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Battles in the Cemetery: Power Structures Acting Upon African-American Mortuary Landscapes in the United States.

Walking down a sandy lane in the southern United States on the outskirts of the local community, your footsteps kick up clouds of dirt that make the hot, dry air difficult to breathe. The light breeze does little to relieve the heat, and through the thick drone of cicadas, you hear the sound of a slow-moving river. Following the sound in hopes of taking a quick swim, you discover a wild-grown field of rolling mounds. Trees litter the area, growing twisted and knobbed around boulders, tall grasses sway in the light breeze, and native wildflowers provide homes to buzzing insects. When walking through the forgotten landscape, you find non-native flowers and trees such as periwinkle, yuccas, daylilies, and cedar trees are clustered about, and you start to notice pieces of broken glass, shards of ceramics and tobacco pipes (Baugher and Veit 2014 169-170; Brooks 2011, 180-181; Burg 2023, 549).

Near the back of the field, a concrete gravestone has fallen over, its inscription rendered illegible by lichen. You realize that you are in a forgotten burial ground, and in trying to figure out the identity of these nameless people laid to rest underneath your feet, you find a curious metal star-shaped spoke that says "USCT."

This marker is a government-issued military grave marker from the Civil War for the United States Colored Troops (Baugher and Veit 2014 175-176; Burg 2023, 563; King 2010, 133). You have stumbled your way into a decomposing African-American historic cemetery, now only remembered by a few older community members whose families and friends were buried here long ago. What remains of this once active resting ground of the dead tells whispers of a time of hard colour lines, political segregation, denied freedoms. Most importantly, however, it also speaks of bonded community and strong resilience. Although African-American life in the United States has always been, and continues to be, a fight for equality and freedom, the years between the American Revolutionary War of 1775 to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1862 was a significant period of political, social, and economic marginalization, struggle, and change.

By analyzing and comparing African-American Antebellum and post-emancipation cemeteries through a Foucauldian and post-processualist understanding and representation of power, I will illustrate how African-Americans pushed against enslavement and marginalization and expressed their form of unique power. This resistance will be unveiled by looking at the political and economic structures enacted upon the cemeteries, their physical layout, and the symbolic expressions of identity to illustrate these communities' struggle and resilience.

Theoretical Background

Power is an unbounded, multi-dimensional concept used in the social sciences to discuss sets of relations between

all elements of social life, including the agency of people, socio-political-economic structures, and environments. Philosopher and social historian Michel Foucault's theory of power is one of the most prevalent theory and definition of power, which was introduced in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1975):

> It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies (Lynch 2014, 19).

Foucault identifies three empirical modes of power: sovereignty power, disciplinary power, and biopower. Sovereignty power is the earliest form of power enacted through a central dominating entity, whether a sovereign ruler, a tribunal, or a government (Lynch 2014, 13). This power is represented through the ability to seize or take away rather than through direct control. Sovereign power can end a life, but also enslave or impoverish it. What it cannot take, however, it cannot control. This is often illustrated through legal systems that follow an execution-based punishment system based on revenge rather than rehabilitation (Taylor 2014, 44-46). Within a sovereign dominant society, death is heavily ritualized as it

is the ultimate expression of the ruler's power, whether through the taking of life through executions, or the gaudy funeral mourning of those in power. Disciplinary power, which emerged in the 18th century, is concerned with the control of individuals through surveillance-based correctional systems and is the most common expression of power in modern organization of societies. Discipline is focused on individuals' psychological and material conditions for deviance and maintains and enforces order through institutional facilities such as prisons, psychiatric wards, and education systems (Lynch 2014, 13-14; Taylor 2014, 44). Biopower emerged slightly after disciplinary power. These two are heavily intertwined and use the same control methods. Disciplinary power is focused on the individual and micro-technology; biopower, in contrast, is understood as the power over the body and is concerned with populations and macro-technology (Taylor 2014, 44-46). Biopower focuses on systematic reasons for social behaviour, is concerned with demographics, and can give and improve life. It is expressed through a population's accessibility to health care, housing, and migration. Since biopower is enforced through giving life, death becomes a muted, hidden aspect of life compared to the highly visible, pompous displays of executions and mourning under sovereignty power (Lynch 2014, 14; Taylor 2014, 44-46). Cemeteries and other mortuary settings have been, and always will be, a political landscape where mortuary rites reflect conflict and power structures. Strict protocol, rules and expectations of representation following the death of a loved one are enforced through varying governing bodies. Individuals are boiled down to basic societal identity markers, whether those be gender, religion, class, or race.

Theory and methods for interpreting these basic societal identity markers through grave goods, cemetery organization, and burial type are constantly being refined and negotiated within archaeology. This is due to their importance as multi-faceted signifiers of deeply entangled, heavily ritualized, and complex elements of social life. Early structural functionalists, such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard, interpreted the funerary rite both as evidence of social bonds between mourners and as a strengthening of political authority (Parker Pearson 2000, 22-23). New Archaeologists, such as Binford, Saxe, and Goldstein, tried following middle-range theory to create axioms of funerary customs based on ethnographic databases rooted within a historical evolutionary model of societies and social stratification (Binford 1971; Brown 1993, 3-5; Carr 1995; Parker Pearson 2000, 72-78). The post-processualist school of thought discarded the New Archaeological notion of middle-range theory and instead viewed funerals as contested events in which social roles are constructed, negotiated, or discarded, aligning with the theory of practice. In this model, social roles are not predefined, but are instead constantly affirmed through social action and practice. Status is considered to be formed based on inextricably interwoven elements of one's gender, political, and kinship positionality, lifestyle, and economic class. This status is also heavily influenced by agency over structural functionalism (Cipolla 2014; Parker Pearson 2000, 72-94).

These post-processual reconceptualizations on how rank and status are created and maintained within societies allowed for new understandings of the inner workings of power and ideology within funerary archaeology. This in turn changed the understanding of mortuary landscapes to not simply be a direct reflection of the living, but a moment where power can be radically reordered and indicate people's understanding of social relationships and the meaning of existence through tangible and intangible means (Parker Pearson 2000, 83-85). This idealized reflection and contestation of power are why Foucault considers cemeteries as a strange but powerful heterotopia, or places of "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live " (Foucault 1986, 23). They are locations outside the everyday aspects of life and are heavily ritualized spaces. They are, however, simultaneously connected to and representative of an idealized, organized, and simplified form of all aspects of society (Foucault 1986, 23-24).

Mortuary landscapes are a form of resilience and identity building, reflecting the unspoken political struggles within the communities while also redefining them.

Historical Background

The transatlantic slave trade, originating in the 16th century, was a terrible, extensive, and lucrative trading network whose purpose was the mass, forced migration of African populations by colonial powers such as Britain, the US, France, Denmark, and Spain to the New World in order to provide labour for the exploitation of natural

resources (Gates 2011, 3-11). The slave trade started in the American Colonies in August of 1619, one year before the Mayflower landed. During the slave trade period, over 12 million Africans were shipped to the United States, with 15 percent of them never reaching their destination, but perishing en route (Gates 2011, 3-4). Forty-five percent of people came from West Central Africa but represented diverse cultures, languages, and customs.

The use of slave labour allowed plantations to produce large cash crops, such as cotton, tobacco, and rice, at low costs (Brooks 2011, 176; King 2010, 125). As the relocated Africans were viewed as property and not fully human, plantation owners treated them as expendable commodities that were valued only for the outputs of their labor. Such dehumanization resulted in massively inhuman working and living conditions, little to no access to health care, and severely restricted freedoms of mobility, social life, and identity expression. Families were often purposely separated, and mortality rates were incredibly high; only 10% of children survived past the age of 16 (Gates 2011, 4).

In many agricultural and labour-intensive regions, enslaved populations often outnumbered free individuals, leading plantation owners and city officials to be fearful of an uprising and highly suspicious of African traditions (Smith 2020, 49-50). This fear led to many places passing legal restrictions against enslaved individuals' free movement and gathering. In 1680, The House of Burgess, Virginia passed a law preventing gatherings on the basis that "the frequent meeting of considerable numbers of negroe slaves under pretence of feasts and burials is judged of dangerous consequence” (Smith 2020, 49).

Starting in the later 1700s and into the 1800s, views in the north, especially among Quaker communities, started changing about slavery. Multiple petitions and calls for the dismantling of the system were raised. By the late 1700s, growing challenges to the institution of slavery began to grow that were rooted in protests and literary works of freed African Americans in the north, most notably Jean Baptiste Point du Sable (Gates 2011, 27-28).

During this same time, the American Revolution occurred, where the original 13 colonies declared independence from Britain and established the United States of America. The Declaration of Independence was penned, in part, by Thomas Jefferson, who spoke about the freedom and liberty of man. Although slavery was not abolished then, these words and sentiments would form the basis of later petitions. The period between the end of the Revolutionary War and the start of the Civil War is called the Antebellum period, where slavery was enshrined, especially in the South's cash crop and heavy labour industries, as part of the United States legal system. In 1807, legislation prohibiting external participation in the transatlantic slave trade was passed in the hope of a gradual abolition of the institution of slavery, but this did nothing to prevent state legislation, nor internal trading in the South. The 19th century saw growing political traction of the abolitionist movement, and many states in the North and West passed legislation that slowly demolished the institution of slavery. This movement, however, was opposed by the growing financial and political power held by the Southern anti-abolitionists (Gates 2011, 49-69).

On April 12th, 1861, the Civil War between the

abolitionist Northern states, known colloquially as the Union, and the anti-abolitionist Southern states, the Confederacy, broke out. This developed into an incredibly bloody and gruesome struggle. African Americans fought on both sides, either voluntarily or by forced participation (Gates 2011, 122-123). The high mortality rates resulted in significant changes to burial practices, predominantly driven through the invention, perfection, and rising popularity of embalming (Redman 2023, 28-34). The Civil War ended with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, which abolished slavery federally throughout the United States and ushered in the post-Emancipation period, also known as the Reconstruction period, which continued until the recognized start of the Jim Crow era of segregation in 1877 (Gates 2011, 132-134).

The Antebellum Period

The political structure of the institution of slavery within the United States followed a sovereignty-dominated power system, in which the much smaller white population dominated enslaved African Americans by limiting movements and control over freedom and labour (Lynch, 2011). A byproduct of this was significant restrictions and regulations in burials and the expression of identity in death. During the Antebellum Period, African Americans were denied membership to the church, despite the general enforcement of Western Christian ideals, including some plantation owners forcing them to attend church services. Without membership in the church, African Americans were forbidden burial on consecrated grounds, even if they

were professed Christians (Cook 2019, 78-79: Smith 2020, 45-47).

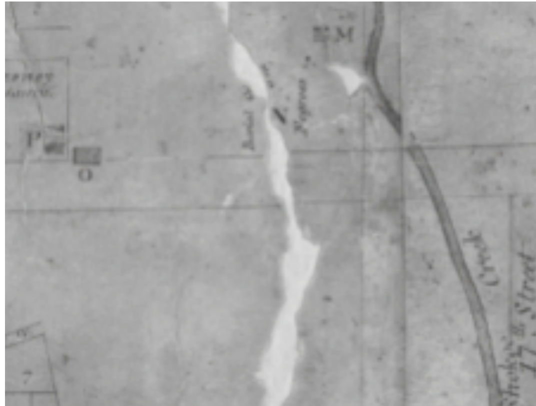

Figure 1: “Plan of the City of Richmond” by Richard Young, circa 1809. ‘Burial Ground for Negroes’ is indicated, ‘N’ is the Gallows, ‘M’ is the powder magazine, ‘O’ and ‘P’ on top of the hill is the Baptist meeting house and theatre. From Smith 2014:47.

In some places, separate or segregated cemeteries were established (although rarely legally recognized or protected), often on the city's fringes (King 2010, 127: Rainville 2009, 196-197; Smith 2020, 45-47). In the City of Richmond, the western bank of Shockoe Creek was one such site. Located at the bottom of the hill where the White cemetery and Baptist church were situated, the site was chosen because it was undesirable to the development of the white community (Smith 2020, 46-53). This is a direct reflection, rooted within the physical landscape, on the status and place of African Americans within White American society. Due to the common practice of splitting up families, cemeteries were often organized based on clusters of loose relational connections that

blended cultural affiliation, friends, and kinship, which reflects how the ersatz, replacement kinship of the displaced slaves, was organized (Bougher and Veit 2014, 168-169; Parker Pearson 2000, 12-17). Most African American headstones from this time were purchased by either the current, or a former, enslaver. "Faithful slave," "loyal slave," and "of African Descent" were common parts of the epigraphy associating the deceased in a paternalistic relationship with their enslaver, and rarely with family, friends, or community (Baugher and Veit 2014, 169-171). At the time, erecting gravemarkers of slaves was a way of asserting power and affirming ownership of the individual, with the other option being buried in an unmarked grave on the fringes of society (Baugher and Veit 2014, 171).

Funerals were usually held at night when people were free from their daytime labour obligations and free from the watchful eye of the plantation owners. Little is known about the ceremonies, but analyses of the grave offerings and burial practices indicate a strong influence from West African burial traditions and beliefs creolized with enforced Western Christianity beliefs (King 2010, 128). The orientation of the coffin varies, but most often seen is an east-west orientation, either following the sun, as is tradition in West African Burials, or following the Christian tradition of being positioned to rise facing Jesus on Judgement day (Brooks 2011, 182). Most burials also featured some form of shrouding, or Western style, simple wood coffins (Baugher and Veit 2014, 52-58). Although the specific burial traditions varied between cultures, most believed in some form of the spirit or soul existing beyond life. The funeral and burial were important elements in guiding the soul to the next life alongside all the things

they might need, such as tobacco or food offerings (Baugher and Veit 2014, 170). Broken glass, ceramics and other damaged household goods are typical grave offerings. It is impossible to tell for sure whether they were intentionally broken or not. There is a strong case for this to be either an interaction of the West African burial tradition to leave broken objects on top of burial to prevent the spirit from returning to the world of the living, or a metaphorical symbol from breaking the enslavement through the broken object so that the deceased may be free in the afterlife (Baugher and Veit 2014, 169-171; Brooks 2011, 181-182; King 2010, 127-128). Later on, broken clocks and pocket watches became standard grave offerings and symbols, which could hold a similar meaning and be used in cases of more significant expendable economic resources (King 2010, 128). Sunbleached seashells are also commonly found and could be connected with the frequent representation of the afterlife as an ocean, with the bleached white possibly symbolically representing purity (Brooks 2011, 181-182; King 2010, 127-128). Old West African traditions and symbols were adapted to the new situations and took on new meanings to reflect the treatment and enslavement that the community faced.

In the face of dehumanizing policies that relegated the deceased to the outskirts of town on unprotected land without documentation, these creolized traditions were a way of acknowledging individual identity and the unique cultural community which was never allowed to be expressed in living society. Although not every individual was West African, or even understood the tradition's origins, the continued use was a way of fighting against

enslavement, assimilation, and political restrictions against African traditions (Smith 2020, 48-51).

Post-Emancipation Period

The Post-Emancipation period created a significant political change in the lives of enslaved African Americans, shifting the dominant form of power from sovereignty to biopower. Hard colour lines were very present within communities, and African Americans were still marginalized, just not through direct means of total control over movement and physical punishment. Biopower manifesting in the communities is indicated through the lower education status, higher incarceration rates, and higher mortality rates in African American populations (Smith 2020, 22-214).

Many communities still faced significant political and economic barriers in establishing burial grounds, along with racial backlash and violent desecration of graves (Davidson 2007; Smith 2020, 211-216; Rainville 2009, 196-197). Especially in the South, there was a major movement toward the commemoration of the *Lost Cause*, where monuments and memorials were commissioned to remember those who lost their lives during the Civil War protecting the institution of slavery. In opposition to this, the establishment and commemoration of Freed individuals became a meaningful political action and was often the target of desecration or other acts of violence and disrespect (Stringfield 2021, 1061-1062). In general, African American cemeteries were also targets for grave robbing, medical experiments, and general vandalism

because higher society which controlled medical institutions and enforced legal policies continued to view African Americans as an educational curiosity and undeserving of peaceful and respectful burials. This is a direct reflection of how the legal system continuously treated African Americans and their placement within society (see Davidson 2007 analysis of body snatching in Freedman's Cemetery, TX).

Despite this repression, many African American communities developed their own mortuary economic business, and their members could be buried with loved ones utilizing established traditions of permanent monumentality (Smith 2020, 216-220; Stringfield 2021, 1061). The Beautification of Death movement heavily influenced the large monuments and park-like layout of the post-emancipation uplift cemeteries (Smith 2020, 212-220). People created their social support systems and institutions by establishing their own churches, organizing community political rallies, holding workshops, and establishing organizations to financially support other social services, such as health care (Smith 2020, 216-220).

Part of this effort was establishing Black-owned and operated funerary businesses, and fraternities to help fund funerals. Headstones and other identity markers, culturally appropriate names, and community and career associations were important elements of burials post-emancipation (Burg 2023 549-562; Cook 2019, 81-84; Smith 2020, 220-225; Stringfield 202, 1062-1068). A significant goal of the enslavement system was to take away someone's identity and personhood.This included tactics such as anglicized name changes, including the forced adoption of the enslaver's last name, the identity of

someone based on gender for official documents, and anonymously burying individuals, or else identifying them as slaves. So the importance of being buried with a marked grave using your own name connected to your family can not be understated. Having a respectable funeral, including all of the furnishings and trimmings, became a symbol of upward mobility and respectability within the community.

This symbol was critical, as African American communities were denied many of the freedoms of expression and financial control (Smith 2020, 211-241). Many individuals used African American businesses or artisans in the construction of mortuary accoutrements, as this brought and kept economic revenue within, creating a tight-knit community of mourning. It also allowed for cheaper alternatives with specific African American traditions represented, such as African American spellings and linguistic variations on epigraphs, as well as headstone symbols like suns or stopped clocks (Burg 2023 549-462; Cook 2019, 84-87; Smith 2020, 220-225; Stringfield 2021, 1063-1068).

Figure 2: Image of a Headstone featuring Baptist and African iconography imprinted into concrete (Stringfield 2021).

Commonly seen would be headstones made of alternative, cheaper materials such as concrete, plaster, and brick, where the inscription could be written on the wet material rather than needing to be chiselled (Baugher and Veit 2014, 175; Burg 2023 549-462; Cook 2019, 87-89; Smith 2020, 220-225; Stringfield 2021, 1059). Not only was this more personal and cheaper, but it also allowed for symbolic material goods such as broken glass and seashells to be embedded within the marker rather than scattered on top of the burial (Baugher and Veit 2014 175; Smith 2020, 220-225; Stringfield 2021, 1058). One example is a coffin-shaped marker made from concrete in Pensacola with seashells embedded in the abstract form of a crucifix (Stringfield 2021, 1067). After such a long period of control and dehumanization, the ability to have the freedom to be buried by your loved ones and have a permanent marker that friends and family could visit was a significant expression of power. This expression was

significant, especially since Civil War monuments and other political backlash from the white community tried to continue to erase African American culture and lives.

Conclusion

The complex, multi-factored expression of power resulting from systems of relations echoes within the overgrown remains of a long-forgotten cemetery. A battle of freedom is told: freedom of movement, financial independence, belonging, and expression of identity. The cemetery's symbol and expression of power are not limited to reflecting the past, however; they are also a window on a modern political and social struggle (Burg 2023 570-573; Rainville 2009 Smith 2020, 235-241; Stringfield 2021). Many African American cemeteries lie forgotten, vandalized, and in ruin compared to the clean, vibrant, and imposing Victorian park-like cemeteries of White communities.

Since Antebellum cemeteries were rarely legally acknowledged or marked on maps, these spaces are more likely to be developed without any archaeological or historical investigation destroying the burials and the history within them (MacLeod-Leslie 2012, 29). Many times there are still living descendants of the deceased that are directly affected by the destruction of cemeteries, especially if their location was known through oral histories but was denied recognition and protection by legal authorities. Cemetery preservation, or lack thereof, affects collective public memory and the establishment of long-term habitation and history in the region, which is often downplayed or outright ignored (Burg 2023

570-573; Rainville 2009). Without tangible, recognized spaces, African American communities lose physical connection to the land and are denied any historical relationship to any particular area. In recent years, there has been a great call for marginalized communities' historical cemeteries to be preserved and respected like those of the dominant community. Influential work by Dr. Lynn Rainville (2009) in establishing proper recording and preservation protocols for historic cemeteries in Virginia, and Dr. Blakey's work with the New York Burial Ground, has rallied community support and awareness towards protecting and cleaning these historic landscapes (Baugher and Veit 2014, 52-54; Blakey 2010; Lans et al. 2023). In a monumental political victory, the African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act was passed in 2023, following the highlighting of general issues surrounding systematic racism faced by African American communities today. This act provides a legal grounding and financial program to protect and maintain historic African American cemeteries from vandalism and developmental encroachment (Lans et al, 2023). The historic cemeteries are a proud and powerful symbol of the struggle and resilience of these communities, as well as a reminder of the marginalization they still face.

This is not just an American issue. Black cemeteries in Canada are at risk for being forgotten, and local communities are fighting for their spaces to be recognized and protected as heritage spaces (MacLeod-Leslie 2012). When these cemeteries are allowed to disappear into the background and crumble back to the earth, their story goes with them, to the detriment of all (Burg 2023 573-74; Rainville 2009).

So next time you go for a walk, notice the inhabitant spaces and wonder whose wander feet had trend on the ground before you, whose grandmother's stories spoke of the trees and boulders you now see, whose loved ones might sleep in the earth knowing they were cared for even if their name is now lost to history. Look for the signs of resilience, cultures, and ways of life that refuse to be forgotten and lost despite all the hardships and pain. Do not let these spaces become forgotten, bulldozed over for a new office building—rather, learn from the whispers that can be heard on the wind, through the stories from your neighbours, and in writings tucked away in boxes and attic.

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Heather Tough est étudiante en première année de maîtrise au département de l'archéologie de l'Université Memorial de Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador. Sa recherche de maîtrise analyse l'effacement de l'histoire des Noirs entre 1600 et 1900 dans le paysage monumental (?) du Canada atlantique. Plus largement, elle s'intéresse à la manière dont l'identité et la mémoire collective sont créées et négociées dans les paysages funéraires et monumentaux, avec un intérêt particulier pour les systèmes de pouvoir et la marginalisation. Heather a obtenu son diplôme de premier cycle à l'université Memorial en octobre 2024, avec une double spécialisation en archéologie et en anthropologie, ainsi qu'un certificat en études autochtones. Ce manuscrit a été complété afin de satisfaire aux exigences du cours *Arch 4411: Théorie archéologique* et a reçu le prix de vice-chancelier adjoint pour les étudiants de premier cycle en 2024.

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