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Racial Necrogeographies and the Making of White Space: The Life and Death of Nineteenth-Century Indigenous and Black Burial Places in Rural Ontario

William Felepchuk

This paper examines the destruction of the burial spaces of Indigenous and Black communities by settler whites in Saukiing Anishinaabekiing, the territory of the Saugeen Anishinaabek, also known as Grey County, Ontario. In addition to discussing the desecrations inflicted upon these sites, I examine the reaction of whites to recent efforts by these same racialized communities to defend their dead and the places in which they are interred. I take as my case studies nineteenth-century Indigenous and Black burial sites in the region, and contestations and assertions surrounding these sites in the late twentieth century, with a focus on a nineteenth-century Anishinaabe burial place in Owen Sound on Sixth Avenue West, and a burial place of a nineteenth-century Black community, the Old Durham Road Pioneer Cemetery near Priceville. Examining these as well as other sites, this article details whites' conscious collusion and dehumanizing impulses in destroying and desecrating Indigenous and Black graves and human remains in Grey County. I argue that these acts are an important part of the racial-geographical construction of white space by settler whites, a construction that constantly attempts to erase Indigenous and Black existence in the region. Despite

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these attempts, Indigenous and Black acts of resistance and community building take place, including reclamation and reconsecration of burial places.

The desecration of Indigenous and Black burial places in Grey County contrasts starkly with the attentive consideration given by settler whites to their own burials. For example, my Protestant Irish immigrant ancestors are buried in Maple Grove Cemetery in Dundalk, Ontario beneath a majestic grave marker.¹ Irish Protestants, the predominant white-settler population in the county, shared a worldview shaped by affiliation with the Orange Order, a white Protestant fraternal order originating in the northernmost counties of Ireland.² For Orangemen, burial is an important and sacred obligation owed especially to coreligionists; one local Orange Order document emphasizes burial as “one of the first charitable duties” and goes on to insist that “if this mandate is compulsory, generally speaking, how much more ought it to be observed in particular by members of our Association.”³

The Orange view of burial is not, however, limited to a sacred obligation owed individually to respected brethren; as one Irish Orangeman put it in verse: “by these graves we claim the country still / This land made rich by sacrifice and tears . . . / . . . Thus do we claim our country from the lord . . . / . . . “The land is his who claims it by a grave.”⁴ These lines point to the appropriative power of the presence of the interred dead in colonial landscapes, that “places are not only founded but also appropriated by burial of the dead.”⁵ The graves of my ancestors are part of what Adam Barker calls “necro-settlement,” which allows for an understanding of “the entanglements between living embodiments of settler colonial power and the materialization of that power in the bodies of the dead.”⁶ The white deathscapes of rural Ontario, in the form of omnipresent country cemeteries, disguise the ever-present reality of the racialized erasure and dispossession of the spaces occupied by the dead of marginalized communities. While settler whites earnestly participate in the burial of their own dead, they simultaneously confer on the burial places of the marginalized the status of what Clyde Woods calls “racially defined zones of destruction.”⁷ These zones constitute an often-microscopic example of racialized colonialism’s “seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area—of *writing on the ground* a new set of social and spatial relations.”⁸

This “writing on the ground” maintains an apparently seamless white possession of land, underpinned by a powerful originary mythos, outlined below in the first section of this paper, which offers a theoretical and historical discussion of racial and colonial geographies in the wider Canadian context in which my case studies are situated. The second part discusses a selection of historical instances of racialized grave desecration and violence towards the dead in Grey County by settler whites and a theoretical approach to these instances. The third part of this paper outlines several examples of the backlash from the same settler whites when marginalized communities reclaim spaces of burial, before concluding with some reflections about spaces of burial as sites of resistance.

RACIAL AND COLONIAL GEOGRAPHIES IN CANADA

The founding mythos of Grey County emphasizes the redemptive hardships of intrepid white pioneers turning an uninhabited and unproductive wilderness into the

celebrated agricultural output of farmlands that today are typified by Anglo-Celtic toponymy (Irish Mountain, Scotch Mountain, Southampton, Dundalk, Thornbury, etc.). This mythos is undermined in no small part by the reality that the first non-Indigenous communities in Grey County were Black settlements, or that the land was already inhabited and stewarded by the Saugeen Anishinaabek. According to York University scholar Naomi Norquay, Black presence in the county “has been vanquished by an overemphasis on the history of pioneers from Great Britain and Ireland.”⁹ Of Canada more broadly, geographer Katherine McKittrick asserts:

“truthful” visual knowledge regulates and normalizes how Canada is seen—as white, not blackless, not black, not nonwhite, not native Canadian, but white. “Other” geographic evidence is buried, ploughed over, forgotten, renamed, and relocated . . . displacement and blackness are implicated, unexpectedly, in the nation through black presence *and* blacklessness, burial, forgetfulness, renaming, relocation.¹⁰

These unseen communities, and their sacred places, are excised through a process of mapping that imposes common-sense white space. In the case of Grey County and much of rural Ontario, this is achieved in part through a neat grid of concessions, county and township lines, and colonization roads that plough through extant communities. In the documentary film *Speakers for the Dead*, one of the Black descendants of those buried at the Old Durham Road site laments that during construction of a new road next to the cemetery, many of the dead of the Black community and their tombstones were likely paved over.¹¹ The road formed an unstoppable imposition over any sacrality that might have preceded it.

Geographer Cole Harris explains that the lands of Indigenous nations “could not have been reorganized into colonial space without something like the map.”¹² The colonial map flattens the world, making a singular toponymic dimension. The mapping mind unites all places, as Dionne Brand observes, with an “unnameable familiarity among us,” which she defines simply as “Empire.”¹³ She describes visiting London for the first time as landing in a place already known to her, a knowing she shares in common with the other travelers who debark at Heathrow with her: “we have the same roadmap in our heads. We’ve walked the same streets of colony.”¹⁴ The grid, the tidy delineation, is facilitated by the map. In the case of Grey County, this grid is marked by the concession lines and county roads, the farms differentiated only by the number of outbuildings, the color of the house, or the kinds of livestock raised. Grey County resembles Ontario, and Ontario resembles Grey County. Colonial mapping thus renders things uniform; it creates a *world* out of many *worlds*. The worlds that do not conform constitute “‘Other’ geographic evidence,” and are often “buried, ploughed over, forgotten, renamed, and relocated.”¹⁵

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist Leanne Simpson, in her discussion of the Otonabee river that runs through her city of Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), notes that

the word “otonabee” is heard or read differently by Canadians and Nishnaabeg peoples. When I hear or read the word “ontonabee,” I think “odenabe,” and I am immediately connected to a physical place within my territory and a space where my culture communicates a multi-layered and nuanced meaning that is largely unseen and unrecognized by non-Indigenous peoples.¹⁶

As Margaret Noori points out, “throughout the process of colonization, identity and specificity were eroded.”¹⁷ The actual presence of communities is irrelevant to white space. This inability or unwillingness of non-Indigenous people to see place meaning is a long-standing result of a process neither mundane nor benign, creating a world in which the names of places are, according to Anishinaabe writer Louise Erdrich, a litany of lies “so tiresome and so insulting. Squaw Rock. Devil’s This and Devil’s That. Indian or Tomahawk Anything.” Erdrich predicts that “some day, when there is nothing more important to do, the Anishinaabeg will demand that all the names be changed.”¹⁸

Erdrich earmarks the maps of coloniality as sites of future contestation and struggle. Erdrich is also emphasizing Anishinaabek resistance to the colonial mapping project. In her novel *Tracks*, she has her character Nanapush point to a map showing areas of the Anishinaabek reservation given up to whites under allotment, observing: “the lapping pink, the color of the skin of lumberjacks and bankers, the land we would never walk or hunt, from which our children would be barred.”¹⁹ Erdrich’s fictional community, and colonized people more generally, have undergone what Cole Harris calls “the experienced materiality of colonialism,” which he points out is “grounded, as many have noted, in dispossession and repossession of land.”²⁰ Harris goes on to draw upon Frantz Fanon, who observed “that colonialism created a world ‘divided into compartments,’ a ‘narrow world strewn with prohibitions,’ a ‘world without spaciousness’”²¹ made up of “the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation.”²² Achille Mbembe explains that the creation of these zones takes place through “seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area”—what he also refers to as “*writing on the ground* a new set of social and spatial relations.”²³

As mentioned, this “writing on the ground” is a constant assault on both Indigenous and Black spaces, which are treated as undesirable remnants to be pushed out and excised. Rinaldo Walcott enumerates such sites as “the ‘reservation,’ the ‘housing project,’ and ‘the priority neighborhood’ (the latter is the name given to the archipelagos of poverty in Toronto), the project of deportation and the dispossession of people beyond Canada’s borders.”²⁴ McKittrick traces how “a presumably Euro-white and colonial nation is concealing and/or obscuring unexpected social and geographic narratives.” She goes on to note how “concealment is accomplished at least in part by carefully landscaping blackness out of the nation” and lists a litany of denigrations, removals, and fractures in the context of Black Canada, including “the demolition of Africville in Nova Scotia and Hogan’s Alley in Vancouver . . . the renaming of Negro Creek Road to Moggie Road in Holland Township, Ontario; the silence around and concealment of Canada’s largest invisible slave burial ground, Nigger Rock, in the eastern townships of Quebec . . . [and] the ploughing over of the Black Durham Road

Cemetery in southwestern Ontario.”²⁵ The racialized destruction of the burial places of marginalized communities is thus one constitutive part of the wider pattern of racial and colonial geographic erasure in Canada.

RACIALIZED DESECRATION OF BURIAL PLACES IN GREY COUNTY

Grey County provides numerous examples of the violent concealment of the presence of racialized communities in landscapes of whiteness; the burial places of both historic Black and Saugeen Anishinaabek communities were desecrated repeatedly throughout the region. After outlining some of these desecrations from the local media archival records (often through columns written in the Owen Sound *Sun Times*), I discuss the meaning of this desecration in the context of what Tiffany Lethabo King calls “genocide, slavery and the violent project of making the human.”²⁶ I attempt to understand necrogeographical violence not only as part of the process of white settlement, but also as part of a long history of whites’ subhumanizing of Indigenous and Black people and denial of Indigenous and Black being.

The Old Durham Road Pioneer Cemetery is a burial place of a nineteenth-century Black community in Artemesia Township. After the inhabitants of the settlement moved to larger towns for better economic opportunity or to escape racial tension, or else married into the local white population,²⁷ the burial ground was taken over by a white farmer who removed the stones, plowed the field, and planted potatoes atop the bodies of the Black community’s dead. According to local tradition, this desecration did not take place under the cover of night, but rather with the collusion of many locals: “Teenage boys had been paid to remove the grave stones and pile them along the road allowance in preparation for the day in the late 1930s when the ‘darkies’ cemetery’ was ploughed under.”²⁸ In the National Film Board of Canada documentary about the site, *Speakers for the Dead*, the farmer’s stepdaughter says with a smile: “We raised very good potatoes on that particular piece of land. They were excellent. They lasted well through the winter. They were good, big potatoes. We never had to buy any.”²⁹

Not only the bodies of the dead were destroyed for personal profit, but the stones documenting their existence as well. The farm woman recalled how gravestones would be used for building material in the homes of local whites:

Back then people didn’t have a lot of money. So you didn’t think of going to the store to buy a patio stone like you would now, or putting cement down. There just wasn’t the money to do it. So you used what you had available. And also there were a few in the basement of the home. I think there was only two or three stones in the basement of the house. . . sometimes we had water in the basement. We needed them to walk on, to get from one board to the next sort of thing [laughs], because there was planks down there if you recall, to walk across, to get to the potato bin, for instance, or where the apples were, things like that.”³⁰

Carolynn Wilson, whose great-great uncle James Handy is buried in the Durham Road site, recounted to one reporter that “the gravestone of ‘Moiriah’ [a woman buried

in the Durham Road site] was used by the children of a school across the road from the cemetery as home plate on a ball field.”³¹

Such dehumanizing desecrations were also visited upon Anishinaabek spaces of burial, such as at Sixth Avenue West in Owen Sound, where the Saugeen Anishinaabek had reserved a burial place for themselves in the 1857 treaty that surrendered their adjacent reserve. It was not long before the site was put to profit-generating uses; as the *Sun Times* reported, “Over the years, soil from the 6th Ave. W. burial site was used to make bricks for construction in Owen Sound.”³² Many of the buildings along Owen Sound’s downtown streets contain soil taken from the graves of Saugeen Anishinaabek.³³ Later, in the mid-1970s, one local resident remembered “buying flowers from greenhouses which sat on the controversial property.”³⁴ By the 1980s the land had been deeded to developers and two houses were erected on the site, eventually leading to the contestation outlined below.

At Mary Miller Park, another site in Owen Sound, in 1958 railroad workers uncovered a Saugeen Anishinaabek burial place. According to one report, local settler whites “removed the remains of a warrior clad in a British tunic and [gave] them to what is now the Royal Ontario Museum . . . Local residents were said to have returned after nightfall to rob the graves for keepsakes.”³⁵ These two desecrations—one in broad daylight for a museum and the other under the cover of darkness for crude personal keepsakes—reveal both the acceptable (public) and illicit (private) nature of grave desecration. Another very public desecration was announced in the *Warton Echo* in 1954, describing the opening of a Saugeen Anishinaabek grave on one of the Fishing Islands near Oliphant, which is not far from Owen Sound. The body of a man was unearthed, examined, and visited as a curiosity by white settlers. His bones and the contents of his grave were disturbed and handled by locals and tourists. According to this article, “When the discovery was announced, many interested vacationers visited the island to see for themselves.”³⁶

I was able to find only a very few local sources discussing the burial place of Saugeen Anishinaabe people that did not detail instances of grave desecration. Among them was an extensive series of articles concerning the grave of Nahneebahwequay, a Mississauga Anishinaabe advocate and leader who lived in Saugeen territory and fought against land surrenders and dispossession. As part of these activities, Nahneebahwequay, whose English name was Catherine Sutton, traveled to the United Kingdom to petition Queen Victoria. Her grave is a source of much fascination in the local archival record. Among many articles discussing the site, one is entitled “Lonely Grave Recalls Indian Princess Who Went to Visit the Queen.” As the site had fallen into disrepair, the author of this article urged that this grave be protected and that Nahneebahwequay be better memorialized.³⁷

In the archival texts I have gathered, there are two approaches to Black and Saugeen Anishinaabe graves: in the first group, constituting the majority of texts concerning racialized burial places in the region, Black and Saugeen Anishinaabe bodies (usually called by racialized terms such as “darkie,” “Negro,” “warrior,” “chief,” or “brave”) are unearthed and their resting place destroyed for the purposes of curiosity or profit. These bodies are not treated as human, but rather as objects of curiosity and

examination, or else to be cast aside as an incidental part of a site's geology. The settler whites of Grey County have practiced, en masse, a kind of common-sense dehumanization of the racialized dead and a desacralization of the burial places they inhabit.

The second (much smaller) group of texts deals specifically with the grave of Nahneebawequay, an individual who, despite possessing an accomplished existence of her own, is principally celebrated for her encounter with a powerful white woman. Nahneebawequay is not, therefore, allowed into the realm of the human on her own innate terms; she is, rather, a source of local pride in terms of white settler connection to a British point of origin. In other words, by virtue of her association with whiteness she is worthy of a respect not afforded to the graves of other racialized people and she was saved from becoming a specimen by being rendered as adjacent to whiteness. I cannot help but wonder what Nahneebawequay's fate might have been had she not met the queen; certainly, no other grave of a racialized person is individually valorized by whites in the region. This discrepancy is fundamentally linked to the dehumanization of people under regimes of racial colonialism, and the ways by which this dehumanization erodes white respect for the fundamentally human activity of grave-making amongst racialized communities. As a result, the landscapes of the dead, or necrogeographies, that are produced in Grey County, are fundamentally uneven: while tombs such as those of my ancestors stand prominently, Indigenous and Black community sites are often hidden or erased altogether.

Necrogeography is defined by American historical geographer and architectural historian Richard Francaviglia in an influential article as a "cultural landscape, that is, as a place having definable visual characteristics based on individual forms, such as tombstones, trees, and fences, and on the placement of those forms in a particular spatial arrangement."³⁸ However, Francaviglia's approach to necrogeography encounters difficulty in the context of colonialism and racialization, where the tombstones, tombs, and mounds signifying the burial places of the colonized/racialized may have been erased, destroyed, or disallowed. Further, even where monumental commemoration is present or intact at the burial places of the racialized, such a method of approaching necrogeography tends to ignore the ontological and relational aspects of burial places and the centrality of burial to human life. This ontological centrality of burial is underscored by literary scholar Robert Harrison, who remarks in *The Dominion of the Dead* that "it is not for nothing that the Greek word for 'sign' *sema*, is also the word for 'grave.' For the Greeks the grave marker was not just one sign among others. It was a sign that signified the source of signification itself, since it stood for what it stood in, the ground of burial itself."³⁹

Graves are signs of not only the worldly death of the person they contain, but also the mortality of those who created the grave. The grave, or other practices honoring or sacralizing the dead, demarcates the human as world-creating subject. Harrison holds that "To be human means to be the surrounding center of such world-forming intentionality."⁴⁰ Harrison underlines the connection between the *humic* (referring to humus, the dark soil produced when the bodies of organisms decay) and the *human*, the grave-bounded and grave-bound nature of our being in space. Harrison further argues that "We cannot understand the . . . institution of places on the earth

independently of the institution of burial.”⁴¹ What makes a place a place, and not merely undifferentiated space, are the human marks that are created to bind it to time; and the most primordial such marking, or *sema*, is the grave. The centrality of burial places to necro-settlement projects and, as mentioned, the explicit sacrality of these places in the discourse of settler whites in the region, all point to a deep sensitivity to their significance in Protestant white-settler communities. Because these whites generally recognize that it is the presence of dead humans that hallows burial places, they must also render racialized communities as less than human to avoid recognizing their own acts as desecration.

Frantz Fanon and his intellectual inheritors have traced the racial line between communities that whites consider fully human, and those considered subhuman. Fanon points out that although Hegel’s master-slave dialectic was based on the mutual and reciprocal recognition of the other’s being, this does not describe the relationships of white people to subjugated Black people.⁴² Black people are denied by whites the circuit of reciprocity that exists between the Hegelian master and his slave: “If I shut off the circuit, if I make the two-way movement unachievable, I keep the other within himself. In an extreme degree, I deprive him even of this being-for-self.”⁴³ Lewis Gordon explains that, in Fanon’s argument, “since racism is a denial to an Other attributes of the self and even those of another self—in other words, even of being an *Other*—the resulting schema is one of location *below*, in the zone of nonbeing.”⁴⁴ According to Ramon Grosfoguel, the zone of nonbeing separates those who are “recognized socially as human beings and, thus, enjoy access to rights” from those “considered subhuman or non-human,” whose humanity is questioned or negated.⁴⁵

This negation of the humanity of colonized/racialized communities allows for a concomitant destruction of their geographic presence. Geographies of the human in the schema of racial colonialism are, according to Achille Mbembe, characterized by the “creation of *death-worlds*,” in which subhumanized racialized/colonized people are given the status of the “*living dead*.”⁴⁶ These zones of subhuman death are similar to categories Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes as “bare life,” in which state sovereignty is exercised through the power to render humans as killable, and deeming certain lives “devoid of value” or “unworthy of being lived.”⁴⁷ For Indigenous studies scholar Circe Sturm, Agamben’s theory describes “a particularly insidious form of sovereign violence by creating a state of exception, one that gives them the power to kill or make live and allows them to strip certain human beings of their political significance, reducing them to bare life and making them subject to state-sanctioned biological death.”⁴⁸ I would extend Agamben’s “bare life” and Mbembe’s “death-worlds” to include the spaces inhabited by the racialized dead themselves, which become socially acceptable spaces of violence in which all manner of desecration, depravity, and destruction wrought upon the dead are permissible. Acts of violence and destruction are permitted in the zone of nonbeing “that would otherwise be unacceptable in the zone of being.”⁴⁹ The creation of such spaces of nonbeing allow the bones of Indigenous humans to be taken to white homes as “Indian relics” and ground containing Black ancestors to be planted with potatoes.

ABYSSAL THINKING AND WHITE BACKLASH

At both the Old Durham Road burial place and the Sixth Avenue West site in Owen Sound, Indigenous and Black descendants reasserted their relation to the spaces of burial and sought to protect them from further subhumanizing desecration. Carolyn Wilson, together with other Black descendants and local white allies, forged ahead with archaeological digs at the Old Durham Road site in the hopes of finding additional tombstones that might identify other ancestors buried there. As Wilson notes on behalf of Black descendants of those buried on the Old Durham Road: “We simply want to recover the tombstones . . . They lived here, they had children here, they died here. If there are tombstones here with their names on them, they should be on top of the ground.”⁵⁰ Saugeen Anishinaabe people occupied the Sixth Avenue West site, setting up a ceremonial camp in the backyards of the two houses occupying the burial ground. A Saugeen Anishinaabe elder explained the importance of the Sixth Avenue West burial place in Owen Sound: “My great, great grandparents were buried at this spot . . . It’s a very sacred place and when you put people to rest you hope they’re going to rest without being desecrated . . . These people were made into bricks . . . It still doesn’t mean their spirits aren’t alive and well. And they would be quite angry with us knowing their final resting place is being disturbed.”⁵¹

These assertions of the sacrality and the relationality of the desecrated sites by members of local communities received significant backlash from neighboring settler whites, who felt deeply disturbed by the reassertion of the presence of the Indigenous and Black dead. I will only mention some representative samples of this backlash here. In reaction to Wilson and other descendants undertaking the archaeological dig, one white household near the Old Durham Road site erected a large banner reading:

LEAVE OUR BONES
LIE IN PEACE
PEOPLE SHOULDN’T
DESECRATE
THEIR ANCESTOR’S
BURIAL GROUNDS
REGARDLESS OF
COLOUR RACE OR
CREED.⁵²

Thus, members of a white-settler community that had formerly grown potatoes in a Black burial place accused Black descendants of desecrating the burial place of their own ancestors. Such a statement also dismissed Black community reasons for undertaking the dig, which Wilson and others emphasized were for the purpose of honoring relations to departed ancestors and reestablishing familial and community connections to the site.

A similar inversion occurred when the lawyer for the homeowners whose houses occupied the Sixth Avenue West burial place in Owen Sound bewailed the distress caused to his clients “when the Indians invaded” their property:

The Indians, in a mass demonstration . . . invaded and occupied the lands, terrified the homeowners, damaged their gardens and lawns, kept the homeowners (and the neighborhood) awake with loud drumming and chanting . . . Given their claim that the lands *were sacred burial grounds* to which they were entitled and their claim of some ancient ceremonial rights thereto, they behaved abysmally by making enough noise to wake the dead.⁵³

The lawyer not only levels accusations of violence and disruption at what was by all accounts a peaceful protest action, but he also derides Anishinaabe ontologies related to the dead and casts doubt on the sincerity of those taking action to protect the site.

In both these examples, settler whites weaponized the language of oppression in which they themselves had been implicated in order to silence Indigenous and Black knowledge of their own connection to these sites (the white anxieties connected to both sites are discussed briefly at the end of this section). Both objected to the *wrong* kind of activity at the site: in an illogical sleight of hand, a Black community was admonished that they should not “desecrate their ancestor’s burial grounds [*sic*]” and Saugeen Anishinaabe protestors reclaiming a treaty-protected Indian reserve were upbraided for having “invaded and occupied the lands.” Relatively few of the local archival sources mention the perspective of the Indigenous or Black community members; many, however, focus on white-settler anxieties and bruised feelings about the contestations. One article quotes a neighboring resident of Sixth Avenue West as lamenting that the protest and its aftermath had been “hard on everyone’s nerves.”⁵⁴ Another local resident conceded that “That’s their right . . . it’s their land” but objected to “the way they went about it. It wasn’t, I don’t think, legal.”⁵⁵ Of a wider land claim by the Saugeen Anishinaabe, a white lawyer in the area lamented: “We’re still trying to recover from the shock. The ramifications of that type of claim is fairly horrible” [*sic*].⁵⁶

The lawyer for the Sixth Avenue West homeowners was not alone in casting doubt on Anishinaabe assertions of relationality to the Owen Sound site. One of the lawyer’s clients, George Haig, was equally dismissive: “As far as I’m concerned, they are all full of beans . . . I think the Indian people have to start living in today’s times. This is 1992, not back in the 1700s.”⁵⁷ And when Saugeen Anishinaabe representatives sought to meet the Owen Sound city council in order to protect another burial place in the town at Mary Miller Park, Mayor Harry Henderson said he’s “not convinced the burial ground exists without more evidence.”⁵⁸

This disregard for Indigenous and Black understandings in relation to these sites is an example of the *abyssal line* in modern Western thinking, which, as formulated by Portuguese decolonial scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “divide[s] the human from the subhuman.”⁵⁹ The abyss is the “other side of the line . . . produced as non-existent [and] radically excluded” from the realm of the thinkable.⁶⁰ These unthinkableables are the “popular, lay, plebeian, peasant, or indigenous knowledges on the other side of the line” that are not allowed entrance as relevant or conceivable knowledges. Those in Santos’s abyss lose “all ontological weight in the eyes of the colonizer.”⁶¹ Thus, even when they are spared physical destruction, their knowledges and ways of being are utterly

devalued and slated for destruction. Santos terms this assault *epistemicide*, defined as “the murder of knowledge,” in which “Unequal exchanges between cultures have always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinated culture, hence the death of the social groups that possessed it.”⁶² When Henderson, faced with claims to a burial ground, dismissed the Saugeen Anishinaabek “without more evidence,” he is participating in a long tradition of dismissing Indigenous knowledges with epistemicidal consequences for Indigenous practices, worldviews, and lifeways.

While geographies of whiteness in Grey County have attempted to erase both Indigenous and Black communities and the places inhabited by the dead of these communities, there are key differences in the trajectory of these reclamations that are important to observe. In response to white supremacy, resistance, reassertion, and reconsecration in and around burial places have emerged in both communities. However, the political discourse of communities around such reclamations is undoubtedly different: Saugeen Anishinaabe people make simultaneous wider assertions of nationhood within their territory, and Black descendants combat erasure and ongoing racism through commemoration and celebration.

Another key difference is the implication of whites in the respective efforts to reclaim burial places in Owen Sound and Priceville. In Priceville, local whites joined Black descendants at the forefront of the reclamation efforts. In contrast, my research in local media sources have yielded little evidence of any direct significant participation of allied whites in the Saugeen Anishinaabe occupation in Owen Sound (at least those able to garner media attention, such as spokespersons).⁶³ Such differentials in participation may be connected in part to demographic and social realities in the region. Anishinaabe people are politically present in Bruce and Grey Counties and in the urban setting of Owen Sound, and Indigenous assertions of nationhood are a significant source of white anxiety in local media, often around property rights and property values.⁶⁴ This may lead to more uniform ambivalence or hostility among whites to Indigenous occupations such as that on Sixth Avenue West in Owen Sound. The Black community in Priceville, however, driven by racism and lack of opportunity to larger population centers such as Collingwood, is considered by local whites to belong neither to the landscape nor the area’s present reality. This has led to the less direct, more abstract anxiety of being exposed as having purported to have Black ancestry.⁶⁵ However, for those whites not concerned with this fear of a racially mixed ancestry, the reclamation of a historic Black cemetery has sometimes, in recent decades, been embraced as an important and valuable aspect of local heritage.⁶⁶

A more thoroughgoing discussion is needed of the differences between white anxieties relating to Indigenous and Black people in the context of southern Ontario. Needed also is discussion of the relation of Black presence to Indigenous rights; the potential implications of celebrating Black people as the “first settlers” in the region; and how white-dominated heritage initiatives might celebrate or recognize Indigenous and Black heritage in the region in different ways and with different emphases.

RECONSECRATING BURIAL PLACES

The poet and scholar of Black Canadian studies Afua Cooper's collection *Copper Woman and Other Poems* contains a piece called "Negro Cemeteries," which she notes is "inspired by the Old Durham Road Negro Pioneer Cemetery."⁶⁷ I read this poem as a reassertion of knowledges "radically excluded" from the realm of possibility. Cooper's poem gives voice to Black ancestors buried in rural Ontario, who are "demanding we remember them / insisting we reveal their history." Complicating the label of "Negro" (always with quotation marks), Cooper lets African/Islamic/diasporic knowledges speak through the dead, asserting their presence as bearers of distinct ways of being in the world:

Griots rising from graves
recounting the stories of their journeys
hafiz tongues uncleaving
reciting surahs of the dawn
babalawos emerging from the storm
divining with their shells and stones.⁶⁸

Against the mundane and dehumanizing geographies ("appearing in potato fields / appearing in fields of corn") of white supremacist mapping of abyssal space, Cooper makes these figures speak. Likewise, Elise Harding-Davis, a historian of the Black history of Southern Ontario, emphasizes "making the dead speak" in the documentary film *Speakers for the Dead*: "I'm a speaker for the dead because they're still alive. There are millions of nameless, faceless people gathered around me on a daily basis and it is my responsibility to give them a face, to give them a voice, to help the world understand that even if we are broken, even if we are disrespected, we can pull ourselves together, and survive." The urgency in Harding-Davis's statement points out the constant threat to the spaces for the dead of marginalized communities and also shows that, despite key differences in political and social contexts of Indigenous and Black communities, both face the same threat.

Leanne Simpson's poem "jūbay or aandizooke" hauntingly elucidates how settler whites were excavating and digging atop Anishinaabe burial mounds near Pi maa dash kode yaang (Rice Lake) in order to build things as banal as a "new deck. new patio. new view."⁶⁹ The poem contains the word *zhaganashi*, a white person:

did i see that right?
my skull is in a cardboard box
in that basement?
my bones are under
an orange tarp from canadian tire, cracked.
rattling plastic in the wind.
 my grave is desecrated. . .

. . . my body is tired
from carrying
the weight
of this zhaganashi's house.⁷⁰

In the voice of those both in the grave and in the realm of the living, the poem “jibay or aandizoke” captures the dehumanizing violence inflicted on the ontologies of those relegated to the zone of nonbeing by racialized colonialism. As with Cooper’s poem, it speaks to the existential importance of burial places to Indigenous and Black communities in Southern Ontario, and illumines why both have rallied around burial places as key sites of relationality and resistance.

NOTES

1. I refer to my great-great-great grandfather, Elias Grey, and his wife Mary Lowry Grey. Elias Grey named Dundalk, Ontario after his native Dundalk, Ireland.

2. Orangeism is a kind of hypervigilant and rigidly moralistic religious chauvinism heavily inflected, especially in Canada, with white supremacy. An 1889 letter from Eugenia Township Loyal Orange Lodge #1118 describes the expulsion of two members because “they allowed themselves to go into company with Roman Catholics to assist in carrying on games” (Grey Roots Museum & Archives, Owen Sound, ON). The “Constitutions and Laws of the Ladies’ Orange Benevolent Association of January, 1954” in Grey County excluded “Unitarians, Jews, Mormons . . . members of Jehovah’s Witnesses, or any whose religious teachings are contrary to the principles of our Order” as well as any “member or adherent of the Church of Rome,” or any Protestant spouse of a Catholic (34). Orangemen were also active in the suppression of the Metis resistances in 1885, including a contingent from Southamptton (Bruce County Museum and Cultural Centre, Southhampton, ON). Francis Bond Head, Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, who negotiated the fraudulent surrender of vast swathes of Saugeen Anishinaabe territory in 1836, was closely allied with the Orange Order to advance his political career. See Sean T. Cadigan, “Paternalism and Politics: Sir Francis Bond Head, the Orange Order, and the Election of 1836,” *Canadian Historical Review* 72, no. 3 (1991): 319–47, <https://doi.org/10.3138/CHR-072-03-02>.

3. “Form of Service to be used at the Burial of an Orangeman,” Grey Roots Museum & Archives (Grey County), Owen Sound, ON, Canada, <http://greyroots.com>.

4. This Orange Order poet is John Worthington Johnston, quoted in Ruth Dudley Edwards, *The Faithful Tribe: An Intimate Portrait of the Loyal Institutions* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 41–42.

5. Robert Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 24.

6. Adam J. Barker, “Deathscapes of Settler Colonialism: The Necro-Settlement of Stoney Creek, Ontario, Canada,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108, no. 4 (2018): 1146, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1406327>.

7. Clyde Woods, “Life After Death,” *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (2002): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-0124.00315>.

8. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003), 25–26, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>. Emphasis my own.

9. Naomi Norquay, “Land’s Memory: Looking for Traces of the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Settlement,” *Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal* 7 (2010): 21, Grey Roots Museum & Archives (Grey County).

10. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 96–97.

11. *Speakers for the Dead*, 49-minute film documentary, dir. Jennifer Holness and David Sutherland (National Film Board of Canada, 2000), <https://www.nfb.ca/film/speakers-for-the-dead/>.

12. Cole Harris, "How Did Colonialism Dispossess? Comments from an Edge of Empire," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94, no. 1 (2004): 175, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.2004.09401009.x>
13. Dionne Brand, *Map to the Door of No Return* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002), 75.
14. *Ibid.*, 77.
15. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 96–97.
16. Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011), 95.
17. Margaret Noori, "Beshaabiiag G'gikenmaaigowag Comets of Knowledge," in *Centering Anishinaabek Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories*, ed. Jill Doerfler, Heidi Kiiwetinepine-sik Stark, and Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 36.
18. Louise Erdrich, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2003), 65, 66.
19. Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), 174.
20. Harris, "How Did Colonialism Dispossess?"; 167.
21. *Ibid.*, 167.
22. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 2004), 39.
23. Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 25–26. Emphasis my own.
24. Rinaldo Walcott, "The Problem of the Human: Black Ontologies and 'the Coloniality of Our Being,'" in *Postcoloniality–Decoloniality–Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, ed. Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014), 100.
25. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 96.
26. Tiffany Lethabo King, "New World Grammars: The 'Unthought' Black Discourses of Conquest," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016): n.p.
27. Norquay, "Land's Memory," 21.
28. Don Crosby, "Restoring Black History Divides Small Town Repairing the Past: Effort to Save Desecrated Graves Creates Controversy," *National Post*, October 31, 1998, A8.
29. *Speakers for the Dead*.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Don Crosby, "Digging Up a Controversy: Plans to Unearth Gravestones Spark Opposition," *Sun Times*, October 27, 1998, A5.
32. Lise Thorbjornsen, "Natives Claim Protest Peaceful," *Sun Times*, December 5, 1992.
33. For a good historical overview of the Sixth Avenue West contestation, see Phil Henderson, *Worlds on the Edge: The Politics of Settler Resentment on the Saugeen/Bruce Peninsula*, MA thesis, University of Western Ontario, 2014, 47–53.
34. Scott Dunn, "Neighbors Glad Homes are Gone," *Sun Times*, July 6, 1993.
35. Scott Dunn, "Natives' Burial Claim Clashes with City's Skepticism," *Sun Times*, February 15, 1994.
36. "Indian Grave Unearthed at Oliphant," *Warton Echo* (1954), Bruce County Museum and Cultural Centre, Southampton, ON.
37. "Lonely Grave Recalls Indian Princess Who Went to Visit the Queen," *Owen Sound Sun Times*, July 16, 1960, 10.
38. Richard V. Francaviglia, "The Cemetery as an Evolving Cultural Landscape," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 61, no. 3 (1971): 502, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1971.tb00802.x>.
39. Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 20.
40. *Ibid.*, 21.
41. *Ibid.*, 23.

42. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008), 192.
43. *Ibid.*, 192.
44. Lewis Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 69.
45. *Ibid.*, 10.
46. Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 40.
47. Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 139.
48. Circe Sturm, "Reflections on the Anthropology of Sovereignty and Settler Colonialism: Lessons from Native North America," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 3 (2017): 342–43, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.3.03>.
49. Grosfoguel, "What Is Racism?," 14.
50. Crosby, "Digging Up a Controversy," A5.
51. Thorbjornsen, "Natives Claim Protest Peaceful."
52. Brynna Leslie, "Dig for Black Settlers' Tombstones Falls Short," *Sun Times*, June 21, 1999.
53. Douglas A. Grace, "Lawyer Fights Back on Burial Ground Dispute," *Sun Times*, February 13, 1993. Emphasis my own.
54. John Wright, "Burial Site Home Taken Away," *Sun Times*, June 4, 1993.
55. Jim Algie, "Land Was Occupied a Year Ago," *Sun Times*, December 4, 1993.
56. Pam Heaven, "Residents Say Natives May Claim Peninsula," *Sun Times*, August 13, 1993.
57. John Wright, "Natives Claim Burial Ground Under Two Houses," *Sun Times*, June 30, 1992.
58. Scott Dunn, "Natives' Burial Claim Clashes with City's Skepticism," *Sun Times*, February 15, 1994.
59. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 124.
60. *Ibid.*, 119.
61. Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, 106.
62. Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 92.
63. One such white activist was the late Les MacKinnon, who served as chairman of Priceville's Historical Cemetery Committee. See Lisa R. Marshall, "Resurrecting Local Black Past," *The Markdale Standard*, August 15, 1990.
64. See, for example, Phil McNichol, "Natives Give Up Claim for Land Taxes," *Sun Times*, June 25, 1996; or Phil McNichol, "Ojibwa File Huge Lawsuit: Landowners' Future Unsure," *Sun Times*, June 15, 1994.
65. According to Carolyn Wilson, a Black community member, "Some of the people living in the area didn't know they had black ancestors. Some people had to be hospitalized when they heard about it." See Mark Bourrie, "Honoring Ontario's Black Pioneers: Black Families Struggle against Bigotry and Racism to Commemorate Their Ancestors, Many of Whom Were among the First Settlers of Some Communities," *Toronto Star*, September 30, 1991.
66. See efforts of Les McKinnon in Sandra Smith, "A Proper Place in History: Researcher Wants Priceville's Black Founders to Have Respect Deserved," *Sun Times*, September 23, 1990.
67. Afua Cooper, *Copper Woman and Other Poems* (Toronto: Natural Heritage Book, 2006), 25.
68. Cooper, *Copper Woman*, 26.
69. Leanne Simpson, *Islands of Decolonial Love* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2013), 67.
70. *Ibid.*, 68–69.

