

# PUBLIC HISTORY

## Potter's field as heterotopia: death and mourning at New York City's edge

by Leyla Vural

**Abstract:** Since 1869, New York City has been burying its poorest people on Hart Island, a hidden-in-plain-sight spot at the city's edge that is its potter's field or public graveyard. By now, that is about one million people, all buried in mass, unmarked graves and all buried by prisoners of the city's primary jail. Michel Foucault called places like Hart Island heterotopias because they are separate spaces that mirror our values and social norms back at us. This article interweaves Foucault's concept of heterotopia with excerpts from oral history interviews with homeless and formerly homeless activists and with a former prisoner who worked the burial detail to argue that Hart Island tells us about us and the way we marginalise the poor, in death as in life.

**Keywords:** Hart Island; potter's field; New York City; Foucault; heterotopia

Whatever you think about death, there is a materiality to it that everyone has to deal with. Where does the body go? Tradition or the practices of a faith guide many people. But there is no decision to make for the dispossessed in New York City; the morgue truck brings those too poor for burial anywhere else to Hart Island, the city's potter's field. Hart Island has been in continuous use since 1869. Some records have been lost over the years so no one has a precise count, but by now about one million people have been buried there, all in mass, unmarked graves and all by inmates from the city's main jail. In 2018, there were more than 1,200 new burials on the island. Because inmates do the burial work and the city's jail system operates the island, going to Hart Island is treated like making a highly restricted jail visit.

I first learned of Hart Island in November 2013 from an article in the *New York Times*, and I was stunned both to learn what it is and that I had not heard of it before. Hart Island had been invisible to me, as it is to most New Yorkers. 'The identity of places', writes



The view of Hart Island, New York City's potter's field, from near the ferry dock on City Island. Photographers are only rarely allowed onto the island. Photo: Dave Sanders.

geographer Doreen Massey, 'is very much bound up with the *histories* which are told of them, *how* those histories are told and which history turns out to be dominant'.<sup>1</sup> The prevailing story about Hart Island is that it is a purgatory for the forgotten. But maybe this trope says more about the larger 'we' than anything else. Who forgets the poorest among us?

It is easy to think of Hart Island in generalities: the poor, the homeless, the unclaimed, the transgressive. But under the labels lie real people with all their

complexities. Each person buried there was someone particular with a story of her or his own, just as each prisoner on the burial detail has a singular path and experience. Svetlana Kitto notes that oral history has the power 'to bring us closer to places, complicating, destabilizing and expanding them'.<sup>2</sup> What, then, does Hart Island mean to people who have personal reason to know it is there? And what does the island, and the way we consider the people on it, say about us more broadly?

### The Hart Island oral history project

If you want to understand 'the ridge and furrow of the social environment' of a particular place, writes Raphael Samuel, ask the people who navigate that place to tell you about it.<sup>3</sup> I have tried to understand Hart Island by doing just that: asking people who have family and friends buried on the island, and people who have done the work of burying the dead on the island, to share their experience of what the place means to them. I began this project as part of an MA in oral history at Columbia University.<sup>4</sup> After working in the labour movement in New York City for more than twenty years, my interest in Hart Island is one of social justice: the fundamental respect that all people deserve should not end with life itself. It is also personal, as my father's early death when I was a child has left me hungry to understand the many ways people mourn. People need a way to express their loss, and for many that means having a place to visit their dead. I wanted to learn about Hart Island for what it says about who we are as a society and what it tells us about that need.

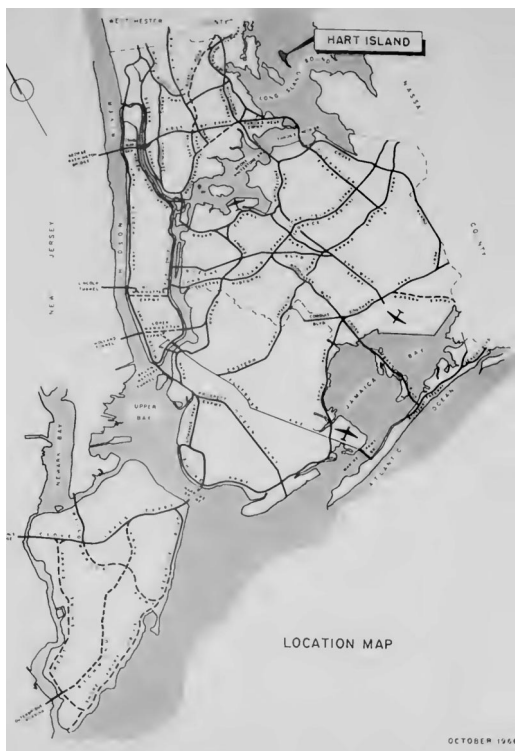
I found narrators in several ways, using a snowball technique and forging new personal connections. This included introducing myself to the activist group Picture the Homeless, attending public meetings about Hart Island, seeking out the regulars at a local bar featured in a press story about a woman buried on Hart Island and asking friends of mine if they knew anyone who might have personal experience with the island. This is a small project with no external funding. I have conducted ten interviews to date, the most recent in April 2019; the interviews have yet to be archived. In this article I draw on three of the interviews – with William Burnett, Rogers, and Junior Alcantara – as these narrators have experience of being on Hart Island and share their thoughts and feelings about the place and its social meaning. William and Rogers are active in the fight for the rights of homeless New Yorkers, and Junior is a former prisoner who worked on the Hart Island burial detail. The interviews with William, Rogers and Junior express the emotional power and the injustice held in Hart Island's very soil. I have not included other interviews from my larger project in this article as they focus on specific individuals buried on the island.

While the ethical concerns around interviewing marginalised people can be particularly sensitive, the narrators quoted in this article have often spoken publicly about their lives, and see doing so as part of their activism. William Burnett and Rogers recently

participated in an oral history project about Picture the Homeless, the organisation where their activism is based, and Junior Alcantara is featured in a documentary about drug addiction and long-term treatment.<sup>5</sup> All gave informed consent for the use of their words.

Oral history can be a useful tool in understanding social problems and advocating for greater justice. There is an important body of such work with prisoners and homeless people that this project about Hart Island both relates to and differs from. *Six by Ten: Stories from Solitary* from the Voice of Witness book series, for instance, shares thirteen oral histories of people who have survived solitary confinement in the US prison system.<sup>6</sup> In visceral, unsparing terms, narrators describe what they have experienced and how it has made them feel. These stories give voice to an understanding that often reveals more than facts and figures can about the arbitrary and cruel nature of punishment in the US prison system. *Six by Ten* is designed to educate readers (Voice of Witness provides curriculum to accompany the book) about prisoner treatment and to serve as an organising tool in advocacy for prison reform.<sup>7</sup> The 'participatory oral history research' method that community organiser and oral historian Lynn Lewis has developed as the methodological and philosophical basis of the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project in New York City is similar to the collaborative work between Daniel Kerr and homeless people in Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>8</sup> Both begin with the premise that homeless people understand what structural inequality is all about because they bear the brunt of it every day. These projects bring narrators together in a collective practice that is about sharing knowledge and using that knowledge to push for change. While this project about Hart Island listens to formerly homeless people and a former prisoner, it is not specifically about homelessness or prison. Rather, it is about a particular place, Hart Island, and what it says about the way we treat the people – homeless people and prisoners among them – we push to the social periphery. The narrators presented here share their knowledge of Hart Island, and two of them have been activists in the effort to change the status quo on the island, but their work regarding Hart Island happened well before our meeting and their activism regarding homeless people's rights continues well beyond what they share here.

Public history, like oral history, is frequently about the collaborative project of co-creating knowledge, putting that knowledge on the historical record and opening it to the broader public in ways that at least point towards justice. People cannot work to change what they do not see, or have not tried to understand once seen. Those with personal reason to care about Hart Island have a profound understanding of the place, which becomes accessible to us by our listening to what feminist scholar Ann Cvetkovich might call their 'archive of feeling'.<sup>9</sup> The emotional power of their stories comes from the body (I mean this literally) of knowledge that the narrators included in this article have about Hart Island and its meaning, and the depth



Hart Island sits in the Long Island Sound at the periphery of the city. Map from 'Memorandum and report on alternative uses for Hart Island', 1966.

of feeling with which they express and share that knowledge. That resonates and, as it should, makes it harder to turn away.

### Hart Island as heterotopia

Maps tell stories about power. Steven High writes that places are not 'empty container[s] where the "stuff" of history happens';<sup>10</sup> we make them in our own messy image. We play out social relations on the ground, and inscribe those relations into the ground. Michel Foucault calls spaces like Hart Island – spaces that are physically separate from the rest of society but mirror our social norms back at us – heterotopias.<sup>11</sup> Heterotopias 'have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralise, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect'.<sup>12</sup> By being physically and functionally separated from everyday life, heterotopic spaces put our values into stark relief and help us see those values, and their effects, more clearly. But heterotopias are only so separate; they are still a part of our time and larger place. If we pay attention, they reveal the same set of relations that shape our everyday existence. Boats, mental institutions, prisons and cemeteries are examples of heterotopias for Foucault.

In part, Hart Island's status as a heterotopia is to be found in its very location. This out-of-the-way spot sits in the Long Island Sound at New York City's outer

edge. It is small – just a speck on the map – a mile long and about a third of a mile wide at its widest, covering about 110 acres.<sup>13</sup> The island is so narrow in places that one can see across it from City Island (part of New York City and where the ferry to Hart Island docks) to Long Island (a New York City suburb) without noticing it is there; the trees just blend into the land on either side of the water. This is a place that is easy to miss. Even City Island, where the ferry docks, is only accessible by a causeway, and is itself unlike any other part of New York City, feeling more like a boating community or fishing village than an urban neighbourhood. It is not on the way to anywhere else.

Hart Island is no ordinary cemetery. Its distinction begins with the term potter's field, which comes from the New Testament story (Matthew 27: 1-10) about Judas returning the silver he receives for betraying Jesus. When the priests will not put the silver back into the religious coffer – because it is 'the price of blood' – they instead use it to buy a 'potter's field, to bury strangers in'. (Some translations say foreigners rather than strangers.) A potter's field is by definition the place to bury the other: the stranger, the foreigner, the poor. There is nothing subtle about its meaning or, in Hart Island's case, its location; the island's physical isolation unmistakably mirrors its social isolation.

Beyond their physical separation from other spaces, heterotopias share a set of qualities that together reflect social mores back at us. They are spaces with specific, although sometimes changing, functions. They are spaces where norms of behaviour are suspended and seemingly incompatible uses are juxtaposed. And they are accessible via their own, unique system of opening and closing, a system that requires special permission to gain entry.<sup>14</sup> In every way, this is Hart Island.

### Hart Island's functions

For well over a century, Hart Island has been a place for New York City to tuck away that which we would rather not see. It was a prison camp for Confederate soldiers during the US Civil War in the 1860s. The city bought the island in 1868 and started using it as a potter's field in 1869. In the 1920s, a developer considered turning part of the island into an amusement park for African Americans. Although that did not happen, in addition to operating as the city's potter's field, buildings on Hart Island also served as 'a shelter or correctional institution of some nature' into the mid-1970s.<sup>15</sup> It has been a workhouse, a reformatory for boys, an asylum for women, a tuberculosis hospital, a place to isolate people with yellow fever, a prison camp for Germans captured offshore during the Second World War and a men's prison. Between the late 1940s and early 1960s, the US Army used ten acres (approximately four hectares) of the island as a Nike missile base.<sup>16</sup>

In the mid-1960s, with the city no longer needing jail space on the island, city planners assessed possible new uses for the buildings. Noting the 'trees, hills, swimming beaches', they considered 'a summer camp



**The morgue truck returning from Hart Island after bringing bodies for burial. Photo: Dave Sanders.**

for underprivileged children' but rejected the idea because of the potter's field:

[T]he placing of children on an Island with a Potters Field, especially underprivileged children, is psychologically and socially objectionable. It would be impossible to conceal the fact either from the children or from their parents that the Island does have a Potters Field, a place for society's outcasts.

The children and their parents would have reinforced a sense of exclusion from society, and feelings of degradation would be enhanced.<sup>17</sup>

Instead, planners recommended using the buildings for a residential rehabilitation facility and Phoenix House (today a renowned drug-treatment organisation with facilities and programmes throughout the US) opened its first large-scale residential facility on Hart Island in 1967, where it operated for ten years. Since then the buildings have been left to crumble slowly and the island's sole use has been as a potter's field. But each of Hart Island's uses shares a fundamental quality. It has always been a place for the marginalised: prisoners, people with mental illness or infectious diseases, destitute people and those struggling with addiction. During the height of fear and ignorance about the disease, people with AIDS were buried in deeper graves in a separate part of the island,<sup>18</sup> creating something of a heterotopia within a heterotopia.

By assigning a space at the city's physical edge and strictly controlling access, this burial ground for the poorest among us also tells us about the space assigned to the same people when they are alive, banished in life – as in death – to the margins. The 1966 city planners' report assessing possible uses of the island that could coexist with the potter's field captures this without irony. Poor families understand their place, the report says in so many words; why make them confront this explicitly by sending their children to summer camp next to the burial ground for 'outcasts'?

## **Suspending norms of behaviour and juxtaposing incompatible spaces**

The nineteenth-century method of burial still in use on Hart Island and the fact that the Department of Correction (DOC), which runs the city's jail system, operates the island and still has prisoners doing the burials, defies usual standards of behaviour and uses of shared space. Prisoners and the dead are not people who otherwise belong together side by side. A jail site and a cemetery are not spaces that otherwise inhabit the same land.

Early on weekday mornings, the prisoners at Rikers Island<sup>19</sup> – New York City's primary and enormous jail complex, itself an island and heterotopic space – who work the Hart Island detail and the correction officers who supervise them climb into a white bus or van and head to City Island. There, behind a locked gate, a sign warning that trespassers will be prosecuted and a short dock, a small ferry awaits. On the days when there are new bodies to bury, a morgue truck brings them and takes the ferry too. Today, as in the nineteenth century, the dead are delivered in plain pine boxes.

The burials take place in mass graves. The men dig two trenches: one for adults and one for infants. Over time, they place 150 bodies in the adult trench (three deep and fifty across) and about 1,000 in the trench for infants. When work is done for the day, the men cover the boxes they have placed in the trenches with plywood, gravel and dirt. When a trench is full, they close it, mark it with a piece of numbered white pipe and dig a new one. A 1967 DOC report about Hart Island contends that 'Many of the inmates consider work there desirable, because it affords them the opportunity to be in the open air and away from the prison proper, and because it gives them job experience in a well-paying field'.<sup>20</sup> I have not found any recent suggestions that the burial detail provides a welcome form of job training, but the former prisoner I interviewed did say that getting out of Rikers for work appealed to him.

Signs on Hart Island warn boaters to stay away ('PRISON KEEP OFF' is painted in large capital letters on what looks to be a retaining wall), just as the sign at



**The Department of Correction, which runs the city's jail system and Hart Island, tightly controls access to the island. Photos: Dave Sanders.**



**Junior Alcantara found working on the Hart Island burial detail unbearably sad. Photo: Steven Puente.**

the gate on City Island warns people that the dock is a restricted area. Foucault considers prisons to be heterotopias because they are spaces set aside for ‘deviants’. We think of cemeteries as sacrosanct spaces and, whether or not it should be this way, of prisoners as anything but sacrosanct. A prisoner burying people is in itself a transgressive act, but the people buried on Hart Island were, in a sense, also deviant. Most people are buried on Hart Island for one reason – poverty – and that makes them the less than ‘other’. ‘It’s amazing’, William Burnett told me, ‘when we talk about homeless people, we talk about them as if they’re not human beings’.<sup>21</sup>

I met William through Picture the Homeless, a grass-roots social justice organisation founded and led by homeless New Yorkers.<sup>22</sup> Rail thin, soft-spoken and once a seminarian, William, who was in his mid-forties when we first met, has been homeless at times. He became active with Picture the Homeless shortly after meeting some of their activists on the street one day in the early 2000s (they were protesting for affordable housing; he was leafleting for a presidential candidate). Long since a member of its board and one of the people who helped lead Picture the Homeless’s successful campaign to pressure the DOC (responsible for the prison service) to open access to Hart Island to mourners, William quickly agreed to an oral history interview when I asked. We met in the Picture the Homeless storefront in Harlem one grey March afternoon in 2015.

We also talk about prisoners as if they are not fully human. I wanted to speak to narrators who had worked on the burial detail to ask them what that work meant to them. It took another year, and I ultimately only met one former prisoner who had worked on the detail. Thanks to a fellow oral historian and social worker, I was introduced to Junior Alcantara in March 2016. Almost forty then, Junior was focussed on drug treatment and keeping his life together. Full of nervous energy, his eyes shine when he talks about his daughters and how the birth of his youngest gave him the jolt he needed to survive. He has been at Rikers more than once and worked on the Hart Island detail many years

ago. He is not sure what year that was, but when it comes to the experience Junior’s memories are clear. His descriptions of the work and his feelings about the island are full of compassion and sadness for what it means to be so close to death and the bodies of people who seemed not to have mattered in life or once gone. While those serving time at Rikers have to work, the Hart Island detail is ‘voluntary’, but how voluntary can a work detail be in jail? Junior signed up because he had heard that working on Hart Island was a way to get more food and cigarettes and that was enticing, he recalls, because when addicts are incarcerated, they arrive desperate for food. As he describes it:

Most people sentenced less than a year are drug addicts, for drug crimes, for petty stuff, for a crack pipe, for a stem, a syringe. You know what I mean? Stuff like that. And when they get in there, they’re hungry, man. We haven’t eaten a real hot meal in years, man! Our stuff is Betty Frickin’ Sara Lee and Little Debbie’s and that’s it. And we good to go. That’s our nutrition. So, when you get locked up, and you get real food, it’s like an addiction, like drugs, man, like holy snap, man. I’ll do anything for food. Anything. That’s how they have you in there. Like you’re a German back before World War One or something, you know. It’s crazy. They have you there begging for food, you know. And that’s just how it is. And you do, you work and you do anything just to get that extra plate of food or that cigarette that they’ll give you.<sup>23</sup>

Junior could not anticipate, though, how difficult he would find the work, which he describes this way:

They have these trenches that it’s just, they just, it’s a pick-up [truck], you go and they just back up and they’re just two of us are on the pick-up and then there’s two of us down in the bottom and they just pass the things to us. They just pass down the thing. You just go and stack ‘em up, just stack ‘em up, just keep stacking ‘em up, man. And there are people in there that you’re stacking up. People. People. Actual people, man, bodies.

I don’t know what the heck is it with the human and me and with bodies and stuff like that, but I think the dead should be treated with respect. And the people that are doing it, a lot of us are not respectful.

They throw those boxes. And a lot of times, they’re passing a body down to you, and you’re way down there. If there’s this much space open [indicating about two inches with his fingers] and that body had just blusted out a last bit of faeces or whatever, that’s exactly what’s gonna come out of there, man. [Makes the sound of disgust] I know, right? Nasty stuff.

And people do that because of cigarettes – and they can sneak in cigarettes – and for food. That’s the rea-



The burial system that social reformer Jacob Riis captured in the late 1800s is the same today. Photo: Jacob A Riis (1849-1914) / Museum of the City of New York, 90.13.4.86B.

son. Now tell me, is that genius or what, man? Free labour for food and a Newport here and there.

You know it wasn't until they brought the kids in, until they brought the little baby boxes, that right there was what broke me. I would go back to the dorm sometimes at night and tears would come out for some of them. I don't know why, dude! I don't know. I don't know why I needed to cry for them. Sometimes I forced myself to cry for them. I don't know. I did. I felt like somebody should cry for them.

And then after that, it was just a lot of sadness because I've seen a lot of documentaries and stuff like that, you know, about death and other cultures and things, and I'm just thinking to myself, wow, man. You know, sometimes it's just the money. You know, if you don't have it, then what? It's crazy the way it is. You gotta have money to die. Right?<sup>24</sup>

The cost of life on the margins is not lost on Junior. He does not know the circumstances that brought the people he buries to Hart Island. And yet, he does. Like him, they were the marginalised. He understands the politics of space and a social order that puts prisoners

and the dead (if they were among the very poor in life) in the same peripheral place. Jacob Riis, the nineteenth-century social reformer who wrote *How the Other Half Lives* about life in New York City's tenements, understood too.<sup>25</sup> The first photos he ever took were of the potter's field and burials on Hart Island. But for their attire and lack of modern equipment, Riis's photos depict a burial method that has not changed in 150 years. In 1888, Riis started giving illustrated lectures about poverty in New York. The last images he showed – of Bellevue Hospital, the morgue and Hart Island – were headed 'How the other half dies in New York'.<sup>26</sup>

### A system of opening and closing

The juxtaposition of a cemetery with a worksite for prisoners has led the city to treat Hart Island like a jail. That means armed correction officers, tight security and very limited access for the public. This is typical of heterotopias, which 'always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable'.<sup>27</sup> Until the early 2000s, the DOC had no system by which people could visit. Those who got onto the island did so by sheer persistence or luck. The photographer Claire Yaffa told me that she telephoned the DOC almost daily for about a year in the early

1990s until someone relented and let her onto the island to take photos for a project she was doing about children and AIDS.<sup>28</sup> In the mid-1990s, the artist-turned-activist Melinda Hunt, who later founded The Hart Island project,<sup>29</sup> and photographer Joel Sternfeld got permission to go onto the island to replicate the photos that Jacob Riis had taken a hundred years earlier.

### The Potter's Field Campaign

In the mid-2000s, Picture the Homeless pressured the DOC to establish a system of opening (albeit still highly limited) that enables mourners to visit Hart Island. Tired of the way homeless New Yorkers were being portrayed in the news and treated in the streets, in 1999 Lewis Haggins and Anthony Williams (homeless themselves) founded Picture the Homeless. They had the goal of building an activist organisation which brought homeless people together to fight for their rights and to present a picture of homeless people as fully human and deserving of the fundamental and unquestionable respect that everyone should receive. In December 2003, Lewis Haggins went missing and it was several months before anyone knew what had happened to him. He had died in a city hospital, somehow separated from his papers, and although he could easily have been identified (his fingerprints were on record), the city had buried Lewis on Hart Island without bothering to figure out who he was. Some of the activists at Picture the Homeless had been talking about Hart Island and what burial there meant for people. When they learned about Lewis, talk turned into action and they formed 'The Potter's Field Campaign' to push for regular access to the island.

Around the same time, William joined Picture the Homeless. He recalls:

Originally when folks were talking to me about potter's field, I wasn't interested in that conversation because my thinking was, we have homeless people who are still living and I want to be focused on housing for the living. [...]

Now Charlie [another activist at Picture the Homeless] was passionate about potter's field before he came to Picture the Homeless. Because Charlie was living for decades on the street and he knew a number of people who he considered friends who were also living on the street and they died and they were buried on potter's field. And so he was concerned about access to Hart Island and things like that before he even came to Picture the Homeless. Then when he came to Picture the Homeless, he was trying to get people interested in that issue.

And then one of our cofounders passed away and was buried on Hart Island. Folks from Picture the Homeless obviously wanted to go to Hart Island and have closure. And they found what Charlie was saying was true, you can't go. And so they became inter-

ested because they wanted to know, why can't we have closure? This is somebody that we were fighting in the trenches with.

And so in one of the early campaign meetings, while we were talking about potter's field, you had these people from different faiths talking about how they come at the question from their different faith perspectives about how you depose people and what kind of dignity people deserve from their faith perspective. And so that conversation was taking place in the Potter's Field Campaign. And I remember I was sitting at the table and I'm looking at everybody and I said, 'Listen, how we depose people and whether people have access for closure, these are pastoral questions, so where the fuck are the pastors?' And I love saying it that way, because I did actually say it. But when I tell people the story, sometimes they get shocked.<sup>30</sup>

Picture the Homeless soon reached out to clergy from several denominations and to Union Theological Seminary, which formed Interfaith Friends of Potter's Field to help pressure the city to open access to Hart Island for so-called closure visits. Rogers (he only uses one name) is a devout Catholic in his fifties and has been a Picture the Homeless activist for many years (we met through William). Our interview was again at the Picture the Homeless storefront, this time in the evening when the space was abuzz with activity. Rogers recalls how Picture the Homeless members held memorial services for friends buried on Hart Island before the city allowed mourners onto the island:

[W]hile we were in negotiation-slash-argument and dispute with the Department of Corrections, we held our homegoing service, we held our memorial service, literally on the docks where the boats would take off to take the bodies to Hart Island. [...] Some of the things that we do here at Picture the Homeless – call attention to things that municipal leaders would prefer to have kept quiet – we were shining light on one of the dark corners of their disrespect and their disregard of homeless New Yorkers who had died. And those two things coming together – the religious leaders inside and outside of the church as well as the public pressure [...] – those two things I think come together in putting pressure on the Department of Corrections to make some of the moves that they have done to bring access to Hart Island, for it to be less of a difficult thing for grieving families, particularly poor grieving families.<sup>31</sup>

Picture the Homeless succeeded relatively quickly in pressuring the city to establish at least some regular access to the island. In 2005, the DOC agreed to let mourners onto the island on the third Thursday of each month, and it agreed to bi-monthly interdenominational memorial services on the island, which Interfaith Friends of Potter's Field organised for several years with

volunteer clergy. The DOC did not agree at the time to let mourners anywhere near the burial sites. Instead, the prisoners built a simple gazebo for the memorial services a short distance from the ferry dock on the island. Currently on Thursday visits, correction officers walk visitors to the gazebo, the captain in charge of the detail talks a bit about the island and people sit quietly. A single gravestone next to the gazebo reads 'New York City Potters Field' and includes some lines from the New Testament. While memorial services no longer take place on the island (finding volunteer clergy every other month became too difficult to sustain), anyone can still register for the monthly Thursday visit.

William and Rogers remember the memorial services on Hart Island as profoundly moving and powerful experiences. William says:

I think what stands out is how emotional they are. Because you go onto that island, I don't care how many times you go onto the island, you say you're not going to get emotional, but when you get to the island, it seems like the further away from the water you are, the further inland on the island you are, I don't know, something happens. You can almost feel the presence of the people that are buried there. And it leaves kind of emotion. It's overwhelming. [William chokes up and pauses.]

Wow, it's overwhelming just talking about it. That came out of nowhere. But anyway, every time you go, you tell yourself you're not going to get emotional, but it's impossible.

Part of me begins to think – we were talking about Hegel before we started recording – part of me begins to think that maybe that collective human spirit is relevant in that case. Here you have thousands of people who were effectively separated from society – many of them on the outskirts of society while they were living, because they were poor – and then they are hidden away on Hart Island. And it almost seems like they're forgotten. If you were superstitious, you might think they're calling out, 'Remember me'. And you can kind of feel that.<sup>32</sup>

### Oral history interviewing, emotion and social justice

The way that narrators like William tell their story – and the emotions they express (in words, voice and body) in the telling – reflect both what narrators know and how they know it; this, in turn, affects what we know as listeners and readers. This dynamic, in the interview itself and beyond, is in part where the richness of oral history and its usefulness in social justice struggles lies. Personal stories can help nurture empathy among people. While empathy is not a given, nor is it necessarily enough to lead to action for social change, when people find their way toward one another, when we listen deeply and connect, these are important for activism. As Sarah Loose, founder of the



William Burnett and Rogers were active in the successful campaign to pressure New York City to establish regular access for mourners to Hart Island. Photos: Leyla Vural.

activist oral history network Groundswell sees it, oral history 'is often the best or only format in which the histories of marginalised communities and social movements are documented and made accessible'.<sup>33</sup> Oral history for social justice and efforts to unpack the meaning(s) of expressions of emotion in interviews both involve trying to make sense of the complicated dance between individual experience and social context (be that society writ large, the family or somewhere in between on the scale of human relations). If we accept Alessandro Portelli's view that oral history is 'an art of dealing with the individual in social and historical context', then our task, as he says, is 'to connect them [narrators] with "history" and in turn force history to listen to them'.<sup>34</sup> This makes oral history inherently relevant to activism.

The risk in an oral history project about Hart Island is that the death of poor people and their burial on a remote, largely inaccessible island become a metaphor for poor people's lives in a way that erases the very individuality and humanity that oral history intends to be about. No matter how much Hart Island says about structural inequality and the place (in every sense of the word) of poor people in our society, death and mourning are first and foremost personal and deeply emotional. The people buried on Hart Island each had a story, and the people I interviewed, like William, each have specific ties to the island. The reward of an oral history project like this one is that it can hold a mirror to society by listening to individual stories. William's sensitive understanding of Hart Island and his willingness to share his experience of the island shed a painful, and urgent, light on the place and its meaning.

One of the ironies of writing about oral history, of course, is that we lose so much in writing about interviews rather than listening to them. Oral history interviews create a record that gives us what Katie Holmes calls 'access, however complex and mediated, to emotions that are not evident in paper documents'.<sup>35</sup> This is more than the difference between a journal entry and an interview transcript. For all the strength of words on the page, there is a power in what Junior, William and Rogers say and how they say it that is muted in print. You really do have to hear their voices

– the pauses, stumbles, exclamations, tears and soft chuckles – to grasp more fully the richness of their experience. Holmes is interested in how oral historians understand expressions of emotion in interviews; we know emotions are meaningful, but how do we know what they mean in an interview? While she proposes using a psychoanalytic lens to find answers, the ‘emotional terrain’ of the Hart Island interviews also can be understood meaningfully through a social lens.<sup>36</sup>

Oral history, Cvetkovich contends, ‘can help create the public culture that turns what seems like idiosyncratic feeling into historical experience’.<sup>37</sup> Feelings are personal, to be sure, but often they also speak to a specific time and place that is, by definition, bigger than any one person. What people know because they have lived it is not just about them, it is about all the forces, large and small, that make a particular experience possible. Therein lies the power of personal narratives and their value to public history: they open individuals, and history, to us. The rawness and depth of feeling that William shares about Hart Island, for instance, is more than personal, and he says so. His teary, halting description of what it is like to be on the island is his statement about the way society marginalises the poor. That marginalisation hurts, and that is what we hear, and what I witnessed and felt, in the interview. William is speaking of a sadness that he knows for himself and understands as a matter of social injustice. Junior’s feelings, and understanding, are similar.

### Special permission

Access to the island opened a little further in 2015 when the city settled a lawsuit challenging the prohibition of going directly to the burial sites. Now, once a month there is a weekend day (some months on Saturday and other months on Sunday) when family members can go directly to the spot where their loved one is buried. Although family members can bring a small group that includes friends with them, the settlement is limited to family members; they are the only ones who can initiate a burial site visit. On their own, friends can neither go directly to the burial site of their friends nor can they be visited directly by friends should they be buried on Hart Island. This matters most acutely to homeless and formerly homeless New Yorkers, like Picture the Homeless members, who rely heavily on their friendship circles.

Whether you go to the gazebo or a burial site, visiting Hart Island is much like making a jail visit. You register with the DOC in advance and, upon arrival at the City Island dock, show government-issued identification to a correction officer before being allowed onto the ferry. You can bring flowers, but no camera, phone or even cigarettes. ‘No contraband,’ a woman at the DOC explains nicely when I call, ‘because of the prisoners’. ‘One can only enter’ a heterotopia, Foucault tells us, ‘by special permission and after one has completed a certain number of gestures’.<sup>38</sup> For Hart Island, these gestures include proving who you are and leaving everyday things like a mobile phone at the dock.

Prisoners and visitors cannot encounter one another on the island – the Thursday visits take place nowhere near any of the burial sites and the burial detail does not work on weekends – but, much like a visit to an actual jail, the limits on what a mourner can take onto the island are set with prisoners in mind. A visitor might leave something behind, intentionally or not, for a prisoner and that is, of course, forbidden. As the Picture the Homeless website notes, ‘The way the poor and homeless are handled after they die in New York City is not the only insult the poor face ... but it’s the final insult’.<sup>39</sup> The fact that the DOC operates Hart Island troubles William:

I have a real problem with the island being under the control of the Department of Correction. It’s almost like an insult. It’s an insult to the people who are buried there. They’re in jail. It’s like the jail cemetery. But also in the sense of the security. I mean the Department of Correction is a pretty secure institution. And the idea that it’s almost like a barrier between people who want to have closure, who want to go over and have closure, and where they’re wanting to go.<sup>40</sup>

The juxtaposition of incompatible spaces and the system of opening and closing are startling on Hart Island. There is no forgetting that you are visiting both a burial ground and a jail site. Correction officers, each with a gun, accompany you at all times.

### Forgotten or forsaken?

Heterotopias tell us about us. If you are marginalised in life, your powerlessness follows you into death. This is no accident; it is part of the way structural inequality works. On Hart Island we are able to dismiss the dead, and those who bury them, even further by assuming that they were, and are, fundamentally alone. Referring to a thirty-foot (nine-metre) monument to the dead on the island that the prisoners had built, the 1967 DOC report, for instance, says, ‘The inmates on Hart Island, many of whom are without friends and family, appealed to the Warden and offered to build a monument to the unbefriended dead’.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, nearly fifty years later, an opinion piece in the New York Times supporting the transfer of Hart Island to the city’s Department of Parks and Recreation and the conversion of the island to a public place of reverence, described what happens on Hart Island as ‘untouchables burying untouchables’.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this metaphor, harsh as it is, was written for dramatic effect and is just naming the ugly truth that prisoners and the poorest among us, even when dead, are social outcasts. But Rogers flinches when he hears ‘untouchables’ and calls it ‘abhorrent’.<sup>43</sup> He knows that the people buried on Hart Island were outcasts, and tells me so himself. That is what poverty does. But these were his friends – people who were not alone in the world – and he says he may well be among them one day.

The trope of the friendless and forgotten on Hart Island is harsh, and often false. Lewis Haggins was a



Visitors to Hart Island can bring flowers and small mementos. Photo: Dave Sanders.

beloved leader in his community, and William and Rogers mourn many people buried on Hart Island. There is a wall of photos at Picture the Homeless of members who have died. Every December on the longest night of the year, Picture the Homeless holds a memorial service at a church in downtown Manhattan to remember by name those who died that year. Homelessness, as Rogers says, does not mean that a person is alone:

The pretence was that homeless people don't have a family. Really? I was homeless, I have a family. The guys in the bunk next to me at the shelter, they were homeless, they had families. And the attitude was that homeless people had no family or no one who cared about them. No. Homeless people don't have a fixed address, that's what they don't have. [...] And I was sensitised to that as well and bringing that to the conversation about homeless people who were dying, you know, they died without a fixed address, not because they were stupid, but because they didn't have the money for a fixed address.<sup>44</sup>

### Acknowledgements

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### NOTES

1. Doreen Massey, 'Places and their pasts', *History Workshop Journal*, vol 39, no 1, 1995, p 186. Italics in original.

2. Svetlana Kitto, 'Review of Shelley Trower (ed), *Place, Writing and Voice in Oral History* (New York, 2011)', *Oral History Review*, vol 40, no 2, 2013, p 411.

3. Raphael Samuel, 'Local history and oral history', *History Workshop Journal*, vol 1, no 1, 1976, p 199.

4. A version of this paper was given at

the Oral History Society and Oral History Network of Ireland conference, 'Dangerous Histories', Belfast, June 2018.

5. Picture the Homeless Oral History Project [web page]. Accessed online at <https://picturethehomelessoralhistoryproject.com>, 30 April 2018; The Fix Documentary Film [web page]. Accessed online at [www.thefixdoc.com](http://www.thefixdoc.com), 30 April 2018.

6. Taylor Pendergrass and Mateo Hoke (eds), *Six by Ten: Stories from Solitary*, first printing edition, Chicago: Voice of Witness/Haymarket Books, 2018. See also Voice of Witness: Amplifying Unheard Voices [web page]. Accessed online at <http://voiceofwitness.org/>, 22 May 2019.

The people I spoke with about Hart Island tell stories which help expose Hart Island for what it is: a reflection of our larger society. While heterotopias are physically separate from all other spaces, they are nonetheless of all those spaces. Because of their isolation, maybe we can ignore heterotopias, maybe we can keep them from coming into our line of sight, but when we look directly at them, we see our social values staring right back. Listening to people who know about Hart Island in the deepest of personal ways because it is a place where they have family and friends – and where they may be buried themselves – makes that reflection harder to ignore. I asked William where he thinks he will be buried:

Potter's field. And to be honest with you, I want to be buried on potter's field. We worked so hard to make sure that folks there are remembered. So I want to go there and have them tell me what they think about that work. It's almost a solidarity in life, let's be in solidarity in death, too. 'You see I remembered you. What do you think?'<sup>45</sup>

7. The co-created performance pieces by Alicia Rouverol and prisoners at the Brown Creek Correctional Institution in North Carolina are another example of the life-affirming, and potentially life-changing, work that personal narratives forge. In the project Rouverol describes, prisoners collectively reflected on their life experiences and then wrote and performed their stories for at-risk youth as forms of cautionary tales. Alicia J Rouverol, 'Trying to be good: lessons in oral history and performance', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, third edition, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, pp 636-654.

8. Daniel Kerr, "We know what the problem is": using video and radio oral

history to develop collaborative analysis of homelessness', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, third edition, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, pp 626-635.

**9.** Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003.

**10.** Steven High, 'Mapping memories of displacement: oral history, memoryscapes, and mobile methodologies', in Shelley Trower (ed), *Place, Writing and Voice in Oral History*, New York: Palgrave, 2011, p 219.

**11.** Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowicz, 'Of other spaces', *Diacritics*, vol 16, no 1, 1986, pp 22-27.

**12.** Foucault and Miskowicz, 1986, p 23.

**13.** That is, 1.6 kilometres long, 0.5 kilometre wide and covering 44.5 hectares.

**14.** Rather than providing a precise definition of what a heterotopia is, Foucault offers a 'systematic description' of heterotopias and ascribes six 'principles' to them. See Foucault and Miskowicz, 1986, pp 22-27.

**15.** Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, Seymour B Durst Old New York Library Collection: Division of Operations Planning, 'Memorandum and report on alternative uses for Hart Island', Report to the New York City Planning Commission (New York), 5 December 1966. Although a report over fifty years old may appear dated, this was the last time that the city assessed the island's viability for use beyond the potter's field.

**16.** 'Memorandum and report on alternative uses for Hart Island', 1966.

**17.** 'Memorandum and report on alternative uses for Hart Island', 1966, pp 10-11. Capitalisation and punctuation as in the original text.

**18.** Corey Kilgannon, 'Dead of AIDS and forgotten in Potter's Field', *New York Times*, 3 July 2018. Accessed online at [www.nytimes.com/2018/07/03/nyregion/hart-island-aids-new-york.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/03/nyregion/hart-island-aids-new-york.html), 24 May 2019.

**19.** Rikers Island – 400 acres (162 hectares) in the East River, near New York City's LaGuardia airport – holds a complex of eight city jails, collectively known as Rikers. With an average daily population of over 8,000 in 2018, most people held at Rikers are awaiting trial or sentencing. The only people who serve their sentence at Rikers are those sentenced to less than one year. It is

only after sentencing that prisoners are put to work in particular 'details'. For more about Rikers, see, for example: City of New York Correction Department, 'Nunez Monitor Reports'. Accessed online at [www1.nyc.gov/site/doc/media/nunez-reports.page](http://www1.nyc.gov/site/doc/media/nunez-reports.page), 5 June 2019; City of New York Correction Department, 'Facilities Overview'. Accessed online at [www1.nyc.gov/site/doc/about/facilities.page](http://www1.nyc.gov/site/doc/about/facilities.page), 5 June 2019; Michael Schwartz, 'What is Rikers Island?', *New York Times*, 5 April 2017. Accessed online at [www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/nyregion/rikers-island-prison-new-york.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/nyregion/rikers-island-prison-new-york.html), 5 June 2019.

**20.** John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, Lloyd Sealy Library, Special Collections, Pamphlets on Criminal Justice, 11, F128.61.H3.S5: Gail Silver, 'A historical resumé of Potter's Field, 1869-1967', Department of Correction, City of New York, August 1967. Accessed online at [https://dc.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/724](https://dc.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/724), 5 June 2019.

**21.** Interview with William Burnett; recorded by Leyla Vural, March 2015.

**22.** I have chosen to refer to the narrators in this piece by their first names because it is a way of acknowledging connection and because first names are how people address one another within a community of activists.

**23.** Interview with Junior Alcantara; recorded by Leyla Vural, March 2016.

**24.** Interview with Junior Alcantara; recorded by Leyla Vural, March 2016.

**25.** Jacob A Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890.

**26.** Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel Czitrom, *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, reprint edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014, pp 129-132.

**27.** Foucault and Miskowicz, 1986, p 26.

**28.** The New York Historical Society, Department of Prints, Photographs and Architectural Collections, PR 290: Claire Yaffa, 'Children with Aids Photograph Collection'.

**29.** The Hart Island Project [web page]. Accessed online at [www.hartisland.net](http://www.hartisland.net), 14 March 2019. The Hart Island Project helps people with family and friends buried on Hart Island and advocates for transferring responsibility for Hart Island to New

York City's Department of Parks and Recreation.

**30.** Interview with William Burnett; recorded by Leyla Vural, March 2015.

**31.** Interview with Rogers; recorded by Leyla Vural, December 2015.

**32.** Interview with William Burnett; recorded by Leyla Vural, March 2015.

**33.** Sarah K Loose, 'Groundswell: oral history for social change – a synthesis', Oral History MA dissertation, Columbia University, 2012, p 15. Accessed online at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52ccd161e4b0739bcd98ed40/t/5570b509e4b0b6329c5c7644/1433449737955/Groundswell+2011+Synthesis.pdf>, 23 May 2019.

For more about Groundswell see [www.oralhistoryforsocialchange.org](http://www.oralhistoryforsocialchange.org).

**34.** Alessandro Portelli, *Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, p viii.

**35.** Katie Holmes, 'Does it matter if she cried? Recording emotion and the Australian Generations Oral History Project', *Oral History Review*, vol 44, no 1, 2017, 56-76, p 75.

**36.** Holmes, p 57.

**37.** Ann Cvetkovich, 'Legacies of trauma, legacies of activism: ACT UP's lesbians', in David L Eng and David Kazanjian (eds), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p 436.

**38.** Foucault and Miskowicz, 1986, p 26.

**39.** Picture the Homeless, 'Potter's Field'. Accessed online at [www.picturethehomeless.org/home/whatwedo/past-organizing-campaigns/potters-field/](http://www.picturethehomeless.org/home/whatwedo/past-organizing-campaigns/potters-field/), 16 March 2019, ellipsis in the original.

**40.** Interview with William Burnett; recorded by Leyla Vural, March 2015.

**41.** Silver, 1967, p 11.

**42.** Bess Lovejoy and Allison C Meier, 'Opinion: the graves of forgotten New Yorkers', *New York Times*, 18 March 2014. Accessed online at [www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/opinion/the-graves-of-forgotten-new-yorkers.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/opinion/the-graves-of-forgotten-new-yorkers.html), 5 June 2019.

**43.** Interview with Rogers; recorded by Leyla Vural, December 2015.

**44.** Interview with Rogers; recorded by Leyla Vural, December 2015.

**45.** Interview with William Burnett; recorded by Leyla Vural, March 2015.

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