



Picturing Hart Island: Negative Heritage Reclaimed

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During the Covid lockdown, many people became transfixed by drone footage of a mass grave on Hart Island, New York, the United States's largest potter's field, which, for more than one hundred and fifty years has absorbed over one million burials, including Confederate POWs, the city's unclaimed or 'indigent' poor, and victims of pandemics past. This article interrogates pivotal acts of representational violence that have contributed to Hart Island's profound stigmatization, focusing on early reportage, which was shaped by racial and class bigotries of nineteenth-century reform journalism. Establishing these 'negative heritage' logics and associations, it turns to recent work by journalists and affiliates of the Hart Island Project who have pursued more positive visual and social imaginaries. While haunted by these older logics and inherited feelings of dread and shame, their activism has become an important locus of recuperative memory and even restorative justice, and may yet reshape the public imagination of the infamous 'island of the dead'.



At the start of pandemic lockdown in April 2020, as New York saw an alarming surge in critical cases, many found themselves transfixed by activity on an oddly shaped patch of rocky ground in Long Island Sound. Few of them had ever visited the site known as Hart Island, which has long been administered by the state; they encountered it through aerial footage circulating online. The video, collected by a drone-mounted camera, showed a burial crew loading coffins into a trench. At the edges of the grim scene, one could just make out a cluster of decaying brick buildings and, beyond that, a grassy expanse studded with cement markers. The video spread rapidly on social media, conjuring visions of epidemics long past, and inspiring all manner of fretfulness and conspiratorial thinking. *Just what sort of place was this?*¹

Observers supplied a range of answers, most of them negative. Some compared the trench to a ‘war grave’ or a burial site in a ‘third-world country’, while others reminded New Yorkers that many of their beloved parks also once contained burial grounds. The politically minded fixated on the ‘travesty’ of anonymous burial, pinning the blame on the Trump administration’s halting public health response, or a ‘liberal hoax’ orchestrated by Democrats to humiliate the president.² For many outside the city, the island’s very existence, and status as the nation’s largest potter’s field — having absorbed more than one million burials since the state acquired the land in 1869 — was both a surprise and a shock. *How could such a place exist in America, in New York City, of all places?!* Some locals, however, found the site strangely familiar, like something recollected from a dream. These uncanny feelings were reinforced by journalism laden with images that confirmed the island’s long function as a cemetery for the city’s ‘silent multitude’, as the *New York Times* had taken to calling them — the poor and unclaimed

¹ Drone footage produced by Reuters, AP, and several other services found its way into reports posted by news outlets worldwide in both video and still form. See, for example, ‘Aerial Video Appears to Show Burials of Unclaimed Covid-19 Victims and Others on Hart Island’, *Washington Post*, 9 April 2020 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/aerial-video-appears-to-show-burials-of-unclaimed-covid-19-victims-and-others-on-hart-island/2020/04/09/bb446cce-410a-4ef4-b938-56393313e9b7_video.html>; ‘Drone Video from Hart Island Shows Grim Reality during Coronavirus’, YouTube, 27 April 2020 <<https://youtu.be/5NkrQ668k-o>>; Daniel E. Slotnik, ‘Up to a Tenth of New York City’s Coronavirus Dead May Be Buried in a Potter’s Field’, *New York Times*, 25 March 2021 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/25/nyregion/hart-island-mass-graves-coronavirus.html>>; Corey Kilgannon, ‘As Morgues Fill, N.Y.C. to Bury Some Virus Victims in Potter’s Field’, *New York Times*, 10 April 2020 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/nyregion/coronavirus-deaths-hart-island-burial.html>>; and Rachel Sharp, ‘Grim Photos Show Workers Still Digging Mass Graves on Hart Island While Bodies Are Stacked on the Back of Refrigerated Trucks in NYC’, *Daily Mail*, 14 April 2020 <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8219101/Grim-photos-workers-digging-mass-graves-Hart-Island.html>> [all accessed 6 August 2025].

² These comments are typical of what I discovered through content analysis of Twitter posts made between April 2020 and September 2021, which focused primarily on those dealing with Covid-related burial activity on Hart Island and in New York City generally (both by institutions and individuals). Many made use of such hashtags as #covid19, #hartisland, #pandemic, #massgraves, and #trumpburialpits; others were tied to local as well as national and international reporting on the island from major news outlets worldwide (see note 1).

dead interred ‘by the score in wide, deep pits’, where they would ‘vanish [along with] any explanation for how they came to be there’.³

And they had been vanishing that way for a long time. The island’s first official burial plot was dug during the Civil War, when a federal mustering station built for the US Colored Troops was converted into a Confederate prison camp.⁴ After the war, the city established a public ‘burying ground’ that would steadily be filled by those who died in New York’s almshouses, prisons, and asylums (several thousand a year) or succumbed during epidemics, as well as of remains from decommissioned potter’s fields in lower Manhattan.⁵ Journalists have been recounting these facts — with varying degrees of narrative flourish — for decades. While in the Covid moment they seemed to some especially shameful or suspect, they have changed very little since the late nineteenth century.⁶ Those who die in state facilities whose remains are unclaimed will be placed in identical pinewood coffins, their names written on the lids and recorded in a register and transported en masse to the open trench.⁷

³ Ford Fessenden, Tim Wallace, and Larry Buchanan, ‘The Silent Multitude on New York’s Invisible Island’, *New York Times*, 16 May 2016, p. A18; Nina Bernstein and others, ‘Unearthing the Secrets of New York’s Mass Graves’, *New York Times*, 15 May 2016 <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/05/15/nyregion/new-york-mass-graves-hart-island.html>> [accessed 6 August 2025].

⁴ The Confederate soldiers were soon joined by Union veterans who died in nearby hospitals. The remains of both would eventually be relocated decades later, when military cemeteries were established. The USCT was comprised of the 20th, 26th, and 31st regiments. The 31st was mustered and trained on Hart Island starting in April 1864 and would soon be joined by the Connecticut Colored Volunteers and Canadian soldiers. See, for example, ‘NY State’s Civil War “U.S. Colored Troops”’, *Correctionhistory.org*, n.d. <<https://www.correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/nycdoc/html/usct01.html>>; and ‘Civil War Parade Ground’, *Points of Interest: Hart Island Project*, n.d. <<https://www.hartisland.net/locations/civil-war-parade-ground>> [both accessed 6 August 2025].

⁵ The first reported interment was of Louisa Van Slyke, an Irish émigré ‘born at sea [who] died alone at Charity Hospital, age 24’. See Nan Robertson, ‘About New York: City’s Unclaimed Dead Lie on Lonely Tip of Hart Island off the Bronx’, *New York Times*, 22 September 1958, p. 28. The island has since played a vital purpose, not just during periods of catastrophe or health crisis, but every day. Hundreds of thousands of the city’s unclaimed or unidentified dead, and all of its stillborn babies between the 1870s and the early 1990s, have been buried there.

⁶ In this period, regular outbreaks of typhoid, cholera, smallpox, and influenza occurred. More recently, the island has been associated with the AIDS epidemic, whose earliest victims were buried in unusually deep graves at its southernmost tip (a practice reflecting the profound stigma of the disease and the ‘abundance of caution’ logic that governed public health response, which extended alienation of patients into death).

⁷ When someone dies in a state facility, their remains are kept in cold storage until next of kin are notified, and (if they can be found) given time to identify and request their relocation. If no one comes forward, or the family cannot afford a private burial, the state arranges for their interment at Hart Island. Families have not always been able to count on state employees’ advocacy and care, but the routines themselves have been ‘refined’ over more than one hundred years. These open-trench burial procedures have also become both more industrialized (using earth-moving equipment and large trucks) and bureaucratized: graves are recycled after several decades have passed. A series of lawsuits starting in 2009 exposed the state’s failures to provide access to families (due in part to unreliable burial data); pursuant rulings by the New York City Council in 2013 mandated that burial data be made available online, and a successful petition filed later that same year by eight women seeking access to the graves of their infants spurred a series of *New York Times* investigations. See, for example, Nina Bernstein, ‘For 22 Unclaimed Bodies in New York, a Grim Path from Death to

That said, not all Hart Island burials have been last resorts; many were intentional, even gladly chosen, and in some cases honoured, as when veterans erected a monument to Union soldiers.⁸ In certain periods, as many as one in five of the city's dead were interred on the island, which has also served as a site of quarantine, hospice, military or vocational training, and drug rehabilitation, not to mention a place of work for thousands of medical and prison staff. And these uses have hardly been secret; indeed, at times they have been celebrated publicly, treated as evidence of a humane (or at least eminently practical and necessary) system of 'confinement' — of the living and the dead (Fig. 1). Early lithographic illustrations documented the island in the same manner as other prized public works projects such as the Croton Aqueduct and the Brooklyn Bridge, and state facilities like Rikers Island and Bellevue Hospital. While perhaps difficult to fathom given what we have come to know about conditions in these facilities, such images — framed as picturesque 'views' — often appeared alongside cheery reports of construction or charity work (Fig. 2), and suggest they were understood as public assets, even would-be heritage.

How, then, did the now dominant view of Hart Island as a profoundly shameful place, a site of abject burial and social alienation, take hold? More to the point, given

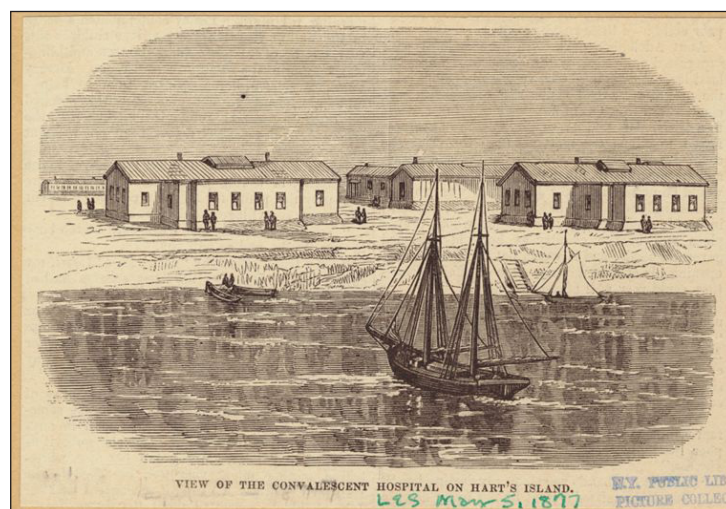


Fig. 1: 'View of the Convalescent Hospital on Hart's Island', *Frank Leslie's Monthly Magazine*, 5 May 1877. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.

Burial', *New York Times*, 27 October 2016 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/28/nyregion/for-22-unclaimed-bodies-in-new-york-a-grim-path-from-death-to-burial.html>> [accessed 6 August 2025].

⁸ Soldiers' remains interred there were eventually moved to a military cemetery, but the plinth remains. Decades later, Rikers' inmates erected a DIY monument to 'PEACE' (1948) nearby. Other elements of the island's memorial landscape include an Episcopal Cross (1907) and the Mercury School Ship Memorial (c. 1878), which marks the burial site of children who died in a serious boating accident nearby.



Fig. 2: 'New York City — Metropolitan Charities — the Bible and Fruit Mission to the Public Hospitals — Ministering to the Convalescent Patients on Hart's Island', *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 5 May 1879. Image courtesy of the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.

its ongoing and vigorous use as a public cemetery, what should we make of the endless cycle of (re)discovery, as each new generation of observers expresses shock, dismay, and even moral panic about the 'island of the dead'?⁹ To answer these questions, we must consider the origins of the attachment/aversion dynamic at work in much island-related reporting. For more than a century, Hart Island has been at once a *lieu de mémoire* and a place of wilful forgetting. A profoundly stigmatized place, it represents an unusually potent type of 'negative heritage', a phrase I have used elsewhere to describe sites with disturbing or problematic histories that become places of dark fixation, and obsessive efforts at fixing.¹⁰

Hart Island's negative heritage status is rooted, not so much in the material facts of its history (although they have been contributing factors), but in moral-interpretative ones and, more specifically, in visual and narrative representations found in the island's vast 'shadow archive'.¹¹ In 2020 certain unsettling pieces of this shadow archive

⁹ This 'rediscovery' has been explored from a different angle, with attention to burial rituals, by anthropologist Sally Raudon in 'Huddled Masses: The Shock of Hart Island, New York', *Human Remains and Violence*, 8.1 (2022), pp. 84–101, doi:10.7227/HRV.8.1.6. See also, Emma Sheppard-Simms, 'Islands of the Abject: Absence, Trauma and Memory in the Cemetery Island', *Landscapes of Violence*, 4.1 (2016), pp. 1–26 <<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/32638>> [accessed 6 August 2025].

¹⁰ Heidi Aronson Kolk, 'Negative Heritage: The Material-Cultural Politics of the American Haunted History Tour', *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 37.2 (2020), pp. 117–56, doi:10.1080/08873631.2020.1754083. A book-length treatment of this phenomenon is forthcoming from University of Chicago Press.

¹¹ Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *October*, 39 (1986), pp. 3–64 (p. 10), doi:10.2307/778312. See also, Leigh Raiford, 'Ida B. Wells and the Shadow Archive', in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African*

found the light of day; or, more properly, were thrust into view, first by bulldozers and drones, and then by news agencies and Twitter. The contents of the burial trench compounded inherited feelings of dread and shame. Early journalism, produced when the island was a newly acquired asset, its character still largely unknown, established the foundational layer of this interpretative history. Such reportage was shaped by the contradictory practices of bourgeois urbanism, from sober-minded scrutiny of social problems to moralizing and often bigoted judgement of the poor to sensationalist muckraking.¹² These accounts deployed visual practices that persisted long after the technologies that made them possible became obsolete, the resulting images having insinuated themselves into media coverage ever since.

Some of these patterns of representation can be attributed to the long history of state control, and the fact that most of the island's residents, living and dead, were wards of the state (until 2020, even the burial detail was comprised of prison inmates).¹³ Information has thus generally been controlled by its own agencies, and filtered through local newspapers — accounts sometimes treated as bland summaries, other times as exposés à la Nellie Bly, whose undercover reporting about the asylum on Hart Island's East River counterpart, Blackwell's (now Roosevelt) Island, contributed to the infamy of both.¹⁴ In subsequent decades, many of New York's penal-reformatory institutions came under scrutiny for mismanagement, abuse, and sanitation issues. But Hart Island has long had a dread factor all its own. Within a decade, its potter's field came to be associated with the 'degenerate' dead — criminals, suicides, prostitutes, the indigent poor, people of colour, and anyone 'thought to have posed a danger to the public body while alive'.¹⁵ Like England's 'pauper graves', it '[carried] the lowly taint of the workhouse' and the carceral state.¹⁶ And while the bigotries inherent in such attitudes

American Identity, ed. by Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 299–320, doi:[10.1215/9780822394563](https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394563).

¹² Literal muckraking, in some cases — for example, in accounts about the consolidation of the city's potter's fields, which brought the fragmentary remains of the long-deceased to Ward's and Hart islands starting in the early 1870s. Reporters often lingered with disgust/relish on the contents of the burial pits. See, for example, Daniel Connolly, 'The Unstoried Dead', *Appleton's Journal of Literature*, 16 March 1872, pp. 289–91; and 'Bellevue and Potter's Field', *New York Times*, 7 April 1872, p. 1.

¹³ The practice of ferrying in a Rikers Island burial detail has been going on since the mid-twentieth century. It was set to change with the shift in custodianship from the Department of Correction to the Department of Parks and Recreation in late 2021, but Covid forced the matter sooner. The island's burial grounds are, however, still managed by a long-time Rikers' burial detail captain, who was recently named 'Director of City Cemeteries'. Melinda Hunt, Zoom interview with the author, 1 August 2022.

¹⁴ Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Madhouse; or, Nellie Bly's Experience on Blackwell's Island* (Munro, 1887).

¹⁵ Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799–1883* (Yale University Press, 2008), p. 42.

¹⁶ The 'taint of pauperism', as one burial specialist/cremation advocate described it, is an aversion that stretches back to 'remote antiquity' and is 'more deeply ingrained in the human heart [...] than any other anti-social custom'. See Frederick Ludwig Hoffman, from a lecture delivered to the National Conference of Social Work in Atlantic City, NJ, and

seem objectionable today, the stigma remains strong.¹⁷ To put a complex matter simply: peering into that open trench on Hart Island involved confronting reminders not just of mass *death* but of mass *dread* — of contemplating ‘a site of estrangement’ whose meanings and uses we might prefer to disown.¹⁸

If pandemic reporting insulated viewers from the scenes of mass death (e.g. by means of the ‘abstracted gaze’ of the drone),¹⁹ it nonetheless delivered information about the island’s long history as a place not just of abject *burial* but abject *memory* — a product of long-standing stigma and representational violence. In what follows, I attend to this recursive pattern of engagement, considering visual practices that frame the encounter with the island as a *terrain vague*. Having established these lineages, and traced some of their implications, I turn to recent works that have sought to reshape the public imagination of the ‘island of the dead’.

Hart Island as a *terrain vague*

The Covid journalism said relatively little about the routine character of burial activities in the ‘graveyard of last resort’, as *Time* columnist W. J. Hennigan characterized it in November 2020. The cinematic opening of Hennigan’s article is typical of the genre:

The sun has barely risen above the glassy surface of Long Island Sound. A breeze sweeps over an island half a mile from the Bronx where 15 workers watch a backhoe remove a layer a soil that separates a mass grave from the outside world. There are

published as *Pauper Burials and the Interment of the Dead in Large Cities* (Prudential Press, 1919), p. 22. As Sherri Broder has shown, pauperism was seen as the ‘ultimate state of demoralization’ for the urban poor throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century. See Sherri Broder, *Tramps, Unfit Mothers, and Neglected Children: Negotiating the Family in Late Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 16. For more on pauper burial as a shorthand for the shame of poverty, see Julie-Marie Strange, ‘Only a Pauper Whom Nobody Owns: Reassessing the Pauper Grave c. 1880–1914’, *Past and Present*, 178.1 (2003), pp. 148–75, doi:[10.1093/past/178.1.148](https://doi.org/10.1093/past/178.1.148); Thomas Laqueur, ‘Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals’, *Representations*, 1 (1983), pp. 109–31, doi:[10.2307/3043762](https://doi.org/10.2307/3043762); Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 316–17; and Graham Denyer Willis, ‘The Potter’s Field’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 60.3 (2018), pp. 539–68, doi:[10.1017/S001041751800018X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S001041751800018X).

¹⁷ As many historians of death have noted, the existential dread inspired by (social) death, and especially the undignified and unindividuated burial, has a specific origin story, and has produced elaborate coping strategies, in the United States. See, for example, Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (Knopf, 1997); Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*; and *The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal*, ed. by Peter C. Jupp and Glennys Howarth (St. Martin’s Press, 1997), doi:[10.1007/978-1-349-25300-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25300-5).

¹⁸ Here, I am drawing on the work of phenomenologist Dylan Trigg, who has written compellingly about the materiality of memory in *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (Ohio University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ The phrase is from Patrick Lichty, ‘Drone: Camera, Weapon, Toy: The Aestheticization of Dark Technology’, *Furtherfield*, 30 May 2013 <<https://www.furtherfield.org/drone-camera-weapon-toy-the-aestheticization-of-dark-technology/>> [accessed 6 August 2025]. See also, Garfield Benjamin, ‘Drone Culture: Perspectives on Autonomy and Anonymity’, *AI & Society*, 37.2 (2022), pp. 635–45, doi:[10.1007/s00146-020-01042-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-020-01042-7).

1,165 identical pine caskets stacked three high, two wide, in this football-field-size pit. The men are here to find and dig up casket No. 40-3. The backhoe churns up a layer of gray sand, a sign that the caskets are close. Already sweating in their hazmat suits, the workers climb 10 ft. down into the hole [...]. The smell seeps through their protective masks [...]. They set about retrieving the box, and its occupant, from the anonymous earth.²⁰

Inside casket No. 40-3 were the remains of a 74-year-old woman who died during a pandemic-related backup in the burial industry. ‘No one knows how many of the people arriving here died of COVID-19’, Hennigan intones, explaining how, in this miraculous case, the Hebrew Free Burial Association intervened, and saw to a ‘proper’ burial. For Hennigan, the ‘dark truth’ is that few of those taken across the river escape the ‘anonymous earth’. The accompanying photographs suggest that Covid had further compounded the dehumanizing character of island burial.²¹

Setting aside the pandemic-specific angst, Hennigan’s account resembles dozens from the past half-century framed thus: as a journey undertaken by an outsider granted ‘unprecedented access’ to an alien and mysterious place — a Dantean crossing-over that allows readers access to the world of the dead.²² Such accounts perform a ritual of mortified discovery of Hart Island’s material and social history and, with it, the moral geography of its remnant landscape.²³ Each reinforces the island’s status as a multiply abject and problematic place — a *terrain vague*, as architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió characterizes sites ‘foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior to the physical interior of the city, its negative image’.²⁴ Such ‘marginal’ places prove difficult to fathom, much less fix, because we fail to understand their origins. In de Solà-Morales Rubió’s view, visual culture, photography in particular, exerts a ‘primordial’ shaping

²⁰ W. J. Hennigan, ‘Lost in the Pandemic: Inside New York City’s Mass Graveyard on Hart Island’, *Time*, 18 November 2020 <<https://time.com/5913151/hart-island-covid/>> [accessed 6 August 2025].

²¹ According to Hennigan, the burial association paid for the exhumation and gave the woman a traditional Jewish burial at Mount Richmond Cemetery on Staten Island, where she lies today.

²² For more on penal islands as otherworldly places, see Jacky Bowring, ‘Containing Marginal Memories: The Melancholy Landscapes of Hart Island (New York), Cockatoo Island (Sydney), and Ripapa Island (Christchurch)’, *Memory Connection*, 1.1 (2011), pp. 251–70 (p. 252) <<https://hdl.handle.net/10182/5697>> [accessed 6 August 2025].

²³ ‘Remnant landscape’ is a phrase coined by geographer Karen Till, who uses it to characterize elements of post-industrial cities that persist in fragments. See Karen E. Till, ‘Wounded Cities: Memory-Work and a Place-Based Ethics of Care’, *Political Geography*, 31.1 (2012), pp. 3–14, doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.10.008.

²⁴ Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, ‘Terrain Vague’, in *Anyplace*, ed. by Cynthia Davidson (MIT Press, 1995), pp. 118–23. For more on how the term can be applied to other kinds of urban landscapes, see Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, ‘Terrain Vague’, in *Terrain Vague: Interstices at the Edge of the Pale*, ed. by Manuela Mariani and Patrick Barron (Routledge, 2014), pp. 24–30, doi:10.4324/9780203552172.

power over our experience of the city, and our perception of *terrains vagues*.²⁵ While many photographs have ‘semiological’ potential, some ‘steer’ the public imagination more than others.²⁶ As these images ‘imprint’ collective memory, they crowd out other images entirely and imperil alternative narratives.²⁷ This has been true for Hart Island since long before 2020.

Prior to the advent of the media crew, those seeking to report on the island had to rely upon public records and whatever they could find in local archives.²⁸ Over time, certain elements of this shadow archive have achieved a degree of primacy, not to say canonicity, moving from niche collections such as local historical societies to repositories maintained by heavyweights like the New York Public Library.²⁹ Twentieth-century journalists have tended to draw on these very same materials. Indeed, there is a quality of amnesiac *sameness* to Hart Island reportage, which has ‘uncovered’ the same facts, and deployed many of the same tropes (crossing-over, unearthing secrets, etc.) while professing shock and dismay at what has been discovered.³⁰ Even as the island’s

²⁵ de Solà-Morales Rubió, ‘Terrain Vague’, in *Anyplace*. He makes the case that, from powerful images emerge certain ‘signals, physical impulses that steer in a particular direction the construction of an imaginary that we establish as that of a specific place’. In this view, photographs constitute a ‘semiological mechanism of communication’ as well as collective memory, which together ‘produce our imagination of the city’ (p. 120).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120. Many well-known historical images — for instance, those Jacob Riis took of bustling Lower East Side streets, which now serve as signifiers of hardscrabble immigrant life — frame our encounter with the actual places. But even less-famous photographs can serve this ‘imprint’ function.

²⁷ Marita Sturken calls these ‘memory remains’, the unassimilated fragments of personal and community experience that might yet be reconstituted as alternative memories. See Marita Sturken, ‘Absent Images of Memory: Remembering and Reenacting the Japanese Internment’, in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, ed. by T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White, and Lisa Yoneyama (Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 33–49, doi:10.2307/j.ctv1131czf.5. For a fuller articulation of how dominant images and narratives crowd out personal and communal memory, see Sturken’s *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (University of California Press, 1997). Susan Sontag goes further, arguing that taking photographs involves an act of appropriation or control of one’s subjects (an act mirrored in the surveillance technologies of the state). Engaging with the photos involves vicarious appropriation and control — not just of those subjects, but what they represent. Thus, while images such as those being discussed seem ‘innocent’, they ‘give people a possession of a past that is unreal, and take possession of space in which they are insecure’. See Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Delta, 1977), pp. 6–10.

²⁸ Among the federal agencies that have documented Hart Island are the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the Army Corp of Engineers, the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA), and their private contractors.

²⁹ See, for example, the New York Correction History Society’s ‘Hart Island Tour/Slides Orientation’, a flash-based slideshow comprised of ‘70 images [...] to help orient participants in Hart Island tours arranged by the NY Correction History Society through the good offices of the NYC Dept. of Correction’, n. d. <<http://www.correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/hart/html/slideshow.html>> [accessed 6 August 2025].

³⁰ During this same period, the island’s physical plant continued to deteriorate, such that engaging with its remnant landscape (semi-collapsed former prison and asylum buildings, abandoned missile silos, etc.) involved a degree of personal risk and increasing surveillance by the Department of Correction. Nina Bernstein’s ‘Unearthing the Secrets of New York’s Mass Graves’ is just the most robust exposé in a long line that includes (to name just a few): Peter Koper, ‘Poor. Friendless. Unknown Find Rest in Potter’s Field’, *Hartford Courant*, 23 June 1981, p. 63; Rebecca Kolberg, ‘Prisoners Bury the Unmourned Dead in New York’s Populous Potter’s Field’, *Hartford Courant*, 3 April 1981, p. 20; Chip Brown,

archive expanded, it has continued to be characterized as ‘invisible’, a *terrain vague* in need of reclamation.

This *seeing-but-not-seeing* corresponds to, and in effect reinforces, wilful forgetting on a collective scale — a ‘disavowal’ which involves repeated ‘disclaiming of responsibility or knowledge’ of disturbing places and histories. Catherine Hall and Daniel Pick explain that we may ‘know something unconsciously, even as consciously we may operate sweetly innocent of the knowledge, just as we can walk a pavement oblivious of the ruins of dwelling places submerged beneath our feet’.³¹ Hart Island has thus been cordoned off, psychically and physically, its remnant landscape descending into ruins even as its vital function as a potter’s field has continued. The island ‘shocks’ us not because we do not know it exists, but because we have been so long determined to *not-see* what it represents: indigent burial, abuse of POWs, incarceration of the mentally ill, a prison labour system, etc. We believe we have ‘moved past’ these things as a society, and the island’s deteriorated condition seems to confirm that fact.³²

Such a disavowal depends not only upon certain habits of mind, but also on certain patterned engagements with the shadow archive. We would not know Hart Island as a place of estrangement without historical photos of the kind featured in the Covid reporting. Perhaps the most ‘primordial’ among them are the melancholy photographs produced by crime reporter turned social reformer Jacob Riis, who visited Hart and Blackwell’s islands with his box camera in 1890.³³ These images have been reproduced endlessly by the press as well as in public history domains such as blogs, textbooks, museums exhibitions, and Wikipedia.³⁴ The best known is probably ‘The Potter’s Field, the Common Trench’ (Fig. 3), which shows a crew at work in a trench very close to where

‘Journey to an Unknown Shore: Aboard the New York Ferry that Carries the Unclaimed Dead to Potter’s Field’, *Washington Post*, 12 September 1986, p. F1; Anna Quindlen, ‘About New York: For Its Few Inmates, Hart I. is a Happy Change’, *New York Times*, 9 October 1982, p. 28; and Cara Buckley, ‘Finding Names for Hart Island’s Forgotten’, *New York Times*, 24 March 2008, p. B1. Another strand of the twentieth-century reporting focused on efforts to rehabilitate and repurpose the island’s penal-reformatory landscape. See, for example, Michael Goodwin, ‘Hart Island Full of Possibilities — and Not Much Else’, *New York Times*, 19 March 1978, p. R1.

³¹ Catherine Hall and Daniel Pick, ‘Thinking about Denial’, *History Workshop Journal*, 84 (2017), pp. 1–23 (pp. 9–11), doi:10.1093/hwj/dbx040. Drawing upon psychoanalytic theory to forge a concept of collective denial that might be taken seriously by historians, the authors explore examples from British imperial history and more recent events, such as the European refugee crisis.

³² Michael Rothberg makes an analogous point in *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford University Press, 2019), where he observes that many contemporary observers feel shock at learning that the traumas of the past are ‘still’ with us despite the strong sense that they have been overcome (p. 20).

³³ Riis routinely borrowed ideas and information from fellow journalists but rarely acknowledged them. His famous account of his visit to Hart Island, which appeared in *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890), was quite evidently informed by the muckraking journalism before him (see note 12).

³⁴ A black-and-white print of ‘The Potter’s Field, the Common Trench’ from the Museum of the City of New York’s collection appears in the Wikipedia entry for ‘Potter’s field’ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potter%27s_field> [accessed 6 August 2025].



Fig. 3: Jacob A. Riis, 'The Potter's Field, the Common Trench' (1890), albumen print. Museum of the City of New York, MNY200874. Image courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.

the Covid footage was captured. It records a dramatic encounter between Riis and his subjects in an environment that seems to vibrate with social meaning. The glass-plate negative, one of the first he ever handled, has captured hundreds of what Roland Barthes calls the 'studium' particulars of the scene: the crudely made caskets, the homely dress of the burial detail, and the blur of their shovelling and hoisting movements.³⁵ At the same time, it discloses details with 'punctum' potential: the imperious (or detached?) look of the well-dressed observer, who must be the warden; the more confrontational look of the convict wearing coveralls, who receives the coffin in what appears to be a staged handoff; the scuffed look of the rocky soil, and acres of burial ground beyond.³⁶

Such a photograph would have been shocking in its time, as it remains today. Riis would ease his audience — the reform-minded bourgeoisie who eagerly snatched up copies of his *How the Other Half Lives* — into the encounter with lectures framed as guided tours of New York's 'nether world' featuring its soon-to-be-infamous tenements, alleyways, opium dens, and sweatshops.³⁷ 'The Potter's Field, the Common

³⁵ Riis was not formally trained as a photographer and relied upon the assistance of several more accomplished gentleman amateurs from whom he learned to shoot and develop images. The dark tinge of these early images, he later admitted, was a product of mishandled negatives, but he found the effects of overexposure well suited to his subjects. See Maren Stange, 'Jacob Riis and Urban Visual Culture: The Lantern Slide Exhibition as Entertainment and Ideology', *Journal of Urban History*, 15.3 (1989), pp. 274–303 (p. 291), doi:[10.1177/009614428901500303](https://doi.org/10.1177/009614428901500303).

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Macmillan, 1981).

³⁷ However, instead of oranges, flowers, and Bibles for the sick, Riis brought his mounted box camera, a tool of surveillance and scrutiny. His picture-taking operation was famously confrontational, involving a gunpowder-laced flash that made a loud bang when deployed, and dead-of-night visits (usually involving a police escort) in tenement districts. See, for example, Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel Czitrom, *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (University of Chicago Press, 2014); and Stange, 'Jacob Riis and Urban Visual Culture'.

Trench' served as one last, gut-wrenching stop on that tour, and evidence of a painful truth Riis often verbalized: that abject poverty begets abject burial and social death.³⁸ In this way, he infused the potter's field with new moral suggestiveness.³⁹

Many have followed his lead. Hennigan, for example, rehashes several of Riis's main points, while purporting to know better than to blame the poor for the poverty. Such modern observers may believe they have moved past such stigmatizing views, yet they are drawn to the spectacle of the encounter with the trench. Riis's photos have carried not only *documentary* but *epistemological* weight, fostering a melancholic style of 'remembering' the island as a place of social death and shame.⁴⁰ To wit: most of the Covid-related press accounts reproduced Riis's photographs as part of an inherited slideshow that apparently required no introduction, and confirmed the fascination/dread so many were feeling. These synecdochic fragments of the island's shadow archive at once evoke and assimilate its 'dark history', reinforcing its negative heritage mystique.

Remembering Hart Island anew

While these negative heritage logics remain deeply entrenched, there are more positive representational efforts afoot. The most influential agent of such work has been artist Melinda Hunt — founder of the Hart Island Project, unofficial caretaker of the island's burial records, and its most devoted memory activist. Hunt has been advocating on behalf of the large descendant community (the many New Yorkers with loved ones buried on the island) for more than three decades, seeking to influence the burial ground's public profile as well as its future uses.⁴¹ Her arts-based interventions began in 1991, when the city was in the throes of the AIDS epidemic.⁴² After months of digging

³⁸ In the burial trench, he explained, the indigent poor 'lie packed three stories deep, shoulder to shoulder, crowded in death as they were in life, to "save space"' (p. 178).

³⁹ Although this is by no means the only animating element of his complex journalistic project. As Bill Hug argues, there are many reasons to believe Riis's perspective was 'not simply [that of] the sloppily thinking Progressive or the middle-class assimilationist scholars have perceived' in his work. These include his long career as 'a savvy and sensitive commentator on the immigrant's plight', and his complex rhetorical self-positioning, which relied, very often, on irony and 'double-voicedness'. See Bill Hug, 'Jacob Riis and Double Consciousness: The Documentary/Ethnic "I" in *How the Other Half Lives*', *Ethnic Studies Review*, 33.1 (2010), pp. 130–57 (pp. 133, 134), doi:[10.1525/esr.2010.33.1.130](https://doi.org/10.1525/esr.2010.33.1.130).

⁴⁰ Many accounts of 'accidental' burial on Hart Island reflect this classist view, which presumes that public burials are shameful because of their association with poverty and social death. Many of the justice-minded accounts (e.g. Hennigan and Bernstein) focus on decedents from the middle or lower-middle classes, but a few have highlighted 'truly shocking' instances when wealthy, well-connected individuals wind up in the common trench. See, for example, Mary Jordan, 'She Died in a Manhattan Penthouse, and Was Buried on an Island for the Poor', *Washington Post*, 2 July 2022 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/07/02/hart-island-new-york-cemetery/>> [accessed 6 August 2025].

⁴¹ Hunt, interview with the author, 1 August 2022.

⁴² The earliest victims of AIDS were buried in unusually deep trenches (14 feet) — a practice that reflected the stigma as well as (unfounded) concerns about the transmissibility of AIDS. See *Phase 1A — Documentary Study and Archaeological*

through historical documents (including maps and Riis's photographs), Hunt set about creating her own visual archive of a place that remained 'essentially unchanged' since Riis's visit.⁴³ The resulting images, later published in *Hart Island* (1998), became the foundation of a larger body of — really her *life's* — work.⁴⁴

To create them, Hunt and her collaborator, landscape photographer Joel Sternfeld, journeyed back and forth across 'the river Styx' with a Department of Correction burial detail once a month — the most they were allowed (p. 25). What they discovered was indeed a marginal place, but one far less grim and loathsome than expected.⁴⁵ They shot their photos much as Riis had done, with the same kind of camera, in near identical locations, but with radically different results — and not just because they were in colour. Some feature people they came to know well (guards, inmates, visitors);⁴⁶ others explore the island's remnant landscape, which was then full of evocative objects that signalled (ongoing) human presence: a Virgin Mary statue draped with a rosary; a pile of shells mounded on a grave; fragments of once useful and dignified brick buildings.⁴⁷ Several show the burial crew at work in the trenches, handling coffins much as their 1890s counterparts had done (*Fig. 4*).

Assessment for the Hart Island, Bronx (Bronx County), New York — Shoreline Stabilization Project (Chrysalis Archaeological Consultants, 2017), p. 20 <http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/arch_reports/1773.pdf> [accessed 6 August 2025].

⁴³ He had made his visit exactly one century before. At the time, Hunt marvelled at the contradiction I have described: that the island had been so extensively 'used as a burial ground through several prior epidemics' yet was still so misunderstood. Hunt, email to the author, 1 August 2022.

⁴⁴ Melinda Hunt and Joel Sternfeld, *Hart Island* (Scalo, 1998). Part photo-essay, part coffee table art book, it is framed by personal reflections by Hunt and then-current members of the burial crew. Hunt has pursued many other island-related projects since. *Just Outside the City*, a mixed-media installation that juxtaposed the crew's stories with photos of burial sites, was slated to open at City Hall in 1993, but the city cancelled it at the last minute. Hunt instead pursued *Circle of Hope*, which marked the location of another once-maligned potter's field in which yellow fever victims were buried (today's Madison Square Park). See, for example, Dana Schulz, 'Interview: Melinda Hunt Memorializes the Unclaimed New Yorkers Buried on Hart Island', *6sqft*, 23 March 2015 <<https://www.6sqft.com/interview-melinda-hunt-memorializes-the-unclaimed-new-yorkers-buried-on-hart-island/>>; 'Playing in the Neighborhood: Madison Square Park; Harvesting Art, History and an Ear of Corn', *New York Times*, 4 September 1994 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/04/nyregion/playing-neighborhood-madison-square-park-harvesting-art-history-ear-corn.html>> [both accessed 6 August 2025]; and email to the author, 1 August 2022.

⁴⁵ In hindsight, Hunt explains, she fundamentally 'misunderstood' the island at first: 'I thought it would a dark and scary place. Instead, it was a 19th century romantic landscape. Very poetic, sorrowful. Emily Dickenson [sic] came to mind instead of Jacob Riis.' Hunt, email to the author, 1 August 2022.

⁴⁶ Although it should be said that the book shows only a select few. One is Vicki Pavia, a woman visiting the grave of a child she had lost forty years ago, whose experiences Hunt recounts in her opening essay (p. 22).

⁴⁷ In addition to a mess hall, a laundry, a butcher's shop, and the burned-out husk of the former warden's house, these photographs also document rarely seen artefacts of labour and of leisure, including a set of weathered bleachers (relocated from Ebbets Field for baseball games among workhouse inmates) and a sculpture made from bed springs and an oil drum. Much of the deterioration was the result of state neglect and mismanagement. The warden's house was accidentally set on fire in 1977, an event Hunt has always found distressing because it destroyed burial ledgers documenting island interments between 1961 and 1977. Email to the author, 1 August 2022.



Fig. 4: Melinda Hunt and Joel Sternfeld, 'James Smith, February 1992', *Hart Island* (Scalo, 1998). Image courtesy of the Hart Island Project. © 1992 Joel Sternfeld.

While clearly inspired by Riis's work, the photographs are rather different in tone. Whereas Riis treated his subjects (living and dead) as anonymous social types, here, perhaps shockingly, they are *named* — on the coffins and in the captions, and in Hunt's storytelling.⁴⁸ She also (with permission) names members of the burial crew, and includes their personal reflections on the long-stigmatized island alongside her own.⁴⁹ Such humanizing efforts are notable and have shaped the work of many journalists since (most have depended on her assistance in some fashion). Indeed, it is hard to imagine Nina Bernstein's revelatory investigations in the *New York Times* on the 'silent multitude', much less recent conversations about opening the island to the broader public, without these interventions.

The *New York Times* has been activist in its own way, supplying more nuanced and socially sensitive reporting and multimedia content. Designers of a map that ran in a print edition of one of Bernstein's 2016 articles, for instance — a composite of aerial stills with notations — sought to transform the otherwise fragmented remnant

⁴⁸ Hunt makes clear that the 'disturbing' practice of turning human beings into an 'abstraction' of 'numbers and statistics' has continued, and been compounded by other factors, such as lack of access. Whereas early record keepers documented 'full names, causes of death, and countries of origin' (and in the case of babies, the name of the mother), these details have been omitted for decades, the decedents' social identities effaced (Hunt and Sternfeld, p. 25).

⁴⁹ Describing the profoundly alienating character of industrialized mass burial, one crew member named Douglas says, 'as far as I can see, things are not the way they should be [on Hart Island]. It's bad enough that the city is robbing the poor when they are alive but to bury them in such a disrespectful manner is messed up [...]. So many bodies are thrown in[to] one grave. If you are poor, people just don't care about you [...]. The people buried here [...] have been forgotten' (Hunt and Sternfeld, p. 30).

landscape into a coherent and even enticing panoramic view.⁵⁰ The map can be compared to early lithographs (see *Figs. 1, 2*), though it is far more complex as a design object, synthesizing elements from disparate genres, including the topographical survey, the cutaway (often featured in museum dioramas), and the phantom view (the sort readily generated by drone/satellite).⁵¹ Comprised of four segments, it is meant to be read left to right, north to south, as if flying over the island in a helicopter accompanied by a chatty tour guide.⁵² The map offers surprising intelligibility; one can get a fix on the whole island and linger on items of particular interest.

An even more nuanced view is found in the suite of visuals accompanying the [online version of the article](#). Readers first encounter a mesmerizing loop of drone footage that shows the island's coastline (and a tiny burial crew) from above — another flyover view.⁵³ Scrolling down, they find more-intimate images, mostly family and landscape photographs, until another map appears whose base layer seems to be a geological survey of the island. Architectural elements (both surviving and lost) have been marked with floating captions tethered to their respective locations with black lines, while burial plots where 'thousands of the dead [have been] lost' are shown by red circles, and 'future plots' by dotted red lines.⁵⁴ When engaged alongside Bernstein's wide-ranging account of New York's public burial system, these maps help readers locate it, spatially, historically, and socially — and, more subtly, to perceive island interment as less alien and fearsome, part of an orderly and even dignified practice, each section demarcated by a nameplate-like marker of its own. Even so, the broader visual system adopted for these visuals — dots and broken lines; ghostly outlines and darker blotches; elusive

⁵⁰ 'The Silent Multitude on New York's Invisible Island', a panoramic map designed by Ford Fessenden, Tim Wallace, and Larry Buchanan, appeared in a print version of Bernstein's 'Unearthing the Secrets of New York's Mass Graves', *New York Times*, 16 May 2016, p. A18.

⁵¹ Like those early lithographs, the map offers a composite view that is taken to be representative. It also involves a similar kind of halftone printing technology that reduces the nuances of landscape into patterns.

⁵² The 'tour narrative' contained in the captions reads: '[Those] white markers show the location of trench sections [where burials] started in 1989, [and have since moved north]. [Over there is a] former tuberculosis hospital [and beyond that, the] area for current burials. [And there, that ruinous building is the] Phoenix House, a drug treatment center [that] closed [...] in 1976. [And over there you see what is left of] a jail, a halfway house, a military training camp, a sanitarium, and even a missile base. Future burial sites will snake around the crumbling buildings' (Fessenden, Wallace, and Buchanan).

⁵³ The drone footage, taken on a cloudy day around the time that Bernstein was conducting her investigation, and possibly used to make the map described above, was made by Alon Sicherman and Micah Dickbauer for the *New York Times*.

⁵⁴ Fessenden, Wallace, and Buchanan. This same red circle schematic was also used for a series of supplemental maps found in a later section of the article — devoted to New York's 'Cadaver Market' — which show locations (hospitals or nursing homes, airports and bus stops, rivers and waterways) where many of the 65,000 buried on Hart Island since 1980 died. These graphics show something of the class and racial biases reflected in the system of public burial. They also reveal just how interconnected the island is to the broader geography of public health and social services across the metropolitan area.

site-tags and feathery shading — telegraphs lingering anxiety about the island's vexed character as a *terrain vague*.

No doubt acutely conscious of persistent public anxiety of this kind, Hunt and her collaborators have developed their own interactive map for an ambitious digital project called the Traveling Cloud Museum (TCM) (Fig. 5). Its landing page, which is also currently the home page for the Hart Island Project website, offers a striking phantom view of the island borrowed from Google Earth — an unexpected choice, perhaps, for an artist who has generally preferred to engage with the island at ground level. But the visual poetics of the map operate differently than one might expect. The first thing the viewer notices is the luminous pale-green colour of the island as seen from overhead; it is shown in its lushest state, perhaps in late spring or early summer; the second is its distinctive shape, and the brownish-grey of heavily trafficked roadways and various lesser paths, worn by feet.



Fig. 5: Two views of the landing page of the Hart Island Project website, which defaults to the interactive map of the [Traveling Cloud Museum](#), and which allows visitors to explore 'the island with all its stories'. Image courtesy of the Hart Island Project. © 2018 Daniel Herbert and Parker Gyokeres.

As one zooms in, a series of black polygons comes into view. Clicking on any one of them offers an even closer view of the landscape, which — viewers soon register — is in fact covered in polygons, an alarming number of them, each with a white plot number. Clicking on one 'opens' the plot, whereupon a cache of records appears on the left: a list of names (if known — otherwise it simply reads '(Fe)male Unknown'), ages, and 'countdown clocks' for each individual buried there. These in turn can be opened — like a drawer in an old-fashioned card catalogue or archive — to reveal slots for more information. Many are empty, but some have been populated with photographs, anecdotes, or informal obituaries. The landing page invites visitors to 'stop their clock of anonymity and restore their history' by posting their own content.

The activist bent of the TCM can be seen in this sophisticated design, which marries technologizing data schematics with visual logics of the kind found in precursor maps while also preserving pleasingly ‘romantic’ elements of the landscape more commonly associated with garden cemeteries — verdant burial plots, decaying seawalls, semi-ruinous buildings. They can only be glimpsed on the map, but visitors can find more images and information in the ‘Points of Interest’ section of the website. The project also interrogates the technologies of the state (satellite footage, burial records, etc.), but puts them to new purpose — as the foundations for vernacular memory work: storytelling and marking of unmarked, and officially unmarkable, graves (since it is against the rules to individualize gravesites). Likewise, it subordinates the phantom view of the all-seeing but eyeless drone (which it poetically reimagines as a ‘floating cloud’) to more intimate scenes, where members of the anonymously buried ‘silent multitude’ can be (re)united in communities of remembrance.

Building on knowledge gathered over decades, the TCM highlights problems of power that have forever plagued the island and advances the work of integrating the marginalized into the landscape of public memory. While this involves certain negative emotions — ruefulness, regret, anxiety about ‘ticking clocks’ and the fate of unclaimed dead — the project seeks to inspire positive acts of recognition and caretaking, which is to say, the opposite of disavowal and shame. In this, it expands the reach of storytelling of the kind featured in the *Times* series, which indeed has depended upon leads supplied by Hunt, and experiences narrated by descendants. These reclamation projects represent an important locus of recuperative memory — and even the start of a process of restorative justice which might be pursued more fully in years to come. And it has already had measurable impact, perhaps especially for descendant communities who now enjoy a new-found agency over Hart Island’s public history and memory. Even modest interventions, like the Hart Island Project’s successful petitioning of city officials to stop using the stigmatizing phrase ‘potter’s field’, have made a difference in how New Yorkers relate to the island.⁵⁵

That said, even in these more inclusivist, politically knowing reclamation efforts, we can make out uncanny traces of the island’s negative heritage past, including a fixation with its remnant landscape, a deference to historical images that steer in the direction of social alienation and abjection, and a compulsive rehashing of narratives of moral shock and dismay, of crossing over and peering down, etc. Together, these traces — distorted echoes of previous acts of representational violence — operate on the public imagination in much the same way as they have in the past. Disavowal of

⁵⁵ Hunt, interview with the author, 1 August 2022.

the *conditions* of alienation and abjection amounts to repression of fuller knowledge and moral responsibility for the *systems that produce them*. This is true even when the disavowal involves a principled stance, as the Hart Island Project's has certainly been. In advancing a new visual poetics, they have boldly reframed the site and its history, and in turn served up a whole new design schema — one that would reimagine the island as a **Landscape of Hope**.⁵⁶

Thanks in part to their efforts, the tone and framing of public discourse has shifted noticeably even if state burial practices largely have not. Reports of record-keeping errors and misidentification of graves have continued, as has the practice of overfilling the plots, which now are made to hold as many as two hundred people each.⁵⁷ Thus, despite progressive-sounding messages from the firm conducting the **Master Plan** (currently underway), which has promised to weigh the needs and perspectives of descendants; and despite the bold **counter-planning efforts** by the Hart Island Project, the spectre of abject burial still haunts the island and its caretaking. The state's ultimate intentions with respect to mass burial remain difficult to predict.⁵⁸ Whether America's 'island of the dead' can ever be fully reclaimed as heritage in the positive sense — and who will have agency over its reinterpretation — remains to be seen.

⁵⁶ The Hart Island Project recently conducted their own land-use study in collaboration with Professor Jake Boswell and others from the Landscape Architecture programme at Ohio State University. Armed with new data, they have argued that existing 'green' burial practices on the island can and should continue, but be given new parameters. They have shared their research findings, and strong views about Hart Island's future use/rehabilitation, with the City Council and anyone else who will listen. Their 'Landscape of Hope' proposal, made public starting in early 2025, appears to give material form to some of the visual logics of the TCM. It envisions approachable, 'right-sized' plots, each with capacity for three to five years' worth of interments, every one of which would be carefully geo-tagged so that individuals' burial locations could easily be found. These plots would be constructed in a succession of 'burial meadows' and divided by hedgerows that form attractive 'windbreaks' even as they 'chronicle the passage of time and [serve] as a register of human lifespan and public memory'. (Importantly, they would also function as an alternative to individualized grave markers.) For more on the Hart Island Project's efforts, and their vision for turning Hart Island into a green cemetery, see their **Landscape of Hope** concept plan, which they unveiled during a July 2024 Zoom presentation: '**Landscape of Hope — Ending Mass Burials in NYC and Preserving Green Burials on Hart Island**'.

⁵⁷ According to Melinda Hunt, that number has increased by 33 per cent since the change of jurisdiction in 2022. Statement in the Hart Island Project Annual Meeting, Zoom session, 14 June 2025. See also, Gwynne Hogan, '**NYC Is Burying More Bodies in Each Hart Island Mass Grave**', *The City*, 4 September 2024.

⁵⁸ As of late 2020, the City Council and other officials were talking about turning the island into a public memorial park. See, for example, Haidee Chu and others, '**As Trenches Fill, Plans for Hart Island COVID-19 Memorial Look to Past and Future**', *The City*, 11 December 2020. The Parks Department's first acts, including mowing the long grass and cleaning up debris, dramatically altered the landscape of the island — effectively turning it into a 'garden cemetery' with closely cropped grass. But that plan seems to have foundered, in part due to lack of funds for more ambitious improvements, and the release of a state-commissioned burial capacity report in 2022 (which predicted that burial space would be exhausted by 2030 if substantial changes were not made, and signalled an intention not to make such changes). The scope of the **new public programmes at the island**, including National Park Service-led tours, which are accessed via lottery, is very limited. Studies still underway in support of a new **Master Plan** have been concerned with 'the goals of improving access to the island, visitor experience, the island's natural ecology, resiliency to severe weather events, and operations'.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

