

**Zack Rosen
Bob Montera
Journalism
Second Semester
Final Paper**

"The Great Democratizer?" Death and the American Dream

"Isn't it funny how things are connected?"
-Ruth Rosen, my grandmother

In 1844, William Cullen Bryant, responding to an editorial in the *Journal of Commerce* denouncing the park movement, wrote in the *Evening Post*: "Commerce is devouring inch by inch the coast of the island, and if we could rescue any part of it for health and recreation, it must be done now." Bryant pointed to the use of Brooklyn's Greenwood Cemetery by thousands of families as picnic space as evidence for the desperate need for "real" parks in the ever-growing city.¹ He missed the point.

From the 1830's to the 1850's, graveyards were the closest thing to public parks. By 1842, Greenwood was drawing over sixty thousand visitors each year. As Donald Simon, an expert on the history of the New York Parks Department, explained, Greenwood's founders intended the cemetery to be, to a certain extent, a place of public indulgence in nature (albeit for private profit):² "In order to get people to come out to what was then the middle of nowhere, they said that you should come to this beautiful place to visit, and they got people to come to have a day in the country. Remember, at this point, there was no place to go to get out of the city. There were still huge parts of the city where you could only go as far as you could walk. So Greenwood's founders used a great deal of inducements and enticements to get people to come out, and the rich would come to Greenwood and take a tour and picnic."

But due to the Depression of 1837 (which had deflated land prices enough for Greenwood's founders to purchase the land), few people had the luxury of spending twenty thousand dollars on a burial plot. The cemetery was opened in 1840; in 1843, only three hundred and fifty-two people were buried in Greenwood. Through much of the

¹ Burns, Ric, James Sanders, with Lisa Ades, *New York: An Illustrated History*, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, 1999), pp. 107-108.

² Telephone Interview with Donald Simon, May 5, 2005.

1840's, the cemetery remained more a place for the living than for the dead. Mr. Simon's doctoral dissertation on Greenwood was called "The Worldly Side of Paradise."

In 1844, the body of New York celebrity politician DeWitt Clinton was disinterred and moved from Albany to Greenwood. At the same time, the effects of the Depression of 1837 were wearing off. That year, more than 700 people were buried in Greenwood. Mr. Simon explained: "The success of the cemetery was really the downfall of it as park. All of a sudden, this option of using it as a place to spend the day was no longer there."

Greenwood was intended to make death beautiful—to celebrate the beauty of the natural world while surrounded by the spirits of great people. But death was something far too real in the 1840's. "People were very squeamish about death in those days. Remember, death was much more real than it is today. Accidents, disease, and all these things were common. Death was something that people experienced every day. You would have a funeral in the home; the family prepared the body. Death was something people were familiar with, so there was this horror with the loss of people. For Jews, we sit Shiva, but the body is gone. But for Christians, having bodies around was something they were familiar with." The spiritual side of death was a popular theme in Romantic and Victorian high culture, but when push came to shove, the physical side of death scared people away. Cemeteries were less and less of an escape for people. As Greenwood filled up with the dead, its appeal was lost to the living.

The founders of Greenwood Cemetery were businessmen. Their interest was in selling plots of land to the wealthy, and giving tours of the Cemetery to the public sold plots. The founding of Greenwood was not an act of philanthropy. "The founders of Greenwood never intended it to be a public park. Their chief concern was in selling plots. They wanted people to come and take a tour and buy a plot, and then off they'd go for a little while until they died." Greenwood Cemetery enjoyed a few years as a public attraction. People had bought plots but had not yet died. Going to a cemetery for a day's outing was a wonderfully romantic idea. But as the cemetery filled up, death became all too real; death was about death itself, not human emotion and romantic mystery.

So when William Cullen Bryant pointed to the use of Greenwood Cemetery as a picnic ground, he missed the possibilities of the relationship between the living city and

the city of the dead. In our own time in which even the dead are not exempt from corporate greed we can better appreciate the potential aesthetic, inspirational, and historical value of cemeteries, funeral homes, and immigrant burial societies. Death can be a connection to old New York; it can be the great democratizer, the epitome of the American Dream; it can be a shadow of life itself. Death and the emotions associated with it are the common thread throughout human existence.

* * *

Greenwood

I emerged from the R train at the Twenty-fifth Street station in the neighborhood of Greenwood Heights. Hole in the wall Mexican eateries dotted Fourth Avenue. Greenwood Cemetery's elaborate gates were hard to miss, looking down Twenty-fifth Street. A crowd had formed around a map of the cemetery listing the many celebrities buried there. One old Brooklyn woman noticed Boss William Tweed's name on the list and declared, "Well, you steal everyone blind and you make yourself a nice monument. Just like all them popes."

The tour began outside of the gates: "Most of the tours Big Onion does are of neighborhoods, not cemeteries, so this is really different," said the guide. "The theme of this tour in many ways will be 19th century Romantic and Victorian culture as it relates to this cemetery."³

Greenwood was one of the cornerstones of the Victorian rural cemetery movement, in which "the dead were the first to move to the suburbs." Donald Simon explained the roots of what one flyer called "Brooklyn's Victorian Necropolis." "If you think back to the time of the Revolution, New York was really a small city. But after the Erie Canal was built in 1825, the city's population and commercial activity grew dramatically. And there was just one problem with this, which was where to bury people."⁴

³ Big Onion Walking Tour Guide, Greenwood Cemetery, April 10th, 2005.

⁴ Ironically, the construction of the Erie Canal was the brainchild of New York's celebrity-politician, DeWitt Clinton, who contributed (posthumously) to Greenwood's success enormously when his body was disinterred to Greenwood.

As prescribed by the Bible, the property-less masses had always been buried at various Potter's Fields, scattered outside of the city. The British buried Revolutionary War prisoners at the site of the old African burial ground at Duane and Reade Streets, and later indigents were buried below 195 Chrystie Street, Washington Square, Madison Square, the main branch of the New York Public Library on 42nd street, and the Waldorf-Astoria, until 1845, when the city disinterred over a hundred thousand corpses from these last two sites and moved them to Ward's Island. This location, as well as Randall's Island, was active until 1868, when the city acquired Hart Island, half a mile east of City Island, for seventy-five thousand dollars. Since then, the city has buried from three thousand to five thousand unidentifiable or indigent bodies each year on Hart Island, using prisoner labor.⁵

But in 1825, as commerce increased, fewer and fewer people died with no property. Property owners were buried on their land or in a church mausoleum. But as the city filled up so did its underground infrastructure. In some instances, as the city expanded churches moved uptown, leaving behind massive graveyards; so when new congregations moved into old churches they often found unmarked graveyards left intact and buried new bodies in old plots. As the ground became overcrowded with bodies the city's water supply became noticeably polluted.⁶

Before, the goal common to all burial practices was to isolate the dead from the living. But in the 1820's and 30's, Romanticism and Transcendentalism defined high culture, and the focus was shifted to the emotions of the mourner, as well as the relationship between human emotion and nature. So by the 1820's, people began advocating rural cemeteries for obvious physical and philosophical reasons. "The idea was that these places would have rolling hills, grass, trees, a naturalistic environment, and graves appropriately put in the middle of all this," said Mr. Simon. Rural cemeteries were meant to be uplifting, to encourage visits, to "make death beautiful for the living," as the guide put it. So, Mr. Simon explained, "During the Depression of 1837, with land prices down, some wealthy people bought property in Brooklyn overlooking the harbor to sell plots and gravesites."

⁵ Edward Conlon, "To the Potter's Field," *The New Yorker*, July 19th, 1993.

⁶ Lockwood, Charles, *New York Moves Uptown*, Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1976, p. 222.

Greenwood was founded in 1838 by Henry Pierrepont, a second generation “Brooklyn Booster.” The Brooklyn Boosters were a group of Brooklyn intellectuals who promoted the image of Brooklyn as the cultural twin of commercial New York. (Ironically, the great majority of those buried in Greenwood were wealthy New York industrialists). Pierrepont chose the location with transcendental goals of mixing human emotion with natural beauty⁷. But the cemetery was so far away from urban Brooklyn and New York that the project was a tremendous gamble.

At first the cemetery was unsuccessful, mainly because a plot cost 20,000 dollars, and the same economic slump that depressed land prices enough for Pierrepont to purchase the cemetery discouraged would be plot-buyers. (In today’s money, this quantity equals 2 million dollars; a plot in Greenwood costs only 10,000 dollars today). But in 1844, with the effects of the depression wearing off and DeWitt Clinton’s body moved to Greenwood, Greenwood became a much more financially successful cemetery. Greenwood soon became, in the words of the guide, “the place to be when you’re dead.” *The New York Times* published an article saying that the rich want to live on 5th avenue, walk in Central Park, and be buried in Greenwood Cemetery.

In New York, death can connect any number of seemingly unrelated things. As Lorenzo Krakowsky, a Woodlawn Cemetery aficionado, remarked, “You can make a lot of historical discoveries walking around a place like this.” In Greenwood, each individual story provides insight into 19th century life and death.

The first grave we visited was that of Louis Bonard, a French immigrant who made a fortune patenting small, practical inventions. His inventions were everywhere, but he was never famous because none of them were earth shattering. But Bonard himself was extremely eccentric; he chose to live modestly in a tenement in the infamous Five Points area, known as the worst neighborhood in history. Bonard believed that he would be reincarnated as some sort of animal and that he would naturally be abused in the next life, so he decided to give his fortune to the newly founded ASPCA. Bonard arranged a meeting with the society’s founder, Henry Bergh and informed him of his wishes. “That’s

⁷ Ironically, Greenwood’s “natural” environment was drastically modified in order to achieve the desired aesthetic effect. Mr. Simon explained: “At one point they got a flock of doves imported from Europe to fly around, which was great, but as soon as they were released that the doves flew away and never came back.”

wonderful,” said Bergh. “But what fortune?” Bonard was dressed in his usual humble attire—he must have appeared to have crawled out of the gutter. At this point, Bonard unveiled a chest containing his massive fortune.

As one might expect, Bonard’s children were not terribly pleased with his plans, and, upon his death, they took Bergh to court. Bergh produced an affidavit in which Bonard clearly explained that he was donating his money to the ASPCA because he would be abused in the next life as an animal. The judge ruled in Bergh’s favor, writing that Bonard’s children were, as he had predicted, abusing his wishes after his death.

Next, we visited the Burnham tomb. Burnham, a staunch Democrat during the late 19th century, one of the most politically polarized times in all of American history (in spite of the essential similarity of the two major parties), refused to be married under a Republican, so he rescheduled his marriage for the date of the inauguration of Grover Cleveland. But the week before the wedding, he caught pneumonia waiting for his bride outside and, ironically, died with a Republican in the White House.

We visited the tomb of Marcus Daly, a wealthy industrialist who didn’t come from the upper crust of New York society, but bought a failing silver mine which turned out to be an abundant copper mine (Edison had just invented the light bulb, so copper for filaments was in high demand). Daly was never accepted in New York high society, but he did befriend J.P. Morgan, who founded the Metropolitan Club because no other clubs would accept Daly. Daly died a lonely man.

* * *

From Rural Cemeteries to Public Parks

A statue commemorating Henry Litchfield, the owner of the land that became Prospect Park and Park Slope, lies on the top of a hill in Greenwood, its back turned to the park. Litchfield, a 3rd generation Brooklyn Booster, developed the area as a suburb for New York’s wealthy. He was instrumental in the building of New York’s street railway in order to facilitate the commute, just as Henry Pierrepont’s father, who owned Brooklyn Heights, donated money to Robert Fulton to develop a steam engine to transport passengers across the East River. Litchfield donated his estate to the newly

founded Brooklyn Parks Department in order to make Park Slope a luxurious neighborhood for the affluent. But Litchfield's children fought the city in court over just how much of his estate Litchfield had contributed; Litchfield gave the land extending from 9th avenue east to Flatbush Avenue, but his children argued that he had only contributed the land from 11th avenue east. Obviously, the city won, but Litchfield's children memorialized their father snubbing the very neighborhood he had created. They could not have realized what an important contribution Litchfield had made to the parks movement and to the city of New York.

As Donald Simon explained, the parks movement was formed out of the ashes of the rural cemeteries movement: "As cemeteries like Greenwood filled up with bodies, they lost their appeal as parks. There still was a romanticism, but it wasn't exactly the perfect atmosphere for a picnic. But people did go visit a cemetery and have an enlightening, uplifting experience, which was what Victorians believed mourning should be about. But it's interesting how people would say, 'I don't want to be buried there, I don't like the view,' or something. Will you really see it, in 500 years? People got very excited about this combination of natural and artificial beauty, which carried into the parks.

"There was the idea that the common man should have these gardens because in Europe they were just for the nobility. It was a democratizing influence, like the subway because people have involvement with one another and there are certain rules and customs. It's the same thing with parks, it's the same thing with death. Death's the great democratizer, and the rural cemeteries brought death from this sad thing to a beautiful thing that everyone could enjoy."

But the comparative size of monuments seemed to indicate that class divisions carried over into death. Mr. Simon remembers: "When I was working on my dissertation at Greenwood, we would go and have a picnic in the cemetery every day, and we would put milk bottles and a newspaper outside these huge mausoleums, because people seemed to actually believe they would be living there. It's the same thing when you go to a great cathedral. You say, 'This is a glorious place.' The doors are eighty feet high, and you think, 'Well, no one's eighty feet tall, so this is for God. It's meant to leave people with a sense of the awesomeness of God and the hope that the world will be better.

“So by the 1840’s, people were beginning to advocate big public parks where you could escape, rather than the small parks which were around at the time, to bring to the living what places like Greenwood brought to the dead.” Landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing observed: “What are called parks in New York are not even apologies for the thing. They are only squares or paddocks.” Another writer warned: “Without these safety valves, to vitalize the dense city with its teeming throngs... the wonder is that we do not suffer collapse sooner than we do.”⁸

“The city was hot,” said Mr. Simon, “there was a terrible stench, there were flies everywhere, obviously there were no fans—so people wanted a place to relax. By the 1850’s, the city was really moving towards a public park. The land that became Central Park was acquired, which, of course, was way far uptown back then, just like Greenwood was really the country. The rural cemeteries formed an important philosophical impetus for the parks movement. People like William Cullen Bryant and Andrew Haswell Green looked at these beautiful places, embellished with streams and ponds, and said that this was a wonderful place to be, but it was lost to the public.”

Downing, who had also been an instrumental advocate of rural cemeteries like Greenwood, remarked in 1849: “In the absence of public gardens cemeteries in a certain degree [supply] their place. But does not this general interest, manifested in these cemeteries, prove that public gardens, established in a liberal and suitable manner near our large cities would be equally successful.”

Downing and other leaders of the parks movement with histories in the rural cemeteries movement translated ideas of nature as a source of inspiration and an outlet for working class stress into the drive for a central park.

“People didn’t know about germs back then,” said Mr. Simon, “but they did know that fresh air seemed to fight illness, which is why there are so many hospitals around Central Park and Prospect Park, as well as other institutions. People believed that a combination of nature and human institutions could uplift people. They believed in a trinity of nature, god, and the mind as an outlet for class friction. At this time they believed in the complete ability to improve things for the common man. You can see echoes of Marx’s writings and of the revolutions in Europe in 1848 in their thinking; they

⁸ Burns, Sanders, and Ades, p. 108.

wanted to create a culture to prevent that kind of rebellion here.” Often, the advocates of public parks and rural cemeteries also built great public works with the same goals of preventing a massive working class rebellion. David Douglass, the designer of Greenwood, also designed the Croton Aqueduct in the Bronx. For many of New York’s most prominent architects, including Augustus San Goddard and Henry Upjohn, designing rich people’s monuments was the bread and butter that enabled them to commission great public works throughout the city.

The movers and shakers of the parks movement refused to compromise their artistic integrity. In the original design of Prospect Park, for instance, Flatbush Avenue would have cut the park in half. Olmsted and Vaux would not tolerate this betrayal of their vision, as it would have diminished the park’s influence and impact. The designers of Central Park and Prospect Park went to great lengths to ensure that the parks would be the escape they envisioned. Hills were built to keep street noises out; drives were built close to the perimeter so as to leave most of the park open. As Mr. Simon explained, “It’s like an egg. The city is the shell, the road is the white, but when you get to the yolk, it’s unspoiled.” Prospect Park achieved more seclusion than Central Park because the buildings built up around it were not as tall as those built up around Central Park later and because Central Park’s rectangular shape made it harder to get far away from the street. But both parks, as well as Greenwood Cemetery and Woodlawn Cemetery, imitated the English style of rural parks, which favored an open, naturalistic environment, so as to disguise the fact that the park was intricately designed.

Sometimes designers borrowed aesthetic effects directly from Greenwood. In Greenwood, Central Park, and Prospect Park, winding paths create the optical illusion of what Mr. Simon calls “a series of landscape paintings,” each step presenting an entirely new view. Each element of the design was carefully calculated to democratize natural beauty, to do for life what Greenwood had done for death.

Death's Role in the Preservation of Independent Communities

"How many dead lives and fading memories were buried
in and beneath the names of the places in this country."

-Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

There was a human cost to all of this. New York State had finally abolished slavery in 1827, but African Americans still faced harsh legal discrimination; the same Constitutional Convention that had brought about universal white male suffrage in 1821 had also imposed a strict requirement of \$250 of taxable property for African American men to vote. By the 1830's, several self-sustaining, independent black communities existed on the outskirts of the city, including Weeksville and Carrville, near what is now Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, and Seneca Village, a Black, Irish, and German hamlet thriving on the land that became Central Park. The town stood between Eighty-second Street and Eighty-sixth Street, just east of Eighth Avenue, but many similar communities dotted upper Manhattan.

The inhabitants of Seneca Village created an interracial, self-sustaining community, free of the discrimination blacks and immigrants faced within the city limits. Many African Americans living in the town acquired enough property to vote, building their own houses, schools, and churches. In 1853, Seneca Village had two schools, three churches, and three cemeteries. But by October 1st, 1857, the entire town had been torn down to pave way for the new park; the modest sums property owners received could not possibly compensate for the thriving, independent community the settlers had created.⁹

Seneca Village was not the first independent black community in New York, nor was it the last. In the summer of 1991, a forty-four-story Federal Office Building was planned at Duane and Reade Streets.¹⁰ Construction was halted when an Environmental Impact study found a map that showed an African Burial Ground at the site. Archaeologists were initially pessimistic about finding remains, but by 1992 archaeologists had found two hundred bodies. It was discovered that the original ground surface had sloped down east from Broadway towards a fresh water pond, known as Collect Pond. After the Revolutionary War, industrial waste had polluted the pond, and

⁹ Burns, Sanders, and Ades, p. 114.

¹⁰ Video: "The African Burial Ground: an American Discovery," Brooklyn, NY: KUTZ Television, Inc. 1994. My account of the burial ground relies heavily on this film.

the city had leveled the hills around the pond and used the dirt to fill the pond in, covering the burial ground. This meant that the ground surface was still intact under the buildings, and that remains of hundreds of bodies were still there.

Africans were New York's second oldest community, second only to their Dutch masters. The free black community dates back to 1644, when Dutch colonists, short of resources, freed eleven black families and gave them farmland under the condition that they provide food for the colony. The area the blacks settled became known as "Negroland." The area remained a thriving black community through the eighteenth century.

When the British took over New York in 1664, they normalized and intensified racism. Many of their policies effected the development of the burial ground, which was founded around this time. Slaves needed a pass to travel a distance of more than a mile, so the burial ground was located less than a mile outside the city limits. The British also introduced new laws on burial practices for blacks. No more than twelve mourners could congregate, and no ceremonies could be conducted at night, as was the custom for many Africans. Blacks were not allowed to inherit property, so the free black community that had emerged near the Collect Pond struggled.

But in 1781, the free black community grew tremendously when the New York State Assembly freed all slaves who fought for the colonies. Then, in 1785, John Jay and Alexander Hamilton founded the New York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves. The free black community thrived, and the burial ground grew to a size of five acres. By 1797, one third of New York blacks were free. Finally, slavery was abolished in New York State in 1827.

But the persistence of discrimination led blacks to form thriving self-sufficient communities all over the city, including the one near the Collect Pond and Seneca Village. These communities were beacons of independent black culture, and their success and self-sufficiency would not be seen again until the Harlem Renaissance.

Yet little is known about these communities, as their inhabitants left no written records. The burial ground led to new discoveries about New York's black community before and after the abolition of slavery. The strain of backbreaking physical labor made someone in his thirties look as if he were in his eighties. Fifty percent of the corpses were

of children under twelve years old, highlighting the terrible conditions free and enslaved blacks faced. Almost none of the bodies were buried with personal possessions, and fifteen percent did not have a coffin.

One discovery especially highlighted the independence of New York's black community. At the time, it was customary for people for people to be buried facing east, so that on Judgment Day they would be facing Jerusalem. These free and enslaved blacks were facing east, not towards Jerusalem, but towards Africa.

Fieldston parent Terry Decker explained the role of the undertaker in the black community today:¹¹ "Undertakers became very important in the black community because you didn't need lots of training; it wasn't like being a doctor or a dentist or a lawyer where you had to be admitted at all sorts of schools. This was passed through families; the kids inherited the business. And in Harlem and the South, the undertaker always had the biggest house, because he needed to display the bodies.

"The undertaker had a similar role in the poor white communities of the South. Sam's father had the choice of becoming the undertaker's apprentice or joining the military, and he chose the military as a way to see the world, since he'd never been down off that mountain where he grew up in Appalachia.

"I think that it's a real community issue. It's a ritual of the community because religion is involved, and you have to handle services of various kinds. New York's a diverse town, and this is one of the few ways that we're still very segregated. Death is a sort of bastion of segregation in New York—not forcible segregation, just independent communities.

"Why is it a bastion like that? Everybody's gonna die. Everybody's going to need these services at some time, so you just tend to do it closer to where you live. That's why it stays in the community."

Fieldston parent Keith Davis owns a funeral parlor in Harlem. He explained the integral role of his business in the black community:¹² "In the South the undertaker was revered in the black community; if you were the undertaker, the doctor, or a lawyer, you

¹¹ Telephone interview with Terry Decker, May 19th, 2005.

¹² Telephone interview with Keith Davis, May 30th, 2005.

were it. After the great migration, people looked up to the undertaker. But now the prestige has gone down. For one thing, there are more black professionals. The whole industry is changing. A funeral director doesn't make as much money."

The biggest threat to the black funeral home industry is the rise of cremation. "If a black person twenty years ago had mentioned cremation, everyone would have looked at him like he was crazy. Everyone's gonna die, and back then you just assumed that everyone was going to buy a casket, so we did much better then. Now, people have less money, so a lot of people are choosing to be cremated, and our business is suffering. In the South, business is also down, but there's not the same level of competition. You might have only two or three undertakers in a town, one for each community. In Harlem, I'm one of twenty-five."

Gentrification also threatens Mr. Davis' industry's communal character: "Gentrification is no longer just feared, it's happening. The population's started to change. Blacks are moving back South because they want more bang for their buck, so our business is going down. Harlem is the hot community of the moment, and the people moving in aren't going to a black undertaker, they're going downtown to Riverside. Meanwhile, the death rate is down. In the year 2003, you had 125,000 deaths in New York City. Last year, there were 90,000. Fewer people are dying. All of these things threaten my business."

Ms. Decker explained the human element of the industry: "When my mother died, I really had no idea how to do a funeral, and Keith and Valerie automatically stepped in. That's just what they did. They just knew what to do, and they somehow made everything better. It's an interesting business because there's a combination of business and comforting people. It's like being a shrink; you need a good personality."

Mr. Davis finds that personality plays an especially important role in a business in which all advertisement is done by word of mouth: "There's a sacred calling. I'm a people person, and you can't do more for someone than when they're bereaved. Every family I give something to, even if they throw a hundred thousand dollar insurance policy at me. I show them how to save, I don't milk them, I don't try to shake them. I do the right thing. And it's been good; people come back."

Two visions of nature have prevailed in American literature since its inception: The transcendental vision of nature as a divine facilitator of human thought and the more Gothic, pessimistic view of nature as a wild, even hostile force to be reckoned with. Fieldston English teacher Annette Stoller explains:¹³ “You can see a split in the nineteenth century in American literature. On the one hand, there were American Gothic writers like Poe, who were into the thrill, the eerie beauty of nature, and the notion that nature is a powerful but usually destructive force for humans, as in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher.’ On the other hand, there were transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, who believed that nature provides a model for humanity, provides inspiration, provides solace.” Naturally, the latter vision was a driving force in the rural cemetery movement. But Edgar Allen Poe found eerie romance in the story of John Anderson, a wealthy tobacconist buried in Greenwood.

In the 1830’s and 40’s, America’s demographic makeup was in flux; immigrants were pouring into the cities, as were young, mostly male migrants from the rural Northeast whose farming opportunities were drying up and who were drawn to what “Clinton’s ditch” had made the commercial capitol of the world.¹⁴ Anderson’s shops catered to these men, and the main attraction of the shops was the beautiful women he hired to work in them. One of Anderson’s most famous young lady tobacco merchants was Mary Rodgers, a migrant from upstate New York who owned a boardinghouse with her mother. (The appeal of the boardinghouse was the same as the appeal of the tobacco shops: the women).

In 1841, Mary Rodgers disappeared; her body washed ashore 3 days later in Hoboken, New Jersey. A lax police investigation followed, and, while the culprit was never found, it has since been determined that Rodgers was the victim of a failed abortion attempt. The story would not have received nearly as much attention, were it not for another important development: the birth of democratic culture and the penny press. With

¹³ Interview with Annette Stoller, May 24th, 2005.

¹⁴ At the same time, many city-dwellers were drawn to the farmland of the Midwest; this explains the huge amounts of vacancies in Greenwood’s family mausoleums—as the guide explained, when people make plans for eternity, they often don’t consider how much can change in just a few years.

the development of mass media came the journalistic techniques we now associate with the press—reporting on a sensational story as it developed. All of the interviews from the police investigation were published, except for Anderson's. The newspapermen deemed it inappropriate to ruin such a prominent man's reputation by publishing his interview, but, in fact, they created so much suspicion of special treatment based on wealth that Anderson, though never brought to trial, never regained his reputation.

Overtaken by loneliness, Anderson befriended Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi, who, like many European revolutionaries, raised money for his cause on Staten Island. Anderson, alienated by everyone close to him, left all of his money to Garibaldi, much to the avail of his children, who unsuccessfully fought Garibaldi in court. "This tour," said the guide, "as well as being about Victorian New York, is largely about ungrateful children."

The so-called "Mary Rodgers Scandal" is an extremely important story in New York history: it marked the birth of mass media, the first move toward police reform in New York, and the beginning of the criminalization of abortion. Once again, I had found that death connected seemingly unrelated developments.

Meanwhile, Edgar Allen Poe was at the forefront of the American literary tradition of ambiguity, moonlight, romantic spookiness, and mystery, and he fictionalized the scandal in a short story, "Marie Roget." Poe's story took place in Paris, but the intricate detail of the parallels were not lost on New Yorkers, and Poe was harassed by regular people trying to solve the Mary Rodgers mystery.¹⁵

¹⁵ Poe, however, apparently didn't mind the publicity. A footnote in the second edition of the story reads: "Herein, under pretence of relating the fate of a Parisian *grisette* [to the scandal], the author has followed, in minute detail, the essential, while merely paralleling the inessential, facts of the real murder of Mary Rogers. Thus all argument founded upon the fiction is applicable to the truth: and the investigation of the truth was the object. The 'Mystery of Marie Roget' was composed at a distance from the scene of the atrocity, and with no other means of investigation than the newspapers afforded. Thus much escaped the writer of which he could have availed himself had he been upon the spot and visited the localities. It may not be improper to record, nevertheless, that the confessions of *two* persons (one of them the Madame Deluc of the narrative), made, at different periods, long subsequent to the publication, confirmed, in full, not only the general conclusion, but absolutely *all* the chief hypothetical details by which that conclusion was attained."

"Isn't it funny how things are connected? It's a small Jewish world."

-Ruth Rosen, my grandmother.

Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, and Fitzgerald's vision of nature was encapsulated by a bizarre experience I had this summer at Old Montefiore Cemetery in Queens, near John F. Kennedy International Airport. It was a beautiful summer day, but Montefiore is spooky no matter the weather. Greenwood is one giant hill, Woodlawn is a valley, but Montefiore is completely flat and rectangular. From anywhere in the cemetery one can easily see the surrounding neighborhood, which is almost as dead as the cemetery itself. Yet this markedly urban cemetery does maintain an air of wild nature akin to the forest in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* or the "valley of ashes" in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, "a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens, where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air."

My uncle, Ed Golub, had come in from Salt Lake City, Utah to visit. More than anything else, he wanted to visit some of the places he remembered growing up in Brooklyn, so we spent an entire day touring the borough with him. We made a stop at Old Montefiore in Queens, where much of my mother's side of the family is buried, to look for the graves of Sam and Sarah Golub, my great-grandparents.

Armed with a plot address we began searching. The address turned out to be incorrect, so my mother consulted with my aunt, Sandra Weinberg, on a cell phone. Distracted by the conversation, my mother wandered off, and before she knew it she was lost. My mom remembers: "I hung up, Aunt Sandy called Esther to get more accurate directions to the plot, and I called Daddy, and he told me that Aunt Sandy had just called to tell him I was lost and that I should just keep walking towards the sun. I wasn't far away as it turned out, but in that place it's like a forest; you could be standing right next to something and not know where you are."

We now had third-hand instructions from my aunt Esther, which, as my mom remembers, were hilariously indecipherable: "Go farther in, and turn left at the tree, and take twenty steps towards the path, it was like a treasure hunt." We knew that the whole

family was buried in the Uzlian burial society plot. So we kept searching. Finally, Shannon called out, "I found a Hyman Golub. Is that him?"

"That's Uncle Hymie!" my mother replied excitedly.

From his grave, the cemetery seemed to open up like an orchid, each headstone helping us piece together the story of the Uzlian immigrants. We found my great-grandfather, Sam. Suddenly, the gate marked "Uzlian Benevolent Society" emerged from behind a tree.

Just as death helped hold together the fabric of the black community in the South and North, burial societies, funeral homes, and cemeteries held together the Jewish immigrant community in New York. Jewish-Americans dealt with many of the same identity issues as African Americans. Howard Schwarz, a family friend, described his parents' funeral home on the Lower East Side, Gramercy Park Chapel, in the context of a broader, independent, Jewish community akin to the independent black communities of Collect Pond, Seneca Village, and Harlem.¹⁶

"When I was much younger, in the late thirties or early forties, Second Avenue, from Twelfth Street south into the Lower East Side was a hub of Jewish intelligentsia, and on Second Avenue at that time, there were four or five Yiddish theaters. And your great-grandfather, Charlie Metzger, owned the Garden Cafeteria, and right nearby was the Jewish Daily Forward, so Isaac Beshevis Singer would always eat lunch there and collect material for his stories. But anyhow, on Second Avenue, there were four or five Yiddish theaters, and my grandfather was the unofficial funeral director for all those actors and actresses, which was a big thing back then.

"Now that neighborhood had also been a hub for Jewish gangsters before, so years later, someone Rabbi Leon Jick [a friend of my grandmother's who just passed away] knew was writing his dissertation on Jewish burial societies in New York, and Leon told him he had to talk to me, so he sent me this piece he had written, in which he identified my grandfather, Sigmund Shwarz, as the 'undertaker to the racketeers.'"

My grandmother remembered Mr. Goren's research: "He got all these funny stories that he would tell us about the gangsters in Brooklyn. There was this one woman,

¹⁶ Interview with Howard Schwarz, April 20th, 2005.

Rifka the gonnaf, who would always lead the women in prayer, but the women knew never to wear their jewelry to temple because Rifka would pickpocket them.

“My friend Phyllis Robinson’s father was Lepke and ^{Lobe} ~~Lobe~~’s lawyer. When Lepke died in prison, his family didn’t want a real funeral for him because they were a respectable family, and they didn’t want to be associated with him, and he would have just been buried by the prison, but Phyllis’s father was very insistent on having a real funeral, so he got the body and made all the arrangements. Isn’t it funny how things are connected? As they say, it’s a small Jewish world.”

That’s how I was starting to feel.

Goren’s paper, entitled “Traditional Institutions Transplanted: The Hevra Kadisha in Europe and America,” focused on how Eastern European Jewish immigrants translated old world customs such as burial societies into a new setting.¹⁷ In Europe, burial societies, or *hevra kadisha*, were charitable, communal organizations—their profits went back into the community, as it violated Jewish law to derive private profit from such a holy deed as ensuring a proper Jewish burial. The societies buried the indigent for free and provided financial aid to bereaved families. The *hevra kadisha*’s role was much more comprehensive than that of the funeral home in America: it provided care for the dying, bought cemetery plots (or owned the cemetery), arranged funerals, consoled the bereaved, and made sure that Jewish law was upheld. The *hevra kadisha*, whose members came almost exclusively from the elite of Jewish villages, became the center of philanthropy in the European Jewish community. Because the *hevra kadisha* held so much power, it also acted as a social regulatory agency. It would charge more to an immoral man or arrange a second-class burial for him. The *hevra kadisha* held together many aspects of life for European Jews.

In America, the traditional *hevra kadisha* was no longer practical. Bodies had to be transported longer distances, municipal regulations called for a burial permit, and bathing and cleansing rituals could no longer be performed in the house of the deceased. The organization was translated into the private funeral home.

¹⁷ Goren, Arthur, “Traditional Institutions Transplanted.”

Jewish funeral homes and burial societies upheld some of the roles of the *hevra kadisha*. My mother described how burial societies held the Jewish community together: “When your grandparents came to this country, the Jews from small towns in Eastern Europe had societies—dances, social events, parties, and they would all buy a plot together in a Jewish cemetery, and that was the burial society. All the people from my father’s town Uzlian, bought a plot together. But a lot of those people moved to Florida or California, or people died out and there’s no one to take care, to administer, and, of course, the societies died out. But that society was how grandma and grandpa met. It was the Uzlian society; the Burial society was a part of it. Grandma Lily won a beauty contest. She was the beauty queen of 1931. They gave her a vanity kit, and I have the button hook.”

Anthony Favale, a Brooklyn funeral director, explained the origins of immigrant burial societies:¹⁸ “Burial societies came to pass during the nineteenth century, when people came from Europe in groups, mostly from the same towns and communities. They didn’t have a sense of culture, community, or language, so in order to survive they formed these immigrant benevolent societies, and as a part of that, they all got together and said, ‘Let’s all be buried together.’ So these groups would buy huge plots in cemeteries. It was a closed club, so that people had commonality.” The societies provided health care, burial plots, and, in some cases, political mobilization. Just as the *hevra kadisha* had in Europe, these societies held together many facets of Jewish life.

“When the Jews got off the boats, they went to where they could communicate, to where they could speak their own language, to where they could be accepted. That’s why they all wound up on the Lower East Side. There was Little Italy, there was a Jewish section, there was a German section. People, especially in death, are more comfortable with their own, even in the 21st century. It’s sociological. That’s why the funeral homes became what they became.”

Mr. Favale echoed Ms. Decker in saying that this kind of segregation is by no means racist: “The fact that I’m comfortable with who I’m closest to does not make me a bigot. We might speak the same language. That’s how we’re trained, what our mind, what our social background, what our id tells us. Death is the great equalizer. In death we

¹⁸ Interview with Anthony Favale, May 15th, 2005.

are all equal. Jews show it traditionally by burying dead in a shroud, a plain white linen garment, so whether you're rich or poor, you wind up in a plain white linen garment. Catholics cover the casket with a clean white cloth. So death is the great equalizer." This equality is hard to see when you contrast the Potter's Field on Hart Island with the elaborate mausoleums of Woodlawn and Greenwood, but it's certainly a nice thought.

Responding to my thesis that death plays an important role in community building, my mother said, "The immigrants weren't tied together by death, they were tied together by a lot of things, and death was one of them. You know, death's a part of life."

* * *

Corporate Death

The Jewish funeral homes—and the entire independent Jewish culture—fell on hard times after World War Two, when wartime patriotism prevailed over ethnic or cultural identity for many Jews. Howard Schwarz explains: "After World War Two, Jews in New York relied less on Yiddish, and people on the Lower East Side weren't thinking about going to Second Avenue to go to the theater; they wanted to go to Broadway. Some of the actors went to Hollywood or Broadway. But the undertaking business was on Second Avenue, until the neighborhood started to change in 1970, when a plan was introduced to build a subway along Second Avenue. Although the plan was later abandoned, they started excavating on the Lower East Side, and it completely destroyed the neighborhood, and Eighth Street and Second Avenue became a big drug hub where they were selling all sorts of things."

Many Jewish funeral homes sold out to big corporations, as Mr. Schwarz explained: "There's a company which is traded on the New York Stock Exchange, called Service Corp. International, or SCI, which bought up most Jewish funeral homes in New York. They own Campbell's Funeral Chapel on 81st street and Madison Avenue, which is a non-denominational place that many Jews use, and the Riverside Memorial Chapel, on 76th and Amsterdam, which is also like that. And they also own the one my family ran, Gramercy Park Chapel.

“We got out of our business I would say around 1980. We were bought out by SCI when the neighborhood had changed and was no longer Jewish, as were many other funeral homes on the Lower East Side. Some were bought out, other moved to Brooklyn or the Bronx. Another place on Second Avenue moved to Forest Hills, which was a wise move for them.”

Other formerly Jewish neighborhoods throughout the city followed this pattern; as neighborhoods became black and Hispanic, funeral homes moved or were bought out by SCI, which made non-denominational homes or catered to the new demographic.

“Usually one of the incentives to sell is the neighborhood changing,” said Mr. Favale.

“People say, ‘Our kind of people are not here any more.’ You’re not going to have the Hernandezes and the Schmidts going to Schwarz’s funeral parlor. So people say maybe it’s time to go. SCI is more neutral, more local, there’s different advertising. The longer they’re there, the more they can change it denomination wise. With Schwarz, you can’t hide the spots on that leopard.”

The Riverside Chapel followed just the opposite pattern. As the neighborhood started to change, it opened a satellite in the Bronx on the Grand Concourse. But that became a Hispanic neighborhood, while the Upper West Side became Jewish again.

As Mr. Davis pointed out, consolidation was not a problem in the black funeral home industry: “In the 1970’s, a big corporation tried to buy out a big funeral home in Harlem, and four black undertakers stepped in and bought it to prevent that from happening, and now they’re all multimillionaires.” But the consolidation of the Jewish funeral home industry stripped it of its character, its role in holding together a community.

Mr. Favale finds that consolidation threatens the heart and soul of his profession: “As a funeral director, my primary service is to console a bereaved family. There’s a psychological aspect of providing solace. It’s a service industry, but the calling is higher. I’m passionate about what I do. But SCI is publicly traded stock company, whose whole purpose is to buy crematoriums, funeral homes, and cemeteries. Right now, they’re on a buying binge. Usually, the character of a funeral home changes when they take over, because the owner is now an employee. Like any other corporation, there are overseers who say we want to do this, this, and that. There’s less of a communal role.

"I find it detrimental to the families, financially hurtful because when you've got an SCI rep who's in Houston, my bottom line has to be here and I can't tell the stockholders that I had a bad week, so I might have to cut back this service, raise prices, close at six. From a corporate point of view, the guy in Texas is good, but on a community level, we're not on the ball. Will it affect business in the long run? Yes. On average we service a family every seven years statistically, and they'll stop coming to the same place if it doesn't provide the ethnic role they're looking for.

"You don't go into a Chinese restaurant looking for matzo ball soup. You want matzo ball soup, you go to Bernstein's; you want Chinese, you go to Won Hung Lo. Few places in this country overlap ethnic groups to a large degree. It's not because they can't homogenize, but because they choose to be with their own, especially at a time of loss. Historically, we are a Jewish funeral home, so rarely will a Hernandez walk in. All funeral homes by federal law have to be non-denominational. If Hernandez says OK, that's fine that you can't make these provisions, then we're happy campers. But people tend to be with their own at a time of loss because traditions are adhered to, especially in Judaism."

Meanwhile, burial societies have become practically obsolete, as Mr. Favale explained: "A lot of those societies are going defunct, because there's not a strong enough membership. People are old, they're dying off. Our generation, your generation, has gone on to different ideas and social behavior, and we're not involved in our own ethnic community as much, so instead of belonging to Schwarz sick and benevolent society, we go to the Westbury Country club. We're more homogenized, we all speak the same language, do the same things, live in the same country. We're not immigrants. The immigrants chose to form their own clubs so that they were more comfortable. But as they lived here longer, they permeated the culture, they left society life and entered community life. Then the next generation had only experienced community life, so it didn't need a support group to get over this immigration hurdle."

With no one to oversee the society plots, many have fallen into disrepair. Recently, the *New York Times* published an article about the fraud surrounding so-called "eternal care" for people whose family isn't there to check on the grave. A woman's

husband was moved from the plot they had purchased together with their now defunct burial society so that another woman could be buried in his plot.¹⁹

This same greed permeates all of society; death, a shadow of society, is no exception. I had seen this greed at Greenwood as well. We climbed to the top of Battle Hill, the highest natural point in Brooklyn. The beautiful views in all directions of New York Harbor, the Statue of Liberty, Lower Manhattan, and Downtown Brooklyn made it easy to understand why Greenwood was such a draw for 19th century picnickers. The monument, including a statue of Minerva, the Greek goddess of war, is dedicated to those who died there in the Battle of Brooklyn. These are the only graves in Greenwood that predate the cemetery itself. Oddly, this Revolutionary War monument lent a telling view—literally and metaphorically—into modernity. A high rise was planned whose construction would block Minerva's view of the Statue of Liberty. (The project was since scaled down, but its presence will surely detract from the mood of the cemetery and the neighborhood).

This same arrogant greed led Boss Tweed, over a century ago, to rob the city blind and arrange for himself an elaborate memorial in a cemetery whose whole *raison d'être* was to provide an escape from the world of commerce and capitalist greed.

So what's death like in Communist China?

Utilitarian Death

China has a rich history of burial practices and beliefs about the afterlife. In March, I visited some of China's historic tombs, including the Terracotta Warriors just outside of Xi'an. Emperor Chingduang, the founder of the Qin dynasty, conquered and unified China. Ambitious to continue conquering even after death, he surrounded his tomb with thousands of life size statues of warriors, each completely unique in facial expression, battle attire, and physical stature. The tomb was first discovered in 1974 by a farmer named simply Mr. Yeng, who was digging a well. It is one of China's most popular tourist attractions.

Death in modern China is very different. The Cultural Revolution devastated many tombs throughout China. We visited a farm town about an hour outside of Xi'an,

¹⁹ Strom, Stephanie. "Taking Confusion to the Grave: Demise of Burial Societies Leads to Fights Over

where a local woman explained the current burial customs in China. Farmers are allowed to bury the dead on their own land. But no public land may be used for cemeteries. All previously existing cemeteries were obliterated when the Communists took over, the bodies cremated. The land was given to farmers. Except for those buried on their own land, almost everyone is cremated when they die. The Communists sacrificed the beauty of cemeteries and traditional burial practices, as cemetery land could be put to much better use for the people.

When I lost my passport, Fieldston Chinese teacher Jane Bredeche and I had a bizarre experience one night in Beijing. As we were walking back from dinner, we saw many little fires along the sidewalks. "The Chinese are so weird," said Ms. Bredeche. We found out that this was the Bright and Clear Day Festival, a custom dating back to the Shang dynasty, in which people tidy up the tombs of their ancestors and burn fake money for them in the streets of the city. The custom preserves a tradition of respect for ancestors dating back to the earliest Chinese writings.

"It's amazing," said Ms. Bredeche, "that after 50 years of communism this practice still exists."

"Why is that strange?" I asked.

"Because it endangers everyone. *Communism* is supposed to protect the good of the *community*. It's supposed to be the community first, whereas capitalism is me first." I thought about it for a while. I guess it's true, but this custom's strange beauty and artistic value must benefit everyone in some sense.

Whereas our capitalist system invites greed to destroy age old customs and monuments, the Communist Revolution in China brought a sense of relentless utilitarianism, often at the expense of natural or man-made beauty.

* * *

One recent Saturday, I drove with my parents out to my mom's old neighborhood of East Flatbush, Brooklyn to visit an old cemetery my mom remembered growing up.

"I remember waiting for the bus," said my mom, "and having this spooky cemetery behind me, and being a little scared. It was spooky, but in a romantic way. I also remember in elementary school, going to the cemetery with my class to do grave rubbings. Grandma Lily was fascinated with it, with how old they were. You know, we'd be waiting for the bus and she'd look through the gate and say, 'Oh, look, that one died in 16 whatever,' and so on. She was always fascinated with death; she was very morbid."

We finally found the cemetery. It was spooky, overgrown, and eerily beautiful. It wasn't pastoral beauty like Greenwood, but decrepit, creepy beauty. Each grave was uniquely interesting. One was eroded; on another, the inscription was faded yet remarkably readable.

Driving back, I realized that every landmark we passed could be connected to my paper in one way or another. Death was New York's ligament; it could connect Prospect Park, Victorian life, Seneca Village, and the Jewish immigrant experience. In my mind, death had ballooned into something bigger. Death was the great democratizer, the great equalizer, and the last bastion of segregation in a multicultural city.

It seemed as if the whole world could be defined by death. I had rekindled a fascination with death I have had since infancy. One of my earliest memories is of my great-grandmother's funeral, and my first articulated thoughts all pertained to death. All along, I had been on a quest to define death, to come to terms with it. I finally did so as I was returning from that rainy day of cemetery hopping in Brooklyn. I realized that what I had been looking for all this time was not death but life. My mind, saturated with memories of funerals and cemeteries, had mixed the two up.

Death (and life) can be beautiful. Death can invite greed or philanthropy. Death can be the moonlit mystery of Hawthorne and Melville; death can be romantically spooky like a foggy day in East Flatbush or beautifully clear like a bright day in Central Park. It can be an eerily beautiful observance of the Bright and Clear Day Festival; a rainy day visit to the spooky revolutionary war cemetery in my mom's old neighborhood; a day of discovery at overgrown Old Montefiore Cemetery. But death can also be industrial modernity and melancholy practicality. Death can epitomize the American Dream: in the afterlife, we all have equal opportunity, no matter our status in this life. But it can also

epitomize the worst kind of capitalist selfishness. These two visions for death are the two visions for America and for life itself.

* * *

We had just found the gate to the Uzlian burial society plot at Old Montefiore. We were still looking for the rest of our family, including Sarah, my great-grandmother. We pushed through vines, grass, and bushes until we found the divider between the more recent plots and the really old ones. We cleared away vines on grave after grave trying to find Sarah. "I'm sure she's within five feet of us," said my mom, "and we'll still never find her."

We never did find Sarah. But I had found what I was looking for.
