYC involves structural racism as a social fact, of which its history of racist burial practices is one small example (chap. 5). NYC is ethnically a superdiverse city, and people experiencing poverty are more likely to be from minority ethnic groups. Hart Island's ethnic profile would make an obvious focus for critical study, given the history of discrimination in burial practices and taking account of the overall whiteness of contemporary death studies.

I could not confirm this speculation through a preliminary analysis of Hart Island's burial data. These records do not include details of ethnicity, and though the data quality is much improved, it contains significant, well-known weaknesses (for instance, one person's age of death is recorded as 200 years). Using name-based race prediction modelling tools ethnicolr[11] and predictrace,[12] I modelled Hart Island's burial data from 2000-2019 against US census and Wikipedia ethnicity data.[13] My analysis suggests that its burials are more ethnically diverse

[11] https://pypi.org/project/ethnicolr/

[12] https://www.rdocumentation.org/packages/predictrace/versions/2.0.0

[13] Burial records accessed from: https://github.com/NewYorkCityCouncil/hart_island_geocoder/blob/master/DOC_Hart_Island_Burial_Records.csv, filtered from 1 January 2000 to most recent data on 11 February 2019.
Census data calculated from https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=new%20york%20city&tid=DECENNIALPL2020.P2

than the US population generally, but significantly less diverse than the population of NYC.[14] My caveat is that these models skew white. This may be because they have difficulty distinguishing between white and African American names that may have been given during slavery or, like with all ethnic groups with a long history of settling in the US, inherited by marriage, making it likely that New Yorkers of colour have taken historically 'white' family names over time. The models are based on US-wide name-ethnicity data and, as noted, NYC's population is significantly more ethnically diverse than that of the country as a whole. Consequently, the models have likely misidentified them as white and thus potentially underestimated the proportion of African American people buried on Hart Island. Latinx names are simpler to identify. Even so, these models suggest that since 2000, the Hart Island dead have been disproportionately white compared with the NYC population.

More definitively, the NYC Council data team helpfully provides location coordinates for the place of death of each person listed on the Hart Island death register.[15] This enabled an income group comparison between the Hart Island dead (2009-2019) and New Yorkers generally (NYC Planning 2005; US Census Bureau 2021) by placing coordinates within census block groups cross-referencing them with demographic and economic data for those block groups using the Census API. Every single income category above the NYC median income showed an under-representation of locations from which people were buried on Hart Island. Of course, this does not prove that poverty is a factor in Hart Island burials, but suggests that wealth offers other choices.

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Ethnic categories	**African American**	**Hispanic**	**White**
NYC census data (2010)	21%	30%	33%
Ethnicolr (sample HI burial data, 2000-2019)	14%	22%	57%
Predictrace (sample HI burial data 2000-2019)	18%	21%	50%

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https://github.com/NewYorkCityCouncil/hart_island_geocoder/blob/master/hart_island_burial_records_geocoded.csv.

A key interlocutor: Melinda Hunt

Melinda Hunt is the primary actor in Hart Island politics and was a leading interlocutor for me. She is most people's primary source of information about Hart Island and has dedicated her life to raising the island's profile and advocating for reforms in how it is managed. In some ways, she is the public face of Hart Island. Melinda was an invaluable and generous source of information and contacts for me.

She is slight, dark-haired and serious, typically demonstrating focused concentration, compassion, and a strong sense of justice. From Calgary, Canada, Melinda moved to the US for university where she trained as a visual artist, earning an MFA (Yale) and MSc (NYU). Melinda told me her interest in Hart Island began after moving to NYC in 1988. She explained how as an immigrant herself, she was drawn to where immigrants were buried, and Hart Island was one way of 'exploring the depths of my new culture' (Greenberg 2008: 18). She described it as 'the quintessential place of eternal urban anonymity' (*ibid*.). Melinda first began visiting Hart Island in 1991, authorized by DOC, with her collaborator and photographer Joel Sternfeld, to reproduce Jacob Riis's photographs from a century earlier (Riis 1891). They published a large format photography book, including an essay by Melinda and quotes from inmates they met, titled *Hart Island* (Hunt & Sternfeld 1998).

In the early-to-mid-1990s, the Municipal Archives informally directed families looking for information to her (Bray 2004: 198), and her voluntary advocacy as the liaison between families and DOC expanded and formalized. In 1994 she founded the not-for-profit Hart Island Project (HIP) and remains its leader. Through the organization and alongside other activism including Picture the Homeless and legal proceedings from the New York Civil Liberties Union, Melinda advocated for improved access to information about those buried on Hart Island and better access to the island itself, especially for families. Melinda also developed the Traveling Cloud Museum, a website where relatives can add the deceased's biography to a Hart Island burial plot map. Her visual art is weaved through her advocacy and now includes community collaborations, storytelling, and video installations (Bray 2004). She moved upstate in 2010 and now lives in Connecticut. She continues to make art based on Hart Island, and HIP produces both art (*ibid*.) and advocacy.

Melinda is acknowledged as Hart Island's 'detective and de facto archivist, its lead witness and chief scribe' (Geller 2021). Many people confirm their relative's burial on Hart Island through Melinda, and she is often interviewed by media speaking on behalf of the bereaved or even representing the island itself. Her views matter because Melinda has been an extraordinarily effective advocate for Hart Island and the bereaved and, working alongside

others, she has secured significant legislative changes and powerfully shaped aspects of Hart Island's public profile, especially as it is perceived by journalists and politicians. It seems reasonable to anticipate that she will continue to do so, especially as Hart Island becomes more publicly accessible.

Thesis structure by chapter

Chapter 1 argues that Covid-19 illuminated the stigma around Hart Island because although it was explicitly available for the soaring numbers of the dead, some families preferred storing their relatives in morgue trucks for months over the shame of a massed grave. Chapter 2 argues that Hart Island's practices distress people because they are so unusual compared with NYC's deathcare norms as to be stigmatizing. Chapter 3 argues that the 9/11 Memorial offers an instructive counterexample of citizenship preserved by extraordinary civic memorialization; against this, the new rhetorical claim that the Hart Island dead are also New Yorkers seems a pointed attempt to recover a previously withheld status. Chapter 4 argues that what many New Yorkers find so confronting about Hart Island's burials is their ordinariness. The mundane, unapologetically differential treatment accorded to their fellow citizens is all the more troubling because the dead should be treated differently, with respect and dignity. Chapter 5 argues that some City Islanders view Hart Island's practices as unproblematic, implying that they, themselves, are citizens in ways that Hart Island's dead are not. Chapter 6 argues that projects aimed at destigmatizing the Hart Island dead imagine it as a space of full belonging, where the dead can be embedded bureaucratically and politically into ordinary posthumous citizenship, where they belong.

Negotiating Hart Island

That I was able to visit Hart Island on that winter day in 2020 was the result of an enduring bureaucratic sleight-of-hand, negotiated by a deceased relative-activist. These monthly visits were for people visiting a grave, and you were asked to affirm a close personal relationship with the deceased, usually as a relative, in your visit application. On my first visit, I had joined Melinda Hunt in visiting the grave of her friend Rosalee Grable. When Rosalee died in 2016, she was distinguished by being the only person buried on Hart Island at her own pre-arranged request through her will (Alvarez 2016). Her mother had been buried on Hart Island, and Rosalee had been outspoken in her advocacy for herself and other bereaved relatives and friends to have greater access to the cemetery (Alvarez 2016). Melinda said that Rosalee had been committed to raising Hart Island's profile and people's access to it, and had asked Melinda to invite people to visit her once she was buried. She had planned to continue her

advocacy, literally, from her grave, and in doing so secured her own posthumous, politically active citizenship. Melinda told me proudly that it was right that I should visit Rosalee. So whenever I applied to visit Hart Island, I requested to visit her, and though I had not met Rosalee during life, I brought flowers to her grave. If DOC staff ever suspected something amiss, they ignored it.

After disembarking the ferry, we boarded the inmates' bus. On the dashboard was a single deer antler. The driver explained, 'We find antlers all over the island, save the best ones'. We drove slowly along the coast for a few minutes, followed by other officers in a golf cart. Each party would be dropped near the appropriate gravesite. The bus slowed then stopped, and an officer turned to me. 'This stop's for you.'

As I stepped into the damp fog, the cold hit me like a blow. Hart Island is at sea level with limited vegetation, and it was now well below freezing, with little between us and the water's temperature. All visitors were accompanied by an officer throughout, though usually, they stood at a distance and only approached if requested. If someone was grieving heavily, I had seen officers politely move further away to offer privacy. Mine smiled at me: 'You know, right?' I looked in the direction of Rosalee's grave, about 100 metres away, where the officers had marked her location with a painted yellow rock. There are no individual grave markers on the island (apart from the AIDS section). Here, people are buried in rows of ten by two, and three deep, with each trench marked by a fence post. So the painted rocks were indicative, accepted by mourners and staff as a helpful proxy for a grave location.

Winter had killed the crabgrass so I followed tracks of deer, geese, and earthmoving equipment over the bare earth and muck. Dressed in snow clothes, my back was already stiffening in the cold. I stood at Rosalee's grave and thought of her. The ground reflected the constant churn of dirt for new graves. The bared earth revealed nuggets of schist and quartz, broken shells from the shore, and shards of brick from nearby buildings. The stones sparkled if you caught them in the light, something you cannot tell from photographs.

The still fog seemed to amplify sound. I heard the tide's muted slapping, the gulls' single note as they rose in a helix, muted weeping, the ferry horn, boat chains, ropes straining at the pier, biddable geese, crinkling from cellophane-wrapped flowers, and the low murmur of guards keeping their distance in the idling golf cart. The vehicles gave the briny smell a diesel top note. On the other side of the nearest decrepit building was a deep trench partially filled with coffins, the island's active burial site.

Captain Thompson approached, telling me Rosalee was the only person he had buried here that he had known, as she had also been a regular – and, he added, 'a character'. We looked

inland at a mature tree that had fallen in the last big storm. It now brandished a plot marker in the air, entangled in its roots. Wandering was unauthorized, but I followed the Captain towards it over undulating ground, and he reminded me to watch my step. Time had settled the bodies into the earth unevenly. ‘I am inclined,’ he said, ‘leave these ditches – depressions – what you call them. It’s history, what happened here. Complicates the mowing though. Like a bronco. And the liability – someone trips.’ We looked at the fence posts inscribed with plot numbers that acted as burial section markers. Decades of weather and enthusiastic painting had dulled the indentations, some now so faint they yielded only to the fingertip.

The bus stopped to pick me up. No one wanted to linger in this temperature.

As we passed the Civil War memorial, a parcel of deer suddenly bounded back into the safety of the woodland. We saw fawns. At least fifteen more deer followed on their heels. One of the Latinx women, who had been tearily subdued, was now focused: ‘Did you see? Did you see the babies?’ Whatever else this island was, for deer it was a paradise.

‘They wait for us. They come down to the dock when they hear the boat. We feed them apples,’ an officer laughed. ‘They know the horn of the boat. Meet us right there. They’re not shy. And the racoons, they’re basically domesticated.’ For the rest of the drive, people pointed out deer to each other, visible through the leafless trees in the woods.

The bus rounded the corner of the ruined records building, revealing the covered burial trench. The Latinx family looked out. The bus was silent. ‘And is that…?’ asked the woman. An officer nodded. ‘I didn’t imagine it would seem so huge,’ she said.

Chapter 1
Frozen

Over only a few days in March 2020, New York City went from one Covid-19 case to hundreds. By April, the city had become Covid-19's early global epicentre. Gotham became ghostly. The streets fell empty, still, and eerily quiet, save for sirens. Then cemeteries, like hospitals, became frenetically busy.

The virus tore through the city, spreading further and faster through more deprived neighbourhoods (Horton 2020; NYC Health). Normally, about 150 people die each day in New York City (NYC Planning n.d.). At the peak of April's wave, 800 people died in a day (Hanna & Maxouris 2020). The death rate rapidly approached six times more than usual, and the city's death infrastructure – the OCME, hospital morgues, funeral homes, cemeteries, and crematoria – strained under the extraordinary burden.

Overloaded with the dead, somehow the city needed to keep the bodies until families could make plans. The OCME holds all NYC dead until claimed by funeral directors on behalf of families. It rapidly established around fifty new mobile morgue trailers, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency sent eighty-five more. These fifty-three-foot refrigerated trailers or freight trucks extended the city's morgue freezer system, with shelving installed so each trailer could store up to 100 bodies. Parked around city streets in open view, this new mortuary ritual of storing bodies in temporary morgues became a highly visible manifestation of the city's crisis.

Covid-19 highlighted Hart Island's stigma. Even though emergency conditions demanded improvisation to handle soaring numbers of dead, some families strove to avoid Hart Island. I take the city's resolution of the problem of storing the excess dead as a site for analysing the temporal tensions between professionals, civic authorities, and mourners. I focus especially on the dead whose families could not look after them. Covid-19 complicated people's temporal experiences of caring for the dead and challenged New Yorkers' expected rhythms of mourning. Professionals caring for the overload of dead experienced time differently in these extreme circumstances, as their priorities competed with a body's biological schedule and the virus' own terrible pace. Consequently, makeshift solutions crystallized various hierarchies of stigma in NYC deathcare. Hart Island is an everyday option for those who cannot afford a funeral and was specifically available to help with Covid-19's death toll.

Even so, some families preferred to store their loved ones in morgue trucks for months over the stigma of prompt anonymous burial in a massed grave.

Figure 3. 'Refrigerated tractor trailers …'
'… used to store bodies of deceased people are seen at a temporary morgue, during the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Brooklyn, New York'. 5 May 2020. (Credit: Brendan McDermid, Reuters Pictures.)

This new temporary hospitality for the dead also revealed aspects of social relations between the dead and the living that would otherwise have remained muted, including the ongoing, sometimes competing responsibilities of care that shift between the city's bureaucrats, deathcare professionals, mourners, and others (Trnka & Trundle 2017). While questions of how to decently keep up with the dead were so urgent, decisions about how to celebrate and remember them were postponed. And while New Yorkers grappled with what they owed their dead neighbours and friends, families grimly weighed up the least shameful option for their most loved.

This chapter introduces the key themes of citizenship, memorialization, and stigma through the case study of NYC's excess mortality during Covid-19's first wave of Spring 2020. The theme of the ordinary is addressed by its inverse, as so many practices of ordinary life were interrupted, including care of the dead; the rupturing of everyday life also revealed practices that were tolerated or accepted as ordinary. Forms of care temporarily compensated for memorialization, which was necessarily delayed; but the need to settle the dead into

normal posthumous relations, including unstigmatized citizenship, became rapidly urgent. Throughout my analysis, I follow Hertz's (1960) instruction to follow the corpse, and also insist on the materiality, fate, and affective power of the corpse itself, rather than its symbols and representations (Verdery 1999), as the object of analysis and a charged site of the political (Newby & Toulson 2018). Attending to what is at stake and for whom in this curious phenomenon of body storage – including who goes into the morgue trucks, who comes out, and when – reveals the necropolitics of everyday, vernacular death (Toulson forthcoming), and the resilience of ritual, even in extreme circumstances. I examine two cases of deathcare within NYC's first wave of Covid-19: that offered by the Hebrew Free Burial Association, which provided funerals to those in their community who had no one to care for them, striving to save them from massed public burials; and that delivered by Dan Flynn, a Californian funeral director brought in as part of the federal response, who prepared bodies for burial on Hart Island.

Hebrew Free Burial's staff shared some perspectives with Dan, but their experiences also contrast. In offering accounts of such work during Covid-19, I document the everyday labour of deathcare, of which there are still comparatively few records in anthropological literature (Carden 2001; Schafer 2007; Harper 2010; Olson 2018; Sanders 2018; Howarth 1996; Toulson 2018). Dan prepared bodies for burial on Hart Island, which he viewed as a practical and decent solution to the terrible problem of so many dead, whereas Hebrew Free worked hard to ensure no Jewish person was buried there. Both Dan and Hebrew Free worked at speed while under great pressure, though for Hebrew Free this was a religious obligation as well as a practical one. Together, these two contrasting cases of the lived experience of those who handled the bodies provides a counterpoint to the views of experts and cemetery administrators (chap. 2). While cemetery managers and researchers could take a more contextual view of the logistical pressures on and ultimate resilience of NYC's deathcare institutions during the crisis, the morticians and funeral staff dealing directly with the dead and their families were unavoidably confronted by the compromises that were now necessary and the distress these caused. As an experienced disaster responder, Dan was confident about the work he performed. Hebrew Free was not without disaster experience, but most staff had nothing with which to compare Spring 2020.

Keeping hold of the bodies

By early April 2020, every sequential step along NYC's death infrastructure was delayed, from retrieving bodies from the place of death, identifying and cataloguing them, notifying families who then appointed funeral directors, funeral homes' collecting bodies from a

morgue or place of death, storing and preparing them, and then conducting the actual funerals, burials, and cremations. Across the city, families were turned away by funeral homes or waited up to five weeks or longer for burial slots, which would usually accommodate funerals less than a week after a death. Funeral homes and cemeteries became short-staffed as workers fell ill or isolated. Suppliers ran short of body bags and coffins. Funeral homes stopped answering the phone. Mortuaries and funeral homes urgently redesigned practices such as social distancing and wearing protective clothing to limit potential infection of staff and mourners. They streamlined ceremonies according to constantly changing restrictions on wakes and funerals as public gatherings. Inevitably, funeral directors reported running out of space to store bodies and shared stories of bodies being misidentified.

Despite crematories receiving dispensation from the city to operate at all hours, cemeteries and crematories simply could not keep up. Phil Tassi of Ferncliff Cemetery in Westchester, just north of NYC, explained that they usually cremated about twelve bodies a day. By early April, Ferncliff was cremating about forty before 11 am. 'We're running sixteen hours a day and we hit capacity … we can't keep up with the number of bodies coming in,' he said, adding that cremators are fragile and expensive to repair. Two of NYC's crematories had retorts[16] break down, likely from overuse (Davies 2020). Cremation slots became so difficult to book that funeral directors started taking bodies to nearby states like New Jersey for cremation.

By early April, the city had also ramped up burials on Hart Island. Widespread alarm from NYC bodegas to national news media to the Pope made clear that trench burials were deeply distressing even as a contingency (Esteves 2020).

On 6 April 2020, NYC Council Health Committee chair Mark Levine tweeted that due to the climbing daily Covid-19 death toll, the OCME's morgue freezers in Manhattan and Brooklyn would soon be full and the 'traditional burial system has largely frozen up'. New Yorkers needed to prepare for a 'gruesome reality' for the bodies of Covid-19 victims, he said:

> *Soon we'll start 'temporary interment.' This likely will be done by using a NYC park for burials (yes you read that right).*

[16] The individual chamber with an industrial furnace for cremating the body, also known as a cremator.

> *Trenches will be dug for 10 caskets in a line. It will be done in a dignified, orderly – and temporary – manner. But it will be tough for NYers to take.*[17] (Levine 2020)

The surreal idea that beloved landmarks like Central Park and Bryant Park would become temporary burial grounds quickly seized people's imagination, symbolising how authorities struggled to manage the excess mortality as death became an unavoidable and visible part of city life. Bryant Park had formerly been a potter's field, and part of Central Park had once been used as a cemetery, but these histories are now mostly forgotten (chap. 2 and 6). Later that day, the OCME stated it was not considering temporary burials in parks, and Mayor Bill de Blasio likewise denied it. Eventually, Levine deleted his tweet, acknowledging that if temporary burials were needed they would be on Hart Island – where bodies would be buried 100 at a time, not 10 as he had warned. However, Levine had correctly observed both that temporary park burials were possible within the disaster protocol guiding the OCME, The Pandemic Influenza Surge Plan for In- and Out-of-Hospital Deaths (Hirsch 2008) – and that the OCME needed a solution quickly.

As the death toll continued rising, the OCME followed the next option from this plan for handling excess mortality, adopting the morgue trailer protocol. The 135 trailers provided by OCME and FEMA could store up to 13,500 bodies. If this proved insufficient, the next option for storing bodies would be temporary burial.

During NYC's crisis, the new mortuary ritual of storing bodies in temporary morgues became highly visible. Refrigerated containers, a prosaic taken-for-granted object of industrial society, had been converted into something deeply troubling. Open to public view, with doors open for loading so that the bodies inside were visible, trailers were parked on city streets, near hospitals, in front of apartments, sidewalks, and oncoming traffic, loaded with bodies from nearby hospitals. At Brooklyn Hospital Center, plastic-shrouded bodies were forklifted into a trailer (Troutman 2020). Many found New York's new reality alarming. Even President Trump commented, 'To see the scenes of trailers out there and what they're doing with those trailers – they're freezers, and nobody can even believe it' (Bumsted & Sisak 2020). Having morgue trailers become commonplace struck New Yorkers' as an existential crisis, as though they were living through a plague, confined to their apartments by what was then a little understood and often untreatable disease. The familiar cause-and-effect of everyday life had been replaced by uncertainty and unpredictability so completely that the

[17] Though the tweet was quickly deleted it was widely reported (eg Marsh et al. 2020).

future became hard to anticipate; the present surrounding of death and suffering, visually represented by mobile morgues on the streets, was too vivid (Bryant 2016). As the President remarked, it was hard to fathom.

Morgue trailers are, in fact, a standard global method of providing additional morgue storage whenever mass fatalities occur and had been used in the US for decades. Amongst the deathcare professionals I spoke with, morgue trailers pragmatically signal that a disaster plan is working, because the additional capacity increases order and predictability in an overloaded system. They literally provide space and time to organize the dead. Publicly, John Fudenberg, the executive director of the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners, said, 'I think it will be … the future, because it's a lot more socially acceptable and more sensitive than temporary burial' (Otterman 2020). Why morgue trailers were more sensitive was not articulated. Perhaps people wrongly assumed refrigeration would halt biological decay, so that the body's physical state would not be much impacted by long delays in arranging the funeral – or that the prospect of a future mass disinterment was alarming. Indeed, other cities were making similar plans. In London, options included adapting containers to hold racks of bodies and storing them on-board a ship anchored in the Thames (Booth 2021); other excess mortality management plans involved aircraft hangars and industrial warehouses (*ibid.*). As funeral directors explained to me, the crucial requirement for the temporary storage of the dead is to minimize each body's movement between locations and custodians, mostly because every transfer risks misidentification or loss. Identification of the dead matters to both professionals and the bereaved. One foresees the possibility of misidentification and plans to prevent it; the other experiences it when processes fail.

New Yorkers outside of the cohort of deathcare professionals – and some within it – talked to me with astonishment and weariness about the bodies being warehoused around the city in giant freezers, a visual equivalent to the piercing ambulance sirens that had become a grimly constant soundtrack. Initially, the morgue trucks seemed almost fantastical. Even deathcare professionals, who knew all too well the immediate and urgent need for additional morgue capacity, were deeply alarmed at the disorganization and disrespect of the dead they had seen inside some trucks. Perhaps morgue trailers were more socially acceptable than massed temporary burials of bodies in parks, which was considered grossly inadequate, but it was far from clear to many people that they were an optimal or sensitive solution by any means. Politicians and officials may have talked as though they had solved the problem of body storage with morgue trucks, but deathcare workers knew this was only temporary. Of course,

refrigeration could slow down decomposition but could not completely suspend it, as David Fleming, the lobbyist for the NYC Association of Cemeteries (chap. 2), observed in frustration. Some communities found this solution more problematic than others. Facing a high death toll within their own community, Hebrew Free kept striving to provide the swift burials ordered for orthodox Jews by the Torah.

A final kindness

NYC is home to one of the world's largest Jewish communities: about 1.1 million NYC residents, or roughly twelve per cent of the population, are Jewish (Cohen et al. 2011).[18] Orthodox Jewish burials are holy rituals that require the deceased to be buried promptly, which practically means within the day. The body must be washed but not embalmed, wrapped in a simple shroud, and placed in a plain but specially crafted pine box. There is no viewing or visitation. Even under normal circumstances, achieving a timely and prompt burial requires work as a matter of religious urgency.

The Hebrew Free Burial Association offers free burials for Jewish people who die in NYC. It is devoted to performing *chesed shel emet* (literally 'the truest act of kindness', or kindness to a dead person). Established in 1888 to provide free burials for Manhattan's Lower East Side residents, it now serves all indigent Jews in the broader metropolitan area of NYC regardless of denominational affiliation. Hebrew Free Burial is the largest Jewish free burial society outside of Israel and has buried approximately 65,000 Jews. An extensive network of community contacts and social service agencies will notify Hebrew Free Burial staff when a Jewish person dies, or even when death is imminent, so Hebrew Free Burial can quickly take responsibility for the body. The staff of ten arrange for the deceased to be removed and rituals begin as soon as possible after death: the *tahara* (spiritual purification of the soul through water) is performed by the *chevra kadisha* (the 'holy society' that prepares a body for Jewish burial). The multilingual staff (English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, Polish, Spanish) can help mourners coordinate with government agencies, guiding the death benefits claims process from the Human Resources Administration, Social Security Administration or Veterans' Administration. In short, they do what is required to ensure that every Jew receives an appropriate funeral and burial regardless of circumstance, and staff will go to considerable lengths to advocate for this. Because the Torah instructs that burial must occur as quickly as possible, Hebrew Free Burial phonelines are open twenty-four hours a day, every day. A

[18] Reportedly the second largest Jewish metropolitan community after Tel Aviv (Cohen et al. 2011).

network of volunteers supports Hebrew Free Burial, and for several months I helped with filing, data entry, and administrative tasks.

Following the required ritual preparations, the *chevra* shroud the deceased and place them in a kosher casket made entirely of untreated wood, constructed without nails or metal hinges, and with holes in the bottom to provide contact with the earth. Hebrew Free Burial's Rabbi Shmuel Plafker officiates each graveside funeral at their cemetery, Staten Island's Mount Richmond, and every burial is individual and receives a memorial headstone.[19] Throughout, simplicity is essential. In these ways, an indigent Hebrew burial is recognizably similar to a 'normal' New York funeral (chap. 2), at least compared with a Hart Island burial. 'Indigent' is the word used by Hebrew Free Burial staff themselves, for individuals and families who lack the means to pay for a funeral, and which the staff interpret as 'those who can't return the kindness.' For Hebrew Free Burial staff, *chesed shel emet* and the kosher burial it enacts are sacred obligations, and respect for the dead could be measured by the hours between death and burial. The staff knew the morgue trucks held members of their community who would eventually be released to them for burial, and every lost day between death and burial was an insult.

For Hebrew Free Burial, the morgue trailers were a pragmatic solution, but one weighted with frustration and tragedy. They signified that many, many people had died unnecessarily, often those who were poor and isolated. For observant New York Jews, storing bodies in trailers meant breaching *k'vod hamet*, traditional principles for honouring the dead. When the body had been stored in a morgue truck there would be undue delays before burial, and sacred care rituals, though never abandoned, would require abbreviation. When Hebrew Free Burial's *tahara* team tried to work with corpses that had been frozen, the partially defrosting bodies distressed everyone. After that, the team performed a token *tahara* on frozen bodies, dressing them in shrouds and doing whatever else was possible. Hebrew Free Burial's chief executive Amy Koplow summarized what others also told me: that to be unable to perform these sacred rituals was 'really very, very tragic, and of course, it's the most tragic cases, it's people who don't have any next of kin.'

[19] Every charitable burial received a named and dated headstone. I helped out on gravestone delivery day, when staff check the shipment of headstones individually for masonry and stone quality, that the headstone is clean, and that those without next of kin are named correctly.

How Hebrew Free Burial adapted during Covid-19

Before the pandemic, an average day for Hebrew Free Burial saw one burial and a 'crazy day' would be five, explained Amy, who led the tight-knit staff of ten-plus volunteers. During Covid-19's first wave, this would reach twelve burials a day. Amy is lively, slight, and dark-haired, with an easy manner and a frank warmth. I asked Amy what had surprized her most about the pandemic. She first talked with great pride about the resilience and committed performance of her staff. She then talked frankly about how the city had been caught unprepared.

> *[it was] a big shock that even after 9/11, the Medical Examiner's Office, well, the mass casualty surge plan was not very well thought out … Funeral directors were turning chapels into refrigerated rooms by cranking up the aircon. It was insane! So many people got lost and the care facilities were losing their minds.*

Amy also echoed concerns that other cemetery managers would articulate (chap. 2), that NYC's excess mortality had caused an administrative and logistical overload. In her view this had prompted hasty solutions being proposed before consequences were properly considered, leading to a breakdown in what should have been an orderly process.

> *And I was on these weekly calls with the Medical Examiner's Office … the beginning of April, they talked about their mass casualty surge plan [tone turns incredulous] They were gonna bury people on an interim basis in New York City parks … like grasping at straws! … just horrifying. And funeral directors started jumping up and down and screaming immediately, to the press … [the plan turned out] to be burying people in City Cemetery*[20] *and that's when the ME's office then bought their sixty refrigerated morgue trailers and set them up mostly in Brooklyn at the Marine Terminal. And y'know there are some still there. And what they're doing is freezing bodies, these bodies that haven't been claimed, they're frozen.*

When Amy says this, it is literal, as the bodies are temporarily preserved by refrigeration. Biological decay has been slowed, though not halted. That they're frozen is also metaphorical, as they are administratively stuck or lodged firmly in place. The work of freeing these temporally and spatially stuck bodies lies in the administrative and legal tasks

[20] City Cemetery at Hart Island, the official name for the cemetery, used only by funeral professionals and bureaucrats (chap. 4).

that occur concurrently with the physical cataloguing, preparation, and casketing that a mortician performs. This bureaucratic unfreezing – knowing who they are or classifying them as unknown, securing a next of kin or alternative to authorize payment for burial or other disposal, and booking this – must be completed before the body can be removed from the trailer or physically unfrozen (such as releasing them to a funeral director, or taking the body to Hart Island). Another way to think about the deceased as frozen is how the dead are now held within time, as death takes a snapshot of relationships and identities, fixing in place patterns of connection and reciprocity, intimacy, and distance, which have flowed across a lifetime.

As Amy explained, every link in the custodial chain of care for the body was confronted by the escalation in deaths:

> *[everyone] had to figure it out. The funeral directors and the cemeteries and the crematoria just did not have the capacity. … the hospitals didn't have the capacity, families waited weeks for a grave opening … cemeteries didn't have the staff, and let's say someone had to wait three or four weeks to get into a grave in the cemetery, at one point it was waiting six weeks for a space in a crematorium.*

Hebrew Free also began tracking when they received rapid increases in cases, tracing it to when the OCME was well-staffed and focused on releasing bodies from the morgue trailers.

Hebrew Free's operations manager and funeral director, Andrew Parver, is a warm, energetic, pragmatic person, eager and sincere. During March 2020, as the pandemic began, Andrew tried to predict what the organization would need. He stocked up on caskets, garments for the dead, protective gear for workers, bleach, and other supplies. Imagining the worst-case scenario, he ordered a mortuary cooler that could hold four extra bodies to supplement their regular morgue storage. Merely ten days later, Andrew bought Hebrew Free Burial its own forty-foot refrigerated trailer that could hold twenty bodies. By then, staff were texting each other about death certificates at 2 am, receiving dozens of calls at a time, and burying up to twelve people every day. 'We didn't even get the stupid four-body thing until sometime in May,' laughed Amy. 'It's just hilarious that we thought we'll be okay if we can hold another four!' Having their own forty-foot trailer made it easier to manage the volume of work and provided Hebrew Free Burial with some autonomy over how bodies were cared for. 'It was much more respectful than some of the morgue trailers at hospitals where,

y'know, the morgue workers were climbing over bodies,' Amy added. 'They were just dumped on the floor.'

Covid-19 shaped all aspects of Andrew's life during Spring 2020. His wife, an oncology nurse, contracted the virus early and was seriously ill for two months. They have two young children. 'They have a greater exposure and understanding of death than most children, given our jobs,' he smiled. Andrew's work regularly took him to hospital morgues, and it was during one such call that he truly grasped the scale of the crisis.

> *There was one day, one of the early days, the trailers weren't even in the hospitals yet but I had gone into a morgue that would usually have, I don't know, four or five bodies in it, though in theory they could have eight, ten, maybe fifteen. And it was full. Early on in the crisis, and that hit me.*

Shortly after this, the OCME rolled the trailers out across the city.

> *You'd go to a hospital that had five trailers in the back in their parking garage, and it was like, okay one trailer's bad, but five! I mean think about that for a second – two hundred feet worth of storage for deceased! Every hospital was different, some had shelves and they were organized nicely. Some [pause] yeah one of the most tragic things I ever saw in my life. And opening some of these trailers, y'know? Dozens [of bodies]. I mean, depending on how they built the trailer, were there shelves, how crowded, a lot of things. It was horrible. We're talking [pause] it was heavy. It was very heavy.*

Heavy is a word that Andrew used often to indicate an emotional burden of great weight or force, caused by serious unpleasantness and distress. I asked him about the emotional toll of this time and what he imagined he'd remember about these events. He smiled frankly and paused. He described a sense of solidarity with other deathcare professionals as they were all suspended within time (cf. Bryant 2016), and the temporary social distance between those with direct experience of the deaths and others who did not.

> *What I remember? We had no hours. I'm on the road, I'm going from one hospital to another, and I get a text from another colleague, and just said, just checking in. And it was 2 in the morning, cos the rabbis were busy. So I called him, I'm like, well I know you're up! And y'know we talked from 2 to 2:30am.*

Another funeral director colleague, we had a nice conversation once at 5:50 in the morning. From 5:50 to 6:15. We had no *hours. If you were involved, you were sleeping two hours a day, three hours a day, weird times, and there's a good chance, you'd just shoot somebody a text, "You up?" You get a call right back. And we were just talking, just to commiserate with one another, or to relate to one another, or just to talk about – we were saying, "What insanity did you have yesterday?" "Well let me tell you what I saw".*

Andrew also recalled that during this time, his professional work gave him a novel authority within his community, which carried an additional responsibility to educate people with accurate information but without causing undue alarm.

I had to be careful … I don't think anybody was immune to it and nobody pretended it wasn't happening, but people didn't necessarily want to hear it … I'd get a call, say, I just saw this on the news, I don't believe this, is this true? And I'm like, uh it's worse than what you saw. Like, the news was dumbing it down. Y'know it was weird … the funeral director is not a job that people want to hang out with. But I definitely was for that period.

Between lockdowns, travel restrictions, isolating exposed family members, and the limits imposed by cemeteries, many NYC funerals were conducted without mourners. Mount Richmond and Hebrew Free Burial prohibited mourners from attending the graveside. Instead, mourners could drive in, park fifty feet away from the grave, remain in their vehicles and watch from there, listening to the streamlined service by cellphone. Cemetery staff, working at pace and under pressure, appreciated the limits on visitors. If someone did not know what was happening, Andrew explained, it looked like mayhem, with traffic from vans delivering bodies, dirt piled up beside freshly opened graves, lines of white signs indicating graves freshly occupied, the cemetery crew dressed in white personal protective equipment (PPE) with gloves and masks, the ritual care teams responsible for *tahara* and *chevra kadisa*, the cleansing and covering of the body, in PPE with N95 masks and face shields. 'Ready for a moonwalk,' smiled Amy. 'We were scheduling burials like every twenty minutes, those days with twelve burials. When family came we would have a limit, who came, and only one car, and they couldn't get out of the car.' Andrew described the scene at Mount Richmond Cemetery on Staten Island:

Bodies were coming in, bodies were going straight to the graves, it was – if you didn't know what was going on it would look so chaotic … Funeral one,

> *funeral two – and they were happening, they'd be burying one body, doing another tahara while another body was coming in and it would just be constant. Which is why we were so careful with checking, double checking, triple checking, the names, the graves, everything.*

Staff were concerned at how detached this seemed and worried that mourners would find it added to their distress. The funerals were truncated and awkward, the workload so heavy, together with the exhausting pace at which they were now operating, they briefly but seriously discussed the value of conducting these graveside video calls. Was it worth it? Perhaps it would be better to simply ask families not to attend. They decided if families wanted them, the rituals should continue; families were still showing up, so the ceremonies were clearly serving a need. Whatever small consolation the families found in watching the masked-up Rabbi via video call was worthwhile when people could not gather for prayer or worship, visit friends and family, hug or shake hands.

The staff were greatly frustrated by errors that occurred beyond their control. For instance, one day a man arrived for his father's funeral as scheduled. He had to be told apologetically that the hospital had not yet released his father's body, so the funeral would have to be held the next day.

Andrew explained other ways that the preparation rituals were adapted during Covid-19. The small, gendered care teams had to manage bodies with different causes of death: some had died of Covid-19, some were suspected to have Covid-19 but had not been tested, some died of other causes, some had come frozen from the morgue trailers. Speed became paramount. In the pandemic's first months, people speculated about how the infection spread and were unsure whether the disease survived in a corpse.

> *I mean, we didn't cut corners … the goal was to get in, to get out. There were unknowns at the time. People were not sure what the risk was of a deceased … we're trying to social distance, stay away from each other, and yet here you have people in very small quarters, in a very intense environment, working. In a significant amount of PPE.*

Team members that were older or otherwise vulnerable were replaced, and working relationships became tight-knit. Team members had to be experienced at working together, experienced at performing *tahara*, and know each other well enough to be able to communicate when gowned and masked. Working at speed was essential to minimising

infection risk, so it became the foundation for caring both for the dead and for deathcare workers.

A view from inside the morgue trucks

Within the morgue trucks, work was also performed at great pace. One of those inside the trucks was Dan Flynn, a Southern Californian funeral director with thirty years of disaster response experience. He is stocky and middle-aged with thick white hair and moved calmly and quickly in a way to suggest he would stay cool-headed in an emergency. His blue-grey eyes watch with keen and kind intelligence, as if he is rarely surprized.

Dan was already a funeral director when the 2001 World Trade Center attacks occurred. He was motivated by the incident to become trained to use his professional skills in mass fatality emergencies. Dan joined the Federal Heavy Search and Rescue Team, an interdisciplinary crew of emergency response experts specialising in highly urban environments. These reserve teams can be rapidly assembled and deployed both nationally and internationally. They include experts in search and rescue, communications and logistics, medics, canine search, and structural assessment: the kind of skilled professionals who dig people out of collapsed buildings. Dan is involved through the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams (DMORT), specialists in disaster victim identification and mortuary work following mass fatalities. He holds a master's degree in the sociology of disaster response and participates in the death-positive community,[21] which is how we met. His spouse directs a hospice. We talked after Dan had returned home from his three-week tour in NYC, shortly before he departed for another. He described how college cultural anthropology courses spurred his personal and professional interest in the death industry. 'I'm fascinated by the way the living look at the dead. Why do we fear them? Why do we fear death? Why does one culture handle death this way and another culture handles it this way? …That's what fascinates me.' As Dan had worked as a mass fatality responder for thirty years, I asked him how the pandemic compared to other disasters he had worked.

> *Very similar to a tornado response. Tornadoes are sudden, extremely acute, whereas hurricanes, you got a week. You know they're coming … But a tornado, much more devastating … because at best you've got 15 seconds.*

[21] Networks of professionals and activists who share information and advocacy to demystify and empower people about death and deathcare. I met Dan through Reimagine, a non-profit organisation that hosts community festivals connecting creatives, professionals, and community groups interested in exploring themes of death and life.

> *At best. And that was the feeling in New York. It just hit so fast … They never saw it coming.*

He described his deployment to NYC and orientation with DMORT colleagues. They were sent to the South Brooklyn Marine Terminal in NYC's inner harbour – under the gaze of the Statue of Liberty – and set up beside the trailers, 'just refrigerated eighteen-wheeler trucks, they put in shelving units so inside the trucks it looked like any morgue'. Dan described his very first task:

> *Clear out the refrigerators, they had the city cases – the ones that're gonna go to Hart's Island.* [22] *For whatever reason, I don't know why, when you've got someone who's going to Hart Island, there's no rush to get 'em there. I think they kind of get lost in the shuffle*

Dan described how the dead destined for Hart Island came out to the tent on gurneys, where Dan and his colleagues, all wearing hooded hazmat suits, gloves, and visors, followed the same procedure for each body. Each one was examined, photographed and fingerprinted, issued a reference number, tagged, and its data loaded into computers. These cataloguing tasks recorded the dead person's individual identity and, in the now rare cases when the person is unidentified or their next of kin cannot be found, mean that in the future the person could be identified and connected with family from these records, and could facilitate a disinterment if the family wished it. These cataloguing tasks were especially important during lockdowns when people could not get to their deceased to formally identify them.

Each body was then casketed[23] into plain pine boxes built by prisoners, wheeled to a morgue truck, and placed on one of the three tiers of wooden shelving, with its row and column position recorded. When full, the truck was wheeled out to the parking lot to wait for DOC before heading for Hart Island. Bodies not going to Hart Island would be held in another truck until collected by a funeral director.

Dan implied that the stored bodies had necessarily endured a lack of respect and dignity that he and his colleagues could rectify, that these people were not receiving burials at the same pace as others whose families had arranged their funeral because they were not

[22] Hart Island is sometimes referred to as Hart's Island, never an official name but one that remains in circulation and derives from the mistaken belief that the island was historically owned by settlers called Hart. People often use both, as does Dan.

[23] People buried on Hart Island are not embalmed. This is important to the argument that Hart Island should become a green burial ground (chap. 6).

receiving bureaucratic and physical care at the right time. He emphasized that there was nothing novel about what he and his colleagues were doing in the emergency.

> *The City of New York is not doing anything different from what it always does, it's just doing it at accelerated pace … I equate it to the 'I Love Lucy' episode where she's working in the candy factory, the belt gets faster and faster – but the care in the role is still taken … Everything stops when the casket truck comes, y'know they're delivering fifty at a time.*

For morgue workers like Dan, speed *is* care. Even so, what marked the DMORT teams as experts was their ability to deliver a high standard of care to the deceased at a terrific pace, one set by the virus itself. Dan was frustrated by the media coverage of the morgue trailers, which he thought sensationalized an ordinary and professional way of managing the overwhelming numbers of bodies, and undermined the professionals doing meticulous work in emergency conditions. For him, there should be no shame or stigma surrounding morgue trailers or a Hart Island burial:

> *Why would somebody try to incite anger or panic, why you would do that? … I thought it was really poor form – look they're just stacking bodies in refrigerated trailers! Yeah, that's the mass fatality! You bring in refrigerated trailers! Where would you like us to put them, you know? They're all in trailers and they're all catalogued!*

Like Andrew, Dan emphasized that caring for bodies always involved painstaking administrative work, especially during emergencies: the risk of errors increased during the speed of work required by mass fatalities, and the suffering for mourners and logistical difficulties for professionals when errors happen also intensified. For Dan, the morgue trailers meant that the bodies could be safely stored, clearly identified and recorded, and handled respectfully and carefully. Temporary morgue storage provided time and space to organize the deceased. When Dan described Hart Island as 'like a giant underground filing system for bodies' he did so with warm admiration, because being able to produce order from the chaos of mass fatality, by cataloguing bodies and preparing them for burial, is a civilising gift that funeral workers see as a balm to grief.

I asked Dan about the emotional toll of this work. He smiled. He was used to the question. 'It's what I do. To see a room with rows and rows of body bags, of human bodies, my reaction is, it's gonna be a long day.'

‘Same as we do’

Recent scholarship has argued that care, as the embodied attention to the needs of others (Buch 2015; Kleinman 2009; Taylor 2008), has become ‘an ambiguous commodity’ (Manelin 2020). Care is often an ‘ambivalent act that can entail risks and trade-offs … constantly being remade by those who participate in it’ (Seo 2020: 6) and replete with competing priorities, tensions, uncertainties, and contingencies. Much care work is fundamentally unsettled as a complex, morally ambiguous, and relationally unstable set of practices with temporal dimensions over the life course (Cook & Trundle 2020).

Ethnographic studies have unsettled common-sense understandings of care by documenting how care can compensate for other moral goods and subject positions such as autonomy, choice, rights, and citizenship (Mol 2008; Kleinman 2009). Further, many contemporary forms of care are regulated by or compete with notions of independence, control, and choice (Brodwin 2013; Mol 2008; Pols 2006; Pols et al. 2017; Stevenson 2014; Taylor 2008). Caring requires ‘physical stamina, emotional strength, and mental acuity along with nervous energy’ (Adams 2017: 766), and its obligations and imperatives can include coercive, conscripted, and subverting elements. In particular, the moral imperatives and practical capacities of tending to others are entangled with the messiness, obligations, junctures, and inherent vagaries of daily practices in social life.

Then, everyone working in NYC deathcare knew all too well that the pandemic had radically compromised caring conditions beyond any individual’s control (McKearney 2020). Care was understood as the antithesis of stigma and due to all New Yorkers: it is bodies that are uncared for that are shameful. A muted version of this often played out in the duality of everyday mortuary work. For instance, in what Toulson describes as a tender deceit (forthcoming), morticians make a version of death visible but simultaneously keep certain, often intimate, secrets as part of their care.

What NYC ultimately offered as care for the dead – a free burial on Hart Island – was often understood as an insult to be avoided if possible, or at least as inadequate, owing to perceived shameful deficiencies of respect, sociality, and individual recognition, amongst other things. Yet rituals of deathcare were compromised under the exigencies of Covid-19, and adaptive responses and alternate forms of care were introduced. The bodies in the morgue trucks could not be prepared in the usual ways. Frozen bodies cannot easily be washed, repositioned, embalmed, or dressed. People also worried early in the pandemic that corpses might transmit infection. Deathcare staff worked in restrictive and uncomfortable PPE but still needed to work at pace, both to reduce the chances of infection and crucially

because the volume of dead demanded it. Limits on public gatherings and travel had radically restructured funerals: the body would not be seen again by relatives, though closed coffins might play a modest part in pared-down rituals. The resilience of ritual meant that people adapted funerals and memorials, such as moving them online (Rial 2022). Cremation allowed families to time-shift the funeral ceremony, pressing pause on the ritual clock (chap. 2). Contrary to Troyer's sense of an American funeral's distinctively homogeneous role for the corpse (2020: 54), with the body transformed by technological innovations into a distinctive modern consumer product, the corpse would not be included in these rituals.

Consequently, the morgue trucks also raise important questions about *who* is being cared for. The body receives the acts of care – it can hardly refuse, though through circumstances of dying or decomposition, some dead bodies resist care in inventive ways. Yet throughout these processes, the body retains a conceptual ambiguity, cared for both as object and person.

So who is it that receives the focus of care within the morgue trucks, where the body will not emerge as a ritually prepared corpse, no-one expects the bereaved to see the body again, and the deathcare workers are unlikely to meet the bereaved? If care is relational, what relationships are in play here? I suggest that deathcare workers remain motivated by an imagined sense of the bereaved. As one funeral director told me, 'We can't find the family right now, they can't see the body because the virus, whatever reason, we wanna reassure them, we took care of him. Same as we do [for anyone]. Y'know?' This statement anticipates the potential need to account to the bereaved in the future because every person has a family and a community, every corpse has its bereaved, even if they are not currently present. The statement also offered a keen sense of professionalism: these are our standards, even if no-one is watching and we work in isolation, this work has a moral value of its own. The funeral director suggested that the dead are due care as an intrinsic right, regardless of whether they will be seen again or have anyone to claim them, even if they are unknown. A frozen body remains suspended biologically and within social relations. It receives care to signify that they were a person, and were part of this community, those who called NYC home.

Covid-19 funerals, poverty, and time

What I have described is one moment early in Covid-19's first wave in NYC. The pandemic and the city's response would move on. But then, people felt suspended within time, so that hours and days passed both quickly and slowly, making it difficult to keep track (Bryant 2016). People speculated about how long we would live like this, which turned out to be far, far longer than almost anyone outside of professional epidemiology could imagine. But right then, as New Yorkers collectively halted, there was a sense of awe and wonder. The virus'

force unfurled in slow motion, becoming omnipresent and seemingly omnipotent. When people recalled the World Trade Center attacks, as they often did at that time, they remembered an affectively comparable moment of awe, when the city knew itself to be in the presence of a terrible power. It was a moment beyond belief.

Very suddenly and publicly, New Yorkers had a new mortuary ritual – temporary residences for the dead – to deal with modernity's peculiar problem of holding death close, but not too close. Beyond questions of ritual, recognition, and respect, it involved issues of biology and space, control and consent. The bodies, held by the state, needed storing because a person who dies cannot be buried until their family arranges it. If the family lacks means, refuses the responsibility, or cannot be found, the state must do it. But ideally, the state cannot bury someone unless the family consents. In the meantime, the best solution was to warehouse bodies in giant mobile freezers.

To see a dead human on the street was markedly different from the presence of other matter out of place (Douglas 1969) such as a tomato can or a dead pigeon (Verdery 1999: 32; cf. Hertz 1960: 27). Corpses are 'indisputably *there*' (Verdery 1999: 27, original emphasis), constituting 'heavy symbols' (*ibid*. 32). Engelke (2019, 2021) argued that 'this thing that is always more than a thing' (Laqueur 2015: xiv; cf. Schwartz 2015; Verdery 1999; Engelke 2021) often provides a persistent antidote to contemporary disenchantment. The morgue trucks added a tangible weight to the dreamlike state of locked down NYC.

Issues of how death and grief are managed and experienced return us inevitably to the political, to how lives are governed, and how death and grief are mobilized in the constitution of social or political orders that help constitute society and the self in the process of naturalising death and grief (Bloch & Parry 1982; Arnar & Hafsteinsson 2018). Analysing the morgue trucks as care of the dead combines local understandings and intentions of what good deathcare requires, and different perspectives of the scale and speed of this care. Questions of how to remember the dead, how to avoid stigma in death, and what people owed their dead fellow New Yorkers were complex, overlapping, urgent, and stubbornly intractable.

Conclusion: caring for the dead at different paces

In May 2021, I joined another NYC Council hearing on Hart Island's future (NYCC 2021). During the pandemic, the city had increased its burial grant from $900 to $1,700 – an amount that would still not cover the costs of a basic funeral (about $9,000 in NYC, NYC Bar n.d.). Federal government also launched funeral grants of several thousand dollars, designed to aid households whose grief was compounded by great financial stress, widespread layoffs, and

ruptures in NYC's platform and informal economies (Gamboa 2021). Yet Hart Island had been busy – and while many families reconciled themselves with the island, some 750 bodies were still held in refrigerated trailers on Brooklyn's 39th Street pier, many dating from the first wave a year earlier. Politicians at the hearing were incredulous: to store the deceased for this long was a disgrace. What was going on here? Dina Maniotis, a deputy commissioner at the OCME, agreed that many of the bodies held in the trucks could end up buried in the city's potter's field on Hart Island. She added that many families were still trying to make arrangements. But the burial grant programmes had been widely available for months, countered the politicians. Officials from the Human Resources Agency's new Office for Burial Assistance explained that only 476 of 3,549 burial grant applications had been approved – some thirteen per cent. Two-thirds of these had been declined because of missing paperwork while other applicants had simply abandoned the process. The politicians pivoted back to Maniotis and her OCME colleagues. How soon could the bodies held in the morgue trucks be buried on Hart Island? asked a council member. OCME officials assured the meeting that the deceased would be buried on Hart Island as soon as families consented – effectively dismissing the clear evidence that this seemed to be precisely what the bereaved families were trying so hard to avoid. These families, facing dire finances or other complications, had already had many months to consider the option of a Hart Island burial and had not accepted it.

At least two different temporal frames are operating here: one that sees prompt public burial as evidence of care, for the public and the deceased, and a second in which some families value other qualities over the timely interment of their loved one, even if that holds the body in limbo for months. These competing temporalities illustrate the 'social tension often found between concern for the dead in general with anxiety over the dead in particular' (Engelke 2019: 33; cf. Taylor 1993; Vitebsky 2017). Dan described the delays inside the morgue trucks for those receiving public burials as when someone 'kinda got lost in the shuffle' as 'there's no rush'. What is understood as appropriate and desirable for an abstracted group of the dead by city administrators and funeral professionals – that is, prompt burial – may stand in tension with what mourners believe is best for their dead loved one because promptness may not be as important as the right *kind* of burial. Sometimes, delay and equivocation can be care.

Perhaps this should not be surprising: the poor were simply more likely to die, as they are in any pandemic (Horton 2020). For low-income families, the inability to afford a funeral is not a sudden and unexpected emergency triggered by Covid-19 but part of a deeper, chronic

experience of routine precarity, poverty, and social suffering (Povinelli 2011), which undermines a sense of time's generative potential. For some families, to have one's relative stored for months in a morgue truck was better than being buried anonymously without ceremony in a massed grave, but both represent a routine, cruddy, everyday form of social suffering that usually does not register in the wider community as an explicit, catastrophic crisis, despite how harsh the experience may have been for the bereaved.

Covid-19 showed how poverty shapes citizenship. During the pandemic's first wave, Hart Island came to symbolize the city's callousness towards its most vulnerable citizens. As Berlant argued, neglect can eloquently elaborate 'what forms of catastrophe a world is comfortable with or even interested in perpetuating and how the rhetoric of crisis effects a slippage or transfer of the notion of the urgency of a situation to the level of the temporalities of the lives of those who are deemed the locus of the crisis' (2007:761). Politicians and deathcare professionals believed a Hart Island burial to be acceptable under the circumstances, especially as the death toll increased, because it allowed NYC to fulfil its obligation to provide welfare to its most vulnerable in a timely way. Some families did not find such a burial adequate, demonstrating the stigma attached to Hart Island.

The unusual circumstances of long-term morgueing crystallized what counts as vital care of the dead within the changing, limiting local conditions because 'the normally invisible quality of working infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks' (Bowker & Star 1999: 35). Through this turmoil, New Yorkers demonstrated imagination and flexibility in reworking death rituals, including sequence and speed, but doing so also crystallized certain values, including stigma. Rituals and formal memorialization were delayed, but some people retained the view that certain options for the dead remained so shameful that they were best evaded. The city and its citizens pursued dignity for the dead at different paces: those inside the morgue trucks worked furiously to prepare the deceased for Hart Island as quickly as possible in a race against the virus' ability to kill; city bureaucrats understood that a Hart Island burial should not be unduly delayed; yet some relatives saw the indefinite storage of their relatives, however distressing, as preferable to a swift end in a stigmatized grave.

Chapter 2
Putting the dead in their place

This chapter examines burial and cremation in the US and NYC, asking what, if anything, is unusual about the way bodies are disposed of in NYC. When people learnt why I was in NYC, they often told me, unprompted, about their own families' funerals or their thoughts on what funerals should be. If interlocutors knew about Hart Island – and most New Yorkers did not – I asked them for their perspectives, including what it said about NYC and New Yorkers. I had these conversations mostly with people outside of the funeral profession. These anecdotes offered some indication of what New Yorkers believed to be the *right* kind of funeral – a professional funeral director, viewing, funeral, individual burial, memorial. They also indicated that cremation was still regarded with scepticism, some trends like green burials were largely unknown, and a Hart Island burial did not meet this shared standard for deathcare. People often explained to me that burial expressed the values of being a New Yorker better than cremation and had various rationalizations for why cremation would be unsuitable as an alternative to a Hart Island burial.

I frequently talked in greater detail with funeral professionals about the trends they saw and what they believed people expected from funerals. Interlocutors included morticians and funeral directors, cemetery managers, board members and administrators, and funeral researchers. These conversations, together with my observations at funerals and cemeteries, contextualized what New Yorkers understand as normal posthumous relations, and how ordinary posthumous citizenship is usually enacted for Americans. Doing so assesses what the Hart Island dead have been excluded from, and especially by which processes.

I collected much of my data from ethnographic interviews conducted with practitioners and experts during NYC's lockdowns in Covid-19's first and second waves. Consequently, I am conscious throughout that, while all ethnographic data is contingent, this material particularly captures a moment of flux in social life, especially because during the pandemic New Yorkers began choosing cremation over burial for the first time (NFDA 2021a). This may seem a self-evident practicality in a city as crowded as this one and during a crisis, yet it represents a significant transformation and was not without practical challenges as NYC has only five crematories. We discussed practices that were already becoming historical but whose forms, meanings, and significance informed what was unfolding concurrently. It is a salient reminder that where a practice is dismantled, it will also be remade by what is to hand,

carrying local meanings about care, time, subjectivity, and social relations. Improvised rituals also revealed what many New Yorkers believed was due to those who died as fellow New Yorkers, especially what memorialization they were owed. There was a tension between what counted as stigma, suffering, or abandonment of those recognized as fellow New Yorkers, and how these obligations were navigated when the deceased was one's own family.

I offer a vignette of one New Yorker's funeral, which includes details of a Muslim burial service that, in its similarities to and differences from other services helps crystallize what counts as essential care of a dead New Yorker. I then briefly summarize a history of African American funerals to illustrate America's history of deliberately using funeral practices to limit the deceased's citizenship. Throughout, I seek to identify deathcare practices that can be appropriately described as specific to NYC.

I also analyse US funeral and cemetery history and law to trace how contemporary practice is symbolically and practically constructed through the constraints of law, ethnicity, faith, geography, and logistics to articulate worldviews of agentive individualism. I rely especially on perspectives from cemetery operators and legal experts, who draw on their own practical experiences of providing deathcare to New Yorkers, though their perspectives differ from those of the mortician practitioners working during Covid-19 (chap. 1). They offer their beliefs about what New Yorkers think they are doing with their dead – including, in turn, their reflections on Hart Island.

Hart Island's place within NYC deathcare

Professor Tanya Marsh, a property and funeral law expert and licensed funeral director, teaches the only course in the US on funeral and cemetery law. Her specialization in property and real estate law motivated her interest in the status and treatment of human remains. She identified memorialization as a central difference in Hart Island's practices:

> *I think we have so strongly internalized the idea in the United States that every person is entitled to a single piece of ground for their remains, with memorialization, with a tombstone or marker, forever, that's the norm and anything that's in deviation of the norm seems indecent, insulting.*

In reiterating Laqueur's notion of necronominalism (2015), Tanya took an historical view to describe Hart Island in terms that accord with NYC's reputation for liberal inclusion and generosity.

I find Hart Island fascinating because when they created Hart Island, there was nothing strange about what they were doing. In fact, by putting bodies in individual caskets, that was more than they'd ever done when the City Cemetery had been on mainland Manhattan. And the system that they have of tracking people … it is really interesting because I find nothing indecent about Hart Island …
Moving it to Hart Island was a symbol of how much the city respected the dead because they wanted to dissuade grave robbers. When it was in Manhattan, medical students were digging up bodies all the time, it was awful. But the same agency was responsible for the prisons and City Cemetery [Department of Public Charities and Correction]. So of course, you're going to use people who are in jail [for cemetery work] … when you think about historically, okay well that made sense at the time and it's just we get stuck in these tracks and don't reimagine them. But it's not like the city was saying "well how could we be as disrespectful as possible?"

Tanya's view as a scholar and deathcare professional was that Hart Island's burials were innovative and compassionate by the standards of the 1870s when they began, although today the burial practices are outdated because they have simply been overlooked. Even so, she viewed it as a sensible solution to a practical problem of how to provide funerals of last resort, which was in some ways preferable to the cremations provided in some other states. This echoes the attitudes towards the use of morgue trucks in caring for the excess dead during Covid-19's first wave, where they caused widespread distress among New Yorkers but were well-regarded by professionals as solving the difficult problems of storing the dead.

The right kind of funeral

Several months before Covid-19, I had arranged to meet Brother Jaraad Abdul-Hakim at the funeral home where he worked. However, in the swift change of plan typical of appointments with funeral directors – death keeps no schedule – we met instead at a Brooklyn church. Alongside his regular work as a licensed funeral director, he volunteered for the Muslim Free Burial Association, a non-profit organization that looks after Muslim families needing burial assistance or Muslims who have no one to care for them. Like Hebrew Free Burial, which I came to know better, this organization helps community members avoid Hart Island burials.

Brother Jaraad was directing a Christian church funeral, so we met at an anodyne low-rise 1980s building that could have been aluminium-windowed offices were it not for the three crosses embellishing the first-floor external walls. I shook the rain out of my umbrella and shrugged off my coat, hoping my clothing was appropriate. As mourners began arriving, Brother Jaraad thrust some printed funeral programmes at me to distribute as I helped him

direct people into the church. If those gathered were surprized to see a white woman apparently staffing an African American funeral, no one seemed to care, least of all the deceased's family. The man's mother looked towards me as though she was unable to catch me in focus.

As the service began, Brother Jaraad and I lingered to direct latecomers, before withdrawing to an anteroom where we could talk without disturbing anyone while still observing the funeral. I could see the fine heavy wooden coffin on the altar, with a life-sized portrait photograph of the deceased displayed beside it. Later, he would be buried at a local cemetery, likely the section used by this church and family. But now, the pastor led the *acapella* singing, choosing songs about God's redemptive love and carrying the congregation with him.

Brother Jaraad explained how the Muslim Free Burial Association served its community by providing free burials, arranged through informal networks. Again, like Hebrew Free Burial, Muslim Free Burial is compelled by religious charity to bury a person promptly. In their tradition, this must be in a titled Muslim grave, in a Muslim cemetery or designated area. The obligation to have a body released for timely burial can cause tension with Public Administrators and the OCME. The *Janaazah* (Muslim burial) volunteer staff will manage every aspect of deathcare, including collecting the deceased from their home, hospital, or morgue, conducting the *ghusl* (ritual washing to purify the deceased's entire body), administering the legal burial documents, and transporting the deceased to the Islamic burial place. They also sold burial kits for people to care for their dead themselves, including shrouds, washcloths, animal-free soap, plastic sheeting, wash basin, camphor oil (sidr leaf powder was also available), and a comb for female kits. Once the pandemic began, kits expanded to include PPE of a plastic apron, head cover, shoe covers, and nitrile long gloves. Janaazah also offered educational seminars to mosques, health facilities, and community organizations.

Brother Jaraad assured me that what I was observing at the church was also instructive, as this was all fairly typical. Compared with the challenges and compromises of disaster conditions described in Chapter 1, what I witnessed that day was the right kind of funeral. As with other funerals I attended and funeral homes I visited, these chance encounters became useful exemplars of NYC deathcare. A decent burial emphasized the next of kin's expectation to dispose of their loved one's body – a legally protected right, which I discuss shortly. A decent burial was also one arranged professionally. These examples helped clarify what was required for normal posthumous relations, such as professional services, ceremonies of

remembrance focused on the body, witnessing the body's final disposition, visiting access to their resting place, rituals, and physical memorialization.

Disposal: putting the dead in their place

This funeral contained the common elements of mortuary ritual: identifying and acknowledging the deceased, and participatory rituals such as witnessing, celebration, and memorialization. A public burial on Hart Island elides these rituals and many others common in NYC funerals – preparing the embalmed body, displaying it at the visitation ceremony, and the funeral itself. I shall address these elisions later, but first I focus on the methods of disposal. By this unsatisfactory term, I simply mean burial, cremation, and their variations. Disposal is a rather functional holdall term for the rich variation of these rituals, but it is accurate: etymologically it comes from *dis* and *pose*, meaning to place, put away, arrange properly, get rid of, settle, or definitely deal with (OED 2022b). It conveys a sense of both finality and appropriateness. The living put the corpse away from themselves, properly and forever, metaphorically and literally putting it in its place.

The African American longing for burial

In practice, not all bodies are equal (cf. Dennie 2009). The deceased, in the funeral Brother Jaraad conducted, was to be buried locally in a section of a well-known cemetery favoured by his family's church. He would lie freely, in a majority African American cemetery, memorialized within his community, and settled into ordinary posthumous citizenship. Yet for much of African American history, including New York's own, this would have been unlikely.

This context matters because African Americans make up approximately twenty-four per cent of NYC's population and, like Latinx, are overrepresented in income disparity indicators (NYC Planning 2005). I was told repeatedly by those with first-hand knowledge of Hart Island's burials, such as former inmates, prison staff, and advocates, that the lion's share of them were for African American and Latino New Yorkers. NYCC does not publish the ethnicity of those it buries on Hart Island; it does not collect this data. [24] An understanding of African American longings in deathcare provides important context because of how Hart Island's burials are perceived as racialized. This history shows how ordinary posthumous citizenship can be systemically denied through controlling funerals, burials, and cemeteries – exclusionary practices which are recognizably similar to criticism of Hart Island today.

[24] NYCC also does not publish whether people are buried in Hart Island with family consent, or because they were unidentified or next of kin could not be found.

The history of Black[25] cemeteries illustrates the nexus between citizenship in life and death in the US, because to own and control where you are buried enacts and symbolizes autonomy, freedom, resistance, humanity, and protection for African Americans, from enslavement until today (Amanik & Fletcher 2020). When cemetery burials were denied to Black people, these experiences were also denied. Throughout the US, African Americans have a particular history of disadvantage founded on 200 years of African slavery and 100 of state-sponsored discrimination (Glazer 1999). In New York, legal emancipation arrived only in 1827. Black people were granted citizenship through the Fourteenth Amendment (1868), but discrimination remained legal until the Civil Rights Act (1964).

The ability to plan for one's own burial, or that of a loved one, represented a freedom that had often been foreclosed in life. From the earliest colonial period through to the Jim Crow era, enslaved and free Black people were frequently buried in local potter's fields, troublingly 'without roots – unknown, unmissed, and unmourned' (Wilson 1991: 99; cited in Fletcher 2020: 129), and without protection against interference from anatomists or vandals. Moreover, even those who were free often had few burial options compared with white people. For instance, local governments might task church officials with keeping death ledgers that omitted Black people, so that they simply did not count on local statistical records (Fletcher 2020: 130). The urgent desire to secure decent burial and memorialize loved ones against often persistent and overwhelming odds was met by a multitude of African American benevolent and burial aid societies (*ibid.*: 129), which secured coffins and dug graves during slavery and afterwards. This accords with the broader pattern of marginalized and oppressed peoples often being willing to make considerable sacrifices to secure funerals and burials (DiGirolamo 2002; Laqueur 1983) because of the deep social significance of mortuary rituals and the stigma surrounding their absence.

Across the US there is now an efflorescence of community and scholarly projects to recover and restore Black enslaved and free cemeteries (Rainville 2009, 2019; Bailey & Ewen 2020; Blakey 2010; Dunnavant et al. 2021; Blakey 2020). Traditionally places of segregation, where people were deliberately forgotten and which mourners found difficult to access, these cemeteries often became neglected and unmourned, which mirrors how relatives described Hart Island today. When the norm is for each death to be named, dated, and memorialized, a failure to do so is often deliberate and always morally charged (Laqueur

[25] I follow the convention for capitalising Black and not white, as Black reflects a shared sense of identity and community; white signifies various and less defined meanings and, within these, capitalization risks following the lead of white supremacists.

2015). To recover forgotten cemeteries restores the burials to memorialization, which requires identification, recognition, and physical access; again, these remain salient issues for the reform of Hart Island's management. Burial segregation was legal in the US under Jim Crow laws (1869) and lasted until the 1990s (Fletcher 2020). Some African Americans valued segregated cemeteries as places of resistance – why would one seek to be buried with one's oppressors? As Jones argued (2011), slavery and landscape were inseparable, but Black burial grounds could become places of liberation where a soul was freed, though she had not been in life. The dead body retained a social role as a vessel for delivering redemption. Consequently, while the placement of human remains was symbolically and literally important, if the deceased was among those 'inauspicious dead' (Hertz 1960) who had not received proper care, their fate in the afterlife could transcend these circumstances. These notions of an emancipated afterlife indicated a profound consolation that the person would not only continue but would have liberty in the next realm, and also that God could be trusted to serve justice to both slaves and masters.

In this history of rights refused and compromised, burial signified social connection and recognition for African Americans, as it does for many cultures. For Black people, this took on additional significance because of the history of denial. Having their own cemeteries functioned as a recognition of rights, a place for preserving material culture, a way to mark lineage – and within American capitalism, an opportunity to build wealth (Amanik & Fletcher 2020; Fletcher 2020). African American funeral directors were recognized within their community as preservers of culture and history, because Black mourning stories bound people to Black heritage and freedom narratives (Holloway 2003). When and where families could autonomously manage burials for their loved ones, dedicated Black burial grounds enacted bodily, cultural, and financial autonomy in death. This longing for burial by African Americans accords with the concepts now enshrined in law, that collected buried bodies can transform and claim a space and hold land, in ways not possible during life.

Manhattan's Financial District also offers an instructive historical example within the African American community of how limits on burial reflect limits on citizenship. In 1991, archaeologists rediscovered a 200-year-old cemetery holding up to 20,000 bodies in Lower Manhattan. The African Burial Ground is the earliest and largest burial site for free and enslaved Africans in the US (chap. 5). It also reflects the status of those buried there: while it was in use, it was outside the town's limits, indicating that those buried there were of no account and it was difficult for mourners to access. Masters often controlled and limited funerals and conditions of burial as punishment (US National Park Service n.d.). This case

matters in the context of Hart Island because it reflects an historical pattern of limits on burial symbolising limits on citizenship. At the African Burial Ground, burials were neglected and uncelebrated, people were openly forgotten, the bereaved's rights of burial and visiting were denied, lineage and connection were unremarked, and material culture was unpreserved – just as relatives complain about Hart Island today.

American ways of disposing of the dead

In the US, corpses are interred by burial or cremation. Burial options include in-ground burial in a casket;[26] a burial vault, which is a covered container placed in the ground into which the casket is lowered to protect it from pressure from the surrounding earth; or above-ground internment in a mausoleum, in which each crypt provides an individual shelf for each casket in spaces above the ground (Ashwood 2009; Metcalf & Huntington 1991). In mausolea, the stone front of each crypt functions as a headstone.

A particularly American preference is for a coffin heavy enough to suggest long-term protection for the corpse against the earth in which it lies. Funeral directors proudly showed me enormous caskets made of extremely heavy oak, mahogany, and other hardwoods. More peculiarly, they demonstrated solid metal caskets to me and promised that the casket would seal tight against airflow or other gases. The metal caskets often gave that part of the funeral home showroom the air of a vehicle dealership. Showing me one very grand – and eye-wateringly expensive – model, a funeral director assured me that the solid stainless-steel casket would never decompose. She explained it would seal airtight and was lined with 'soft interiors' including silk pillows, adding that 'In this casket, the decedent would rest comfortably and very safely.' 'Very safe from what?' I asked. 'From the effects of time and the surrounding environment, anything that might contaminate or interfere with the decedent's ease,' she said soothingly. This illustrated a particular understanding of the deceased's body as resting, the funeral director having intervened against nature's threat of decomposition. The notion that a corpse's decay could ultimately be halted or prevented, and indeed that the corpse's perpetual existence was possible and even desirable, was understood as normal (cf. Mitford 1963).

[26] American funeral professionals often used the term coffin to describe the body's container inside a casket, the decorated vessel that enclosed it. Further, they described coffins as tapered to the body's shape, whereas caskets are a full rectangle and usually more expensive, as they are made of more costly materials and decorated both inside and out.

How American law developed for dealing with the dead

Though America shed some colonially inherited English law in the Revolution, its laws regarding the treatment of human remains still largely remain founded on concepts from the English Reformation via Protestant ecclesiastical law. I spoke with Professor Tanya Marsh, who explained that when faced with disputes or confusion about cemeteries, judges reached for systems in common law and so 'American cemetery law has been incredibly informed by this English Protestant worldview from the 1700s'. In particular, this worldview is understood to have shaped a preference for burial in perpetuity. This better provided for the body to be available for the resurrection and helped ensure that bones were not worshipped as idols (Walter 1993), compared with Catholic practices of burial and second ceremonies of disinterment and permanent placement of the bones into spaces such as charnel houses, ossuaries, and church grounds.

Throughout the US, cemetery law is overwhelmingly state law; there is almost no Federal law regarding cemeteries. That means there is no unified body of cemetery law and the states have different approaches. New York State's laws are highly unusual by US standards: its cemeteries are mostly not-for-profit; they are amongst the nation's most heavily regulated, which controls capacity; and while the same legal right is widely available across America, New Yorkers claim their legal right to dispose of the body of the deceased more than most other Americans. This refers to the Right of Sepulchre, which protects the next of kin's right to dispose of the deceased's body under US common law. As I will explain, families used this right to sue NYC to disinter bodies from Hart Island. For most states, including New York, a cemetery is simply defined as 'real property' (i.e. land or buildings) where human remains have been laid, and six or more graves transform land into a cemetery. Dead bodies have collective power. Within these simple definitions are complex ideals of perpetuity.

Becoming a cemetery fundamentally changes land legally, Tanya explained: 'As soon as it's dedicated for that purpose and human remains are planted there, the human remains change in legal form, they become part of the real property and that real property is dedicated to that use forever. Forever!' In practice, this means 'until we want to expand a runway or put a road in'. This notion of land dedicated to one purpose in perpetuity comes from the early English Reformation ideals (Walter 1993, 2005) that a body should be buried permanently, rather than burial followed by, say, bones recovered and placed in an ossuary.

This value placed on perpetual burial provides important context for the distress caused by the prospect of temporary burials during Covid-19's first wave in Spring 2020 (chap. 1), and also for understanding one way that Hart Island's trench burials trouble so many people. The

vast majority of the million people buried there will remain in perpetuity, and today each body buried there has been carefully identified or had identifying details recorded, with its burial location explicitly logged and geotagged (though unmemorialized). While this is true of all contemporary burials, what makes the practice distinctive at Hart Island is that this care is taken explicitly to enable the deceased to be disinterred. Within the trenches, adult coffins are staggered for easier removal; children and infants are rarely disinterred. Hart Island's trenches – 'like an underground filing cabinet of bodies,' according to funeral director Dan Flynn of Chapter 1 – anticipate each burial's potential impermanence, which undermines the norm of perpetual burial.

While ecclesiastical thinking and property law are important for understanding contemporary American death practices, the most important historical event that shaped how Americans care for their dead today was the Civil War, with its massive 750,000 death toll. Most significantly, its legacy persists in the widespread preference for embalming, a practice that gave families a way to preserve a soldier's body long enough to get it home by rail (Faust 2008; Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Troyer 2020). The practice was popularized when it was used to preserve Abraham Lincoln's body so it could be displayed in an open casket at every stop on its 20-day train journey from Washington DC to Springfield, Illinois (Faust 2008; Metcalf & Huntington 1991). A contemporary legacy of the Civil War's influence is the insistence on bringing American war dead home for burial, even from historic wars (Wagner 2019). No other country pursues a no-resources- or expenses-spared policy to bring the fallen home. This has become a hallmark of American exceptionalism and an important marker of American citizenship.

NYC: doing cemeteries differently

Like most municipalities, NYC bears a responsibility to bury its dead 'decently': 'Except in the cases in which a right to dissect it is expressly conferred by law, every body of a deceased person, within this state, shall be decently buried or incinerated within a reasonable time after death' (McKinney 1953). How this is understood varies. I spoke with David Fleming Jr, who has been a lobbyist for the trade association, the NYC Association of Cemeteries (NYSAC), for twenty-five years. NYSAC has 520 cemeteries and crematory members. In his role, David has written most funeral laws that New York State has introduced over the last quarter century. He is also a local politician, a Supervisor for Long Island's Nassau County, and holds governance or advisory roles for many cemeteries. He had long been among the advisers whom Melinda Hunt called on and was effusively supportive of her work. As a professional lobbyist and local elected official, David was quick-witted and engaging, with a

native New Yorker's manner of scant small talk and fast conversation. As NYC was in lockdown, we spoke by phone.

David explained that much New York State cemetery law could be tracked back to the 1949 New York State Attorney General's inquiry into the deathcare industry. This revealed scandalous corruption: funeral directors purchased graves from cemeteries and on-sold them at an enormous markup, cash was withheld from cemeteries, and people with no connection to a cemetery were selling graves. Following this report, reforming laws reshaped New York State cemeteries in ways that would become especially distinctive to NYC.

New York cemeteries are unusual in three main ways. First, all public cemeteries are required to be owned by non-profit organizations. Within the US, only five other Northeastern states have such a law. Several funeral directors or cemetery operators I met believed that this non-profit requirement limited New York cemeteries' ability to earn enough through sales to have adequate surplus funds to innovate and adapt, an assumption that reflects the common American confidence in the logic of private enterprise. In contrast, in Europe and Australasia, local government ownership is common, as is church ownership to a lesser degree (Walter 2005). This perhaps illustrates the idea that to manage such an essential and sacred service as a business would be morally objectionable, and that ultimately government may be the only institution able to guarantee perpetually that the graves will be protected, and people will have access to them.

Second, New York State requires crematories to be located at and owned by cemeteries. Almost all industry professionals I met described this as significantly constraining cremation capacity across the state, which became important during Covid-19's first wave in Spring 2020.

Third, New York State itself approves cemetery pricing. Cemeteries cannot set their own rates. Instead, the Cemetery Board oversees the state's Division of Cemeteries and administers its cemetery law, including sales, fees, and land acquisition for establishing, maintaining, and preserving burial grounds. It approves all rules, regulations, and service fees charged by not-for-profit cemeteries throughout the state. For instance, cemeteries may charge different amounts for similar services. As David said, 'When a regulated cemetery organization wants to increase its fees it must apply to the Cemetery Board, which assesses whether the increase is warranted.' Many industry interlocutors believed that this kept prices artificially low, although there is also clear evidence that many people already found funeral costs prohibitive. David summarized this by noting that, 'Prices are lower in New York than

the market would have them.' Tanya Marsh agreed that, 'All of those things together mean that cemeteries in New York are very economically challenged.'

Most US cemeteries are small religious, family, or private cemeteries in rural areas. However, most Americans are buried in large, public, densely managed, commercial, urban cemeteries. Today, New York State has around 6,000 cemeteries. Approximately 1,700 are public cemeteries, often large, and are where most New York burials take place.

As highly regulated non-profit organizations, NYC's cemeteries are required under regulations of the New York State Cemetery Board and the Division of Cemeteries within the Department of State to maintain graves and guarantee access to the bereaved and the public. The Board includes representatives from the offices of the Secretary of State, the Attorney General, and the Commissioner of Health. Due to these regulations, David believed, cemeteries are considered quasi-government entities, 'because of their unique public purpose, and the perpetual obligation they entail.'

I asked what happened to cemeteries that became full or stopped accepting new burials. David described how such a cemetery became financially unsustainable because they would no longer earn income from burials, so therefore would be abandoned by their owners and the local municipality legally must assume responsibility for it. When a cemetery fails in New York State, the local government must absorb perpetual economic and moral responsibility for it. Indeed, David explained, it was always a considerable burden on municipal government when a small historical cemetery failed because this responsibility cannot be refused.

The Right of Sepulchre, or the autonomy of the bereaved

The legal framework for NYC's deathcare infrastructure articulates what rights dead persons retain after death, and how those rights came to be determined and recognized, who may claim those rights, who owes what duties, how these rights are regulated, and on whose behalf. The legal frameworks expressed here sometimes reflect cultural expectations and other times conflict with them, yet they can also circumscribe how people can respond to what they see as aberrations in practice. One distinctive and regularly exercised right is the common law Right of Sepulchre.

Tanya Marsh believed the Right of Sepulchre to be a profoundly American legal notion. Its first use appears to be in New York (Ruggles 1856; Summerfield 2014; Marsh 2015; Calderon 2016; Flanzig 2011), and it refers to the right of next of kin to possess and control human remains and to choose how and where they are disposed. I met relatives who had, as the next of kin of a deceased person, sued NYC to remedy the violation of their Right of

Sepulchre, when their 'right to immediate possession of a decedent's body is interfered with, and the interference causes mental anguish' (N.Y. App. Div. 2009). The law understands the body as a form of property to be possessed, the possession of which should not be delayed – and that without this possession of the deceased, next of kin may feel agonising sorrow and suffering. In such cases, the city will disinter the deceased and relatives can arrange another burial. This raises the conundrum of how human remains are property to be possessed and controlled: are they persons or things? 'A number of courts have done backflips and said human remains are quasi-property – not a thing!' laughed Tanya.

The problem of understanding human remains as property rests on how property manifests a set of relations (Strathern 2005), as human remains certainly do. Within Anglo-American legal traditions, the body is understood as the inalienable foundation of legal individualism (Pottage 1998: 745), in which a person is embodied in and by their body, equating a person with their individual body. As Strathern described, while 'a corpse may be treated as a whole body, no one would think of regarding it as a whole person' (2007: 210), and yet corpses 'cannot be property although there is a duty to effect a decent burial and a corresponding right to possession for that purpose' (*ibid*.: 212). This is effectively what the Right of Sepulchre secures. Correspondingly, New York law implies that the dead have rights that the living must protect, including the right to a decent burial.[27]

Tanya explained that while there was no clear legal agreement about what it means to have a decent burial, New York had seen more cases of interference with the Right of Sepulchre than any other state, many of which concerned Hart Island. This may be a consequence of public disquiet about Hart Island's practices – and that Hart Island burials facilitate disinterment. Between 2007 and 2009, an average of seventy-two people each year were disinterred from Hart Island for private burial elsewhere (Seitz & Miller 2011: 140). Tanya added, 'In most other states, if there's a body at the coroner and it goes unclaimed for some time, they're just going to cremate it. Or send it to a cemetery and have them bury it in an unmarked grave.' These funerals of last resort do not attract media attention in the same way that, in Tanya's view, the spectacular elements of Hart Island's media coverage have shaped periodic public discomfort about it.

[27] Though fewer than those of a living person, the dead have protected rights such as the right to will property, order a funeral and disposal, donate organs, and even reproductive rights – and even if these contradict the preferences of the living. The dead also receive special protections such as those against bodily interference. While these rights are practical, the legal rights of the dead are predicated by norms and values including dignity and respect (Smolensky 2009).

People with relatives buried on Hart Island often mentioned the autonomy and agency they had lost, as they would have preferred to care for the deceased themselves. This reiterates the desire for the Right of Sepulchre, protected both in common law and statute. The notion of the next of kin's right to control the deceased's remains accords with how values such as individual autonomy and agency are regarded in matters of death and dying in the US. For instance, Kaufman (2006) has revealed how American hospital staff often informally collaborate with patients and families to plan the time of someone's death from illness or accident, with the dying person being held in a liminal state of life until the agreed time. The medical system requires relatives to make these decisions, even in seriously constrained circumstances, so that the inevitable is presented to families as agency and autonomy (Kaufman 2006: 17). The discourse of dying within American hospitals 'redirects incoherence, anxiety, breakdown, diffuse suffering, and any other expression of affect that lacks rationality' (*ibid*.) into one of control and choice. Kaufman described how death is managed in the American medical system, but the critique can appropriately be applied to adjacent experiences like deathcare, as it helps explain the pain families felt from the loss of expected autonomy and agency when a loved one was buried on Hart Island. In deathcare, this logic takes a capitalist frame: control and choice over where one is buried rely on being able to afford to purchase that property.

New Yorkers' views on why they prefer burial over cremation

I now pivot to Americans' and New Yorkers' relationships with cremation. This matters because, for most of its history, the right kind of NYC funeral has involved burial, so much so that burial could be understood as a literal claim on the city's most iconic resource – its land. Cremation was considered at best a compromise, attracting some social anxiety. But during the pandemic, when it was hard to obtain a burial plot and rituals became flexible, people reconsidered cremation and New Yorkers began choosing it over burial for the first time.

New Yorkers' changing attitudes towards cremation matter because Hart Island is predicated partly on the longstanding preference for burial. If cremation becomes a normal dignified way of death for New Yorkers, one that enables ordinary posthumous citizenship, then potentially some of Hart Island's public burials could become cremations. The implications for Hart Island could be profound.

When I asked people outside the funeral industry about their views on cremation (pre-pandemic), a common reaction was mild disgust, such as a wrinkled nose and a statement like, 'My family doesn't cremate, I don't know, we prefer burial. It's just what we do'. The

usual exception was New Yorkers of Asian heritage. When people talked about cremation in their families, it was often rationalized by the practicalities it enabled, in statements like, 'Our family is spread out over several states now, so the last couple of people who died got cremated, we can bring them home more easily. But scattering? No, we got an urn, interred the cremains.'

This anecdote supports the American drive to return the deceased home for disposition as an assertion of community belonging. When I mentioned the popularity of scattering ashes in other cultures, New Yorkers were often bemused and assumed that this was a practical choice because cremations cost less than burials, as it is generally perceived in the US. In 2022, the NFDA reported that the average price for an American funeral including viewing and burial was $7,848, against the average direct cremation (cremation only, without viewing or funeral) costing $2,550, or about one-third of the burial cost. A cremation with a viewing and funeral cost an average of $6,970, only slightly less expensive than a traditional burial (NFDA 2021b). When I explained that in other countries the costs of burial and cremation were often similar, people were puzzled: then why choose cremation?

When I asked people both within the industry and outside it why New Yorkers preferred burial over cremation, they speculated about motivations. Was it simply the popularity of land *qua* land, in a city notoriously preoccupied with real estate? Was it the cultural influence of New York's Jews, who abhor cremation and its association with the Holocaust? Or the influential Irish and Italian immigrant population, and more recently those from Central and South America, following the guidance of Vatican II that a proper burial was preferable, which had shaped a strong residual Catholic stance against cremation?

People often introduced Hart Island into these discussions, though I had not, and although they had sometimes only learned about Hart Island from what I explained about my research. Views were almost entirely against cremation for the poor or unclaimed: surely cremating people who required a public funeral would be unseemly, that it would frustrate families who might later seek disinterment, that it risked offending against the deceased's faith, or that, ultimately, it might conceal criminal evidence and prevent justice being served. Bereaved families, should they be identified, may not bother to pick up the cremains (the American hybridized term for cremated remains) or dispose of them properly. Many US metropolitan governments already use cremation to provide funerals of last resort. Officials sometimes mused that families consenting to public burial might even prefer cremation because it would offer more flexibility for memorialization than was currently possible with a Hart Island burial. Some funeral directors worried about where the cremation capacity would come from

to handle this additional work, though the number of people receiving a public burial from NYC was approximately 1,000-1,300 people a year before the pandemic. Currently – and perhaps curiously given the popular beliefs about cremation being the least expensive option – New York State law permits only burial for those needing a public funeral.

America's normalization of burial, and suspicion of cremation

Understanding New Yorkers' attitudes to cremation has a direct bearing on Hart Island's historical use and its future. Examining why cremation was regarded by New Yorkers as disrespectful helps explain why Hart Island's burials represent so intractable a problem. For instance, cremation is perceived by some as making memorialization difficult, but I show how a Catholic community has solved this problem to their own satisfaction. Removing cremation's stigma in this community involved a significant change in practice but one that sustained the social value of memorialization. Could a similar transformation be possible at Hart Island too?

Following cremation's modern invention in the UK in the late nineteenth century (Prothero 2001), it was favoured by atheists, intellectuals, and other non-conformists. It was originally understood as being counter to Christian values, partly because of its association with atheism and partly lingering convictions that the body should be as intact as possible to ease Christian resurrection (Meier 2020). Cremation has long been favoured in societies with Buddhist worldviews, and more recently in Protestant Britain and Europe, as well as in some other settler societies. For instance, in Australia and New Zealand, cremation had become the favoured method of disposal by the mid-twentieth century (Schafer 2012; McManus & Raudon 2019), perceived as a quick, clean, modern, and practical practice that avoided the distressing idea of a body rotting in the earth.

Funeral directors told me that burial was so much the US standard that even immigrants from strong cremation traditions often opted for burial as a way of adopting American ways; enacting a claim of American citizenship. This adaption is an unusual prioritization of assimilation, as often mortuary traditions are among the most enduring in immigrants' cultural practices, persisting after others have been adapted (Walter 1993). Early associations with the Civil War helped crystallize the notion that America's soil was fertilized by the bodies of her citizens (Faust 2008). Even earlier, Thomas Jefferson wrote of the Republic's ongoing need for sustenance from the bodies of Americans, patriotic and otherwise: 'the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants. it is it's natural manure' (sic Jefferson 1787). Burial came to be understood as a profoundly and

enduringly American act (Prothero 2001), and despite America's cultural diversity, its funeral rituals have been judged remarkably homogenous (Troyer 2020).

Hart Island's usefulness as a cemetery is founded on the local preference for burial. Cremation has been historically unpopular with New Yorkers, though rates have gradually increased over the last century. During the pandemic, New Yorkers began to prefer cremation over burial for the first time (NFDA 2021a).[28] Deathcare professionals and others often speculated to me that NYC could solve the problem of Hart Island by offering consented cremation instead of burial for funerals of last resort, as many other American cities already did.

The New York Cremation Society was formed in April 1874 (Prothero 2001: 27). Despite an initial flurry of interest, cremation remained unpopular, and in 1879 *The New York Times* announced 'The End of Cremation,' dismissing it as a fad and stating accurately that 'cremation has not come into fashion' (NYT 1879). In 1881, as there was not enough local interest to justify it, the NY Cremation Society was quietly transformed into the US Cremation Company (Prothero 2001: 214).

By the mid-1880s, cremationists had taken up germ theory (Prothero 2001: 56). In a stance that would resonate during the Covid-19 pandemic, the New York Cremation Society President and naval chaplain, Reverend John Beuglass, delivered a paper to the American Public Health Association (1884) entitled 'Cremation as a Safeguard against Epidemics' (*ibid*.). The reverend argued that cremation is 'the only never-failing germicide' that could be relied on to avoid 'epidemics of contagion' (*ibid*.). Evocatively, he called for 'a crematory at every quarantine station and in connection with every public hospital and in every Potter's Field' (*ibid*.: 57). It was a potent foreshadowing of the American nexus that would develop between cremation as a practical technology and an expedient way of dealing with the bodies of the poor, including recent immigrants.

While Reverend Beuglass was not successful nationally, in 1889 NYC opened the country's first publicly operated crematory on Swinburne Island, the tiny artificial island off Staten Island's South Beach. Swinburne had been strategically built to quarantine and hospitalize unwell immigrants before they reached Manhattan, and officials started cremating immigrants who had died of infectious diseases, especially cholera (*ibid*.: 57). The crematory effectively replaced the island's potter's field. Notably, during my fieldwork people did not

[28] 'New York City, the first major COVID-19 hotspot, saw its state-wide cremation rate increase from 49.8% in 2020 to 51.1% in 2021' (National Funeral Directors Association 2021b).

explicitly describe cremation as a useful public health measure. New Yorkers chose cremation at unprecedented rates during Covid-19 (NFDA 2021a), when concerns about the practical problem of disposing of so many dead and anxieties about how contagion might operate were widespread and urgent. Presciently, historian Stephen Prothero associated cremation with the austerity of American Puritanism, yet also recognized that cremation was 'a preparation for memorialization' (Prothero 2001: 196) and may herald 'a new era in American ritual life' (*ibid.*: 199) as it was potentially well suited to a culture that values choice and personalization.

Cremation's slow adoption

In the 1920s, approximately one per cent of the dead were cremated across the US. Advocacy and official acceptance gradually increased over the decades. With the instruction *Piam et Constantem* of 5 July 1963, Pope Paul VI approved cremation as long as the ashes were interred in consecrated land.[29] The same year Jessica Mitford (1963) championed cremation as a simple, dignified, and affordable option in her best-selling exposé of the American funeral industry. Despite this, by 1981 only ten per cent of Americans chose cremation and in 1999 this had grown to twenty-five per cent. By 2020, however, fifty-six per cent of Americans were cremated, more than doubling the rate over two decades (NFDA 2021a: 7). In comparison, in Great Britain cremation is so naturalized it is described as the British way of death. The UK's cremation rate has been over seventy per cent since 2000 (Jupp 2006) and is still steadily climbing, reported as seventy-eight per cent in 2021 (The Cremation Society 2022). In New York State, according to the NFDA,[30] in 2019 approximately forty-seven per cent of the dead were buried and just over forty-seven per cent were cremated (NFDA 2021a).[31]

Burial and cremation data have always been aggregated at a state rather than a city level. NYC funeral directors confirmed to me that New Yorkers' longstanding preference for burial was yielding to a steadily increasing demand for cremation. Many funeral directors saw this as alarming because of cremation's reputation as a less expensive option. Cremains are likely to be placed in an urn, which the family can keep at home or place in a niche (dedicated memorial space) at a columbarium, a space set aside for interring ashes. Families would not need a large, heavy wood or steel coffin, to have a grave opened and burial vault prepared, or

[29] This effectively reversed the Catholic ban on cremation issued in 1886 (Holy See Press Office 2016).

[30] The most recent data is from 2020 because of the two-year delay in reporting final death data, including cremation and burial statistics. NFDA contracts the University of Wisconsin-Madison to project cremation and burial rates out to the year 2040.

[31] The remaining 5.5 per cent were donated to science, sent out of state, or otherwise unknown.

to purchase a headstone and other burial goods. Funeral directors explained that families choosing cremation were also less likely to want a viewing event over several days at the funeral parlour, often preferred only minimal body preparation as opposed to having their loved one embalmed, and purchased only a basic urn rather than a columbarium niche. As more families chose cremation, they required fewer goods and services from funeral directors and the lost sales represented a real crisis for the industry.

To demonstrate how cremation is the lesser option, the NYSAC website explained that cremation's extreme heat reduces the deceased's remains to bone fragments, clarifying that 'It is an irreversible process' (New York State Association of Cemeteries n.d.). NYSAC strongly opposed the idea of scattering: 'If a person's remains are scattered, there is no permanent place for future generations to come and pay their respects to the deceased' (*ibid*.). This remonstration not only indicates the funeral directing industry's financial interest in selling goods and services that make use of cremains (the urn, plaque engraving, columbarium niche, perhaps memorial jewellery or other options) but also emphasizes the social norm of having a place permanently dedicated to remembering and honouring each deceased person.

New Yorkers who plan to scatter remains, despite this advice, are strongly advised to gain permission before doing so. However, in most cultures, even where authorization is officially expected, some degree of collusion and surreptition is both intrinsic and routine to the ritual of scattering ashes (Engelke 2019). It is especially common when it involves a small amount of the ashes being placed in a public spot of great private emotional significance, such as a favourite sports ground, tourist attraction, or holiday spot. Informal ash scattering rituals often involve a smaller ceremony of close family and friends in places of personal meaning more associated with life than with death (Prendergast et al. 2006). British mourners reported that the ritual act of scattering and its memory were more important than the consequent absence of memorialization (Prendergast et al. 2006; Rumble et al. 2014). These practices represent an important counterpoint to Laqueur's (2015) necronominalism, as the bereaved are choosing not to inter individually and not to memorialise, yet find the ritual deeply significant.

I observed a similar ritual on Hart Island when a bereaved relative standing near a grave marker quietly produced a small container of ash from their bag. They explained to me on the ferry ride off the island that the deceased's infants had been buried at that approximate spot decades earlier, so scattering some cremains there felt like the right thing to do. It was unclear to me whether the DOC officers had not noticed the scattering or had seen it and decided to

ignore it. Regardless, uniting the parent's remains with their babies clearly gave the bereaved relative some relief and satisfaction. They exercised autonomy and agency alongside a furtive camaraderie, in what is a salient reminder that while rituals often centre on material objects, in death, the body itself is the matter at issue. The relative left Hart Island with the air of having put something right, in its rightful place.

How immigration flows influence burial or cremation choices

NYC has always been a city of immigrants and remains so (Moynihan & Glazer 1970; Binder et al. 2019; Foner 2000, 2007, 2013; Anbinder 2016). The city reported that in 2019, it had 3.1 million immigrants, accounting for some thirty-seven per cent of NYC's population and forty-five per cent of its workforce (NYC Mayor's Office 2019). Within 'America's quintessential immigrant city' (Foner 2007: 1001), NYC's population of those categorized as white[32] was largely by first-, second-, and third-generation Irish and Italian Catholics, and Jews, reflecting consecutive, massive immigration waves, especially from Italian and eastern European Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century (Foner 2000). Reflecting this heritage, many of NYC's non-governmental institutions like schools and community service sites are Catholic or Hebrew (*ibid.*). Further, senior NYC politicians regularly perform ritual visits to Israel, Italy, and Ireland, the 'homelands' of Catholic and Jewish voters (Foner 2007). Following more recent migration flows from Central America, NYC's Catholic churches are often 'Mexicanized,' 'Dominicanized,' and 'Haitian-Creolized' (*ibid.*). Even at NYC's Catholic Archdiocese seat, St. Patrick's Cathedral, each Sunday has a Spanish mass.

Many of my interlocutors believed that Catholic attitudes towards cremation, like the Jewish abhorrence of it, had shaped New Yorkers' lack of appetite for it, given the size and political influence of the Irish and Italian Catholic and European Jewish population. In recent decades, traditionally-minded Catholic immigrants from Central American communities may have had a similar reluctance to embrace cremation. However, from the 1960s, immigration rose from East Asian cultures such as the Philippines, where cremation is preferred including among Catholic populations.

Before the pandemic, I visited the Basilica of Regina Pacis (Latin for Queen of Peace), a Roman Catholic parish church in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. In 2012, it was made a Basilica Minor, a canonical honour that indicates a church of special architectural, historic, and spiritual importance to the faithful. 'We're the Pope's church in Brooklyn!' smiled my guide for the day, as she indicated the papal symbol on church banners and furnishings.

[32] Italians and Jews were not seen as white in NYC's colonial history but are now.

Regina Pacis has always been a church of its time and community. The original 1905 church was known as the 'Mother Church of Italian immigrants'. Within the Italian Renaissance-style Basilica dedicated in 1951, the high fresco ceiling shows Catholic saints mingling with local parishioners in vernacular 1950s dress. Today, the parish offers Mass in English, Spanish, and Mandarin, for Latin American and Asian immigrants who have supplanted many of the original Italian parishioners. However, what I had come to see was the second church, Saint Joseph Chapel, which lies below the main church.

As parish demand gradually decreased, Saint Joseph's space was no longer needed for worship and the parish began using it for various community needs. The pastor, Monsignor Ronald Marino, noted that in 2016, the Vatican had issued guidance that cremation for good reason was permitted, though a 'brutal destruction', and burial remained preferred as bodily integrity enacts faith in the promise of resurrection (Holy See Press Office 2016). As with burial, a corpse destined for cremation should be present for the Vigil, Funeral Liturgy, and Committal rituals, and the Vatican clarified that remains should be interred in a sacred place in a cemetery or church and never scattered, divided, manufactured, or held at home. So, Monsignor Marino proposed, if cremation was permitted, why not store ashes at Regina Pacis? After parish consultation, Monsignor Marino led a renovation project to line Saint Joseph Chapel's walls with a sizeable columbarium offering niches for families to deposit cremains. My guide, a local parishioner of Italian American heritage, explained that parishioners saw the columbarium as a practical solution to NYC's high funeral costs, one which made good use of the Basilica to care for its parishioners.

> *Yes, Regina Pacis* is *a basilica – with a beautiful columbarium! It makes this space that we were using for all kinds of things, y'know it's relevant to our community again, it's already sacred. Interring remains here, it ties families to Regina Pacis, they return and visit their niche, especially as more family are placed here. It's dignified, affordable, convenient, it's a place full of grace, a beautiful peaceful spot to come and reflect. Sales are going well!*

As my guide intimated, the parish board welcomed how columbarium niches earned money from what had been infrequently used space. Some of the more desirable spots, at prominent eye-level positions, were already holding cremains and decorated with plaques, photographs, and keepsakes, or reserved for family groups, often with names indicating a Southeast Asian heritage. My guide confirmed that the columbarium was extremely popular

with the parish's large Asian community because 'cremation's just normal where they're from' and families could hold the funeral in the chapel where their relative would later be interred. The Basilica's columbarium thrived in no small part thanks to the syncretic beliefs and practices of people from cultures with Buddhist worldviews that had been colonized by Catholics.

For almost sixty years, disposal practices in NYC had followed a fairly predictable trajectory, responding over time to changes in immigration patterns, religious practice, and economic constraints and opportunities, just as Regina Pacis had adapted to its changing parishioners. Even the cultural rupture of the WTC attacks did not significantly interrupt this pattern. But the pandemic's death toll meant more New Yorkers used cremation than ever had before and found it suitable for memorialization.

Funeral directors, legal bureaucracy, logistics, and Covid-19

As discussed, NYC's death toll during Covid-19's first wave of Spring 2020 reached about six times more than normal (Hanna & Maxouris 2020). Examining the perspectives of cemetery managers and administrators reveals different tensions from those experienced by the morticians in Chapter 1. Many funeral homes were encouraged to transfer the deceased to upstate crematories that had sufficient capacity. Further, New York State issued a slew of regulatory amendments to smooth out some practicalities of funerals during the pandemic (James 2020), such as how legal paperwork could be completed during lockdowns.

Funeral homes were forbidden from adding any surcharge for a death caused by any infectious disease, including Covid-19, and were prohibited from refusing to embalm or handle a deceased on the grounds of any cause of death. While most legal documents could be signed electronically, cremation authorization still required a physical signature, though it could be witnessed remotely. Funeral directors could now manually alter cremation authorizations that had small errors, rather than having to start again with new forms that would require another round of in-person witnessed signatures. The in-person requirement for cremation authorization represented a logistical challenge that caused delays during stay-at-home orders. 'They were adamant at the height of the pandemic that it had to be a wet signature on the authorization to cremate,' said David Fleming of NYSAC. 'Well if the husband's dead and the wife's in quarantine, are you going to send a funeral director in to be exposed?'[33]

[33] During my time with Hebrew Free Burial I noted the unusual reliance on paper documents that needed to be physically signed, witnessed, and faxed to facilitate deathcare arrangements – legal documents were rarely

During the pandemic, it was not possible to arrange and purchase a cremation online because this was prohibited under State law. David noted some of his younger legislative colleagues were incredulous to learn this. They believed this was a particular issue during the lockdowns when, for instance, a person locked down in another state tried to arrange a local cremation for their loved one. This was not possible when travel restrictions meant they could not arrange the purchase in person, despite lockdowns being a motivation for cremation in the first place. 'They buy everything on their phone, why wouldn't they be able to buy [this] on their phone? … you want to be able to click a couple of times on your phone and pay with your credit card.' David was working on legislation that he hoped would allow online cremation purchases from mid-2020.

I asked David what had surprized him most about the first wave of the pandemic. He said that frankly he was stunned at how well NYC's deathcare infrastructure had coped under such pressure. It 'started to buckle, but it didn't *really* buckle,' he said. From David's perspective, the problems of managing the excess mortality had been logistical rather than capacity. More people died in the deprived neighbourhoods of Queens and the Bronx (NYC Council Data Team n.d.; Horton 2020), and the bottlenecks needed to be better distributed across the state's network of funeral directors, cemeteries, and crematories. He described how there had obviously been an extraordinary volume of work required within cemeteries, 'these poor people who were worked around the clock,' but the real bottleneck issue was storing bodies before cremation. As David explained:

> *Pine Lawn for instance, I think they were doing y'know four hundred and some burials a month, they put in shifts, they were able to do it ... it's obviously a lot easier to bury people than it is to cremate them as far as time commitment, you can do fourteen holes to get them done, but doing fourteen bodies in the same retorts*[34] *not going to happen in one day … it still takes three hours to cremate a body.*

In David's view, the problems caused by NYC's excess mortality during Covid-19 were not that the state's death infrastructure had insufficient capacity overall, but that demand for cremation in particular needed to be distributed *across* the state. The real problem was one of

delivered electronically, let alone authorized online. Two of the office staff were authorized notaries who facilitated this legal work.

[34] The individual chamber with an industrial furnace for cremating the body, also known as a cremator.

networked logistics – of authorising transfers, transporting and storing bodies between the place of death and the place of cremation, or burial.

> *The capacity to properly store the remains until they could be cremated was the biggest problem … it was seven days a week on the phone with State Mortuary Task Force … really just trying to get the storage we needed, dealing with the City of New York, dealing with the State … [people in] government who will go unnamed just said "yeah we're providing refrigeration" and I said well go to the store and get three pounds of raw chicken and stick it in your refrigerator and then come back and talk to me in a month and a half and tell me how that's going. It does not prevent decomposition.*

Tanya Marsh interpreted the problem more explicitly, as she believed the impact of NYC's death toll during the pandemic's first wave – for which the drone footage of Hart Island became a signifier – resulted from the combination of the sharp increase in death rate over a limited geographic area and the inflexibility of its cemetery and crematory infrastructure. 'New York has one of the most rigid [deathcare] systems in the United States,' she said.

> *It did not have any room to give … it would not have gone down that way in other states because they just had to go to the state for everything, to get anything out of them … In other states, you would have just been sending bodies to out-of-state crematories or out-of-city crematories and be done with it, you wouldn't have had this whole backlog, it was because there are a ridiculously low number of crematory retorts in New York City for the demand and the population.*

She described a self-defeating circle: city and state regulators limit crematoria to cemeteries, limit bodies from being sent out of the city or state to crematoria with capacity, and make it hard for operators to upgrade their retorts. Consequently, the retorts are old, fragile, costly to repair, and can't be run at capacity as they need time to cool; prices are limited by the State; operators must be non-profit; and so, there is inadequate crematoria capacity even under normal circumstances, let alone emergency conditions. She was also unsurprised that others I had spoken with had not made these points. 'It's a heavily regulated industry, they cannot criticize their regulators very easily.'

David saw increasing cremation capacity as a clear goal for NYC: more crematories at more cemeteries and urgent maintenance and upgrading of those already in use. ‘That has to be done. And it has to be done at cemeteries, that’s New York law, but that’s really about [economic] sustainability, providing a revenue stream for the cemeteries.’ Then he added, ‘We do view this as the cheap alternative’ to burial. He reiterated the popular industry view, ‘Scattering is a real problem for a lot of reasons but particularly for cemeteries and revenue and what a cemetery is, which is really memorialization [for families, historians and genealogists]. It’s incredibly irritating if someone gets cremated and there’s no monument’. A similar framing of cremation as incompatible with memorialization was echoed by funeral home executive Elisa Krcilek, who stated that the funeral industry had ‘to do a better job informing people that there’s a time to say goodbye and a place to say hello. The moment you scatter someone, you’re done. People need a memorial, to be remembered’ (Heller 2022). Interlocutors frequently glossed cremation as the problem when they meant the lack of memorialization that often accompanied cremation; however, as CANA estimates that only twenty to forty per cent of cremains are interred, the data supports this conflation. For David, cremation is a commercial reality that the industry needs to grapple with, especially how to make it financially viable. However, he sees the frequency of scattering and its lack of physical memorialization as creating difficulties for the bereaved, other members of the community, future generations, and researchers. What might this mean for Hart Island’s future?

‘There has to be a significant evolution’ of Hart Island

I conclude this chapter as I began, with an expert interlocutor’s reflection on Hart Island. I asked David Fleming whether cremation, if consented to by families, might ever be an option for NYC’s public funerals. He explained that it was not only statutory constraints that prevented cremation but concern that NYC would be rightly criticized if unidentified remains were cremated and the person was later identified as belonging to a faith that forbade cremation, such as Judaism or Islam. But if this was at a family’s request? I asked. ‘I think that’s an option, yes,’ he said. ‘We have to destigmatize Hart Island as a location … [diversifying] options for interment or memorialization at the island would help do that.’

David described visiting Hart Island with Melinda Hunt. He said, ‘It’s very tragic … I was with families who had loved ones there, it’s just, the way in which it’s done is just, is horrible.’ David’s objection was not the trench burials or even the prison labour, but the absence of physical memorialization.

> *the fact that there's no memorialization allowed, I think it robs the family of the dignity to be able to remember folks … [there should be] some right of memorialization on the island so that there is a touchstone for the family to understand. I mean just to go to some stake … the marker's there and you're gonna go out to the marker, when I was there it was under guard, it's just—it's awful.*

He believed that if Hart Island had a cenotaph or memorial on which families could name their dead, it would help 'to create a sense of place for Hart Island that's lacking'. David mentioned how some cemeteries have a book of remembrance or monument in the cremains scattering garden where mourners can inscribe their loved one's name.

> *There has to be a significant evolution of Hart Island. I think it is a place for memorialization and interment and it's not been done, obviously, well, but it has the potential of being the premier green cemetery in New York City.*

What David described is a remarkable vision of Hart Island as a cemetery suitable for the kind of funeral that New Yorkers, whatever their background or circumstances, considered decent, respectful, and correct. It would help bring a Hart Island burial – or cremains interment should that ever become an option – closer to being the right kind of funeral. Such a cemetery would help bereaved people choose for themselves how to inter those they loved, whether cremated or buried. They could employ a funeral director and hold a viewing if they were able to afford it, and could participate in funeral and memorial rituals. Most importantly, this cemetery would be celebrated and cared for, with deceased New Yorkers remembered and connected to the living through physical memorials and relationships with visitors.

Understanding New Yorkers' beliefs about what counts as the right kind of funeral, including memorialization, helps explain the social anxiety around projects aimed at recovering the Hart Island dead to the realm of normal posthumous relations. New Yorkers enact ordinary posthumous citizenship and normal posthumous relations through funeral rites: participatory funerals, rituals involving the corpse, and memorialization including a named disposal place (of burial or interment) where the living can perform care by visiting. I have contextualized how contemporary local practice evolved over US history and how social values normalized these preferences. One instructive example is how ordinary posthumous citizenship was systematically withheld in African American history because some of these systematic practices are recognizably similar to complaints from bereaved relatives about

Hart Island today. I traced New Yorkers' changing attitudes towards cremation, now considered suitable for settling the dead into proper posthumous relations, and examined New Yorkers' distinctive and longstanding Right of Sepulchre that guarantees the next of kin's right to arrange the disposal of the deceased's body. Being able to arrange a loved one's funeral is crucial to how New Yorkers imagine normal posthumous relations. In a social order where six or more graves transforms land into a cemetery, the symbolic power of Hart Island's estimated one million bodies has an extraordinary claim, despite the many ways in which they have been marked as less than full citizens.

Chapter 3
New Yorkers too

> *New York City offers a quest. A kind of transaction that you can realize with sufficient willpower and determination and ambition, that the city will reward those things with power, money, whatever. And Hart Island is like the inversion, what happens when the dream goes brutally wrong, you'll be nothing. In reality, the city doesn't care either way, like, it's not sentient. But the myth is reality.*
>
> *NYC artist, interviews*

Claims for political belonging have played out in several NYC mass burial and memorial sites. Like Hart Island, these are exceptions to norms, though they vary considerably across circumstance and time. Discoveries of mass graves often prompt subsequent political projects of social repair, in which the identity, relationships, and citizenship of the deceased can be bitterly contested (Kwon 2006; Wagner 2008). By contrasting Hart Island with the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, I explore questions of who owns the dead and whom among the dead can be appropriately socially abandoned. The tensions over those buried and memorialized reveal anxieties over different standards and spheres of citizenship between neighbourhoods and broader ideas of belonging to NYC or the nation. They also show how memorialization can be used to abstract identity, both to put the dead to work for the living and potentially to make them safe to forget. In an individualistic culture (Tocqueville 1959), reclaiming the dead in a collective identity has significance and may make it acceptable to remember them less. In celebrating a group, it may be easier to elide a given individual's circumstances and any shared responsibilities for how those came to be.

During my fieldwork, people often emphasized the Hart Island dead *as* New Yorkers, as they talked about moving Hart Island's jurisdiction from DOC to Parks, or destigmatising its burials, or expressed their shock at the massed burials during Covid-19's first wave. People often invoked ideas of citizenship, underpinning a rhetoric of reclaiming Hart Island that reiterated within different social contexts, in statements like 'Is this the best we can do for our fellow New Yorkers?' This citizenship talk claiming the Hart Island dead as belonging in the same category as other citizens was novel. Archival materials often emphasized that a Hart Island burial was for unwanted or unclaimed people.

Part of what distresses people about Hart Island is that it appears to transgress what NYC symbolizes, specifically through an uncomfortable recognition of social abandonment at scale in their city that was 'socially authorised … ordinary and unaccounted for' (Biehl 2013: 38). To analyse this, I contrast rhetoric offered about Hart Island's dead with statements from others about recognising the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers, as well as other talk by those in Hart Island's epistemic community. Of the array of possible rhetorical meanings, including broad notions of community and identity, I interpret this as talk about citizenship because it recognizes a political category in which the living and the dead are alike. I argue that 'New Yorker' is a kind of local term for citizen, even if people do not use the term (Lazar 2008); this is especially salient given citizenship's foundations in ideas of belonging to a city or city-state. What does this claim of citizenship for the Hart Island dead make possible and what does it foreclose? Which interlocutors make use of these claims and who does not?

My interlocutors rarely used the term citizenship itself, and their talk of the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers was not bounded by but overlapped with recognition of the dead as persons and their own sense of themselves as New Yorkers. Talk of being a New Yorker includes issues of informal identity and community that are variously recognized. So why use citizenship over the alternative categories of the person, or kinship, or identity within community? These categories intersect and intertwine. The broad sense of feeling like one belongs to a group and the different ways that someone can be formally and informally recognized as a member of that group are imprecise, even amorphous (Shore 2003); the notion of identity seemed likewise too slippery to provide analytic purchase. Throughout this thesis, I use the lens of citizenship to trace projects which seek to reclaim those buried at Hart Island. By restricting the enquiry to claims and recognition of citizenship rather than how we confer recognition of the deceased as a person, my analysis focuses on revealing certain power relations that were previously taken for granted, as well as potentially emphasizing power relationships that existed during the deceased's life. In short, why all the talk of the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers, if not to summon a political category? Then, if the dead always work for the living (Laqueur 2015), what work does the notion of the dead's citizenship perform and for whom?

I am not arguing that the Hart Island dead can claim, act on, and experience citizenship as the living do – through political agency, the ability to act, and the experience of affect and subjectivities. While there are intriguing arguments about the agency of the dead (Smolensky 2009; Troyer 2020; Harper 2010), including the ability to shape experience for the living such as haunting, or the legal force of a will, these take limited forms. The dead themselves

may not claim inclusion and effective participation in political life, but they can be recognized or mobilized to do so by the living. How do the living perceive the citizenship of the dead? And how is this shaped by a sense of political agency or collective identity belonging to a particular locality?

I begin with my first visit to Hart Island and the citizenship talk I heard there.

Six to the Styx

When I started fieldwork, people could only visit Hart Island in three ways. Relatives could register for one of the monthly graveside visits, in which a DOC officer would take them from the prison bus to the approximate position of their loved one's unmarked grave. They cannot walk from this location. When they have finished at the graveside, they and the officer return to the bus which returns them to the ferry. Second, the public could register for the monthly gazebo visit, in which they left the ferry, sat in the wooden gazebo a few metres from the wharf with other visitors, then returned to the ferry. Third, once a year, vetted media were hosted. Each type of trip required careful planning: visitors needed to be registered twelve days in advance, come in groups of five or fewer, provide government-approved photographic ID, and be over 16. Media could take still cameras, but everyone else had to surrender all communications devices to DOC staff while on the island.

For my first visit to Hart Island on 28 September 2019, I had registered weeks in advance with DOC. Previously, all visitors had been required to provide evidence of whom they intended to visit and declare a close family connection. Given the role that ruptures in family relationships could potentially play in a Hart Island burial, this seemed a remarkable restriction, frustrating the desires of close friends, carers, and chosen kin to visit. This was the first family visit open to visitors with other relationships. A few days prior to my visit, Melinda Hunt and I realized we would both be on the midday sailing and she invited me to join her in visiting Rosalie Grable, who had been buried on Hart Island at her own request.

I began my journey two hours earlier than midday, taking the L train[35] to Manhattan, then the 6 subway train to the end of the line, and then a bus to City Island. I left the bus at the City Island Diner and walked down Fordham Street past the Nautical Museum and Community Centre to the locked gates of the DOC wharf. The gates were heavily signposted, declaring that this was private property belonging to DOC and that trespass was forbidden. On the left was a boatyard for over-wintering yachts. To the right, a gated condominium community. I rarely saw people inside, but from the condos, many residents could watch the

[35] An elevated – so, 'L' – train between Brooklyn and Manhattan.

burials from their balconies. Captain Martin Thompson met us at the gates, a tall heavyset Black man in late middle age with an understated avuncular manner. He has managed DOC's Hart Island operations since 2005, organising the Rikers Island inmates' gravedigging work.[36]

Standing in the early autumn sun, we visitors chatted with one other. Several people had brought flowers to leave on graves, and Melinda had brought roses from her garden. Many had learned of Hart Island through Melinda's work, and she greeted everyone she knew, remembering relatives' names and burial details, and introduced herself to those she didn't. People greeted her effusively in response, emphasising their gratitude for her assistance. She had helped several find their relative's approximate burial plot, had even accompanied some on their first visit and, at times, her advocacy on behalf of a family had lasted years. Captain Thompson also greeted those people he affectionately referred to as 'regulars' but was less assertive than Melinda. It seemed almost as though she was the host and authority here, rather than him. It was an emphatic reminder that many people find the city's bureaucracy difficult to access and navigate, in addition to the shame they already felt.

Melinda was the obvious longstanding exception to the need for visitors to claim a close kinship relationship with the deceased in order to visit. She told people I was a researcher, the first to visit the island for eleven years. The other non-family visitor was a social worker there to pay her respects to a client who had died and for whom no family had come forward. The other ten visitors were there for family.

As the wharf gates opened we walked towards a shipping container-like office, where two DOC officers were waiting. Each of us presented our photographic identification for inspection, and the officers ticked us off the list of approved visitors. We signed liability waivers acknowledging the risks posed by, among other things, Hart Island's wildlife and 'uneven ground'. More urgent, in my view, were the risks from the dilapidated Victorian brickwork buildings that disintegrated unpredictably with every storm, and the slimmer chance that someone might roam and fall into the active burial trench. One officer collected all mobile phones and other communication devices into sealed envelopes, which were secured in the office until we returned. Though the officers were friendly, polite, and firmly professional, the process was intimidating.

[36] During NYC's first pandemic wave, Rikers inmates and staff, including Captain Thompson, were so ill with the virus that they could not provide Hart Island's burial labour during its busiest time in decades. NYC quickly replaced inmate labour with private contractors, which had already been planned for when Hart Island's management was transferred from DOC to Parks in 2021 (Kravitz & Geanous 2021).

Then Captain Thompson walked us down the wharf to board the ferry, calling greetings to the marine crew as he boarded. He introduced each crewmember by name, and they in turn urged passengers to take care as some of the onboard surfaces were uneven. Most passengers stood on the sunny deck for the brief crossing and watched the island as we approached. Captain Thompson pointed out two osprey eyries (nests) at this dock and the retired dock further down the island's short coast. They are majestically, comically big, preposterously balanced on the solid wharf beams. 'They here for a while,' he said of the eyrie on the wharf where we docked, 'but the traffic [from the ferry bringing prison workers and visitors] too much so they move.' 'Oh, goin' Midtown,' someone joked, referring to New Yorkers' preoccupation with location and real estate. 'That's right,' smiled the Captain.

Figure 4. Hart Island visitors, 28 September 2019.
Midday sailing. At far left is Melinda Hunt (Hart Island Project), beside the author. At right rear is Captain Martin Thompson (DOC). (Photograph taken by DOC staff on polaroid.)

We disembarked at the tiny island's landing stage and walked past two small gardens planted with hardy perennials. Several small stone angels decorated one, donated by a previous rotation of Rikers officers, we were told. The other plot boasted a retired dinghy. The red brick buildings visible from City Island became dilapidated ruins when seen up close. They included the former hospital, the prison records and reformatory, the Pavilion, the women's asylum that became the addiction treatment residence Phoenix House, the dynamo building and smokestack, the chapel, and the wooden cottages. As we walked towards the prison bus that waited for us near the visitors' gazebo, behind the derelict administration

building, Captain Thompson turned and waited for everyone to attend to him. He met the gaze of those watching.

'We sorry for your loss,' he said solemnly. 'We Correction officers. But we New Yorkers too. Most of us lost somebody. Know what that means. So, our thoughts with you today' (28 September 2019). Many visitors nodded. They understood what Thompson was saying and appeared grateful for it.

What *was* it that Captain Thompson had said that resonated with those gathered? He spoke simply and directly, and I would learn that his habit of omitting copular and auxiliary verbs gave his speech a haiku-like immediacy. He spoke for his staff and expressed sympathy ('sorry for your loss' is the common American idiom of bereavement acknowledgement and compassion) and empathy. He identified his staff as working for Correction, thus for the City of New York. This scarcely needed saying, as they were all uniformed and moved confidently about the island, unlike the visitors who knew the island less well due to having spent less time there and, more significantly, needing permission from DOC staff to move anywhere on the island aside from the graveside.[37] In his capacity as a DOC officer, he can and will control your freedom of movement, restrict your possessions, and has the right to forcibly restrain you if you do not comply with his instructions. So there was an underscored admission of unequal authority in Captain Thompson's stressing DOC's presence. Then comes the 'But', the precursor to empathy, as it establishes the common ground required. He emphasizes that he and his staff are *also* New Yorkers – being *of* the city, not only working for the city. He suggested that their identification as belonging to NYC counterbalanced their official role. He mentioned that many of his staff had experienced bereavement and so could empathize with what visiting relatives were experiencing. In this he also implied a claim of equivalence – that to cope with any death of a loved one is difficult, regardless of the circumstances, so a bereavement resulting in a visit to Hart Island may be neither better nor worse than many others. He made no acknowledgement that a Hart Island burial is a further burden to bereavement. He was sorry for their loss but did not acknowledge that when the person is buried at Hart Island they have often been twice lost, especially if loved ones have not known where they were. This is consistent with being Correction, as the job is about controlling people in conditions of suffering. He concluded with an assertion that this sympathy would be uppermost in the minds of his staff and himself on Hart Island that day.

[37] Long-time visitors told me that things had improved compared with when relatives' graveside visits began, when they were closely attended during visits by armed DOC officers.

It is his assertion that his staff are 'New Yorkers too' that is salient. In another location, would such a declaration be made? In one sense, as he recognized a distinction (we are Correction, you are not), he also underscored that they all belong to a larger and defining common category, that of being New Yorkers. To say, 'we New Yorkers too' is to say, 'in this we are like you.' He identified being a New Yorker and implied that his professional role, and the power that comes with it, does not preclude other forms of identity, as being a New Yorker is a connection with the experiences and values of those he was addressing. He certainly implied the popular mythology of New Yorkers sharing the bond of special knowledge through living in an exceptional place. Notably, Captain Thompson was not commenting on the citizenship of the deceased but of those living and attending, and so was making an argument for the shared distinction and equivalence with all those present.

Indeed, most were New Yorkers, apart from a father and son from another Northeastern city and me; Melinda lived out of State at the time and was Canadian by birth, but she had lived in Manhattan and Brooklyn for decades. Some other relatives had begun life in other countries but had long become New Yorkers. Their loved ones had died as New Yorkers and were buried as such. But in this assertion, Captain Thompson was claiming that the cemetery visitors and DOC officers belong to the same political category, one of shared political identity and some common experiences and values.

New York's exceptionalism

New Yorkers often talk about New York in terms that suggest it is exceptional to America, and yet *more* American than any other city. The clichéd notion that NYC is the greatest city in the world, the biggest, brightest, and best, lies beneath common remarks that someone is a 'die-hard New Yorker' who 'couldn't live anywhere else'. Tee shirts and clothing bearing the advertising slogan 'I love [heart] New York' are not just for tourists but worn by locals, as is clothing that identifies one's borough or more commonly one's neighbourhood. For instance, Brooklyn Industries made streetwear celebrating the borough through motifs associated with Brooklyn, such as cycles, rooftop water towers, rats and pigeons, the Brooklyn bridge, community gardens, the phrase 'No Sleep Till',[38] and designed t-shirts naming the suburbs of Williamsburg and Bushwick, though most simply state 'Brooklyn'. In NYC's mythology, living here also produces a rough and unflinching strength in people, honed by intense population density and subsequent competition for resources, the extraordinary cost of living, and the forbidding logistics of just getting around. Part of this sense of exceptionalism about

[38] Lyric from *No Sleep Till Brooklyn* from local band the Beastie Boys.

NYC was, ironically enough, a kind of provincialism: that this city was so vast, diverse, and absorbing that a true New Yorker could find the entire world contained inside its limits, and that anywhere else in the US was something of a backwater to be escaped from. LinkNYC stands, which provided free Wifi and charging stations across NYC and were as ubiquitous as the payphones they had replaced, often alternated bus timetables and advertising with quotes from writers about NYC's character and affective hold on those who live there.[39]

More reflective New Yorkers also suggested to me that the notion of NYC's exceptionalism was a way for them to rationalize or marginalize the difficulties or moral challenges of city life: 'The trash, the homeless, a rat for every human, the broken subway, outrageous rents, rampant inequality. On the other hand, it's *New York*!' one told me. Another said, 'I think of New York as a huge and prosperous city in the developing world. People accept everything else because you can come here and reinvent yourself. You can aspire. And life is great *if* you have money.' Conversely, I was also told more than once to remember that NYC had been targeted by terrorists in the World Trade Center (WTC) attacks 'because of who we are'. People often felt that these attacks had stimulated a certain form of resilience and courage but had been motivated by jealousy of New York's essential ambitious and liberal qualities.

'We're taught to celebrate New York's superdiversity, and that's true of the population. But that's diversity, not equality,' explained one academic and activist. 'Look at the spaces where people have power, those spaces have white people in them. But that burial ground you study, I don't know if you have data on that, but they'll be Black people, Latino people, immigrants. Same with the Rikers crew.' Recalling Hage's (2012) argument that white nationalism in Anglo-settler states is normalized to invisibility, this interlocutor also correctly predicted that there would be no official data about the ethnicity of those receiving public burials, but by definition, they were usually people already disenfranchised during life. Anecdotally I was told by multiple sources that the people receiving public burials were most often Black or Latinx.

Simultaneously, parts of NYC were organized with cooperative ideals and practices. An obvious example is the subway, which was used by all but the very wealthy, and charged one flat rate for each ride no matter the distance. Subway stations were also home for what I came to consider a typical New York act: a mother with a stroller and infant would pause at the

[39] One example is 'The true New Yorker secretly believes that people living anywhere else have to be, in some sense, kidding' (John Updike).

subway stairs, unsure how to navigate down to the train or back up to the street. Inevitably someone would, without asking or talking to the person with the stroller, pick up one side of it and help carry it up or down the stairs, then walk on without saying anything. The mother would not speak either. The person helping could be anyone: I saw this done by a tattooed youth, an enormous Caribbean man carrying an artwork, a well-heeled Manhattanite woman in tasteful earth tones, and others. There would simply be no acknowledgement of the other person, perhaps even no eye contact. No thanks would be offered or expected. When I described this pattern to a friend, they responded, 'Sure. New Yorkers aren't nice, but they *are* kind.'

Another example is public libraries, which hold extraordinary collections and also act as resource centres for accessing education and training, free Wi-Fi and computer use, citizenship and social services, art spaces, and community-building of all kinds. When I first applied for a New York Public Library card without a permanent address and tried to explain my circumstances to the librarian, she interrupted: 'We don't care if you from the moon, dear. Everybody gets a card'. All over NYC I saw community gardens, used to grow food and create beautiful environments, used for holiday celebrations, children's parties, and by older people playing board games. All of these were superficial markers perhaps, but they suggest the kind of communities New Yorkers imagined and sought for themselves and the inclusive values of distributed equality many subscribed to. Through mythologies, discourses, and practices that involved notions of the liberal, progressive, multicultural pluralism, scale, economic potential, and particular forms of strength and resilience, New Yorkers often seemed to constitute themselves as different from a group of imagined others, especially other Americans.

Some people suggested to me that NYC's population density shaped a distinctive way of behaving that New Yorkers could recognize and reflect, and that this influenced policy ideals. People told me that living at such close quarters promoted a form of tolerance because people must find ways of forging and testing alliances across lines of race, ethnicity, and language. Jane Jacobs (1962), herself a New Yorker who took her city as example, described how, while overcrowding can be a problem to be solved for some urbanists (the garden city urbanists, and Le Corbusier and his skyscrapers), others understand density and its frictions as a productive and even magical part of city life (*ibid.*). She imagined trust between people as the rational organising principle because peace on the sidewalk and street depends on 'an intricate almost unconscious network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves and enforced by the people themselves' (Jacobs 1962: 32). Jacobs insisted on

celebrating 'the smallness of big cities' (*ibid*.), arguing that living in density means one almost inevitably engages with those in one's block as this is where one's life is mostly lived (Tönnies 2002; Young 2011). This sociality is also partly due to the way life is lived on the streets and how most people move around the city; the majority walk everywhere and use public transit. Within this vision, a public burial amidst Hart Island's million has the resonating virtue of lying as one lived in NYC, among strangers.

Many interlocutors also readily marked those they considered false New Yorkers. President Trump was an oft-cited example of someone who had popularly (nationally and internationally) exemplified New York and was born in and lived there, but whom locals often refused to recognize as 'a real New Yorker.' Notwithstanding Trump's own repudiation through his relocation to Florida during his presidency, why did so many New Yorkers say things akin to, 'And the truth is, Trump, the lifelong New Yorker, was never a New Yorker. He was a tourist' (Mehlman 2019). Even the discredited Governor Cuomo[40] stated that he did not consider Trump a New Yorker based on Trump's incendiary divisive speech and behaviour: 'I don't believe he was a New Yorker … Living in New York does not make you a New Yorker. To be a New Yorker is a state of mind. It's a set of beliefs that you live by. New Yorkers do not discriminate' (Reisman 2019). I met numerous people who not only knew the Trumps by reputation but had some sort of personal encounter with them, and were incredulous that Donald Trump, of such low character, had become President. For instance, Elaine Jacobs (chap. 4), who is white, had signed leases on behalf of Black friends and family for housing in Queens owned by the Trumps in the 1970s and 80s, who notoriously refused tenancies to Black people. For her, misleading these racist landlords was a small moral rebellion.

The notion of NYC's exceptionalism is useful because it helps elaborate the sense many New Yorkers have of belonging as individuals to a political community that is distinctive and held in tension with national citizenship. For instance, once on the subway, I spotted a woman's tote bag bearing the phrase, 'Please don't call me an American. I'm a New Yorker' highlighting that the two spheres of citizenship can be distinctive, even contradictory, and that some felt little sense of national belonging during the divisive periods of the Trump administration. I first saw the term 'New York exceptionalism' used by media during the first wave of the pandemic (Hallum 2020a, 2020b) when NYC was still locked down. The term

[40] Cuomo was disgraced for lying about nursing home deaths due to Covid-19 and resigned for sexually harassing female staff.

localized the concept of 'American exceptionalism,' that the United States was distinct from other countries in having certain leadership responsibilities that went with its unparalleled wealth and military powers.[41]

By 'New York exceptionalism', then, people suggested that NYC exhibited these traits of American exceptionalism in exhilarating ways: so that NYC is more American than other places while *simultaneously* exceptional to America. Throughout my fieldwork, I met people who joked that NYC was readying to secede from the Union (implying that they no longer saw a place for NYC in the national political direction and that NYC city was large and powerful enough to make a separate state), or that they had come to the city to prove themselves and now could never live anywhere else in America.

Take, for instance, Mayor de Blasio's comment that NYC had Covid-19 first and worst (compared with other places in the US) and would return even more glorious (Hallum 2020b). Other perceived qualities about being a New Yorker, such as toughness, were also amplified politically during the pandemic. During the first wave, New York State Governor Cuomo's daily addresses began including ideas about people being 'New York tough,' which would help them prevail against the virus:

> *We're going to get through it because* we are New York *and because we've dealt with a lot of things, and because we are smart. You have to be smart to make it in New York. And we are resourceful … we are united … And because we are New York tough. We are tough. You have to be tough. This place makes you tough, but it makes you tough in a good way … New York loves you* (Cuomo 2020, emphasis mine).

The speech gained purchase online with the hashtag #NYTough and exhorted people to recognize these characteristics of New Yorkers. The phrase 'New York loves you' inverts the popular advertising slogan 'I [heart] New York' and personifies and animates NYC. But the phrase 'we are New York' makes an explicit claim about the city being the sum of its

[41] Ultimately the concept derives from Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Its American significance comes from John Winthrop's 1630 sermon in Massachusetts Bay, when he told colonists 'we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us for others to be inspired by' (Winthrop 1996). Through the mid-twentieth century, scholars, politicians, and administrators developed the concept of American exceptionalism (Tocqueville 1959; Miller 1955; Madsen 2022; Lockhart 2012). They saw unique advantages that, because of America's broad middle class, the US, though an extremely wealthy nation, had never had the kind of welfare state and working-class political party common in European countries. In many ways, the twentieth century was the American Century as the Cold War crystallized the idea that the United States' free-market capitalist democracy could project its powers globally, a role that this nation was destined, entitled, and even obliged to play in international affairs. Embedded in these ideas of America's international political power as, if not superior, then at least exceptional, is a domestic mistrust of centralized authority – as President Reagan stated in his inaugural address, 'Government is not the solution [but] … the problem' (Reagan 1981) – and a faith in 'rugged individualism', that there are inherent and intrinsic American qualities of character that means that individuals and privately organized businesses and organizations will be inherently better than government at virtually everything.

citizens. What does it mean for someone to *be* New York – and what are the limits to this claim? What is enabled or foreclosed by constituting New Yorkers as uniquely tough?

It seems more than the rhetorical claim of a city comprising individuals, but something that New Yorkers cheerfully claimed for themselves. As one minor but instructive example, early in fieldwork, I chatted briefly with a stranger wearing a Red Sox baseball cap. I joked that it was bold to openly supporting the Boston team over the New York Yankees — or Mets. He raised his brows slightly in acknowledgement and smiled, 'I'm from Astoria [a suburb of Queens], ain't scared'a nothing.' Today, Astoria has gentrified, but the man relied on his history with the suburb as it had been to indicate his fortitude, and right to support whatever team he liked.

The notion that New Yorkers valued life differently was also observable in how outsiders viewed New Yorkers. Community historian and former police officer Tom Vashti spent an evening going through his archives of the Northeast Bronx with me and gifted me two used postcards dated 1910. At that time, Hart Island had a permanent residential population of the boy's workhouse and reformatory, tuberculosis sanatorium, and prison for aged and infirm men (Seitz & Miller 2011: 141), as well as the staff that served these institutions and the cemetery. Neighbouring City Island and nearby East Bronx areas of Pelham Bay were far less developed and functioned as holiday retreats for New Yorkers during the oppressive summer heat.

One postcard offers an image of Hart Island (mislabelled 'Hart's Island') with what looks like a bustling set of buildings and two ferries (fig. 5), and far more vegetation than remains today. On the back of the postcard is written simply, 'This is where NY carts its pauper dead & prisoners dig trenches & dump them in. Cathn.' (i.e. truncation of Catherine) (1910). The description remained accurate in 2019. In 1910, that massed graves and burial practices of Hart Island were considered a suitable and worthy subject for postcards, that City Island pharmacist C. A. Buchbinder had sufficient confidence in the marketability of these to place a print order with Americhrome and publish them, and that holidaymakers selected them to send to loved ones is remarkable enough, though it accords with the popularity of the exotic in the early twentieth century. The postcard writer, Catherine, obviously considered the burial practices to be unusual and interesting enough to report to her correspondent. Her words implied a frank curiosity at this local tradition, and even in this brief sentence expressed a sense of wonder at both the callous aberrations in burial rites (carting, dumping, using prison labour), and at a people so hardened that they were content with such indecency and

indignity. The practices are understood as peculiar to NYC and are offered as a token of New Yorkers' callous ways.

The second postcard showed a similar image and simply said, 'John will explain on his return'. The writer intriguingly raised Hart Island as a future conversation topic, worthy of comment but too difficult or improper to canvas in the truncated and semi-public communication of a postcard, and tasked someone else, John, with the eventual explication. Notably, the graves are not clearly visible in either image, but it is solely to these practices that each holidaymaker refers. They use words to make visible what remains invisible to the eye. Both postcards offer small vernacular expressions of how Hart Island was regarded with uneasy curiosity by holidaymakers over a century ago and how its unusual practices are linked with the idea that New Yorkers value their people differently or pitilessly lack the capacity to care.

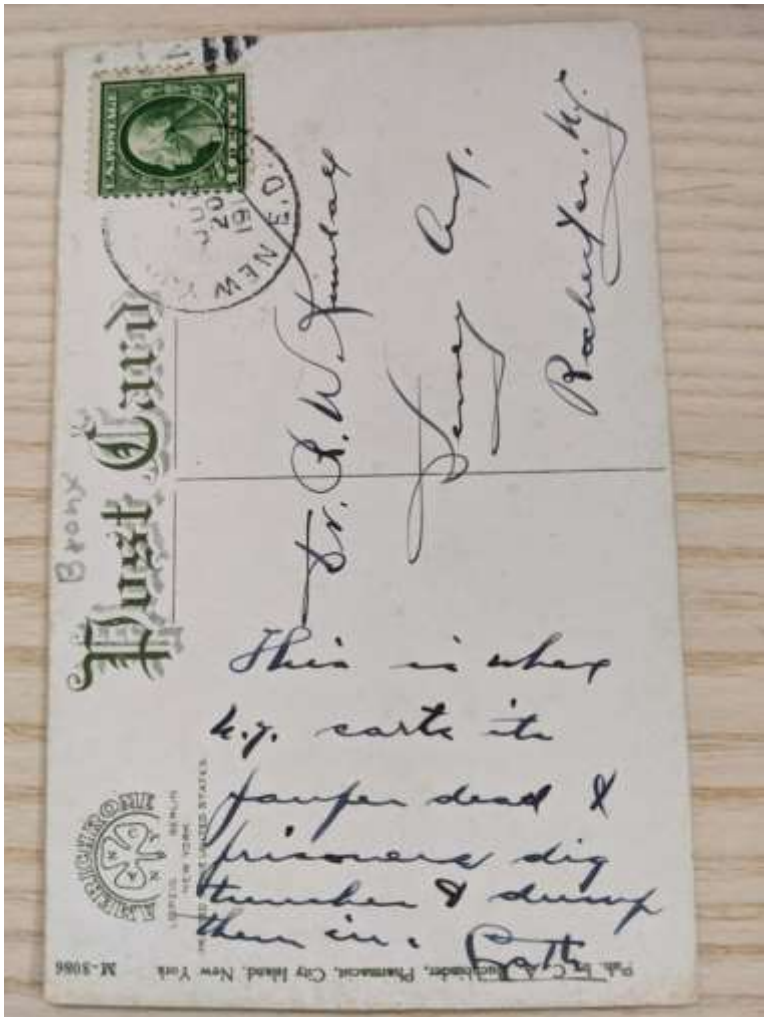

Figure 5. Postcard of Hart Island. 1910.

New Yorkers to remember

NYC's more recent history offers another comparison of competing claims for posthumous citizenship rights, in the aftermath of the attacks on Manhattan's WTC in 2001. A massed grave is often by definition an erasure of individual identity for the deceased; at the 9/11 memorial, individual identity is honoured to an extraordinary degree. People often talked about the experience of the WTC attacks as an epoch for the city. Before the pandemic, confidence in NYC's exceptionalism often featured in rationalizations of the WTC attacks. People described the attacks as symbolically motivated 'because of what [New York] means to America and to the world'. I first overheard this on the subway, and the sentiment seemed widespread. The attacks were mentioned often during the pandemic's early stages because people felt a similar sense of disbelief and horror as death suddenly seemed everywhere (chap. 1). The WTC attacks were akin to a unifying key symbol of grief for New Yorkers, one in which citizenship remains deeply implicated.

Those who died in the WTC attacks and those buried on Hart Island represent two groups of New Yorkers who needed their city's help in death. This need was met in two radically juxtaposing ways. Comparing how NYC imagined, cared for, and memorialized the dead of the WTC and Hart Island helps reveal the publics that these policies were designed to serve. Public policy is never about a particular person and their specific circumstances. But NYC's public burial policy, like all public policies, has an imaginary public. When public burials began on Hart Island in 1869, paupers' burials were tacitly designed to be shameful (Laqueur 1983) and reporters wrote that Hart Island was too alarming and miserable to visit (NYT 1915b). What this meant in practice did not change much over the next 150 years. The deceased has been provided with a public burial as a New Yorker, and other social relations were assumed concluded.

The bodies of those who died at the WTC have come to stand powerfully for all New Yorkers (Aronson 2017). The jostling over the memorialization of the WTC was a complex act of settling the dead as heroic victims and new sacred ancestors for the City (*ibid*.) – while the dead of Hart Island are overwhelmingly forgotten. Of course, those deemed unworthy of memorialization can find themselves rehabilitated according to new political projects (Verdery 1999).

Those who died in the attacks at Manhattan's WTC are imagined differently, resulting in instructively different policies and practices of care and remembrance. The city has made an extraordinary commitment to recovering, identifying, and returning all human remains larger than a thumbnail (CBS 2013) of those killed in the attacks. This project, funded by city, state

and federal governments, remains open, regardless of cost or time. Of the 2,753 killed in Manhattan, only 293 bodies were found more or less intact (Aronson 2017). Some 8,000 fragments of human remains, too small or otherwise unable to be currently identified by DNA technology (Wagner 2008), are stored in a repository behind a multifloored blue mosaic wall in the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum,[42] in anticipation that scientific advances will eventually make identification possible. The repository also holds the remains that families have not wished to receive. Several funeral directors had described to me the emotional challenge of how few and small the human remains recovered after the attack were, meaning that many families had only fragments of bone to grieve over, or no physical remains whatsoever. Yet this lack of certainty regarding physical remains has corresponded with extraordinary acts of memorialization.

Each time a fragment was positively identified, the next of kin would be contacted by the OCME about the opportunity to claim the remains. Some families, having received conclusive evidence about their loved one's death via a positively identified fragment, decided it was unnecessarily distressing to receive anything further. Some families appreciated the return of every fragment. Others were contacted numerous times before deciding that they did not wish to know if further fragments of their loved ones were discovered. One funeral director told me about a family that had been contacted over ten times as tiny fragments were successively identified, but they found the process retraumatising. The same funeral director described another case in which a family had made that same decision after receiving a fragment that confirmed their loved one had died: 'Very sadly, the family had had a piece of bone or similar and decided that was enough, they knew he was gone. Had the funeral. But then they (OCME) discovered his almost intact remains, but the family were clear they didn't want to go through it again. So these remains, virtually complete, sit in the memorial downtown. Very sad.'

This commitment to identifying and returning nameless remains from the WTC to the point that families began refusing them, is radically juxtaposed with how those buried on Hart Island and their bereaved were treated by the city. The contrast is especially acute when

[42] This striking blue mosaic wall by artist Spencer Finch, *Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning*, comprises 2,983 blue panels representing the victims. It is inscribed with this quote: 'No day shall erase you from the memory of time. Virgil.' Whenever I visited, people seemed to find this quote significant, taking photographs of themselves standing in front of it. As widely noted, this quote from Virgil's the Aeneid (Book IX) refers to two Trojan soldiers, Nisus and Euryalus, whose decapitated heads were stood on pikes in retribution for their attack on sleeping soldiers. Being executed in disgrace for war crimes is quite different to the sacrifice of innocents, as the 9/11 Museum implies (Dunlap 2014).

compared with the years when relatives could have as little as forty-eight hours to claim a body before it was directed for public burial (Bernstein 2016a). Those buried on Hart Island are not individually named or collectively honoured by the city, their burial ground is not constantly available for rites of mourning with monuments and a museum, the city does not mark their birthdays with roses; in short, the Hart Island dead were not understood as martyrs or venerable ancestors. The victims of the WTC attacks were honoured by the city as exemplary citizens. There are obvious rationales for this difference: the WTC dead were killed violently, *en masse*, in a spectacular way which atomized their remains, and their deaths were nationally infused with sacred meaning. They did not die the everyday deaths of those on Hart Island. The WTC dead were represented as professionals at celebrated companies in the productive, ambitious world of finance and commerce that powered NYC's economy, or emergency workers who risked their lives for others. Of course, there were blue-collar staff serving these professionals who died in the attacks, such as janitors, hospitality workers, and cleaners, and they rarely feature in these accounts. There were likely also undocumented migrants within this labour force, whose remains will not be identified because they officially did not exist (Aronson 2017). Nevertheless, the WTC dead became powerful symbols of the kind of citizens that the city and the nation should honour. Those on Hart Island are the inverse, the city's Janus face, the kind of citizens who are not missed and whose lives should not be publicly celebrated or serve as a model for others.

Memorialization at the WTC shifted from a local to national scale. Recovering all human remains at the WTC was an important project for the federal state in ways that identifying and remembering the Hart Island dead cannot be. Benedict Anderson (2006) began his analysis of 'national imagination' by contemplating tombs of unknown soldiers and how the problems of memorializing absence and anonymity can be employed by a state to harness the peculiar political polyvalency of the dead (Verdery 1999). The WTC dead became martyrs in an extremely evocative narrative and a politically powerful moment in American history. Portrayed from the start as national heroes, their biographies were reported in local, national, and international media, which insisted not on the loss of an abstracted number of anonymous dead but rather individual lives. Simultaneously, of course, the national political discourse depicted the attacks as on the group rather than individuals (who were of course unknown to the hijackers), but in ways that 'render[ed] the context of violence one of national suffering and sacrifice' (White 2004: 296). The project of recovering, identifying, returning, and especially memorializing fragmented remains was to provide relatives with certainty about their loved one's death but also to demonstrate how Americans valued their citizens' lives,

emphasizing the dramatic difference from the terrorists who had undertaken the attack. The local and federal governments' resolve to recover all remains, in itself, helped position the WTC dead as victims in state conflict given the federal government's distinctive commitment to care for all deceased Americans killed in conflict, which consequently determined forms of commemoration (Wagner 2008).

The tensions between private grief and public memorialization were illustrated by the well-documented decade-long dispute between the committee appointed by the city to develop a memorial and the bereaved families. The WTC dead were claimed in multiple ways: as relatives; as employees of particular corporations, who wished to commemorate entire offices who had perished together; as representatives of vocations. Those who died while attempting rescues were claimed as emergency workers, fire departments of various precincts especially wanted to honour their brother firefighters who died in service that day. All were claimed as New Yorkers, specifically Manhattanites, and ultimately as Americans.[43] The issues disputed by these parties are many, and as fundamental as place – exactly where should the memorial be located? – and property – who owned the body (Aronson 2017)? Some bereaved found it unbearable that commerce would recommence on the site they considered sacralized as their relative's burial place. Civic and business interests saw the site's commercial redevelopment as an assertion of American, and specifically NYC, values: that consumerism should not be cowed by violence and to fail to redevelop would mean that the attackers and their values had prevailed (*ibid.*). But issues of what the space should be – a cemetery and repository for unrecovered remains, sacred space for private memorialization, national memorial, political mobilizer, commercial and tourist hub – played out over the decade. The sometimes bitter dispute over what work the dead should perform and for whom mapped directly to claims made on their identities by the living. Should this person be remembered primarily for their death as well as their vocation, private relationships, and citizenship?

Eventually, after a decade-long dispute, rebuilding began and the space of Ground Zero was preserved as an open-air memorial and the 9/11 Museum. The museum especially is multifaceted, simultaneously a memorial, museum, repository for human remains, educational institution, tourist attraction. It is also a securitized space, patrolled by guards and with strict visiting restrictions. However, each person is named and has their life described in

[43] The museum largely glosses over the deceased's religious affiliations, but religious identity is central to the museum's discussion of the hijackers' Islamic ideology.

a dedicated room. Every American known to have died in the attack has their name and photograph displayed, as if in a shrine. Each person can be looked up through an electronic display to learn more about their biography and often what they did on the day they died. At the nearby memorial, the name of every deceased person is carved in stone, and staff leave a rose to celebrate each individual's birthday.

Over this period, the living relinquished some of their original claims on the identities of the dead. Companies fairly quickly withdrew their claims, for instance, to have their employees who died together listed together on the memorial (Aronson 2017). Some firefighters told me that their brothers who had perished on duty had not been appropriately recognized at the national memorial, which had prompted their unions to erect their own. Family members were the most intractable of the stakeholders in their concerns about how the dead should be remembered. Many believed that their lack of a body or remains to grieve over added moral weight to their claim over Ground Zero as a place where their loved one had died and that it should be set aside for personal mourning.

This phenomenon of affective attachment to absence in the aftermath of mass violence on memory, trauma, and subjectivity has been extensively analysed in recent literature (Navaro 2020). In particular, human remains are constitutive of and constituted by the political, especially at sites of political violence where the state mobilizes forensic science to recover and commemorate mass graves (Wagner 2008; Crossland 2017; Fontein 2011; Petrović–Šteger 2009). Further, the missing or disappeared can manifest a persistent presence of absence in the lives of their relatives (Crossland 2000; Denyer Willis 2018; Gandsman 2009; Sant Cassia 2005), giving them extraordinary symbolic potency. Consequently, political projects of social repair can enable the state considerable control over the status of the deceased and their symbolic meanings (Kwon 2008; Wagner 2008).

The Memorial and Museum reckoned with the relationship between the individual dead, their city, and the nation. At both sites, the dead were celebrated collectively and name-by-name, honouring both individual and group identities. Indeed, the museum offered deeply personal evidence of the ending of an individual life, such as clothing and personal possessions, footage of people jumping to their deaths from the collapsing buildings, and recordings of voice messages from people trapped inside the buildings or on hijacked flights, at first unsure, then gradually realising their fate. Simultaneously, within a cultural context that celebrates the individual, commemorating individual loss was intrinsically useful for mobilising national grief. The 9/11 memorial illustrates the importance of personal narratives in constructing national subjectivity, as 'memorial sites and ceremonies have long been

acknowledged as a basic means of symbolizing identification with the nation' (White 2004: 294). Great national loss is often interpreted through mythic histories and heroic ancestors to hold broad explanatory significance. Despite the space left for families to acknowledge and celebrate their relatives, and the obvious tensions between private individual grief set against the national wound, the primary identity of the dead celebrated at the Memorial and Museum was that of local and national citizens as vehicles for national sentiment. They marked a place of local and national trauma and froze a moment of enormous moral significance.

The city attempted to regulate the public outpouring of emotion by suggesting appropriate locations for mourning and grief, but people favoured developing their own informal memorials (Greenspan 2003). Setha M. Low described the tensions of designing and constructing an architectural representation of 9/11, located within competing social, political, and economic spheres, all vying for 'space and status' and broader nationalistic meanings (Low 2004, 2004; Aronson 2017). The design competition participants imagined a national and global visiting public, including New Yorkers in general and downtown residents in particular, especially children. This competition process helps explain how the 9/11 Memorial and Museum became such a heterotopic place: museum, shrine, reliquary, art gallery, tourist hotspot, community centre, education space, café, gift shop, and securitized civic space. Low's work illustrates how memorialization operates in both public and private modes. Saliently, within the museum, the only actors with developed pasts were the victims. This celebration of every individual is extreme and says something important about the notion of the individual as the basic social unit in American social life (Tocqueville 1959). However, memorialization inevitably aggregates the deceased into a collective that can be imbued with significance and values, and the city's efforts to control the location and form of the memorial were also efforts to shape its political and emotional meanings as remembering exemplar citizens and sacred ancestors.

The 9/11 Memorial helps reconcile Americans with the suffering and bereavement of the attacks, while skilfully linking hegemonic ideals to a cosmic order and back to vernacular daily existence (Cannadine 1992: 17). It demonstrates how public participatory acts help hone collective memory (cf. Halbwachs 2020) or what has been termed 'continuous communal history' (Connerton 1989: 17). The memorial helps transform the otherwise futile loss of innocent life into the productive defence of American values, reifying notions such as citizenship, duty, service, and sacrifice.

The memorial resonates with many elements of war memorials – military death also accrues debt because of the sanctity of bodily sacrifice (Halbwachs 2020: 78; Anderson 2006;

Wagner 2013). The 9/11 Memorial's state-aligned nationalism seeks to bind citizens together through the reciprocal obligations of the national family – and its ancestors, those exemplar citizens, the sacrificial dead. Like most nationalisms, it emphasizes transcendent unity, and the memorial rhetorically asserts its ability to unify Americans. Attending the 9/11 Memorial is how many Americans can express pride in their national citizenship. Yet my fieldwork found that many New Yorkers, especially those who had their own memories of the event, often felt ambivalent about the memorial and would not visit.

As Povinelli argues, it is easier to comprehend a catastrophic moment than a slowly corroding social phenomenon (2011). The 9/11 Memorial represents an event encapsulated in a short series of moments, which almost all New Yorkers already knew and had a relationship with. Even if some of its significance shifts over time and if they, themselves, were not bereaved, New Yorkers were familiar with the narrative of tragic loss and solidarity, and the national values of freedom and liberty embedded within it. In comparison, Hart Island remains largely unknown, its labels and names shift, and its meanings are unstable even within the communities to which they matter most, such as the bereaved or activists. Hart Island has inspired numerous artists, especially after it came to prominence after the pandemic, and some bereaved families have developed memorialization practices that others have adopted, such as leaving stones decorated with hearts as grave gifts. However, it has not inspired spontaneous public memorials of the kind that occurred after the WTC attacks.

The 9/11 Memorial and Museum took on explicit pedagogical roles to smooth out contested meanings while also creating spaces for new understandings – tasks for which the inauspicious dead (Hertz 1960) are particularly useful symbols. As a category, 'memorials do not teach well about history, since their role is to remember those who died rather than to understand why they died ... It is important that the sites that are created to mourn the dead do not foreclose on discussions about why their lives were lost' (Sturken 2002: 384). As Hage noted, the 'monstrous criminality of the WTC attacks and the consequent war climate made them resistant to popular explanation' (Hage 2003: 88), though the museum and memorial provided a framework of profound national meaning to these deaths. The city, state, and nation's project of body recovery provided the moral authority for this undertaking, helping each level of government to demonstrate its 'authority as the arbiter of socio-political order in the aftermath of dramatic rupture' (Wagner 2008: 261). The symbolic potency of the WTC dead helped the state to negotiate relations with its living citizens.

The 9/11 Memorial and Museum have been received extraordinarily warmly by many Americans, and I was regularly told it was the city's most popular tourist destination; I could

not prove this, but the unfounded claim demonstrated a popular belief in the site's importance. When I was to begin fieldwork, American friends from outside NYC told me that this site should be my top priority as it was incredibly moving. Other friends, native New Yorkers, explained that they had never visited, as they felt it unnecessary. They had their own memories of that day and, for them, the events required no interpretation or elaboration. A few New Yorkers I met were uncomfortable and even critical of the museum's nationalist narrative, especially as a rationalization for the subsequent invasion of Iraq and other military deployments.

Burial sacralizes local space by attributing meaning through connection and continuity of place connected to memory. The Memorial and Museum marks a place of physical destruction, an event that transformed it into a sacred landscape. It provides spatial and other symbols that created a sense of place within space, marking this group of the dead as being primarily citizens, and giving the group an honoured history through extraordinary spatial rights. These citizens are venerated – this is greater than the ordinary posthumous citizenship that most NYC dead receive. At Hart Island, however, personal and cultural history and expressions of collective memory are unmarked and omitted, and for decades the public attribution of meaning through the expression of enduring relational recognition was actively discouraged and denied. Rather, since its purchase in 1868, Hart Island can be seen as a way of delineating which New Yorkers needed to be held at the city's margins: prisoners, delinquent boys, the mentally unwell, the infectious, addicts, many of whom were also destitute. For 150 years the city has judged the publicly dependent deceased as belonging to this category.

Reclaiming the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers too

The 2019 legislation transferring Hart Island's jurisdiction from DOC to Parks was the most significant event in its modern history, and it was motivated, rhetorically at least, by the notion that those buried there belonged to New York. The legislation was part of a package that required public hearings on public burial, access, transport, and related issues, which would lead to a task force charged with recommending changes to current policies. I attended two such hearings. The process was not transparent, even to those who were intimately involved in the issues, but it offered me an opportunity to hear directly from city officials and politicians. At the legislation signing at New York's City Hall on 4 December 2019, the politicians had refined earlier versions of their statements: claiming Hart Island dead as New Yorkers and considering how Hart Island reflected on living New Yorkers were central to this rhetoric. This excerpt from Mayor de Blasio's speech exemplified this rhetoric.

> *Now the folks who have been buried on Hart Island over generations – they are New Yorkers, they are part of the fabric of our life. And I think it's a reminder to us all there are so many people who built this city, who made this city great, whose names we will never know, and that's a sad reality, but does not take away their personhood, it does not take away their place in history. It doesn't take away who they were as human beings… New York City will not accept injustice in life or in death. It's important to recognize that an injustice was done to so many and we will not let that be the way the story ends* (4 December 2019).

NYC Council Member Deborah Rose had sponsored part of the legislation and spoke after the Mayor. She described Hart Island's burials as troublingly anonymous and added:

> *The process for visiting Hart Island is equally impersonal, with structured visits scheduled once a month.* This is not who we are as New Yorkers *… My hope is that it [the public hearings and task force] leads to a policy where every New Yorker without means for a private burial is laid to rest in a space that can be visited in private moments of peace, comfort and tranquillity* (NYCC 2019a)

Several people used the phrase 'not who we are' when explaining their unease about Hart Island to me. At first glance, it seems a curious proclamation because Hart Island has operated more or less the same way for 150 years so, really, it *is* who New Yorkers are. Using this phase highlights the symbolically meaningful distance these New Yorkers wish to put between what they perceive Hart Island to represent and the values they aspire to live by. The expression 'This is not who we are as New Yorkers' is more than just an acknowledgement that Hart Island's burial practices are morally unacceptable. It simultaneously accepts a fact: this practice happens in New York. It recognizes this as wrong and attempts, by fiat, to sever it from the category that links speaker and listener: 'You and I are New Yorkers, but this does not define us; in fact, it is inimical to our understanding of who we are, as we would not do this.' The denial has as its primary reference not the practice itself, but the common bond of identity between the speaker and listener: we are New Yorkers. So Hart Island's burials, like Schrödinger's cat, are both of New York and not of New York at the same time. This discordant paradox effectively claims that we, speaker and auditor, reject Hart Island burial practices as unacceptable because we are New Yorkers. So what are these specifically New York values that Hart Island transgresses?

Rose articulated some of this overtly, objecting to the lack of individual recognition on Hart Island for those buried there and for their visitors. The anonymous and collective qualities of a Hart Island burial invert American ideals of individual recognition and private autonomy and choice. This accords with Laqueur's (2015) notion of necronominalism. However, these are hardly values distinctive to NYC: Laqueur is deliberately generalising, though in Anglo-American cultures the individual has long been the unit for analysis (Foucault 1995) and has arguably been the organising principle of industrial modernity in contrast to societies organized on communal group ideals (Robbins 2004). Of course, it is possible that the notion of individual recognition is understood by New Yorkers themselves as a particularly local value, so the concept may stand as an ethnographic rather than an analytic one.

At an earlier legislation vote, NYCC Speaker Corey Johnson, a long-term champion for reforming Hart Island's operations, stated that:

> *I believe that how we remember those who came before us says a lot about our moral compass and about who we are as people. The people who have been buried on Hart Island were in many cases the folks who were most marginalized in life. Many were immigrants with no family here to claim them. Many could not afford funerals. Many were AIDS victims, people who died at the height of the AIDS epidemic, shunned by society and often by their own families … those visiting Hart Island still feel as though they're visiting a prison when they're going to the island* (Hart Island: The City Cemetery 2019).

Johnson's speech questioned who the Hart Island dead are to New Yorkers, what their treatment says about New Yorkers, and how they contributed to New York, directly or as exemplars. He speculated on their legacy. Specifically, he considers what New Yorkers are through the Hart Island. This mistreatment was done in the name of New Yorkers and their predecessors' names, so it must reflect on them.

Speculating on the relationship between the WTC and Hart Island dead

How much does this citizenship rhetoric about the Hart Island dead owe to the WTC attacks? Questions of how the collective experience of the WTC attacks crystallized a communal and cohesive understanding of being a New Yorker are beyond my scope, but the question sits behind the project nevertheless. Indeed, while the WTC attacks are an important memory for many, the extraordinary project of memorialization at the 9/11 memorial and especially the museum often seemed unimportant to New Yorkers. Interlocutors rarely overtly compared

how Hart Island and the WTC mirror each other, but often spoke about the WTC when talking about the pandemic. The facile conclusion is that it clearly shaped New Yorkers' conception of themselves as a distinct group of Americans, but this must be held in tension with the historical view that New Yorkers always had of themselves as exceptional.

Likewise, New Yorkers rarely mentioned the WTC attacks when discussing Hart Island with me. However, there was often an unspoken sense of 9/11's significance when speaking with New Yorkers about death. This changed in the first wave of the pandemic when death and disaster became viscerally close in ways that reminded people of the cataclysm and loss of ontological security from two decades earlier. The rhetoric about New Yorkers as tough and exceptional, with *communitas*, seemed to tacitly recall values and affect associated with 9/11. The WTC attacks remained a lodestar for referencing death and suffering in this city and a burden that New Yorkers ultimately needed help from the nation to bear.

The rhetoric about the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers does not appear in the archives until recently. Before the 21st century, its burials were often described as shameful and shocking, but simply a social fact: the unclaimed or impoverished dead required burial and this was the local solution. As discussed earlier, Melinda Hunt's extraordinary advocacy through the Hart Island Project was well underway before the WTC attacks: she began researching and visiting the island 1991-3, founded the Hart Island Project in 1994, and co-authored a photography book on it in 1998. However, her campaign only gathered public momentum in the following decade: NYC Council launched hearings to review Hart Island's operations in 2011, and from 2013 DOC was legally required to publish an online burial database and operate public visits. Over this time, the rhetoric about Hart Island specifically being a New York problem increased in advocacy and media. After the WTC attacks, immediate claims of kinship had to be shared with urgent claims of civic and national citizenship. So, as people embarked on projects of Hart Island's social repair, questions of its dead's collective identity became increasingly prominent.

Having argued that citizenship rhetoric was distributed variously through Hart Island's epistemic community – anyone invested in Hart Island's future, or interested or experienced in what happens when a New Yorker needs a funeral but cannot provide one themselves – it is also significant that one important group did not use this rhetoric. Bereaved relatives did not often refer to their loved ones or themselves as New Yorkers, though they certainly talked about and acted on problems posed by 'the city', the complexities of navigating the information it held, of negotiating visits with DOC, or physically accessing Hart Island. The

one exception was when bereaved relatives expressed hope that reforming Hart Island would help New Yorkers care more about the island and its history.

This exception is unsurprising, as relatives and bereaved friends had far more significant relationships than that of shared political belonging. The notion of citizenship inevitably aggregates, as it marks one's membership of a group, whereas, for the bereaved, the deceased remains an individual and a family member or close friend, which are far smaller groups. Further, in communities that value the individual, the emphasis on remembering the person over the group has particular resonance. This distinction between kinship (personal) and citizenship (group) was at the heart of tensions over how to remember those who died at Manhattan's WTC. There, the deceased's memory was jostled over by the city and the nation as a citizen, with all the symbolic polyvocality that this involves, alongside competing claims from employers, organizations, and representatives of first responder groups. Most powerfully, families claimed that the deceased belonged privately and ultimately to them as kin, in which relationships are defined by intimacy, authenticity, and warmth, rather than civility and solidarity. Both the cases of Hart Island and the WTC accord with the notion that a person may move posthumously through various social categories, beginning with the urgent claims of kinship and intimate personal relationships along with those made powerfully by the state, moving through larger social categories such as religious or vocational affiliation, and ultimately to settle in the broader category of citizen. Remembering people as an abstracted collective helps recognize them, while making them – and the inequality they might embody – safe to forget.

Conclusion: New Yorkers too

The notion that New Yorkers share certain qualities with and obligations to each other, and that these commitments could extend beyond life, were embedded within these ideas. This chapter's evidence goes directly to my central problem: how can citizenship survive death? What do New Yorkers understand as ordinary posthumous citizenship, and how have the Hart Island dead been placed outside of this?

During my fieldwork, people often talked about the many responsibilities of the city to its people, especially as Covid-19 heightened their concerns about the city's obligation to protect them and their rights to receive and offer care themselves. These concerns encompassed both living and deceased individuals. However, when people talked of Hart Island, one thread appeared distinctive: the relationships and responsibilities between the Hart Island dead and the city and people of New York. Activists, politicians, public servants, and caregivers often

talked of the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers, urging others to remember them as New Yorkers, of the Hart Island dead reflecting on living New Yorkers, and of the responsibility of living New Yorkers to care for their dead. When people talked about the Hart Island dead, they were talking about what it meant to be a New Yorker, and how both the living and dead belong to NYC.

With projects underway to reclaim the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers, it is instructive to compare their trajectory with the dispute over remembering the dead at the WTC both as individuals and local and national citizens. After the WTC attacks, the political problem of how to recognize its dead as New Yorkers was resolved primarily through collective and individual memorialization. As long as memorialization stays absent, as on Hart Island, the citizenship of the deceased remains unrecognized. Memorialization is crucial to maintaining the bonds between the living and the dead, both in individual kinship relationships and with group identities. Citizenship can be a collective identity, as well as recognized individually, just as citizenship is lived at different scales of the city and the state. While memorialization is largely absent on Hart Island, I found evidence of the citizenship of its dead being rhetorically asserted by people within its epistemic community. This usually took the form of claiming them as New Yorkers, which is the local term for citizen. It may be that reclaiming them as New Yorkers does the work of easing the shame of anonymous burial, but this is a collective claim that displaces the more protracted and complicated work of individual recognition. In reclaiming the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers, people assert that the dead belong politically to this city.

Chapter 4
The shock of Hart Island

> *The city has always wanted to forget about Hart Island … It's wanted to forget about the fact that there is a potter's field, that there is a place where difficult stories are hidden*
>
> Mark Levine, NYC Council member (*One Million American Dreams* 2018, at 1:21, 1.23)

Throughout my fieldwork, I asked New Yorkers what they knew about Hart Island. Usually, the response was emphatic: 'I'm a native New Yorker, never heard of it!'[44] A few would offer hesitantly, 'Isn't that where they used to bury the bums?' 'I think I read about that, it's the potter's field, right? Where is it again?' 'It's where, East River somewhere?' Others confidently told me that the island had closed years ago or that the cemetery was no longer in use 'but I don't know where they bury the homeless now', or that the island had opened now and anyone could visit at any time. Knowledge and its meanings are always dispersed unevenly within a community. Regarding Hart Island, New Yorkers' knowledge seemed always partial, incomplete, and fragmentary. If people knew, this was usually through personal connection. In the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic when Hart Island become international news, New Yorkers' shock and great discomfort at learning about the island was unmistakable. Partial knowing or forgetting was intrinsic to how New Yorkers lived with Hart Island.

Here, I consider how the shock of recognition and forgetting of stigma tacitly form patterns of affect towards Hart Island, by examining how the 'cruddy' inequality (Povinelli 2011) it represents is normally somewhat veiled by the haziness of language used to talk about it, and its comparative and figurative isolation. I make a broader argument about why Hart Island's massed burials are persistently difficult to recognize and shocking when acknowledged. I propose that the shock so widely experienced by New Yorkers when confronted by Hart Island in April 2020 can be understood as the distance between two narratives. The first describes suffering that is 'ordinary, chronic and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden and sublime' (*ibid*.: 132). The second is the shock of recognition that occurs when a citizen grasps the appalling chronic suffering of others and, crucially, their own ability to overlook it (Le Guin 2001; Povinelli 2011). I argue that, although mass burial

[44] The exception was the residents of nearby City Island, the gateway to Hart Island and from where all Hart Island activities are easily visible (chap. 5).

is generally a sign of social breakdown in disaster or violence, it is Hart Island's ordinariness that distresses people. As Berlant describes, some structural violence 'is neither a state of exception nor the opposite, mere banality, but a domain of revelation where an upsetting scene of living that has been muffled in ordinary consciousness is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all' (2007: 761). Some New Yorkers are regularly excluded from ordinary posthumous citizenship and this is mundane, not exceptional.

On 2 April 2020, activist and artist Melinda Hunt of the Hart Island Project released drone (unmanned aerial vehicle) images of the massed burials which vividly conveyed the magnitude of the Covid-19 tragedy. Mainstream media followed suit on 9 April. Internationally, the images became a synecdoche and key symbol (Ortner 1973) for the scale of the suffering – of those who died alone and had to be communally buried and survivors who had their loved ones buried this way – and of authorities' struggle to deal with the excess mortality as humanely as possible. As the pandemic took hold across the globe, images of overflowing crematoria or bodies stacked awaiting burial became more common, but the Hart Island images were among the earliest. Part of the shock was that the images seemed foreign: I heard people commenting that it looked like a scene from a developing country, not a great American city. The images also became a symbol for NYC, as the place so unfeeling that they buried their pandemic dead anonymously in trenches (cf. the postcards in chap. 3). In 2021, 2,666 people were buried on Hart Island, second only to burials recorded in 1988 during NYC's AIDS epidemic (The City 2021a). Yet while the cemetery was around six times busier than usual, work on Hart Island continued in ways little changed since burials began there in 1869.

Figure 6. 'Workers bury the dead …'
'in mass grave on New York City's Hart Island amid coronavirus outbreak.' 9 April 2020. (Credit: Lucas Jackson, Reuters Pictures.)

The images showed a team of men, some wearing protective hazmat (hazardous material) jumpsuits and PPE, stacking person-sized pine boxes three deep into a trench, side by side in two rows, each twenty-five boxes long. In the first images from the Hart Island Project, the men were inmates from nearby Rikers Island prison; in the photographs taken by journalists (fig. 6) a few days later, the workers are contracted labourers, a change accelerated by Covid-19. The DOC ferry, the Michael J. Cosgrove, carried the workers to Hart Island together with a truck loaded with boxed bodies. A forklift truck entered the trench, which had been dug out by a backhoe earlier in the week, driving down a gradual slope at one end to deliver several boxes into it. Working together, the men lifted the boxes from the vehicle into place in the trench. Once the day's boxes had been placed, some of the men moved to the top of the trench and shovelled first sand, then soil, over them. Large ply boards were placed over the boxes at the front of the trench, both vertically, with braces which helped shore up the boxes, and horizontally, on top, so that the men's weight was distributed over the deceased to minimize damage.

When this drone footage emerged, the images shocked New Yorkers, who were mostly unaware of Hart Island, despite its longevity, size, and consistent operation. How does Hart Island slip in and out of public knowledge for New Yorkers in a cycle of remembering and forgetting – and why is its rediscovery shocking? I examine the desire to ignore and avoid

shameful knowledge and what shame and stigma do to knowledge. Perhaps Covid-19, understood as a spectacular event, revealed what has been there all along.

For most New Yorkers, these images were the first they had heard of this uninhabited and seemingly abandoned place. Hart Island has featured only cyclically in public discourse over its 150-year post-settler history, unlike well-known and beloved cemeteries or parks, such as Green Wood or Woodlawn. Throughout the history of Hart Island's cemetery, it has almost exclusively come to public interest through critical media attention. Reporting sparked an aldermen's investigation as early as 1874. In his iconic publication about the everyday squalor of Manhattan's slums in the 1880s, photojournalist Jacob Riis (1891) included images of prisoners working in Hart Island's trench graves. (While the digging is now mechanized, the communal burial method remains largely unchanged, and Riis's images show scenes recognizably like the 2020 drone footage.) In 1958, a reporter described the 'lonely … little-known island' where the city's 'loneliest' and 'forgotten' were buried by prisoners (Robertson 1958). For generations, New Yorkers have been periodically confronted by Hart Island's incongruity with the city's popular liberal mythology (chap. 3).

Cycles of accidental discovery – and rediscovery

Learning about Hart Island was often haphazard and serendipitous, I discovered during fieldwork. For those I met who had searched for missing relatives, finding out about Hart Island resolved a central mystery in their lives and followed a pattern of 'drama of revelation'. These families were often baffled by nomenclature. The official name for the burial site is City Cemetery on Hart Island, a title used only within city bureaucracy and by funeral professionals. I never heard this term given vernacular use. Likewise, the official term for interment on Hart Island is a 'public burial', and again, I never heard this description outside public administration and industry. Instead, people spoke simply about Hart Island, and some also used the term 'potter's field'. NYC death certificates list four options for 'Method of Disposition': burial, cremation, entombment or City Cemetery.[45] That public burial in City Cemetery exists as a separate type of disposal emphasizes its distinction from 'normal' burial in administrative thinking, whereas relatives – inasmuch as they could comprehend their options in their grief – often thought that a public burial may be similar to a 'normal' burial, but provided by the city. While Hart Island is not a public secret in Taussig's sense of something that everyone knows but knows *not* to know (1999: 55), there is evidence

[45] New Yorkers, like most Americans, have historically strongly preferred burial (Mitford 1963; Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Walter 1993; chap. 2).

that many people experience Hart Island as a mystery that needs revelation or at least exegesis. This was a common experience for the bereaved who had not known their relative was buried on Hart Island, and indeed the majority of New Yorkers who have not heard of it.

The phrase ‘public burial’ has a specific local meaning. Here, the word ‘public’ refers to funding. The alternative is a private funeral, where the person’s estate or family pays for the funeral and disposition, as these services are entirely commercially privatized in the US (Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Walter 2005). In NYC, a ‘public’ burial is somewhat oxymoronic, if we understand something public as ‘open.’ In reality, the term explicitly means that it is not open to the community at all, in fact, the opposite, for there is no ceremony involving the body and no one may attend the burial. Officially, this ensured that the public were never at risk from the inmates who performed Hart Island’s burials; logistics aside, officials also commented that mourners would find witnessing inmates stacking the deceased into a trench extremely distressing. The city’s foregrounding of payment also suggests an official preference for avoiding more popular but emotive terms, such as potter’s field. Placing this nomenclature in context helps to assess the social significance of a collective, anonymous municipal burial ground in a society which valorizes individualism, responsibilization, choice, and private enterprise.

Hart Island’s profile has increased rapidly since around 2011 in particular, thanks to journalism, and campaigning from several non-profits including the Hart Island Project, Picture the Homeless, the Interfaith Friends of Potter’s Field, and the New York Civil Liberties Union. Information about Hart Island is available to anyone, with the crucial caveats that one must know where to look, and it is influenced by gradients of power and the shame of being seen searching for it. However, unless someone knows what they are looking for and the right search terms to use, it can remain difficult to find information about a loved one because the typical public attitude to Hart Island is silence. Perhaps this should be unsurprising, in a place committed to erasure, in a city renowned for its habitual discarding and renewal.

Yet New Yorkers who discovered that their relatives had been buried on Hart Island told me repeatedly that not only had they never heard of City Cemetery, but they could also not find out anything about it from those they dealt with at hospital morgues or other city departments. Others instead were told that their loved one was buried at the potter’s field, but were given no further information with which to find the site. Shame and stigma often hampered relatives’ investigations. Often, families connected City Cemetery or the potter’s field with Hart Island only accidentally, such as from seeing stories about it in the media.

Still, I was regularly asked by New Yorkers with no connection to Hart Island how someone could be buried there without family knowing about it: was it not true that people were buried on Hart Island only if their families had abandoned them?

Elaine and Tomika

Elaine Joseph is a gracious, lively, no-nonsense woman raised in lower Manhattan's housing projects. She'd retained a quietly commanding presence from her nursing career, retiring after twenty-three years in the Navy with the rank of lieutenant commander. Elaine had told her story often to the media, and we met regularly at events involving Hart Island, including public hearings. She was an extremely impressive public speaker who never used notes. I asked if she would tell me her story and thoughts in her own words. One freezing winter day, we sat in a mid-town mall food hall with coffee and donuts, and talked.

In the blizzard of 1978, Elaine's daughter Tomika was born prematurely at Manhattan's Beth Israel Hospital and with a heart deformation. As a nurse, Elaine suspected that her four-pound, three-ounce baby's chances of survival were poor. Elaine was sent home to Flatbush, Brooklyn, while Tomika was transferred for emergency heart surgery to Mt Sinai Hospital, where she died. The snowstorm had halted all transport, and Elaine, grieving, alone, and stranded at home, called the hospital repeatedly to find out how to collect her baby's body. After four days the hospital morgue responded, saying Elaine had signed her consent for Tomika to be buried at the potter's field. Elaine was adamant that she would never have done this.

'She said, don't worry – can you believe it! – she's already buried,' Elaine said. 'I looked at the death certificate and it said City Cemetery. I said I hadn't consented and how could I find out where it was, so I could visit my daughter. She said she didn't know.' Elaine kept searching, a task complicated further by the disappearance of Tomika's burial record. It was as though her daughter had vanished. Elaine called city agencies, searched for city burial services in the Yellow Pages, and visited the Municipal Archives. But she always received similar answers: no one knew anything else about it. It was only after seeing a news item in 2009 about the Hart Island Project that she realized where her daughter was buried. 'I waited thirty years to find out City Cemetery was at Hart Island,' she said, still incredulous. Then, all visits were prohibited, so Elaine began fighting for this right. She visited for the first time in 2011 but was still forbidden from finding or visiting her daughter's approximate burial location:

> *Back then when the visits first started they allowed you to go to the island this one time only, it was called a Closure Visit. You got off the ferry, they took you to the gazebo right off the wharf and you could sit for a while. That's all. And there's guards there in case … I don't know what! [laughs] I asked where my daughter was buried, I wanted to go to there, lay some flowers on her grave. You know, like a normal cemetery. They couldn't tell me. It was dirty, there was garbage everywhere. And then a piece of the gazebo fell on me. It was … a dump. And then you were supposed to have 'closure'.*

In 2014, for the first time, Elaine joined as DOC allowed families to visit their relatives' grave sites on the island, some thirty-six years after Tomika had been buried.

Elaine's story was not one of persistent precarity. She had excelled professionally, relished her role as a cheery grandmother to a large family, and remained proud of her origins in the projects. However, her experience resonates with the notion of ordinary suffering (Povinelli 2011). Though she had told Tomika's story many times, her emotion remained raw as we spoke. Despite her hard work, diligence, and endurance, she bore the burden of chronic harm achieved in multiple unhurried ways. The original bureaucratic mishandling had been compounded through delay, inattention, and indifference, and Elaine making the crucial connection to Hart Island had been pure serendipity.

Fundamentally, Elaine's story conforms to the notion that abandonment is foundational in late liberalism (*ibid*.). The city's presumption that the baby would be relinquished set in motion processes that ensured Tomika was not carefully cared for by the city and that her mother's attempts to do so would be frustrated for decades. Despite Elaine's striving to find her daughter, it might appear to anyone unfamiliar with Tomika's story that she had been, like a million others, deserted and forgotten. Further, if the baby was disregarded, then the grief caused by her loss could be likewise disregarded.

I heard many similar stories. For example, on my first visit to Hart Island, I met a couple whose baby had been buried there a few days earlier, against their instructions; so the pattern continues. Babies and infants represent between a half and a third of the approximately one million buried on Hart Island (Purcell 2014). Consequently, even when taking into account new understandings about when life begins (Kaufman & Morgan 2005), and that infant mortality is significantly less common and more grievable than when Hart Island burials began (Layne 2000), Elaine and Tomika's story could easily stand for tens of thousands of other families effectively or inadvertently compelled by the city to perform abandonment, despite their intense desire and commitment to care for their babies in death.

Despite significant distinctions between the bureaucratic indifference Elaine described and the crisis of Covid-19, there are parallels too. As interlocutors began telling me about disinterments from Hart Island of people who had been buried there during Spring 2020, it became clear that people were still being buried there in bureaucratic confusion or expediency (Yuan 2020). When families found out that their relative was buried on Hart Island, they wanted to arrange a different burial. During the pandemic it was easier to understand how this could happen; during such a high death toll when people were confined to their apartment so could not travel to hospitals or morgues to identify their dead, more people would die unidentified or the OCME would not be able to find their families. There was a pattern of difficulty in finding the missing dead, followed by shock at discovering them buried in a Hart Island trench. However, Covid-19 expanded the experience from relatives directly affected to New Yorkers with no connection to Hart Island apart from what they read in the media. To analyse why knowledge about Hart Island is so frequently ignored and avoided, and why people find learning about it so shocking, I recall the cultural significance of massed graves.

What massed graves usually mean

Communities grant appropriate death rites to those they deem its members, and physically and symbolically exclude those who do not belong. In most societies, mass graves indicate a bad death, because individual burial crucially affirms personhood by signalling who is 'grievable' (Butler 2010). Some lives are recognized as worth celebrating, while others are deemed less valuable and may be disposed of anonymously. Some societies, such as Japan, have ancient histories of not burying or interring their dead as ordinary practice – bodies were once simply discarded or left in the open air, partly because of the pollution associated with corpses (Simpson 2019) – but this is unusual.[46] This cultural variation shows that the desire for individual burial is not universal, and indeed, there is rich cultural variation in the 'right' way to dispose of a corpse. However, it is extremely common for there to be a culturally normalized disposal method, and practices that breach the norm will provoke a moral and affective reaction for what they represent about the deceased's marginalized political relationship with their community.

Using Rikers Island inmates for labour has been another sign of stigma and abandonment in this process. Many critics saw the use of inmates to bury the dead as marking this labour

[46] In contemporary Japan, communal ash interment is a relatively common form of disposition, because within Japan's breakdown of traditional kinship, people can find it a desirable way to secure continued posthumous care (Allison 2013).

with a troubling banality of exploitation and erasure – the disenfranchised burying the forgotten. The nexus between these 'public' burials and the 'public' labour provided for them was always uncomfortable for city officials and politicians I spoke with. For instance, take this typical comment from one politician who told me, 'Using prisoners to bury the poor? The optics on that! My god.' It may be a pragmatic solution, according to the politician, but using inmates for this work harmed the city's reputation, because it will be perceived as insulting the dead and exploiting the inmates. Rikers, scheduled for gradual closure, is notorious for violence, criminal neglect, human rights abuses, and delays of justice (SDNY 2014). Infamously, it disproportionately imprisons, for relatively inconsequential wrongdoings, young Black and Latino men who were unable to afford better legal representation. This reflects the intersection of racism and incarceration in the US justice system. However, in April 2020, as Covid-19 tore through Rikers and thus Hart Island's workforce, the city quietly replaced inmate labour with private contractors, removing penal labour from the cemetery for the first time since burials began.

While communal graves usually signal social collapse or exception, Hart Island's cemetery differs from most massed graves in being unexceptional, documented, subject to democratic and legal challenge, ostensibly open to visiting relatives and public scrutiny – and still in active use. The context of Hart Island's massed graves within contemporary peaceful political stability is highly unusual. These burials materially illustrate a nexus between inequality and symbolic violence (arguably, in a form of discrimination and exclusion which reduces individuals to numbered bodies for filing in trenches, rows and levels, cf. Stevenson 2014). As longstanding unchallenged practices become interpreted as being without opposition and gain acceptance as a status quo, their unremarked, unrecognized nature signifies the burials' sustained political legitimacy.

The catastrophe of Covid-19 has made Hart Island spectacularly visible, so that its burials seem simultaneously disclosed and concealed. They are difficult to talk about, information about them is often hidden, discovery can be haphazard or serendipitous, they are challenging to visit, and what they represent is confronting to admit. The near-ubiquitous shocked reaction and political reassurances that followed demonstrate that something serious was clearly at stake in their revelation.

My analysis begins with Ursula Le Guin's 'The Ones Who Walk Away from the Omelas' (2001). This short story describes the exuberant, intelligent people of Omelas, whose festivities have a Janus face. All their abundance and delight depend on a child being held in

miserable conditions in a broom closet. If the girl[47] receives even the smallest kindness, the Omelas' comfort will evaporate. All the Omelas know about the suffering child, some even visit her. They are sickened and shocked, but accept that things are what they unjustly are, as the girl is beyond saving. Occasionally, an Omelas citizen leaves, unable to reconcile themselves to the unjust utilitarian arrangement underpinning their society. Using Le Guin's moral vision of misery, Elizabeth Povinelli analyses the potential for life and death in late liberal society as 'socially cosubstantial' (2008: 511). That is, one person's happiness is substantially – that is, significantly and corporeally – within the child's unhappiness. Likewise, individual and community physical well-being is embodied within her bodily suffering.

Occasionally, cyclically, New Yorkers are shocked to recognize that, somehow, the broom closet of Hart Island underpins their city's bright and shining exceptionality. Commonly, and for over 150 years, Hart Island has provided the full stop to individual stories of ordinary suffering and cruddy ways of dying. A Hart Island burial conforms to Povinelli's notion of a cruddy quasi-event, an experience shaped by ongoing conditions of poverty, isolation, and disconnection that is not perceived as an explicit crisis, though it may be bitterly destructive for the individuals concerned. However, NYC's first wave of Covid-19 was clearly a spectacular event by Povinelli's definition. The soaring death toll, constantly itemized by the media, was unfathomable. The drone images of Hart Island's trench gave visual form to what these numbers meant: that masses of New Yorkers were dying of this disease, and many either had families who could not afford a funeral, or had no one to care for them when they died. Because events shape narrative as well as ethics in late capitalism, the pandemic revealed longer-term trends by giving a new spectacular form to death in lives of ordinary suffering. Specifically, the spectacle here is that the media drones revealed the everyday circumstances of so many New Yorkers.

The burials signified Covid-19's impact but also stood metonymically for all New Yorkers – and for NYC itself. In a bodega,[48] I saw people in masks transfixed by the printed images of Hart Island's burial trench in newspapers and magazines. One person commented, 'That *can't* be New York!' The other person responded, 'Could be any of us.' Behind the counter, the bodega staffer added, 'Before this ends, everyone will have someone on that island.' I heard similar remarks from friends and contacts. Melinda Hunt echoed these sentiments, saying that

[47] In the story, the child does not have a gender. I follow Povinelli in making her female.
[48] Small local stores selling staple groceries and over-the-counter remedies, usually owner-operated and open 24/7.

with so many being buried on Hart Island, it would become 'New York's cemetery, for everyone' because so many people would have family or friends buried there, and consequently, it would lose its stigma because New Yorkers of every social demographic would have a connection to it; this was early in the pandemic when the disease appeared indiscriminate, before its syndemic qualities were broadly understood (Horton 2020). In this way, I argue that individual bodies buried on Hart Island came to stand for the social body of NYC, recalling Kantorowicz's description of the legal fiction of the monarch's two bodies (2016). Kantorowicz identified how aspects of sovereign power in modern states are often legitimated transcendentally through a metaphor of embodiment, comparing the natural body of individuals with the everlasting body politic. Le Guin's narrative refers to older archetypes (2001): the community's physical and emotional well-being depends on the unhappiness and suffering of certain individuals as scapegoats (Durkheim 1915; Frazer 1913). The overheard bodega conversation, especially the fear that Hart Island *was* New York, suggests that some people saw a connection between the burials of individuals and the welfare of NYC, and the well-being of individual New Yorkers.

Shown *en masse*, the burials cannot be dismissed as cruddy quasi-events but carry an undeniable moral weight of appalling human suffering and societal neglect and indifference. The stark loneliness of Hart Island's Covid-19 burials powerfully reiterated that a Covid-19 death was often an isolated one, and this could result in a desolate massed burial. The shock provoked was partly empathy for the nameless abstracted million New Yorkers already buried on Hart Island. But, as indicated by the bodega conversation and others that echoed it, the affective shock was also about the sudden visceral fear that one might know someone there, that one's grandmother or uncle, having died alone, could be buried there unknown – or that this could be one's own fate.

As a catastrophe, then, Covid-19 can be made to carry too much narrative significance, because the suffering for which the Hart Island burials became emblematic is, in fact, a constant part of NYC life. Covid-19 caused specific and extremely consequential points of suffering through disease and death, but the mass catastrophe eclipsed the ordinary corrosive individual precarities that can lead to illness, mortality, and a mass grave. Adopting Le Guin's (2001) metaphor, the images of the Hart Island burials meant that we have all seen the child in the broom closet, we can no longer claim we did not know of her and, in fact, she has been there all along.

To whom does a Hart Island burial cause suffering and what form can this take? In one sense it is the deceased herself, who seems abandoned, has no one of means to look after her

once she has died, or has been separated from such care by circumstances or mismanagement, and now lies with strangers. Relatives I met often worried that their loved one would be unable to 'rest easy' on Hart Island. Many bereaved said they suffered from being unable to arrange and attend the burial, being prohibited from memorialising, performing rituals, or visiting the grave as they wish, and by carrying the affective burden of concern that the deceased remains troubled by her conditions of burial. Indeed, the Right of Sepulchre offers legal protection from the harms caused by interference with a next of kin's right to choose and control the final disposition of a dead relative (chap. 2). Relatives I met often wished that they could have prevented the fate of Hart Island and been able to provide for their deceased relative themselves, such as Elaine described. During fieldwork, I met people with a wide variety of interests in Hart Island, from politicians to funeral professionals to relatives. Despite their different communities of interest with contested responsibilities and concerns, questions of how and when they first learned about Hart Island were always insightful about the desire to ignore and avoid the difficult or disgracing, and what shame and stigma can do to knowledge.

A very public unmasking of a difficult-to-acknowledge problem

Reiterations of public exposure, shock, disquiet, and forgetting have marked New Yorkers' relationships with Hart Island since the cemetery opened in 1869, just as occurred during Elaine's search for Tomika's grave, or when Covid-19 drew fresh attention to the island. Reporting sparked an aldermen's investigation as early as 1874 (NYT 1878). Photojournalist Jacob Riis published images of prisoners working in Hart Island's trench graves (1891). In 1958, a reporter described the 'lonely … little-known island' where the city's 'loneliest' and 'forgotten' were buried by prisoners (Robertson 1958). As Rhiannon, a journalist, told me of Hart Island today: 'We all imagined the city was better than this. It's … so Dickensian,' evoking images of grotesque hardship, degradation, and injustice. Her comment also captures how Hart Island's practices seem lodged in a historical moment where they may have once been acceptable but do not accord with contemporary norms. Yet newspaper reports from the nineteenth century offer distressed and shaming descriptions of the burials, indicating that for some, they were never acceptable. Revelations from local and national media have occurred every decade or so, following similar patterns of outrage before being forgotten (NYT 1878, 1885, 1917, 1948b; Robertson 1958; O'Connell 1975; Quindlen 1982; Brady 2006; Bernstein 2016a). New Yorkers repeatedly seem to forget Hart Island, only to be shocked when next it is brought to their attention, as happened with Covid-19.

Figure 7. 'The Common Trench'
Hart Island burials circa 1880s. (Credit: Jacob A. Riis (1849–1914). Museum of the City of New York. 90.13.4.86B.)

By April 2020, the city's deathcare infrastructure was not quite broken but was under extreme pressure. When Hart Island's burials operate normally, they are invisible and ignorable for all but those directly involved. The 2020 images showed, spectacularly, labour that is usually unseen, as is most death labour.

Some official reactions interpreted the footage as defacing an otherwise respectful and dignified operation of burials under extreme conditions. Police detained the drone operator, seized his equipment, and erased his data – but not before he had saved it externally (personal communication). Mayor de Blasio's comments to media at the time framed the footage as sensational and distorting. He asserted that 'there will be no mass burials on Hart Island' and that all buried there would be treated 'with every measure of dignity and respect' (de Blasio 2020), thereby equating mass burial with indignity. Following Le Guin (2001), it seemed that the city could offer no comfort for this evident suffering by the deceased and their relatives; it could not even be acknowledged, although it could be stigmatized and denied. New Yorkers I spoke with and the widespread public reaction could not reconcile de Blasio's words with the

images they had seen of bodies being forklifted into a trench. ‘No mass burials, huh?’ said someone to me, having just read Mayor de Blasio’s statement. ‘Dignity and respect? Huh.’ ‘But we saw it,’ added someone else, referring to the images. ‘What’s he even talking about?’

More importantly, the images revealed the burials as violating social norms. They illuminate the social articulation of power because the disposal of the dead is one way of freezing each individual’s economic, political, and material experience. Whatever each life contained, a Hart Island burial records that it concluded without much social or economic capital, and the death will not be marked by any form of ritual or ceremony – a desecrating omission. Acknowledging the burials means accepting that some New Yorkers are either destitute or so socially isolated that the city can find no one to identify them. The curious complicity is that while Hart Island is generally unknown, the social truth it represents may already be widely suspected, enough to be unsettling.

The difficulties of acknowledging Hart Island

To grasp how Hart Island has been difficult to recognize and shocking to acknowledge means understanding the desire to ignore and avoid certain knowledge. To achieve this, Hart Island can be placed within a particular historical context. Its stigma is partly inherited from the late-eighteenth century when mass graves became a common punishment for poverty (Crowther 1983; Laqueur 1983), explicitly designed to shame. Hart Island’s burials reiterate older forms of indigent burial by discouraging ritual, preventing memorial, accommodating forgetting through mundane bureaucracy, in short, designing posthumous social suffering that extends to their mourners (O’Neill 2012). A pauper’s burial was further feared because it could provoke other desecrations and the dread of anatomical dissection was well-founded (Richardson 2001). Indeed, people provided with Hart Island burials were automatically offered for unconsented dissection until public condemnation ended the policy in 2015 (Bernstein 2016a). Again, this clearly represented the deceased’s value to the city, classifying them as a physical resource rather than a person.

What the living do with someone’s remains reflects their social status. As discussed in Chapter 2, in the US and NYC, mortuary rituals generally normatively involve body preparation and display for visitation, a collective ceremony (funeral/memorial/wake, usually with the corpse) for the individual’s kin and community, and then disposal by burial or cremation, with the remains located individually at a spot identifiable by memorialization and accessible for future visits by the bereaved (Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Laderman 2005; Mitford 1963). There is variation across faith and ethnic traditions, for example, but these norms are what funeral directors invariably described to me as a ‘normal’ funeral and they

corresponded with my observations. Troyer (2020) described American funerals as essentially homogenous. This holds for cremains held in urns, which many Americans prefer over scattering: the urn is portable and may be eventually placed in a vault or buried, but until then, the place of the deceased is known. Laqueur interpreted efforts to name the Hart Island dead, such as the Hart Island Project's Traveling Cloud Museum,[49] as evidence of modernity's 'age of necronominalism' (2015: 419), in which the normative Anglo-American expectation of an individual named grave makes the unknown dead a 'moral rebuke' (*ibid.*). Massed graves challenge this normalization of individualized human remains, and effectively mute social connections. To be buried promiscuously, in the sense of indiscriminately mixed, is a lonely burial, separated from family, faith community, or other group. Because Hart Island is difficult to visit, rituals celebrating the continuing bonds (Klass et al. 1996; Verdery 1999) between the living and the dead are not easily performed either publicly or privately. The lack of headstones and names means there is no legible public display of these social links, and this deliberate denial of social connection is itself shameful in the US (Laqueur 2015). Thus, the bodies of the dead are most symbolically potent when absent (Verdery 1999) and the most dangerous are those 'inauspicious dead' (Hertz 1960) who have not received proper ritual and burial (Kwon 2006; Robben 2015). Indeed, the unknown, uncelebrated dead can reveal things about a society that cannot otherwise be known (Kwon 2008; Wagner 2008).

A cemetery is, as discussed, more than where we bury bodies (Rugg 2000). It is a dedicated place, where people can commemorate the dead, perform rituals, visit and memorialize, and honour the deceased according to religious and other traditions. Cemeteries also put people in their place, so to speak, marking ongoing hierarchies, relationships, and identities in the world relinquished by the deceased. However, they usually do so according to the wishes of the bereaved and their families. By this definition, as many interlocutors articulated, Hart Island fell short.

[49] A website where people can add the deceased's biography and eulogy to a Hart Island burial plot map.

Forgetting and remembering AIDS

The role of shame and stigma in shaping knowledge is especially evident and relevant in Hart Island's role in AIDS history. Hart Island is the US's largest burial site for people who died of AIDS during the epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s, and the cemetery's busiest year was 1988 when approximately 1,300 people were buried at the height of the crisis (The City 2021a). As NYC was also an epicentre of this epidemic, Hart Island may even be the world's largest AIDS cemetery. Some thirty-one of those buried during this period, all men, are buried alone at the north tip, at double depth and in lined boxes out of an (unnecessary) fear of contagion, further stigmatized as the only individual graves on Hart Island. NYC Council Speaker Corey Johnson, himself openly gay and HIV positive, has championed the reclaiming and remembering of these dead as representatives of a generation of gay men who were often cruelly shunned during life, illness, and death. This case shows how deeply shameful knowledge can be recovered and restored, though this process is not without complexities and compromise, as the following example will illustrate.

In 2005, Pennsylvanian Shawn Ross was buried on Hart Island when his next of kin declined to claim his body after he died in NYC of HIV/AIDS. His cousin, Martha Wade, was around the same age as Shawn, and they had grown up together. She explained that Shawn's immediate family could not reconcile themselves to his sexuality, and so, in that sense, 'he was already dead'. Members of his wider family and his church wanted to bring Shawn's body home but did not know where he was or how to find him. Martha knew her cousin had been buried in a potter's field but could not find any further information.

'All we knew was New York potter's field, we had no idea what that was! All I knew about Potter's Field was the biblical reference,' she said. 'I always thought this was the most inhumane situation that was humanly possible, if that makes any sense.' Fourteen years later, while watching a fictionalized account of Hart Island on television, she guessed that it was the place she had heard about. 'It was crazy! They were on this ferry … and I was like oh my god, Hart Island, potter's field! … I had never heard of Hart Island until Pose!' (Pose 2019). The drama portrayed Hart Island as difficult to locate both geographically and due to hostile bureaucratic hurdles, and physically cold and desolate, which it certainly can be. Martha recalled being alarmed by how the fictional characters discussed Hart Island: 'Why are we the only ones out here?' 'Who wants to come out to the most remote part of New York?' 'You think people will come to pay their respects?' 'Out of sight, out of mind.' Since then, Martha has attempted to visit Hart Island but found it difficult to coordinate with DOC's limited timetable. Meanwhile, she has campaigned for greater transparency around Hart

Island, insisting that her cousin Shawn was not unknown: ‘He was known and loved and wanted, and we had wanted to provide for him properly.’ Her own experience of a frustrating search for her cousin’s grave and the difficulties of visiting resembled the fictional depiction that had helped her find her relative. Her wider family’s rejection of her cousin had prevented her from caring for him because the knowledge about where he was buried had effectively been suppressed. The denial of a death from AIDS had been motivated by shame, and that denial was itself now understood as shameful.

These stories represent narratives I heard repeatedly, and they have commonalities with the stories of people whose relatives are missing or buried in mass graves as a result of war, conflict, or catastrophe. Sometimes the facts of the death, such as cause, date and time, and responsibility, will stay unknown. A relative might remain missing to the family for months or years before someone makes the connection – sometimes completely accidentally – that the lost person can be found buried on Hart Island.

Hidden in plain sight?

Hart Island’s physical and cultural position also hampers public familiarity with it, as both geography and policy limit access. In the past, burial records and archives were poorly maintained. It was difficult to visit. DOC operated visits monthly and gaining access was somewhat like a prison visit: your attendance must be approved in advance; you must be checked off the authorized list, present a government-issued photographic identification, and surrender all electronic devices; the only access to the island was by DOC ferry, then prison bus; and DOC officers accompanied you throughout. Some relatives found the process intimidating or awkward to arrange around DOC’s schedule. As Elaine explained, ‘I just want to be able to wake up and see the sun and decide that today I’ll go visit my daughter. No planning, no nothing, I’ll just decide and go, like a normal cemetery.’ This recalls Allison’s account of Japanese interlocutors’ feelings of disorientation at their everyday precarity, as if what they believed to be normal expectations of how life would proceed had been unexpectedly cancelled (2012; cf. Berlant 2007). Elaine articulated a paradox that was often present when bereaved relatives spoke about Hart Island: they worked within the current circumstances but refused to accept them and actively retained a sense of dislocation at how their loved ones had been buried.

Once on the island, the landscape itself conspires in this concealment. The land quickly recovers from each open pit, leaving minimal visible evidence of the deceased save for a burial marker for each trench: ‘Each mass grave … disappears from view within a season’ (Hunt & Sternfeld 1998: 20). Earthmoving equipment fills in the hole, and the winter kills the

crabgrass each year so, after a season enriched by the abundant resident wildlife, the bare earth will sprout spring grass and the land holding the trench will be detectable only by those who know where to look.

When I asked people why Hart Island was so unknown, a common rationale was death denial. People also usually indicated its geographical isolation. 'It's just so far out, even for New York,' explained one interlocutor. 'How do you even get there? Do you need a car … and a boat?' In this city where location and distance are constantly discussed to evaluate employment and schools, or friendships and romantic potential, people use place and travel to locate themselves within the parameters of their neighbourhoods and domains. To make this approach manageable, large parts of the city – and the citizenry – need to be carved off and ignored as inaccessible and irrelevant. For most, Hart Island falls within this category.

Yet the scale of Hart Island makes it exceptional. It is 'purportedly the largest tax funded cemetery in the world' and the largest cemetery in the US (McSweeney 2013: 11). Yet its physical and imaginative distance from the city is matched by a 'remarkable absence of any significant cultural claim on the island' (Bray 2004: 179). The inability of many New Yorkers to locate Hart Island is perhaps unsurprising, when its cultural invisibility is officially reified by its omission from famous city maps. Arguably, the map New Yorkers see most often is the NYC Subway Map, published by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and available in all subway stations and many subway cars. Yet, it excludes Hart Island from its graphical representation of public transport routes, despite including other islands without subway access. Further, the Panorama of The City of New York, on display at the Queens Museum of Art and a notable tourist attraction, also does not record Hart Island's existence. Created for the 1964 World's Fair, it is celebrated for its meticulous accuracy and has been continually updated since its creation, including architectural features. In 1964, Hart Island had a permanent resident population and regular public traffic, albeit both tiny. Paul Connerton (2009) described similar situations as a community's topographical forgetting. Of course, places where death is visible are often sequestered from social life in ways that can make them difficult to remember.

Conclusions: Honestly shocking

The shock caused by Hart Island's Covid-19 burials sits at the interstices of knowing, not knowing, and denial. These states include absence and invisibility, public secrecy (Taussig 1999), indifference, mutual pretence (Bluebond-Langner 2020), tender deceit (Toulson forthcoming), ignorance, and forgetting (Connerton 2009). Hart Island oscillates between

revelation and concealment, presence and representation, individual knowledge and collective silence. At one extreme of this enduring and precarious tension lies public recognition. At the other, Hart Island is rendered unrecognizable and even disguised by bureaucratic language, taxonomies and processes, social isolation, limited resources, truncated citizenship rights, and the physical remoteness of the dead. Its burials remain a conditional benefit fulfilled by right of belonging to NYC, as federal citizenship documentation is not required. Yet it has been constructed historically and experientially to sit below the consciousness of most New Yorkers, though it is reiteratively unmasked, in this case, made publicly legible by transformational disaster. The gradual expansion of Hart Island's epistemic community and its eruption into clear view thanks to Covid-19 suggest that the Hart Island dead may be due a cyclical reckoning and restoration to collective memory before they can be safely forgotten again.

Since about 2009, access to information and to the island itself has improved significantly for people with relatives buried on Hart Island. Throughout, relatives and friends have publicly demanded the identities, biographies, and remains of the deceased. These changes broaden Hart Island's social world and ease its silencing. Activists hope that the interest in Hart Island sparked by Covid-19 will make it easier for people to find and visit their relatives and friends, affording the 'social reconstruction' of the living's ability to locate the dead in time and place (chap. 6).

The pandemic's first wave in NYC during spring 2020 fulfilled all the criteria of a disaster narrative. The excess mortality was undeniably catastrophic; in Povinelli's terms (2011), a crisis event, given form by statistics and made legible by media magnification. However, on Hart Island, burials were conducted much as they had been for more than 150 years, albeit at a great pace. To be buried anonymously without ceremony in a massed grave represents a routine, cruddy, everyday form of social suffering that appears to be socially tolerated (Berlant 2007; Biehl 2013). Further, these burials represent the everyday precarity of the lives of some New Yorkers who, despite all efforts, experience forms of suffering that are dull, messy, uneventful, and relentless. These people could not raise, if they needed to, enough money for a funeral. They've been there all along, and most New Yorkers know this too. To limit Le Guin's metaphor (2001), I am not claiming – not quite – that New Yorkers understand that some cosmic bargain has been struck so that the well-being of most citizens utterly depends on others' suffering. Precarity is something that can be 'sensed' in an environment (Allison 2013: 15) even if the realization is not obvious. It would be more precise, perhaps, to suggest that the pleasures and privileges many New Yorkers enjoy – like

those of Le Guin's Omelas – relies on them discounting that sensed recognition of precarity, or forgetting, or habitually minimising the suffering it causes, for nothing reasonable can be done about it anyway.

Ultimately, perhaps what many New Yorkers find so confronting about Hart Island's burials is their honesty. Usually, death rituals seek, through deeds and words, to affirm social relations between the living and the dead and uphold the latter's reputation. Whatever the past, the deceased is now precious, beloved, and honoured; shortcomings are forgiven or at least overlooked. It may even require a degree of insincerity or hypocrisy for the deceased to receive care and regard that was not always available during life. This happens within families and friends, and across a matrix of relationships throughout a person's social world, such as work, a club, or their broader community. An instructive example is veterans who may live disenfranchised and destitute lives, or struggle to secure adequate care for mental and physical traumas caused by their service, but in death will be honoured as heroes in special cemeteries dedicated for this purpose and whose memory can be mobilized in celebrations of nationalism. Arguably, American military cemeteries' uniform rituals and headstones also diminish the deceased's individuality, but crucially, they embed dead veterans within relationships, in sacred places marked with significant symbols of social and political belonging.

What is remarkable about Hart Island is that it is not exceptional, it is prosaic. When a massed grave is a routine, everyday matter, it signals that those buried there did not greatly matter to those doing the burying, because the norms of offering the dead special care and honour do not apply. When people describe the Hart Island burials as disrespectful and undignified, the transgression lies partly in this bluntly honest indifference. There is no socially mandated pretence that, however neglected in life, they are valued now in death. Such a burial is forthright about things that are usually denied or left unsaid: those buried here were not due the normal courtesies. The omission is deeply meaningful, and it is understood as uncivil, that these people are not really valued. What shocks people most about Hart Island's burials is their frankness.

Chapter 5
Citizens, neighbours, and communities
The case against change on City Island, and a counterexample

> *The native City Islander was content with his little world … and he hoped, as his ancestors had hoped before him that the invasion, now at flood tide, would never come.*
>
> *Tales of the Clam Diggers* (Payne 1969)

Questions about Hart Island's future shaped the relationships between those buried there and different groups of the living. While NYC Council grappled with Hart Island as a symbol of civic failings that ought to be addressed from lower Manhattan's City Hall, to those who lived nearby, Hart Island was simply a neighbour: familiar but seldom visited; different yet unexceptional. City Island, the NYC neighbourhood closest to Hart Island, lies only half a kilometre off its eastern shore. Consequently, it acts as both a gateway to Hart Island and a passive, neighbourly observer of all activity that takes place there. For most City Islanders, Hart Island remained imbued with prosaic memories, rather than the shameful public profile it had acquired. Some were upset, even outraged, that the place they grew up alongside and occasionally visited had been reduced to a tarnished cemetery in the public eye, to which New Yorkers from elsewhere in NYC can claim a right. Some saw these proposed changes to Hart Island's access as potentially degrading their cherished island neighbourhood, and this threat motivated some to act to protect their own citizenship identities as City Islanders of the Bronx, and as New Yorkers.

Here I shift focus to analyse how people imagine Hart Island's future, beginning with those who live closest, the City Islanders. I examine their understandings of stigma, memorialization, and citizenship regarding Hart Island. Some City Islanders actively supported efforts to recognize the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers and understood this might require facilitating better access for their families and friends. Others worried deeply that such changes would compromise their own distinctive way of life in this forgotten pocket of Nantucket in the Bronx and believed no reform was needed – Hart Island worked well as it was.

I also examine the case of Manhattan's African Burial Ground, in which the dead were literally and symbolically placed outside the community's limits, and funerals and

commemoration were circumscribed to deliberately signal exclusion from the political community. This echoes descriptions of the African American longing for burial that gave their dead the same normal posthumous relations as other Americans (chap. 2) – and evokes the multiple ways those buried on Hart Island have been marked as less than full citizens. Older interlocutors often saw similarities between contemporary interest in Hart Island and how the African Burial Ground had been rediscovered and championed as a project of social reconstruction by restoring its forgotten dead to the city's collective memory and honouring those previously excluded and forgotten as citizens.

Ethnographically, I draw on the time before the City Council signed legislative changes that would transfer Hart Island's jurisdiction from DOC to Parks. This was before people knew what the changes would mean in practice, so they expressed their hopes and fears, and strove to imagine and influence the future. The tension evident at a community meeting held on the night of the signing illustrates how people construct narratives of citizen belonging – on issues including traffic, funding, commercialization, and exploitation – and how the problem of Hart Island's stigma was perceived as racialized.

Sitting on NYC's periphery but on Hart Island's border, the vantage from City Island offers a distinctive comparative value (Candea 2018). It was the one place in NYC where Hart Island was entirely familiar, where people professed no shock at its existence. Further, City Islanders were confident of being New Yorkers, while feeling distinct from the metropolis, too, as a special category of locals; the feeling is mutual, as most New Yorkers have never visited City Island. Even more unusually, here Hart Island's future was a common, even constant, concern. I rarely met anyone without an opinion – and here, attitudes were sharply divided. City Islanders were the one group in which views on Hart Island were genuinely split, not between those who knew nothing about it and those who did, but between those who supported reforms to its management and those who saw no need. The group that vigorously opposed any change whatsoever to Hart Island's operations exhibited the strongest emotions of any in Hart Island's epistemic community, other than bereaved relatives. These specific and deep concerns were a stark contrast with the general ignorance or indifference of most New Yorkers towards Hart Island, or the shock from those who found out about it. City Islanders' relationship with Hart Island is something that defined City Islanders in relation to New Yorkers and divided them from one another. Examining how this relationship is produced and fought over, then, is one way of 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway 2016) of the problem of how to resolve Hart Island's stigma: a problem that some saw as being without a solution, and that others did not see as problem at all. Analysing how

some City Islanders classified those buried on their nearest island neighbour offers another perspective on how citizenship survives death in NYC. In this distinctive community, there were genuine differences about how to reconcile what City Islanders reasonably owed the Hart Island dead and their relatives, against what the city owed to them as City Islanders.

Clam diggers and mussel suckers

The B29x bus to City Island blasted warm air as we rode past Pelham Bay Park's stark winter trees in the northern Bronx. With almost three times the area of Central Park, it is NYC's largest public park. Those travelling on the bus were blue-collar workers, often Latinx or local youths. Most City Islanders had their own cars – unusual in itself for New Yorkers – so this bus was the only public transport service to City Island. This is not the kind of place people stumble on accidentally. The sole access is via City Island Bridge at the island's north end, and at weekends and during holidays, congestion can grind traffic movement to a standstill for hours. But at 8 am on a weekend morning traffic still flowed freely. Officially we were still in the Bronx, but atmospherically we'd left it behind. 'City' Island is misnominal. The island is not a city, it is not near the city, and those who live there see themselves as distinct from other New Yorkers. City Island meant fried lobster and seafood factories, bait and tackle shops, sailmakers, chandlers, and dry docks for working on yachts over winter. It is a mile and a half long and a half mile wide with only one through street, City Island Avenue. The cross streets start and finish at the shore, many ending at sandy private beaches enclosed by residential housing. The island is so narrow that there are spots where you can see the sea in both directions at once. Most houses were quaint, solidly built coastal New England-style wooden cottages with yards. These single-family homes can pass quietly from generation to generation, often at prices that enable the property to stay within extended family. We'd entered a Cape Cod fishing village without leaving NYC.

City Island only became part of NYC in 1895 – like Hart Island – when the city annexed parts of Pelham, and in 1898 the island found itself part of the Bronx. Most of the approximate 4,000 residents are white, and of Irish or Italian heritage. They still jokingly described someone born on City Island as a 'clam digger,' a true native. Local residents are known as 'mussel suckers.' I met people who'd lived on City Island for three decades yet described themselves with self-deprecation as mussel suckers. They identified as part of the Bronx's diversity and were confident of being New Yorkers, but were deeply conscious of their own City Island community first. Within this self-contained small town at the city's edge, people seemed to view themselves as both a very special kind of New Yorker and yet truly distinct from NYC. Visits to Manhattan were discussed with regret.

This island was called Minnewit by the indigenous Sinawoy people (Seitz & Miller 2011: 106). Early British settlers transposed this as Minneford Island. Thomas Pell – who also acquired Hart Island – bought Minneford in 1654. Benjamin Palmer led a syndicate to purchase it in 1761. It was renamed City Island because the new owners hoped it would become a commercial rival to Manhattan, as its excellent harbour could save traders the risk of sailing the hazardous East River to reach New York (McNamara 1989). The Revolution interrupted these plans. Settlers made their living from fishing, clamming, oyster farming, and sea salt making. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it had become a favoured base for marine pilots; it was a convenient location from which to board ships heading to and from the city whose captains needed local knowledge to navigate through Hell Gate's dangerous waters to Manhattan. Unlike so many of NYC's islands, City Island was never used by the city as discreet storage for the inconvenient or distressing. Through most of the twentieth century, its prosperity and reputation relied on thriving maritime businesses and shipyards, but these could not compete with the technological processes of fibreglass and global consolidation that reshaped boatbuilding in the 1980s. That industry has gone, but its character remains in the shipyards and marinas on the shores and the ship's chandlers and tackle shops along City Island Avenue. It has become attractive as affordable retirement for a handful of migrants from Manhattan and the Bronx – from which it seemed a universe away.

Many Islanders exhibited a good-humoured clannishness about boundary marking. This recalls Kohn's (2002) observation that newcomers to a Hebridean island were tolerated when they performed rituals of belonging but would only be accepted as insiders when they could regularly engage in appropriate everyday social action. For example, I often had at least thirty minutes between my arrival on City Island and the time I was due for muster at the DOC wharf for the Hart Island ferry. Winter temperatures were often below freezing and without vegetation or shelter, people stood in wind chill straight from the sea, making it another five degrees cooler. So I often visited one of two coffee shops to shelter from the cold, drink something warm and use the bathroom (Hart Island has no water or plumbing). In March 2020, on the last visit to Hart Island before access closed due to the pandemic, I was the first customer of the day and chatted with the barista before taking my coffee up to their second-hand book section – the only one in the Bronx, they told me proudly, every time. An older man entered, dressed stoutly for the weather in a heavy guernsey, fisherman's jacket, and cap. He stood wide-legged, as though he knew how to handle himself in a heavy swell. He was after pastries. He assessed me frankly over his glasses, taking in my parka and snow boots. 'You're off-island,' he announced, using the local idiom for stranger. It was not a question.

Before I could explain exactly how off-island I was, the barista, another newcomer, said, 'Yeah but she's okay! She's a researcher from Australia and she studies the island [gestured easterly].' Peter, the proprietor and a local, called out, 'No, no it's New Zealand! But we know her!' I agreed that I was very much off-island. The man continued watching me but did so with a hint of amusement – a local had vouched for me, and while I remained firmly a visitor, I knew enough to drink something warm before a winter ferry crossing. This interaction demonstrates how an islander's identity is woven together by choice, action, allegiance, and experience (Kohn 2002).

Living on and visiting Hart Island

One perspective, rapidly fading, was that of City Islanders who had lived on and regularly visited Hart Island before it was closed to the public in the 1970s and shrank to its current use and status. Several City Islanders suggested I speak with an older local who had grown up on Hart Island. Her parents had lived and worked there. I called after her friend gave me her number. She was suspicious, assuming I was a reporter. I tried to explain that I was a researcher rather than a journalist and that I just wanted to hear about her experiences. It was important to clarify that I made no judgements about things either way; this was during a controversial time leading up to NYCC's vote regarding Hart Island's future, so I always tried to assure people that I was not campaigning for either side. She interrupted me angrily, saying that the island had been a good place to grow up but now all the ghoulish attention went to the burials. 'But it was a lot more than that, the cemetery was only a small part of the island! But now that's all people talk about. Making a big deal! It's wrong.' I began to say that these memories were exactly what I would be interested in hearing, but she hung up abruptly after telling me not to contact her again.

The woman's immense irritation at my apparent reduction of Hart Island to its cemetery is justified. Throughout this text, I often use the proper noun as a synecdoche for the cemetery because that is how New Yorkers, and indeed many City Islanders, talked about Hart Island. Her offense was a stern reminder that before the island closed to the public it had a flourishing if small community, of which the cemetery was only one part. A local history from 1969 boasts that 'Hart Island is completely self-sustaining' (Payne 1969: 28). Saliently, this self-published booklet devotes five pages to Hart Island (*ibid*. 26-31) but makes a separate half-page entry on 'Hart Island – Potter's field' (*ibid*. 31-21), illustrating how local people then considered the cemetery as part of Hart Island but only one aspect of it. At that time, local resources included a church, prison, butchery, medical clinic, launderette, and clothing, paint, and food stores, as well as power and sewerage plants, which supported a

permanent population of up to 2,000 residents. Prison inmates had other occupations once they ceased cemetery work, including raising chickens and growing food in the garden. They could also play for their own baseball team, the Hart Island Wildcats, or join the prison orchestra. Earlier, in the 1940s, the warden's wife played the organ for church services and ran an inmates' singing group (*ibid.*). When I visited the island, DOC's Captain Thompson pointed out the foundations of the warden's shooting gallery and his wife's greenhouse near the gazebo. The object of the woman's nostalgia was a community that no longer existed, yet her defence of it remained keen.

Someone happier to share his memories was Tom Smith, an avuncular, well-mannered City Islander of well-groomed middle age. On an island where locals have known each other since childhood and settled into partisan differences, he seemed warmly liked by most, with a history of public service, professional success, and community theatre. Of all his achievements he was perhaps proudest of the Tide Chart that he had published every summer for decades. Each year it would be placed on refrigerator doors from the City Island Bridge to Belden Point as a ready reference guide for summer swimming and sailing. Like so many City Islanders, Tom grew up there as generations of his family had before him, and Hart Island was a place that, for him, felt deeply familiar. He was old enough to remember it as an active community before it closed to the public. His memories of Hart Island centred on when he was a teenager, when people could take the ferry to Hart Island and back to City Island at will. This included people under treatment at Phoenix House, a drug rehabilitation centre where people were sent as an alternative to jail sentences. Then, this was an innovative approach to treating addiction as a health issue rather than a crime.

Like the woman who had grown up there, Tom remembered when Hart Island, apart from the cemetery, had been well cared for by the island's permanent population, but affirmed that the cemetery had been poorly maintained. Today, he explained, the cemetery was better run, though the island was derelict and abandoned. 'We just accepted that people came and went, including people from Phoenix House. They could look pretty out of it,' he said. His strongest memory was from August 1971, when approximately 18,000 young people ferried from City Island for a drug- and alcohol-free music festival on Hart Island to raise money for Phoenix House (NYT 1971). These 'Summer-End Happenings' had become regular fundraising events on the island for the rehabilitation service (NYT 1969), expanding to include carnival rides, prize stalls, movie screenings and performances by well-known acts such as The Velvet Underground and Janis Ian.

Tom was fourteen and his parents had strictly forbidden him from attending. They were worried about the hippies in the crowd and that, as the event was for Phoenix House, there would surely be drugs available. In the end, four people were asked to leave the festival for smoking marijuana (NYT 1971; Sullivan 2019).

'My parents said I couldn't and of course, I was desperate to go to this festival, there would be all kinds of people! So my friends and I, we snuck across on the ferry,' he said, smiling at the memory. Naturally, his parents found out – especially when deluged by other New Yorkers, City Islanders close ranks – and his father, the island's Harbour Master, brought the boys back on the official vessel. 'The embarrassment was just, you know I was a teenager and this festival was going to be so cool and then to be picked up in the Harbour Master vessel by your old man …' He laughed ruefully at the mortification of his teenage self. Phoenix House loomed large in memories of Hart Island for most City Islanders I met of Tom's age. Several told me about the time someone had stolen a skull from Hart Island and displayed it in the window of the Black Whale, a local City Island café that still operates. 'Someone put an enormous joint in the skull's mouth, like he was having a smoke!'

Tom also described how, generally, young people rarely visited Hart Island even though it was so close, because they considered other places more interesting to explore by boat. Potentially, Tom and his friends had also negatively associated Hart Island with the threat of the Cold War because of the Nike missile base on the island.

'We were very conscious of the missiles,' he explained. 'We did bomb practice at school. And the missiles were so close, it made the threat of war seem very real.' Like the woman who had spent her childhood on the island, the cemetery was incidental in many of Tom's memories of the place.

He did recall one older friend sailing across to Hart with some younger guys. The friends had walked through the cemetery in the dark as a kind of dare. The ground was uneven because some of the skeletons had worked up to the surface. One had stumbled on a protruding bone. 'It really was not as well kept as it is today', he said.

I was told the same stories again and again by other City Islanders. Tom's memories of Hart Island articulated how it meant different things to City Islanders than to other New Yorkers – who were often completely unaware of it. Because City Islanders were so familiar with Hart Island's wider social world and had previously participated in it, it also carried more complex meanings than for those who only knew it for the cemetery. Talking about Hart Island for older City Islanders often included reminiscences of childhood, fun and recreation, adolescent risk-taking, and parental work. In turn, they related this familiarity

directly to their own understanding of being New Yorkers at the city's periphery, who consequently had to work hard to get their views across.

As another example, many City Islanders had strong memories of four Bronx teenage boys setting off to Hart Island after a party on City Island in January 2003. The boys stole a dinghy and attempted to cross to the island, intrigued by the cemetery and abandoned missile silos. When their boat began taking on water, they called 111 but the call was cut off after only twelve seconds before rescue services could locate the caller. The water was about one degree Celsius. The capsized seven-foot fibreglass skiff was found shortly afterwards but only one of the boy's bodies was recovered, three months later in April (McFadden & Worth 2003). 'It's a very sad thing and I mean no disrespect,' said a City Islander who wished not to be named. 'All accounts those boys were good students, good families, you know? Teenagers do silly things. But no City Island kid woulda done that.' By this, he meant no local teen would have taken a boat joyriding on a frigid winter night, especially a new boat on a waterway they did not know. For City Islanders, the boys' story was a sorrowful parable about the maritime sense possessed by most City Islanders that New Yorkers generally lack – and the dangerous perils of off-Islanders' fascination with Hart Island. The incident recalled another mythic archetype, about the danger that lurks in the unknown offshore place, containing knowledge that will remain safely contained there unless one disturbs it. City Islanders live comfortable if comparatively modest lives; unlike the Omelas, they are not New York's most fortunate, but they know themselves to have cultural treasures that other New Yorkers do not.

The case against change

City Islanders who opposed Hart Island reforms often believed that DOC's control of the island adequately provided for visits and that the city could not afford change anyway. They articulated several other broad arguments: lack of interest, traffic, exploitation (of and by whom was often unclear), and the need to protect City Island's heritage. They argued, correctly, that Parks was chronically underfunded and already could not fulfil its responsibilities at nearby Pelham Bay Park, and added, also correctly, that Parks wanted no part in operating a cemetery. Further, they asked, how would City Island's infrastructure support a public ferry service and the additional car traffic and parking needs? People also expressed concern that, if given free access to Hart Island, the public might disturb graves and violate religious customs of those buried. Versions of these views were often collectively expressed by the City Island Civic Association and the Chamber of Commerce.

Concerns about traffic were especially intractable and longstanding. In 1978, in an article tellingly headlined 'Hart Island Full of Possibilities – and Not Much Else,' the Times reported that, 'Mr. Galerne, president of the City Island Chamber of Commerce, said most people on City Island are for constructive use of Hart, but they are against anything that would drastically increase neighborhood traffic' (Goodwin 1978). Ralph Zinn, the principal planner in the Department of City Planning Bronx office, commented that, 'It's got a magnificent beach on the eastern shore, some very interesting vegetation and everything. It could make a luxurious residential area, or if the city ever gets into legalized gambling, it would make a very good place for casinos … It's good to have resources like Hart Island around. It's like money in the bank.' The reporter wrote that the island 'always seems to be relegated to the role of human dumping ground' and added only in passing that its other major use has been as a burial ground, 'first for Civil War soldiers and, for the last 100 years, as the eternal home of the city's paupers'. The reporter presumed that Hart Island would continue to provide New York's public burials: 'While some people have questioned whether there are not more economical and practical ways of handling pauper corpses, such as cremation, the city has no plans to change its policy.' The article reiterated another recurrent theme: that Hart Island burials are always considered in terms of economic cost to the public, just as contemporary arguments against transferring its control to Parks also often involve cost. Throughout the article, Hart Island is regarded as an underutilized resource that New York is negligently not making more of. But the impact of changes to the treatment of the dead would be measured in traffic flows, should the people making these decisions be City Islanders. The unspoken concern appeared to be that if the dead, or the bereaved as their representatives, were granted greater rights, the rights of some living persons would have to be compromised, so concern for the dead and bereaved weighed less heavily. From this perspective, some City Islanders engaged their political belonging to New York in order to circumscribe the claims of other New Yorkers to Hart Island. Their citizenship of the city stood in tension with their belonging to the neighbourhood.

Cathi Swett, an attorney and actor, was outspoken in her condemnation of the proposed changes and her preference to leave Hart Island's operations as they were. A tall white woman, Cathi had a thick braid of gently greying hair and broad forehead with heavy brows. She sometimes closed her penetrating deep-set brown eyes when she spoke. I first met Cathi at a Bronx Community Board 10 meeting where she described her own visit to Hart Island.

She told the meeting that her visit had been easy to arrange at late notice, the ferry trip had been undersubscribed, DOC had been straightforward to deal with, and the overall experience

rather pleasant. Cathi's experience was surely mediated by her advantages in dealing with Hart Island's bureaucracy: as someone white, middle-class, with confidence from decades of professional legal practice, the secure footing of longstanding belonging to City Island, and, importantly, visiting out of curiosity rather than grief. She was resolute in seeing the proposed changes at Hart Island as not only unnecessary but immoral.

'It's a sin. A *sin*. What they're doing,' she told me at a City Island Christmas event. 'Wasting money on this. Just because of one single looney who's lining her pockets. Melinda Hunt, they need to follow the money! We need to know the truth about what she's doing. The lies she tells.' I asked what lies she held Melinda responsible for, as she had insinuated similarly vague accusations at the Community Board meeting.

'That there's a huge pent-up demand to visit Hart Island. Not true! That it's difficult to visit. It's not, I went. They want to develop it, make some money off it. So disrespectful. Let the dead rest in peace.' She talked at length about the waste of money and resources this would mean, and how City Island would only suffer from the changes through pressure on infrastructure and risks of crowding and crime. She also railed at how politicians and media ignored the experiences and views of those closest to Hart Island, the City Islanders, who felt unheard, ignored, invisible.

One City Islander had even attended the annual Halloween costume parade dressed as Hart Island, with its distinctive grave markers covering a t-shirt, as a joke protest at the attention the island was receiving. Several other locals had mentioned this to me in disgust. I saw this person regularly at public events and they were often extremely aggressive online and in person towards people advocating for reform, to the point that some activists had complained of harassment. I approached this person several times saying I was interested in understanding their views but did not receive a response.

City Islanders' objections often presumed that Hart Island would be commercially developed or exploited for its tourism potential. For instance, one common objection to Hart Island's jurisdictional transfer to Parks was concern that it would be commercialized as a theme park. Parks was broke anyway, the argument went, so it would need to make Hart Island pay for itself, and what was to prevent Hart Island from being developed into the Coney Island of the Bronx? 'They'll put a Ferris wheel on there!' several City Islanders told me in disgust. They rationalized this as disrespect to the dead, but usually also mentioned that anyone wishing to reach Hart Island must cross City Island to do so, and City Island could not handle even current traffic and car parking volumes.

I found no evidence, in public or private, that Melinda Hunt or the Hart Island Project – or any other party – sought to commercially develop Hart Island; conversely, there was plenty of evidence that Hunt had quite different plans (chap. 6). Indeed, I never heard those seeking reforms suggest any kind of commercialization, let alone a Ferris wheel. It was a straw man argument, only ever presented as a risk by those opposing reform. Pre-emptive criticism of the prospect of Hart Island's commercialization, persistently represented by the imagined Ferris wheel, recalled an earlier controversy, which suggested other motivations behind the objections.

Decorum and discrimination

Before its municipal purchase in 1868, Hart Island had occasionally hosted clandestine boxing matches. By 1922, NYC owned virtually all of the island, save the four acres at the southern point which remained owned by John Hunter, of the same family which had sold the city much of the island. The city declined Hunter's offers to sell this land. So, in 1924, he sold the acres to millionaire and Harlem developer Solomon Riley for $35,000. In 1925, Riley announced plans to develop the so-called Negro Coney Island (Seitz & Miller 2011: 141–2) on this land, a seaside resort and amusement park for Harlem Blacks, who were barred from other nearby amusement parks. By then, Hart Island's cemetery had been operating for some fifty years, and DOC still operated a jail there to supply labour. The city condemned Riley's development plans on the rationale of public safety – prisoners might harm visitors, start smuggling, or escape using visitors' motorboats – though Riley had reckoned his potential consumers would have been prepared to take these risks and been untroubled by the nearby cemetery and jail. The city firmly insisted that the decision was motivated by decorum and safety, rather than discrimination: 'While affirming that there is no question of racial prejudice, officials … declare that the presence of a resort of this kind on Hart Island, under the very windows of the prison dormitories, has created an extremely awkward situation …' (NYT 1925). In 1925, the city bought Riley out for $144,000, over four times what he had paid the previous year. Local resorts remained closed to Black New Yorkers. The city used the land to build a sewerage treatment facility. In the early 1990s, when the island no longer had a permanent population, this area was used for individual AIDS burials. What this episode illustrates is a long history of moral anxiety among those who would not visit Hart Island that any pleasures it offered would surely be sordid, dubious, and morally incompatible with its other uses. In this sense, Hart Island belongs to that category of forbidding places where prohibiting an activity – in this case, the entertainment of those who had little – is framed as a moral imperative. It also adds to Hart Island's perceived

history as a marker of racial separatism and discrimination that Black Harlemites were barred from other recreational resorts but also forbidden from having one of their own, even in a place as shunned as this.

One City Islander put it more bluntly. Privately, and with a frank sigh, he said, 'This island is white. The fear of more people coming here, especially to visit Hart Island, is about [he gestured to the skin on his hand]. People say they're scared of crime, but when they say it, that's code. They mean they're scared of Black people.'

The earlier accounts of the open-air prison environment, in which inmates could garden, tend animals, play sports, and make music alongside burial duties, described a practice that could reform and enrich the lives of men through productive work and enjoyable recreation while they served their sentences. It provides an extraordinary juxtaposition with the contemporary mass incarceration at Rikers Island, which has now served Hart Island for decades (SDNY 2014). In many ways, scandal-ridden Rikers, constantly plagued by human rights abuses and miscarriages of justice, exemplifies current understandings of the retributive purpose of prison: that the conditions of imprisonment should include suffering and cruelty, which may well efface all sense of personhood for the imprisoned. As those imprisoned are now largely held from public view – unlike this description of earlier decades on Hart Island in which prisoners mingled with others in public space – it has been easier to imagine that for those 'doing time', their time is not valuable, productive, or meaningful.

New York's historical model for abandoning the dead on racial grounds

On a winter's night early in my fieldwork, I met Tom Vashti at City Island Nautical Museum, which that evening was hosting a popular local chapter meeting and book launch for the Bronx County Historical Society. Tom was a North Bronx local and had worked most of his career as a local police officer. In his retirement, he had become a keen community historian and we spent several hours going through his archive of materials on City Island and Hart Island. He interspersed discussions of press cuttings, community publications, postcards (chap. 3), and letters with his memories about the neighbourhoods. He then handed me another carefully kept file of archival materials concerning another of New York's historical burial sites, the African Burial Ground, at the opposite end of the city to the North Bronx. If I wanted to understand Hart Island, he suggested, I would first need to understand the African Burial Ground and its controversies. I had not heard of it. However, those who remembered it often compared the African Burial Ground's surprising rediscovery and the controversy over how it should be handled and memorialized to what they saw as similar processes for reform to Hart Island. Despite some obvious differences, most obviously a clear and politically

motivated constituency to act for the buried, for some people the African Burial Ground and Hart Island were mentally filed together as social wrongs.

Some of New York's most beloved parks began as potters' fields, including Madison Square Park, Washington Square Park, and Bryant Park. This is not widely known because, for the most part, New Yorkers' lives simply proceeded above what lay beneath. However, this changed when in 1991 workers uncovered human remains during excavations for a federal office building in lower Manhattan.

Under some of Manhattan's most expensive real estate, only a few blocks from the WTC, lay the bones of about 300 men, women, and children. Archaeologists dated the remains to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and estimated that the almost perfectly preserved burial site actually held up to 20,000 people. All were African. It is the earliest and largest known burial ground in the US for enslaved and free Africans.

The discovery prompted a reckoning about Black New Yorkers' rights to their own history and how all New Yorkers should connect with their city's ancestors. Those buried here were not recognized as citizens when they died, yet contemporary efforts seem strongly geared towards recovering an equivalent status, or even honouring them as founding citizens who had helped build the city that New York would become (US National Park Service n.d.). This framing made the deceased's occupation the relevant category – workers and labourers who built the city – though when a proportion of the dead were legally not persons but property, this classification can only be taken so far.

After the archaeological investigation, city officials drew up what they believed were respectful plans to proceed with the planned build. But massive protests and political interventions by activists, historians, archaeologists, educators, and community leaders halted construction and prompted bitterly negotiated revisions to the building plans. Many of my older interlocutors recalled these protests and debates when thinking about Hart Island in the present. The Burial Ground embodied the city's debt to slavery which was usually absent from public discourse and at odds with its narrative of racial diversity and liberal inclusivity. Those who had helped build the city had literally been buried beneath it and forgotten.

Slavery had been part of New York since the colony was formed (Berlin & Harris 2005; Smith 2021). The Dutch West India Company brought the first cargo of slaves when they arrived in North America in 1626. In the eighteenth century, slaves may have constituted a quarter of New York's workforce (Landy 2017; US National Park Service n.d.). Yet when slavery became illegal (1827), the work and contributions of the slaves were seemingly erased: there are very few public acknowledgements of slavery in New York outside the

African Burial Ground National Monument, and the cemetery had been rapidly forgotten as the city had expanded (Many other burial grounds had been had bodies exhumed and moved as the city expanded; NYC Parks n.d.). Fittingly for people not recognized as citizens, the burial ground lay outside the boundaries of the colony. Studies of the bones identified injuries likely attributable to strenuous physical labour, malnutrition, and early death (Blakey 2010, 2020). Moreover, records showed that funerals themselves were sites for deliberate cruelty to slaves by owners: punishments included forbidding singing and limiting mourners to ten. Restrictions on funeral rituals are often especially painful. Similarly, when limits on funerals were democratically imposed in New York and many other places during the Covid-19 pandemic, people often described them to me as causing great suffering.

Amongst many thorny issues debated during the African Burial Grounds rediscovery, issues of representation were central. Critics asked who had the right to judge if the remains were being respectfully handled and stored? Where were the Black archaeologists and historians in the recovery project, least discrimination and power imbalances be perpetuated by prioritising white experts at white institutions? And crucially, how should the site be memorialized, now that this history could be recovered?

Ongoing protests had effectively secured and sacralized the space. In 1993, the burial ground was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 2006, the African Burial Ground National Monument, at the corners of Duane and Elk Streets in lower Manhattan, was declared a national monument and placed within the National Park Service, to honour the work and stories of African Americans in NYC, including the political activists who had secured the site.[50] The memorial ground contains seven raised mounds holding crypts filled with coffins, where all the human remains and artefacts were reinterred. In 2007, Rodney Leon's memorial sculpture was unveiled, and within the well-resourced $4.4 million visitor centre, sculptures in tableau depict re-enactments, including chanted recordings, of funerals that had taken place on this site. The discovery, the dispute, and its resolution provided an exemplar of a fundamental nexus between burial rites and political rights that had existed in NYC from its beginning. Here, 200 years later, memorialization disarmed necropolitics and restored the dead's citizenship and memory. The African Burial Ground's rediscovery and reclamation also gave those involved an opportunity to enact community through memorialising the recovered bodies and those unrecovered persons they represented. Could political change help the same happen on Hart Island?

[50] This process may have inspired Melinda Hunt's plans for Hart Island (chap. 6).

The abandonment and recovery of those interred at the African Burial Ground is an instructive case with which to compare the current projects of reclaiming, or refusing, the Hart Island dead as fellow New Yorkers. At Hart Island, the African Burial Ground, and the WTC (chap. 3), the political problem is that the dead *were* New Yorkers, but this claim is only revealed through memorialization. While memorialization is absent, as it was at the African Burial Ground before its recovery, the citizenship of the deceased remains unrecognized.

Civic incivility, necropower, and the will of the people

At its broadest, Mbembe defined necropolitics as 'the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not' (2019: 27; original emphasis). For many City Islanders, insider/outsider distinctions relied substantively on who was 'of the island', and who rightly belonged elsewhere. Unlike most of NYC, it has a small stable population of people well known to each other, and this attribute is widely appreciated, and jealously guarded by some. Those buried on Hart Island are unknown to them, as they are to most New Yorkers. Some City Islanders welcomed the prospect of improving access to and the status of Hart Island. Some were ambivalent, or joined the annual Ascension Day Mass led by St. Mary's Star of the Sea parish to pray for the Hart Island dead. Others found the notion of enduring bonds with the Hart Island dead and their relatives presented an intolerable challenge to their way of life.

On 14 November 2019, NYC Council voted to pass legislation transferring the jurisdiction of Hart Island from DOC to Parks. That freezing night, I joined the public meeting of Community Board 10 Parks Committee at City Island's Grace Episcopal Church Hall. There may have been other business scheduled, but the only topic was Hart Island's future. The vote had passed decisively, forty-five to two. One dissenting vote was Council Member Chaim Deutsch, representing the 48th District of Brighton and Manhattan beaches, one of New York's rare Trump-favourable spots. The self-described 'Conservative' Democrat, who would be expelled from Council when he pled guilty to criminal tax fraud in 2020, said he feared NYC Parks' operations might unintentionally disturb graves, and that greater public access might lead to violations of religious customs. The other was Council Member Mark Gjonaj, City Island's representative, who voted against three of the four bills relating to Hart Island – painfully against his better judgement, I suspected from conversations with him. During the Council meeting, he justified his vote: the bills did not go far enough to protect the island and its burials, they did not give enough of a voice to the Bronx residents who lived near the island or the loved ones of those buried there, and there was inadequate detail

on the monies and resources required for the changes (NYCC 2019a: 78). He had supported the fourth bill, which merely required the city's Department of Social Services to create an office to help people arrange public burials. What the 45:2 vote revealed was that City Islanders' representation was dramatically at odds with the overwhelming views of the rest of NYC. Gjonaj and his officials drove straight from City Hall to City Island, knowing he would need to explain the result.

Gjonaj had a politician's uncannily warm direct gaze and ability to recall people's names. Prior to his political career, he had founded a real estate brokerage and cut his teeth electorally as a member of New York's powerful City Taxi and Limousine Commission. A centrist Democrat, he spoke often about how his family's Albanian heritage shaped his personal ethics. Though he had voted in response to pressure from some City Islanders and the City Island Civic Association, Gjonaj clearly knew he would be the target of many Islanders' angry disappointment at the church that evening. He arrived extremely late. The atmosphere was acrimonious.

Locals vigorously opposed to any reform of Hart Island's management insisted that the Community Board and Council Member Gjonaj should fight on. Several board members looked startled: had some City Islanders not understood that the legislation had passed, and by an overwhelming majority? The speakers, mostly associated with the Civic Association or Chamber of Commerce, criticized the NYCC for failing to listen to the views of those closest to Hart Island and accused Gjonaj of failing to represent them. They canvassed the usual arguments: that increased access to Hart Island was unnecessary, risked traffic congestion and crime, would disrespect the deceased, that the site was too fragile and polluted to be open to the public, and would damage City Island's unique way of life. Gjonaj spoke at length, pacing the hall, sometimes pausing dramatically. He strove to reconcile those gathered to the fact that the legislation had passed, and stressed his loyal representation of their opposition to it. At times speaking with deep emotion, he described the central importance of funerals and burials to his own Albanian family and implored those gathered to consider the vital human need to show respect to the dead and their relatives. If nothing else, he said, could they consider the terrible 'optics' of using inmates for burial work, by which he meant the damage to reputation in how this was perceived by others. Contempt and alarm at using inmate labour for the Hart Island burials was usually an easy point of agreement for New Yorkers I met, and City Island was the only place where I saw this disputed.

Someone in the audience interrupted, 'It's a plum job, they love it! Get out of Rikers for the day,' she called. Near me, someone groaned 'Oh my god' under their breath. The

interjector continued, ‘And if they don’t like it, well, shoulda thought of that before they did the crime!’ Others called out in support.

Another City Islander spoke emphatically about what he saw as false logic in greater public access to Hart Island, which the politicians all refused to admit. ‘I worked the [Hart Island] ferry seven years, back in the 90s. Never once I saw anyone try to visit Hart Island. *Never once*.’ People called in support. He continued, ‘They got no-one, otherwise they’d be someplace else. That’s why they there! Sad to say, but it’s like they buried animals over there. There’s not gonna be any visitors. That’s the truth.’ Again, some people called in vigorous support, while others looked away. No-one pointed out that, during that decade, visits had been prohibited, the island was uninhabited, and under DOC’s control, all public access was forbidden, making it completely predictable that no one had attempted to visit. The room felt highly charged with bitterly divisive necropolitics, evidenced by averted eyes and the pointed refusal of Gjonaj’s invitation to show respect for the dead. He sighed heavily.

‘That is one view among many,’ another City Islander told me firmly afterwards, who I knew strove to build consensus. ‘We don’t all see things that way.’ Ultimately, that rancorous evening, the only outcome was that the Parks Committee passed a resolution recommending that the Community Board draft a letter to the Department of Transportation asking for the board to have a formal role in the transportation study of Hart Island. This was redundant, as the request had already been made directly to NYCC the previous month.

To return to necropolitics as the sovereign capacity to define who matters and who is disposable, this meeting becomes a piece of theatre, an epilogue performed after a vote confirmed that the dead on Hart Island mattered after all. Those City Islanders disputing this were not claiming sovereignty over Hart Island but insisting on previous understandings which questioned whether those buried there and their families mattered. After all, if they had been buried as animals, they *were* disposable and had been disposed of accordingly. They argued these points from the moral claim of longstanding residence and proximity, because they were of this place in ways that other New Yorkers were not. The meeting’s purpose was to be heard, to issue demands, to claim that those living City Islanders mattered, and express fears that making these local dead matter would come at a cost to their living neighbours – in short, to reassert democratic rights.

However, some saw the reforms as the morally right thing to do, as well as seeing potential for City Islanders to gain from greater public access to Hart Island. Indeed, some believed it was urgently needed to help support the island’s struggling economy. Erica was one such example. She had grown up on City Island, the sixth generation in a well-known

Island family, adept at sailing. She had gone to school and worked in NYC but now, in her thirties, felt City Island pull her back. We met at her neat seaside wooden bungalow. Like many City Islanders, she had acquired it through family – and it was about three minutes' walk from the wharf from which the DOC ferry shuttled back and forth to Hart Island. She had made her first-ever visit to Hart Island the day we met to talk.

Erica's position as someone with multigenerational family connections and who had shown loyalty by 'coming home' to City Island (cf. Kohn 2002) meant she felt confident about participating publicly in meetings about Hart Island as a counterpoint to the City Islanders who vigorously opposed change. She always spoke confidently and calmly, and never seemed to engage with the inflammatory arguments from some of her fellow City Islanders.

> *Parking! I mean, those people worried about getting a park outside their house – where else is this a problem in New York City? [laughs] But if more people were coming through to visit the island [Hart], they want to eat, they want a coffee or a drink, they've come all this way anyway. And those are things that other people like too.*
> *But we all need to work somewhere else as there are so few jobs on the island, and online shopping means there's even fewer. And there's not the quality of life here for people who are younger. Where's my craft brewery? [laughs] I think it's okay to say we'd like some changes so that you don't need to be retired to live here, without being accused of throwing away City Island's heritage. And if more people come through City Island, they'll spend money here and it could be good for us. But if we make people unwelcome, that won't happen.*

Erica participated in City Island Rising, a progressive, community-based, non-profit association that formed from a factional schism with the City Island Civic Association, which it was perceived by some locals as opposing. Consequently, City Island Rising focused on positive participation in the local community, listed 'open discourse and civility' and inclusion in its values, and strove to distinguish itself from the Chamber partly by communicating in positive terms – as Erica strove to embody. City Island Rising members usually believed that increasing access to Hart Island was the ethically right decision for bereaved families, and New Yorkers generally. As expressed by Erica expressed, welcoming greater access to Hart Island would increase the connections between City Island and their fellow New Yorkers, and that, far from threatening City Island's way of life, it could help support it. 'It's a pity they see it that way because actually we want many of the same things

– more local employment, more reasons for people to stay on the island. But it's generational I guess,' she said. She was cheerfully ready to embrace the possibility that the Hart Island dead, far from being an unwanted intrusion, could help provide work for City Islanders that would sustain their community, as it had in generations past, when the cemetery was only one aspect of Hart Island.

Back to the water's edge

Where some New Yorkers see Hart Island as a problematic emblem for the city, the City Islanders see it as a local matter, one marked by a degree of alienation from NYC. At the same time, while many City Islanders understand Hart Island as something profoundly local, for which they had claims verging on autochthony (Geschiere & Ceuppens 2005) and even implying a form of guardianship, they also believe it is something that they will never use themselves. For instance, at another public meeting, I was introduced to a local funeral director. I asked if they had ever had dealings with Hart Island, for instance, disinterment. 'For a City Islander? No. We know each other,' replied the funeral director, smiling at my naivety.

These apparent paradoxes illuminate how City Islanders produce, enact, and hold in tension their own citizenship identities as individuals, as locals of City Island, of the Bronx borough, and as New Yorkers. The debate over Hart Island in fact split fairly neatly along conservative and progressive lines: on one hand, nostalgia and local autonomy, and on the other, ethical values, social improvement, and economic benefit. Their disagreements over Hart Island's future and how best to make claims over it demonstrate how social groups can do democracy by symbolically and literally asserting inclusion and exclusion, and attempting to distribute or preserve equality as a lived, everyday practice of politics of belonging. The conflicts over what was held as significant to City Islanders' way of life helped produce signifiers of belonging that could be performed as individual and collective qualities, which in turn represented homogeneities (Yuval-Davis 2011). Most, regardless of their hopes for Hart Island's future, felt deeply familiar with Hart Island and experienced it as an ordinary, unremarkable aspect of City Island life.

Opponents of change did not wish to be sealed off from each other but from off-Islanders. Consequently, this does not quite accord with the geographies of fear (Davis 1999, 2017) and securitization (Low & Maguire 2019) studies that have become central concerns for urban anthropologists. For instance, most City Islanders were openly critical of the gated condominium that had been built beside the DOC wharf: no true City Islander would live there, I was assured. Yet several complained to me that City Island no longer had a dedicated

police officer. Instead, those City Islanders against reform were concerned with maintaining boundaries, and clearly marking locals and strangers, which would inevitably exacerbate existing racial, gendered, and economic inequalities. Perhaps it is more accurate to describe the concern as one of insecurity. The City Islanders against greater public access to Hart Island feared more people entering within City Island's boundaries. Keeping the Hart Island dead – and more importantly, their relatives and friends – at a safe distance had become a preoccupation. The dead might be New Yorkers, but they were not City Islanders.

To return to Le Guin's (2001) tale of the Omelas, we do not know if anyone else lived in the house that held the girl in the broom closet. Nor do we hear about neighbours. Perhaps those nearby knew about the girl and believed things could be different. Or maybe they had made their peace with the girl's treatment, as life is full of unpalatable compromises and trade-offs, or thought that others would not understand this peculiar local practice.

All City Islanders knew that Hart Island was there, and most recognized the social abandonment and suffering it represented. Some saw change as inevitable, ethically good, and even advantageous for City Islanders. Others did not believe that anything needed changing, nor that anything reasonable could be done about it, as change risked jeopardising the virtuous nostalgia of their own comfort. Further, some felt unfairly disenfranchised and ignored. This group were concerned to secure the space of City Island for locals.

Conclusion: 'This is a cemetery'

One day, knowing I had time before the next bus off the island, and bolstered against the chill by another coffee from the City Island Diner, I walked back down towards the ferry wharf. Once past the Nautical Museum, I veered left down King Avenue, past the neat wooden houses decorated with driftwood sculptures and nautical whimsy, until I reached Pelham Cemetery. I entered the iron gates, on which a plaque was engraved:

> *This is Pelham Cemetery. Lives are commemorated – Deaths are recorded – Families are reunited – Memories are made tangible – And love is undisguised. This is a cemetery … A cemetery exists because every life is worth loving and remembering – always.*

The plots traced lineage, sorted by family names. Some were familiar from the local streets named in their honour. Many headstones also marked maritime occupations, pastimes, causes of death, carved as they were with ships, anchors, yachts and other vessels, sails,

compasses, and fish. They told of seafaring ranks and disasters, military records and wars. Some older headstones sat at jaunty angles thanks to the movements of what lay beneath. People had decorated the graves with real and plastic flowers and other mementos, most often American flags. I heard the gulls' single-note chorus and the slap of the tide, and spotted two fat black squirrels laying up food under a tree. A small yacht sailed past, and a motorboat chugged in the opposite direction. About two thousand City Islanders were buried here, in a three-acre plot that sloped gently down to the water. Half a kilometre across the sea, I could see Hart Island.

Here was an American ideal of how to celebrate the dead and anchor them in community. It showed powerfully how a cemetery can shape the everyday reproduction of life, the taken-for-granted and ordinary (Das 2020). Hart Island, in stark contrast, seemed a study in socially authorized abandonment (Biehl 2013); and some City Islanders had spoken passionately that the juxtaposition was not only bearable, but should be perpetuated. Like the African Burial Ground, Pelham Bay Cemetery demonstrates that citizenship survives death through memorialization. On this small, intense island, City Islanders expect their dead to be safely settled into ordinary posthumous citizenship. Some City Islanders supported the effort to pull the Hart Island dead back into that realm. Some saw this as a moral obligation to fellow New Yorkers and could even see some material advantages for City Islanders in doing so. NYC has models for recovering forgotten and excluded dead and restoring them to celebrated memory, such as with the African Burial Ground. Yet for other City Islanders, the delta between normal posthumous relations and Hart Island's exclusions seemed less than unremarkable, they seemed appropriate and correct, even though they may be, like the child in the broom closet, regrettable. For if the Hart Island dead were to have the same normal posthumous relations and be accorded the same posthumous citizenship as other New Yorkers such as those in Pelham Cemetery, it could potentially threaten City Islanders' way of life. This suggests that City Islanders can be citizens in ways that some other New Yorkers, especially those who lie on Hart Island, cannot.

Chapter 6
Hart Island's stigma problem

> *As for Potter's Field, the very thought of it is depressing. It is a shameful place. There is no decency, there can be no reverence for the dead in a paupers' cemetery, crowded with unmarked graves.*
>
> (NYT 1915b)

> *I think the island is a beautiful place to be buried. I would not want to be buried in the way that I buried the bodies though, no. I'd want to be buried on the island but by more friendly hands.*
>
> *Saxon Palmer (fieldwork interview)*

Throughout this project, I engaged with debates about how to destigmatize Hart Island's cemetery. These tensions played out through policy negotiations, public debates, and private conversations about how to make Hart Island more accessible and restore it to public memory. In practical terms, following two decades of activism, criticism from the families of the interred, and growing public awareness, the city reformed how Hart Island was managed. Its jurisdictional transfer from DOC to Parks was intended to facilitate better public access and public involvement, not just for its cemetery but for the island itself (NYCC 2019b; DOC, Parks, DSS 2021). People's visions for the future were a crucial part of this transition process, but not everyone saw things the same way.

Virtually everyone agreed that Hart Island burials were stigmatized in their pre-2019 form, but people disagreed about what caused stigma and how it might be remedied. They felt that stigma came from the trench burials themselves; having inmates perform the burials; the visiting constraints imposed by DOC; the being island closed to the public; the absence of memorialization; and the bereaved's lack of autonomy and involvement in the funeral and burial.

I examine projects aiming to destigmatize Hart Island, including political actions like removing DOC from Hart Island's management, which was contested and protracted as the agencies such as Parks tried to evade responsibility for it. I analyse activist campaigns to declare it a National Historic Monument or a green cemetery, and alternative perspectives, such as those of a former inmate who performed burials there, and of several bereaved relatives, including Kathleen Mayer, whose brother was buried there. I ask how the various proposals would enact memorialization and restore the Hart Island dead to ordinary posthumous citizenship.

The months leading up to Hart Island's jurisdictional change from DOC to Parks highlighted what arguments were being made by which parties, and on whose behalf. My examination builds on Chapter 5's account of City Islanders' fears of gentrification, and the tensions involved in being citizens of both NYC and City Island. I analysed the Hart Island Project's goals after the transfer to Parks, which are 'to preserve Hart Island as a sustainable alternative to cremation and designate the island a National Monument to alleviate stigma of city burials' (Hunt 2022). I analyse some critiques from others, including relatives. I argue that the debates illustrate how Hart Island's practices have exposed racist aspects of its stigma and contend that memorialization is crucial both for remembering and forgetting the Hart Island dead.

Various social actors attempted to persuade me of their visions for Hart Island's future. Sometimes I could agree, sometimes I could not. I hope I participated in and analyzed disagreements as a technique of knowing, of governance and discipline, of expressions of hope, of community-making, and of possibility. Taking seriously the futures that people envisioned for Hart Island helped reveal the strategies they used to make and share their visions of themselves, their place in NYC, and their role in a democratic society. Attending to disagreements oriented me to the lived, material enactments of politics – what it means for people to do democracy and claim social and political belonging in the place where they lived.

In the ongoing, sometimes bitter debates about Hart Island's future, different social actors offered diverse future-oriented visions of political and social belonging by imagining the visibility of something hitherto hidden and invisible. Some of their visions were presented formally, at public meetings organized by the City Council. Simultaneously, informal discussions were also held. Meetings involved activists such as the Hart Island Project, bereaved families, funeral directors, artists, cemetery operators, City Islanders, public officials and senior policy analysts from Bronx Community Board 10 (representing City and Hart Islands), OCME commissioners, Human Resources Agency officials, and the NYCC Speaker's office. Community participants watched and engaged in public meetings with cynicism and suspicion. Many regarded them as pointless and believed that city bureaucrats already had made up their minds, hosting the meetings as mere tokens of consultation. Their suspicions intensified when City officials delayed publishing official reports of the meetings and refused to publicly take sides. Sometimes the formal negotiations were met with informal controversy. When the Speaker's office invited several actors to a group call and parties who had not been invited found out, they angrily criticized the parties involved and complained

that the process was undemocratic and opaque. Throughout the consultation, many activists complained that officials knew little about the real issues around Hart Island as experienced by those to whom it mattered. Most officials, especially those from the Speaker's office, knew that their role was to act as substitute targets for their office-holding bosses and that certain City Islanders would treat them aggressively.

I spoke with as many of these parties as I could, and was in regular and long-term contact with several, both on and off the record. Though I believed that relatives and New Yorkers should have far better access to Hart Island, I made clear that my main interest as an anthropologist was to understand their views. The Speaker's office always invited me to present at public hearings; I declined each time, not wanting to reduce the time available to bereaved relatives or to insert myself into proceedings, but each time I offered a brief written statement summarizing anthropological understandings of the near-universal importance of mortuary rituals, and that, comparatively, Hart Island is a highly unusual solution to the problem of funerals of last resort. More than that, I believed, New Yorkers must resolve the problem for themselves; I aimed to witness in the sense of both practice and ethos (Chua 2021; Loperena 2020).

The transfer from DOC to Parks

On 4 December 2019, NYC Council passed a legislative package of four bills that together aimed to 'examine the city's public burial process, improve accessibility to Hart Island, and respect the memory of those buried there' (NYCC 2019a). The legislation transferred jurisdiction over Hart Island from DOC to Parks (Bill: Int 906); required the Department of Transportation to develop a plan to maintain and operate a regular ferry service to Hart Island (Bill: Int 909), designed to improve access through public transport; created a task force on public burial and related issues (Bill: Int 1580); and established an Office of Burial Services to provide support to those requiring burial assistance and help to navigate bureaucracy (Bill: Int 1559). Creating an Office of Burial Services was especially prescient as it became crucial during Covid-19.

On 1 July 2021, after two decades of lobbying and activism, Hart Island's management passed from DOC to Parks. Burials would no longer be performed by Riker's inmates, and the 'No Trespassers' sign on the dock and the 'Prison Keep Off' sign on the eastern seawall would disappear, commencing the integration into NYC of a place that had been defined by neglect, obscurity, and exclusion for 150 years. The changes were deeply important to people with loved ones buried on the Island, and to many other New Yorkers besides. What would it mean for Hart Island to be managed by Parks instead of DOC?

Figure 8. Eastern seawall of Hart Island
28 October 2010. (Credit: Janko Puls, Flickr).

Interlocutors discussed Hart Island's future with me as a question that raised many others. How should the city deal with people who needed a funeral provided for them? What changes did those who visited Hart Island want? What about City Islanders, the closest residents to Hart Island, through whose spaces anyone who visits Hart Island must currently pass? Would it remain a working cemetery? Be overrun by tourists with ghoulish tastes? Host a memorial to all New Yorkers who died of Covid-19? If so, would its trench burials continue – in a public park? Would all the remains there be disinterred – and taken where? Who would staff it, if not the Riker's inmates? Would Covid-19, ironically, secure Hart Island's future? Would it get a museum, restrooms, and a gift shop, or be sold to developers? Become a nature reserve and host outdoor art exhibitions in summer? Would New Yorkers come to love Hart Island? And crucially, who would pay for it all – the burial labour, landscape maintenance, development, and the rest?

For some New Yorkers I spoke with, it would simply be more honourable to have this work performed by a private commercial contractor than by the state. In April 2022, the contract for managing Hart Island's burials and maintenance was awarded to JPL Industries,

also known as J. Pizzirusso Landscaping Corp, the same firm that provided burial labour during the pandemic (The City 2021b). The company's regular work was planting street trees and roadway maintenance. Captain Thompson resigned from DOC to join JPL, managing its Hart Island operations. Melinda Hunt criticized both appointments (Kravitz & Geanous 2021).

Having been closed to all visits because of Covid-19 on 16 March 2020, Hart Island reopened for family visits only on 15 May 2021. Relatives complained to me that visiting remained an intimidating process, like the procedures imposed by DOC: visits were permitted only twice a month, only on weekends, and had to be reserved and vetted. Though visitors were now hosted and guided by Parks wardens rather than Riker's officers, they were still not free to roam about the island or take photographs. 'It's like visiting jail,' complained one bereaved relative (Hippensteel 2022). Visitors had to prove a personal connection to the deceased as public and media visits remained suspended due to the pandemic.

Beautification work had commenced by the time the island reopened for family visits, including demolition of the derelict buildings, complementing remedial work to coastal damage caused years ago by Hurricane Sandy, which had begun before Covid-19. Further, the Human Resources Agency (HRA) that oversees Hart Island's burial operations contracted an organization to assess its long-term burial capacity. The city held public hearings about planning for transport to Hart Island on 25 January and 30 March 2022. Over this time, the need for a public burial was clear: up to ten per cent of NYC's 40,000 Covid-19 dead were buried here (The City 2021a).

Placing stigma within Hart Island's politics of space and access means analysing the transfer from DOC to Parks, including why it was so contentious and protracted. Whose vision for the future would shape the ongoing use of Hart Island, and what were the motivations? In whichever vision prevails, some meanings and histories will be foregrounded and others foreclosed. I examine these questions through two ideas mooted during fieldwork about securing Hart Island's future as a celebrated site: as a National Historic Landmark and as a green burial site. The two proposals are not mutually exclusive. They were not widely engaged with by disparate parties; in fact, they were raised almost exclusively by Melinda Hunt of the Hart Island Project. This is useful to think with for two reasons. First, because Melinda has ultimately prevailed in many of her goals for Hart Island, including opening the island to the public and transferring jurisdiction from DOC to Parks; and second, because both propositions elaborate a complex system of values, ethics, and beliefs that Melinda and aligned advocates believe will gain purchase amongst New Yorkers, and alter how people

regard and engage with Hart Island. I recognize that as an advocate, Melinda's goals are informed by what she judges will be politically palatable or effective in a given moment.

Defining stigma

The idea that the Hart Island dead had been disgraced – stigmatized – but can and must be recovered ran throughout my fieldwork. I use the term 'stigma' because my interlocutors did. Implicit within this was the idea that the island, and specifically the suffering it caused, must be ascribed meaning. In such a densely symbolic place as Hart Island, the meaning of that suffering was potentially transcendent.

Notably, Hart Island's stigma seemed socially contagious. It belonged to the deceased but also to the bereaved, whose grief could be delegitimized by the deceased's perceived status as ungrievable because of their abandoned burial. If meaning is ascribed, if the shame of a Hart Island burial to which bodies have been subjected is acknowledged and, somehow, atoned for, then it may be possible for the original meaning of the stigma to be positively transformed. This can reverse the inflicted injuries, enabling the dead to take their place again as persons, not bodies, in family, community, and civic memory – and be safely forgotten, as ordinary posthumous citizens.

View from the burial detail

The inmates who buried the Hart Island dead were themselves marginalized and stigmatized citizens. Before canvassing plans to destigmatize Hart Island, I want briefly to revisit what it was like to bury the dead under these conditions. This matters because while most people agreed that it was shameful for the city to have inmates perform this labour, it was unclear whether this was because it was considered disgraceful for the dead to be buried by convicts, or because the inmates were being cruelly exploited for cheap labour in horrible and dangerous conditions, or some combination. The official narrative was that these burials were 'a sacred duty, solemnly undertaken' (Hippensteel 2022). If possible, I wanted to hear directly from those who had performed this work about their experiences. Inmates who did this work volunteered for it, as it did not suit everyone. However, those I met often felt a strong emotional connection to Hart Island and that the task was an honourable one, though they felt conflicted about how the work was performed.

Saxon Palmer worked on Hart Island's burial detail when he served four months in Rikers in 2019. He believed it was important not to sanitize how public burials had been conducted. In his experience, they were often not respectful or dignified, despite public assertions that those involved found it 'important and sacred work' (*ibid.*). Something important is at stake

in these narratives; when Saxon began commenting to the media about his own experience (Gross 2020; Yuan 2020), he received anonymous threats for his candour. He told me:

> *I just did not find it humane at all … Some of the coffins were broken … due to misuse and sort of throwing them off the vehicle … it was recreational … I objected to the way that the bodies were handled. My experience was that the bodies in the coffins, both in terms of the adults and the infants, we buried infants on Thursdays, that it was a joke, it was really a joke. [The babies] would be tossed like footballs … we often would deal with rain and snow that had built up so we were wading in waist-deep water with coffins … we were throwing bags into the earth, it didn't feel like we were burying human beings. There was no respect for what we were doing.*

I spoke with other former inmates with similar experiences, including casual violence by prison staff and inmates against the island's wildlife, such as an officer destroying a goose's nest and crushing all the eggs within it. Like Saxon, other former inmates had felt deeply upset at how the bodies were treated but were powerless to stop it. Saxon described the disinterment of a Vietnam veteran in which the body had decomposed so that it had become scoopable 'like oatmeal', but no additional gear was provided to perform this work. Despite these distressing conditions, and although Saxon was 'ridiculed for being too sensitive with the bodies, and also the animals on the island,' he found solace in his time there, if not in the work itself. He explained that 'most of the people who came out to work on Hart Island left after a day or two. I stayed the whole four months of my term.' He paused. 'I looked forward to it every day. It was meaningful … I was free. I was free while I was incarcerated.'

Almost all parties agreed that DOC was not the right agency to perform this work, although privately numerous people suggested to me that without the almost free labour provided by inmates, NYC would find the costs of providing public burial prohibitive. Yet for many, for the city's poorest to be buried by criminals was deeply offensive.

Hart Island: outstanding aspect of American history and culture

I first heard of Melinda Hunt's proposal to secure National Historic Landmark status for Hart Island directly from her. To become a Landmark would mean that Hart Island was officially recognized by the United States government for its outstanding historical significance. Melinda had begun lobbying subtly to have the cemetery listed as a Landmark several years

earlier.[51] She explained to me that being awarded Landmark status would help secure Hart Island as NYC's site for public burials, improve how people perceived Hart Island, and secure funding from the Federal National Parks Service for the island's future. Most importantly, she believed that making a significant cultural claim on the island would help destigmatize its burials. After this conversation, I saw her regularly promote the idea at public events, such as at the City Island Nautical Museum (2021) and in a podcast (Hunt 2021).

What seems most curious about the Landmark proposal is its premise. Rather than argue that Hart Island is extraordinary for its scale and record of NYC history, for instance, the claim instead relies on connecting the burials to the Civil War and its transcendent, sanctifying effect for many Americans (cf. Lazar 2021). 'New York City, soon after the Civil War, adopted a system of burials that was developed for the Union Army to quickly bury soldiers on battlefields and this burial process allows for later disinterment,' Melinda said. 'But in New York City it allows the city to quickly bury unclaimed bodies' (Hippensteel 2022). The Landmark campaign may hinge on proving that Hart Island's burial techniques – namely, stacking the unknown or unclaimed dead in unmarked trenches using conscripted labour – preserves a piece of cultural heritage from the Civil War. Hart Island's 150-year-old stigma is inextricable from such massed burial practices, widely seen today as troubling, yet they would be protected by Landmark status.

The Landmark campaign attempts to use the past to reimagine the present and future. It frames Hart Island's trench burials not as a shameful signifier of exclusion or unbelonging, of being poor, lonely, and forgotten in NYC, but as participating in an important tradition that confers dignified historical associations upon the departed: an exalted form of posthumous citizenship. It would implicitly demand respect for any New Yorker who rested after death as they lived in their city: cheek by jowl, above, below, and alongside strangers. New Yorkers may previously have regarded the burial pits as distressing, the campaign's argument goes, but they should now take pride in them.

Civil (War) Burial?

Undoubtedly, the Civil War shaped American death rituals in enduring ways, including the widespread preference for embalming (Faust 2008; Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Troyer 2020) and the imperative to repatriate war dead (Wagner 2019). Hart Island's burials began during that war, when it also served as a training camp and Parade Ground for the 31st

[51] In the late 2010s, the Hart Island Project and City Island Historical Society began petitioning for Hart Island to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation recognized Hart Island as a 'site of historical significance' in 2016.

Regiment of Colored Troops (McCarthy 2018b). In April 1865, as the war ended, 3,413 Confederate soldiers were crowded into a tiny four-acre enclosure on Hart Island as Prisoners of War. Some twenty Union soldiers and 235 of the Confederates died there, likely of diseases like diarrhoea and pneumonia that they brought with them, exacerbated by terrible conditions (ibid.; Speer 1997; Historic Districts Council 2018). The Union soldiers and a few Confederates were buried on Hart Island, and in the following years when ex-soldiers died unclaimed, having lived out their lives in city asylums, they were given public burials on Hart Island. Between thirty-one and forty-two Union soldiers (records are unclear) were buried in a dedicated fenced cemetery in the northern part of the Island; this was Hart Island's first 'cemetery within the cemetery'. They possibly received individual graves because trench burial did not begin on Hart Island until a decade after Appomattox (Historic Districts Council 2018).[52] This dedicated plot remained until 1916, when six soldiers were removed to the Bronx's West Farms Soldier Cemetery, with plans to do the same for twenty-five others. This followed an eight-year public campaign that propounded they should rest in a dedicated military cemetery, and that placing them near the potter's field was unsuitable (NYT 1916). The remaining known Civil War veterans buried on Hart Island were removed on 9 June 1941 to Brooklyn's Cypress Hills National Cemetery. The small, fenced area remains today, marked by a memorial for the Civil War dead (McCarthy 2018b).

Of course, trench burial is no longer considered suitable for US military dead. Today's US war dead usually rest in dedicated cemeteries, marking the special status veterans are accorded within American society. Veterans mistakenly buried on Hart Island are regularly disinterred and reburied elsewhere with military honours.

American military cemeteries carry great symbolic weight for many citizens because they honour sacrifice for the nation.[53] The dead they hold are venerated publicly as heroic ancestors and model citizens for having risked their lives in the service of a collective benefit. But those buried on Hart Island are civilians, linked less by any martial bond in their manner of death than by shared want in both life and death. Arguably, a connection to the Civil War obscures that material want, and with it, an honest account of how they came to lie there. The first popular record of Hart Island's burials suggested as much, in which Jacob Riis argued that trench burials were not the result of sacrifices freely chosen but occurred because 'bitter

[52] When the Civil War ended, Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered his army to general Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia.

[53] Bereaved relatives sometimes compared indifference towards Hart Island with public resect for military cemeteries (see Elie Soto's remarks on p. 71 and Hippensteel 2022).

poverty has denied' to some New Yorkers 'the poor privilege of the choice of the home in death they were denied in life' (Riis 1891).

The Landmark campaign had not yet come to the attention of politicians I spoke with. They were more focused on the practicality of removing DOC from the island's management and getting appropriate alternatives in place. As one politician told me privately, speaking of DOC, 'Best will in the world, they ended up with Hart Island by accident but they are not the right agency for this work'. 'Oh my god no, Parks doesn't want to touch this!' said another of Hart Island, implying it was a poisoned chalice. They were also focused on finding solutions for the problem of transport, how it could be funded, and how this all could be designed taking into account the concerns of the City Islanders. Throughout, they remained committed to change for a system they openly admitted was a disgrace.

Some city officials knew about the Landmark campaign. After a heated community meeting, I stood chatting with some political staff as they waited for their transport. In the late hour of the very cold evening, we drew our coats and scarves tighter. One of them lit a cigarette and inhaled gratefully. We discussed the vehemence of opinions from several City Islanders and the upcoming public hearings about Hart Island's future. I asked one what they made of the Landmark campaign. They affirmed the goals of making Hart Island easier to visit, and holding more respectable and dignified burials for families; these things were urgent, inarguable, and long overdue. They praised all that Melinda had done to achieve change. But they doubted how popular the Landmark campaign would be and what it could achieve, implying accurately that it was a novel idea from advocates without widespread public support. 'Can we do no better than say that this [Hart Island] is like how we buried soldiers butchered in battle under dire conditions 150 years ago? *That's* New York City's best offer in 2020?' asked one city official acidly. Their colleague sighed heavily and then smiled ruefully, taking another long drag on their cigarette.

Further, as the official implied, the Landmark campaign might unwittingly substitute an apparently historical military link for a more disquieting one. The bodies of Union Army dead had often decomposed following long exposure after battle, and the Colored Troops found themselves responsible for burial duties (Faust 2008). Melinda is correct that a form of trench burial became popular for Union troops, but it was not always done quickly after death; in fact, it was often the opposite. It was innovations in embalming and railway networks that facilitated the return of soldiers' bodies to their families, not trench burial (*ibid.*).

Assigning this deeply unpleasant work to Black men in the United States Colored Troops regiments signalled their ongoing discrimination within the army they served (*ibid.*). Racism's fault lines have persisted on the island, of course: the Riker's Island inmates on burial detail were disproportionately African American and Latino men sentenced or awaiting trial on minor charges,[54] reflecting the intersection of racism and incarceration in the US justice system (Alexander 2019; Smith 2021).

Parks management would sever this literal connection with conscripted Black labour, but it cannot – nor should it, arguably – attempt to sanitize other legacies of racism on Hart Island. Those buried there are assumed to be disproportionately African Americans and Latinx. Further, potter's fields in the United States are resting places for countless victims of racist crimes (Amanik & Fletcher 2020; Bahde 2006). The lynched were often buried communally and anonymously as a final humiliation and punishment, and a warning against protest.

It is possible that Landmark status for Hart Island could draw salutary attention to NYC's ongoing problems of class and racial inequality, but it is difficult to imagine how this might happen without confronting more precisely what people have found so troubling, so disrespectful and undignified, about Hart Island's burials. Was it mourners' inability to attend the burials, or the communal trenches? Was it the fact that the gravediggers were inmates, or that they were disproportionately people of colour, or the lack of individual memorialization? Was it that visits have for so long been coercively controlled by the DOC, or that figuring out what had happened to a loved one was so difficult? The transfer of management will address some, but not all, of these issues. The conditions of Landmark status would preserve some of them.

People with relatives buried on Hart Island mentioned all these points, but above all, they resented the lack of autonomy and agency in choosing a final resting place for their kin. They consistently mentioned memorialization, even if Hart Island reminded them of America's military cemeteries. 'Just because it's a mass grave … doesn't mean that it shouldn't have the same respect as Arlington,"[55] said Elsie Soto, whose father was buried on Hart Island. 'We

[54] Blacks and Latinos make up fifty-two per cent of the New York City population but about ninety per cent of jail admissions. Unlike prisons, jails detain many people charged with minor crimes. About fifty-six per cent of New York City jail admissions include those incarcerated for misdemeanours, outstanding warrants, or violations of parole (Western et al. 2021).

[55] One of America's two national military cemeteries operated by the US Army. Established during the Civil War, it is on the National Register of Historic Places. It hosts the Tomb of the Unknowns, state funerals, and Memorial Day and Veterans Day ceremonies, so is both a private place of mourning for bereaved relatives and a

have millions of New Yorkers there. They need to be memorialized' (Hippensteel 2022). I met bereaved relatives who had dreaded visiting Hart Island, yet were pleasantly surprized to find it a beautiful, tranquil place, abundant with deer, osprey, and other wildlife. Some told me that the end of DOC's involvement ended the shame, and Hart Island could become a place that New Yorkers might cherish. Others remained unreconciled.

Kathleen and Kenny

Kathleen Maher is dark-haired and composed, with calm, warm, watchful eyes. We met at a hearing about Hart Island's future, where she offered testimony about her family's experience. Her perspective was enriched by her previous work as an oncology social worker: sometimes her clients had required a Hart Island burial. She now worked as a grief therapist, which she felt was an irony founded on an early, profound bereavement. I asked her if she'd tell me her family's story, and we met at a Brooklyn diner. We talked further during the pandemic by phone.

When Kathleen moved as a student from California to NYC two decades ago, she began surreptitiously watching homeless people on the streets. She hoped one of them would be her missing twin brother, Kenny.

In 1991, when he was 20, Kenny had also moved from California to NYC. He was a gentle and free spirit who loved the ocean and bike riding in the hills near their home. Kathleen said that although he suffered from mental illness, he was functional. Once he arrived in NYC, he got a job in Queens. Shortly afterwards, he went missing. The family was distraught but had no idea how to find out what had happened. From California, they called NYC hospitals and the police. He had simply disappeared. They even hired a private investigator to try to find him.

In August 2007, sixteen years after he vanished, Kathleen learned that Kenny had died at St. Vincent Hospital from head trauma after a fall on a Tribeca Street. He had died without any identification on him, so he was buried on Hart Island as unknown. A detective had connected Kenny's missing person's report filed in 1991 with an unknown man buried on Hart Island at about the same time.[56] Having been told by police that it was not possible to visit Hart Island for any reason whatsoever, Kathleen and her other brother approached DOC

public site of pilgrimage for many others. Aside from the Unknowns, every grave is individual and memorialised. When people mentioned Arlington to me, it was with reverence.

[56] Through the OCME, detectives from NYC's Missing Persons Squad photograph and fingerprint all bodies being transferred to Hart Island. The squad maintains a database of photographs, names, and descriptions of missing persons against which to check an unknown deceased.

directly and secured a ‘closure visit’ for the next month; the only others on the DOC ferry were a couple whose baby had been stillborn some fifty years before. Kathleen and her brother had planned to scatter Ken’s burial spot with soil from their home state of California, but the FedExed package of earth had not arrived in time. Instead, her brother had brought a joint with him. He rubbed it together with marigold petals and threw it into the air as an offering to Kenny. Kathleen took a small rock from Hart Island as a remembrance.[57]

Though Kathleen had found the island surprisingly peaceful, the family agreed this was not what they would have chosen for Kenny. They ordered a disinterment. Kathleen was contacted the following January or February, at least five months later, informing her that Kenny’s remains had been recovered and were waiting at the Medical Examiner’s Office. She had to call twelve crematories around New York State before one agreed to cremate Kenny’s remains. Somehow, during the transfer between the Medical Examiner and the funeral home, Kenny’s remains went missing for two days. At this point, Kathleen lost confidence in the process and sceptically asked the Medical Examiner whether she could even trust that the remains were those of her brother.

Barbara Butcher, Chief of Staff at the NYC Office of the Medical Examiner, was sympathetic and arranged for a forensic anthropologist to identify the remains. When Barbara called Kathleen after the investigation, she said she had good news and bad: the remains were definitively Kenny, but it was less than half of him. ‘She said, “Don’t tell your mother!”’ laughed Kathleen. The forensic anthropologist returned to Hart Island and worked to retrieve more of Kenny’s remains, so that some ninety-five per cent of the skeleton was recovered – and Kathleen was assured there was ‘no comingling,’ meaning that the anthropologist was confident no other person’s remains had been accidentally collected with Kenny’s. As she spoke, Kathleen was both tearful and laughing, thinking about how her brother would have reacted to the misadventures of his afterlife. ‘I think he would find that very funny … yeah, sneaky devil, he is.’ After Kenny’s cremation, his family buried him in California, near the hills he loved so much. But some five per cent of Kenny still remained on Hart Island.

Quite aside from the problems her family had experienced in recovering her brother from Hart Island, Kathleen was troubled by the pressure she felt was placed on some families to deny their negative reactions to Hart Island. She described trying to remonstrate with Melinda about this.

[57] Hart Island’s landscape features small glistening quartz-like stones. I had also taken one as a memento on my first visit and learned that other people did this too.

> *I challenged her, a lot! … She's [sigh] very steadfast. Yeah. Yeah. And I think, I got a little offended by her "This is an amazing place." I said, "It's actually not." It's actually not and that's okay, but you can't just [keep telling people they are wrong about Hart Island].*

Kathleen respected that some families found Hart Island beautiful and dignified, but believed that people who did not feel positively toward Hart Island were not afforded the same respect. She felt that Hart Island's stigma could not be redressed simply by denial. The following is a typical example of Melinda's advocacy for Hart Island (Hippensteel 2022):

> *I don't see there's any reason to look at this as a dark place, it's really a wide open natural landscape full of deer and birds and it's out in the Long Island Sound, it's really a peaceful location. It's a very sacred place to New Yorkers.*
>
> *There's 150 bodies in a grid within a plot … I know that sounds dark but it's actually much better than individual burials because within that grid it's very very secure and they are able to go in and get individual bodies out due to the layout … very efficient and organized system of burials that people should not fear.*

Kathleen's ambivalence reflected what I saw of other families visiting Hart Island. After visiting for the first time, some people described it as beautiful and full of nature, which it can be. Others were struck by its serenity. But often people described it in negative and affective terms, even if they also appreciated its natural environment: 'It's really weird.' 'So creepy.' 'Really kind of eerie.' 'Awful.' 'It's so weird.' 'Grim.' 'It's sinister.' 'And then you see the pit for the burials and oh my god.' 'It reminded me of the camps.' Yet people also described experiencing pressure to see Hart Island as Melinda now saw it: as an amazing, beautiful place. 'A Hart Island burial is not disrespectful,' said Melinda. 'It's a very sacred place' (Sanchez 2020).

Kathleen articulated views similar to what many others had expressed, though usually people wanted to be off the record. For instance, as one relative explained carefully to me, 'I know that Melinda is promoting Hart Island … I could take both positions [that it close or remain open as a cemetery]. You know, I don't feel strongly about it. But I don't think … I don't know if it should stay the way it is.'

Kathleen had offered testimony at City Council hearings that Hart Island should stay open to serve New Yorkers who had no other option. When talking to me, she expanded on this view, saying that NYC still needed a way to provide funerals of last resort, but based on her family's experience and her advocacy for other families as an oncology social worker and now a grief therapist, she believed that Hart Island needed significant change:

> *If I want to change Hart Island? It has to have a little more dignity. A* lot *more dignity. It has to have a lot more individuality … the person needs to be represented not as a mass, but in their separate way. And a* place *to grieve. I mean there's that little gazebo that was built right after we visited … But there's nothing marked. It wouldn't kill them to put up some kind of thing, and etch a name in there, every time! But the problem is they don't have names, but—something! A name! I think it's symbolic, it's really important. You know, that's why all the memorials have names. You have to name something to make it emotionally more resonant.*
>
> *And I think these are people who were so disenfranchised. Not always, I know … But, if you don't put a name down, it just further hammers home that these people didn't exist … these people just disappear into the ether, like, they didn't exist? And yes, some people were on the fringe that are buried there, doesn't mean they shouldn't have their name! You know, what about if they have children and grandchildren and… How are they gonna find out? There's Melinda's cloud thing,*[58] *but I like the idea of something concrete. People want to have a sense of pride, y'know?*

What Kathleen described entirely accords with Laqueur's (2015) notion of necronominalism. She stated that those buried on Hart Island deserved more dignity than they received, and in fact, they deserved more than the normal quotient, because they had likely been marginalized in life. To fail to mark someone individually, by name, would imply that they had disappeared, or failed to exist to begin with, and would deny their emotional significance. To name a person made their life tangible and legible. In short, Kathleen argued for memorialization. This mattered, to her, more than the circumstances of burial, though her family had decided to remove Kenny and rebury him for all these reasons.

Name them. For all New Yorkers.

As intimated above, some bereaved relatives had thought deeply about how to materially mark the memories of their loved ones buried on Hart Island. Several interlocutors who

[58] The Traveling Cloud Museum (Hunt 2022).

worked as material artists had also developed concepts to celebrate Hart Island's transfer to Parks on the island itself. None of these had materialized by the time I left, as Hart Island was closed to the public during Covid-19. What was salient about the ideas people discussed with me was that they all, whether sculptures, interactive installations or other forms of large-scale public art, involved naming the dead. Some envisaged people being able to engage with the artwork, draw up a loved one's name, or leave an offering for them. As one described to me, 'You're already on the water – it could be beautiful. A huge piece that works with nature, the sea, the wind, that enables you to feel close to the dead, to reach out to them, maybe to say things to them, to celebrate them. But most importantly, to say their name. Name them. For all New Yorkers.'

Stigma, memorialization and implications from AIDS

Current debates in AIDS memorialization, including whose illness is destigmatized and whose memory is celebrated, suggest issues of shame and recognition in Hart Island's own restoration to public memory. Indeed, some AIDS activists believe that 'Hart Island itself will continue to be an important measure, a test case, of the decentring of whiteness in AIDS memory' (Brouwer & Morris 2021). NYC's history of AIDS is one of stigma, invisibility, activism, and restoration, and as discussed, Hart Island has played an important, if largely unrecognized role within this. Early in the AIDS pandemic, the New York State Funeral Directors Association, nominally operating on precautionary principles but for some surely motivated by prejudice, had recommended to its members not to embalm those who had died of AIDS (Troyer 2007, 2010). Some funeral directors consequently refused to handle the bodies of people who died of AIDS. Many of the bodies were directed to Hart Island for burial. Consequently, Hart Island is NYC's largest burial site for those who died of AIDS during the epidemic (Kilgannon 2018); it may be the largest in the world. What remains largely unspoken in this new narrative of remembering Hart Island's AIDS dead is that they were overwhelmingly Latinx and African American, and had contracted the virus intravenously (*AIDS Initiative* 2020). Recognising and reclaiming stigmatized histories can lead to new omissions and invisibilities.

The notion that Hart Island was a site of special importance to the gay community was gaining traction among people I met. 'If you're an LGBTQ New Yorker, that's sacred ground,' one gay activist from the death-positive community told me. 'You should be able to visit *whenever*.' He added that those who died early in the AIDS epidemic often had to form their own families during life because of the disease's stigma, and they had become significant to others in their community as ancestors. Therefore, he believed, the visiting

criteria of presumed kinship did not accurately reflect the social relationships of the deceased (cf. Weston 1997). 'I want to be able to pay my respects to that generation, our debt to them. I might not have a connection to any one individual [the visiting criteria] – though I should check, you never know, right? – but I have a connection to *all* of them. Why shouldn't we be able to visit?' He pointed out that Corey Johnston had done exactly that when, as a politician, he visited Hart Island to pay his respects. The man described Hart Island's AIDS burials as a potential site of pilgrimage, invested with affective and spiritual significance.

Of the AIDS activists I spoke with, writer and researcher Ted Kerr was particularly articulate and nuanced, and his views and concerns broadly represented those of others I met. Ted was delighted that Hart Island was being reclaimed in public memory but observed that it accorded with other patterns in which collective memories were often rewritten as unracialized and unclassed phenomena. Ted argued that the constant debates over the custodianship of the AIDS archive, like the debates over who will be remembered on Hart Island, have implications for deciding who counts as grievable (Butler 2010). He described the 'whitewashing' of AIDS remembering, and how white male identity has been naturalized in AIDS memorialization. For instance, the AIDS quilt, arguably the most well-known AIDS memorial project, was largely a white initiative, accompanied by a rhetoric that assumed an audience of 'middle-class communities, gay and straight, rather than of inner-city Latinx, Black, and other poor communities, so that the community addressed was likely 'one of privilege'' (Hernandez 2019: 36). Like many other AIDS collective memory projects, the quilt 'centralizes the bodies of white gay men' (Shahani 2016: 4). This white centrality marginalizes the experience of others including Blacks, Latinx, and women, an elision compounded by representing AIDS as a manageable health condition – which it clearly can be, as it is for Speaker Johnson and many other middle-class white people. This minimizes the fact that AIDS continues to be a disproportionately mortal risk in communities dealing with other disparities (Moyer & Hardon 2014; Nguyen 2010). As another activist explained:

> *Middle-class white people are surprized when I tell them I've been to a funeral of someone who died from AIDS. "Really? People still die?" And the answer is, if you're a low socioeconomic minority, potentially yes. You might have other risk factors, you might find it difficult to access decent health care. And that's without looking at developing countries.*

In an article reviewing the contemporary remembrance of the AIDS crisis, Ted wrote:

> *With a few exceptions … there is an overall absence of people of color, of women, of Black people, of trans people, of people in rural America, people who inject drugs, who do sex work, who live in poverty, and people who live at intersections of all of these ways of being alive* (Kerr 2018).

In Ted's view, the whitening of AIDS in public memory has implications for the current tensions over Hart Island's public memorialization because it provides a precedent for minimising, marginalising or erasing the structural factors that brought them to this end. Further, the debates occur within an atmosphere of reckoning about the whitewashing of Unites States' history generally, and contemporary protests such as the Black Lives Matter movement (Sobo et al. 2020).

Ted's questions about who gets included in collective narratives, who can resonate with a given historical account, and who takes custody of these histories, are illustrated by Melinda Hunt's videography project on AIDS burials on Hart Island. The five stories that she tells are all of Latinx or Black families, of women as well as men who died of HIV/AIDS, and for whom transmission was often likely intravenous (*AIDS Initiative* 2020). In each of these short films, a narrator told the story of the relatives they lost to AIDS; Martha's story of her cousin Shawn, which detailed how she found out about Hart Island from the television show *Pose*, was one in this series (Pose 2019; chap. 4). Often the interviewee recounted the story of a parent or close relative – or sometimes several family members – dying when they themselves were children or teens. In most stories, the chaos of grief was further burdened with needing to grapple with a complex nexus of poverty, incarceration, racism, addiction, and migration: in short, the myriad forms of structural violence in which a bereavement and its costs could further burden everyday chronic suffering (Povinelli 2011).

Melinda launched each video as part of a series of 'online workshops' during the pandemic lockdowns, which were formatted as film viewings followed by question-and-answer sessions. They were usually attended by the narrator in each video as well as a couple of members of the Hart Island Project's advisory board, perhaps a HIP volunteer, other narrators from other videos, one or two journalists following Hart Island, two or three researchers (including me), and often someone who had recently discovered that a relative had been buried on Hart Island and was there primarily to gain more information. Most narrators were effusively grateful to Melinda for her work and for making a short film about their family's story. It was striking that the narrators and bereaved were people of colour, but the audiences – journalists, researchers, board members, volunteers, and Melinda herself as

film director, President of the Hart Island Project, and host – were invariably white. For me, these viewings often exposed an awkward disconnect between the communities whose stories were being told and those attending to the stories and committing to retelling them.

In fairness – as this vignette implies a sense of overt racism that is not warranted – most people I met in the epistemic community surrounding Hart Island were white. Partly, this is because I am white and found it harder to access non-white spaces. Partly too, the Black New Yorkers I met were focused on projects that improved circumstances for the living. Given the structural inequalities of NYC life, to be invested in altering Hart Island's future required financial, energy, and time commitments, which seemed less available to those already committed to fighting other injustices. Complex issues of class, race, and memorialization are also evident in the proposal to formally make Hart Island into a green burial ground.

Natural burial?

Since 2015, Melinda has also collaborated with British landscape architects Ann Sharrock and Ian Fisher to promote the concept of Hart Island as a natural burial ground. Together, they claimed that the cemetery should be celebrated as sustainable and ecological, and that Hart Island should be honoured as the world's largest green cemetery (Sharrock et al. 2015a, 2015b).

Perhaps surprisingly, as discussed by legislator and cemetery board member David Fleming (chap. 2), no NYC cemetery currently offers natural burial, though some larger operators are planning to do so. If someone wanted a green burial, they had to be transported to one of the few green cemeteries in New York State. As the premise of green burial is to minimize the carbon cost of disposing of a body, advocates preferred local options. I met Amy Cunningham, a Brooklyn funeral director specialising in green burial. While Amy would facilitate burials in green cemeteries upstate, she emphasized making funerals affordable and sustainable for families in NYC, which often meant helping families conduct home funerals, followed by burials stripped of all unnecessary options, or cremation.

Melinda contended that Hart Island could pursue a future as a natural burial ground, and even lead the city in it, under Parks' management. Her proposal supports the market logic of cemeteries in the US: 'There is a market for natural urban burials, and the city could sell plots on Hart Island and eventually other park locations … Green burials pay to preserve parkland … it's already a natural burial facility because there's no embalming and it's a plain pine box,' she explained (Meier 2016). The commercial angle was met with scepticism by some interlocutors: 'No one's ever gonna pay to be buried on Hart Island,' said one.

Cemeteries, especially those shaped by northern European Protestant and secular cultures (Walter 2021), often use nature to offer solace for grief. Several of NYC's most beloved cemeteries, such as Green Wood and Woodlawn, were designed explicitly to offer solace through landscape. Consequently, Walter argues, twenty-first-century natural burial grounds are more likely to gain support in Protestant cultures than Catholic ones (*ibid*.). The natural burial movement was launched as an environmental campaign in the 1980s in the UK (Davies & Rumble 2012). Also known as eco or green burials, natural burials usually operate by several principles, such as shallow burial, no embalming, dressing the deceased only in natural fibres, and only permitting grave goods that will decompose (spectacles, watches, artificial joints, and pacemakers are usually removed from the body before burial). In most green cemeteries, the body can be shrouded in a natural fibre (such as cotton, linen, wool, or silk), or carried in a coffin of untreated wood or woven wicker. The principle is that the body should decompose as efficiently as possible and that the processes involved should have a minimal environmental impact. There is no tolerance for practices that will slow the body's decay, as so many American funeral practices such as embalming, heavy wood or metal coffins, grave liners, or burial vaults are designed to do. Perhaps the way green burials celebrate the body's decomposition as a gift for the earth has sat uneasily within common American practices founded on preserving the intact body and delaying its contact with the earth, aiming to defer decomposition for as long as possible (Ashwood 2009; Rumble et al. 2014).

Advocates of green burial argue that the practice is not new but simply a return to a pre-industrial, pre-professional, home-based form of funeral (Albery et al. 1997). Families and friends may be able to help to dig or backfill the grave or bear the coffin. Many green burial sites forbid memorialization, or leaving flowers or goods on the grave other than home-picked flowers. Yet studies show that many bereaved people find it difficult to comply with these restrictions on grave gifts and will find ways to subtly transgress them. Already, on Hart Island, I asked a DOC officer what happened to the cellophane-wrapped flowers and gifts that people left on the gravesites of their loved ones on Hart Island. He said the deer would eat anything, and DOC tried to retrieve most objects and dispose of them before they blew into the sea.

I know of no green cemetery that practices massed burial. While it is standard for natural burial grounds to have either temporary biodegradable memorials – usually a 'headstone' of untreated wood designed to disintegrate – or none whatsoever, the deceased are typically buried individually and the spot is sometimes identified by some form of planting, as well as

digitally. The norm for individual burial across all types of cemetery is incredibly culturally powerful in the US. For instance, new innovations such as human composting were originally designed to handle multiple bodies simultaneously, which is significantly faster and more energy efficient, but after death studies, scholars and funeral directors were consulted, the processes were redesigned for individual interment, as both the industry and academia advised that mass composting would be culturally unpalatable (pers. comm., Tanya Marsh, Karla Rothstein).

The transgressive element of contemporary natural burial is the general absence of memorialization. Ethnographic research shows that relatives tolerate unmemorialized burials, albeit sometimes reluctantly, because the choice of green burial has been freely made, is often deeply meaningful to the deceased and bereaved, and is rich with ritual potential (Prendergast et al. 2006; Green et al. 2015). Choosing a green burial can provide spiritual meaning for the deceased, who often (but not always) did not identify with an organized religion, and so sustainability became a way to signify spirituality and help the deceased express ethical beliefs about the world and their place in it (Davies & Rumble 2012). It can provide a kind of eco-afterlife, in which the body becomes a gift for the earth's nurturance and can return smoothly to other natural elements through decomposition (*ibid*.).

In some green cemeteries, the family may be able to participate in planting a tree or wood in the deceased's memory so the bereaved can feel a connection to the burial site as a green space of special significance (Rumble et al. 2014). As the ceremony usually takes place at the burial site, some mourners report feeling comforted by the physical and symbolic presence of nature (Davies & Rumble 2012), especially in the warm summer months when a green cemetery can be alive with wildflowers, birdsong, and abundant wildlife. Nature offers both aesthetic physical beauty and the symbolic reassurance of the life cycle. These consolations were less accessible in other seasons (*ibid*.).

Yet while Melinda is correct that Hart Island burials have 'no embalming and it's a plain pine box' (Meier 2016), it is not clear that this means 'it's already a natural burial facility' (*ibid*.). Hart Island's lack of permanent, named memorialization somewhat accords with natural burial norms, but most relatives and many other New Yorkers view individual and public memorialization on the island as a crucial step in repairing its stigma. Melinda and her collaborators themselves said that Hart Island's regular disinterments and provision for grave reuse would inhibit the plantings and land conservation practices that are usually foundational for natural burial grounds (Sharrock et al. 2015b, 2015a). Most importantly, no bereaved

interlocutors mentioned green burial. As one relative commented, what did it matter if Hart Island became a green burial ground if the troubling practice of trench burial continued?

> *Nobody's gonna say that out loud! [that they bury trenches of 100 people] I mean maybe … it depends on their beliefs, I mean maybe some people want that, like Melinda's position is "It's green!" you know, people want that! Um, but…*

Natural burial did not seem to be something they hoped for, which is perhaps unsurprising as it would not necessarily solve many of their current objections. This corresponds to research suggesting that green burial, while internationally common, remains a niche, middle-class, largely white phenomenon (Davies & Rumble 2012; Green et al. 2015; Stock & Dennis 2021), usually embraced to signify beliefs about nature, sustainability, and climate change (Davies & Rumble 2012) and appealing to those who can afford to perform acts of ethically conscious consumption (Griskevicius et al. 2010). Natural burial, for those who seek it, represents a funeral of meaning, dignity, significance, and autonomy. Would these meanings persist if the bereaved had no choice in it? What bereaved relatives seemed to want most from Hart Island was something as close as possible to a 'normal burial' in an 'ordinary cemetery' – or at least the ability to choose one. Accordingly, I suggest that individual memorialization will be more important for destigmatizing the island than converting it into a natural burial ground.

While Kathleen Maher was unusually articulate in her views about Hart Island's future, I also met others with similar desires to change how the deceased were remembered there. 'I mean, I have a few ideas that Melinda wants to hear nothing of,' said one interlocutor, who wanted to remain unidentified. Interlocutors ruefully offered statements like 'I've shared this idea with Melinda but she said no' more often than they told me that they supported the idea of Hart Island becoming a Landmark or a green burial ground. People almost always prefaced their remarks by emphatically noting that they were very grateful for the help that Melinda had given them and what she had achieved for Hart Island. But they wished they too could be involved in shaping what Hart Island would become. They knew Melinda had different priorities and they were concerned about expressing dissenting views. Several had disagreed with her in the past and found the conflict deeply unpleasant. 'She's an amazing advocate and these changes one hundred per cent would not have happened without her, I give her credit for that,' said one relative, who wished to remain anonymous. 'But what comes next for Hart

Island, it's gotta be more than one person's vision, y'know?' Another added with a sigh, 'It's like … I don't want to say it … it's like the only name she wants associated with Hart Island is hers.'

Legislator David Fleming, who advised the Hart Island Project, also found the idea of Hart Island as a green burial ground compelling. When we spoke he described his hopes for 'a significant evolution of Hart Island … it has the potential of being the premier green cemetery in New York City … It makes sense for the government to embrace it. I do agree green burial is under-utilized in New York.' He explained that his cemetery operator colleagues were researching how to provide green burial options, understood as an undeveloped source of revenue. Cemetery operators believed it was something people wanted and would be willing to purchase – and that it would usually be more expensive as a 'premier product.' However, in many situations, green burial can be significantly less expensive than traditional burial because it does not use embalming or heavy treated caskets, or purchases such as headstones or other permanent memorialization, the ceremonies are often comparatively simple, and families are often encouraged to be significantly involved in formally and informally caring for the deceased before burial (Rumble et al. 2014; pers. comm. Caitlin Doherty; Amy Cunningham).

David added that it was important that Hart Island continued actively burying people because when cemeteries close to new burials, families and communities often stop visiting and using them and the space may become neglected through lack of income (Woodthorpe 2011). He implied that developing Hart Island's reputation as a green burial site could make it a more attractive option for middle-class people and consequently secure its future, but also concluded that it could become a cemetery that met many needs for many different people:

> *From the government perspective along with the middle-class perspective, it gives you another option to make Hart Island a reasonable alternative for generations to come and it makes it useful as a place of continual remembrance … I went with Melinda, I've reviewed the entire property with professionals and there is a tremendous amount of opportunity to make that a really functional cemetery, but I think not all of it has to be green. … you can do columbaria …. you can do cenotaphs and things that would appeal to other folks, that diversify the landscape a little bit but preserve the landscape as well.*

In this description, David imagines Hart Island becoming more like an 'ordinary' cemetery, albeit as a prestigious green burial site, which offers New Yorkers diverse options

for burial and interment. It offers a transformational vision, in which Hart Island attracts New Yorkers willing to pay to be buried or have cremains interred alongside public burial trenches, with green burial options, columbaria, public monuments, and stonework memorials, with shelter and facilities amid the coastal lawn landscape with a couple of featured woodlands. It is a green cemetery, but with memorialization. It is a Hart Island imagined as generating revenue for the government because of its appeal to climate-minded citizens. It is a Hart Island for all New Yorkers, especially welcoming to the middle-class, not just for the indigent who has no other option. It is a vision at odds with Hart Island's past and present.

If we return to the notion of disposal as putting bodies in their place, envisioning Hart Island as a green or lawn cemetery solves only one part of the problem: the place. It privileges land. It still does not address the other elided aspects of mortuary rituals – the gathering, celebration, witnessing, celebration – without which the body risks becoming one of the inauspicious dead (Hertz 1960).

Ruins, visibility and invisibility

With management reforms secured and the penal system removed, Melinda had refocused on retaining Hart Island's status as an active cemetery and communicating the destigmatization of Hart Island's burials. In July 2021, addressing the proposed demolition of the island's derelict buildings that had alarmed some heritage conservationists, Melinda told the NYT that 'preserving the burial process on the island was far more important than preserving buildings' (Gill 2021). She continued:

> *City Cemetery is a historic site for marginalized people whose histories have long been overlooked … The buildings are offensive to thousands of low-income families whose relatives are buried in close proximity to former prison facilities … [removing the buildings would] honor and provide access to the gravesites of low-income people of color* (*ibid*.).

Melinda knew far more bereaved families and had visited Hart Island many more times than I had. However, I never heard a relative or any other party react to the buildings with offence or fear. Mostly, the ruins seemed to be regarded with great curiosity (probably intensified by their being forbidden to visitors) and with an appreciation of the history that they helped to illustrate.

Herbert Sweat Jr., a former chairman of Black Veterans for Social Justice, had advocated for greater rights for families with relatives buried on Hart Island for years. His own infant

daughter was buried there, as well as other of his relatives. He and Melinda knew each other and had worked together; I met him at public gatherings for Hart Island, including the legislation signing in December 2019. Herbert was quoted in the same article stating his preference to preserve the buildings as physical reminders of the island's transfigurations since the Civil War era. He believed that demolishing Hart Island's buildings would similarly deprive New Yorkers of a tangible connection with their past. He said:

> *That's how the taking away of history from the people is done, they take it out of our sight … That's so deep, because how do you destroy that type of history? How many thousands of people have been transformed in those buildings that held them and ministered to them before they either went into the ground or went back into the city? As quiet as it's kept, they hide what went on with the people there* (Gill 2021).

So while Melinda described the buildings as offensive and dishonourable to low-income people of colour whose relatives are there, Sweat, a Black man with a relative buried there, saw the idea of demolishing the buildings as an insult. Also, curiously, the Hart Island Project was described in the article as a non-profit 'that advocates for the restoration of the island as a natural burial ground and wilderness site'. This was the first time I had seen the organization described that way, and it publicly marked the organization's pivot from the general goal of increasing access and information for families, and creative works, to a specific vision of Hart Island's future.

Can a massed grave be destigmatized while still in use?

Unlike the famous individuals celebrated in cemeteries like Green-Wood and Woodlawn, the dead of Hart Island are most often described *en masse*, as evidence of bare death, ungrievability, cruddiness. Hart Island has only a handful of famous dead. One is the original Peter Pan, Oscar-winning actor Bobby Driscoll. Pertinently, Driscoll was buried there only because addiction meant he died destitute and unidentified, so he fits the general profile of the deceased (Keene 2019). To be buried on Hart Island is, almost by definition, to have lived the kind of life that does not appear in official records, except as part of a collective.

Underneath these narratives of suffering, exclusion, and memorialization, and issues of the politics of space and access, lies a foundational issue: can the meanings of a massed grave change while it still operates? As of the time of writing, the city intends to continue using Hart Island as NYC's cemetery of last resort – meaning that people will continue to be buried here anonymously in trenches, but with the important caveat that DOC will no longer

perform the burials, host the visits, or have any other involvement. People who cannot afford a funeral and die without next of kin or die unidentified will still be buried on Hart Island. As NYC has the legal right to reuse burial spaces after 25 years, and the burials will continue in trench form, Hart Island could potentially provide the city with burial space for many decades to come.

Communal burials are most often associated with breaks in social order. Over time, mass graves can become sites of pilgrimage for commemorating tragedy and reflecting on national values (Verdery 1999). Such transformations have even seen places like Auschwitz, Ground Zero, and Chernobyl, which have witnessed great human suffering and horrific crimes, become tourist destinations. Places of such deeply painful significance can develop transcendent meanings.

But in each of these cases, the place's meaning has been transformed in part because the events that caused the pain and death ended, wrongs were acknowledged, and time was allowed (and, often, great effort and resources expended) for the site to transform into something new and different. There has been accounting and atonement for the suffering that happened there. To return to Povinelli's (2011) theory of suffering, these sites of death become marked as places of exceptional and spectacular events, rather than the everyday vernacular death of cruddy suffering. Perhaps invoking the Civil War, without personal memorialization, might sacralize space and behaviour at Hart Island. But would it confer a form of quasi-military citizenship on the deceased and transform their stigmatized posthumous relations?

If the answer is no, then Landmark status would create practical difficulties for the city that go beyond history or remembrance. The pandemic has reiterated the city's inequalities all too clearly. Low-income people of colour were more likely to die of Covid-19, and so bereaved families could find their grief compounded by medical and funeral debt, in addition to being told that a burial on the site of past racist exploitation should be celebrated as cultural heritage. If Hart Island closed as an active cemetery, what would happen to New Yorkers who needed help with burial? Even if some families consented to cremation, it would place further strain on the city's handful of crematories. If the new burial site was even further away from the main population centres of NYC than Hart Island already is, how would the bereaved be able to visit? If Hart Island ceased to be an active burial site, it might lose contemporary relevance to bereaved families and the wider community, and be rapidly forgotten by all but a few (chap. 2); or alternatively, this may be considered a reasonable and long overdue closing of a shameful enactment of NYC's inequality.

Perhaps establishing an official connection to the Civil War, however historically tenuous, wouldn't matter to the bereaved if it helped make Hart Island more like a 'normal' cemetery. Its enhanced reputation could certainly help relieve some of the longstanding stigma of burial there. National Historic Landmark status, capping decades of resolute activism by Melinda Hunt, would secure recognition and federal funding for Hart Island, making it more accessible.

Conclusion: Hart Island's stubborn problem of stigma

People often imagined and even enacted changes that would improve Hart Island, and even domesticate and normalise it; I saw bereaved relatives visiting the island improvising rituals, such as scattering ashes or leaving or taking stones. These examples accord with Das' conception that the everyday includes efforts to make change (2020: 55). Some of the imagined futures for Hart Island (chap. 6) seek not to change its practices of massed graves but to embed these methods as aestheticized, idealized, and sacred, transforming those buried there to be, like war dead or the WTC victims, part of 'the sacrificial economy of the nation/state' (Filippucci 2020: 84). These reforms would seek to elide or invert Hart Island's extraordinary qualities, suggesting that where history cannot be explained it must be transcended.

Historically, power has been exercised at Hart Island as a set of practices that shape forgetting and remembering, including omissions of notifying next of kin or frustrating information they might need, preventing ceremonies, and forbidding acknowledgement, memorialization, and access. Slave burial sites and mass war graves practice these techniques deliberately when they are constructed, attempting the erasure of personhood and silencing the bereaved. That may not have been the intent at Hart Island, but arguably it has been the outcome.

Forging a link between Hart Island's burials and the Civil War into its defining characteristic or gentrifying it as a natural burial ground risks masking the experience of those buried there. These different statuses would require the Hart Island dead to take on new identities within local and national memorialization. Crucially, what these proposals do not resolve directly is the yearning from relatives for more personal memorialization, or the desire to reclaim the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers. Nor would it provide an account of how they came to be there. For some bereaved, this may be welcome. But projects of memory always raise contentious questions about what being remembered is – especially in a place that was for so long dedicated to forgetting.

These laudable efforts to repair one form of social erasure risk gentrifying collective memory and marginalizing painful community traumas of racism and inequality that Hart Island also represents (Brouwer & Morris 2021). Telling those who still object to their loved one's burial on Hart Island that it was actually honourable all along may seem like an attempt to sanitize this uncomfortable history, or worse, to tell people what to feel or how to grieve. It risks the assumption that stigma is simply a matter of perspective.

Perhaps redeeming the Hart Island dead is not only a matter of adopting new practices or finding ways of legitimizing or historically validating existing practices. A change in management will not necessarily effect a change in the way in which the politics of space play out on Hart Island. Whether Hart Island's unusual trench burials become broadly acceptable, now that they are no longer associated with incarceration, is for New Yorkers to decide. What's clear is that New Yorkers are seeking to reconnect with Hart Island, and many are ready to recover Hart Island's dead from their non-citizenship and restore them to a realm of normal posthumous relations. But new ways of remembering can inadvertently cause new forms of forgetting. The liberatory vision to redeem those buried there must manage the fine line between turning a page in Hart Island's history and attempting to rewrite it.

Conclusion:
Restoring ordinary posthumous citizenship to Hart Island's dead

The Stoic philosopher Diogenes the Cynic (ca. 412-323 BCE)[59] told his students that he had no beliefs about the afterlife, so when he died they should simply throw his body over the city wall for the beasts to devour. His students were horrified. He responded that they could always give him a stick to fend off the wild animals. 'How would you use it?' they asked. 'You'll be dead.' 'Exactly,' he said. 'I'll be dead' (Cicero 1927: 1.43). The anecdote pinpoints the urgent and culturally specific need people have to care for their dead, how difficult it can be to ignore a dead body and the person it contained, and the work required to settle the dead into posthumous relationships.

Yet Diogenes, as was his custom, was trying to have it both ways. He ostensibly insisted his body was purely biological so would shed its social meaning, but engaged his hierarchical relationship with the students to exercise some posthumous agency over their disposition of his remains. Diogenes goes further than avoiding memorialization by actively inviting his own body's desecration. He sought the final word on his political belonging in the world and his ambivalent relationship with Athens by claiming his resting place beyond the city's walls. In short, he could not escape the social significance of his own burial, because in seeking to control his posthumous citizenship, he was being profoundly social.

How welfare can reshape citizenship in death and life

A late-emerging twist in Hart Island's story offered another perspective, as a new campaign tactic from the Hart Island Project again modulated the relationship between citizenship, stigma, and memorialization. As part of their project to destigmatize Hart Island burials, the group began advocating that the burials should not be discussed in terms of financial need. Hart Island's burials, it was argued, were no longer for the very poor, if they had ever been, but for all New Yorkers, as the island's stigma had been removed with the change to Parks. Researchers who used terms such as poor, poverty, indigent, or welfare were criticized for language judged 'deeply hurtful' to those who had received a Hart Island burial (Hart Island Project Annual Meeting June 25, 2022). Advocates argued that mentioning economic want was prejudicial and damaging to the buried, and extremely upsetting to their families because people might seek a public burial for many reasons, any of which should be honoured as a

[59] Laqueur opens his monumental *The Work of the Dead* with Diogenes; I disagree with his argument that concern for the corpse is universal, though I likewise find it useful to think with.

personal choice (*ibid*.). Further, they insisted, it was potentially inaccurate to mention poverty without evidence from the Medical Examiner's Office or other proof of the financial status of families of the buried (pers. comm.). No organization collects, nor ever has collected, a next of kin's reasons for consenting to a public burial or indeed any financial information about the Hart Island dead. Media stories began reporting how Hart Island had been 'created for the destitute but now serves a surprising range of people' (Jordan 2022). The Hart Island Project lobbied for the HRA to cease referring to public burials as indigent or paupers' burials, or the potter's field – the latter being the term most commonly used by most people I met – and remonstrated with researchers, including me, to avoid referring to poverty, inequality, or welfare regarding Hart Island. Instead, they preferred the term 'City burial', the official, if anodyne term, that highlights the deceased's political belonging, as it potentially obfuscates other meanings.

Of course, activists advocate for what they believe will be most politically effective. Perhaps, as some activists state, Hart Island's stigma had been entirely due to inmates working as sextons and the island's access being managed like a prison by DOC. Melinda Hunt said that many families had felt 'shame' about DOC's management of Hart Island but now that the penal system no longer had any association, 'light is coming to this "dark place"' (Jordan 2022). Reading generously, this rhetorical move implies that Hart Island is now for all New Yorkers, regardless of economic or social status. It attempts to turn the problem of needing a Hart Island burial into a virtue of American values such as agency, freedom, and autonomy, and effectively writes poverty and disadvantage out of the story. I want to take this new pivot from advocates seriously for what it illuminates about citizenship, memorialization, and stigma on Hart Island.[60]

When I visited Rosalie Grable's grave on Hart Island, she was then distinguished by having been the single person to have chosen a Hart Island burial for herself before death as a political protest. She had the means to be buried otherwise but chose Hart Island knowing that her decision would grant her continued posthumous citizenship, marking her as still belonging to a community of activists. And DOC officers, who knew her, supported this exclusive membership by speaking of her warmly, recognizing her by name. There is a

[60] I do not have and did not seek information about the financial circumstances of individuals buried on Hart Island from my interlocutors. The evidence seems clear enough that many families consent to Hart Island burials because of financial hardship. The people whose stories I tell in detail came to Hart Island because of bureaucratic mistakes, family ruptures, and myriad other complex issues to which financial need sometimes contributed; cruddy ordinary suffering (Povinelli 2011) is rarely just one thing. This may simply reflect the circumstances of those who were willing to tell me their stories.

symbolic distance between her considered, agentive, and altruistic burial, and those she is buried alongside.

Even if some New Yorkers do choose Hart Island over other options, insisting that they all do erases those who had little or no choice. Denying the link between Hart Island and poverty obscures questions about how equality is distributed unequally to New Yorkers based on economic and social status – and how this shapes citizenship. The denial marks a taboo around poverty, of which being unable to afford a funeral is a reliable indicator. When funeral poverty is stigmatized, it becomes essentially a moral issue that identifies 'what is most at stake for actors in a local social world' (Yang et al. 2007: 1524). Throughout my fieldwork, people related Hart Island's stigma to DOC, the trench burials, the lack of commemoration, the visiting restrictions, to the isolation and loneliness of the deceased's circumstances, but only rarely, and then shyly, to poverty – which itself revealed how deeply stigma attaches to poverty. The most embedded stigmas are those so taboo that they are difficult to articulate.

As homeless advocates suggested to me, surely any shame attached to Hart Island should lie not in an individual's economic want but in a society unable to do better by its most vulnerable. Denying the nexus between inequality and the symbolic violence of paupers' burials risks further marginalizing New York's existing inequalities. It risks minimizing the lived experience of suffering caused by destitution, recalling Kleinman's stern polemic that the term stigma no longer accurately describes the lack of humanity that causes 'social death, moral defeat, and cultural exclusion … nullification of personhood' (Kleinman 2012: 120). Hart Island has for so long been a place for deliberate forgetting. It would be a new cycle of remembering then forgetting for Hart Island if, in trying to emancipate the cemetery from its past, it obscured the precarity of some people's lives, further marginalized those who had no other choice, and minimized the painful truth of how poverty shapes citizenship.

Hart Island's burials began in 1869 as part of the city's Department of Public Charities and Correction and so drew on potters' fields as being an appropriate way of caring for the indigent dead. Originally and historically, potters' fields were for those designated strangers. Since the eighteenth century, when burial became less a right than a private consumer choice, the practices of potters' fields have meant shame and stigma, deliberately marking those in great need as placed outside the bounds of ordinary posthumous citizenship. Hart Island's purpose remains unchanged: it offers welfare for those who need burial assistance.

Today, individuals are supposed to responsibly prepare for their own funerals by accumulating wealth, such as by saving or buying insurance policies – the modern form of

burial societies. To fail to do so is to die a bad death, which reveals hierarchies of value between individuals and groups (Dawdy & Kneese 2022: 17). Consequently, in many ways a Hart Island burial has signalled a degraded form of citizenship or a form of non-citizenship. The case study in which hundreds of families kept their loved one's bodies stored in mobile morgue trucks during Covid-19's first wave rather than accept a free burial on Hart Island (chap. 1) provides evidence of funeral poverty, and of the great shame that can still be attached to a Hart Island burial. Even in the crisis, some families found Hart Island's stigma too much to bear.

The Hart Island burials meet a civic responsibility to provide funerals as welfare to the city's most vulnerable. But NYC's manner of doing so – reiterating old forms of indigent burial, discouraging ritual or engagement, accommodating their forgetting through mundane bureaucracy – has recalled forms of posthumous symbolic violence that equate to social death for those in its society least equipped to resist. This history and practice undermines the city's own narrative of radical inclusion and superdiversity.

How memorialization can transform stigma into ordinary posthumous citizenship

Returning to the Christian notion of stigmata, in which the stains of infamy or ignominy hold regenerative potential for transcendent grace and purity, destigmatization is not simply achieved by removing a sign of disgrace, but through transformation and new meanings. In the case of Hart Island, as I have argued throughout this thesis, the dead seem not to have been recognized as New Yorkers, despite such a burial being a claim that any New Yorker can make on the city. Efforts to recover the deceased from their exclusion focus on reclaiming them as New Yorkers and settling them in memory as citizens. The new rhetorical insistence on the citizenship of the Hart Island dead seemed so deliberate as to be a form of social reclamation of a status that had been lost.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that what many New Yorkers find so confronting about Hart Island's burials is their honesty: they are ordinary and socially authorized. What they see as undignified and disrespectful is in fact mundane, though massed burial is generally a signal of social breakdown in disaster or violence. The burials struck people as transgressing what New York *should* mean – radical democratic inclusion, the apex of the American dream, an urban environment optimized for human diversity – because the burial practices routinely mark the dead as belonging to a category of people less than a true New Yorker. Like the child in the broom closet (Le Guin 2001), people found in the burials distressing evidence of social abandonment at such scale that it was almost unbelievable. It became a powerful symbol of abandonment and forgetting for those who have heard of it.

During the first wave of Covid-19, Hart Island's burials became a key symbol (Ortner 1973) for the scale of mortality and suffering caused by this disease – and a symbol of NYC's callousness towards its most vulnerable.

Though it helps the city cope with excess mortality during disasters such as Covid-19, Hart Island is not primarily for exceptional circumstances, but an everyday, ordinary part of New York life. The new advocacy position, that a Hart Island burial is not only for the vulnerable but for everyone and is simply a choice that families make, reframes this ordinariness as a moral positive. The position claims that mortuary rituals can be decoupled from the body, that memorials can potentially be unlinked from materials or physical location, or may even become unnecessary. Any New Yorker can be buried unmemorialized in a massed grave, if they so choose.

Indeed, plans have long been laid for Hart Island's transformation into a green burial site, a National Historical Monument, America's largest burial ground, a cemetery for all New Yorkers – an ordinary cemetery, full of New York neighbours, which could be visited at will. All these plans aim, through various tactics, to combat Hart Island's stigma, and all turn around how – or indeed, whether – Hart Island's dead can be memorialized. Most plans could accommodate the notion of reclaiming the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers, settling them in memory as ordinary posthumous citizenship, re-embedding them into the realm of normal posthumous relations.

Yet the expected personal naming of the dead described by Laqueur (2015) features little in these plans. Some bereaved relatives had come to terms with the absence of individual memorialization, or made do with their own private commemoration. For others, the desire to name their beloved and know the grave to which they could anchor their grief and memories remained a profound longing. Relatives rarely described the Hart Island dead to me as New Yorkers because the relationship of kinship naturally remained primary. Collective memorialization can be used to abstract identity, to make the dead comprehensible, and then safe to forget.

I argue that destigmatization requires a transcendent renovation, not only the removal of stigma. It is not enough to remove old meanings or ignore them: they must be supplanted by new and powerful significance. The ethnographic evidence suggests that this would be enacted as reclaiming the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers, an assertion of their political belonging to the city. It is a truism that cemeteries are for literally putting people in their place. Shaped by prejudices of society and history, cemeteries sort people into categories of kinship and genealogy, faith, ethnicity, vocation, and other identities. Cemeteries settle the

dead within relationships, in revered places marked with meaningful signs of social and political belonging. In this new imagining of Hart Island, there would be only one category to supplant all others: New Yorker. The individuals buried on Hart Island would truly come to stand for the social body of NYC (cf. Kantorowicz 1957). Crucially, it will not be enough to just say so, because who counts as a citizen is marked by memorialization.

For as long as Hart Island stays open to burials it will remain implicated in problems of what the dead are owed by the living, and who among them can be appropriately socially abandoned. Questions will endure regarding the different priorities of care that shift between the city's bureaucrats, deathcare professionals, mourners, and the public, and how these practices enact belonging, differentiation, and exclusion from New York's political community. Examining claims for the Hart Island dead, what these might make possible and for whom, and the debates and disagreements over them, orients me to the everyday enactments of politics, about what it means for people to do democracy and claim social and political belonging in the place where they live.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that a Hart Island burial is one sign of the 'ordinary, chronic and cruddy' everyday suffering possible in NYC (Povinelli 2011: 132). Just as for the Omelas, many New Yorkers are shocked by the appalling chronic suffering that a Hart Island burial often signals, and shocked again when they grasp their own capacity to overlook this. Like the child in the broom closet, the Hart Island dead have been taken for granted and unrecognized, on the assumption that there is no reasonable alternative to unmarked trench burials (Le Guin 2001). Just as some citizens can still choose to lie in a single underground vault in Wall St's Trinity Church, costing many tens of thousands of dollars, so some must lie in a trench grave at the other end of the city.

Reclaiming the Hart Island dead as New Yorkers might do the work of easing the shame of anonymous burial, but this collective claim may also displace the more protracted and complicated work of individual recognition. It potentially amalgamates different standards and spheres of citizenship, between neighbourhoods, boroughs, and broader ideas of belonging to NYC or the nation into a single, unified citizenship. It suggests that if no one is personally memorialized then there is equality for all, for in reclaiming the dead collectively, it can become acceptable to elide the individual's circumstances and any shared responsibilities for them. Recovering the dead in a collective recognition of citizenship may make it acceptable to remember them less. For in collectively acknowledging – and abstracting – the Hart Island dead, they can be made safe to forget, which is the real work of grief and memory. It shows once again how the dead can be put to work for the living.

The curious case of Hart Island confirms that citizenship can survive death, depending on the social claims made on the dead by the living. In New York, where memorialization is crucial for maintaining bonds between the living and the dead, an absence of memorialization stigmatizes, signifying the moral failure of neglecting to provide for one's own death or the exhaustion of social relationships with those who could provide care. Whether the meanings of Hart Island's trench burials will change or whether New Yorkers will accommodate them as ordinary, unexceptional, and appropriate, remains unclear. The conflicts, controversy, and campaigns about what the burials should mean and how New Yorkers should live with them are some of the ways in which New Yorkers enact citizenship and negotiate its boundaries. Through debate and disagreement over what might or should be possible, by making competing claims of social and political belonging in the place where they live – for themselves and the dead – they and the massed dead are doing democracy.

Bodies in aggregation carry moral weight. In US law, six people buried together constitute a cemetery. One million are buried on Hart Island, silent in most respects except in their combined mass. When thousands upon thousands are buried together in this culture without being named, the accumulated symbolic weight of so many dead signifies that something exceptional has happened, and that ordinary death processes have been impossible or forbidden. Usually, when habitual practices are temporarily impossible, their absence can be later remedied through memorialization.

When New Yorkers began choosing cremation over burial for the first time during Covid-19, it demonstrated the resilience of ritual and how stigma can be transformed. Comparing Hart Island, with no memorialization, with the 9/11 Memorial, packed with personal memorialization, and the African Burial Ground's dignified collective memorialization, affirms that commemoration and identification, or their absence, are vital when deploying the symbolic power of the dead. It also confirms that those who have been stigmatized and placed outside the realm of ordinary posthumous citizenship, like those buried at the African Burial Ground, can be recovered to the ordinary realm of posthumous relations through memorialization. There the memorialization is not individual, but it identifies the dead as, collectively, those whose labour built the city: 'It protects the historic role slavery played in building New York' (US National Park Service n.d.). This frank acknowledgement demonstrates how reclamations of citizenship – and humanity – at massed burial sites often require a searing honesty about the past, including truthful public communication, in ways that are difficult to ignore or reinterpret. They require support and acknowledgement by the many, not just the few.

Some relatives imagined that appropriate memorialization on Hart Island may need to name the dead, or as many as practically possible. This is no small task given its scale. It may also need to acknowledge the hardship and suffering that sits uncomfortably alongside New York's exceptionality, or recognize that being 'New York tough' comes at a cost, one borne disproportionately by those who possess least. Yet despite disputes about how destigmatization might be achieved, many New Yorkers seem committed to the project of pulling the Hart Island dead back into the realm of normal posthumous relations. Their fellow citizens are now ready to recognize and commemorate them. These projects, led by relatives, activists, politicians, and many other New Yorkers, imagine Hart Island as a space of full belonging, where the dead can be embedded bureaucratically and politically into ordinary posthumous citizenship, where they belong.

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