

## Finding Zion: Spectral intimacy and state indeterminacy at an erased American cemetery

Michael Vine

**To cite this article:** Michael Vine (03 Sep 2023): Finding Zion: Spectral intimacy and state indeterminacy at an erased American cemetery, History and Anthropology, DOI: [10.1080/02757206.2023.2248159](https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2023.2248159)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2023.2248159>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 03 Sep 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 126



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Finding Zion: Spectral intimacy and state indeterminacy at an erased American cemetery

Michael Vine

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Salle), Germany



### ABSTRACT

In 2018, a previously erased African American cemetery was dramatically rediscovered in Tampa, Florida. The rediscovery was accompanied by multiple acts of remembrance: archaeologists set about confirming the presence of coffins and bodies; people living on top or nearby this and other burial grounds began reporting a series of ghostly visions and visitations; and the city government and its contractors put forward plans to memorialize the erased cemetery. Based on participant-observation with city employees, developers, and activists undertaken as part of a broader project on the politics of race, empire, and urban life in South Florida, this article investigates the erasure and rediscovery of this and other historic cemeteries in order to inquire into the social and political life of indeterminacy at sites of necropolitical violence. While some residents attempted to enter into meaningful interpersonal relations with the spirits of actual deceased persons, taking their existence as a potentially transparent fact, agents of the state instead developed a position on the question of haunting more in line with social theories of the spectral as an impossible possibility. Attending to this fact ethnographically reveals the relationship between statecraft, the nonsecular, and the politics of indeterminacy in a new light.

### KEYWORDS

Cemeteries; ghosts; intimacy; state; indeterminacy

It was a sweltering summer day in 2019 when a group of workers arrived at Robles Park Village, one of the few large modernist housing projects still left standing in Tampa, Florida. Built in the early 1950s as part of a wider effort to ‘renew’ Tampa’s ‘blighted’ urban environment, the housing project had suffered since at least the 1980s from the ill effects of long-term municipal neglect. It had also been singled out by state officials as a site of punitive housing policies that seemed systematically to exacerbate the very problems that they were intended to remedy, such as crime, violence, and unemployment. By 2019, then, Robles Park Village stood largely abandoned and awaiting demolition. The few hundred or so remaining residents gathered to watch the workers go about their business.

**CONTACT** Michael Vine  mdvine@gmail.com  Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Advokatenweg 36, 06114, Halle (Salle), Germany

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Such a scene is familiar within the visual ecology of Tampa. The city, after all, had experienced a building boom in recent years. But this was something different. The workers were archaeologists; they had come to investigate claims that the several hundred bodies laid to rest at Tampa's first all-Black cemetery between 1901 (when the cemetery was founded) and 1926 (when it was erased simultaneously from municipal records and the urban landscape) remained buried under Robles Park Village. By the middle of their first afternoon at work, these archaeologists had already identified at least one grave; weeks later, that number had risen to several hundred. The erased cemetery was the resting place for many of the Africans, African Americans, and Afro-Caribbeans who, working on the railroads, in the cigar factories, and in the phosphate mines of late 1800s and early 1900s Tampa, had helped transform the postbellum city from a ramshackle frontier into a regional epicentre of trade and industry. Until recently, their whereabouts remained a mystery.

This place was not the only erased burial ground to be unearthed in Tampa Bay in recent years. Some burial grounds – including a series of Second Seminole War-era graves (1835–1842) – had been accidentally unearthed in the course of routine construction work. Other sites had been actively rescued from obscurity by a small group of historical activists and amateur historians. Significant sites included not only the segregation-era Zion Cemetery, but also a former 'Potter's Field' that had also been erased from county records and subsequently rezoned for development. The problem is thus not restricted to Black burial grounds. Yet it is African American cemeteries and burial grounds that are currently most at risk from erasure. Cemeteries, along with schools and churches, were some of the first institutions founded by African Americans in the aftermath of the Civil War, and they remain an important cornerstone of Black community-building (Stringfield 2021). In recent years, however, the difficulties faced by all public cemeteries (such as a lack of planning or provision for long-term maintenance) have here been dramatically compounded by several additional challenges such as a relative lack of written records documenting specific sites of burial; an increased risk of predation from unscrupulous developers; and the systematic displacement of Black communities by urban renewal and interstate highway construction – all of which work to actively sever ties between these communities and the sites of their ancestral burial (Rainville 2014).

The erasure of these places of burial constitutes a form 'necropolitical' (Mbembe 2011) or 'thanatopolitical' (Foucault 2003) governance that is distinctly though not entirely racialized in its contours. In response to the myriad forces of erasure, people in Tampa and elsewhere are currently coming together to recover and preserve African American and other cemeteries through a wide range of everyday activities that include clearing overgrowth, documenting headstones, collecting oral histories, and scouring through thousands upon thousands of death certificates and other documents in order to piece together individual biographies and the broader necropolitical patterns they point towards. In Tampa Bay, these efforts have led to a high-profile reconsideration of the role of racial violence in the history of the region (McFarland, Bowden, and Bosman 2019).

A different and decidedly less secular configuration of historical encounter is also taking place in Tampa. Based on more than 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Tampa – between 2018 and 2020 – this article explores attempts made by those living on top or nearby erased cemeteries such as Zion Cemetery to develop meaningful

interpersonal relations with the ghosts or spirits of actual historical persons. The article argues that the relatively successful nature of these attempts demands that we revisit social theories of ‘the spectral’ as a site of irreducible indeterminacy that occupies a ‘hauntological’ position somewhere between ‘presence and non-presence’ (Derrida 2004, 12). In stories I heard during fieldwork, what begins as an uncomfortable feeling or series of strange physical happenings slowly morphs into a more concretely reciprocal relationship – defined by a degree of comfort and conviviality – between the living and the dead. In the process, the ghosts or spirits of actual historical persons gradually and incrementally take on the markers of a properly relational subject: a human form; an age and gender; a name and an ethical identity. Here, then, the indeterminacy of the spectral subject is contingent, not foundational, and can be actively modulated through cultural practices of ‘transformative hospitality’ (Ladwig 2012). I call this ‘cultivating spectral intimacies’.

Translated into English in 1994, Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* puts forward a specific vision of the spectral as that which unsettles distinctions between (for example) absence and presence and so confounds some of the key ontological coordinates of European modernity (Derrida 2004, 51). For Derrida, ghosts, spirits, and other spectral phenomena are neither wholly absent nor fully present; they are an indeterminate ‘absent presence’ (Appelbaum 2009, 108). As such, these phenomena belong less to the realm of ontology than to that of ‘hauntology’ (Derrida 2004, 10). Indeterminacy has subsequently been singled out as the signal attribute of the spectral by a wide range of scholars exploring the haunting qualities of research objects as diverse as industrial ruins (Edensor 2005) and computational algorithms (Dixon-Román and Amaro 2021) – even when the Derridean influence is not explicitly acknowledged. So established is this hauntological equation that it leads one distinguished historian and philosopher of science to claim that, at the level of particles, matter itself exhibits a spatiotemporal indeterminacy and so can be understood in meaningful ways as ‘haunted’ (Barad 2017). All matter, they write, is ‘haunted by all im/possible wanderings, an infinite multiplicity of histories present/absent in the indeterminacy of time-being’ (Barad 2017:G113). All matter is ‘spectral’ (Barad 2017:G113).

Writing in the wake of this Derridean influence, Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln (2015) have developed a ‘typology of hauntings’ (2015, 192) to capture the ways in which the study of spectral subjects has bifurcated in recent years. Following most closely in the footsteps of Derrida, ‘secondary haunting’ (2015, 192) deals with spectral subjects as the ‘sedimented textual residues of horrific historic events or, alternatively, as tropes for collective intrapsychic states and experiences’ (2015, 200) in ways that rob ghosts of their ontological status as ghosts and so may distort aspects of the phenomena it seeks to understand. Yet a countervailing tradition also exists – ‘primary haunting’ (2015, 192) – in which spectral subjects ‘appear as fully extant and active animate beings that confront the living in direct, non-mediated, and even menacing fashion’ (2015, 198). While primary haunting is ‘narrow and specific’ (2015, 200), then, secondary haunting entails a more abstract encounter between ‘a general public and a mass of unquiet, impersonal dead’ (2015, 206). Another key difference between primary haunting and secondary haunting (as described by Lincoln and Lincoln) is that the former is immediate and the latter rests on the mediating qualities of speech and text (2015, 200).

As will become clear, the two forms of haunting described below appear in broad terms to map onto Lincoln and Lincoln’s ‘typology of hauntings’. In the first, a mass of

undifferentiated dead is evoked as part of collective attempts to try to make moral and political sense of the rediscovery of formerly erased burial grounds. At the same time, particular living people make concerted efforts to enter into meaningful social relationships with the ghosts or spirits of actual deceased persons, and to some extent succeed in doing so. But the difference between the two kinds of haunting is not between the *presence* or *absence* of mediation; it is between different forms of mediation. Like all social relationships, spectral intimacies are mediated by a diverse array of things and processes, such as material objects, social practices, and cultural narratives, which together endow them with their particular form and thrust. In Lincoln and Lincoln's terms, secondary haunting can be transformed into primary haunting and specific (deceased) individuals can be rescued from a mass of unquiet, impersonal dead.

A final comparative point is illustrative. In a series of articles, the anthropologist Patrice Ladwig (e.g. 2012; 2013) has described how, during the annual ghost festivals of Lao Buddhism, living people offer food to what they understand to be a horrifying and pitiful species of hell-being as part of their attempts to enter into social relations with them. Ladwig describes these ritual relations as forms of 'transformative hospitality' (2012, S90) taking place between radical strangers and across an ontological divide in which both host (the living) and guest (the dead) are remade anew. On the one hand, the living are transformed through their rituals of hospitality into properly Buddhist subjects. At the same time, these ritual offerings effect what Ladwig calls an 'ontic shift' (2013, 427) in which the formerly insatiable and wandering hell-beings can 'escape hell, receive a new body, and re-enter the cycle of reincarnations' (Ladwig 2012, S90) – thus being transformed from one kind of being into another. At the heart of this process are the transformative qualities of food.

The term 'transformative hospitality' captures well the attempts made by my research participants to establish reciprocal relations with ghostly subjects, but with two important qualifications. First, the cultural practices of hospitality described here are very much *unlike* the annual ghost festivals of Lao Buddhism insofar as they take place in the absence of 'elaborate supporting cosmologies' (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 197) and an accompanying ritual repertoire. This is not to say that my research participants did not operate within the context of existing cultural traditions *vis-à-vis* death and the dead, because they did (Dawdy 2021). Three such traditions are especially relevant for the ethnography and analysis that follow: (1) broadly Christian accounts of death that stress the continuity of souls even as they emphasize the fundamental discontinuity of a temporal life with an eternal afterlife; (2) secular orientations which explicitly reject Christian notions of the afterlife even as it incorporates on a formal level Protestantism's emphasis on the highly individual nature of death; and (3) a much more historically and regionally specific tradition of 'African American ... hant (a colloquial version of 'haunt') stories' (Stewart 2016, 1) that seize on the relational possibilities of ghostlore and spirit work 'as metaphor, as weapon, as salve, [and] as a fundamental epistemology for living in the vortex of North America' (Gordon 1997, 151).

Despite the availability of these overlapping traditions, it is nevertheless important to point out how my individual research participants' themselves emphasized the fact that, at the outset of their apparitions and visitations, they did not consider ghosts or spirits as social beings and lacked any established means of cultivating relations with them. Such a felt absence of elaborate supporting cosmologies lent their practices an especially

'experimental' or 'probing' quality in which the means, the ends, and the transformative prospects of spectral encounters were being worked out in real-time. What was being unearthed here, then, was not only the existence of the formerly erased cemetery. It was also the possibility and consequences of spectral intimacies.

Second, I prefer to think of the effects of these relations on the dead less in terms of an 'ontic shift' – the transformation of one kind of being into another – and more in terms of what I will call 'social focus'. Much like the focus function on a camera, cultural practices of hospitality can modulate the clarity with which a social scene or actor presents itself. They can also render a scene or actor *social* as such. Through acts of social focusing, a 'radical stranger' can be rescued from a generic dominion of otherness and made more or less crisp, clear, and socially meaningful. It is the act of the bringing into social focus of a formerly fuzzy spectral subject – rather than the radical rupture of an ontic or ontological shift – that I think best describes the efforts to cultivate spectral intimacies that constitute the empirical material of this article. To state it another way, I think about spectral intimacies not in terms of ontology (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) or even hauntology (Derrida 2004), but in terms of the different kinds of relational dynamics that characterize the ebb and flow of interpersonal encounters.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section tells the story of Zion Cemetery and describes the long-term efforts made by reporters, residents, and archaeologists to bring its erasure to light. It also explores the affective fallout of these efforts, focusing especially on the interplay of moral outrage, political critique, and discourses of haunting that took shape following public confirmation of the cemetery's continuing existence. The second section focuses on the stories of two research participants in particular in order to show, first, how they attempt to cultivate meaningful social relations with ghosts or spirits of actual historical persons and, second, the transformative effects of these attempts. The final section shows how state actors endeavored to lay claims to the language and experience of haunting in ways that smuggled indeterminacy back into the social scene. Taken together, these sections reveal a diversity of mechanisms through which histories of political violence may be earthed and unearthed – some literally, others metaphorically – even as they also show how the legacies and afterlives of such violence can become woven into the infrastructural environments, spatial configurations, and lived experiences of the city in ways simultaneously explosive and illusive, secular and spectral, intimate and expansive.

## Finding Zion

The moment at which archaeologists identified their first grave at Zion Cemetery was an emotional one; it was also the culmination of a long and painstaking process to recover knowledge of the cemetery and those still buried there. This process had begun several months earlier with the work of a retired county employee, Larry,<sup>1</sup> a middle-aged white man who had moved to Florida from New York when he was just a young boy. While searching for the names of people buried at another erased cemetery in Tampa – a story I return to in the next section – Larry came across a series of death certificates (first one, then many more) with the place of burial listed as 'Zion'. He was surprised. Having worked for the county for several years and researched its cemeteries for several more, he had never heard of such a place. Another fact caught his attention:

each person buried at Zion Cemetery was listed as being Black. He contacted Peter, a local news reporter, and they set about working their way through a patchy archive of death certificates, property deeds, and other city records in order to piece together the story of Zion Cemetery.

As they learned, Zion Cemetery was founded in 1901 by wealthy Black businessman Richard Doby in Robles Park, a historically African American neighborhood just a few miles northeast of downtown Tampa. In 1907, Doby sold Zion to Florida Industrial and Commercial, a Black business that manufactured caskets, furniture, and musical instruments. In 1915, however, Florida Industrial and Commercial were forced by the county to sell the property to an unrecorded buyer in order to pay a debt. A 1916 map shows the words 'Mt. Carmel' scribbled by hand in the corner of Zion Cemetery land, perhaps indicating a nearby church had taken over responsibility for managing the cemetery. At this point, the paper trail goes cold, resuming only a decade later when former city councilmember Henry P. Kennedy purchased the Zion Cemetery land for \$1 from Alice W. Fuller of Los Angeles County. It is unclear how Fuller came to own the land. When Doby sold the property to Florida Industrial and Commercial, records noted that it contained cemetery plots, but no such mention appeared in the 1926 Fuller-to-Kennedy deed. Having purchased the property, Kennedy first sought a property tax relief from the city on the grounds that it was a cemetery, but later built a storefront along part of the land. After 1929, Zion Cemetery disappeared altogether from city records.

The story does not end there. In 1951, the continuing existence of the cemetery irrupted suddenly (if only partially) into view again when two caskets were uncovered by the Tampa Housing Authority (THA) during the construction of the Robles Park Village housing project. Yet the THA and city officials assured reporters that all bodies had been moved in 1925. Today, state law insists that construction must stop in the case that it uncovers a forgotten or abandoned cemetery, at least until the relocation of any and all bodies is confirmed. Such laws did not exist in 1951. Construction of Robles Park Village continued, obliterating all trace of Zion Cemetery from the urban landscape. The cemetery's erasure was complete.

The relocation of so many bodies would have most likely left a paper trail, and yet Larry found none. For him, the absence of a paper trail itself constituted proof that bodies remained buried under Robles Park Village. Others came to different conclusions. As Tampa Bay History Center Director Rodney Kite-Powell told reporters: 'Considering the second-class status of African-Americans in the 1920s, I can certainly picture a scenario where a private or a church-based black cemetery ceased to exist and they move the remains to someplace else, but they don't document that' (Guzzo 2019). In response to conditions of public uncertainty, Larry and Peter turned to archaeologists from the University of South Florida for help confirming the presence of graves, caskets, and bodies at Robles Park Village.

The archaeologists' work began in 2019. Using ground-penetrating radar, they first confirmed the presence of a series of rectangular, casket-like objects arranged in neat rows throughout a portion of the Robles Park Village grounds. The evidence was compelling, but not conclusive, so they turned to more invasive methods – digging down a few millimeters at a time in an effort to confirm the presence of coffins and bodies while disturbing them as little as possible. Finding their first coffin, what the archaeologists saw was more of a shadow than a solid object; the wood had long ago deteriorated and



mixed with the soil to become a dark stain, which one archaeologist described as ‘the ghost of a coffin’ (Guzzo 2020). Similar work over the following weeks revealed several hundred more graves and caskets.

As archaeologists worked, they did so within a climate of heightened affect. After the news of the erased cemetery first broke, many Robles Park Village residents reporting feeling outbursts of sadness, grief, trauma, and horror that they had been living on top or nearby the former Zion Cemetery without knowing it. That the overwhelming majority of residents (more than 90 percent) themselves claimed African ancestry made the erasure of the segregation-era burial ground especially significant – and especially hurtful. Almost all the former and present residents I spoke with agreed that the story of Zion Cemetery exemplified the systematic mistreatment of African Americans in the United States; the ‘color line’ (Du Bois 2007, 113) apparently extended from life into death. Yet different people identified different configurations of responsibility, and worked towards different forms of redress.

Worldly affects of moral outrage and political critique soon became entangled with less secular senses of spiritual tumult as more and more people seized on the possibility of posthumous agency and paranormal happenings to make sense of the story of Zion, its erasure, and its rediscovery. Multiple and overlapping discourses of haunting took shape. Among the first of these to gain widespread traction in Tampa were reports of a generalized atmosphere of spiritual dis-ease at and around the crumbling mid-century public housing project. These reports circulated in both the regional and national news media, gathering a degree of legitimacy as they did so. As a local faith leader told one regional reporter:

I don’t know how to explain it to people, but there’s a feeling you get. As if there were people there. Their spirit was kind of still there because I could feel it. I stood there in awe. There used to be a cemetery there, and it just gave me chills (Guzzo 2019).

The sense of spiritual dis-ease focused most intensely on the confirmed site of the former cemetery. But even those living elsewhere in Robles Park Village and the city said that they felt their home was ‘infected’ by its proximity to the erased cemetery. This feeling of infection seemed to stem, in part, from people’s suspicions that the city and the THA were continuing to withhold from the public important information about the true spatial extent of the erased cemetery. If public officials had in the past conspired to erase the cemetery, people wondered, why should they now believe that these same actors were being upfront about the number and location of the bodies? At the same time, however, the feeling of ‘infection’ seemed structured by the belief that the spirits of the dead had been made restless by the events taking place after their burial. Spectral beings had been let loose on the urban landscape.

Emergent tropes, discourses, and experiences of haunting also took on more tangible forms. Many people suggested that the conditions of crime, violence, poverty, and other social hardships that characterized Robles Park Village in recent years could be directly attributed to the spiritual tumult stemming from the erasure of the Black burial ground. Speaking at a high-profile memorial service held for those still buried at the former cemetery, a Florida State Representative who had herself grown up in Tampa told the people gathered at the church: ‘Some of us from the old days would say there are many spirits still there, so maybe that’s why we’ve had so many trials and tribulations



at Robles Park Village'. Others picked up on similar themes during speeches and conversations about the cemetery.

In this way, people from all walks of life seized on the possibility of posthumous agency and paranormal happenings to make sense of the story of Zion, its erasure, and its rediscovery. The forms of haunting described in this section conform loosely to what Lincoln and Lincoln (2015:, 192) have called 'secondary' haunting. People spoke of the 'dead', 'spirits', 'ghosts', and 'souls' in general terms; specific individuals were very rarely if ever identified or named. The encounter was thus between 'a general public and a mass of unquiet, impersonal dead' (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 206). Mediated by casual conversations, political speech, and the circulation of different news media, tropes of haunting were most often activated with specific goals in mind: to '[arouse] mass consciousness, [mobilize] outrage, and [move] a large group to remembrance of atrocities they might prefer to forget' (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 201). The point seemed less about the desires and demands of actual spectral beings than about the present reckoning of past events.

### Cultivating spectral intimacies

Other experiences of haunting also took place. This section explores attempts made by people living on top or nearby erased cemeteries such as a Zion Cemetery to cultivate meaningful interpersonal relations with the ghosts of actual historical persons. I focus on the stories of two people in particular: Evangeline, an elderly African American resident of Robles Park Village, and Larry, the retired county employee at the center of the rediscovery of both Zion Cemetery and a former Potter's Field elsewhere in Tampa. In both their stories, what begins as an uncomfortable feeling and series of strange physical happenings slowly morphs into a more concretely reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead. In Lincoln and Lincoln's (2015:, 192) terms, secondary haunting is transformed into primary haunting and specific (deceased) individuals are rescued from a mass of unquiet, impersonal dead. The mediating role of the spaces and objects of the home seem especially important in this process (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 17).

### Larry and Maymie

Larry's interest in cemeteries began several years earlier after he buried his own father in a small cemetery in East Tampa. Wanting to learn more about what he called his father's 'neighbours', he set about searching through county death certificates in order to find out who was buried alongside him. Doing so revealed repeated mention of a county cemetery, sometimes called 'County Home and Hospital' but more often listed simply as 'Poor Farm'. As with Zion Cemetery, he and his former county colleagues were surprised; they knew of no such place. Yet a quick visit to the address listed on several of these death certificates confirmed the continuing existence of Poor Farm, which unlike Zion Cemetery remained undeveloped. Thanks to Larry's efforts, the county eventually rededicated 'Poor Farm' as the 'Cemetery for All People' – complete with a shiny new fence, gate, and sign – and awarded him a public commendation for his work in bringing it to light. According to official county estimates, a little over 800 people were still buried at the newly rededicated cemetery.

Larry was initially pleased with himself; he felt like he had done a good deed for those unable to fend for themselves. The feeling did not last. Each time Larry passed the cemetery on the way to and from his nearby home he would get an uncomfortable physical feeling like 'a hive of angry bees' had taken up home in his stomach. As the weeks passed, this feeling grew more and more intense until one day it became so disorientating that he was forced to pull over his car on the road next to the cemetery. Larry's 'insides' were telling him that 'something was very wrong'. Having pulled over, Larry was beset by an urge to walk out into the cemetery. He continued beyond the southeastern boundary of the newly dedicated cemetery and into a shady, overgrown field abutting a county psychiatric hospital. The uncomfortable feeling surged; Larry felt compelled to keep moving forward until he saw small fragment of grey cement in the ground. Scraping at the earth around the fragment, he uncovered a rectangular piece of cement no larger than a shoebox with a three-digit number inscribed on it: a burial marker. The uncomfortable feeling that had been building since Larry left his car on the side of the road suddenly subsided. He felt weak and fell to his knees.

From there, Larry enrolled his friends and neighbors to search the shady field, inch by inch, going on to reveal over six hundred more burial markers. At the same time, he redoubled his archival efforts to attach names and biographies to these burial markers. Yet his work was hampered by attempts to keep the true extent of this Potter's Field shrouded in uncertainty. After 1966, the two-foot cement markers were laid down on their side rather than stood upright, which Larry took to be a conscious attempt to render them less noticeable. Burial records were rife with errors and omissions. 'Much effort had gone into 'undocumenting' the burials at the Poor Farm', he told me. Persevering, Larry went on to reveal a cemetery significantly larger and more populous than the one rededicated by the county government.

It was at this point that 'strange things' started happening at Larry's home. His cell phone would shoot off the couch, where he had carefully placed it, as if propelled by an unseen hand. He would return to doors he knew he had shut to find them ajar – and vice versa. Citing a 'strange' or 'uncomfortable' feeling, Larry's friends and family began to decline invitations to visit him at his home. (While we were talking one day in his home, Larry was visited by a friend who – after Larry had invited him into the conversation – confirmed that he felt uneasy when at the house.) As he worked on compiling the names and biographies of people still buried at the Potter's Field, Larry began to hear muffled whispers and see glimpses of human figures.

Strange things became even stranger one day when Larry discovered one particular burial marker, marker 671, listed twice in county records: once for Maymie Georgalas and then again for 'Infant James'. According to county records, Maymie was white, while Infant James was Black. Although Larry looked closely, he could find no marker 671 in the white section of the segregated Poor Farm. He did, however, find a marker 871, which, in turn, he found no mention of in county records. With this information in hand, Larry concluded that Maymie was buried under marker 871, not 671. The day he made this connection, Larry says, a drinking glass exploded in the back of his cupboard. Larry, who had before these experiences never contemplated the existence of ghosts, immediately took this to be the work of Maymie Georgalas.

Continuing his archival work, Larry tried to piece together the story of Maymie Georgalas. Born in 1888, Maymie was the daughter of George Lord and Elenor Triese. She

changed her name when she married a fruit vendor called Gus Georgalas. The two lived in Daytona Beach, Florida, where Maymie worked as a seamstress. In 1915, they had a daughter, Velma, who later left Florida for New York City. Maymie died in 1959 after a six-month stay in Tampa General Hospital; her daughter followed in her footsteps four decades later when she was buried at Hart Island – New York City’s own Poor Farm. The fate of Gus Georgalas remains unknown.

Having pieced together the story of Maymie Georgalas the best he could, Larry began to feel a significant shift taking place at his home: the uncomfortable feeling that he and his friends had reported there gave way in part to a feeling of comfort and conviviality. Larry believes that Maymie is grateful to him for unearthing her burial marker, telling her story, and so restoring to her the ‘dignity’ that she was previously denied; he hopes to do the same for the unnamed others still buried at the Potter’s Field and elsewhere in Tampa Bay. In return, Maymie keeps Larry ‘company’ as he continues his work uncovering the region’s erased cemeteries.

### *Evangeline and ‘Infant of Marie Lewis’*

When Evangeline first moved to Robles Park Village from another public housing project elsewhere in the metropolitan Tampa Bay area, she was happy; the place seemed like a step up from her former home. As the months and years passed, however, happiness turned into frustration. Things at Robles Park Village routinely did not work. Broken water heaters. Bad wiring. The place was plagued by dampness, mould, cockroaches, and peeling paint. Requests made to THA for repair and maintenance fell on deaf ears. At the same time, Evangeline became increasingly lonely in her new home. She found new friendships hard to come by, while social relations centered on her former home gradually withered. In addition, her loneliness was compounded by fear; the sound of gunshots, fights, and other disturbances were common at the public housing project. Fear, loneliness, and a sense of physical disorientation converged for Evangeline into a feeling of being out of place, out of joint, and out of her element.

Evangeline became forlorn and withdrawn. It was at this point that strange things began to happen at her home. The interior doors to the apartment would slam shut suddenly and for no apparent reason. She was kept awake by a series of unusual noises – not quite mechanical, not quite animal, not quite human – the source of which she could not identify, no matter how hard she tried. At first, Evangeline chalked all this up to the general state of dilapidation at Robles Park Village, which, after all, had seen better days. After a while, however, the physical fact of an unruly architectural environment began to merge with a less worldly sense that something else was afoot. Sat alone in her stuffy apartment, Evangeline would feel an abrupt disturbance in the air – as if someone standing far too close to her had suddenly shifted position. Objects placed in one cupboard would disappear, only to reappear days later in a different location. Perhaps most disconcerting for Evangeline was the sense that she was being watched, constantly, by an unseen set of eyes.

Time passed. These strange things continued to happen. Ruling out all other explanations, Evangeline had no choice but to assume that they were the work of something ‘not of this world’: a ghost, spirit, poltergeist, or something similar. Intrigued, she began to keep a journal, noting down when and where the strange things took place. She

described in detail the noises she heard and the feelings she felt. What began as a disembodied force (doors slamming and relocated objects) and uncomfortable feeling (of being watched while alone in her apartment) gradually took on something akin to a 'physical' form. This happened in fits and starts: first it would be a shadow shifting on the wall of the apartment; then it would be a dark shape swishing across the side of the room – seen by Evangeline only out of the very corner of her eye. The more Evangeline got used to them, however, the more these shadows and shapes adopted a recognizable form: the fuzzy outline of a young child. Initially, Evangeline thought of the child as a boy. But somewhere along the way she changed her mind; she was definitely a girl. At first, the girl would show up only very irregularly: sometimes appearing several times in a single day, before going missing for several weeks or even months at a time. Evangeline began to wonder if the girl would ever return. Over time, however, the girl came to visit more or less regularly with Evangeline, who, eventually, even began setting a place for her at the table at mealtimes. Something of a 'friendship' evolved.

It is important to note here that this story was first told to me, not by Evangeline, but by Evangeline's friend and former neighbor, Chloe – a Black community organizer I had come to know through our shared interest in regional highway expansion – who had initially attributed her friend's story to a combination of loneliness, old age, and an overactive imagination. Chloe had no time for ghosts, she told me; she was busy trying to improve conditions for the living. But she began to reconsider her skepticism when the news of Zion Cemetery first broke. Her conversion to 'believer' was completed several weeks later when she and Evangeline had accompanied several other women – all former and present Robles Park Village residents – to visit the archaeologists at work. Zip-tied to a chain-link fence, a series of large signs depicted what was known of the story of Zion Cemetery and its erasure, along with the names of the several hundred people thought to be still buried there. Chloe described in vivid detail Evangeline's reaction upon seeing one particular name on the list:

She stopped dead. The colour drained from her face. She was as white as a sheet. She starts pointing at the fence and screaming 'that's her, that's her'. I was like 'who?' I didn't know what she was talking about. Anyway, there was someone there on that list that had jumped out at [Evangeline]. Just jumped right off the page. That little girl was called 'Infant of Marie Lewis'. No other name. [Evangeline] was convinced that that was her ghost, her little girl. I know. If you'd have seen her, you'd believe her too.

Later, I managed to meet Evangeline for myself and was struck by the lack of self-consciousness with which she confirmed the story for me. She emphasized that she had never heard of Zion Cemetery before the news of its rediscovery broke – long before the strange things started happening at her home – and that she had never really considered the possibility of posthumous agency or paranormal activities before moving to Robles Park Village. Still, she agreed with Chloe insofar as she acknowledged that the rediscovery of former cemetery made her story seem more plausible. It also offered a context of broad historical and political relevance for her experience. 'Nobody considered these people at the time', she told me. 'The least I can do is take the time to get to know her now. She keeps me company'.

## Governing indeterminacy

Despite the significant differences between Larry and Evangeline, their stories converge around the possibility and transformative effects of spectral intimacies. In both cases, what begins as an uncomfortable feeling and series of strange happenings gradually and incrementally transforms into a more obviously human subject, endowed with an age, gender, and location within a wider network of kinship relations – a fact that is especially striking in the case of Maymie Georgalas. At the same time, Larry and Evangeline are themselves transformed: from people who had not previously considered the possibility of spectral agency to people who seem happy to share their home with ghosts. These transformations are mediated by a range of objects, from death certificates and property deeds to journals, household doors, and dinner plates (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 17), and seem to be understood in broadly reciprocal terms (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 198). Larry and Evangeline use strikingly similar language in their stories, which both begin with ‘strange things’ happening at home and end with spectral subjects keeping their living interlocutors ‘company’. To the extent that indeterminacy figures in their stories, then, it seems contingent – rather than foundational or irreducible – and can be actively modulated through cultural practices of ‘transformative hospitality’ (Ladwig 2012). A formerly fuzzy spectral subject comes into greater social focus.

Paradoxically, other (living) human subjects remained out of social focus at Robles Park Village. As the number of graves, caskets, and bodies located under the crumbling housing project increased, so did the overall atmosphere of moral outrage and political critique. How did this happen? Who was to blame? What forms of redress and reparation were necessary? The spotlight centered on two state and state-adjacent institutions: the city council – which allowed white elite Henry P. Kennedy to build on the land after granting him a tax-break based on its status as a cemetery – and the Tampa Housing Authority (THA) – which had unearthed two caskets during the construction of the Robles Park Village housing project without investigating the possibility of more bodies buried at the location. Already controversial due to what many saw to be its mismanagement of Robles Park Village and the city’s overall public housing program, the THA emerged as especially vulnerable to criticism.

Sensing an impending political crisis, the THA was quick to act, focusing first on relocating as quickly as possible the thirty or so families living directly atop the former cemetery – including those reporting the greatest distress at its revelation – thereby greatly accelerating a bureaucratic process already scheduled at the condemned housing project. It then turned its attention to the remaining residents at Robles Park Village, which, as the THA itself noted, did not currently ‘meet the basic needs of family living’ (Schreiner 2019). As a form of public relations, the responsiveness worked; many people praised the agency for taking such quick and decisive action in the days and weeks following the rediscovery of the former Zion Cemetery.

At the same time, the THA also attempted to lay claim to the narrative, affects, and experience surrounding the rediscovery of the erased Black burial ground and its local social and political significance. It did so using the internationally available tropes of ‘truth and reconciliation’ (Ashby Wilson 2003) and in the psychological key of ‘grief’ and ‘trauma’ (Moon 2009). As THA Senior Vice President Leroy Moore wrote in a public social media post accompanying images of the archaeologists at work:

Doing right about past sins, racist motivations, and dishonour shown to black families and their ancestors, sometimes requires we literally dig up and expose those deeds for the crimes they were and preserve the true story for future generations. Today at Zion we are doing just that. With the help of our vast community ... we start that process of truth and reconciliation for the evil that was perpetrated by past generations. Finding the truth is sometimes hard, sad, emotional and messy but it always informs and strengthens. Let's keep exposing the truth for a better tomorrow.

In the post, racist motivations and dishonor are located firmly in the past. Through processes of truth and reconciliation, the evils of the past are remade into the very resources from which new, stronger communities can be forged. A key part of this alchemy – the transformation of past sins into stronger communities – are practices of cultural preservation and historic storytelling. The post connects the past, present, and future into a teleology of national redemption, and it does so without challenging the continuing political economy of racial inequality that produced the cemetery's erasure.

The THA forged a series of partnerships with other organizations as part of its attempts to lay claim to the narrative, affects, and experience surrounding the rediscovery of the former Zion Cemetery. Key among these partnerships was the assemblage of high-profile planning and architectural agencies commissioned to redevelop the site. Over several months in 2020 and 2021, these agencies together organized a series of 'focus groups' with Robles Park Village residents and other stakeholders in order to determine local desires for the site. The agencies then put together a number of glossy reports charting out several potential futures (or 'concepts') for the former cemetery and its memorialization. The reports were peppered with images of other 'similar sites' – presumably intended as aesthetic inspiration – such as the Freedman Cemetery in Dallas, Texas and the African Burial Ground National Monument in New York City. Together, the THA and its planning and architectural partners promised to honor the historical specificities of Zion Cemetery. Yet the effects of the planning process and documents were to erase these specificities in favor of a national story of truth, reconciliation, and racial redemption. The whole process was widely publicized.

Even as the THA and its planning and architectural partners worked to co-opt the story of Zion Cemetery into a national story of truth and reconciliation, however, their efforts to do so were confounded by the continuing circulation of stories of ghostly apparitions and visitations at Robles Park Village. In response, the THA partnered with a local 'crisis centre' to help people deal with what it considered to be the root cause of the spectral stories: the 'grief and trauma' associated with the sudden revelation that many residents had been living on top of an erased burial ground. When I interviewed Leroy Moore in January 2020, he told me: 'We're providing a lot of consultation and support and counseling to help them [his tenants] face the fact that they've lived on top of a cemetery'. He went on to describe how the counselors made themselves available to the residents during residents' meetings and other housing project events.

This might seem like a classic case of modern statecraft – the transformation of haunting into the secularist language of grief and trauma (Rojas-Perez 2017, 10–11). But a closer look reveals something more complex. After several weeks of trying, I eventually managed to speak with one of the counselors stationed at Robles Park Village. Rightfully conscious of issues around confidentiality, the counselor told me that they could offer up no specific details on individual cases. They were, however, comfortable to relay a general

sense of how things had proceeded. When our conversation turned to ghosts and spirits, I enquired into the counselor's own personal take on the possibility of their existence and they told me:

*I'm not saying ghosts exist and I'm not saying they don't. These people come from a range of cultural and spiritual backgrounds and so it makes sense they process the trauma in this way ... Which is not to say that it's only about trauma – there's more at work here. I think both things can be true. That's not really our concern, anyway, because we're here to offer help to anyone that needs it.*

What is notable, I think, about the counselor's statement is not that it translates haunting into grief and trauma – but that it refuses to do so. The statement instead evokes the indeterminacy of the spectral before taking comfort in the practical demands of consultation and support.

As it turned out, the THA's attempts to help Robles Park Village process their grief and trauma proved something of a failure. Having made themselves available at resident meetings and housing project events over the course of several months, the counselors' services had gone largely unused. During our interview, Moore offered several reasons for this fact, including that the Robles Park Village residents had preferred generally to 'work through' their grief, trauma, and other negative emotional states with their friends, families, and neighbors, rather than with the unfamiliar figures of the state-backed counselors.

I later recounted my conversation with Leroy Moore to Chloe, the Black community organizer and former Robles Park Village resident who had introduced me to Evangeline and undergone a process of conversion to 'believer' in ghosts. Notably, Chloe agreed with the broad strokes of Moore's claim that residents had preferred to talk with their friends and neighbors than with the counselors. She also offered an interesting twist on this overarching truth: it wasn't (only) to do with a lack of familiarity between residents and counselors, it was (also) because the counselors seemed unable or unwilling to discuss with the residents the possibility of the existence of actual ghosts, spirits, and other spectral entities. If asked about their own position or beliefs, they equivocated on the issue – much like the counselor had done during our interview – and this had proved frustrating for the Robles Park Village residents. To be clear, not everyone at Robles Park Village believed that ghosts or spirits stalked the halls of the crumbling housing project. But most had a position, one way or the other, which they were willing to discuss – often at great length and with great gusto. Above all, this appeared important in the present moment.

Ghosts stories, suggests Laura Bear (2018), 'are experiments in plausibility offered to elicit further speech'. By sharing, discussing, and debating ghost stories, Robles Park Village residents were drawn together in a collective act of contemplation and critique that transcended the boundaries of the living and the dead in ways that, while not settled, did not rest on the kinds of irreducible indeterminacy that have come to define our understanding of the spectral within poststructuralist (Derrida 2004) or new materialist (Barad 2017) social theory. Yet indeterminacy was not entirely absent from the picture. It reared its head in the equivocations of the state-based counselors, who, apparently out of a late liberal respect for 'cultural and spiritual' difference, adopted what comes close to a 'hauntological' stance when they asserted that ghosts, spirits, and other spectral entities could simultaneously *exist* and *not exist*. Of course, there may be



many reasons the counselors went unused by those they were tasked to support. But what seemed especially frustrating to the residents of Robles Park Village (whether they believed in ghosts or not) was not that the counselors achieved a finished act of translation – of haunting into grief and trauma – but that they hedged their bets, making them unsatisfying sparring partners for the ‘experiments in plausibility’ that were taking place at this particular moment. In a way, the counselors’ refusal to take a position ensured they remained out of social focus for the residents of Robles Park Village, who remained somewhat suspicious of their presence at collective events and in turn preferred to look elsewhere for conversation and support.

## Conclusion

In recent years, a series of abandoned, forgotten, and actively and intentionally erased cemeteries and burial grounds have been unearthed in Tampa, Florida, setting in motion a flurry of social activity. Archaeologists work to confirm the presence and extent of the bodies; amateur historians and historical activists come together to clear overgrowth, document headstones, collect oral histories, and scour through thousands upon thousands of death certificates and other documents in order to recover individual biographies and the broader patterns they point towards; state institutions – including those agencies and authorities most directly responsible for the erasure of the cemeteries and burial grounds – attempt to manage the affective and political fallout of the breaking news. All the while, ordinary Tampanians and Tampeños debate in real-time the social and political significance of the continuing existence of the erased cemeteries and burial grounds, populated not only but overwhelmingly by people of African descent, at times quite literally under their feet.

Taking place alongside these important activities, a decidedly less secular configuration of historical encounters is taking place: people living on top or nearby the erased cemeteries report a widespread sense of spiritual tumult, describe a series of ghostly apparitions and visitations, and, in a smaller number of (admittedly) extreme cases, recount more or less successful attempts to develop meaningful interpersonal relations with the ghosts or spirits of actual historical persons. I think of these alternative configurations of historical encounter as *nonsecular* not simply because they center their narrative on the possibility of posthumous agency and paranormal happenings in ways that confound many of the key assumptions of Euro-American scientific secularism; they are non-secular in the more specific sense that they are concrete sites in which spectral entities and agencies enter – actively, forcefully – into the relational spaces of public and political life within the city, remaking them as they do so. Thus, the distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ haunting may be far less fixed than the analytical framework of Lincoln and Lincoln (2015) allows for; interpersonal encounters with ghosts may shape the relational terrain in which cultural discourses of grief and trauma take place – and vice versa – as when people such as Larry and Evangeline participate in public events and political discussions around the erasure and rediscovery of historic burial grounds based on their own relationships with the ghosts of actual deceased persons.

This article has suggested the term ‘social focus’ as a useful heuristic for understanding the overlapping relational dynamics at play in people’s efforts to cultivate spectral intimacies *and* the stilted attempts made by state agencies to lay claim to the narrative, affects,

and experience surrounding the rediscovery of the erased cemeteries. In the first, a strange noise, shifting shadow, and series of unexplained physical happenings can be brought into greater social focus as the intentional actions of a spectral *subject*, endowed with an age, a gender, and a location within a wider network of kinship relations. In the second, a professional commitment to late liberal respect for ‘cultural and spiritual’ difference ensures that the state-backed councilors charged with helping residents process the grief, trauma, and other negative emotional states associated with living unknowingly on top of an erased cemetery remain out of social focus to the people they hope to help. Acts of social focusing are interpersonal insofar as they take place between actual human subjects both living and deceased; they are also political, insofar as they help shape the broader terrain of state-citizen relations. Taking spectral intimacies seriously as sociopolitical (rather than ‘ontological’ or even ‘hauntological’) phenomena invites close scrutiny of the place of indeterminacy both within ghostly encounters and in projects and practices of late liberal statecraft.

## Note

1. All names are pseudonyms. Other biographical details have been amended to protect the anonymity of my research participants.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the US-UK Fulbright Commission.

## References

- Appelbaum, David. 2009. *Jacques Derrida's Ghost: A Conjunction*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ashby Wilson, Richard. 2003. “Anthropological Studies of National Reconciliation Processes.” *Anthropological Theory* 3 (3): 367–387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14634996030033007>.
- Barad, Karen. 2017. “No Small Matter: Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetimemattering.” In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, edited by Anna Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, G103–G120. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bear, Laura. 2018. “The Vitality of Labour and Its Ghosts.” *Anthropology of This Century* 21. <http://aotcpress.com/articles/vitality-labour-ghosts/>.
- Dawdy, Shannon Lee. 2021. *American Afterlives: Reinventing Death in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2004. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. New York: Routledge.
- Dixon-Román, Ezekiel, and Ramon Amaro. 2021. “Haunting, Blackness, and Algorithmic Thought.” *e-flux* #123. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/123/>.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 2007. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Edensor, Timothy. 2005. *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

- Foucault, Michel. 2003. *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*. New York: Picador.
- Gordon, Avery. 1997. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Guzzo, Paul. 2019. "Nearly 400 People Buried in Tampa are Missing. What Happened to Zion Cemetery?" *Tampa Bay Times*. <https://www.tampabay.com/florida/2019/06/23/nearly-400-people-buried-in-tampa-are-missing-what-happened-to-zion-cemetery/>.
- Guzzo, Paul. 2020. "First Coffin is Uncovered at Tampa's Erased Zion Cemetery." *Tampa Bay Times*. <https://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/history/2020/06/26/first-coffin-is-uncovered-at-tampas-erased-zion-cemetery/>.
- Holbraad, Martin, and Morten Pedersen. 2017. *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ladwig, Patrice. 2012. "Visitors from Hell: Transformative Hospitality to Ghosts in a Lao Buddhist Festival." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (s1): S90–S102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2012.01765.x>
- Ladwig, Patrice. 2013. "Ontology, Materiality and Spectral Traces: Methodological Thoughts on Studying Lao Buddhist Festivals for Ghosts and Ancestral Spirits." *Anthropological Theory* 12 (4): 427–447. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499612471933>
- Lincoln, Martha, and Bruce Lincoln. 2015. "Toward a Critical Hauntology: Bare Afterlife and the Ghosts of Ba Chúc." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57 (1): 191–220. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417514000644>
- Mbembe, Achille. 2011. *Necropolitics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- McFarland, Stephen, Samantha Bowden, and Martin Bosman. 2019. "'Take 'Em Down Hillsborough!': Race, Space, and the 2017 Struggle Over Confederate Iconography in Neoliberal Tampa." *Southeastern Geographer* 59 (2): 172–195. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sgo.2019.0014>
- Moon, Claire. 2009. "Healing Past Violence: Traumatic Assumptions and Therapeutic Interventions in War and Reconciliation." *Journal of Human Rights* 8 (1): 71–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754830902717726>
- Navaro-Yashin, Yael. 2012. *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Rainville, Lynn. 2014. *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Rojas-Perez, Isaias. 2017. *Mourning Remains: State Atrocity, Exhumations, and Governing the Disappeared in Peru's Postwar Andes*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Schreiner, Mark. 2019. "Zion Cemetery: What's Happened So Far and What's Next." *WUSF Public Media*. <https://wusfnews.wusf.usf.edu/university-beat/2019-10-16/zion-cemetery-whats-happened-so-far-and-whats-next>.
- Stewart, Catherine. 2016. *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Stringfield, Margo. 2021. "'Sacred to the Hart': Identity and Dignity as Reflected in the Memorial Landscapes of Postemancipation African Americans in Pensacola, Florida." *Social Science Quarterly* 102 (3): 1056–1073. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12966>