

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Decay-Life of Things

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## Abstract

Examining the graveside tributes left at Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery, this article considers the meaning-making work of decay. Green-Wood is a polysemous place, existing as a historical and active cemetery, an arboretum, an arts and performance space, a space of mourning, and a place of leisurely strolling and birdwatching. Through a site-specific analysis of the cemetery, I approach decay as an active and durational phase of material life and explore different decay-temporalities through the tributes left graveside. I argue that orienting ourselves to the decay-life of things necessarily entangles us in a larger ecological ethic and relational ontology of self, land, weather, animals (human and non-human), and time. While advocating for material attention to decay-life, I consider how the aesthetics and taboos of decay shape the cemetery's relationship to visible and invisible rot and ruin. The cemetery staff, wildlife, visitors, ecology, climate, and the dead create a complex network of active actors experiencing and altering the material decay-life of the left-behind natural and artificial material tributes. Together, this active and entangled decay-life of the site forms a network of temporalities of decay that co-construct the affective and environmental space of the cemetery.

**Keywords:** decay; cemeteries; heritage; gravesites; affective heritage; rural cemetery movement; New York City heritage; ecological heritage; aesthetics

## Introduction

Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York opened for extended hours during COVID-19. In this moment when the city was collectively experiencing an overwhelming number of dying and dead people, Green-Wood opened itself up more to the people of the city and became an outdoor space to meet, walk, and interact with nature. Simultaneously, Green-Wood also opened itself up more to the dead of the city; burials rose to over 150 per week and the five cremation ovens operated sixteen hours a day, the maximum possible.<sup>1</sup> In New York City, images and

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<sup>1</sup>W. J. Hennigan, "We Do this for the Living' Inside New York's Citywide Effort to Bury Its Dead," *Time Magazine*, 21 May 2020, <https://time.com/5839056/new-york-city-burials-coronavirus/>.

statistics of the mass graves at Hart Island, the temporary morgues, and medical spaces presented death as anonymous, overburdened, and depersonalized. Inside the cemetery, visitors left graveside tributes throughout Green-Wood and watched the birds. The dichotomy of personal intimate death care and statistics of overwhelming death tolls shaped the experience of COVID. During this time, I enrolled in the University of Vermont's death doula certificate program; here, students came together to learn how to be with people who are actively dying. Life and death are often framed as opposites, as a binary wherein you are either alive or dead. In the training, the idea of cascading losses (memory, independence, pain-free breathing, appetite, etc.) leading to death suggested an alternative where dying is an experience of duration. The cemetery similarly seems to rely upon a binary opposition of the living and the dying, between visitors and residents. However, the corporality of death is itself durational where those who are dead are slowly decaying beneath the soil and, indeed, those who are visiting are slowing dying. The framework of "companioning" in the work of a death doula is to be with the dying, to provide support, sit vigil, advocate for the advance directives of the dying, and be a compassionate and neutral party. This article draws from the doula practice of companioning (of being-with) the dying to consider the companioning of things in the care work of burial visitations. It takes place in the afterwards of death, in the durational space of decay and mourning and in this setting, I argue for a framing of graveside tributes as active matter anchoring the experience of decay to a visual register wherein these relational things keep the dead in the vital space of the living.

Decay moves us into a space of wet materials—rot, mold, and mildew—as well as the entropic space of environmental response—drying out, washing away, eating, and breaking apart; chaos and putridity are messy. I am invested here in the decay-life of things as an orientation towards death and destruction as generative categories of material cultural study that prioritize the environmental and relational context of things in place and in use by humans and non-human animals. Decay-life is an afterlife; the dead—bodies, cut flowers, mementos severed from their commodity life now sacrificed as graveside tributes—are not still. Instead, their decay-life is a durational and mutable continuation that morphs the cemetery into a place of active matter. Throughout this article, I trace the different decay-life of things within this space to center attention on the generative and ongoing processes of fast and slow destruction. Beginning with a historical contextualization of Green-Wood Cemetery, I then turn to an exploration of different temporalities of decay-life to consider the aesthetics and identity of decaying things. These graveside tributes encompass a variety of material things including flowers (living, cut, and plastic), broken statues, whisky bottles, Christmas wreaths, and plastic bottles. The different materials are brought together through their shared identity as things left graveside. Their decay-life as tributes is inherently tied to the site-specific nature of the cemetery and is fundamental to the experience of materiality as relational in both an interpersonal sense between the living and the dead and an ecological one, entangled with the land, weather, and nature of the cemetery park.

The decay-life of things becomes central to a reading of the cemetery as a place of durational death. The burial is a stage in the longer trajectory for corporeal decay set within a material, relational, and ecological world that is itself decaying, whether in the sunbaked and bleached photographs left graveside, the slow forgetting of long-ago-buried ancestors, or the rotting of fallen leaves, the durational time of decay progresses along different trajectories throughout the cemetery. Decay itself is often

encountered as unanticipated and unwanted, tucked away in the back of a fridge or in a cup of coffee that has escaped notice on a shelf for too many days. Yet it is omnipresent in our world, visibly and invisibly, desired and avoided. Here, I turn towards and focus on the decay-life of things that have passed through their ascendancy as created things, their primacy as used things, and now are in the moment of cascading loss—of decay, destruction, and eventual material death. Their material borders become soft with rot and their perhaps unintended and unaesthetic parts become visible as surfaces erode. Based on data collected over the year and a half between March of 2020 and July of 2021, I present a series of photographic encounters with material decay at gravesides. These images present a material companionship of the dead where visual decay becomes part of the active death-life of the interred. In the cemetery, the grounds themselves become a decay-scape of active rot living and altering the heritage landscape of the cemetery. Nature and artifice come together and co-construct the cemetery as a site-specific ecological heritage-scape. In the background of this article are the cemetery's crematories that churned out smoke and ash, burning as hot as 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit, for sixteen hours a day until two of the ovens broke.<sup>2</sup>

### Green-Wood Cemetery: Living and Dead Collections

Green-Wood Cemetery is a 478-acre non-sectarian cemetery in Brooklyn, New York. It is a living cemetery that continues to inter the dead, but it is also an urban green space for birdwatchers and mycologists, a historic landmark, a performance art space, and community space. Dedicated to maintaining itself actively as both a historical heritage site and an active performance, natural, and community site, it is neither entirely preservable nor entirely alterable, and the potentialities of the space are expanded through the interplay between these seemingly oppositional trajectories of future planning.

The life of the cemetery as an artificial construction began in 1836 as one of America's first rural cemeteries; Green-Wood provided a burial space for an overcrowded (both the living and the dead) New York City. Landscaped and participating in a middle-upper-class culture of urban populations, "the rural cemetery movement encourages culturally elite Americans to experience strong emotional reactions when exposed to beautiful country landscapes, remarkable works of art, or even, in some cases, the stories of the cemetery's inhabitants."<sup>3</sup> Designed to be aesthetic spaces of reprieve in nature for visitors, mourners, and the dead themselves, these were stylized spaces that also responded to the needs of expanding cities, sanitation concerns over urban graveyards, and a desire for permanent markers of the dead. In 1868 the *New York Times* ran an article titled "Green-Wood Cemetery: The City of the Dead—Its Name—Its General Nomenclature—Its Avenues, Paths, Hills, Dells, Mounds, Waters and Groves—Information for the Public—Statistics—Officers—Improvements, &c." At that time, Green-Wood was second only to Niagara Falls in terms of popularity as a tourist site in the United States, with over five hundred thousand visitors a year.<sup>4</sup> This

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Joshua Britton, "'Feeling Is Our Objective': Green-Wood Cemetery, Sentiment, and Refinement in Antebellum New York," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 36, 1 (2014): 19–34, 20.

<sup>4</sup>At: <https://www.green-wood.com/about-history/>.



Figure 1. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. “Silver Lake, Greenwood Cemetery.” New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed October 18, 2023. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-e682-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

*New York Times* article, from thirty years after the cemetery’s founding, presents it as an idyllic rural space and one in sharp contrast to the inherited conceptualizations of what burial sites were; the author writes, “Green-Wood does not realize the old-fashioned grim memoires of the church-yard where ghosts and goblins were wont to hold high revel. People in their first paroxysm of grief would prefer to wander through groves of weeping willows, but not too many. The Comptroller ... very properly remarks, ‘however pleasant the shade, the sunshine is better. There is nothing so neat and clean—nothing that is so pleasing at all seasons and to all eyes, as close shaven green sward.’”<sup>5</sup>

Neat, clean, bright, and free from goblins, the rural cemetery movement was a heterotopic space set outside of the city; landscaped and participating in an urban middle-upper-class culture, these rural cemeteries were designed to be bucolic country landscapes displaying artistically constructed statues, mausoleums, and cenotaphs. Tied to good health, weekend recreation, and the development of tourism culture, they were aesthetic and leisure spaces in addition to being burial sites (Figure 1). Geographically and affectively separate, the cemetery offered an alternative space where our relationships between ourselves, our world, our communities, and philosophies were embedded within the microcosmic space of the landscaped burial grounds.<sup>6</sup>

The rural cemetery movement, and Green-Wood Cemetery as an early American iteration, offered a retreat from the crowded and cramped cities and graveyards, and

<sup>5</sup>“Green-Wood Cemetery: The City of the Dead—Its Name—Its General Nomenclature—Its Avenues, Paths, Hills, Dells, Mounds, Waters and Groves—Information for the Public—Statistics—Officers—Improvements, &c.,” *New York Times*, 7 June 1868: 8.

<sup>6</sup>Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” Jay Miskowicz, trans., *Diacritics* 16, 1 (1986): 22–27.

invited a hybrid experience of bucolic retreat and mourning. The aesthetic of the rolling hills, trees, ornamental bushes, and a pond invited wanderings. Prior to its rise to touristic stardom in the 1860s, Walt Whitman wrote for the *Sunday Times & Noah's Weekly Messenger* of his visit out to Green-Wood in May of 1844. Whitman begins with the travel out to the cemetery, suggesting both the ease and adventure of visiting: "On Tuesday, we mounted a gallant steed in Brooklyn and rode out to Greenwood."<sup>7</sup> Upon reaching the rural cemetery in Brooklyn, his prose shifts into a poetics of pastoral melancholy describing the site as a place of leisure, rest, and retreat: "Greenwood is a beautiful spot. There is no denying this. It is romantically broken up into hill and dale; here a secluded little nook, where a disappointed and broken hearted man would like to lie down and be at rest, there a little sunlit knoll, fit for the happiest and purest being that ever breathed, to rest within. A beautiful lake, the surface of which is as quiet as the graves around, its depths as passionless as the forms, that having dismissed their spirits, now crumble away to dust, adds to the poetic beauties of the place."<sup>8</sup>

While Whitman adopts a melancholic and reflective tone throughout his descriptions of the cemetery, in a moment of levity, he recounts stumbling upon a "young couple, who appeared to be making love. We laughed outright, notwithstanding the sacredness of the place. We have heard of love among the roses, but never before of love among the graves. And yet it was all right enough, nay appropriate."<sup>9</sup> The affective landscape of the cemetery is opened up to a broader range of emotion, embodiment, and engagement than the churchyard of ghosts and goblins. Walt Whitman's sense of rightness at the "love among the graves" reflects a vernacular approach, a disruption in mores but nevertheless seamlessly integrated into the experience of the space. Whitman's sense that this was, nevertheless, a sacred site where the behavior was unexpected, reminds readers that cemeteries are disciplinary sites. These are spaces that enforce normative structures of how to interact with the dead, both materially around handling and caring for the corpse and affectively around mourning and visiting. Winnifred Sullivan, in her book *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, follows the court case of Boca Raton Cemetery where the graveside tributes people were leaving disrupted the aesthetics of the burial space; viewed as "cemetery anarchy," these "nonconforming grave decorations ... were not professionally manufactured monuments ... but rather hand-made and privately assembled collections of statues, crosses, Stars of David, candles, fences, plantings, and marble chips. Many of which were purchased at garden centers ... they were at once private and public, individual and communal, kitschy and profoundly moving."<sup>10</sup> Anarchy here amounted to a desire to express mourning, care, and relationality through material markers beyond those permitted by the cemetery. The disciplinary aesthetic was disrupted.

Today, Green-Wood remains a multivalent site. The majority of people you encounter in the park on a given day are there birding, taking photos, walking

<sup>7</sup>Walt Whitman, "A Visit to Greenwood Cemetery," *Sunday Times & Noah's Weekly Messenger*, 5 May 1844, in Douglas A. Noverr and Jason Stacy, eds., *Walt Whitman's Selected Journalism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014): 212–14, 212.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 213.

<sup>10</sup>Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 16, 18.

with friends, looking for mushrooms, or attending the public programs that run year-round and provide tours, art performances, concerts, and science education. Nevertheless, the “Rules and Regulations” remind visitors, “Green-Wood is an **active cemetery**, please be respectful of cemetery services and operations. Be mindful of those visiting the final resting places of loved ones and respect their privacy.”<sup>11</sup> Activities such as picnicking, jogging, wearing costumes, and sunbathing are listed as not permitted within the park—however, the fact that these behaviors are banned suggests that within the visitor’s imagined range of behaviors there is a possibility of playing frisbee or tanning in the cemetery. Similar to the amorous couple Whitman interrupted, encounters on the grounds participate in the slippage between cemetery and park, mourning site and natural retreat, remaining part of the experience of place. As an active cemetery, the newly interred dead share a burial site with prominent figures such as Leonard Bernstein and Jean-Michel Basquiat. The cemetery is starting an archival project of preserving and documenting some of the tokens and offerings left at these celebrated artists’ graves and maintaining institutional archives and historical collections that engage with traditional modes of preservation and conservation. These themselves share space, however, with the everyday spaces of family plots and intimate grief, love, and remembrance where things are left that decay and become destroyed as part of their durational life within the environment of the cemetery.

Lacking the controlled environments of many heritage and historical sites, Green-Wood Cemetery is a chimeric place; at once a National Historic Landmark and an active burial site, the cemetery holds space for the dead and an arboretum. It is a registered member of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System, and home to a vast and diverse living collection of fungi, plants, and animals. The artificial gravestones, mausoleums, cenotaphs, and statues stand within a meshwork of a natural world of mosses, tree roots, rain, and squirrels that alter and decay the material; this surface-level decay is coupled with the often-subterranean decay of the dead who are interred (literally, in-earthed) in the ground. Conservation happens at Green-Wood through the Restoration and Preservation Department, which also provides training in the Bridge to Crafts Careers program to provide basic training in the restoration and preservation of stonework.<sup>12</sup> Director of Restoration and Preservation, Neela K. Wickremesinghe, notes that the goal of this work is, however, to be “as invisible as possible, that our repairs blend into our historic landscape and they do not detract to the original design intent...”<sup>13</sup> Part of the blending is accepting that the decay processes of the environment are part of the material life of the artificial material in the land. These dynamic relationships between built and natural space were part of a debate in 2005, when developers sought to build condominium towers that would interrupt the sightline between the *Altar to Liberty* (1919) that commemorates the Battle of Brooklyn and the *Statue of Liberty*. The work was halted and part of the arguments against it was that the view between the statues was part of the historical preservation of the cemetery and was

<sup>11</sup>“Hours and Rules,” Green-Wood Cemetery, <<https://www.green-wood.com/rules/>> (accessed 14 Feb. 2022; bold in original).

<sup>12</sup>“Bridge to Craft Careers,” Green-Wood Cemetery, <<https://www.green-wood.com/bridge-to-craft-careers/>> (accessed 14 Feb. 2022).

<sup>13</sup>“May Is Historical Preservation Month,” Green-Wood Cemetery, <<https://www.green-wood.com/may-is-historic-preservation-month/>> (accessed 14 Feb. 2022).



thus protected as heritage space.<sup>14</sup> The statues themselves become configured in the site-specific landscape, embodied sensorial perception, and natural world.

This entropic relationship between the living and dead collections, the natural and the artificial, the persevered and the decaying sets up simultaneously a relationship of Green-Wood as both and neither—it is both a heritage site and a living site, but also neither since these are intertwined at every moment through the site-specificity as somewhere inbetween an environment and a place, inbetween *artificial* and *naturalia*.<sup>15</sup> Sites like this engage with non-human actors as co-participants and co-configurers of the site itself, decisions to plant native flowers to support local pollinators is active heritage work and the cemetery produces honey under the label *The Sweet Hereafter*, given to donors who sponsor hives in the park. Like the sightlines between the two statues, it is the interplay between artifice and land that defines the space of Green-Wood, and it is the dead and their ongoing relationships with the living that anchor this to place and claim this land.<sup>16</sup>

### Placing Tributes

At the foundation of a cemetery are bodies. The dead are a definitional epicenter to the existence of the cemetery. Within the deathscape of the cemetery, the economics and social capital of specific people becomes materialized in the memorials. Mr. and Mrs. Conway's grave (Figure 2) was reproduced in stereographic photography as part of a series of images from Green-Wood. Stereographic images are, as Jonathan Crary states, part of a turn to abstract visual culture and framework of subjective vision.<sup>17</sup> The image comes together as a 3D virtual reality through the embodied experience of the spectator. The mind fills in the gaps and blurs together the just-off duplication of the image. The tributes piled on the grave of Mr. & Mrs. Conway jut out and create a phantom image before us if we can only look at them the right way. The image now circulates online and has become part of the public domain as the copyright has expired. In 1877, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* published a brief write-up announcing a newly established carriage ride service through Green-Wood Cemetery for twenty-five cents; they note that “the driver will furnish all the information as to the objects of interest in the cemetery. The route is six miles long, and the carriage passes the Tracy tomb, Arbor Water, Valley Water, Horace Greeley's grave, ex-Mayor Havermeyer's tomb on Orchard Hill... Niblo's plot—the handsomest and best kept in Greenwood—the Sea Captain's monument, Mrs. Conway's, the Catacombs....”<sup>18</sup> Within the

<sup>14</sup>Caterina Y. Pierre, “Preserving the Sightline of Ruskstull's Minerva on the Alter to Liberty (1919) in Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn,” *Markers* 28 (2011): 14–43.

<sup>15</sup>I use “inbetween” here as a single word in reference to Paul Basu's conceptualization of things inbetween as a framing of diasporic and moving material, in *The Inbetweenness of Being*. This is not a middle point of crossing between two poles, but a third path that sits in the midst of both.

<sup>16</sup>This claiming is also always entangled in histories of settler colonialism and the dead have a long history of becoming methods of holding, legislating, and privatizing land. I would like to thank Pamela Klassen for raising this at the American Academy of Religion Annual meeting. The history of burial rites/rights traces predictable lines of racism, white supremacy, religious persecution, and the imposition of Eurocentric aesthetics and values on the care and afterlives of the dead.

<sup>17</sup>Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>18</sup>“A New Six Mile Drive through It for Twenty-Five Cents,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 17 Apr. 1888: 4.



Figure 2. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "Decorations of Mr. & Mrs. Conway's graves. Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed October 18, 2023. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-e63c-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

cemetery, Mrs. Conway's grave becomes both a site of remembrance materialized through tributes and a tourist attraction materialized in the stereographic images (in both physical and digital versions).

Away from the Conway grave, Green-Wood's "Freedom Lots," the current name given to what was previously referred to as the "Colored Lots," were in a segregated portion of the cemetery. Here are buried "people who might have been enslaved, descendants of enslaved people, or free people of color whose freedom was restricted because racial oppression and discrimination persisted after slavery ended."<sup>19</sup> These graves were not maintained nor were they built with foundations that supported their above-ground demarcation; the grave marker became submerged in the ground. Tribute became impossible since the gravesites themselves had been lost. Preservation and decay can be purposeful political processes of care and neglect. Chuo Li observes in her work on Chinese cemeteries that "heritage preservation, as a practice connecting the past and present, provides us with insight not only into the historic meanings attached to cemeteries, but also the contemporary values and ideologies of communities with regard to their efforts in interpreting the past."<sup>20</sup> The decaying of these graves reflects the values that have informed the cemetery over the course of its history. In 2017, an internship team made up principally of high school students from the Mather Building Arts and Craftsmanship High School and the Williamsburg High School for Architecture and Design in New York City worked to document, restore, and interpret these sites.<sup>21</sup> As a deathscape, the cemetery is entangled in the politics of the body, as is the preservation and material care.

<sup>19</sup>"Freedom Lots," Green-Wood Cemetery, <<https://green-wood.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=b550a7818cbd408d812755c5183bd619>> (accessed 6 Nov. 2023).

<sup>20</sup>Chuo Li, "Heritage and Ethnic Identity: Preserving Chinese Cemeteries in the United States," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, 7 (2014): 642–59, 644.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.



Achille Mbembe's framework of necropolitics extends the politics of the body to the post/pre-mortem body.<sup>22</sup> The death-worlds are populated by the living-dead, the cemetery's gravestones become themselves the living-dead, and those in the Freedom Lot were always already oriented toward their own material death.

Bodies decay (quickly or slowly depending on a multiplicity of factors including burial methods, embalming, and the localized ecosystem) underground or inside urns without visitors' confrontations with the decomposition of some-body. Most visitors to cemeteries confront decay as a surface-level experience—flowers on graves wilt, gravestones crack, and across generations memory decay creates forgotten graves. Decay is the leitmotif across the site-specific experience of the cemetery, and yet the central entanglement with decay is hidden. The graveside tributes left behind become part of the ecology of the site while also moving in and out of alternative identities as relational things, preserved things, trash things, and broken things. Cemeteries, however, routinely clean out tributes as part of the site maintenance. These tributes are oriented toward their own decay and destruction; their embedment within an ecologically and environmentally diverse space and their own limited lifespans within the park means these things are ephemeral. As things, these tributes are each thrown into the world in a set of conditions that shape their beingness as things. Sometimes rains come fast and hard, crushing and drowning the cut flowers and candles a day after they are left; sometimes, the long dry summer months bake the photographs, bleaching them of pigment and curling their edges. These things are in the world and decaying as a shared and inevitable condition. The decay-life of something is a durational experience that something wears throughout its life—emphasizing it here points toward a being-towards-death where the finitude of things, things as ephemeral, is what simultaneously places them most vitally within the space of the living by allowing and welcoming the entropic material change of environmental, human, and non-human forces to co-configure the thing itself.

Flowers and floral arrangements are the most common graveside tribute, seen covering the Conway graves and continuing today throughout the cemetery. Across the street from one entrance, a florist shop sells natural and artificial wreaths, changing seasonally and representing New York City cultural institutions, including the New York Yankees (Figure 3).

Across the cemetery, people leave graveside tributes that demarcate the changing seasons and the passing of anniversaries, or celebrating ritual calendars. Christian calendars are enacted moving from birth to resurrection, starting with the floral arrangement of evergreens with a ribbon reading "Christmas in Heaven," (Figure 4) to the cross made for Palm Sunday, and finally to the plastic easter eggs stuck into the ground on sticks. These items are all located within specific moments within a calendrical cycle of holidays; in their nature as tributes, they offer an act of remembrance in their transience as purposefully time-sensitive things.

It is rare to see holiday items drastically out of season and generally people follow patterns of visitation and decoration that keep the graveside materials embedded in the time of the living. The cemetery staff will come through when they are tending to the lawns and remove items that might interfere with the mowers or hedge trimmers, which clears out remaining Palm Sunday crosses or the Easter eggs. Officially, the cemetery states that "Evergreen arrangements [are permitted] during the winter

<sup>22</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Steve Corcoran, trans. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).



**Figure 3.** New York Yankee's Wreaths at Shannon Florist and Nursery, Brooklyn, New York. Photograph by the author.

holiday season” but will be “removed in February as weather permits” and “Easter palm crosses ... are collected and discarded approximately two weeks after Easter during our annual spring clean-up.”<sup>23</sup> Before they can be removed, however, they often rot or get blown away, passively clearing space for new mementos of the next holiday. The decaying, destruction, and removal of seasonal items clear space for new demarcations that trace out the timeline of the year and show the habits and care of visitors to the gravesites.

The long traditions of burning, burying, consuming, or spoiling food intended for the deceased inform not only the nature of many offerings, but also the normality and acceptance with which they are viewed within the cemetery. At the start of March in

<sup>23</sup>“Graveside Tributes,” Green-Wood Cemetery, <<https://www.green-wood.com/tribute-rules/>> (accessed 14 Feb. 2022).



**Figure 4.** “Christmas in Heaven” bouquet on a grave, January 10, 2021 at Green-Wood Cemetery. Photograph by the author.

Green-Wood, eggplants were resting and slowing rotting on the leaves by the fence at the edge of the cemetery (Figure 5). The eggplants place us in the larger neighborhood context that Green-Wood cemetery now is located in; no longer a rural cemetery, it has been a fixed point within a changing Brooklyn. Today, the cemetery is located a few blocks from Flatbush which, in 2018, was named “Little Haiti” a year after Flatbush also received the cultural district designation “Little Caribbean.”<sup>24</sup> Eggplants are common cemetery offerings within Afro-Caribbean traditions and are specifically connected to Orisha Oya who is connected to cemetery gates and the color purple, as Saille Caia Murray notes in her analysis of food offerings in the Sugar Hill area of Harlem.<sup>25</sup> Consumption in the cemetery engages in symbolic, spiritual, and accidental relationships mediated by the actors in the cemetery—the dead and the living human and non-human animals. At a graveside in early January, I watched as a young man drank half a bottle of Dewar’s White Label before he capped the bottle and propped it up on the tombstone before leaving (Figure 6).

While this scotch is left in the bottle for the deceased, other bottles will be empty after being poured out over the burial ground. The interplay between alcohol and the

<sup>24</sup>Aisha Powell, “Little Haiti: The Latest Ethnic District Added to New York,” *Haitian Times*, 28 June 2018, <<https://haitiantimes.com/2018/06/28/little-haiti-the-latest-ethnic-district-added-to-new-york/>> (accessed 28 Dec. 2022).

<sup>25</sup>Saille Caia Murray, “Apples for Audubon and Eggplants for Oya: Afro-Caribbean Diaspora Religious Practice in Sugar Hill, New York City’s Parks and Cemetery,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 15, 4 (2021): 487–516.





Figure 5. Eggplants at the Cemetery fence, March 1, 2021. Photograph by the author.



Figure 6. Dewar's "White Label" left graveside January 10, 2021. Photograph by the author.

dead is pervasive across traditions; in an article about *kumyshka*, a homebrewed spirit made by the Udmurts (an Indigenous nation in the Volga region in Central Russia), Eva Toulouze summarizes the role of alcohol locally stating, “*kumyshka* is irreplaceable during funeral and commemorative rites. There are different rules related to usage at the time of death and immediately after someone has died, and during the funeral rites....”<sup>26</sup> While her analysis is locally specific, the ritual life of alcohol around the dead is often deeply connected to practices of mourning, celebrating, and remembering the dead—from Irish Catholic wakes to *kumyshka* in the Volga to the popular 1994 Thug Life song “Pour Out a Little Liquor,” alcohol is often irreplaceable in our relationships with the dead.

Amongst the familiar offerings of food and drink, it is rare that any are left behind untouched, unopened, or undisturbed in the environment of the outdoor living landscape of the cemetery. Glass bottles may break from wind or a lawn mower hitting against them. Rats, racoons, and rot will eat away at the eggplants if they are not removed first by staff. Their decay is relatively short-lived and does little to interrupt the aesthetics of the cemetery. Their short decay-life does not alter their importance in the ritual care and material companionship of the dead. The consumption of the food and drink as an offering or sacrifice as something that decays becomes part of its identity as an excess share, a purposefully constructed thing removed from a commodities-market life and allowed to ruin and be destroyed.<sup>27</sup> Other forms of waste materials, however, are not entangled in the material ontology of the thing as ritual care. The unintentional waste produced through the decay-life of graveside tributes displays becomes a revealing of their underlying skeletal materiality—a trash skeleton with a slower decay-life than the wet materiality of its superficial embodiment (Figure 7).

Here, the flowers and plant matter decayed and were destroyed more rapidly than the Styrofoam mount that exists on an existentially long decay timeline. The Styrofoam skeleton here forces a confrontation with the materiality of mourning tributes and the unequal decay-lifespans of the different component parts. We are left with a ruined thing that was never intended to be seen beneath the flowers that covered it. Slow decay-lives threaten us, from the massive existential accumulation of Styrofoam to the ruined aesthetics of graveside tributes, these waste byproducts are often set outside of the discourse of preservation, framed instead as things desired for destruction. The threat of slow decay-life haunts us. The Styrofoam trash-skeleton will outlive those who left it as a memorial for their dead. The paradoxical nature of a no-longer-floral arrangement left in memorial lasting in its derelict state beyond the lifespan of the mourners hauntologically merges past and future into the present. It is through the entropic relationships of decay within the space of the cemetery that the materials that resist it become most visible as slow-decaying things—some intentional like the stone grave markers and some unintentional like the trash-skeletons. Together, however, these form the aesthetics of the cemetery. The TRES art collective points out that waste stands in intimate relationship with us and becomes part of the everyday aesthetics of space (even when negatively marked). While the Styrofoam mounts are unintentionally part of a slow ephemeral materiality

<sup>26</sup>Eva Toulouze and Laur Vallikivi, “‘We Cannot Pray without *Kumyshka*’: Alcohol in Udmurt Ritual Life,” *Journal of Ethnography and Folkloristics* 15, 2 (2021): 221–39, 226.

<sup>27</sup>Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, Robert Hurley, trans. (New York: Zone Books, 1988).





Figure 7. Styrofoam 'trash-skeleton' of a floral arrangement. Green-Wood Cemetery, January 10, 2021. Photograph by the author.

within the cemetery park, there are also moments of purposeful intrusion on the decay-life of things. In order to arrest the process of decay and destruction at the gravesides, individuals often use non-biodegradable materials that, in turn, create their own waste byproducts.

The waste created by the graveside tributes becomes part of the slow-decaying elements of the cemetery through the technologies and interventions of preservation. Styrofoam is, notably, the example used by Timothy Morton in his work on hyperobjects to express a collective and long-lasting materiality participating in an apocalyptic reality. Their resistance to decay leads to an accumulation and density that remains and congeals into something too big to be merely an object; these trash-skeletons for Morton are not themselves hyperobjects but rather the hyperobject is the sum total of all Styrofoam. While this idea articulates a sense of collective and planetary existential crisis, it moves us out of the space of local meaning-making that



Figure 8. Broken statue. Green-Wood Cemetery, February 16 2021. Photograph by the author.

the trash remnants hold in the experience of space. A techno-utopian fantasy of preservation is an arresting of decay. The ecology of decay and its facilitation of entropic materiality becomes a politics of the Anthropocene where the permeability of things is imperative to combat stockpiling of capital that threatens to overwhelm us in museums and trash heaps.<sup>28</sup> The TRES art collective (Ilana Boltvinik and Rodrigo Viñas) work with trash materials in their art practice and attend to the pervasiveness of waste in local and global contexts. In these spaces, however, they are interested in “the intimate relationships we have with waste” where the closeness in which “we live with waste becomes an aesthetic experience that reveals new information and symbolic values about trash and our society.”<sup>29</sup> TRES works with trash as a local and global category, one that moves between hyper-embedded local experiences and a global crisis.

Throughout the cemetery broken tributes become trash. A cracked St. Patrick’s Day hat decorated with a pinecone sticking out of it at a jaunty angle, a set of helium balloons blown into the bushes only partially inflated and upright, and a shattered statue have become ruinous things (Figure 8), stuck somewhere between being ruins and ruined. As ruined things, these pieces are no longer intact in their intended form but their materiality resists decay allowing their broken and disjointed parts to remain physically present in the cemetery. Their decay-life exists on a timeline that extends beyond the scope of an individual human life moving into a deep

<sup>28</sup>TRES Collective, <[resartcollective.com](http://resartcollective.com)> (accessed 23 Dec. 2023).

<sup>29</sup>TRES, *Ubiquitous Trash: Hong Kong Edition* (Hong Kong: Puerta Roja, 2016).

decay-future. As ruined things, their broken materiality is undesired. As ruins, however, we can consider their broken forms a decay process, the breaking down of the material form from its intentional structures to unintended and untended remains. In ruins, the intentionality of the original form that is hinted at in the slow-decaying fragments left behind are distinguished from the unintentional waste byproducts of things—here, the Styrofoam mount used for floral arrangements. Not the broken ruins of the tribute, this is the trash-skeleton of intentional materials that are now gone, no longer able to fill their intended material purposes.

Styrofoam might prompt existential anxieties about waste accumulation through the overwhelming slow-decay-lives of things outlasting and overtaking the quick-decaying biodegradables such as flowers, bees, and humans. However, it is present in the cemetery as a material presence that shapes and is shaped by the environment of the space. The permissible biodegradable flowers are only able to be arranged in the desired form through the foam mount and the nature of the outdoor space and their death as living plants facilitates their quick decay-life. The foam mount becomes part of the memorialization of the passage of time standing as a materialization of the relationships of the living to the dead. It is, perhaps, instinctually easier to argue for the value of food offerings at a graveside than a Styrofoam mount with only the smallest traces of decayed flowers; however, both are material remnants of the relationship of care, mourning, and memory performed by the living through tributes. Taken as an assemblage, the idea of living collections seemingly expands to include the materiality of the cemetery as a whole, where animate and inanimate materials are co-configuring each other through the site-specific environment of the cemetery wherein decay operates pervasively and heterogeneously throughout the space.

Green-Wood Cemetery's graveside tributes direct attention to different decay-lives that are generally negatively marked as undesirable; even the permissible fresh flowers become undesirable once decay is visible. What is valued is the entropy of the natural world—the trees are allowed to grow, birds are celebrated, and bees are actively welcomed through native pollinator planting programs. The artificial elements of the site are welcomed when they are part of valued heritage—the gravestones, mausoleums, and statues—which are shaped by and, in turn, shape the natural space they are placed within. These protected categories are maintained through preservation and conservation work to remain intact, aesthetically appropriate, and durationally maintained to secure their future for generations to come. Nevertheless, these practices also produce their own destruction through the removal of tributes, the restoration of decaying stonework, and the prohibiting of the material by-products of intangible heritage practices of mourning, care, and ritual. Decay and non-decay become key justifications for what materiality is acceptable and valuable and what is not, both within Green-Wood Cemetery and in heritage spaces more broadly.

The slowing of decay through preservation technologies involves multiple actors across the cemetery. The stonemasonry work of repairing headstones and the training of new preservation experts in the "Bridge to Crafts" program together with the beekeepers building and maintaining hives to protect the species loss of bees are sanctioned acts of slow-decay interventions. Other technologies become illicit ones. The slow-decaying things visitors leave at the gravesides merge into trash as the cemetery sweeps the graves and as the rules and regulation change reflecting the ambiguity of our values. In 2023, the cemetery had red warning signs at the entryway



that read, “**Only floral bouquets can be left at the graveside.** Remove paper and cellophane before laying the bouquet. **Green-Wood has strict rules for placement of flowers and other graveside tributes.... Cemetery clean sweeps occur in February, April and [sic], September.** Everything will be removed from graves except fresh flower bouquets. **Notice to Lot Holders:** As of January 2023, Green-Wood will no longer allow plastic flowers.”<sup>30</sup> Previously, however, it was fresh flowers in water that were forbidden. In 2022, the City of New York started allowing the use of plastic flowers within cemeteries as a way of combating resting still water that attracted mosquitos which can carry diseases.<sup>31</sup> Between 15 March and 31 October, in fact, the Department of Health has banned all cemeteries from the use of vases that can hold water. Staff are told to pour out the water and remove the vases if they see them and cemeteries can be fined for standing water.<sup>32</sup> The plastic bottle at the center of the triptych that reads “Souvenir from Lourdes” was no longer graveside (Figure 9). It will be thrown out either during the sweeps or sooner during general groundskeeping. Intended to preserve and transport healing waters from Lourdes in France, the entropy of the site itself already saw it moved away from its graveside placement shifting it from tribute to trash.

Fresh flowers, while permitted, are removed when they expire. Decaying biodegradables when they are no longer in their material primacy and non-biodegradables in their non-decaying state are both subject to removal, framing the decay-life of the cemetery as subterranean (the decaying dead) and environmental (decay on gravestones, leaves from trees, and general natural detritus). The entropic relationships of decay introduced through the tributes become undesirable and seemingly unclean, needing to be swept away three times a year. The five–six month stretches from April to September and September to February offer windows for the accumulation of prohibited materials and the scale of the park means that many things survive in situ regardless of removal policies. Though these things may slip through the disciplinary structures of the cemetery and remain graveside, the policies themselves frame the slow-decay materials of plastics, metals, glasses, or other non-biodegradables as ephemeral in their nature as tributes not in their decay-life but as undesired material intrusions reformed as waste rather than tribute. The cemetery decay-life of a plastic bottle may be artificially truncated by its disposal forcing it to enter a new decay-life phase as trash in the elsewhere where trash is taken to remove it from the public viewing space.

Decay sits at the epicenter of experiences within the cemetery. The decaying of the dead is hidden in boxes, urns, and earth and the participatory experience of decay is materialized in the surface level immersive space of the park. Human and non-human actor networks co-habitate and co-curate the aesthetics of the site and force negotiations around the space as a heritage site, a memorial space, and a living place. Ranging from rotting eggplants placed at the perimeter of the cemetery to a half-drunken bottle of scotch whisky to a smashed statue, the materiality of graveside tributes is always in relationship with experiences of decay as entangled with natural

<sup>30</sup>Sign at Green-Wood Cemetery, 19 Oct. 2023.

<sup>31</sup>W. Bajwa, S. Slavinski, Z. Shah Z, and L. Zhou, “Comprehensive Mosquito Surveillance and Control Plan.” New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2022.

<sup>32</sup>See, for example, the 22 May 2012 CBS News report on Queens cemetery fined \$600 for standing water: <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/queens-cemetery-fined-for-having-flowers-with-water-at-graves/>.



Figure 9. Souvenir from Lourdes. Green-Wood Cemetery, January 28, 2021. Photograph by the author.

and artificial forces. The material resistance to decay is seen in acts of amateur preservation, attempts to forestall the natural forces of rain, wind, and rot to keep photographs of the dead visible to the living. The prioritization of fresh flowers is rooted in a valuing of decay-able materials in an ecologically minded orientation, yet the promise of removal once the decay is visible continues to situate decay itself as undesirable.

Graveside tributes start out as intact things active in the space of offering, memorialization, and care. As they live out their time in the natural environment of the cemetery, their decay-life becomes entangled in the site-specific nature of the park. Their life as material things is oriented towards their inevitable destruction through their decay. As the relationships that sustain the ritualized cycling of thing in the cemetery decays, so too do the material intersections of site, thing, and performance. Gravesides become abandoned and ambiguous in the boundaries. A stone grave marker seemingly shifted down a hillside and is now partially submerged





**Figure 10.** A grave marker partially submerged at the bottom of a hill. Green-Wood Cemetery, January 10, 2021. Photograph by the author.

next to the paved pathway, most likely separated from the place it marked out for bodily decay (Figure 10). Decay as a universal condition of materiality entangles the living and the dead within a temporality of rot and ruin.

### Decay-Life: Messy, Wet, and Active Matter

The still life presents the viewer with things frozen at a moment in their being-towards-death-ness. Arresting the vision in a moment, the stilled life points toward the collective experience of death. Jane C. Desmond, in her prologue to the book *Leisure and Death: An Anthropological Tour of Risk, Death, and Dying*, observes that while death and the dead have become increasingly a focus within cultural productions (films, television, tourism sites, games, etc.), dying has not; she notes that the “often messy, unaesthetic, sometimes excruciating *process* of dying” lacks the neatness (definitiveness and cleanliness) of the dead.<sup>33</sup> If we are comfortable with the dead, but not the messiness of the dying, I would contribute an addendum that we are also not comfortable with the decaying of the dead. In the cemetery, the decay of bodies is hidden from view in mausoleums, graves, and urns; the narrative of these as “final resting places” itself seemingly masks the very active decay-life of the post-mortem bodies.

<sup>33</sup>Jane Desmond, “Leisurely Death and Dying? Body, Place, and the Limits to Leisure—A Prologue,” in Adam Kaul and Jonathan Skinner, eds., *Leisure and Death: An Anthropological Tour of Risk, Death, and Dying* (Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2018), ix–xv, xiii.

The paradox of still life is using a static moment to unfurl the longer durational timeline of decay and mortality. The decay-life of things is a paradox of living after death. Decay is active; the fungi, water, insects, rats, and groundskeepers act as a network of actors facilitating, arresting, and ending decay. The tributes, as a point of contact between the hemispheric pairing of the living and the dead decay for us visibly in the cemetery. They entangle the dead and the living in the processes of decaying as part of a wet entropy of rot. Bodies and leaves rot in the park, the cut flowers turn to brown sludge attracting mosquitos, and the grass grows back covering the overturned dirt of new burials. The decaying Santa Muerte statue (Figure 11) rotted in the corner of the cemetery; next to it, a gold skull like a shining bauble remained whole and eventually was picked up and placed upright on the cement ledge supporting the fence posts until it too vanished. Taken, thrown out, tarnished, tattered—somewhere the dead were left a tribute that ended up thrown against the fencing that kept it contained within the deathscape of the cemetery.



**Figure 11.** Decaying Santa Muerte and gold skull, Green-Wood Cemetery. Photograph by the author.



The cemetery is a space set aside for the after-life of the body in its durational state of decay. The burials and cremations of bodies break down the bodily form. The decaying bodies enter the soil, the air, the neighborhood, and the lives of others who visit, tend, and mourn in the park. During the height of the pandemic, they also entered into our public sphere as an invocation of precarity and an overwhelming reminder of the scale of loss. Shuyi Cao and Remina Greenfield, co-founders of the Decompose Institute, ask, “As artists, where should we begin to tell stories about decay? Stories with no origins, no heroes, only a myriad of fuzzy, or slimy, or wriggling, or crawling, or floating, or dormant, or swollen, sprawling, exploding spores, or ecstatic particles. They are stories with no conclusion, only leading to infinite endings.”<sup>34</sup> Critiqued here is the heroism of human imperviousness to decay—a desire for immortality, an aversion to bodily and cognitive decay, a revulsion to rot; “in the Western techno-utopian discourse of today” they write, “the reality of decay is outright denied, or worse, imagined as something for other people to deal with: future generations, neglected urban and rural communities, ‘separate’ regions of the earth such as the global south, machine attendants, and other species.” Our aversion to decay extends into scholarship; the study of materiality often valorizes the creation and use of things but forgets about or averts its eyes from the entropic timeline of pre- and post-mortem slow destruction.

Decay is inevitable and necessary. The decaying carbon fossils of deep pasts fueled the Industrial Revolution and the decay of bodies allows graveyards to recycle graves by condensing burial spaces.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, as anthropologist Ghassan Hage notes with some surprise, “Given the pervasiveness of the differential experiences of organic, physiological, physical, organizational, moral, and social decay in everyday life, it has attracted relatively little explicit social scientific attention.”<sup>36</sup> While categories of scholarship engage with ideas of decay—the expanding field of ruin studies, ecological discussions of decay timelines for waste, and mortality studies (to name just a few)—decay itself as a conceptual category is often an aspect, rather than the focus, of the works. The messiness and wetness of decay can challenge “our decay-phobia and denial of decay, especially in Western culture where the taboo around decay and its aesthetics is perhaps the strongest and most insidious.”<sup>37</sup> The still life, while invoking decay, often presents the “fruit is at the peak of its ripeness; [though] soon it will begin to rot.”<sup>38</sup> Decay is implied, but not seen.

Decay is not without its aesthetic merits, however. Ruins, shipwrecks, statues with missing limbs, and patinaed surfaces have been motifs in artworks ranging from Marco and Sebastiano Ricci’s Renaissance ruinscape of Roman statues and architectural fragments in *Landscape with Classical Ruins and Figures* (ca. 1725–1730) to Kathleen Ryan’s sculptural *Fool’s Mold* (2018), where a plastic-coated foam

<sup>34</sup>Shuyi Cao and Remina Greenfield, “Soft Rot, Bitter Rot, Sweet Rot: The Politics of Decay,” *Heichi Magazine*, May 2021.

<sup>35</sup>Akhil Gupta, “Infrastructure as Decay and the Decay of Infrastructure,” in Ghassan Hage, ed., *Decay* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 37–46.

<sup>36</sup>Ghassan Hage, “Introduction: States of Decay,” in Ghassan Hage, ed., *Decay* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 1–12, 7.

<sup>37</sup>Cao and Greenfield, “Soft Rot.”

<sup>38</sup>Wayne M. Martin, “Bubbles and Skulls: The Phenomenology of Self-Consciousness in Dutch Still-Life Painting,” in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall, eds., *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 559–84, 563.

structure was beaded with agate, malachite, smoky quartz, Russian serpentine, and other minerals to create a pointillistic moldering lemon. Here decay is aesthetic, nostalgic, and playful; nevertheless, the works themselves are still bound together in an aesthetic of material wholeness with interventions by various curators and conservators who stave off any active rot or disintegration.

Sally Matthews, a British multimedia artist, created a series of wolf sculptures for Grizedale Forest, which is part of the Forestry England that maintains public forests in England and “supply[s] England’s largest amount of sustainably-sourced timber.” Matthews has made multiple wolves (1993, 2019, and 2021) as well as other animals including deer, hounds, and boars. Starting from a metal sculptural frame, Matthews builds up a textured body made up of “bits of wolf like brash and roots. Mixing pine needles and forest floor with the cement and smearing the work with earth from the ‘path where the wolf has walked.’” The “Grizedale Forest Sculpture: An Unofficial Archive,” run by Amelia Harvey as a personal project, lists the status of the 1993 wolves as, “Decommissioned, few remains. One still vaguely recognisable 2020” and the more recent 2021 wolves as, “Still in situ, as new Oct 22.” Harvey says that there is possibly something transgressive about her unofficial archive; the works she documents were not intended to be preserved and their mutability through the exposure to the environment itself is part of their life as artworks. She writes, “It is the nature of Grizedale that the sculptures disappear over time. The majority of the sculptures were created in the forest, from materials found there. They were designed to be temporary and return to the forest naturally. Therefore, the only way of preserving them is through photography. It is important to remember, however, that this is not the intended way to experience these artworks.”

Matthew’s work, as installation art, is not made to ever be remounted or removed from its site-specific setting. Its decay is entropically engaged with the weather, visitors (human and non-human), bacterial flora, and microbial fauna. Matthews notes that the last wolf in England “was perhaps chased from Cartmel in the 14th Century and killed near the coast. Grizedale seems the perfect forest in which to encounter wolves—there are none.” The decaying sculptures will eventually die in situ—a memorializing decay paying tribute to the absence of wolves themselves in the forests. These wolves do not have afterlives in other settings. Conservator and art historian Pip Laurenson frames time-sensitive installation art as “on the ontological continuum somewhere between performance and sculpture.”<sup>39</sup> The time-sensitivity and site-specific nature of performance is here the durational progression of decay. The still-life photographs of the graveside tributes, like Harvey’s archive, are unsatisfactory representations of the ongoing entropic heritage, the active relationality between the living and the dead, and the interplay between natural and artificial materiality. Like still life, they can only pin down a fleeting moment, leaving to the imagination or ongoing companioning their extending decay-life.

The extension of the aesthetics of decay into heritage and site conservation reflects alternative understandings of stewardship. Peter Oakley introduced the term “contrived dereliction” to describe heritage sites that purposefully curate visible

<sup>39</sup>Pip Laurenson, “Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations,” *Tate Paper* 6 (2006), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/06/authenticity-change-and-loss-conservation-of-time-based-media-installations>.

decay as an immersive experience of historical authenticity and affective engagement. Sites such as ghost towns, old mines, shipwrecks, and historic house museums might allow visible aging, patina, cracking, and creaking but the deception of this is that while it all appears as a natural progression of time on things, it is, in fact, a tightly managed aesthetic that allows just the right amount of cracked paint, dusty books, and fogged glass.<sup>40</sup> Opposite to this is Caitlin DeSilvey's proposal of entropic heritage; in her book *Curating Decay*, she advocates for a framework of entropic heritage that makes it "possible to perform remembrance through transience."<sup>41</sup> In this framework, there is an invitation and incorporation of a chaotic expanded space of possibility that emerges when we approach heritage sites and things as living collections. DeSilvey acknowledges that this "may require a willingness to find value in alternative material forms" that challenge our expectations, aesthetics, and perceptions of care.<sup>42</sup> Here, she looks at sites such as the Cold War era Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Orford Ness to explore how a practice of non-intervention allows the natural entropy of a site to take over stewardship.<sup>43</sup> After an initial decontamination of the site and addressing of critical safety hazards, it was allowed to move into a state of ongoing ruin. Sea salt crumbles the cement, birds nest in the walls, and field flowers take over the hills.

Green-Wood cemetery sits somewhere between these two poles of carefully curated decay and entropic continued ruination. It also merges together the aesthetic, nostalgic, and playful decay of the artistic canon with wet active rot and structural disintegration. The idea of a rural cemetery was rooted in the pairing of nature and artifice; the seasonal changes in the landscape are at the center of the aesthetics of the space requiring the rotting fall leaves and the moss-covered stones to complete the space. The groundskeepers and preservationists at the site maintain the gravestones, monuments, art installations, bees, and trees conserving the natural and artificial landscape. The tributes become a third space straddling the natural and artificial worlds of the cemetery. Brought into the park, organic and plastic flowers are placed on graves demarcating the active materialization of the ongoing relationship between the living and the dead. These tributes themselves become thrown out by employees and families, or are eaten by rats and racoons, rot away, break apart, or get blown away. Their decay-life is co-constituted by the entropic ecological heritage of the site and by the carefully curated stewardship.

Green-Wood Cemetery's decay is filled with wet rot, messy grave tributes, and an active network of actors who alternatively decay and preserve the material landscape. It is a place co-constituted through a relational ontology—a beingness rooted in the phenomenological space of encounter, perception, environment, and affective engagement—of things that engage with other-than-human actors as agents in the processing of material. This processing can be the slow and halted work of conservation that prompts the repairing of gravestones or the fast destructive work of eating a pumpkin. Across the temporalities of materiality, decay-life and death of

<sup>40</sup>Peter Oakley, "A Permanent State of Decay: Contrived Dereliction at Heritage Mining Sites," in Hilary Orange, ed., *Reanimating Industrial Spaces: Conducting Memory Work in Post-Industrial Societies* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014): 49–71, 67.

<sup>41</sup>Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 5.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 77–79.



things is always present and is generative and constructive through its destruction. This privileging of destruction as central to materiality recognizes the being-in-the-world of things and acknowledges them as embedded in natural, relational, cultural, mortal, and moral worlds. The axiomatic statement that all things will eventually decay can also be an ecological orientation advocating for decay-oriented ethics of material production and disposal; the Styrofoam trash skeleton becomes entangled in the hyperobject of Styrofoam itself that outlasted its cut flowers and will outlast our bodies. Scholarship tends to approach these things in their states as ascendancy and primacy—their creation and vital stages where they are being worn, displayed, carried, dressed, and fed; rarely, is the focus on what happens as things experiencing the cascading losses that lead to death—the breaking, fading, deposing, and throwing away stages when something is decaying and oriented towards its death. Decay allows us to consider the environmental impacts of preservation and storage, while also advocating for alternative frameworks of heritage that place material culture within the space of living cultural heritage that invites use, touch, destruction, alteration, and reconstruction that might alter the material thing but also keep it in an active space of ongoing decay-life.

### Riotous Rot

The entropic nature of rot creates a decay landscape on different timescales. Ana Smailbegović advocates for poetics as a methodology for defamiliarizing anthropogenic perspectives of time.<sup>44</sup> She imagines a seafloor covered in starfish that appear still from a human perspective, but in starfish-time that same frozen being is rapidly moving just outside of the “temporal dimension of the human *Umwelt* [the world as it exists through the perspective of a being].”<sup>45</sup> Poetics, with its potential for rhythmic meter and prismatic twisting of images in metaphor and textured description, opens a potential for encountering starfish-time. The still life breaks meter, but in its isolation points to those pasts and futures that entangle with the frozen moment. Decay as still life is always already entangled in durational time. Slow and fast decay become perspectives. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* uses a poetics of noticing and storytelling to trace the relational assemblages gathered by matsutake mushrooms. She asks, “What do you do when your world starts to fall apart?”<sup>46</sup> The answer from the mushrooms is a contaminated diversity of collaborative living. The matsutake required ruination to occur; mushrooms digest rotted material and the matsutake were the “first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape” of Hiroshima.<sup>47</sup> Tsing is noticing emergent lives, and these lives are always contaminated by the livingness of decay. Cut flowers, bodies, Styrofoam mounts, and gravestones are actively living their decay-lives embedded and entangled in the

<sup>44</sup>Ana Smailbegović, “Cloud Writing: Describing Soft Architectures of Change in the Anthropogenic,” in Heather M. Davis and E. Turpin, eds., *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 93–109, 105.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>46</sup>Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

entropic landscape that contaminates them. Rats nibble the eggplants; staff throw away the palm Sunday crosses. Death ushers in a material life of decay.

A riot of rot spreads across the cemetery. It morphs the landscape; Green-Wood—as a heritage site that moves between natural and artificial heritage, betwixt historical and contemporary frames, and in a liminal relational space of the living and the dead—is a fully living collection where each part co-configured the whole. It is, in effect, an entropic living site. Decay becomes substratum of life—decay rejects stasis and intact authenticity. Just as everything is living in Green-Wood, everything is also decaying; even the dead continue to decay. Death is not an end, as it were. In their FAQs one of the listed questions asks, “Why is there no grass at my loved one’s grave?” (Figure 12). This is because it takes over a year for the grass to grow after the ground has been opened and the ground sinks causing headstones to move and plants not to take root. As a result, over those months of settling, the



**Figure 12.** A grave without grass yet covering it with Palm Sunday cross Green-Wood Cemetery, April 23, 2021. Photograph by the author.

cemetery has to “fill in the grave with soil over time.”<sup>48</sup> The bodies, headstones, grass, visitors leaving Palm Sunday crosses on fresh graves, and the cemetery workers packing dirt for approximately eighteen months after a burial, are all mutually constructing the conditions of decay—some desirable and some not. But together these establish a network of relationships that require loss as a generative and creative predicative experience.

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<sup>48</sup>“Frequently Asked Questions,” Green-Wood Cemetery, <<https://www.green-wood.com/frequently-asked-questions/>> (accessed 24 Mar. 2024).

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