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A Critique of Discourse about Tampa's Recovered African American Cemeteries: How Rhetorics of Mystery, Apathy, and Absence Perpetuate Harm

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Public discourse surrounding recently recovered African American cemeteries in Tampa, FL is often inaccurate and misleading. Taking up Zion Cemetery as a case study, I identify three rhetorical tropes commonly employed in discourse about Zion and related Black cemeteries in Tampa—mystery, apathy, and absence. These tropes obscure Zion's history: it was unjustly seized by the city of Tampa, headstones were removed, and the land was redeveloped for expanding white suburbs. Following analysis of news media reporting, a city press conference, and a state-wide report, I argue for a recontextualization of Zion as a memory place that commemorates Black history and agency.

Keywords: African American History, Black Cemeteries, Justice, News Media, Public Memory

In the last several years, scores of so-called "forgotten" or "neglected" Black and Cuban cemeteries have been recovered in the Tampa Bay region. Beginning in 2018 with a historian's search for Tampa's Zion Cemetery,[1] local reporters and researchers have found Black cemeteries under the King High School campus, MacDill Air Force base, Tropicana Field's parking lot, and the Frank Crum human resources building, among other sites.[2] Anthropologists and archeologists identified at least forty-five unmarked burial grounds in the county that encompasses Tampa, most of which were for Black or Cuban residents.[3] Although city and state officials created taskforces and pledged to address the preservation of recently recovered Black cemeteries, few concrete actions have been taken, leaving many in the community frustrated. Yvette Lewis, head of the Hillsborough County NAACP, exclaimed:

> It's not shocking news anymore. It shouldn't be hard to believe. The city did not care about the African American community. That's why this kept happening. No one had the power

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[1] The search was led by local cemetery researcher Ray Reed who found "Zion Cemetery" listed on city death records but no known location/address. See Paul Guzzo, "A Complete Timeline of Tampa's Erased Zion Cemetery," *Tampa Bay Times*, August 26, 2020, http://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/history/2020/08/26/a-complete-timeline-of-tampas-erased-zion-cemetery/.

[2] Paul Guzzo and Brandon Meyer, "In Search of Lost Cemeteries," *Tampa Bay Times*, December 30, 2019, https://projects.tampabay.com/projects/2019/special-reports/missing-tampa-cemeteries-map/; Paul Guzzo, "Graves were Found under Tropicana Field Parking Lots. Now What?" *Tampa Bay Times*, August 10, 2021, https://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/history/2021/08/10/graves-were-found-under-tropicana-field-parking-lots-now-what/.

[3] Erin Kimmerle and others, "The Search for Unmarked Cemeteries and Burial Grounds on Hillsborough County," Report presented to the Board of County Commissioners from Government Relations and Strategic Services, February 16, 2022, https://www.scribd.com/document/559300651/Report-regarding-unmarked-cemeteries-and-burial-grounds-in-Hillsborough-County.

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> to stop it. We need to get to the bottom of this. If the bodies are there, we need to know. If they are not, where are they?[4]

Here, Lewis responds to the "discovery" of College Hill Cemetery under what is now the Italian Club Cemetery parking lot. Despite records indicating 1200 Black and Cuban people are interred there, Italian Club officials have refused to comment or agree to an archeological survey of the land.[5] Many Tampa Bay community members and leaders continue to call for searches for other cemeteries and reparations for those that have been found.[6]

Recovered cemeteries pose many ethical questions about the politics of memory and history: Who is remembered and who is forgotten? What does it mean to remember someone whose final resting place was stolen, desecrated, and paved over? How do communities seek justice for people whose lives were deemed disposable and who were erased from public memory? This article explores these questions through a case study of Tampa's Zion Cemetery and an analysis of the harmful tropes currently used to describe its history. Zion was a popular burial site for Black residents in the early 20th century, until its seizure in the 1920s through the unjust taxation of land. While it should have been tax exempt because of its cemetery status, Zion was commandeered by a white developer who removed the headstones and built on the land. Today, Zion and the people interred there lie under a public housing complex, restaurant warehouses, and a tow lot. In this case, white suburban land development exploited Black history and memory.

The recovery of Zion is an opportunity to name and reckon with the racist actions that led to its current state; however, public discourse (e.g., news reporting, press conferences, and task-force reports) frequently perpetuates narratives that Black Tampa cemeteries inadvertently disappeared. Many news headlines reflect a mysterious, accidental phenomena: "Another Lost Black Cemetery in Tampa?"; "50 Things to Know about the Tampa Bay Area's Forgotten Cemeteries"; and "1,200 Graves are Missing in Tampa. How Did They Disappear?"[7] Words like "lost," "forgotten," and "missing" don't adequately capture what happened to Tampa's cemeteries. Instead, this language avoids accountability and obscures the violence and harm that was done to these memory places. Even discourse about cemetery "erasure" ignores the persistence of Black Tampa citizens—laborers and domestic workers, some of whom survived enslavement—who remain in

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[4] Paul Guzzo, "1,200 Graves are Missing in Tampa. How did They Disappear?" *Tampa Bay Times*, May 19 2021, http://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/history/2021/05/19/1200-graves-are-missing-in-tampa-how-did-they-disappear/.

[5] Paul Guzzo, "Why Won't Tampa Italian Club Say if 1,200 Graves are in its Parking Lot?" *Tampa Bay Times*, November 4, 2023, https://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/history/2023/11/03/italian-club-college-hill-tampa-erased-cemetery/ ; Paul Guzzo, "Tampa Residents Want Italian Club to Stop Parking on Black and Cuban Graves," *Tampa Bay Times*, Dec. 13, 2022, https://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/history/2022/12/13/tampa-residents-want-italian-club-stop-parking-black-cuban-graves/.

[6] Paul Guzzo, "NAACP Wants Reparations for Tampa's Black Cemeteries that Governments 'Stole'" *Tampa Bay Times*, February 27, 2023, https://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/history/2023/02/27/tampa-black-cemetery-ridgewood-naacp/; Paul Guzzo, "Florida Senate Passes Bill to Establish Program to Find Erased Cemeteries" *Tampa Bay Times*, May 4, 2023, https://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/history/2023/05/04/tampa-zion-black-cemetery-florida-bill/; Paul Guzzo, "What's the Price Tag to Move Erased Clearwater Cemetery? Likely Millions" *Tampa Bay Times*, August 9, 2023, https://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/history/2023/08/08/clearwater-black-cemetery-frankcrum/.

[7] Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board, "Another Lost Black Cemetery in Tampa," *Tampa Bay Times*, May 10, 2022, https://www.tampabay.com/opinion/2022/05/10/another-lost-black-cemetery-in-tampa-editorial/; Paul Guzzo, "50 Things to Know about the Tampa Bay Area's Forgotten Cemeteries," *Tampa Bay Times*, January 9, 2020, https://www.tampabay.com/news/hillsborough/2019/12/31/50-things-to-know-about-the-tampa-bay-areas-forgotten-cemeteries/; Guzzo, "1,200 Graves are Missing in Tampa."

the ground. Narratives that imply cemetery or grave absence flout the racist actions that razed them and uphold the underlying belief that Black people's lives, deaths, and legacies are inconsequential.

As a rhetorical study, this article applies public memory scholarship to elucidate the complex interplay among environment, race, history, and place, revealing how public discourse constructs and distorts the story of Zion. The article begins with a brief history of Zion Cemetery, which illustrates a complicated negotiation among land rights, public memory, and racial justice, and whose recovery ignited searches for Tampa's Black and Cuban cemeteries. Following analysis of rhetorics of mystery, apathy, and absence in news media reporting and official public discourse, I draw on cemetery, public memory, environmental, and human rights scholarship to recontextualize the significance of Zion. Finally, I argue that public discourse about Black cemeteries in Tampa, and across the country, should accurately reflect their histories, condemn the racist practices that overtook them, and commemorate Black history and cultural contributions.

Founding / Finding Zion Cemetery

Purchased in 1894 by Black businessman Richard Doby and founded in 1901, Zion was the first African American cemetery recognized by the city of Tampa.[8] According to a map filed to the county in 1901, it included ninety-eight plots with eight graves in each, and in 1907, Doby sold the land for $300 to a Black-owned company, Florida Industrial and Commercial Co.[9] Zion appeared for the first time in the County City Directory in 1914; however, it was not listed in 1923 and thereafter, despite being described in the newspaper as one of Tampa's "most prominent and greatly used burial places."[10] In the 1920s, the city levied new taxes on property owners to accommodate growing white suburbs, adding paved roads and sewer. For Black cemetery owners who couldn't pay—whose cemeteries should have been tax exempt—ownership reverted to previous white owners, a common practice in the Jim Crow south, while white cemetery owners successfully petitioned the fees.[11] Through this unjust taxation, Zion's ownership reverted to the daughter of a former white owner in 1926 who sold it for $1 to white developer H.P. Kennedy, a member of a pioneering Tampa family and former city council member, who successfully petitioned to have back taxes waived.[12] While the 1907 deed notes the land contains cemetery plots, the 1926 sale to Kennedy does not.[13] After removing the headstones in Zion but not the bodies, homes and stores were built over the graves. By the 1930s, city maps show storefronts on the land and no cemetery.[14]

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[8] During the early 20th century, cemeteries were often segregated by race. Some Tampa cemeteries, like College Hill Cemetery, had separate Black and Cuban sections. Zion was intended to be an African American cemetery; available death certificates and county clerk records denote the "color" of those buried in Zion with a "c." At the time, records show people from Cuba were assigned "w" so were unlikely to be interred in Zion.

[9] Paul Guzzo, "Nearly 400 People Buried in Tampa are Missing. What Happened to Zion Cemetery?" *Tampa Bay Times*, June 23, 2019, https://www.tampabay.com/florida/2019/06/23/nearly-400-people-buried-in-tampa-are-missing-what-happened-to-zion-cemetery/; Guzzo, "A Complete Timeline."

[10] Guzzo, "A Complete Timeline."

[11] Guzzo, "1,200 Graves are Missing."

[12] Guzzo, "A Complete Timeline."

[13] Guzzo, "A Complete Timeline."

[14] Paul Guzzo, "Who's Accountable for the Tragedy of Zion Cemetery? Chasing a Century-Old Mystery," *Tampa Bay Times*, September 5, 2019, http://www.tampabay.com/news/hillsborough/2019/09/05/whos-accountable-for-the-tragedy-of-zion-cemetery-chasing-a-century-old-mystery/.

By 1951, the Tampa Housing Authority owned the land and began construction of Robles Park Village, a whites-only public housing project. When three caskets were found during construction, they were moved but no further effort was made to search the land. When asked about additional graves, the city told reporters that caskets had been moved in 1925 by someone who purchased the cemetery that year.[15] However, there is no evidence of a largescale relocation; only thirteen bodies could be confirmed to be relocated. Rumors about the cemetery persisted among complex residents, but it wasn't until 2018 that cemetery historian Ray Reed found "Zion Cemetery" listed on hundreds of death certificates, but no known location or address. Reed shared the tip, and reporter Paul Guzzo broke the story to local and national audiences.[16] Through his and others' research, it was confirmed that Zion Cemetery is now underneath five buildings of the Robles Park complex, two restaurant warehouses, and a tow lot. With ground penetrating radar, archaeologists verified the existence of at least three hundred likely graves, though it's estimated there may be as many as one thousand on the land.[17]

Despite city and state acknowledgment of its history (and from the three separate owners of the land), Zion Cemetery's future remains unclear. With the help of the city of Tampa, a Zion Preservation and Maintenance Society nonprofit was formed, and city and state task forces were created. The nonprofit proposed an $8 million plan for the land that would be part memorial and part education center; however, the city, county, and state have collectively donated only $150,000.[18] The Tampa Housing Authority, which receives federal funds, agreed to donate its portion of the land for a memorial park, but the two private owners of the tow lot and warehouses have asked the city to compensate them for the land.[19]

Meanwhile, early Tampa residents remain buried in the ground without a permanent memorial. However, Zion death certificates are now digitally available for genealogical research, so some descendants of those interred have learned about their familial ties to the memory place. When Jeraldine Williams discovered her great-great-grandmother Anna Rebecca Wyche was buried in Zion in 1912, she planned a funeral service: "I must humanize her. She has to be more than a box of bones that was discarded."[20] Through her own research, Williams determined Anna was born enslaved in Alabama in 1839. By 1900, census records show she lived in Cherry Lake, FL with nine children who were labelled "mulatto." Married to Frederick Wyche, Anna was widowed by 1910 and living with grandchildren in the Scrub, the first Black Tampa neighborhood settled after the Civil War.[21] According to Williams' research, Anna could read and write; she worked as a cook and rented a room to a boarder. A model of perseverance, Anna lived to age seventy-three, decades beyond average life expectancy at the time. Anna is just one example of a person buried in Zion who has not been "lost" or "forgotten."

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[15] Guzzo, "A Complete Timeline."
[16] Guzzo, "Nearly 400 People."
[17] Guzzo, "Nearly 400 People."
[18] Paul Guzzo, "Proposed Memorial for Tampa's Erased Zion Cemetery has an $8 Million Price Tag," *Tampa Bay Times*, May 21, 2021, http://www.tampabay.com/lifeculture/history/2021/05/21/proposed-memorial-for-tampas-erased-zion-cemetery-has-an-8-million-price-tag/.
[19] Guzzo, "Proposed Memorial."
[20] Paul Guzzo, "100 Years after the Black Cemetery was Erased, Tampa's Zion Hosts a Funeral," *Tampa Bay Times*, February 17, 2022, http://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/history/2022/02/17/100-years-after-the-black-cemetery-was-erased-tampas-zion-hosts-a-funeral/.
[21] Guzzo, "100 Years."

Since Zion's recovery in 2019, researchers have worked to better understand the people who are buried there. Death records reveal that most were laborers and domestic workers, 20 percent of whom were born before the end of the Civil War.[22] African Americans received little coverage in the local white-owned newspaper, except for a few residents who were deemed notable at the time. Of those buried in Zion with published obituaries, some were well-known residents like L.G. Caro (1839-1916) who conducted most Black Tampa weddings, performing up to twenty-two weddings in a week; John Newton (1858-1915), a deacon and lunch counter owner; and Caroline Hicks (1840-1915) a domestic worker for the sheriff.[23] Obituaries for people whose deaths were violent or tragic also appeared in the newspaper, including Perry Maxwell (1878-1913) who was stabbed to death after allegedly using vulgar language around his killer's wife; Henry Jones (1887-1913) who was struck by lightning while at work; Perry Johnson (1896-1913), a foster child who drowned after friends supposedly coaxed him into deeper water; and Leroy Williams (1905-1917), who reportedly didn't know how to swim but went swimming in and drowned in the Hillsborough River.[24] The few obituaries published for those buried in Zion offer a glimpse at life of Black Tampans in the early 20th century. Today, as debates about its future persist, Zion exposes tensions among history, memorialization, and racial justice.

Public Memory, Black Cemeteries, and Public Discourse

Scholars across disciplines have detailed the importance of cemeteries for historical and cultural preservation, in addition to their familial, emotional, religious, and sanitary functions.[25] Cemeteries are central places for inventing and preserving public memories. As "ideal memory sites," Elizabethada Wright describes cemeteries as places where *kairos* converges with *chronos*.[26] They mark the passing of generations but also the historical intersections of power, identity, and ideology. What is visible in cemeteries reveals much, though what has been removed or left to crumble

[22] Paul Guzzo, "What We Know about Those Buried at Tampa's Forgotten Zion Cemetery," *Tampa Bay Times*, June 23, 2019, http://www.tampabay.com/florida/2019/06/23/what-we-know-about-those-buried-at-tampas-forgotten-zion-cemetery/.
[23] Guzzo, "What We Know."
[24] Guzzo, "What We Know."
[25] Allan Amanik and Kami Fletcher, eds., *Till Death Do Us Part: American Ethnic Cemeteries as Borders Uncrossed* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020); Christine S. Davis and Deborah Breede, *Talking Through Death: Communicating about Death in Interpersonal, Mediated, and Cultural Contexts* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Keith Eggener, "Building on Burial Ground," *Places Journal*, December 2010, https://placesjournal.org/article/building-on-burial-ground/; Diane Jones, "The City of the Dead: The Place of Cultural Identity and Environmental Sustainability in the African-American Cemetery," *Landscape Journal: Design, Planning, and Management of the Land* 30, no. 2 (2011): 226-240. Ashley Lemke, "'Missing Cemeteries' and Structural Racism: Historical Maps and Endangered African/African American and Hispanic Mortuary Customs in Texas," *Historical Archeology* 54 (2020): 605–623; Zach Mortice, "Perpetual Neglect: The Preservation Crisis of African-American Cemeteries," *Places Journal*, May 2017, http://placesjournal.org/article/perpetual-neglect-the-preservation-crisis-of-african-american-cemeteries/; Lynn Rainville, *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016); Margo S. Stringfield, "'Sacred to the Hart': Identity and Dignity as Reflected in the Memorial Landscapes of Postemancipation African Americans in Pensacola, Florida," *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 3 (2021): 1056-73; Elizabethada A. Wright, "Reading the Cemetery, *Lieu de Memoire par Excellance*," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2003): 27-44; Elizabethada A. Wright, "Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places: The Cemetery as a Rhetorical Memory Place/Space," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2005): 51-81.
[26] Wright, "Reading the Cemetery," 36.

deserves equal attention.[27] As contradicting narratives about the past emerge, public memories serve present cultural purposes and stakeholders.[28] Communal and individual identities are negotiated in relation to public memories;[29] thus, cemetery "discoveries" urge us to reckon with anti-Black histories and memory practices.

For Black Americans, cemeteries preserve cultural histories and burial customs. With an ancestorial heritage that is fraught—if not inaccessible—cemeteries are one of few places to honor the African and African American generations who were integral in building U.S. economy and culture. Continually shaped by enslavement, segregation, and Jim Crow laws, African American cemeteries have often been destroyed and neglected.[30] Lynn Rainville argues in her study of African American cemeteries in Virginia, "Final resting places serve as containers for the body, but far more significantly, the memorials to these ancestral bodies inform our contemporary identities."[31] Black cemeteries are also sites of agency and historical perseverance—a testament to the resourcefulness and will of early Black American generations.[32] African American burial grounds were, Kami Fletcher asserts, spaces of freedom where Black people could own land, support Black undertakers, and practice their own rites.[33] Death, during and after enslavement, was a site of economic investment and self-sufficiency. While physical and symbolic borders have historically separated U.S. cemeteries by faith, race, and social status, African Americans used these borders to exercise agency and create their own memory places.[34]

The recovery of Zion and similar cemeteries is a rhetorical opportunity to communicate with the broader public and shape collective understanding. Cultures invent public memory, Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott claim, through "the language, structural elements, arguments, tropes, narratives, justifications, and such in which the event is cast."[35] Because the public exchange of ideas and beliefs is the basis for public memories,[36] discourse about Zion exposes the in-process formation of public memories. As a "recovered history," the story of Zion is necessarily

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[27] Eggener, "Building on Burial Ground."

[28] John H. Saunders, "The Pulse of Public Memory," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 12, no. 3 (2022): 112-115; Deborah Atwater and Sandra Herndon, "The Use of Public Space as Cultural Communicator: How Museums Reconstruct and Reconnect Cultural Memory," in *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations*, eds. Ronald Jackson and Elaine Richardson (New York: Routledge, 2003): 69-82; Bernard Armada, "Memory's Execution: (Dis)placing the Dissident Body," in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* eds. Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, & Brian L. Ott, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010): 216-37; Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, & Brian L. Ott, "Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place," in *Places of Public Memory* eds. Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, & Brian L. Ott, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010): 1-54.

[29] Kendall R. Phillips, ed., *Framing Public Memory* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007); Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, & Brian L. Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010).

[30] Mortice, "Perpetual Neglect;" Ryan K. Smith, "Disappearing the Enslaved: The Destruction and Recovery of Richmond's Second Burial Ground," *Buildings and Landscapes* 27, no. 1 (2020): 17-45; Ashley Lemke, "'Missing Cemeteries' and Structural Racism."

[31] Rainville, *Hidden History*, 90.

[32] Stringfield, "'Sacred to the Hart'"; Jones, "The City of the Dead."

[33] Kami Fletcher, "Founding Baltimore's Mount Auburn Cemetery and Its importance to Understanding African American Burial Rights," in *Till Death Do Us Part: American Ethnic Cemeteries as Borders Uncrossed*, eds. Allan Amanik and Kami Fletcher (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020): 151.

[34] Fletcher, "Founding Baltimore's."

[35] Blair, Dickinson, & Ott, "Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place."

[36] Edward S. Casey, "Public Memory in Place in Time," in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004): 30.

constructed and requires careful examination to consider how it has been crafted and whom it benefits.[37]

News reporting and official city and state reports present salient avenues for informing community members about oppressive histories. For this study, I read all available (approximately fifty) texts about Zion Cemetery and related recovered Black Tampa cemeteries published since 2019, including news articles, blog posts, state reports, and press conferences, all intended to inform the public. This range of media provided a broad picture of how Black cemetery recoveries have been characterized and understood in public discourse. During analysis of these texts, three tropes emerged in repeated descriptions of cemetery recoveries: mystery (e.g., "cemetery disappearance" and "lost cemeteries"), apathy (e.g., "forgotten and abandoned cemeteries"), and absence (e.g., "erased cemeteries").[38] While the language used in these texts may be intended to be figurative, metaphors communicate cultural values that inform the public.[39] In the following sections, I begin with an analysis of examples of recent news coverage, including Florida newspaper, television, and blog articles, which reflect local discourse about recovered Black cemeteries. I also analyze a city press conference and a state-wide taskforce report, asserting that reporters and public officials fail to accurately represent cemeteries' histories, further harming descendants, Black residents, the Tampa community, and beyond.

Mystery and Resistance

Many of the initial news stories about Zion Cemetery in 2019 and 2020 imply mystery, presenting its fate as a "disappearance." Headlines like "What Happened to Nearly 400 People Buried in Tampa?" and "How Do Hundreds of Graves Just Disappear?"[40] insinuate hidden or suspicious circumstances. Once reporters and researchers exposed a fuller history of Zion's ownership, news coverage employed mystery less frequently, though it still persists. In a 2022 University of South Florida news story, Torie Doll wrote about a librarian who helped "bring closure to some of the families impacted by the disappearance of the century-old Zion Cemetery – the first African American cemetery in Tampa."[41] "Disappearance" suggests unknown or accidental circumstances, overlooking the human role in removing headstones and manipulating city maps. This depiction puts the onus on the interred themselves, as if they may have purposefully chosen to go missing, and disregards the history that was once known, concealed, and now recovered.[42] Similarly, the first

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[37] Bernard Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[38] Since I was looking specifically for moments of public memory invention, I identified tropes that made implications about the history of Zion Cemetery that were at odds with its history. While these are not the only tropes in public discourse, this study highlights select examples of public discourse that misinform the public.

[39] Erika Falk, "Clinton and the Playing-the-Gender-Card Metaphor in Campaign News," *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 193.

[40] Paul Guzzo, Associated Press, "What Happened to Nearly 400 People Buried in Tampa?" *The Gainesville Sun*, June 29, 2019, https://www.gainesville.com/story/news/state/2019/06/29/what-happened-to-nearly-400/4798220007/; Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board, "How Do Hundreds of Graves Just Disappear?" *Tampa Bay Times*, January 13, 2020, https://www.tampabay.com/opinion/editorials/how-do-hundreds-of-graves-just-disappear-editorial-20190628/.

[41] Torie Doll, "USF Libraries Create History, Not Just Preserve it," *University News*, February 8, 2022, https://www.usf.edu/news/2022/usf-libraries-create-history-not-just-preserve-it.aspx.

[42] Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*.

sentence of a 2023 *Florida Politics* article detailed, "a bill that would help preserve Black cemeteries threatened with disappearing into obscurity."[43] Again, this portrayal suggests the cause for past and ongoing cemetery exploitation is unknown. Yvette Lewis, president of the NAACP in Hillsborough County, echoed this critique when asked about the responsibility of Tampa and its Housing Authority: "They need to apologize and make this right. Bodies don't mysteriously disappear."[44] Asserting mysterious disappearance is not only unethical, but tangibly impossible, since the graves and bodies never left.

In addition to "disappearance," "lost" is often used to describe Black Tampa cemeteries, which implies an unknown cause or a lack of conscientiousness. In a 2020 *AP News* article, Bobby Caina Calvan described cemeteries across FL that are "at risk of being forever lost because they are now unmarked."[45] Calvan wrote, "A move is underway nationally to rediscover these lost cemeteries," and lawmakers want a taskforce to "help identify and memorialize these lost cemeteries."[46] Describing Black cemeteries as "lost" conveys absent-mindedness or unknown circumstances, ignoring the systematic ways in which cemeteries were coerced into their present conditions. More recently, a 2023 *Fox 13 News* article detailed a law to "help protect lost and abandoned cemeteries," spurred by finding the "once-lost historic Zion Cemetery."[47] "Lost" communicates a lack of family regard in upkeeping headstones and overlooks how segregation, economic oppression, and changes in ownership forced these memory places into supposed invisibility.[48] While the 2023 *Tampa Bay Times* Editorial Board's article "Finding Florida's Lost Cemeteries is a Worthy Cause"[49] made a compelling argument, the headline suggests unknown or random misplacement. Community members who don't read beyond the headline are given a skewed perspective. Additionally, the connotation of "lost" as damned insinuates Black cemeteries may have been forsaken, perhaps as victims of "damnatio memoriae," the ancient Roman practice of eliminating unwanted memories.[50] Advancing moral judgment, "lost," in this sense, dehumanizes people interred and shifts blame onto the Black community at large.

While headlines and content that invoke mystery may reflect a news media trend to sensationalize, they do harm by misinforming the public and overlooking culpability. As one of few places to honor the African and African American generations who were integral in building Tampa, Zion

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[43] Anne Geggis, "House Unanimously Approves Bill Bolstering Abandoned Cemeteries," *Florida Politics*, April 19, 2023, https://floridapolitics.com/archives/604880-house-unanimously-approves-bill-bolstering-abandoned-cemeteries/.

[44] Guzzo, "What Happened to Nearly 400 People Buried in Tampa?"

[45] Bobby Caina Calvan, "Florida Lawmakers OK Funding to Commemorate Black Cemeteries," *AP News*, February 12, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/tampa-florida-us-news-ga-state-wire-d8f65b8879c0d71029431552284d1222.

[46] Calvan, "Florida Lawmakers."

[47] Briona Arradondo, "New Florida Law Helps Protect Lost, Abandoned Cemeteries," *Fox 13 News*, June 7, 2023, https://www.fox13news.com/news/new-florida-law-helps-protect-lost-abandoned-cemeteries.

[48] Dianne Harris, "Race, Space, and the Destabilization of Practice," *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1, (2007): 1-7; George Lipsitz, "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape," *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007): 10-23.

[49] Editorial Board, "Finding Florida's Lost Cemeteries is a Worthy Cause," *Tampa Bay Times*, May 17, 2023, https://www.tampabay.com/opinion/2023/05/17/finding-floridas-lost-cemeteries-is-worthy-cause-editorial/.

[50] Paul Bennett, "In Rome's Basement: Below the City Lies the World's Largest Undiscovered Museum," *National Geographic* 210, no. 1 (July 2006): 93.

preserved cultural histories, memories, and burial customs.[51] Zion, like all cemeteries, contextualizes descendants' origins within the nation's cultural narratives. To depict it in terms of "disappearance" distorts its actual history and denies descendants' understanding of how Black cemeteries shape contemporary identities and ways of being.[52]

The re-emergence of Black cemeteries disrupts persistent land development and reasserts the existence, significance, and memories of people interred. Black history may be discounted, but Black graves will not just disappear. As Michael Blakey claims, "Once the corporeal remains of a human life have been planted under earth, chances are that they will be encountered again."[53] Amid rhetorics of disappearance, headstones, caskets, and ancestorial bodies will continue to rise to the surface, reasserting Black cemeteries as testaments to the lives and contributions of early generations.[54]

Apathy and Remembrance

A second, related trope regarding recovered cemeteries is apathy, frequently leveraged in the terms "forgotten" and "abandoned." In a 2022 *Fox News 13* article, "Historical Marker Honors Tampa's Largest Forgotten African American Cemetery," Aaron Mesmer claimed, "College Hill is the largest of the forgotten African American cemeteries" among "up to a dozen forgotten African American cemeteries in the Bay Area."[55] Whereas mystery conceals the actors, apathy suggests that *someone* has forgotten or abandoned. Yet these depictions don't name who, leaving readers to assume it may be cemetery owners or families who are responsible, rather than a city-wide program to confiscate cemetery land. While some families may have failed to share information with younger generations, discourse focusing on apathy distracts the public from intentional destruction of Black cemeteries and memories. For example, in a 2023 *News Nation* article, "Researcher Says Evidence Shows Tampa Has More Cemeteries Lost to Time," anthropologist Erin Kimmerle explained, "Cemeteries go missing, lost, abandoned if you will, over time because generations pass and there is this disconnect."[56] Among the dozens of recently recovered Tampa cemeteries, each has its own story, yet suggesting a "disconnect" between generations is to blame ignores how many

[51] Many Black cemeteries preserve burial processes developed during enslavement. For example, according to Diane Jones, the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore may appear to be randomly designed and organized, yet this "improvisational" arrangement expresses African American views of nature and relationship to the land. See Jones, "The City of the Dead."

[52] Rainville, *Hidden History*; Roberta Hughes Wright and Wilbur B. Hughes, *Lay Down Body: Living History in African American Cemeteries* (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1996).

[53] Michael L. Blakey, "Forward" in *Lay Down Body: Living History in African American Cemeteries*, eds. Roberta Hughes Wright and Wilbur B. Hughes (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1996), xiii.

[54] Stringfield, "'Sacred to the Hart,'" 1068.

[55] Aaron Mesmer, "Historical Marker Honors Tampa's Largest Forgotten African American Cemetery," *Fox 13 News*, June 17, 2022, https://www.fox13news.com/news/historical-marker-honors-tampas-largest-forgotten-african-american-cemetery.

[56] Jeff Patterson, "Researcher Says Evidence Shows Tampa Has More Cemeteries Lost to Time," *News Nation*, August 17, 2023, https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/researcher-claims-tampa-florida-has-multiple-cemeteries-lost-to-time/ar-AA1fpN6J.

Black and Cuban cemeteries were disproportionally stolen and desecrated. At least four Tampa Bay cemeteries were taken from Black owners between 1920-40 through wrongful taxation.[57]

Though official city discourse reflects investment in cemetery recoveries, it still often implies community apathy was the cause of their "disappearance." On January 14, 2022, at a city of Tampa press conference, the administrator of neighborhood and community affairs, city planning director, mayor, and a city council member updated residents on the city's response to several Black cemeteries that have been recovered. Notably, this press conference was held in Memorial Park Cemetery, whose private owner died two years prior; at the time, the city was in the process of obtaining and maintaining the cemetery which holds Black WWI veterans and an unknown number of unmarked graves, including possibly Richard Doby, founder of Zion.[58] Likely a strategic location, this cemetery is an example of the city making finite moves toward preservation and does not highlight Tampa's history of commandeering Black cemeteries through unjust taxation. The speakers discussed several initiatives, including preservation efforts, land use designation changes to prevent development on burial grounds, a directory of existing burial grounds, and policies for future discoveries. Despite these valuable moves, officials still invoked rhetorics of apathy to characterize Black Tampa cemeteries. Administrator of Neighborhood and Community Affairs Ocea Wynn claimed, "Tackling forgotten, abandoned, and vulnerable cemeteries that are so common across the country is complicated."[59] While a good point, none of these adjectives acknowledge culpability in what happened or the lasting corruption of the land. Similarly, Mayor Jane Castor, referenced the beginning of the cemetery recovery movement in Tampa: "when we were made aware of the lost cemetery in Zion."[60] Local news media had widely reported Zion's history at this time, yet Castor went on to use "lost" and "abandoned" three more times to describe Black Tampa cemeteries. While not all cemeteries were intentionally seized like Zion, "lost" and "abandoned" are gross mischaracterizations of what happened. All Black Tampa cemeteries were casualties of segregation, lack of economic opportunity, and urban renewal in ways that fundamentally shaped their fate.

Contrary to community apathy, Black cemeteries counter dominant national histories that uphold white identity and innocence. Cemetery recoveries, then, encourage examination of how sacred spaces have been colonized[61] and politicized through commemoration.[62] Tzarina T. Prater critiques how "history" is privileged over "memory" in western philosophy and asserts, "Memories of the ineffable, memories that resist representation are foundational in the Black experience in America."[63] She argues that the theorization of memory requires complication, offering this

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[57] Paul Guzzo, "Woodlawn Cemetery Could Help Solve Mystery of Tampa's Erased Black Cemeteries," *Tampa Bay Times*, July 4, 2022, https://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/history/2022/06/30/woodlawn-cemetery-could-help-solve-mystery-of-tampas-erased-black-cemeteries/.

[58] Paul Guzzo, "Could Tampa's Memorial Park Cemetery be Full of Unmarked Graves? Archaeologists Think So," *Tampa Bay Times*, June 3, 2020, https://www.tampabay.com/news/tampa/2020/06/03/could-tampas-memorial-park-cemetery-be-full-of-unmarked-graves-archaeologists-think-so/.

[59] 10 Tampa Bay, "Tampa Mayor Holds News Conference on Efforts to Protect Historic Cemeteries," Facebook Live, January 14, 2022, http://www.facebook.com/10TampaBay/videos/304034174998851/.

[60] 10 Tampa Bay, "Tampa Mayor."

[61] Anndretta Lyle Wilson, "Preserving Sacred Space: Mahalia Jackson's Transnational Song Labor During the Era of Decolonization," *Journal of African American Studies* 23, no. 1 (2019): 34-51.

[62] Stephen H. Browne, "Remembering Crispus Attucks: Race, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Commemoration," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85, no. 2 (1999): 169-187.

[63] Tzarina T. Prater, "Forgetting to Remember: The Performance of Memory, History, and Gender in John O. Killens' *The Cotillion: Or One Good Bull is Half the Herd*," *Journal of African American Studies* 17 (2013): 344.

analogy: "A memory, or rather memory object, is analogous to a bead on a thread, a sliding nodal point, whose efficacy, in terms of developing strategies of resistance, depends on its lack of fixity, its ability to be moved and turned, reimagined, and recontextualized."[64] By reimagining and recontextualizing public memories, recovered Black cemeteries defy absent, erased, and revisionist rhetorics that pervade histories of the U.S. These memorial sites not only challenge sanitized histories but also western memory practices that deny Black experience.

Absence and Endurance

A third trope in portraying Tampa cemeteries connotes absence, largely through the term "erasure." In a 2022 *Tampa Bay Times* story which was picked up by the Associated Press, "Solving Mystery of Tampa's Erased Black Cemeteries," the terms "erased" or "erasure" were used eleven times.[65] Guzzo wrote, "Each was erased, built over and then discovered due to Tampa Bay Times investigations spanning four years"; "From the start, the best guess was that racism was behind the erasures"; and "Tampa's Zion Cemetery was erased and covered by developments."[66] Unlike rhetorics of mystery and apathy, "erasure" asserts causality and intentionality—someone was the eraser. At least sixteen *Tampa Bay Times* article headlines from 2019 to present use "erasure" as a primary descriptor for recovered Black Tampa cemeteries, for example "Florida Senate Passes Bill to Establish Program to Find Erased Cemeteries" and "Woodlawn Cemetery Could Help Solve Mystery of Tampa's Erased Black Cemeteries."[67] While this characterization highlights the intentional expunging of Black histories, "erasure" also asserts absence and ignores the ongoing material existence of people's bodies. Representing cemeteries in this way continues to project invisibility on the people interred at Zion. The buried endure in the ground under tow lot asphalt and under warehouse and apartment foundations.

More than just public discourse, the landscape and material remains of Zion Cemetery inform public memory. Since memory is ecological, "entangled with its natural and cultural environments," as Dave Tell contends, race, place, and memory are inextricable.[68] Unlike western philosophy that tends to theorize land as detached from ideology, African American environmental and landscape scholarship foregrounds relationships among people, culture, and place.[69] In the introduction to *Landscape*'s special issue on race, Dianne Harris situates landscape "as an active agent in the formation of ideas about race, identity, belonging, exclusion, and minoritization" and asserts space defines the "primary terms of racism—segregation, seclusion, marginalization, incarceration, hierarchy."[70] In the U.S., enslavement, sharecropping, segregation, white supremacy, and environmental racism have imposed racial dimensions onto the land. These dimensions persist in

[64] Prater, "Forgetting to Remember," 328.
[65] Associated Press, "Solving Mystery of Tampa's Erased Black Cemeteries," *U.S. News & World Report*, July 9, 2022, https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/florida/articles/2022-07-09/solving-mystery-of-tampas-erased-black-cemeteries.
[66] Associated Press, "Solving Mystery."
[67] Paul Guzzo, "Florida Senate Passes Bill to Establish Program to Find Erased Cemeteries," *Tampa Bay Times*, May 4, 2023, https://www.tampabay.com/lifeculture/history/2023/05/04/tampa-zion-black-cemetery-florida-bill/; Guzzo, "Woodlawn Cemetery Could Help."
[68] Dave Tell, *Remembering Emmitt Till* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019) 16.
[69] Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).
[70] Harris, "Race, Space, and the Destabilization of Practice," 2.

more subtle contemporary examples of housing discrimination, mass-produced housing developments, and legal protections that benefit white communities and ownership.[71] As a landscape that expresses, constructs, and reinforces racial identity and racism,[72] Zion is a visible manifestation of the economic and cultural suppression of Black Tampans. A Black cemetery—then and now—cannot supersede a well-known white developer, a whites-only housing development, or today's private landowners.

Rhetoricians are poised to scrutinize the role of place in public memory, specifically how histories of racist land usage, taxation, development, and ownership compose the public memories attached to physical environments. Black environmental tradition, Kimberly Smith claims, "conceptualiz[es] the American landscape not as pristine and innocent wilderness but as a corrupted land in need of redemption."[73] Humans, therefore, should cultivate a mutually beneficial relationship with the land; humans are not its saviors but "active, creative, co-equal partners."[74] For Zion, this relationship could be cultivated through gaining sole nonprofit ownership, dismantling current buildings, and creating a memorial to honor the early Tampans whose bodies remain in the ground. Local Black urban planner Ennis Davis calls for redevelopment of the land to include greenspace and urges that community members be involved: "the more inclusive and equitable we can be with history and allowing people in the community to have a seat at the table, the better we will be."[75] More than city and state taskforces, families who have been directly impacted by Zion's seizure and the city's cover up should decide its future. At the time of writing, this future remains unclear with three separate owners of the land and reports that the city taskforce has excluded the nonprofit preservation group from its meetings and plans.[76]

Looking Forward

The state-wide report from the "Task Force on Abandoned African-American Cemeteries" offers some hope, acknowledging the power of language in representing recovered Black cemeteries in Florida. The ten-member task force, created by the governor, submitted its final report December 17, 2021. It states in the final recommendations, "A key finding that emerged from the Task Force deliberations is the need to highlight and define 'abandoned,' 'neglected,' 'lost,' 'forgotten,' 'stolen' and 'erased' African-American cemeteries to make clear the distinction between such cemeteries."[77] While this is a significant acknowledgement, the report undermines itself by failing to exercise nuances in vocabulary throughout, relying most heavily on rhetorics of apathy. In the report (excluding footnotes and appendices), "abandoned" is used most frequently (44 times), followed by "neglected" (18) and "unmarked" (13). Less frequently used words are "forgotten" (5),

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[71] Lipsitz, "The Racialization of Space," 13.
[72] Harris, "Race, Space, and the Destabilization of Practice."
[73] Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*, 8.
[74] Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*, 8.
[75] Ennis Davis, interview by Antoinette T. Jackson, *African American Burial Grounds Oral History Project*, August 27, 2021, https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/african_american_burial_grounds_ohp/6.
[76] Emerald Morrow, "Tampa's Internal Cemetery Task Force Raises Transparency Concerns," *10 Tampa Bay*, May, 18, 2022, https://www.wtsp.com/article/news/special-reports/erased/tampa-internal-cemetery-task-force-transparency/67-a9e7096c-f401-49aa-8dc0-38e66cc9fb75.
[77] Task Force on Abandoned African-American Cemeteries, "Task Force on Abandoned African-American Cemeteries: Final Report." December 17, 2021, https://files.floridados.gov/media/705214/hb-37_task-force-on-abandoned-african-american-cemeteries_report_12-17-2021.pdf, 14.

"stolen" (5), "lost" (4), and "erased" (3).[78] The latter two appear only in the final recommendations. As the most frequently used characterization, "abandoned" suggests recklessness, blames family and community members, and fails to account for how systemic racism caused the desecration of these memory places. One of three "abandoned cemetery" case studies included, Zion's history is briefly described: "The cemetery disappeared from public view in the late 1920s, and a storefront, warehouses, and Robles Park Village were built on the land that once was the site of the African-American cemetery."[79] Again, even though the city of Tampa's role in commandeering Zion was well known and documented, it was still described under a veil of mystery. The use of passive voice obscures the circumstances that led to Zion's current state and absolves the city of Tampa. "Stolen," which is used sparingly only in the final recommendations, does proffer a more accurate description, at least for Zion, though such accusatory terminology is rarely used in official and public discourse.

Overwhelmingly, news reporting and official public discourse offers sanitized, blameless histories of Black Tampa cemeteries, failing to reckon with intentionality, profit, or stolen familial and ancestorial knowledge. Rhetorics of mystery, apathy, and absence suppress memories of Zion that could otherwise be catalysts for change. Whether in the news or official discourse, these inaccurate depictions affect the way readers and viewers come to understand cemetery and regional histories. Public acknowledgment and reckoning, Ron Eyerman claims, is often achieved through "mass-mediated representations."[80] To facilitate public reckoning and mourning, reporters and officials should at least describe Zion accurately: we know Zion was systemically targeted, confiscated, and violated. One promising trend in recent news coverage portrays recovered Black cemeteries as "destroyed,"[81] which succeeds in capturing the brutality that "erasure" does not. Beyond accuracy, language should capture the desecration and violence leveraged in this case and the decades-long ruse to cover it up. If a Zion public memorial is completed, it may be undermined by unethical, inaccurate discourse, since many people will have already digested a false narrative of Zion's history.

While law has been slow to protect Black cemeteries,[82] human rights scholarship offers insight into pursuing justice for the dead. Applying human rights to the deceased may seem to be a paradox, yet it is still a worthy pursuit, claims Adam Rosenblatt: "Work on behalf of the dead may be one of those places where it is easier to recognize and respond to injustice than to completely theorize the conditions of justice."[83] The incapacity to imagine the conditions of justice for Zion exemplifies the profound trauma and harm that was done to Zion's interred, their families, and the community. Rosenblatt suggests a process-based approach of care to encourage repeated practices,

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[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., 8.
[80] Ron Eyerman, "The Past in the Present Culture and the Transmission of Memory," *Acta Sociologica* 47, no. 2 (2004): 160.
[81] Chris Young, "Florida Senate Passes a Bill to Fund Historic African-American Cemeteries," *WMNF*, May 4, 2023, https://www.wmnf.org/senate-passes-bill-to-fund-historic-african-american-cemeteries/; Emerald Morrow, "Erased: The Fight to Restore Tampa Bay Area's Destroyed Black Cemeteries," *10 Tampa Bay*, November 27, 2022, https://www.wtsp.com/article/news/special-reports/erased/erased-restore-tampa-bay-areas-destroyed-black-cemeteries/67-a8673365-07fb-445e-bf1d-f3a9504a2033; Morrow, "Tampa's Internal Cemetery Task Force."
[82] William A. Engelhart, "Equality at the Cemetery Gates: Study of an African American Burial Ground," *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 25, no. 1 (2019): 1-20.
[83] Adam Rosenblatt, *Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 163.

showing continued investment.[84] Land preservation practices are necessary, yet officials, reporters, and community members should also develop repeated rhetorical practices that reduce degrading and harmful effects.

Language—metaphorical and otherwise—shapes the way people come to understand Black histories and memories. In Tampa and other cities across the U.S., there is a missed opportunity to clearly denounce the anti-Black policies and actions that caused cemeteries to be neglected, stolen, or demolished. Rhetorics of mystery, apathy, and absence disregard the calculated means by which sacred places were overtaken, shifting the blame to descendants and the Black community at large. As weaponized communication,[85] rhetorics of mystery, apathy, and absence avoid accountability and erode democracy. To respond to cultural trauma, a practice-based approach of care helps name past violence, acknowledges generational effects, and revises public memories to include complex histories of a community that thrived despite its circumstances. The story of Zion is not just one of despair but of agency, perseverance, and resistance—of people worth remembering.

[84] Rosenblatt, *Digging*, 173.
[85] Jennifer R. Mercieca, "Dangerous Demagogues and Weaponized Communication," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2019): 264-279.