

rest in peace? the moral topography of New York City's potter's field

by leyla vural

Perhaps you already know, but many of us wonder what'll happen when we die. Is there an afterlife, a return to Earth, nothingness? And what of the body? If you die broke in New York City, or no one comes for you, you're headed for Hart Island, a small spot off of another island, City Island, itself off of the Bronx. More than one million people have been buried on Hart Island since 1869, following the same method of mass graves devised in the nineteenth century. Burial workers – until covid, they were incarcerated men from the city's largest jail – dig long trenches, one for adults, another for infants, that stay open until filled. That's 150 adults, stacked in pine boxes, two across and three deep, and up to 1,000 babies. When a trench is closed, it's marked with a numbered piece of white pipe. There were more than 1,200 burials on the island in 2018, nearly twice that in 2020 when covid struck.

The places we make – the land we shape – inscribe a moral topography into the landscape that reveals who we are and who we think belongs, and who doesn't, to the larger we. Hart Island is no accident: New York has been making and remaking the place in the same image for more than 150 years.

Places like Hart Island are called "potter's fields." It's from the Judas story, literally Biblical, in which priests use the silver Judas returns to buy land "to bury strangers in" because they can't put blood money back into their treasury. "Strangers" has come to mean poor and unclaimed people, their burial site a public graveyard.

Hart Island is on the map. Just type it into Google Maps. Still, it's one of those places you just don't see. To get there, you take the #6 subway to the last stop in the Bronx and then the BX 29 bus across a causeway to Fordham Street on City Island and walk a couple of blocks to a gated ferry dock and, when allowed, take the ferry. You don't get there by mistake or on your way any place else.





When it comes to potter's field, at least in New York City, there's blood on our hands: we continue to accept a nineteenth-century burial method and a burial ground for the poorest people among us that in no way resembles the fundamental respect humans deserve in death.

It's easy to think that the people pushed to the social margins are strangers, somehow other. But the first person I met, in a city of more than eight million, who knew about Hart Island from something other than press coverage was a neighbor, Rosalee. I'd seen her in an MSNBC story about Hart Island because her mother – who called herself Karaoke Gladys – was buried there in 2014. Gladys lived with Rosalee and sang karaoke on Sunday nights at a bar around the corner from our block.

"If one has chosen to live mindfully," said bell hooks in *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, "then choosing a place to die is as vital as choosing where and how to live." hooks returned to Kentucky, where she grew up, to live, work, and eventually die because she felt she belonged there. Perhaps, like hooks, we each make a "narrative map" of our lives and mark it with the places that locate our story. If Hart Island is on your map, is there what hooks called a "language of belonging" for you?

Karaoke Gladys was beloved. Her karaoke community gave her a surprise birthday party – with noisemakers, balloons, gifts, and a cake – held a "Gladytude" memorial for her, and set her photo, ringed with lights, on the bar on karaoke nights. Maybe the ultimate insult of Hart Island is the bad math that equates money with belonging.

Visiting Hart Island is its own thing. In 2015, still under the control of the city's Department of Correction (DOC) at the time, a Hart Island visit was treated like making a jail visit. "No contraband," I was told when I called to make arrangements for Rosalee and me. If you didn't sign up in advance, you wouldn't be allowed on the ferry. That had happened to Rosalee before.

Rosalee and I went to Hart Island in mid-March, a year after her mother's death, on the one day a month that visits to the island were allowed. Armed DOC guards walked us to a gazebo close to the ferry dock, the only place visitors could go, for what was called a "closure" visit. We stood before a single gravestone, fading buildings, and barren land, no burial-site markers in view.

And it was so still. You could almost feel the land floating. If it weren't so forlorn, could this place feel peaceful, hallowed even?

Rosalee seemed invigorated on the island. She strongly favored a bill to transfer it to the Parks Department (which happened in 2021), but she liked it: “The whole loosening up of getting Hart Island turned into a park has made a wonderful turnaround just as my mommy got there.”

We went again on a Sunday in July, the first day the DOC allowed burial-site visits for family members. The press was waiting by the City Island gate to the ferry. On the island, vans took the various groups to their specific sites. We were with a young couple going to what turned out to be the open baby trench.

When the van dropped us off at the edge of a rocky, dirt field, the first thing we saw was the flowers. On this dreary patch of land lay a bouquet to mark where Gladys is buried, plot #365. It was a nice gesture. A DOC officer had gotten out with us. He hung back, gun in its holster, and stayed quiet as we approached the spot. We saw the ferry dock and condo construction on City Island in one direction and Long Island in the other. Right next to us was an open trench, so far holding just a few pine boxes under a sheet of plywood peppered with dirt and gravel. We each took a couple of rocks.

When we got back to City Island, the press was still there, and Rosalee told reporters she was “glad to be poor” because “the rich don’t get a better place than this.” She was only troubled that the field where Gladys is buried was so bare.

The following March when Rosalee learned she had cancer, she told everyone to bury her on Hart Island. Seemingly a first, that even made the news. “Once I am planted there,” she wrote on Facebook, “I plan to haunt every sucker who won’t let there be grass on the graves. I’ll be a pretty convincing demon if need be.”

The last time I saw Rosalee was a cold, wet April day. We went junking, a favorite pastime of hers, in East Harlem. She intended to bring her daughter and grandson, who’d be visiting from Michigan, to Hart Island in May. Rosalee died a few weeks later. Her daughter and grandson went to Hart Island as planned. They visited Gladys’s burial site and surreptitiously sprinkled wildflower seeds. Soon after, Rosalee was buried in plot #376, not at all far from her mommy.





I went to visit Rosalee's burial site recently. You still need to register in advance and show government-issued ID, but with the Parks Department running the island, it's no longer treated like a jail. There's now one weekend a month with four allotted visiting times open to anyone with close ties to someone buried on the island.

But Hart Island feels even more desolate than I remembered it. Maybe that's because Rosalee isn't with me to point out its inherent beauty. Maybe it's because most of the old buildings with what Rosalee called their "wonderful ruinly character" have been torn down. Even the trench markers look lonely, small sentinels in a field of dirt, mud, and puddles.

What would New York's moral topography look like if we treated our poorest neighbors not as strangers but as people who belong? Maps are imbued with social meaning, just like everything we make. We'd have to become new mapmakers, making new meaning of places and carving a new ethics into the land.

A moral topography wouldn't relegate those buried on Hart Island to numbered trenches and barren fields. We'd value the place because we'd value the people on it just because they were people who lived and loved, struggled and survived the same as everyone. Rosalee saw Hart Island as "the kind of place where one can contemplate infinity" because she thought you could "kind of see all the way to infinity from there." The map we'd make, if right and wrong were its legend, would contemplate that infinity and make a place where rest in peace means something.