**My Hopes Were Brighter Than Now:**
**Race and Remembrance in Washington Park Cemetery**

**A Small Needful Fact**

*Is that Eric Garner worked*
*for some time for the Parks and Rec.*
*Horticultural Department, which means,*
*perhaps, that with his very large hands,*
*perhaps, in all likelihood,*
*he put gently into the earth*
*some plants which, most likely,*
*some of them, in all likelihood,*
*continue to grow, continue*
*to do what such plants do, like house*
*and feed small and necessary creatures,*
*like being pleasant to touch and smell,*
*like converting sunlight*
*into food, like making it easier*
*for us to breathe.*

—Ross Gay

The poet Ross Gay writes of plants as a source of inevitable temporal continuity. Although his words dwell on the lyricism of chance the plants do their work slowly, the poem spins around "some" and "likely" and "perhaps"—Gay is, after all, stating a fact. Plants will grow; and by means of that growth will evoke not only nature's relation to architecture ("…plants do, like house…") but, more tangibly, the human sensorium itself ("pleasant to touch and smell"). Plants also provide the ultimate guarantor of human sustenance, oxygen, which was forcefully denied Eric Garner on July 17, 2014, when he became yet another victim of systemically racialized police brutality. The other fact at the heart of Gay's poem that Garner worked as a horticulturalistwas sourced from an obituary.[1] Gay's poem thus reads as a project of remembrance, an epitaph but also a reminder that this project may well thrive all around us, as continuity in the natural world.

The notion of continuity and its antithesis in the form of erasure is particularly poignant in the case of Washington Park Cemetery. On a bracingly cold November day, sightlines are clear across the main lawn. Gravestones in various states of reveal punctuate the swells and valleys, and scattered trees read as silhouettes against a white sky. The bright yellow of a Waffle House billboard announces itself on the near horizon. Closer still, a communications tower makes a mockery of neighboring trees, its trunk taller and rootless. In the forested southeast portion of the cemetery, a dirt path weaves through brittle undergrowth, occasional gravestones hinting at the many more hidden

beneath. And then, a clearing: a stand of young cottonwoods encircles one grave. Above their branches, an airplane roars to landing. From the cemetery's high point to the north, the land registers as a broad, unified gesture—until the buzz of Interstate 70 cleaves the still.

Established in 1920 as the region's largest commercial black cemetery, Washington Park embodies a tumultuous history. To this day, the site and its sprawling context provide equally weighty clues to reading this history. The cemetery's northern edge ends abruptly in ten lanes of asphalt. Barely past I-70, the runways of an international airport press in. Less than three miles further, one finds what remains of Kinloch, once the oldest incorporated African-American community in the state and since subjected to a nefarious regime of buy-outs. The over 90 municipalities in surrounding St. Louis County form one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the country.[2] Ferguson, the birthplace of #BlackLivesMatter, is a ten-minute drive away.

The parallels between the gradual breakdown of Washington Park Cemetery and the civic fabric around it are unmistakable. The cemetery today is thus as much a site of African-American pride, tradition and self-preservation as it is a living record of systemic breakage and neglect. Washington Park Cemetery also speaks to the politics of memory in black cemeteries across St. Louis and, indeed, the country as a whole—spaces where the continuity of plant life is both a nod to the transcendental and also, frequently, a means of erasure. To what extent can landscape, as both medium and tradition, help render visible Washington Park Cemetery's many legacies?

In the summer of 1920, Washington Park Cemetery was the talk of black St. Louis. Andrew H. Watson and Joseph J. Hauer, two local white businessmen, had recently bought 75 acres from B.H. Lang, a grain merchant, in the inner-ring northern suburbs. This land was to become the largest commercial black cemetery in the St. Louis region, designed to house 90,000 burials. Over the course of four months, a series of advertisements in the *St. Louis Argus*, an African-American newspaper, described a place that would marry natural beauty with the security of tradition. "Visit this Beautiful Park," invites one. "Nature has given to Washington Park a setting that approaches the ideal. The founders have set it aside sacred to the dead forever," reads another. "The lot or grave of each individual—rich and poor alike—will be kept smooth and beautiful forever," reassures a third. Sprinkled throughout these texts are references to nature as the stuff of transcendence, but also something far more worldly: the language of upward mobility. The purchase of a burial plot is described as a "family duty," an "investment," an invitation to participate in an "American institution." Even the memorial trees are said to be chosen for their lasting power. This was cemetery as generational insurance for a population systematically robbed of its intergenerational wealth.

By all accounts, the founders' appeals were a success. Local churches, fraternal organizations such as the Black Elks and the Pythians, and black labor unions reserved large blocks of burial plots. In the spirit of cemetery as civic space, Watson and his associates invited interested groups for outings on the site, including a festive Labor Day event that drew over 1,000 people and a band. The cemetery's white neighbors did not welcome this new presence, which they perceived as a threat to their property (and

property values). Wilfred Schade, a custom house broker whose property abutted the site, reported that during these events "the negroes often crossed the road, climbed his fence and fished for crawfish in his lake."[3] Lang himself, claiming no knowledge of the land's intended use prior to its sale, lamented its predicted effects.

Yet not even its foundational paradoxes could prevent Washington Park Cemetery from becoming a new community node— "*the* fashionable place for burial," even—for St. Louis' growing black middle class.[4] Surveyor and landscape designer G.D. Joyce had created a bucolic respite from the rhythms of city life, complete with framed views, meandering paths and a rich canopy. As the Great Migration to the North brought a population influx to the St. Louis area, the roster of individuals buried at Washington Park Cemetery—former slaves, war veterans, artists, laborers and a spectrum of middle- and working-class African Americans—reflected the diversity within this burgeoning community. Among the notable individuals are Dr. Miles Davis, Sr., father of the legendary Miles Davis; Joseph E. Mitchell and Nannie Mitchell Turner, who co-founded the *St. Louis Argus* in 1912; Oscar Minor Waring, the first African-American principal of a St. Louis public school; Beatrice T. Hurt, a community leader active in the Urban League; John Feugh, assistant to Henry Shaw; and George L. Vaughn, the lawyer who successfully argued against racial covenants in *Shelley v. Kraemer*.

That Washington Park became a thriving space for the living as much as for the dead is hardly surprising. Washington Park exists in the civic tradition of the picturesque cemetery, traced back to early 19th-century France. In the post-Revolution political context, these landscapes embodied a desire to model, in the so-called cities of the dead, "an idealized order in the cities for the living."[5] In this new order, designers introduced the irregular features of the picturesque winding paths, naturalized topography, framed views to what had traditionally been rectilinear arrangements, suggesting a challenge to rigid social hierarchy. The resulting tension positions the grid as the space of the dead, while the meander functions as the space for the living, and the landscape as a unifying ground.

In the United States, the picturesque cemetery model was adopted both for more pragmatic and experiential reasons. The first of its kind, Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, MA, was dedicated in 1831 not only as an alternative to Boston's overcrowded, unsanitary church burial grounds, but also as "an experimental garden."[6] Mount Auburn was designed with nature as a salve: "in a wooded cemetery, trees would hasten decomposition, stand as monuments to the deceased whose substance they consumed, and represent the divinely ordained system of nature."[7] The site served as a lofty precedent for the so-called "rural" cemetery as public space, setting off a wave of similar projects across the nation.

The rural cemetery arrived in St. Louis with Bellefontaine Cemetery in 1849, after a cholera epidemic killed ten percent of the city's population. The landscape architect Almerin Hotchkiss designed Bellefontaine as a space for both reflection and enjoyment, a point of pride and an emblem of progress. Indeed, the 138-acre site was the first large rural cemetery to be built west of the Mississippi River. By highlighting views of the

mighty river, Hotchkiss placed the cemetery in dialogue with Manifest Destiny, imbuing the landscape with a collective myth at one with whiteness.

A few miles away in Hillsdale, Greenwood Cemetery, the first commercial non-denominational African-American cemetery in St. Louis, was also one of the many rural cemeteries built in the second half of the 19th century. Its birth can be traced to a parallel narrative—one as integral to the city's and nation's identity. In 1846, an enslaved man by the name of Dred Scott filed suit for his freedom in a St. Louis district court. In March 1857, the Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, ruled that African-Americans "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."[8] Four years later, *Dred Scott v. Sanford* proved to be one of many sparks to ignite the Civil War.

Dred Scott died of tuberculosis in 1858, having lived one year free, and was interred in an unmarked grave. On the 30th anniversary of Dred Scott's death, the *St. Louis Daily Globe* ran an article summing up the life and legacy of "the character whose life became a national issue."[9] In it, the author references a freed slave society's attempts to erect a monument in Dred Scott's honor. While little else has been written about this episode, it is clear that these individuals, having for so long been denied the right to be remembered, had staked their own claim to the project of commemoration. While their efforts ultimately failed, no monument was built and Scott's grave was only rediscovered, and finally marked, in 1957—the right to be remembered lies at the root of St. Louis' black cemeteries.

Formerly enslaved African Americans who, like Dred Scott, might have previously been buried in unmarked or mass graves now had the right to marked, individual burial plots. This was, of course, a mere nod to parity severely undermined by racial segregation: by the mid-1900s, nearly 90 percent of public cemeteries, including those in the St. Louis region, were governed by racially restrictive covenants. That idealized order proved elusive indeed. Yet the shift from the vertical superimposition of bodies in the potters' fields and crowded churchyards of yore to a horizontal arrangement was not only a nod to a flattened hierarchy, but also resonated with the ample spatial language of landscape: the cemetery as inhabitable field. This increased demand for cemetery space opened a new real estate market.

When Herman Krueger, a German immigrant, bought 32 acres and founded Greenwood Cemetery, he entered this lucrative captive market. As the first of its kind in the region, Greenwood Cemetery became a cultural and typological touchstone for the ones that followed, including Father Dickson Cemetery in 1903 and, later yet, Washington Park Cemetery. Notable burials include Harriet Robinson Scott, who outlived husband Dred Scott by 18 years; folk hero Lee Shelton ("Stagger" Lee); musicians Walter Davis and Grant Green; and civil rights leader Charlton Tandy.

In part due to segregation, Greenwood Cemetery became a site where the typological landscape of remembrance could adopt particular customs and contours. There, recent migrants from the South could maintain burial traditions passed down from previous generations via the African diaspora. Unique customs documented at Greenwood include the use of vernacular concrete grave markers generally devoid of typical decorative motifs and instead displaying "grave goods...in a myriad of interesting

forms, from toys placed on children's graves, to broken pottery, conch shells, and other items."[10] These items, believed to honor and guide spirits to the next world, spoke a language of continuity tantamount to cultural survival. More recent ephemeral displays, including traditional arrangements of yew branches in 2002, suggest practices that persevere to this day.

By the time of Washington Park Cemetery, the black middle class had grown significantly, and some of the traditions so integral to the older Greenwood Cemetery were less common at the new site. Many families at Washington Park Cemetery opted instead for elaborate caskets and celebratory funerals, further developing the African-American tradition of homegoings.[11] For centuries, slave funeral rites had been considered subversive and dangerous not only as celebrations of lives considered less than, but also as opportunities for enslaved people to independently assemble. In spaces like Washington Park Cemetery, communities reclaimed these rituals, recognizing the value of black lives in a society that staunchly refused to. Replete with music and pageantry, they granted the departed hopeful send-offs to the next world.

Washington Park Cemetery is, without a doubt, a powerful social document of the Jim Crow era, when it saw its peak as an active space. During the latter half of the 20th century, however, the communities around it were shaped by policies designed to cement segregation as its legal footing crumbled. Local governments and homeowners wielded racial covenants and exclusionary zoning tactics to further reinforce the color-line; as white residents began to flee to the southern suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s, black residents were forced to stay in St. Louis proper or in the older northern suburbs.[12] These laws effectively seared segregation—and related patterns of political and economic disenfranchisement into the spatial fabric of St. Louis.

The repercussions on Washington Park Cemetery were gradual but significant, and the site today is just as much a record of these policies. The very segregationist regime that had rendered Washington Park Cemetery, Greenwood Cemetery, and the region's other black cemeteries fraught spaces of contradiction had, it turns out, also sustained them. Once they no longer enjoyed a captive market, their commercial viability suffered. This new reality ushered in a chapter of profit-driven desecration and steady decline at Washington Park Cemetery.

The early 1950s saw the cemetery's founding principle of "one person, one grave" turned on its head with the mass burial of 300 bodies exhumed from Wesleyan Cemetery. While both black and white bodies had been removed when Wesleyan Cemetery was sold, no effort had been made to preserve the identity of the black individuals, and the nature of the mass burial remained rather covert.[13] In 1955, shortly after the original owners sold off Washington Park Cemetery to Harlin Brown and Manuel Lasky, the construction of I-70 bisected the cemetery, stranding the 12,000 burials in the northern section from the rest of the site. To this day, it remains uncertain whether the bodies under the highway's asphalt ribbon were properly exhumed.

Over the subsequent decades, burial revenues at Washington Park Cemetery, like at nearby Greenwood Cemetery, plummeted. Families who could afford to bury their dead in newly desegregated, financially stable cemeteries did so; the rest were

increasingly left to tend to their family's graves themselves. In 1972, the enterprise's founding principles once again fell to the rewards of land speculation when the owners sold nine acres to Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. But not even the hefty payout sustained a maintenance regime adequate to the site. As vegetation smothered more of the cemetery, a fundamental truth came to light: the founders' promise of perpetual care had been just another myth. Washington Park Cemetery had no endowment to speak of.

By the early 1990s, burials had ceased at Washington Park Cemetery. Relatives of the generations buried there no longer had easy access to their loved ones' graves. Many markers had been toppled, and many more were engulfed by a thicket of green. Parts of the site became dumping grounds for tires, old furniture, and pallets. There were reports of human bones surfacing above the ground. Nearby, Greenwood Cemetery was in a similar state, with a portion of the site now under a dense forest canopy. Yet at both cemeteries, the importance and urgency of recovering and honoring those graves drove relatives into the thickest brambles. "You are taught that you need to come back to take care of your family's grave," says Etta Daniels, a local activist and historian who spearheaded efforts to restore Greenwood Cemetery, "That's a tradition."[14] Indeed, a potent symbolism is attached to tending to one's dead.[15] At Washington Park Cemetery, indignant relatives went as far as to protest on cemetery grounds, accusing then-owner Virginia Younger of mismanagement.[16] The state of Missouri subsequently sued Younger for mismanagement; she committed suicide in 1991 for related reasons.

The effects of neglect—of the inexorable workings of time and light on fertile soil—tie the story of Washington Park Cemetery to many other historic black cemeteries, locally and beyond. Yet what continued to mark Washington Park Cemetery are the far more violent acts of erasure. In 1992, two major capital improvement projects—the airport and MetroLink expansion adjacent to I-70—finally sealed the fate of the cemetery's northern portion. The multimillion dollar investments were, according to a local reporter, "intended to help usher St. Louis into the 21st century."[17] Only 12,000 bodies lay in the way. The Lambert Airport Commission spent many millions removing and reburying remains in cemeteries across St. Louis, in the process uncovering problems with the cemetery's deeds and records that went back decades. What once formed the apex of Washington Park Cemetery, its highest promontory, was flattened into the region's newest runway. A newspaper article from that time notes the alarm and dismay relatives of the buried felt seeing bulldozers and heavy equipment so close to their loved ones' graves.[18]

Over the past twenty years, an influx of energy from relatives and concerned citizens has begun to uncover and recover these sites of memory. Kevin Bailey, who purchased Washington Park Cemetery for $2 in 2009 and whose father is buried there, has established a non-profit dedicated to the site's care. The Greenwood Cemetery Preservation Association, established by Etta Daniels and now headed by Raphael Morris, plays a similar role. Yet these largely volunteer efforts have so far been unable to ensure the long-term sustainability that comes with institutional and government support. And this is not simply a St. Louis story. In a recent *New York Times* op-ed, "For the Forgotten African-American Dead," Brian Palmer writes about similar efforts at

Richmond, Virginia's East End and Evergreen cemeteries.[19] He contrasts the overgrown state of the two historic black cemeteries with the pristine condition of nearby Confederate cemeteries, which have received roughly a century of taxpayer support. Virginia's House Bill 1547, currently under consideration, would distribute public funds to non-profits for the maintenance of historic black cemeteries. If passed, it would be the first such legislation in the former Confederate states.

When considering contested sites which have fallen into disrepair, the seductive narrative of wilderness often frames such ruins as the apex of a natural progression of events. Detroit's so-called "feral houses" suggest a rewilding, a reversion to a state of unfettered nature. But where we see biomass, we too often forget design. As the products of complex sociopolitical processes, these sites are anything but natural. The state of Washington Park Cemetery, Greenwood Cemetery, and many others is as much a product of carefully managed systems—in the form of racist policies and predatory norms—as was G.D. Joyce's original plan or, indeed, Frederick Law Olmsted's parks.

Yet while the vegetation tends to naturalize the structural violence embodied in the site, it is also a living testimony. Washington Park Cemetery's many histories are both covered and spoken by the landscape. Given this layered nature, both biophysically and narratively, future preservation efforts will require us to both reconstitute a history and challenge the very notion of heritage—what we are trying to hold on to and what we are trying to reverse in such a site, and why? What does it mean to introduce new social life into a space with so much life already rooted into its soil?

*Higher Ground: Honoring Washington Park Cemetery, Its People and Place* encourages us to listen, to see, and to engage with Washington Park Cemetery's many legacies. Denise Ward-Brown's *Home Going* weaves a soundscape of reverie and mourning, not unlike what would have emanated from the cemetery in its heydey. Dail Chambers' sculptures use a coded, visceral material language to render the meaning and experience of searching for a loved one's grave. Finally, Jennifer Colten's photographs ask us to begin by bearing witness. They remember a moment in time that speaks volumes about forces that have shaped—and continue to shape—the St. Louis landscape: racial segregation, land speculation and the devaluing of black lives and black bodies. Yet these still images are also a document of time itself. In them, we see juxtaposed the signs and symbols of the sacred and the unmistakable marks of desecration. We see spring shoots pushing up through the same loam that hugs a sinking gravestone. We see landscape as an evolving record. In the very fact of this evolution thrives possibility.

**Notes**

1. Soraya Nadia McDonald, "Friends: Eric Garner Was a 'Gentle Giant,'" *The Washington Post*, December 4, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/12/04/friends-eric-garner-was-a-gentle-giant/
2. John Eligon, "A Year After Ferguson, Housing Segregation Defies Tools to Erase It," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/us/a-year-after-ferguson-housing-segregation-defies-tools-to-erase-it.html?_r=0
3. "County Residents Object to Negro Burial Ground," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 9, 1920.

4. Brett Rogers, “Impressions of Black St. Louis: Concrete Markers in St. Louis’ Greenwood Cemetery,” Pioneer America Society Transactions, Vol.26, 2003, 27.
5. Margaretta Darnall, “The American Cemetery as Picturesque Landscape: Bellefontaine Cemetery, St. Louis,” Winterthur Portfolio, Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter 1983, 249.
6. Ibid., 252.
7. Blanche Linden-Ward, *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston’s Mount Auburn Cemetery* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 171.
8. Roger B. Taney, Dred Scott v. Sanford, 60 U.S. 393, 1857. https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/60/393#writing-USSC_CR_0060_0393_ZO
9. “Dred Scott: Life of the Famous Fugitive and Missouri Slave Litigant,” *St. Louis Daily Globe*, January 10, 1886.
10. Rogers, 29.
11. Tiffany Stanley, “The Disappearance of a Distinctly Black Way to Mourn,” *The Atlantic*, January 26, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/01/black-funeral-homes-mourning/426807/
12. The Editorial Board, “The Death of Michael Brown: Racial History Behind the Ferguson Protests,” *The New York Times*, Aug 12, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/13/opinion/racial-history-behind-the-ferguson-protests.html?_r=0
13. Margaret Gillerman, “Families Are Anxious About Plans to Relocate Graves,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 5, 1992.
14. Freed Wessler.
15. Lewis Mumford proposed this act as the very foundation of society, writing “In the earliest gathering about a grave...one has the beginning of a succession of civic institutions that range from the temple to the astronomical observatory, from the theater to the university.” Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1966), 18.
16. Joan Little, “25 Protest Management of Cemetery,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 11, 1990.
17. Gillerman.
18. Ibid.
19. Brian Palmer, “For the Forgotten African American Dead,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/07/opinion/sunday/for-the-forgotten-african-american-dead.html?_r=0

Author’s note**:** The title of the essay is taken from Frederick Douglass’ 1857 speech on the Dred Scott decision.

“A Small Needful Fact” is published with author’s permission. The poem was first published on Split This Rock’s The Quarry: A Social Justice Poetry Database, 2015. *http://www.splitthisrock.org/poetry-database/poem/a-small-needful-fact*.