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When Black History Is Unearthed, Who Gets to Speak for the Dead?

Efforts to rescue African American burial grounds and remains have exposed deep conflicts over inheritance and representation.

By Jill Lepore • September 27, 2021



At least fifteen hundred African Americans are buried in Geer Cemetery, in Durham, North Carolina. Only two hundred headstones now remain, but locals are painstakingly working to reconstruct the site's population and to restore its grounds. Photographs by Donavon Smallwood for The New Yorker

Herein lie buried many things.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, 1903.

When Deidre Barnes was a kid in North Carolina, horsing around in the back seat of the car with her little brother, her grandfather drove by the woods in a white neighborhood in Durham. “You got cousins up in there,” he called back from the driver’s seat, nodding at a stand of loblolly pines in a tangle of kudzu. Barnes and her brother exchanged wide-eyed glances: they had cousins who were wild people? Only later, looking hard, did they spy a headstone: “Oh, it’s a *cemetery*.” A few years ago, Barnes read in the newspaper that the place was called Geer. “My grandmother’s maiden name is Geer,” she told me. “And so I asked her, ‘Do we have people buried there?’”

I met Barnes at the cemetery on a warm, cicada night, with Debra Gonzalez-Garcia, the president of the Friends of Geer Cemetery. “When I was growing up, I could name five African Americans in history,” Gonzalez-Garcia said. “Five. Nobody else did anything.” At least fifteen hundred people who did all sorts of things are buried in Geer Cemetery, including Deidre Barnes’s great-grandfather, a grandson of Jesse Geer, a plantation owner who sold two acres of land to three Black freedmen in 1877. Gonzalez-Garcia and her team have been painstakingly reconstructing the cemetery’s population from its two hundred surviving headstones and from burial cards recorded by the W.P.A. in the nineteen-thirties.

The movement to save Black cemeteries has been growing for decades, led by Black women like Barnes and Gonzalez-Garcia, who have families to care for and work full-time jobs but volunteer countless hours and formidable organizing skills looking after the dead and upending American history. They transcribe death certificates; they collect oral histories. They bring in community organizations—Keep Durham Beautiful helps out at Geer—and hand out rakes and shears and loppers to Scouts and college students, tackling poison ivy that’s strangling trees. They hold tours, warning everyone to wear long pants, because of the snakes. They work with churches. They work with businesses: Durham Marble Works repairs broken headstones. Eagle Scouts installed Carolina gravel along what might once have been a carriage road. An archeological survey will be done soon, to make sure that, when you walk that road, you’re not stepping on sunken graves.

“The people who started White Rock Baptist Church and St. Joseph’s A.M.E.,” Barnes told me, “they’re buried here.” She and Gonzalez-Garcia seemed to know each epitaph, telling story after story about African American families who thrived in the early years after Reconstruction—getting college degrees, starting businesses—only to lose most of their gains to segregation and swindles. “Olivia Tilley Wills,” Gonzalez-Garcia said, pointing to a stone, amid the overgrowth. “She was married twice. There was a big court case about her estate. She had investments.”

Underneath America lies an apartheid of the departed. Violence done to the living is usually done to their dead, who

are dug up, mowed down, and built on. In the Jim Crow South, Black people paid taxes that went to building and erecting Confederate monuments. They buried their own dead with the help of mutual-aid societies, fraternal organizations, and insurance policies. Cemeteries work on something like a pyramid scheme: payments for new plots cover the cost of maintaining old ones. “Perpetual care” is, everywhere, notional, but that notion relies on an accumulation of capital that decades of disenfranchisement and discrimination have made impossible in many Black communities, even as racial terror also drove millions of people from the South during the Great Migration, leaving their ancestors behind. It’s amazing that Geer survived. Durham’s other Black cemeteries were run right over. “Hickstown’s part of the freeway,” Gonzalez-Garcia told me, counting them off. “Violet Park is a church parking lot.”

What would it mean for the future of the United States to mark and honor these places? In 2019, the four-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the first captive Africans in Virginia, members of Congress from North Carolina and Virginia, inspired by volunteer organizations like the Friends of Geer, introduced the African-American Burial Grounds Network Act. Last year, an amended version passed unanimously in the Senate. It doesn’t come with any money, but if it’s enacted it will authorize the National Park Service to coordinate efforts to identify, preserve, and interpret places like Geer, Hickstown, and Violet Park. Federal legislation might also provide some legal clarity. A few years ago, a Geer neighbor took down a giant tree; as it fell, it crushed a row of headstones. They’re pinned there still. There’s little the Friends can do about that: they don’t own the land. “Legally, this place is considered abandoned,” Gonzalez-Garcia explained. “The city hasn’t traced anyone who’s inherited the title.” The Friends of Geer can’t find a titleholder, either, and not for lack of trying. Their work is guided by the principle that descendants (“people with bodies in the ground”) should decide what to do with the cemetery. They’ve so far found about fifty. They’re still looking.

Meanwhile, that same principle—that descendants decide—lies at the center of a widening controversy about human remains in the collections of universities and anatomical and anthropological museums. It has led to a proposal for another piece of federal legislation modelled on the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, *nagpra*, but for African American graves—an *aagpra*. This spring, in an essay published in *Nature*, three young Black archeologists called for, among other things, a halt to the unethical study of all human remains in the United States until those of people descended from Africans can be identified, and descendants found and consulted. Another group of Black archeologists argued that, on the contrary, suspending research would only further widen the gap between what scientists know about people of African and European ancestry, leading to worse public-health outcomes for African Americans, who are already adversely affected by a history of medical mistreatment and poor representation in everything from clinical trials to the human-genome project. Antiracist orthodoxy has it that everything’s either antiracist or racist: there is no other position. This anguished disagreement reveals the limits of that premise.

It isn't merely an academic dispute. The proposed burial-grounds network and graves-protection acts are parts of a larger public deliberation, less the always elusive "national conversation" than a quieter collective act of conscientious mourning, expressed, too, in new monuments and museum exhibits. History gets written down in books but, like archeology, it can seep up from the earth itself, from a loamy underground of sacred, ancient things: gravestones tucked under elms and tangled by vines; iron-nailed coffins trapped beneath pavement and parking lots and highway overpasses. How and whether the debates over human remains get resolved holds consequences not only for how Americans understand the country's past but also for how they picture its future. The dispute itself, along the razor's edge between archeology and history, is beset by a horrible irony. Enslavement and segregation denied people property and ancestry. But much here appears to turn on inheritance and title: Who owns these graveyards? Who owns these bones? Who owns, and what is owed?

Bury me not in a land of slaves.
—*Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1858.*

When I went to Geer Cemetery, dusty with Carolina gravel, I was about midway through a road trip from New Hampshire to Florida. I'd plotted a route that would take me through battlefields in today's history-and-archeology wars. I started out in Portsmouth, a brick city founded in 1652 along the Piscataqua River and the site of the northernmost African burial-ground memorial in the United States, and I ended in the Tampa Bay area, on the Gulf Coast, incorporated in 1866, where a half-dozen paved-over Black cemeteries holding thousands of graves have been found in the past two years alone, including under a parking lot at the Rays' baseball stadium, Tropicana Field.

In an interview Toni Morrison gave in 1989, she explained why she'd written "Beloved," a novel whose title is an epitaph. "There is no place that you and I can go to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves," she said. No marker or plaque, no museum or statue. "There's not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit, or you can visit, in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or better still on the banks of the Mississippi." Three decades after "Beloved," people everywhere are tending to markers.

Portsmouth's Negro Burying Ground first appeared on a map in 1705 and disappeared only after 1902, but it had already been built over by the eighteen-teens. Primus Fowle, an enslaved artisan who operated the press that printed the *New Hampshire Gazette*, was buried there in 1791. The *Gazette* printed an epitaph: "Now he's dead, we sure may say / Of him, as of all men, / That while in silent graves they lay / They'll not be plag'd agen." In October, 2003, construction crews working on a sewer line under Chestnut Street discovered eight coffins, which turned out to be a fraction of those buried there. In deciding

what to do next, Portsmouth took as its model the New York African Burial Ground Project, an effort that began in 1992, after the remains of hundreds of people—at a site that held some twenty thousand—were found in lower Manhattan during excavations for a federal office building. Because these weren't Native American graves, no law explicitly applied to burial grounds which would prevent the government from continuing to excavate and build. Protests persuaded Congress to authorize funds for a memorial. Michael Blakey, a bioarcheologist then at Howard University, led the study of the remains and artifacts; he also pioneered a protocol for collaborating with the Black community, rather than leaving decisions to white property owners, government officials, and archeologists. Under *nagpra*, indigenous artifacts and remains were returned to Native nations designated as their "culturally affiliated group." Blakey created an analogous group-rights category: what he called the "descendant community."

Descendants can be hard to find, for reasons that have everything to do with the atrocities of slavery, which stole people from their homes, separated children and parents, barred marriage, and assigned to people no family name except that of the people who claimed to own them. You can find Primus Fowle at Findagrave.com, but you can't find his family tree at Ancestry.com. Given the difficulty of identifying literal descendants, the New York African Burial Ground Project used a proxy—the local community of African Americans. Portsmouth's population is more than ninety per cent white. The city council appointed a committee, led by a local Black educator, that, in the absence of a descendant community, held public meetings and selected a memorial designed around the theme of honoring those who have been forgotten. Sometimes the people in charge of a site do nothing more than consult with a descendant community after the fact. In an article published last year, Blakey denounced some white archeologists working in this field for "appropriating" human remains and "avoiding acknowledgment and redress of White racism, blinded to their own deep subjectivity and deaf to critiques of those who are not of their own White likeness and presumed neutral voice." (Blakey declined to speak with me.)

In 2003, just as Portsmouth's site was discovered, the New York remains were carried from Blakey's lab at Howard back to New York and reburied in a series of ceremonies called the Rites of Ancestral Return. The site is now a national monument. Here, too, Portsmouth followed New York's example: in 2015, the remains found in 2003 were placed in eight coffins and reburied in a vault beneath that block of Chestnut, now permanently closed to through traffic, at the unveiling of a memorial featuring eight golden silhouettes that appear to rise up from the ground. A trail of red bricks is inscribed with the words from a petition that African-born Portsmouth men submitted to the New Hampshire legislature in 1779, seeking emancipation and pleading "that the name of 'slave' may no longer be heard in the land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom."

More unknown sites are sure to turn up, especially if the African-American Burial Grounds Network Act passes. Still, not all African burial grounds in the North have disappeared. Last March, Keith Stokes, whose first African ancestor arrived in Philadelphia and moved to Newport, Rhode Island, in 1795, buried his mother beside seven generations of his family in an area now called God's Little Acre. (In 2019, the Newport site was awarded a fifty-thousand-dollar grant from the African American Cultural Action Fund, which is part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.) What survives in God's Little Acre is a measure of what's been lost elsewhere. Its every headstone, including those carved by an enslaved eighteenth-century artisan named Pompe Stevens and dozens with engraved portraits—faces with strikingly African features—contains a record not found in any archive. As Stokes told me, “It’s a repository of African American heritage and history.”

Vincent Brown, a colleague of mine who teaches in Harvard's departments of history and African and African American studies, has ancestors who were enslaved in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake. He coined the expression “mortuary politics,” to describe the uses to which mid-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century diasporic Africans put the dead. Lately, there's a partisan politics to mortuary politics. “I'd for sure rather have voting rights than Juneteenth,” Brown told me. “But who knows where that goes, because anytime someone is celebrating the dead it's not really about the past—it's about how we imagine the future.” A century ago, when white supremacists destroyed Black cemeteries and erected Confederate monuments, they weren't so much honoring the Lost Cause as advancing their cause: segregation forever. A risk, in this fraught moment, is of getting strangled by their dead hands. White Tea Partiers dressed up like George Washington; Black Lives Matter activists demanded the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. The Trump Administration answered the *New York Times*' 1619 Project with its 1776 Commission. And then what? “There's a strange overlap between people who don't want to think about the history of slavery and people who fixate on the politics of race only in terms of slavery,” Brown said. Both assume that “the conflicts of the past are necessarily the conflicts of the present and the future, as if somehow the descendants of the slaveholders and of the slaves are supposed to be aligned with their ancestors forever.”

In Albany, a graveyard not on any map was found in 2005, on the onetime plantation of a cousin of Philip Schuyler, Alexander Hamilton's father-in-law. It held the bodies of African-descended people, mainly children and babies, all buried before 1790. Cordell Reaves, who is African American, was working for the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation when he learned about the Albany remains. Those bones went to the New York State Museum for analysis. “What people ate, where people were from, where their ancestors hailed from, understanding the effect of the brutal physical labor they were forced to endure,” he told me. “That story is etched into their actual bones.” For a long time, Reaves tried without success to get people interested in a reburial. In 2015, it finally came together: a Catholic cemetery donated

plots; woodworkers built coffins, and artists and schoolchildren decorated them. The dead lay in state in the front hall of Schuyler Mansion before the multi-faith burial, in one of the best attended and most moving public-history events the state has ever hosted. Reaves wept. “It was like lightning struck,” he told me. All that night and the next day, people read poems, and sang, and danced. “Something about this captured people,” Reaves said, tearing up again. “I'm not sure what it was. But I keep coming back to the word ‘reconciliation.’”

He's got a slightly different notion of what a descendant community might be. “I looked out at the sea of people that were there,” he said. “This country is rooted in the story of enslaved people. This is everyone's history.” You can be a cynic about all of this, Reaves admitted. It's one thing to pray for the dead; it's another to look after the living. But Reaves isn't cynical. “It's a door,” he said. “You open it, some of them will walk through.” The question is what lies on the other side.

God has no children whose rights may be safely trampled on.
—Frederick Douglass, 1854.

Samuel Morton, a Philadelphia doctor, began collecting skulls in 1830. Determined to study the craniums of the world's five newly classified “races,” he directed faraway correspondents to dig up graves and ship him heads, eventually amassing nearly nine hundred, including, closer to home, those of fourteen Black Philadelphians. Morton is buried in Philadelphia's Laurel Hill Cemetery, under an obelisk inscribed, “Wherever Truth Is Loved or Science Honored, His Name Will Be Revered.” In 1854, three years after Morton's death, Frederick Douglass called his work “scientific moonshine,” but it took more than a century for scientists to disavow the notion of biological race. And yet calls for the return of those remains rest on a notion of race, too.

Christopher Woods, a Sumerologist from the University of Chicago, is the first Black director of the Penn Museum, in Philadelphia. In April, not yet two weeks after he began his appointment, the museum issued a statement apologizing “for the unethical possession of human remains in the Morton Collection” and pledging to return them “to their ancestral communities.” Penn is not alone. In January, the president of Harvard issued a similar apology and charged a committee to inventory the human remains found in its museums, with priority given to those of “individuals of African descent who were or were likely to have been alive during the period of American enslavement.” As Evelyn Hammonds, a historian of science who chairs the Harvard committee, told me, “No one institution can solve all these questions alone.”

But Penn has other problems. Days after Woods's first apology, the museum issued another one, this time for holding on to the remains of a Black child killed by police in 1985 during a raid against the Black-liberation organization move. (The police bombed the move house, and eleven people, including

five children, were burned to death.) The museum returned those remains to the families this summer. As for the rest of the remains, including the Morton collection, “We want to do the right thing,” Woods told me. “We want to be able to repatriate individuals when descendant communities want that to be done.”

During the years when Morton was collecting skulls, much of Philadelphia’s African American community was burying its dead in a cemetery on Queen Street that’s now a playground called Weccacoe, for a Lenni Lenape word that means “peaceful place.” The day I stopped there, the playground was a tumble of sippy cups and strollers, water buckets and tubes of sunscreen, and toddlers playing pirates. Underneath lie thousands of graves.

Pennsylvania passed a gradual abolition law in 1780, and by the seventeen-nineties Philadelphia had a thriving free Black community, much of it centered on what is now the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1810, the Bethel church trustees and the A.M.E.’s founder, Richard Allen, bought a city block on Queen Street. Until 1864, the congregation used the land as a burial ground and then, in 1889, strapped for cash, sold it to cover the cost of a new church. The burial ground became a park, and then a playground. Nearly half the city’s population is Black, but the city’s monuments and museums mostly commemorate Benjamin Franklin, the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, and the drafting of the Constitution. Avenging the Ancestors, a coalition formed in 2002 to advocate for a slavery memorial in the city, has taken a broad view of the notion of a descendant community, describing its members as “today’s free Black sons and daughters” of “yesterday’s enslaved Black fathers and mothers.”

In 2010, Terry Buckalew, an independent researcher and aging antiwar activist, read in the newspaper that the city was about to renovate Weccacoe. “They were going to dig it up,” he told me. “They were going to put in new trees, new light poles, and a sprinkler. And I said, ‘Oh, no. The bodies are still there!’ ” Three years later, the city conducted a ground-penetrating-radar survey and concluded that the site, the Bethel Burying Ground, contained at least five thousand bodies. Buckalew, who is white, has spent his retirement researching the lives of those thousands of Black Philadelphians. I asked him why. “Reparations,” he said. “I firmly believe in reparations.”

Reparations rest on arguments about inheritance and descent. But, if genealogy has a new politics, it has always been urgent. After Emancipation, people put ads in newspapers, desperately looking for their children, husbands, wives, and parents. “information wanted of my mother, Lucy Smith, of Hopkinsville, Ky., formerly the slave of Dr. Smith. She was sold to a Mr. Jenks of Louisiana,” Ephraim Allen of Philadelphia posted in the *Christian Recorder* in 1868. Today, reparative genealogical projects in search of descendants put out calls on social media and ask people to fill out Google Forms. One of the most successful, the Georgetown Memory Project, has been looking for direct descendants of two hundred

and seventy-two enslaved people sold by the Jesuit Society that ran Georgetown in 1838, mostly to pay off debts. So far, the project, in conjunction with independent researchers and American Ancestors (the nation’s oldest genealogical research organization, which established pedigrees for Mayflower descendants), has located more than eight thousand descendants. In 2019, after a student-driven referendum, the university announced a plan to provide four hundred thousand dollars a year in reparations, in the form of “community-based projects to benefit Descendant communities.”

Reparations hasn’t been the dominant note sounded in Philadelphia over Bethel, perhaps in part because it was the A.M.E. Church that sold the burial ground. Still, there’s been plenty of controversy, along with the usual and more than usual delays of a complicated city-planning process. But last year the Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site Memorial Committee selected a proposal by the award-winning artist Karyn Olivier, for a memorial titled “Her Luxuriant Soil.”

Olivier, who teaches sculpture at Temple University, was born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1968. “My ancestors were slaves, but not here,” she told me. Olivier likes to work with soil: “It holds history and holds loss and holds pain.” But she took her title from a speech made by Richard Allen in 1817, before a meeting of three thousand free men of African heritage, who’d gathered to debate a proposal, mostly favored by Southern slaveowners, for resettling free Black men and women in West Africa. “Whereas our ancestors (not of choice) were the first cultivators of the wilds of America,” Allen said, “we their descendants feel ourselves entitled to participate in the blessings of her luxuriant soil.”

Olivier’s elegiac design incorporates features discovered during excavation of the site, including the inscription found on the only headstone that was unearthed: “Amelia Brown, 1819, Aged 26 years. Whosoever live and believeth in me, though we be dead, yet, shall we live.” A wrought-iron cemetery gate reading “Bethel Burying Ground” will mark the entrance to the park—half of which will still be a playground—where paving stones engraved with epitaphs will have something of the quality of Germany’s Stolpersteine, or stumbling stones, marked with the names of those who were killed in the Holocaust. You won’t trip over Olivier’s installation; instead, inscribed into water-activated concrete, the words will appear, and disappear, with rain, snow, and a sprinkler system. The plan is to break ground in March. But it won’t be very broken: the graves lie only inches deep.

Olivier’s work stands at the vanguard of a mournful aesthetic, closely associated with a Philadelphia-based non-profit called the Monument Lab, which, with a four-million-dollar grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, is reimagining the nation’s public memory. In September, the Monument Lab released the results of a National Monument Audit as a prelude to opening ten field offices across the country—places in need of new monuments “to transform the way our country’s history is told in public spaces.” The stops along my route began to

appear to me to be gathered together by thread. The artist Sonya Clark, who teaches at Amherst College, has worked with the Monument Lab, and she also once collaborated with a carver named Nicholas Benson, who owns the stone-carving shop in Newport where Pompe Stevens etched headstones: Benson carved the word “slave,” in Italian, in Roman capitals in marble, then sent her the dust. Clark likes to work with dust the way Olivier likes to work with soil. “To gather dust is to gather up all that is around us that is sloughed off,” she told me. In 2019, Clark covered a floor with dust she’d collected from Philadelphia sites like Independence Hall and Declaration House, and—dressed as a charwoman named Ella Watson, photographed by Gordon Parks in 1942—got down on one knee with a bucket of soapy water and scrubbed the floor with a Confederate-flag hand towel, to reveal the words “We hold these truths . . .”

Let the people see what they did to my boy.
—*Mamie Till-Mobley, 1955.*

Washington, D.C., is a monument to the dead. But the “national” dead rest on top of the Black dead: Arlington National Cemetery started out as a Black burial ground, the former plantation of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee, seized by the Union during the Civil War. After Appomattox, James Parks, once enslaved, dug the graves of the white Union dead; the United States Colored Troops were buried in a separate section. In 1898, President William McKinley opened Arlington to the Confederate dead, declaring, “In the spirit of fraternity, we should share with you in the care of the graves of Confederate soldiers.” In 1914, Woodrow Wilson dedicated a thirty-two-foot monument to the Confederacy, on Jefferson Davis’s birthday. Having admitted secessionists, Arlington remained racially segregated until Harry S. Truman integrated the military, in 1948. A bill introduced in 2020, the Removing Confederate Names and Symbols from Our Military Act, would, if passed, call for taking down the Confederate monument. But, like a lot of gestures made in 2020, nothing has yet come of it.

Washington’s newest monument is written on the ground across from the White House, where yellow painted letters spell black lives matter. If a commitment to naming and marking the Black dead undergirds reparation efforts, it also informs the design of new monuments and museum exhibits. They cleave to the same dark themes—dust and soil, ancestors and descendants, death and resurrection—because the spectre and the spectacle of Black death lie at the heart not only of anti-Black violence but also of Black freedom struggles. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, opened in Montgomery, Alabama, in 2018, suspends from its ceiling hundreds of steel coffins, memorials to victims of lynching. The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened in 2016, displays Emmett Till’s glass-topped casket. In September, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History installed a single artifact in a vast hall at the entrance of the museum, a historical marker that, until recently, stood along the banks of

the Tallahatchie River, where Till’s body was found. It’s a sign, evocative of an old headstone, that not long ago had been shot by vandals three hundred and seventeen times. Dimpled with BBs, pocked with shotgun blasts, riddled with the bullets of semi-automatic weapons, the sign now stands as a monument not to the past but to our violent national present. “It is an object of such pain,” Anthea Hartig, the museum’s director, said to me. “How do you memorialize when you’re still in the middle?” The historian Tsione Wolde-Michael, who co-curated the Till exhibit, is also the director of a new Center for Restorative History. “There are very few historical moments that create openings like the one we have right now,” Wolde-Michael told me. “You have publics around the globe that are pushing not just museums but universities, and governments, all sorts of major institutions, to not just issue solidarity statements, but to create altogether new structures.”

Lonnie Bunch III, the first Black secretary of the Smithsonian, has charged the National Museum of Natural History, down the block from the American-history museum, with assessing its human remains and sorting out individuals of African descent. Sabrina Sholts, a museum curator of biological anthropology, is leading that effort, from an office where a plastic skeleton, propped up in a corner, gathers dust. The audit is beset by a paradox: the people who collected these remains did so in order to invent “race” as a biological category, one that does not exist, but one that has to be used, somehow, to identify what remains can be considered those of African heritage. “Our discipline, biological anthropology, helped reify race,” Sholts told me. “And now we need to explain to the public that race does not describe biological variation.”

Here’s one way of thinking about this impasse. Democratic political struggle rests on the idea that ancestry is not destiny. But American history has betrayed that idea through centuries of state-imposed inequality, discrimination, and disenfranchisement. There is therefore no path to equality without measures aimed at repair: restorative history, reparations, the return of remains. But these measures sometimes advance the anti-democratic idea that ancestry is destiny. Politicians are trapped in this maze; you can hear them in there, screaming. Can archeologists and genealogists, curators and artists, and, not least, everyday people who volunteer in cemeteries find a way out?

Among the remains Sholts’s committee will consider are thirty-three skeletons found in Maryland in 1979, during the expansion of a state road through what turned out to have been a slave cemetery at Catoctin Furnace, an ironworks. (Catoctin isn’t far from Gettysburg, along a route taken by Civil War battleground tourists, where the highway signs read “Hallowed Ground.”) “It’s an accident of history that we have these bones,” Elizabeth Comer, the head of the Museum of the Ironworker, told me, but the museum is able to tell its visitors about those lives because of what has been learned from the remains by Sholts’s curatorial colleague Doug Owsley. Owsley’s study, along with sequencing done by the Harvard geneticist David Reich, is the kind of research that people calling for aagpra

want halted, until a descendant community can be found and consulted. (Owsley says that the local African American community supports the research.) As for what to do with the Catoctin remains now, Comer, too, believes that it's up to the descendants, except that, after years of steadfast searching, she has yet to find any.

Why add only historical African Americans to a protected category? If collecting human remains without consent is wrong, which was nagpra's argument, why not include everyone? Sholt's answer is that no one is more powerless to give consent than a person held as property, so the work has to begin there. She sees this change of approach as generational, and she's a part of the new generation.

Among the leaders of that generational change are Ayana Omilade Flewellen, from U.C. Riverside, and Justin Dunnivant, of U.C.L.A., co-founders of the Society of Black Archaeologists. They're trying to build the kind of restorative justice-based structures in archeology that Tsione Wolde-Michael wants to build in history. In an essay that appeared this past April in *American Antiquity*, Dunnivant, Wolde-Michael, and others warned, "The future of archaeology is antiracist, or it is nothing." The next month, *Nature* published an essay, by Dunnivant and others, calling for the creation of an aagpra, while acknowledging that "centuries of displacement and sparse genealogical records for African Americans can mean that it is difficult to link a set of human remains to specific Black descendants." The sensible solution, they argue, is to define "descendants both in genealogical terms and more inclusively, to welcome input from African Americans whose ancestors had a shared historical experience." According to guidelines established in 2018 by the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, that shared historical experience is enslavement. For Dunnivant, it's also being Black in America. "We need to do this research on behalf of the communities we are studying," Dunnivant told me. The Society of Black Archaeologists is calling for a national audit of all human remains.

But the universal keeps straining against the particular. The people whose remains were most likely to be taken without their consent are also the people whose lives are the least well documented in paper archives, the people about whom forensic and genetic analysis has the most to tell. That's why Henry Louis Gates, Jr., disagrees with aspects of the aagpra approach. Gates, who serves on the Harvard human-remains committee, has been studying the diaspora through historical records, genealogy, and DNA for decades. In 2006, he started a PBS series called "African American Lives" that spurred interest in genealogy in the African American community. Gates grew up in West Virginia, where he visited the "colored" cemetery. "My grandfather and my grandmother were buried there," he told me. He hasn't had a strong emotional response to the African-burial-ground ceremonies he's seen, with kente cloth and African drumming. "I'm deeply moved by the recovery of remains," Gates says, "but I worry that sometimes an excess of kitsch substitutes for substantial reflection about the meaning and import of the burial sites." Although he believes in a notion

of descent that encompasses shared historical experience, he thinks that decisions "shouldn't be made exclusively by local Black families who happened to live there" but through a process of collective deliberation involving genealogical descendants, representatives of the local Black community, scientists, and other researchers. For Gates, DNA research has the potential to repair some of the damage done by slavery: it can restore links that were severed when families were separated and genealogical evidence was destroyed. Otherwise, it's a Catch-22: not sequencing the DNA makes it harder to find the descendants to ask for their permission to sequence the DNA. "This is magical stuff," Gates said. "It's the only way to connect the dead to the living. It's the only way these dead can speak. Some people think they should be buried and sealed. I believe in respecting the dead. I also respect the living."

Fatimah Jackson, a professor of biology at Howard University, has been weighing the implications of aagpra for scientific research. (Jackson, like Blakey, is a former director of Howard's W. Montague Cobb Research Laboratory, which houses the largest collection of African American skeletal remains in the world—a collection that Cobb assembled to refute the work of people like Samuel Morton.) Suspending research, she argues, will affect public health, widening historical inequities and leaving the African American community even less well represented in databases that are essential to practices expected to be central to the future of medicine.

What should be done when one kind of restorative racial justice conflicts with another? Jackson is unpersuaded by the contention that all people whose ancestors were enslaved ought to be called upon to decide what to do with their remains. "Scientists know more about Neanderthals than modern humans recently out of Africa," she said. And she's skeptical of Dunnivant and his co-authors "speaking for forty million people, or even for four people." She thinks their rhetoric of representation is misbegotten. "What sampling method is that?" she asks. "Does he speak for Black America? Or do I speak for Black America? It's ludicrous." She also believes that, on balance, African Americans (who lately, like the rest of the country, have tended to cremate their dead) would want the research to proceed and that, meanwhile, if the scientific community needs to make an ethical assessment about future research, it should engage in a deliberative process, perhaps involving a series of conferences with Black lawyers, doctors, clergy, ethicists, and scientists.

That deliberative body sounds something like the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, called for by Congress in 1974 in the aftermath of revelations about the experiments done on Black men at Tuskegee. The commission—eleven scientists, ethicists, lawyers, and activists who deliberated for nearly four years—produced the landmark "Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research," better known as the Belmont Report. It might be time for a new commission, on the Protection of Human Subjects, Postmortem. Still, it's easy to imagine that venture falling apart

before it even starts, over the vexing question of who can speak for the dead.

Why do you not propose a cemetery for
the illustrious Negro dead?

—Zora Neale Hurston to W. E. B. Du Bois, 1945.

Near Richmond, the former capital of the Confederacy, Brian Palmer met me at East End and Evergreen Cemeteries with his little black dog, Teacake, named, he said, “for the one good male character in Hurston’s ‘Their Eyes Were Watching God.’” Palmer, an award-winning journalist, helped found Friends of East End, in 2017. “I’m a descendant,” he told me, hitching Teacake’s leash to a carabiner dangling from a belt loop and waving to me across a locked gate. The cemeteries, both founded in the eighteen-nineties by African American citizens, are open only to descendants and, for now, only with advance notice. Between 2019 and 2020, the Enrichmond Foundation, a nonprofit that had no experience with cemeteries or with historical preservation, acquired both of them, an area that stretches across seventy-six acres. “The state secretly anointed this white-led organization and said, We’ll do what we want, and then we’ll worry about the descendants,” Palmer said. “In my humble, grumpy-ass view.”

Enrichmond plans to develop a tourist site (Palmer calls it a “recreation plantation”), including a visitor center with an estimated price tag of \$1.9 million, bike trails, and hundreds of feet of electrical, sewer, and water lines—all plans that could disturb unmarked graves. Last winter, members of Richmond’s Black community formed a descendants council: they consider the site hallowed ground, and they have asked the governor to suspend the development’s funding. But Enrichmond has enlisted its own group of descendants, including John Mitchell, a descendant of Richmond’s celebrated Black newspaper editor John Mitchell, Jr., who is buried in Evergreen. Mitchell is also “Enrichmond’s Family Ambassador,” and the man you’ve got to notify before you enter the cemetery. While Palmer and I were walking around with Teacake in tow, Mitchell pulled up in a pickup truck. He waved hello but eyed us warily. “Brian has valid concerns about descendant representation,” Mitchell later said. “But twisting the words and actions of those descendants that chose to get inside this system is not productive.”

The term “descendant community” comes from Michael Blakey’s work on the New York African Burial Ground, but it also has roots in sites of conscience, where the terms are “families of the missing” or “communities of mourners”—labels that apply equally well to U.S. sites of mass atrocity, like Tulsa, where archeologists have been uncovering a grave believed to hold the bodies of hundreds of African Americans who were killed in the 1921 massacre. The human-rights scholar Adam Rosenblatt, the author of “Digging for the Disappeared,” is struck by the relationship between descendant communities and communities of mourners. “These are the people who matter the most,” he told me. “But what it often too quickly translates into is the assumption that somehow those people are always going to agree with each other.” Which, as a visit to East

End and Evergreen makes clear, isn’t necessarily what happens. Palmer, pointing out that the condition of these cemeteries is a consequence of disenfranchisement, argues for a democratic solution. “There are people who still have deeds to their plots, people in the ground,” Palmer said. “Let’s gather around a table. Let’s vote. Isn’t that what democracy is for?”

After Richmond, I travelled through the heart of the Confederacy, from cemetery to cemetery. The Oberlin Cemetery, in Raleigh, was one of the smallest, with about six hundred bodies interred beneath magnolias and oaks. Cheryl Williams’s family is buried there, and she’s the cemetery’s steward, but she doesn’t expect ever to lie in any grave. “My family recently, we’ve been going with cremation,” she told me. The Friends of Oberlin Village gives amazing tours. Williams said, “We’re at a time when people are ready to hear these stories and accept them as true history.”

But in Charleston I wasn’t so sure. The neighborhood around Bethel United Methodist Church, on Calhoun Street, sits atop graveyards, including Bethel’s own, containing the remains of congregants, white and Black. The church grounds are covered in dug-up old headstones, lying in beds of pine needles and on patches of shaggy grass, some rescued by the church, others left by neighbors who came across them in their back yards. (“Sacred to the Memory of Laurence Carnes,” one 1805 stone reads. “Disturb not his bones while they are mouldering in their Mother Earth.”) Behind the church is a house on a lot that city archeologists believe to be the not very restful resting place of more than fifteen hundred people. In the nineteen-forties or fifties, the owner began using headstones as paving stones, for a garden path. I found the new owner by a dumpster in the driveway. Earlier in the summer, when he filed for a construction permit, the city issued a stop-work order but then decided that it lacked the authority to halt the planned renovations. I asked him about the burials in his back yard. “It’s all over,” he said, exasperated. “It was sold in 1915.” He threw up his hands. “There is no story.”

Everything happening in the rest of the country is happening faster, and hotter, in Florida. “It’s just insane right now. It’s crazy here,” the anthropologist Cheryl Rodriguez said when we spoke about the state’s Republican governor, Ron DeSantis. Rodriguez is the former director of the Institute on Black Life at the University of South Florida, in Tampa. In June, within a matter of days, DeSantis denounced the teaching of critical race theory, forbade the use of the 1619 Project in the state’s classrooms, issued a requirement that state colleges and universities survey their students to reveal whether they have been indoctrinated into an antiracist agenda, and signed a law convening the Task Force on Abandoned African-American Cemeteries. I asked Rodriguez how the task force could possibly produce a report that doesn’t document the very kind of discrimination that the Governor’s other directives ban people from even talking about. She laughed, and said, “Welcome to Florida!”

In 2018, a *Tampa Bay Times* reporter named Paul Guzzo got a tip from an amateur genealogist named Ray Reed: he found

death records for an African American cemetery called Zion, but he couldn't find its location. At first, chasing leads and digging through the archives, Guzzo thought there might be just a few bodies, but then he realized, "Oh, shit, this is a big cemetery." Guzzo fell down a rabbit hole, and so did a lot of other people. He learned that part of Robles Village, now a predominantly Black public-housing community, had been built on top of Zion. People would call to tell him about another cemetery they knew had been paved over, Guzzo would investigate, the *Tampa Bay Times* would run another story. A local TV news station, WTSP, started a history series called "Erased." All this breaking news galvanized activists, including Corey Givens, Jr., whose great-great-grandfather, a mason who helped build the St. Petersburg seawall, is buried somewhere under an overpass for I-175, outside Tropicana Field. The Tampa Bay Rays are scheduled to redevelop the site in 2027. "All I'm saying is it should be Black descendants telling the mayor what we want to do to honor our Black ancestors, not him telling us," Givens told me. "I want to bring some peace and justice to my family."

The Task Force on Abandoned and Neglected African-American Cemeteries, introduced by the state congresswoman Fentrice Driskell, passed Florida's legislature with unanimous support, and was signed into law this summer by DeSantis, even as he was doing things like banning the 1619 Project. Paul Ortiz, a historian at the University of Florida, and the president of the United Faculty of Florida, says, "They're going to make sure you don't mention 1619—I mean, don't mention the *date*?" Ortiz is the author of a history of racial violence in Florida. Between 1882 and 1930, no state in the country had a higher rate of lynching than Florida; a state senator urged the nullification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; and one governor, Napoleon Bonaparte Broward II, effectively proposed the deportation of all Black people. During the election of 1920, the Ku Klux Klan burned prospective voters alive in their homes, and Dade County Democrats published an announcement in the Miami Herald: "*WHITE VOTERS, REMEMBER! WHITE SUPREMACY IS BEING ASSAULTED IN OUR MIDST.*" In the face of this violence, Blacks fled the state. In 1860, the Black and white populations of Florida were roughly the same size; by 1930, whites outnumbered Blacks by more than two to one. Then came cars, and asphalt. The decades-long process of transforming Florida from the Jim Crow South into a Sun Belt Disney World involved not only destroying Black communities but also dismantling Black cemeteries, all but erasing the state's Black history. In 1945, Zora Neale Hurston wrote to W. E. B. Du Bois proposing that the N.A.A.C.P. buy a hundred acres of land in Florida, build a cemetery, and rebury the remains of the "illustrious Negro dead." Du Bois wrote back, "I have not the enthusiasm for Florida that you have."

If a way ahead is possible in this moment, if all sorts of people can be brought together through a door to sit down around a table and come up with something like a Belmont Report, Antoinette T. Jackson is the person to make it happen. Jackson, an anthropologist at the University of South Florida, is dazzling



Debra Gonzalez-Garcia, the president of the Friends of Geer Cemetery, leads a group of volunteers who tend to neglected grave sites. "Legally, this place is considered abandoned," she said.

and unstoppable. In 2020, with funding from a university antiracism initiative, she started the African American Burial Grounds and Remembering Project. The project has brought a team of anthropologists, historians, activists, artists, poets, and storytellers to burial sites in both Tampa and St. Petersburg. (Cheryl Rodriguez is a principal investigator on Jackson's team.) They research genealogies, conduct oral histories, meet with community members and organizations, make art, tell stories, and perform poetry. A burial-grounds network? Jackson isn't waiting for federal legislation; she's doing this now. This spring, she founded the Black Cemetery Network, a research coalition that tweets using the hashtag #BlackGravesMatter.

Jackson, who was born in New Orleans, was an executive at A.T. & T. in Illinois when, on vacation in South Carolina, she heard stories she'd never heard before, and decided to become an anthropologist. "I went to a rice plantation outside Charleston with my dad, and we were on a boat," Jackson told me. "And something just hit me, and I knew, this is what you gotta do. Tell these stories." She took a leave of absence from her job, and went to graduate school. She wrote a pioneering book called "Speaking for the Enslaved," about the efforts of African Americans to preserve their own heritage at antebellum plantation sites. "Descendant knowledge needs to be on the same plane with archeological and historical knowledge," she told me. "The same thing applies to the cemetery project." As a cultural anthropologist, she doesn't have the same attitude toward descendants as Justin Dunnivant's society of

archeologists: she's not only looking for descendants with a legal claim; she's interested in the meanings people make out of places. "One way to think about it is you network out, six degrees of separation," she said. "There are the people who have people in the ground. There are the people who live on top. There are the people who own the land." Her work rests on all kinds of other work, including researching, unearthing, and reburying, but she has a particular gift for bringing people together around learning, the act of openhearted and honest inquiry.

Jackson and I got into her blue Volvo and drove across a city of pavement and palm trees. Zion, Tampa's first cemetery for African Americans, opened in 1901, at the center of a Black community on North Florida Avenue. It closed in 1920. In 1951, the Housing Authority of Tampa bought the land and then built Robles Park Village, a residential community for middle-class whites, a Sun Belt Levittown, one and a half acres of which is on top of more than eight hundred graves. Later, the housing authority opened Robles to Black residents, who now account for more than ninety per cent of the population there. Three months after Guzzo's story about Zion ran in the Tampa Bay Times, the housing authority conducted an environmental assessment. When it announced the results at a community meeting in Robles and the residents learned that they were living on the dead, people wept and screamed. Some left the room.

There is no plan to move the bodies, only a plan to move the living. Finding Zion led the housing authority to relocate all the tenants and accelerate a planned redevelopment that will expand low-income housing. The housing authority has convened the Zion Cemetery Preservation and Maintenance Society to decide what to do with the cemetery; there has been talk of a memorial and a genealogical-research center. Todd Guy, the Robles Village property manager, met Jackson and me in the parking lot and took us into his office to show us a new master plan for a mixed-income community, a lavishly illustrated, glossy, oversized book that looks as though it cost the moon. "It is with great care and respect that we must now honor those buried within Zion and tell their story," it says. The Zion committee has two vacant slots, reserved for descendants. So far, committee members say, they have yet to confirm any.

Yvette Lewis, the head of the Hillsborough county branch of the N.A.A.C.P., wants more than a memorial at Zion. "These people have been walked on all their lives, and now they want to rest and people still want to walk on them," she told me. She wants reparations: scholarships for African American families affected by the Robles Village discovery. Fentrice Driskell, the state representative, wants the whole community involved. "In a place like Zion, if we can't find descendants it's got to be a community conversation," she said. "Also, what about all the Black families who have lived in Robles over the years? What about sending these kids to college? Starting grants for Black entrepreneurs?" But, here again, the particular strains against the universal: free college tuition and business grants are great

ideas as remedies for economic injustice. Why stop at providing them to people whose families lived at Robles?

Jackson, Lewis, and Driskell all serve on that state task force. Its report is due at the beginning of 2022, around the time that reports and audits from committees at Penn, Harvard, and the Smithsonian are to be finalized. "We don't want to be a road to nowhere," Driskell told me. "We want the work to continue even after the task force sunsets." Jackson isn't worried. DeSantis? "The Governor has sanctioned the importance of African American cemeteries," she told me, and smiled. "We can go wherever we want with that."

Todd Guy drove Jackson and me around the Robles housing project in a golf cart. We rumbled across crumbling pavement and past tipped-over trash cans and fading grass to a six-foot-tall chain-link fence that marks the perimeter of Zion. A Mylar banner, zip-tied to the fence, lists the names of the people known to be buried there, a makeshift memorial.

Beyond a swinging gate marked "Restricted Area" lies a peach stucco ghost town. The families living on top of the cemetery have been moved out. The housing authority will relocate the remainder, about four hundred families, in the next year or two. "The housing authority ran this place into the ground," Jackson whispered to me. She fears the worst. "They'll move these people to someplace worse, make this place nice, and move other people in." Spanish moss drooped from an oak tree. The trees are protected, Guy explained. "Even to prune the oaks, we have to have permission from the city," he said. "We have to build around them."

Jackson looked around. A lone washing machine stood in a patch of grass. A white plastic bag fluttered on the ground. She appreciates the work that human-rights activists do at sites of conscience, but she doesn't think it fits a place like this. "They define justice as if you build a memorial and you're done," she said. "You've got justice. You have closure. That's not justice. I don't want anything to get closed. I want an opening."

In Zion, a black screen door, unlatched, flapped in the wind.

An earlier version of this article misstated the estimated cost of Enrichmond's planned tourist site.