HOLT CEMETERY:
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF AN URBAN POTTER’S FIELD

A THESIS
SUBMITTED ON THE TWELFTH DAY OF APRIL 2013
TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS
OF TULANE UNIVERSITY
FOR THE DEGREE
OF
MASTER OF ARTS
BY
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ABSTRACT

Holt Cemetery is a historic potter’s field in New Orleans that has been in active use for several centuries. One of the few below-ground cemeteries in New Orleans, it is one of the most culturally fascinating burial places in the city. In spite of being frequently visited by families (evidenced by the unique votive material left on grave plots) and the final resting place of several historic figures, Holt is threatened by a lack of conservation so extreme that the ground surface is littered with human remains and the cemetery is left unprotected against grave robbing. Many locals have expressed concern that occult rituals take place within Holt, promoting the theft of human bones, while others have expressed concern that the skeletal material is stolen to be sold. Attempts to map and document the cemetery were originally undertaken by archaeologists working in the area who intended to create a searchable database with an interactive GIS map. Additionally, the nonprofit group Save Our Cemeteries, which works to restore New Orleans’ cemeteries and educate the public about their importance, has taken part in conservation work. As of today all the projects and preservation efforts involving the cemetery have ceased. This thesis documents and analyzes the skeletal material within the cemetery alongside the votive material and attempts to explain why Holt is allowed to exist in its current state of disrepair while still remaining a place of vivid expressive culture.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the product of the combined efforts of many individuals. Without the scholarship, passion, and love of New Orleans that came from everyone who helped me with this project, it would never have come into being.

First of all, I would like to thank Nathalie Dajko. It was spending a summer doing field research with her in French-speaking Louisiana that convinced me anthropology was the way to go, and it has been through her encouragement and belief that I have not only learned to become a researcher but been able to explore parts of the world and human spirit I otherwise would not have, from allowing me to co-present at a linguistics conference in Paris, France to trekking through the bayous of Louisiana to document the untold stories of fishermen after the BP Oil Spill. She has been a constant source of inspiration, friendship, and undeserved patience. The most important trait of a good anthropologist in any subfield is a sense of fearlessness and adventure, and Nathalie embodies this completely for me. I don’t even know where to begin in thanking you, Nathalie; you quite literally changed my entire life.

I also need to thank John Verano, who not only taught me everything I know about osteology, pathology, and forensics—information without which this thesis would have been impossible to write—but who reminded me how much I love skeletons and mummies and that I was meant to be a physical anthropologist. Thank you for helping me construct this project, the dozens of borrowed books and last-minute meetings, your patience, and especially your sense of humor surrounding the subject of human mortality; it has reminded me to never take anything too seriously in life and enjoy being on this side of the archaeological record.
Additionally, I would like to thank the other researchers whose passion for history, archaeology, and the cemeteries of New Orleans allowed me to shape this project. Dr. Ryan Gray, who not only introduced me to Holt Cemetery with the beginnings of the mapping project in 2010 but was there when I first broke ground with a spade in his field school the same summer, thank you not only for the information you have given me about Holt, but for your help and encouragement in becoming an archaeologist. Furthermore, thanks to Angie Green, whose efforts to preserve the cemeteries of New Orleans cannot be underestimated. Thank you not only for your help concerning Holt Cemetery, but for taking a stand for these places and recognizing their beauty.

Also, thank you to the many friends who not only encouraged me in this project but who were brave enough to venture out to Holt Cemetery with me; I understand not everyone gets excited about skeletons and your willingness to explore something new was greatly appreciated! Thanks especially to Michael Mangold for spending Easter Sunday with me in the graveyard and paying respects to those without family and those who had been lost in time.

Finally, while my entire family deserves thanks for their continued love and support in my education towards becoming an anthropologist, my mother Linda Connors deserves special mention. Thank you, mom, for taking me to all those cemeteries when I was a kid; as you can see it had no lasting side effects.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW .................................................... 1

2. CEMETERIES, VOODOO, AND GRAVE ROBBING............................7

A History of New Orleans Cemeteries

Historic use of cemeteries, the poor, and grave robbing in the American South

Modern Day Grave Robbing

Voodoo and Santeria in relation to grave robbing

3. HOLT CEMETERY .............................................................................35

4. ANALYSIS OF THE OSTEOLOGICAL MATERIAL..........................44

Discussion of the distribution of osteological material

5. VOTIVE MATERIAL AT HOLT.........................................................60

The “altar” in Holt Cemetery

6. SURVEYING THE VISITORS TO HOLT.........................................72

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.............................................79

Appendix A

1. Visitor’s Survey.............................................................................83

REFERENCES ....................................................................................85
**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1: Distribution of human remains throughout Holt Cemetery……………………51

Table 2: Graph illustrating the bones most represented in each part of Holt Cemetery....51

Table 3: Representations of different parts of the skeleton………………………………52

Table 4: Number of disturbed graves per area of Holt Cemetery………………………54
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A grave under an oak tree in Holt Cemetery.........................................................1
Figure 2: A votive candle and figurine on a Lacombe grave..............................................10
Figure 3: Lionel Batiste at his funeral..................................................................................18
Figure 4: Detailed view of Lionel Batiste’s hands.................................................................19
Figure 5: A ngang containing human bones from a forensic case in Metarie......................31
Figure 6: A hand-made sign marking the entrance to Holt Cemetery..................................35
Figure 7: Holt Cemetery in 1993.........................................................................................36
Figure 8: Holt Cemetery in 2013.........................................................................................37
Figure 9: Map of Holt Cemetery (A)..................................................................................38
Figure 10: Isaiah Morgan Jr.’s grave and Charles “Sunny” Henry’s grave.........................39
Figure 11: Samuel Morgan’s headstone.............................................................................40
Figure 12: Memorial dedicated to Buddy Bolden...............................................................42
Figure 13: Map of Holt Cemetery (B)................................................................................45
Figure 14: An example of a grave in Holt Cemetery with unusual depressions..............46
Figure 15: A cervical vertebrae found by a newly dug grave..........................................47
Figure 16: Long bone fragments of varying sizes...............................................................48
Figure 17: Half a mandible which retains several teeth...................................................49
Figure 18: A highly fragmented coxal bone.....................................................................50
Figure 19: A Popeye’s Chicken container and a fragmented avian bone.......................53
Figure 20: A now-empty family tomb in Lafayette Cemetery.........................................56
Figure 21: A thoracic vertebra beside a religious figurine in Carrolton Cemetery.........57
Figure 22: A hand-painted sign hanging on the now-abandoned sexton’s cottage in Holt Cemetery........................................................................................................61
Figure 23: A grave within Holt Cemetery

Figure 24: A grave precariously marked by a wooden cross and box frame

Figure 25: A grave in Holt Cemetery marked with a concrete slab containing a real electric guitar

Figure 26: The “altar” in Holt Cemetery

Figure 27: Examples of objects found within the altar

Figure 28: A row of bottles containing herbs; a close-up view of one of the bottles

Figure 29: A ceramic bowl filled with dried grass and a small, rusty dagger

Figure 30: An unusual double-grave

Figure 31: A child’s grave in Holt Cemetery

Figure 32: Further examples of unique grave markers

Figure 33: A simple, hand-painted head stone
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Figure 1: A grave under an oak tree in Holt Cemetery.

“Cemeteries, or burial grounds, have always been a part of the human environment. The undisputed truth of humanity’s mortality forces human societies to learn how to cope with death and its role in life. Cemeteries, and the customs of burial, change from culture to culture depending on each culture’s religious values and customs. The burial customs and placement of an individual are viewed as the deceased’s point of connection between this world and the next and for this reason, many cultures place an emphasis on the
specific place of burials” (Miller and Rivera *Hallowed Ground, Place, and Culture: The Cemetery and the Creation of Place*, 2006; 335)

This thesis explores the relationship between the living and the dead in New Orleans through an examination of Holt Cemetery, a historic potter’s field. Holt is an important case study in the field of physical anthropology and biological archaeology due not only to the unique cultural material placed on individual graves, but to a high number of exposed human remains and an unprotected, urban placement that leaves the cemetery open to grave robbing. Holt Cemetery is neither exclusively historic nor is it abandoned; on the contrary, it is a highly active cemetery where burials of locals from the surrounding area (or individuals from families that have since moved or were displaced by Hurricane Katrina) take place at least twice a week, and while it is not always a family's first choice for burial, it is well-loved as evidenced by the votive material. This thesis looks particularly at the cultural aspects of the nearby low-income neighborhood as expressed in the burials and grave markers of the cemetery, and in so doing it addresses the cultural significance of Holt to the surrounding area. Furthermore, this thesis addresses how the cemetery's state of disrepair has left the human remains within it vulnerable to exploitation by grave robbers who sell them or possibly use them for occult purposes. Additionally, it makes suggestions for the future use and possible protection and preservation of Holt. Though cemeteries are not usually awarded this distinction, the presence of graves of significant historical figures such as “King of Jazz” Buddy Bolden makes Holt eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. Part of the research for this thesis will go towards petitioning a place for Holt on the National Register by illustrating its cultural-historical worth and need for preservation.

In this thesis I will answer the following specific questions:
1. How is the surrounding neighborhood’s response to death expressed in Holt?

2. How is Holt used by members of the living community? What parts of the cemetery are used most frequently? Is Holt still subject to grave robbing, and if so, to what purpose?

3. Why does the cemetery rest in its current state of disrepair, and what -- if anything -- can or should be done to reverse this trend and revive the cemetery?

At present, there are no formal programs in place for the protection of Holt. At one time Delgado Community College (in particular, their funeral studies program) was involved in the upkeep of Holt, along with the efforts of Save Our Cemeteries, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the restoration and protection of New Orleans’ cemeteries. After Hurricane Katrina, archaeologist Shannon Dawdy and her graduate students made plans for documenting Holt to preserve its historic value. Her former graduate student, Dr. Ryan Gray, is now an archaeology professor at the University of New Orleans and has plans in place for an eventual mapping project at Holt. Though not connected to the cemetery by family, his interest and research have brought him to Holt, which he calls “a unique, beautiful, vibrant, and endangered part of our city's cultural heritage” (Ryan Gray, personal communication, 2013). Dr. Gray visits Holt several times a year to check on the maintenance of the graves, and is one of the few people actively working on its preservation. Notably, he says, “Holt is, for me, distinct from other New Orleans cemeteries in the degree to which the space is still active and transforming, but also in the degree to which it is threatened. While cemetery preservation in other historic cemeteries is very carefully considered, there are still activities conducted by both well-meaning volunteers and by city maintenance efforts that regularly destroy significant stylistic elements of the site, sometimes on a dramatic level” (Ryan Gray, personal communication, March 14 2013).
Dr. Gray reports that while Holt has always been in a state of disrepair, it was even more unkempt before Katrina. As an archaeologist he is also well aware that the bones scattered on the ground surface of the cemetery are human and that this is not unusual in cemetery spaces; nevertheless, tourists taking bones and bone fragments as souvenirs is still a concern. As for Holt's future, Dr. Gray is working on a project to help in the documentation and preservation of Holt. He explains,

“My own planned project involves an open-sourced GIS database, which keeps track of a basic database of graves, associated names, and decorations. This will serve as a framework for individuals to submit their own pictures or documents, to be linked with individual plots. It will be intended to serve as a structure for informed preservation efforts” (Ryan Gray, personal communication March 2013).

Another individual deeply involved in the preservation of Holt is Angie Green, the executive director of the Save Our Cemeteries project. She reports that she only visits Holt on SOC business, which includes monitoring the conditions of the cemetery, organizing cleanup, and communicating with families who have questions. Regarding the osteological material present in Holt, she says,

“But because of the randomness of the burials, and the informal way of identifying burial locations, it is extremely common for gravediggers to encounter a previous burial when digging for a new one. Every single time I’ve visited the cemetery I’ve seen bones on the ground. It is common practice to collect the random bones, and re-bury them in a common location…I do wish there were better practices for identification of grave locations, and a less-haphazard method of telling families where to dig. It must be terrible for a grieving family to see bones when they visit, knowing that their loved one will one day have his/her bones exposed.” (Angie Green, personal communication March 2013).

Angie Green also describes the problems associated with having exposed bones and no means of securing them, as well as the possible uses grave robbers might have for stolen human remains. “I have heard rumors that grave-robbing for bones has happened there. Apparently a skull can fetch $1,000 or more, so I do worry about that. There's no security, lighting, or even a
fence to protect that from happening. I have seen evidence of spiritual/Voodoo rituals in the
cemetery, but I don't know how common or 'real' that is. It just might be kids messing around.”

In short, Holt is heir to a complicated history of New Orleans’ race and class divisions,
Afro-Caribbean magic, well-intentioned but now abandoned plans for city restoration, and wet
graves. The following chapters describe whether this sordid history is repeating itself at Holt as
well as how Holt is used by the modern community. In order to answer these questions, I
employed several strategies. First, I conducted an analysis of the human remains present on the
surface, with the documentation of the type and frequency of osteological material in an area to
determine if there was any evidence of grave robbing, and if so, for what purpose. Next I
analyzed the votive material in the cemetery and determine how it describes the cultural, formal-
religious and folk-religious responses to death in the surrounding neighborhood. Finally, I
conducted a survey of visitors to the cemetery to determine who comes to Holt and for what
purpose.

In chapter 2 I will look at cemeteries and their historic uses, with a focus on New
Orleans’ cemeteries, as well as grave robbing in relation to Voodoo and Santeria. In chapter 3 I
will focus on the current state of Holt and the recently abandoned projects concerning its
restoration, concluding with remarks on how my own project relates to these past efforts. In
chapter 4 I discuss the skeletal material present on the ground surface of the cemetery and what
can be inferred about the possibility of grave robbing and the use of the bones for occult
purposes. Chapter 5 focuses on the votive material present on the graves, while chapter 6 looks at
visitor’s responses to the surveys I conducted. Conclusions about Holt both as a cultural locus
and a case study for modern, urban grave robbing are made in chapter 7.
CHAPTER 2: CEMETERIES, VOODOO, AND GRAVE ROBBING

A History of New Orleans Cemeteries

Joseph Roach, discussing the cemeteries of New Orleans, refers to these unusual burial places as “behavioral vortices of death” (48), and indeed, cemeteries make up an iconic part of the New Orleans landscape. The geology of New Orleans (specifically, the proximity of the water table) promoted if not necessitated the use of above-ground burials, and consequently New Orleans' cemeteries are visually distinctive among the burial places of North America. They are frequently-encountered reminders of mortality—perhaps even more significantly so in a city with a history of disaster, disease, and violence. New Orleans' proximity with its cities of the dead was not part of its original layout, but instead due to the city outgrowing its original boundaries. The earliest colonists of New Orleans were buried in the ground along the Mississippi, though in 1725 St. Peter's Cemetery, located in the area now bounded by Burgundy, Rampart, Toulouse, and St. Peter streets in the modern-day French Quarter and long since paved over, was laid out as the first official cemetery of the city (Upton, 1997; Dawdy, 2008). This original cemetery was excavated by archaeologist Shannon Dawdy in 1984 and was found to contain a mixed population of African, European, Native American, and mixed-race individuals (interestingly, the only burial objects recovered from the cemetery—two saints medals, a “jewel-set” rosary, and a glass-encased depiction of the Virgin Mary—were all associated with a man in his forties who, bearing distinctive notching on his teeth, was concluded to have been born in the Congo [Dawdy, 2008; 138-140]). As recently as November 2011, locals were reminded of their proximity to this cemetery when a resident digging a pool uncovered fifteen 18\(^{\text{th}}\)-century coffins in his backyard. Construction of the nearby St. Louis No. 1, now primarily known for its most
famous occupant, the "Voodoo Queen" Marie Laveau, followed in 1789 (Upton, 1997), and stands as the first example of the now-commonplace above-ground tombs of Louisiana. Upton (1997) notes that “Early-nineteenth-century reform cemeteries throughout the United States followed this pattern of location outside the developed portion of the city, as did rural cemeteries. The difference was that rural cemetery planners believed -- wrongly as it happens -- that they had chosen sites far beyond any possible urbanization” (133).

The stylistic change (European cemeteries were traditionally located within city or town limits) put, as Miller and Rivera put it, a new “emphasis on memory,” reflecting the deceased’s life and the preferences they had, so that “within the United States, the cemetery became a microcosm of the real world...” (Miller and Rivera 2006: 336). In a somewhat different view, Roach interprets the use of the European model for cemeteries as a “revolutionary spatial paradigm” that allowed for “the segregation of the dead from the living” (Roach, 1996: 48). Prior to the modern, urban-style of cemeteries with their secluding use of space, cemeteries—often overcrowded and overflowing with the skeletons of the now-anonymous dead—served as public spaces where the living could interact with each other in the presence of the dead, seemingly without revulsion (Roach, 1996). Changing attitudes towards the dead, likely due to new understandings of diseases carried in corpses and cemeteries, altered this sphere of interaction and took away the social aspects of the European cemetery. Thus, “modernity itself might be understood as a new way of handling (and thinking about) the dead” (Roach, 1996: 48).

In New Orleans, cemeteries have retained this status as significant gathering places for the community, creating “a sense of place that facilitates the communion of the living and the dead through religious and cultural activities” (Miller and Rivera 2006: 340). Not unlike city parks, these cemeteries have hosted everything from music festivals to marathon races
(Greenwood Cemetery's Run Through History 5K Run) (Miller and Rivera 2006). Bone hunters will notice that it is not uncommon to find chicken and turkey bones littering the ground of these graveyards, evidence of everyday use of the cemeteries as gathering places.

The reverence locals once kept for these historic places was (and still today in certain locations like Lacombe, see Figure 2) especially apparent on All Saints Day, when families went to the cemeteries throughout Louisiana to clean, white-wash, and decorate the tombs before they were blessed by a Catholic priest and families discussed their long histories while votive candles burned out on the graves.
The architecture of these cemeteries varies by wealth and antiquity, but for all of them, there is an impression of far fewer individuals than are actually interred within the boundaries. Families with a long history in the city frequently have a family tomb which is used by generations of people, and even the few below-ground cemeteries contain family plots with stacks of coffins, often with the remains of several individuals collected together in the coffin of the most recent burial. For most individuals in New Orleans, their coffin is placed on a slab
running through the center of the above-ground tomb. After a year and a day, the tomb is re-opened and the remains of the individual—naturally cremated when the Louisiana heat turns the tomb interior into an oven—are swept into an envelope and placed in the inferior portion of the tomb with those of their ancestors, some of whom have been there for more than three centuries. Less affluent locals unable to afford their own tomb can rent a burial space in the vaults built into the cemetery's surrounding walls. If the individual’s family is unable to pay their “rent,” the body can be “evicted” from the cemetery. The gridded “fours” (the in-wall burials along the cemeteries) are in a sense a resting spot between in-the-ground burial and the elaborate mausoleums, so even the poor have a sense of being preserved, often with the expectation (in Catholic beliefs) of an eventual resurrection of the corporal body (Upton, 1997).

Though faced with unique architectural restraints (including being completely surrounded by a mosquito, alligator, and snake-infested swamp), the changing landscape of the cemeteries of New Orleans was in line with what was happening across the United States in the 18th century, when health concerns about burying the dead too close to the ground's surface inspired a change in cemetery architecture (Miller and Rivera 2006). In other words, “To consider the quick and the dead as members of a single community exposed both to danger” (Upton 1997: 133). Proximity to the dead created medical problems, something even early doctors recognized, and while cemeteries still served as important places of community and family memory, Upton (1997) notes that “(t)raditional fears of death and the dead were magnified by new medical theories that attributed disease to the 'miasmas' emanating from low, damp places like graveyards. Physicians tallied the large numbers of epidemics that seemed to begin near burying grounds. The hazards posed by the dead—one's own ancestors—were reported with a sense of betrayal” (133).
If 19th century cemeteries were in general considered damp and infected places, New Orleans, at one time nicknamed “the Wet Grave”, was in a category by itself. Coffins buried below ground required people to stand on the lid until they could be covered over with enough mud to keep it from rising to the surface, while grieving families knew their newly-buried loved ones would be eaten by worms as well as crabs and other water-dwelling creatures. Furthermore, weighting coffins down in this manner was often only a temporary solution to the problem—when heavy rains caused the soil to become waterlogged, the coffins buried within them had an unpleasant tendency to rise to the surface. New Orleans residents found a solution to this problem by building above-ground cemeteries, already fashionable in Europe (such as Père-Lachaise in Paris, founded by Napoleon in 1804 [Roach, 1996]). These cemeteries protected the remains of the dead by preserving not only their dignity but identity; by nature they also incorporate the dead into the urban landscape by creating a sort of monument out of the mausoleums. However, such burials are expensive and are consequently a luxury of the middle and upper classes. The poor must content themselves with shallow below-ground burials (in a conversation with grave diggers preparing for a funeral at Carrollton cemetery in New Orleans' 16th Ward, I learned that these graves are routinely dug about three feet deep) that while more successful at keeping the coffins in the ground than the historic cemeteries, nonetheless face their own problems, primarily that of overcrowding and reuse.

A potter's field burial dilutes one's identity after death—a mingling of memories and bones, opposed to the “archive of human memory” Upton describes. The cemeteries of New Orleans are prime examples of the disparity between the socially elite and the poor. In Lafayette or Greenwood cemeteries, for example, the dead are placed in church-like mausoleums, decorated with stained glass windows and weeping, stone angels. In stark contrast to this, at the
potter's fields at Carrolton or Holt the dead are buried in shallow graves marked with homemade grave stones -- if they are marked at all. This does not mean, however, that the cemeteries are any less important to the living relatives of those buried there than are the austere, well-kept mausoleums in wealthier neighborhoods. Though the grounds are overgrown and the area littered with human bone fragments, they are replete with cultural material and evidence of frequent visitation and devotion. These discrepancies are reflective of the deceased’s postmortem status, and “observable differences in class behavior exists 'after death', that is, with reference to funeral and burial customs and in practices associated with bereavement” (Kephart 1950: 635). In his 1950 article focused on disparity between classes in funerals and burial, Kephart argues that that the difference in social status can be retained after death, with great persons receiving elaborate funerals/mourning rituals, and poorer people receiving hardly anything. In seeming contradiction, however, he states that the upper class spends proportionally less on funeral expenses than the middle and lower class, which will frequently use the majority of any life insurance policy received to pay for the funeral (Kephart 1950). Kephart hypothesizes that “the occurrence of death in a lower class family has a much more disorganizing effect than in the case of an upper class family” (Kephart 1950: 640) and thus accounts for the proportionally longer lapse between death and burial (about 4 days) compared to an upper class family (2 days). Lower classes display more emotionality at funerals, have more set-piece like flower arrangements, and are more likely to have a “public viewing” of the body, which is frequently not present at all in upper class funerals (Kephart 1950). Interestingly, cremation (at the time the article was published) remained a phenomenon of the upper class; less common in the middle-class, and least common in the lower-class, though a potter's field burial was regarded with great apprehension. He states,
“If potter's field in Philadelphia can be taken as typical, it would probably be no exaggeration to state that so far as social class is concerned, such fields literally represent the end of the line. Here, generally speaking, lie the social ciphers. Individuals interred at potter's field are stripped of all the symbols which classify them as human beings. They are buried without flowers, without clothes, without graves, and without names” (Kephart, 1950; 643).

Kephart's article illustrates, by comparison, the uniqueness of New Orleans burials, where lower class responses to death are distinct from those in other historic cities of the United States (in the above example, Philadelphia). The potter's fields of New Orleans are centers of impressive cultural expression, and the individuals within them are frequently honored with unique votive material. However, due to their state, they are vulnerable to exploitation by the living. Besides frequently lacking the means to be protected from normal taphonomic forces, these cemeteries are easy marks for grave robbing. While valuable material goods are lacking, the exposed and easily accessible human remains are targeted instead, as in the case of Holt Cemetery.

These vivid cultural expressions likely have their roots in West African traditions, brought over with the slave trade and metamorphosed into something uniquely New Orleanian. Anthropologists Metcalf and Huntington, reflecting on the death industry in America, observed,

Given the myriad variety of death rites throughout the world, and the cultural heterogeneity of American society, the expectation is that funeral practices will vary widely from one region, or social class, or ethnic group, to another. The odd fact is that they do not. The overall form of funerals is remarkably uniform from coast to coast. Its general features include: rapid removal of the corpse to a funeral parlor, embalming, institutionalized ‘viewing,’ and disposal by burial (Huntington, 1979; 187).

New Orleans is clearly an exception to this pattern, not only with its cemeteries but in the customs and celebrations surrounding a burial. A funeral in New Orleans is quite unlike a funeral anywhere else in the Western World. According to Dr. Olanike Ola Orie, a linguistics professor at Tulane University born in Nigeria, West-African funerals bear many similarities to those in
New Orleans, though some important differences are maintained. In Nigeria, for example, family members are often buried in their house within a space that they had occupied in life, such as their former bedroom. In this way, the presence of the deceased and their continuing place within the family is still acknowledged. This unique burial practice also means that, in contrast to what is seen in Holt Cemetery, there are no headstones or overt markings of graves. The week leading up to a burial is filled with celebration, ending in even more celebration at the actual internment—a practice Dr. Orie and other researchers have likened to the New Orleans “jazz funeral.” These elaborate funerals are common throughout the West-African area, though particularly present in Ghana (Olanike Ola Orie, personal interview March 2013). Importantly, a difference exists between the two funeral celebrations concerning the level of grieving. In West Africa, there is little grieving at funerals, particularly those of the very old (the death of a child or young adult is an exception to this, where their missed opportunity for life is mourned and no celebration takes place). For African-Americans in New Orleans, as Roach illustrates, the death of an older individual is met with much grieving due to the loss of an important link with one's ancestry. Within the historic African American community, honoring the dead was also an act of honoring one's ancestry, such as the “festivals of the dead” held after the 1759 slave revolt of Point Coupee which “in defiance of the authorities and the Code Noir, honored the executed freedom fighters” (Roach, 1996; 48). Alongside a description and discussion of a 19th-century funeral of a woman who had been born in Africa, which occasioned extreme displays of grief among her family (such as her granddaughters throwing themselves into the wet grave, though children playing in the cemetery reportedly happily pelted each other with bones), Roach explains, “The occasion created by death offered this community an opportunity to affirm its semiautonomous but discreetly submerged existence within or against the obligatory rituals of
the better publicized fiction called the dominant culture” (Roach, 1996; 60). “Louisiana creoles live closer to the dead than do most Anglo-Americans” Roach reaffirms, while historically (and in the modern-day) “the line between the living and the dead in New Orleans worked as a symbolic reiteration of the color line, particularly with the increasing popularity in the 1870s and 1800s of expanding 'Whites Only' cemeteries, segregated Cities of the Dead” (Roach, 1996; 209). In West African tradition, the treatment of the dead and the handling of human remains involve specific cultural practices. The recently deceased are prepared for their funerals by the adult members of their family, and always by the family members of the same sex. Traditionally, the deceased is dressed in seven layers of clothing (either their own or clothes donated by other family members) to demonstrate their affluence (Olanike Ola Orie, personal interview March 2013). These practices bring to mind the very personal cultural expressions of New Orleans jazz funerals. According to musicians I have spoken with in the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University, sometimes “attended” by the deceased musicians themselves who are preserved in life-like manners to “greet” the guests at their own funerals. Jazz musician Lionel Batiste “Uncle Lionel,” for example, was displayed in such a unique manner at his funeral in July of 2012. The famous New Orleans newspaper the Times Picayune reported, “In a send-off as unique as the man himself, Mr. Batiste wasn’t lying in his cypress casket. Instead, his body was propped against a faux street lamp, standing, decked out in his signature man-about-town finery” (Spera, 2012).
The scene brings to mind Louis Armstrong’s famous rendition of the folksong St. James Infirmary Blues: “When I die I want you to dress me in straight lace shoes/ Boxback coat and a Stetson hat/ Put a twenty dollar gold piece on my watch chain/ So the boys ’ll know that I died standin’ pat.”
Like New Orleans, in West Africa the dead are sometimes buried with trinkets, though again this is most common in Ghana.

As part of the legacy of slavery, the disparity between social classes appears to play an equally contrasted role when dealing with spirituality and rituals of burial; wealthy cemeteries lack the power of their smaller, black or mixed-race counterparts. In places like Holt, the dead/ancestors demand consideration with their conspicuous presence and thus create a kind of
ritual space. In contrast, the absence of elaborate funerals or votive material in wealthy cemeteries could indicate not only a weak cultural expression but the lack of an ongoing relationship with the dead. In Holt and other predominantly African American cemeteries in New Orleans, even the giving of small “gifts” to the inhabitants of the tomb suggests an expectation of reciprocation, or gratitude for a favor already granted. Gomez (1998) explains the importance of having a strong ancestor-focused ritual and spiritual element in funerary and burial customs. Speaking of the mourners at black funerals, he says,

> No one knows what or how these sojourners felt at such times. The emotions may be incomparable to those of European immigrants who, for all their sacrifice and suffering, nonetheless made the voyage voluntarily. For the African-born, the passing of a fellow was especially difficult, for as surely as death had come for the deceased, death would find him as well, away from his family and familiar surroundings, away from all that could bring him solace. To stare into the death mask was to reflect upon his own mortality, and that on foreign soil. Perhaps the only consolation was in the sure knowledge that upon death, he would return to ancestral land (Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (1998); 277).”

In this light, extreme expressions of grief and mourning at African American funerals, such as the one described by Roach and opposed to their West African counterparts, are understandable, as is the unique way life (and death) are now celebrated in New Orleans.

*Historic use of cemeteries, the poor, and grave robbing in the American South*

Potters’ fields such as Holt have long been in use, and frequently the remains they house tell stories about class disparity. Mozart famously received a pauper's funeral, as did Buddy Bolden, who has a decorated monument dedicated to his memory as “the blowingest man since Gabriel” (quoting Jelly Roll Morton) though the exact location of his grave has been lost; his
remains are likely disarticulated and scattered around the cemetery. The American South, and New Orleans in particular, has a history of grave robbing and other instances of the lower-class dead being exploited not only by the upper class, but by their living lower-class counterparts. In traditional Christian doctrine, the human corpse retains some sanctity because the actual, corporal body is expected to be resurrected (Upton 1997), thus the use or even handling of human remains is a strongly taboo activity. In West African tradition, the spirit of the deceased is believed to still be attached to their bones because, as Dr. Orie explains, the skeleton is the most enduring part of the human body and thus has special significance. The taking or tampering with bones, therefore, is considered a very negative thing. Beliefs such as this have created a problem for the dead; human bones (depending on how they can be used, if stolen) can alternately be viewed as either devoid of personal significance or imbued with supernatural power. In historic New Orleans, the need for body parts for both scientific and ritual purposes created a market for human remains.

Medical schools were springing up in the United States with rapid speed, jumping from five in 1760 to sixty-five by the next century (Carney, 2011). The 18th and 19th centuries, for all their revitalization in cemetery architecture, maintained an even more complicated relationship with the dead as medical schools modernized and cadavers were needed for anatomical dissection. These scientific endeavors were more often than not met with resistance from the surrounding communities, whose religious beliefs and cultural practices “taught that respectful treatment of the body was necessary for the spirit's rest and to avoid ghostly retribution” (Upton 1997: 133). In the 1700's, medical dissection inspired riots among lower-class laborers in London, while the managers and physicians of the Pennsylvania Hospital condemned “the indecent conduct of some Young Surgeons in taking up and dissecting dead bodies, [which]
occasions a general uneasiness and displeasure in the minds of all humane People” (Upton 1997: 133). The supposed indecency of medical students is a theme echoed in several accounts of historic anatomy labs, and even the urban folklore of New Orleans contains a legend of Tulane medical students throwing human fingers from a float during a downtown Mardi Gras parade. This displeasure non-medical people felt towards the dead and dissection meant that cadavers, while necessary for medical training, were hard to come by, and many dissectors turned to grave robbing. Halperin (2007) describes the process: “If soil conditions were good and the grave shallow, the thief and his accomplices could exhum the body in less than an hour. Typically, a hole was dug at the head of the grave, the coffin lid was pried off, and the body was lifted out. Clothing and other personal effects were usually removed from the body and tossed back into the coffin” (490). In the absences of any embalming agent (as embalming was not perfected nor made commonplace until the American Civil War), ten days was the limit between burial and exhumation of a body to be sold to anatomists; exhumation occurred primarily in the winter months when decomposition was slowed and anatomy classes were generally held (Halperin 2007). As we might expect, “(s)ince deterrence of grave robbing took time and money, the poor were disadvantaged and their graves were the most vulnerable” (Halperin 2007: 491). The simple fact of being buried below ground and at easy access meant that the destitute often ended up in the anatomy lab. Those with more money took measures against this by having everything from iron coffins to metal cages placed over their graves (Halperin 2007), “Body snatching,” says Carney, “was so commonplace that wealthy graveyards posted sentries, raised formidable walls, and dug deeper trenches than the graveyards of the poor. Funeral parlors sold heavy concrete monuments to place above caskets in order to impede digging. Some funeral homes even offered
anti-body snatching alarms that triggered when a robber’s shovel breached the burial vault” (Carney, 2011; 47). In Louisiana, body snatchers were deterred by bricked-up mausoleums.

Even when not subject to the extreme but commonplace practice of grave robbing, society's indigent population was not free from postmortem exploitation, a practice that predictably had racial components and consequential complicated laws surrounding whose body could be used and how. Halperin explains,

“State laws were passed in the 19th century allowing medical schools to use the remains of the downtrodden of society—the unclaimed bodies of paupers, residents of almshouses, and those buried in potter’s fields.... Mississippi and North Carolina exempted the bodies of Confederate soldiers and their wives. The North Carolina law also provided that the body of whites never be sent to an African American medical college...These African American Medical schools typically obtained unclaimed Black ‘potter’s field bodies’...” (Halperin 2007: 491).

Like the rest of the United States, medical schools in the old south based a large part, if not all, of their reputation on the number of patients and material they could acquire, and this included cadavers for dissection and medical experiments (Savitt 1982). Blacks, particularly slaves, were obvious targets for this, and frequently ended up on dissecting tables. Interestingly, “Neither whites nor blacks held hospitals in high esteem during the antebellum period. Not only did patients object to having medical students and doctors touching and poking them…they also feared that experiments might be performed on them and that they would be permitted to die so autopsies could be undertaken” (Savitt, 1982; 336). According to Savitt, these fears were mainly superstition and medical students and doctors did their best to cure patients. However, they also did do all they could to claim bodies for autopsy and dissection, sometimes going to the predictable extreme. “...(P)hysicians and students had to resort to grave robbing, hurried dissections before bodies were claimed, and deception to obtain cadavers for autopsy and anatomical investigations” (Savitt, 1982; 337). As in life, the impoverished were exploited by the elite, and the human body was seen as commodity. Though generally distasteful, Southerners felt
that dissection was permissible so long as it was performed on blacks, with Georgia and
Kentucky even proposing that executed blacks be given to dissectors (Savitt, 1982). It is
interesting to consider that these individuals were evidently “similar” enough to whites to teach
medical students anatomy (which I assume includes neuroanatomy) but not similar enough to be
granted the same rights and dignity in life, including being spared from the anatomy lab. Even in
modern day labs with advanced embalming techniques, dissection is an unsettling task; before
embalming became widespread, the anatomy lab must have understandably been a nightmarish
place. In Charleston in 1856, one elderly black woman, looking at the medical school, was
overheard by the Reverend Robert Wilson to say that she hoped to God to die in the summer
time, winter being the optimal time for using cadavers (Savitt 1982: 340). “Blacks usually knew
full well how the bodies of their friends and relatives were being used,” Savitt (1982) notes, “and
they were both offended and frightened” (340). Living slaves were also used for experimental
medical treatments and were sometimes purchased by doctors solely for this purpose, while in
others cases, blacks were paid by doctors to either officially (legally) collect bodies from
plantations, or rob the graves of fellow blacks (Savitt 1982). One example of this is Grandison
Harris. Harris, who died a lawyer but was born a slave, was in his youth purchased by the Dean
of the Medical College of Georgia and “owned by all seven members of the faculty” (Halperin
2007: 492). Harris’s main job was to procure bodies in any way he could, sometimes through
negotiation but “frequently...from the Cedar Grove Cemetery, a burial site reserved for
Augusta’s indigent Black community” (Halperin 2007: 492). Perks in Harris's job included the
freedom to travel frequently to see his family, and free access to the whiskey that was used to
embalm the bodies (Halperin 2007). By working with the anatomists, Harris became proficient in
dissecting and became a teaching assistant, valued such that “(p)hotographs of the graduating
classes frequently portray Harris standing with the students” (Halperin 2007: 492). In a strange series of events, “Harris made his way in a white-dominated world of medical education by aiding and abetting the theft of African American bodies” (Halperin 2007: 492).

New Orleans, with such a high transient population, a destitute population, and a large slave population, had far fewer problems obtaining bodies for dissection than the rest of the United States and even the South. For a time the city even had a lucrative business shipping bodies in molasses barrels (though these were frequently shipped clandestinely under inconspicuous labels such as “fresh paint” or “turpentine”) to the Grafenberg Medical Institute in Alabama (Halperin 2007: 493). As this business continued, stories about “night doctors” who killed blacks for dissection became part of African American folklore, and by some accounts these superstitions were even perpetuated by whites trying to dissuade blacks from moving north after the Civil War by dressing like doctors and wandering African American neighborhoods at night (Savitt 1982; Halperin 2007). Halperin states that,

“In New Orleans the medical mythology among African Americans included stories about 'needle men'—medical students at the Charity Hospital who were eager to procure cadavers for their studies. The so called ‘black bottle men’ were said to give patients cascara and magnesia in order to hasten death and provide corpses…” (Halperin, 2007; 493).

Ressurectionists such as Grandison Harris, who had gained prominence and high status in white society, became “well-known boeysmen” among black communities (Halperin 2007: 494)

Grave robbing, and exploitation of the bodies of blacks, echo a common theme in the history of New Orleans and the southern United States. Joseph Roach, in his Cities of the Dead, speaks of the idea of human flesh as commodity, in particular the slaves at auction in the circum-Atlantic marketplace. Like slavery, grave robbing became another means of transforming the body into commodity in the South.
Modern Day Grave Robbing

While attitudes towards human dissection have changed and donating one's body to science has come to be thought of positively (or at the very least, not unusual), the availability of complete human skeletons continues to be limited. Most frequently, donated bodies, post-dissection, are cremated—skeleton included—and returned to their families. This means that even in the twenty-first century, a market exists for grave-robbing. In many third world countries the selling of human bodies and body parts is as common as other forms of human exploitation, though frequently these sales are completed within legal boundaries and any unethical procurement is “covered up in a veil of altruistic ideals” (Carney, 2011; 6). As in the historic cases mentioned earlier, the destitute are most frequently (if not exclusively) targeted for crimes related to the market for human bodies, creating a complex ethical dilemma for potential buyers who frequently have no way of knowing where the specimens in question came from or how they were acquired (Carney, 2011). A complete human skeleton can cost several thousand dollars, and orders can take years to fulfill, making them highly valuable both to medical professionals and suppliers who reap the benefits of their worth and scarcity (Carney, 2011). India had been the world's supplier of human skeletons for nearly 200 years until, in 1985, the Indian government banned the export of human remains. Because the market for skeletons was a highly profitable business and Indian specimens are considered the best in the medical world, the trade went on clandestinely with suppliers turning to the time-honored practice of grave robbing to help meet their demands (Carney, 2011). In time, the demand for skeletons was such that children were being kidnapped off the street and killed for their bones (Carney, 2011). According to Carney, bones that have been in the ground for too long are not of much use in the medical
field; the resulting discoloration and probable fragmentation lessens their worth as teaching tools for students of anatomy. In other fields, however, these bones are still highly valuable. Students of physical anthropology are required to be able to identify and study fragmented human bones that have been subject to taphonomic forces and long periods of burial, and so such “archaeological” specimens are as valid as medical ones. Furthermore, human bones—particularly skulls—are marketable as curiosity pieces or even tools for occult rituals. Within the French Quarter of New Orleans, which is not shy about exploiting the very real practice of Voodoo for the tourist market, I have witnessed several examples of human remains being used to create an atmosphere of authenticity and mystique. The Voodoo Museum, among other esoteric objects, has a full human skeleton dressed in the sunglasses and tuxedo of the Voodoo lwa Baron Samedi. Hex, a magic boutique on Decateur street selling touristy and occult objects, contains a “witch's” altar, the centerpiece of which is a human skull that was once clearly an anatomical specimen (evidenced by its pristine state and the sawn-off calvaria with metal hooks for reattachment). Most impressive is the occult shop Esoterica, which deals in magical herbs and supplies and is home to two antique, anatomically-prepared human skeletons. The large stature and general morphology of both specimens suggests that both were taken from African Americans, though whether or not they were old enough to have been slaves was indeterminable from the short time I was able to look at them. New Orleans may represent a unique case among examples of the use of human remains. Historically a center for medical-based grave-robbing, today the city still sees the illegal or morally questionable use of human body parts, a fact which the local culture seems to embrace.

Voodoo and Santeria in relation to grave robbing
Where the remains of the deceased are denied respect as once-living persons in the case of medical body theft, grave robbing can also take place for ritual and religious purposes in the belief that human remains contain spiritual power. The popular image of New Orleans’ Voodoo paints the practice as a dark one where the use of human remains would not be unexpected. While several tourist-oriented “Voodoo” shops in city display actual human remains to create the desired mystique, in reality Voodoo, while involving animal sacrifice, does not traditionally make use of human remains. Closely related Afro-Caribbean practices, however, such as Santeria, do have offshoots that use of skeletal material, and while more frequently found in Spanish-speaking or Latin-culture areas (opposed to French-culture areas like Louisiana), instances of Santeria and the more sinister practice, Palo Mayombe, have been found in Louisiana. Voodoo, as a phenomenon of the francophone world, is seen primarily in cities with a large number of Haitian immigrants, such as Montreal, New Orleans, Miami and New York (Perlmutter 2003). The practice is a composite of folk Catholicism and Ewe, Yoruba, and Fon cultural elements from West and West Central African (particularly Angola and Kongo) traditions (Gomez 1998: 54-55). Such traditions are prominent in Cuba, Brazil, (both areas where Santeria and Palo Mayombe are also practiced) and Haiti. In the United States a variation of Voodoo is found primarily in Louisiana (Gomez 1998: 54-55). Here, the practice of Voodoo is often conflated with Hoodoo. “Hoodoo” may be said to be more similar to Palo Mayombe. Based on West Central African miniski, it involves the use of magic charms or amulets, such as the well-known personal, magic charms called gris-gris (Gomez 2008). Gomez explains that Hoodoo “consisted of mechanisms of intervention that evolved out of the religions of ethnicities from places other than the Bight of Benin. There are numerous areas in which the two systems overlap, although in others they are essentially the same” (283). It is this practice containing the
use of charms and magic that has gained notoriety in popular imagination, and essentially “…represents the legacy of the African worldview divorced from its proper religious context” (Gomez 2008: 284). In Louisiana, “Voodoo gradually came to be viewed less as a religion and more as a particular brand of magic, boasting the efficacy of various potions, charms, and amulets in the lives of its adherents” (Gomez 2008: 57).

In many respects (that is, the African history and the use of charms and amulets) Santeria is similar to Voodoo. In spite of a common origin in the slave trade, however, Voodoo and Santeria are distinct practices, originating from different African traditions and developing under different colonial rules (French versus Spanish). “Although they share Yoruba and Kongo influences, the cultures they assimilated into were different; Haiti was under French influence during the slave trade while Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic were under Spanish rule” (Perlmutter, 2003; 536-537). If grave robbing is taking place for occult reasons, it is Santeria that is to be suspect in such cases, even in the Voodoo-oriented Louisiana. Forensic investigators have frequently come in contact not only with human remains used for purposes of Santeria, but “violent and nonviolent deaths of Latins” alike (Wetli and Martinez 1981: 507). Wetli and Martinez explain that “The forensic science aspects of Santeria are manifold and mostly emanate from the black magic sect. Besides ritualistic death wishes, outright homicide and apparent natural deaths have been associated with Santeria rituals. Of particular interest to the forensic scientist are those rituals requiring the use of human bones” (Wetli and Martinez 1981: 507).

Such crimes are not part of the general practice of Santeria, but instead a dark branch of the religion, *Palo Mayombe*, which focuses not on the gods of Santeria but instead on the spirits of the dead. This “black magic” form of Santeria is feared by regular practitioners and rarely
used (Perlmutter 2003). These crime scenes often contain “...statues, bowls of fruit, candles, herbs, strings of beads, and decapitated birds. Occasionally other ritually sacrificed animals, especially goats, may be found” (Wetli and Martinez 1981: 507). Besides these items, the true locus of the practitioner's power is a cauldron filled with human bones, known as a ngang (Wetli and Martinez 1981), a Congo word meaning “dead, spirit, or supernatural” (Perlmutter 2003: 541).

Figure 5: A ngang containing human bones from a forensic case in Metarie, Louisiana. The bones had been stolen from a cemetery. Photo courtesy of John W. Verano, who investigated the case.

In Palo Mayombe, the skeleton in the cauldron is known as the ngang's “patron,” and it is this individual's spirit that is called upon to do the bidding of the palero (Perlmutter 2003). To
enhance its power, the cauldron is filled with graveyard or crossroads dust, insects, herbs, spices, coins, animal remains (primarily avian), and animal blood, which must be continually “fed” to the cauldron's “patron” to initiate it and offer payment (Perlmutter 2003). There are several forms of evidence that could indicate a grave was robbed for this ritual purpose, including coins (left as “payment” to the spirits) and bird bones associated with the scene (Wetli and Martinez 1981). Long-bones with sawn-off ends have also been reported in these forensic contexts, the presence of which would be stark indicators of ritual activity (Wetli and Martinez 1981). Furthermore, graverobbers practicing Palo Mayombe preferentially remove the skull from graves (Perlmutter 2003), with long-bones being the second preferred material for the nganga. They summarize, for forensic investigators,

“Bones found outside the context of an obvious ritual may be perplexing. However, some common features and clues usually suggest their ritualistic use. Most frequently the bones are discovered in a cemetery, often one located in a Latin neighborhood. Although wrapped in plastic or burlap, they are usually covered with dirt containing dried grass and fine roots and may have an appearance of rust caked on the surface (possibly from prolonged interment in an iron cauldron). Almost always there are other peculiarities, which include coins (often in multiples of seven), chicken feathers, blood stains, adherent wax, commingling with avian bones, sawed-off portions of long bones, and beads or cloth in the symbolic colors of one of the Seven African Powers” (Wetli and Martinez 1981: 514).

After the bones have served their purpose as the locus for the nganga's spirit, they are frequently re-deposited in a cemetery, so the conspicuous placement of skulls and longbones on the surface could indicate a returned “patron.” As with Voodoo, decapitating roosters is a frequent ritual occurrence, so chicken bones found in a graveyard could be more than the remains of a picnic, with non-edible parts such as the heads and feet being indicative of animal sacrifice. Additionally, unlike Voodoo, domestic animals such as dogs are used Palo Mayombe rituals. An important component of Santeria emphasized by several forensic anthropologists (Wetli and Martinez, as well as Steadman [2003] who worked on a Santeria case in New York that had all
the hallmarks of a *Palo Mayombe* ritual) is that the religion is primarily present in the Spanish-speaking and Latin culture world; finding a case outside of this context would be unusual.

A final and important aspect of *Palo Mayombe* is that the practice is particularly prevalent among drug traffickers, “...who believe that it has the power to protect them, and Paleros are hired to conduct special protection rituals” (Perlmutter 2003: 542). As yet another connection between the dead, the destitute, and the exploitation of both, “There are more crimes attributed to *Palo Mayombe* than any of the other syncretic traditions; they frequently include grave robbing, extortion, and animal and human sacrifice” (Perlmutter 2003: 542). Wetli and Martinez report that in some cases, individuals have been murdered so the *palero* (the *Palo Mayombe* practitioner) can obtain their organs for ritual use, in which case taking human remains out of cemeteries may prevent such violent deaths. The “threat” skeletal material implies may, in contrast, be used solely for intimidation, as some practitioners lacking other means of power have used the setup of the cauldron, altar, and other ritual objects to intimidate others (Wetli and Martinez 1981). These complex instances make up what Wetli and Martinez (incorrectly) refer to as “Voodoo Death,” where a combination of intimidation and real violence are used to bring harm to the living. More accurately, Perlmutter (2003) refers to these instances as “occult crimes”, including Voodoo, Santeria, and *Palo Mayombe* in the same group of Afro-Caribbean Syncretic Religions.

A common theme among these syncretic religions is the supernatural power of the dead. Perlmutter notes that where Santeria can be effective, *Palo Mayombe*, though dark, is quicker and more efficient, a theme echoed in Voodoo with the interactions with the *Petro* spirits. Assuming one has proper payment or is willing to deal with certain consequences or possible side effects, evoking the dead in *Palo Mayombe* to deal with “particularly hard cases” that can't
be solved with white magic (Perlmutter 2003) is seen as an effective strategy. Anthropologist Zora Neil Hurston (1938) describes several vaguely similar practices in Haitian Voodoo, from living individuals beating upon graves and wailing their distress to evoke the buried person's pity and subsequent supernatural help, to the creation of zombies which, while not medically dead, are still startling examples of a magical control of the “dead” to aid the living. The connecting theme is the exploitation of the dead by those who are exploited themselves. They are robbed for their bones and body parts to be given to anatomists, they are sold or stolen in pieces for occult purposes, and they are invoked— with a physical loci or not—to do the bidding of the living. For whatever reason, grave robbing is an ongoing occurrence in Holt Cemetery.
CHAPTER 3: HOLT CEMETERY

Figure 6: A hand-made sign marking the entrance to Holt Cemetery

Holt Cemetery, an unkempt, below-ground potter's field, is a burial place for the poorest of New Orleans citizens, most of them African American. It is also a center of rich and expressive culture. The surrounding neighborhood’s interaction with Holt, in the form of cultural and votive material, contrasts sharply with the state of the cemetery, where human remains are left available for exploitation. The cemetery is located in the Mid City neighborhood of New Orleans and has been in active use for over a century and a half, and possibly much longer (Save Our Cemeteries online). Its most curious feature--that unlike virtually every other cemetery in New Orleans, it is
entirely below-ground--makes it easy to miss it in its location along City Park Avenue behind Delgado Community College, whose funerary school, once involved in the upkeep of Holt, is no longer associated with the cemetery. Holt is a very active cemetery, with burials still occurring several times a week (Angie Green, personal communication March 14, 2013).

Figure 7: Holt Cemetery in 1993. Photo by John McCusker, courtesy of the Hogan Jazz Archive of Tulane
The area that now makes up the potter's field was in active use as a burial ground before an official of the city board of health, Dr. Joseph Holt, officially established the cemetery in 1879 (SOC online). Exactly how long the grounds of Holt have been used to bury the dead has not been determined. The original 600' by 400' outline was expanded with the addition of a plot on St. Louis Street in 1909, and today the cemetery maintains those dimensions. Originally intended for the “indigent” of the city, Holt Cemetery is the final resting place for an assortment of individuals, from anonymous veterans to famous jazz musicians to victims of epidemic and violent inner city crime. The poor state of the grounds of Holt and the rich culture that it contains are both immediately evident. Chairs, toys and stuffed animals, and liquor bottles are dispersed
among votive material as idiosyncratic as bed frames, and wooden crosses and hand-painted headstones.

Figure 9: Map of Holt Cemetery (A). Part of the Don Marquis Buddy Bolden Collection, Courtesy of the Hogan Jazz Archive of Tulane University

Most of the graves are unmarked and unrecognizable due to their layout; graves are arranged somewhat haphazardly and determining where a plot may lie is often impossible from surface reconnaissance.
While individual grave plots may not be easily identified, Holt's long, active career is evident from the human skeletal material found on the ground. Centuries of using and reusing grave plots (marked or otherwise) have overturned a startling amount of osteological material, most of it fragmented and likely unrecognizable (either as bone or, specifically, human bone) to visitors.

According to Angie Green, the executive director of the nonprofit Save Our Cemeteries, easy access both to the cemetery (due to its lack of any kind of gate) and the graves themselves (which lack the protection of a sealed, above-ground tomb) has long made Holt an easy target for grave robbers, who still frequent the cemetery (personal communication, October 20, 2012). Besides traditional Voodoo offerings such as rum bottles and cigars, which can be found on a
number of the tombs, the few trees in the cemetery sometimes have ritual objects nailed to them or suspended from their branches, evidence of the cemetery's importance as a sacred space but also as an attractive place to collect human remains for ritual purposes.

Figure 11: Samuel Morgan’s headstone. Photo by Michael Ondaatje (1972), courtesy of the Hogan Jazz Archive of Tulane University.

Though it is one of the most culturally fascinating cemeteries in the city, given the Voodoo offerings and the homemade grave markers and the history of grave robbing, and though it contains several historically important figures, Holt and its historic and cultural significance to New Orleans is threatened by a lack of conservation. Burial, visitation, and restoration activity were slowed following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when many of the residents of the surrounding neighborhood were displaced. Attempts to map and document the cemetery were originally undertaken by archaeologist Shannon Dawdy, one of the first “responders” to the post-
storm problems at Holt, with the intent of creating a searchable database with an interactive GIS map. Additionally, Save Our Cemeteries, which works to restore New Orleans' cemeteries and educate the public about their importance, and the Funeral Service Education program at Delgado Community College (once one of the primary forces behind the cemetery's upkeep) took part in further conservation work.
Currently, all the projects and conservation efforts involving the cemetery have ceased. This leaves Holt vulnerable in two main areas. The votive material left on the graves is left undocumented and exposed to destructive taphonomic and human forces. More problematic, the
human remains within Holt are threatened by the cemetery's lack of protection. The fragmented osteological material that litters the ground not only demonstrates the cemetery's need for restoration but highlights the accessibility of the human remains within it. Internet sales and auction sites such as ebay and Etsy, which make no effort to verify the origin of the human remains being sold or to consult physical anthropologists have facilitated the sale of remains. With human skulls selling for between three-hundred and a thousand dollars, it is easy to see how a cemetery in an area high in crime and poverty might be targeted.
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF THE OSTEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

I performed a visual exploration of Holt Cemetery to determine what areas would seem most attractive for grave-robbing and where human remains appeared to be most prevalent. I predicted that taphonomic forces would expose the smaller bones of the skeleton opposed to larger and heavier ones, thus phalanges, ribs, carpal bones, and vertebrae—particularly the cervical vertebrae—would be the most prevalent. I looked for fragments associated with newly dug graves to determine what kinds of bones would be overturned in the process of digging a grave and thus most readily accessible for theft.

After walking through the whole cemetery along the rows and lines of graves to cover the entirety of the ground, three areas of the cemetery emerged as most interesting for study due to their having the largest and most obvious number of bone fragments on the surface, and a prevalence of votive material or apparent access to fresh graves. These were the North-West portion of the cemetery, which contains several large oak trees (which create an attractive burial spot) and is farthest away from the main road; the row of burials closest to the front gate running East to West (where the majority of recent burials were located); and a small portion of the cemetery in the South-East corner where a second cluster of oak trees was located. Like the graves and cemetery themselves, these areas were roughly defined; an exact number of graves per area would be difficult if not impossible to determine.
Figure 13: Map of Holt Cemetery (B). Part of the Don Marquis Buddy Bolden Collection, Courtesy of the Hogan Jazz Archive of Tulane University.
Because I was unable to remove any of the bones from the cemetery, all analysis was done on site and exclusively with fragments that were visible on the surface (that is, no digging was involved in recovering bones).

Figure 14: An example of a grave in Holt Cemetery with unusual depressions.
I kept a tally of each fragment found and classified the bones based on what part of the skeleton they represented (verified by a field manual of human osteology) and what area of the cemetery (based on the three portions I defined as most relevant) they came from, and when possible, photographs were taken of the bones. These fragments were examined for cut or saw marks (particularly sawn-off edges of the epiphyses of long bones, which would be clear indicators of Santeria), as well as the residual presence of material such as blood, chicken feathers, candle wax, or coffin lining. Furthermore, notice was taken of the color of the bones.
(bleached white or not) to determine if they had been subject to long surface exposure or stained long burial below ground, alongside consideration of the feeling of the bones (“greasy” bones would indicate a recent burial while dry bones indicate longer internment).

Figure 16: Long bone fragments of varying sizes

I also examined them for possible evidence of grave robbing--indicated by strange soil disturbance or an unusual representation of bones--under the assumption that new graves would be the most attractive target for grave robbers. Additionally, graves with less recent burials that
had soil coloration different from the surrounding earth, depressions outlining the entire grave or part of the grave, (for example, depressions only at the head or foot of a grave).

Figure 17: Half a mandible which retains several teeth. Even an individual with no experience in skeletal biology would be able to recognize this as human opposed to animal.

The largest number (55.7%) of bone fragments was found in the North-West portion of the cemetery, while the newly dug graves along the front entrance contained the second largest number of fragments (29.1%). I identified bones from twelve categories, representing different parts of the human skeleton: skull, vertebrae, ribs, brachial, ante-brachial, pelvic, thigh, leg, phalanges (hand and foot), teeth, non-human, and unknown.
Of the remains documented (n = 79), only several phalanges, vertebrae, and one fully intact mandible were not fragmented. However, the remains were still large and distinct enough that I was able to determine that they were human opposed to animal, with only a small portion (15.2%) being so fragmentary as to be unidentifiable; most of these were in the N to SW section. Tables 1 and 2 show this distribution.
For all sections of the cemetery, the majority of the sample was represented by small, unidentifiable fragments (25.3%). Over all areas, of the identifiable fragments, the part of the skeleton most frequently represented was the skull (21.5%) followed by the vertebrae (16.4%). Considering all the longbones as one category (brachial and ante-brachial region with the leg and thigh bones), longbones make up as much of the sample as the skull fragments with 20.2%. See Table 3.
I found only four non-human bones. As far as I could determine these were all avian due to their light weight and hollowness (though squirrel is another reasonable possibility), and alongside crawfish remains and sometimes in association with food containers (specifically, Tupperware and a Popeye's Chicken box, see Figure 19) I would conclude they were chicken bones (though crows are frequently seen in the cemetery). The avian remains and associated paraphernalia are suggestive of families spending extended time with their buried relatives or perhaps locals using Holt as a community space.
Table 4 (below) shows the distribution of disturbed graves in the cemetery. The North-West portion of the cemetery contained six identifiable grave plots (recall that within Holt there is a high number of layered, unmarked, and overgrown graves, making any kind of estimate of number of graves per section problematic) with unusual soil depression, coloration, or soil disturbance that suggested a burial had taken place in the recent past or that the grave had been disturbed. Of the six graves examined, four were depressed at the supposed head of the burial (assuming graves not marked with headstones were nevertheless laid out in the same direction as those that were within the same row) where the skull would be, suggesting that if the grave had been disturbed for non-burial purposes the skull was being targeted. Only one other grave, located in the South-East corner, seemed to be unusual in terms of soil color and depression, while the burials along the entrance were so recent (still containing tall wreaths and flowers) it would be difficult to determine if any of the disturbance was not directly due to the burial. None of the bone analyzed contained any evidence of the unusual saw or cut marks that might suggest
they had been modified for ritual purposes. Furthermore, none of the bones had any traces of coffin lining, candle wax, bird feathers, or blood, nor were any of them found in association with feathers, coins, beads, or any other objects that would suggest they had been used on an altar and returned to Holt, or that they were part of a ritual performed within Holt itself.

Table 4: Number of disturbed graves per area of Holt Cemetery

In order to determine whether the presence of disturbed human remains was unique to Holt Cemetery, I examined two other cemeteries, Lafayette Cemetery and the Joseph Street Jewish Cemetery, for comparison. Lafayette is a wealthy, predominantly white, historic above-ground cemetery located within the upper Garden District of New Orleans, the first official cemetery of what was once Lafayette City (the American section separate from the French New Orleans). In contrast to Holt, Lafayette is well-kept by groundskeepers and volunteers, and while its mausoleums are architecturally impressive, there is almost a complete absence of the votive material one sees at Holt, suggesting a less personal relationship between living and deceased
family members. I searched the entire cemetery for visible bone fragments on the ground surface. Only a single grave (one of the few below-ground burials in Lafayette) contained any bones: three fragmented vertebrae, a fragmented rib, and a small and unidentifiable bone fragment, a find that is perhaps unsurprising considering most bodies within Lafayette are naturally cremated inside their tombs. It is worth noting that one of the historic tombs had been opened within the past several years and the human remains removed, allowing visitors to the cemetery the rare opportunity to see the interior of one of these mausoleums (Figure 20). Grave diggers in the cemetery informed me that they enjoy daring children and students on tour groups to climb inside the tomb.
The Joseph Street Jewish Cemetery is notable because, while it is a wealthy and historic cemetery, it is—in accordance with Jewish custom—below ground. Although tightly placed, the graves in this cemetery are neatly laid out in an orderly fashion, and the ground was never a potter’s field. Reconnaissance was done for the entire cemetery, but no osteological material was
visible on the ground surface. I was fortunate enough to be present for the digging of a new grave within the cemetery. The gravediggers permitted me to look through their back dirt, but no bone fragments were present and the gravediggers reported that they had never found any while working in the cemetery. Finally, though I performed no formal analysis there, it is also worth mentioning Carrollton Cemetery, a mixed-race graveyard partially above ground and partially below ground.

![A thoracic vertebra beside a religious figurine in Carrollton Cemetery.](image)

Figure 19: A thoracic vertebra beside a religious figurine in Carrollton Cemetery.

The below-ground portion is predominantly African-American and bears obvious similarities to Holt in its overcrowding and state of disrepair (note however that Carrollton
Cemetery is located within a residential neighborhood, containing a level of individuality perhaps unavailable to Holt in its situation beside a busy city street). During a brief visit to Carrollton Cemetery I noted a considerable number of bone fragments (phalanges, vertebrae, and fragmented long bones, see Figure 21) on the ground surface, though impressionistically it seemed that a high number of these were avian – a higher proportion (or at least a higher number, I suppose) than I found at Holt, possibly due to the close approximation of the surrounding houses which necessarily incorporate the cemetery into their space and make it public.

Discussion of the distribution of osteological material

None of the bones in my sample contained any unusual residue, cut, or saw marks, suggesting that they had not been used for ceremonial purposes (or been part of a Palo Mayombe altar) and then redeposited within the cemetery. This does not exclude the possibility that bones could have been permanently removed from the cemetery for occult reasons, but I feel that this is also unlikely. Voodoo, while attributing strong, supernatural powers to the dead, does not make use of human remains in its rituals. Santeria, which does use human remains, could be suspect but I believe this is also unlikely; the religion is a product of Spanish-Caribbean culture, and New Orleans—a French-Caribbean culture—does not have, neither historically nor in the modern day, the presence of this practice that exists in places like Miami or New York. I have only been able to find one documented forensic case of a Palo Mayombe cauldron in Louisiana and even this was in Metairie, not New Orleans. On a practical note, I imagine that unless grave robbers are daring enough to steal fresh bodies, the bones they would be able to recover at Holt would be so fragmentary (barring a lucky find of an intact skeleton, as yet not disarticulated and
distributed throughout the cemetery) as to be unsuitable for ritual purposes. Another possibility, however, would not result in cut marks or other obvious material on the bones: that the bones are being taken to be sold as curiosity pieces. The high percentage of skull and long bone fragments on the surface could indicate that these parts of the skeleton are being targeted, the skull in particular for its distinctness. Poor excavation techniques, however, could mean that in the process of digging for the skull, grave robbers are accidentally shattering it instead—a common problem due to the bones’ fragility and shape, and one archaeologists are trained to avoid. Of note, I did speak briefly to a woman (a white, non-native) who lived in the neighborhood around Holt who claimed to have once seen an intact human skull resting on the ground surface of the cemetery. Her interpretation of the skull’s conspicuous placement was that someone had robbed it from a grave but (perhaps being superstitious) had then become uneasy by its presence and returned it. She insisted that such grave robbing frequently happened in Holt, but that this was worth ignoring in order to maintain the uniqueness and character of the cemetery—the city, if it got involved, would damage its allure.
CHAPTER 5: VOTIVE MATERIAL AT HOLT

Alongside the human remains at Holt, the votive material decorating the graves deserves consideration. Not only can the material be considered unique among funerary decorations, the votive material demonstrates Holt's active use and the continued relationship between the deceased and their families. The material expresses the importance of the interred and their continued place in the culture. Evidence of African and Afro-Caribbean burial traditions has been found and documented at Holt by at least one archaeologist (Ryan Gray, personal communication, March 2013). Like Gomez’ description of miniski, the material present in African-American cemeteries of the American South does is not explicitly suggestive of funerals or burials, but is more charm-like, or suggestive of life of the now-buried individual—cigarettes and liquor for an adult, for example, with dolls or fire trucks for a child. Throughout the entire cemetery, the votive material at Holt includes candles, flowers, Mardi Gras beads, stuffed animals, and occasionally “offerings” suggesting the enjoyment of life. More esoteric decorations include wooden bed frames placed over graves, as well as hand-made and painted stone and wooden grave markers. Though in many instances grave markers or protective materials—from a school crossing sign converted to a headstone to a Smoothie King tarp covering a grave—serve as examples of the poverty of Holt, there is a brightness and vividness to the grave decorations, lacking any somber aesthetic and opting instead for a colorful and celebratory expression.
Figure 22: A hand-painted sign hanging on the now-abandoned sexton's cottage in Holt.
Some of the materials were of the type that could suggest the practice of Voodoo or, less commonly, Santeria (for example, working in the cemetery in 2010 I saw several “Voodoo” dolls nailed to a tree). However, such materials should be considered carefully. Besides liquor and cigarettes, none of the “occult” material at Holt is what one would expect from an authentic practitioner, such as ritual candles, coins, beads, or chicken feathers. Furthermore, it is possible that “occult” materials like Voodoo dolls might be purposefully added to the authentic votive material at places like St. Louis #1 by local ghost-tour companies for sensational purposes.
(Angie Green, personal communication March 2013) or, as one of my professors put it, by “overly-enthusiastic amateur enthusiasts.”

The alcohol and cigarettes found at Holt appear to be non-occult, however: While conducting surface observation, I observed an older gentleman putting a bottle of liquor (an item frequently used on Voodoo altars to invoke the life-loving *lwa*) on his recently deceased sister's grave simply because she had liked it in life, not for any extra religious purposes.
Figure 25: A grave in Holt Cemetery marked with a concrete slab containing a real electric guitar. The individual's name and birth/death dates are not recorded on this unique headstone.
The “Altar” in Holt Cemetery

During one of my final days of field work in Holt I discovered a small, antique-style cupboard on a double grave situated near the oak trees in the South-East corner of the cemetery,
mostly obscured by the headstones behind it and the more eye-catching votive material surrounding it. The cupboard contained the only objects that I would possibly classify as occult since seeing the “Voodoo dolls” nailed to the oak.

The altar, which had been slightly warped and damaged by exposure, appeared to have not been used in some time (Figure 26). Among the objects found within the cupboard was a Mardi Gras “doubloon” dating to 1993, which could suggest the time around which the altar was put together. Other objects included several small, empty draw-string bags (reminiscent of those used in Voodoo to make *gris-gris*, personal charms), handkerchiefs, a collection of small porcelain Christmas ornament skulls, a white chicken feather, a collection of eight small, glass bottles containing different kinds of herbs, an Indian-style incense burner, a plastic snow-globe containing the figure of a devil and labeled “Welcome to Hell”, an old fashioned Coke bottle, another gold Mardi Gras doubloon, a large, felt baby blanket (presumably for laying across the grave to sit on while praying or performing rituals at the altar), several panels of wood covered with fabric, a small plastic, yellow monster, and a ceramic bowl filled with dried grass. Within an even smaller compartment in the cupboard, I recovered an empty, leather wallet, a compass, a Swiss army knife, a small and rusted dagger, and a plastic bag filled with smooth, black stones.
The objects contained in the “altar” have no connections to either Voodoo or Santeria, and while mildly suggestive of the occult the altar contains no symbols or objects that are clearly related to any practice (even classically satanic symbols, such as a pentagram). The altar does not contain any human bones or animal parts, and while a knife is present, there is no evidence of blood on either the blade or any of the blankets or handkerchiefs within the altar. Based on the objects with loose associations with the occult (the skulls, dagger, and “Welcome to Hell” snow globe, along with the ceramic bowl which could have been used to burn small “offerings”) I would conclude the altar (now apparently forgotten) was used for an individual or group’s “ritual” purposes, perhaps to channel the “spirits” or “powers” of the cemetery but without a formal occult or religious framework.
Figure 21: A row of bottles containing herbs (left) and a close-up view of one of the bottles (right).

Figure 29: A ceramic bowl filled with dried grass (left) and a small, rusty dagger (right). Both could possibly used for ritual purposes.
In other words, the altar is a probably just a prime example of “kids messing around.” The absence of a Voodoo/Santeria connection does not imply a lack of ritual, however, as the "altar" exemplifies. While it may not be related to the occult, a kind of ritual is taking place between the living and the dead when someone leaves items of personal affiliation at a loved one's grave site. I interpret this as a way of including them in the living sphere through a continued ritual interaction. The inclusion of elements like Mardi Gras beads and “throws” in particular should not be dismissed or underestimated in this regard; the cultural importance of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, along with the carnival theme of celebrating life and excess (for example, the “Skeleton Krewe” of Treme which celebrates life by celebrating death), has been explored by researchers such as Roach, who makes clear connections between the spirit of Carnival and his “Cities of the Dead.”

Figure 30: An unusual double-grave. Here, the occupants are buried facing each other.
Once more, comparison with other cemeteries proves useful for understanding Holt and its relationship to the surrounding community. Both of the predominantly white cemeteries I visited
for comparison, as noted in the previous chapter, feature impressive architecture and statuary but a near-absence of votive material or community activity. The expression of a continued connection with the dead carries special significance in an African-American cemetery; as Joseph Roach says, “Death has so many uses” (48). The contrast between the two types of cemeteries, expressed through the votive material, emerges as one of Death-focused versus Life-focused, segregating the dead versus not segregating the dead, hiding and disguising cemeteries versus having to encounter the remains of the dead with each visit to the cemetery.

Figure 32: Further examples of unique grave markers: one grave has had a tree planted on it (left) while the other displays a carefully hand-painted headstone with the figure of a lion's head (right).
CHAPTER 6: SURVEYING THE VISITORS TO HOLT

During several weekends in February and March 2013, I "staked out" the cemetery watching for 2 to 4 hours on these days of the week, observing as people came and went. I was able to formally interview 21 visitors to Holt during these visits. I asked them questions such as why they came to Holt and what they did during their visits in order to learn people’s most common responses to the use of the cemetery and its current state; the full questionnaire appears in Appendix A. The majority of visitors were families visiting relatives buried in the cemetery, though a few visitors passing through out of interest or in search of the cemetery's famous occupants made up an interesting part of the sample.

Figure 33: A simple, hand-painted head stone.
As mentioned above, the majority of visitors were those who had family members in the cemetery (n = 16). They were exclusively African American, with males and females equally represented and ranging in age from their mid-teens to their late sixties. Individuals were always from the Greater New Orleans area, some living within the neighborhood and others living farther out in New Orleans East or on the North Shore. These visitors nearly always came as a family or with at least one other family member. All but two of the families that I spoke to had come not only to visit or pay respects to the deceased, but to clean and decorate the grave as well (an activity also done almost exclusively by the families; exceptions to this discussed below). Maintenance ranged from being as simple as bringing fresh, living flowers to the grave, weeding the plot and leaving toys or other objects, to leveling the plot with shovels and setting down new layers of stones to mark the space of the grave. One man reported that while he was just leaving flowers on this visit, he had plans to return later in the week to white-wash the tombstones of his family's graves and rebuild and paint the wooden box that outlined the large plot.

Family members typically reported they visited on special occasions, such as the deceased’s birthday or other holidays such as Christmas, Easter, or Mother's Day, though those who lived closer to the cemetery reported they tried to visit as often as they could, from every other month to every other week. Visits typically lasted between half an hour to an hour, depending on the occasion and the amount of restoration needed by the grave plot. The families were uninterested in the more famous occupants of the cemetery and said they almost never encountered people visiting Holt for their sake. Notably, families were very aware of the fact that Holt was a “cemetery for the poor.” One man explained to me that Holt was “a cemetery for black people. For poor black people” and that there was a time when “it didn't cost anything at all to be buried here” (though now, he explained, it costs $500 to dig a grave in Holt—which is
still the most inexpensive price in the city!). Several individuals explained that their relatives were in Holt because that's where family plots had already been established generations before, while others confessed that they simply did not have the funds to be buried elsewhere. One family I spoke with had come to pay respects to their young son on his birthday, cleaning his grave and leaving him several toy trucks. Faced with the sudden and unexpected death of their five-year-old child, they explained, they were unable to afford a grave plot elsewhere. The child's father reported that though he “hated everything about” Holt, he himself planned to be buried there; “if it's good enough for my boy, then it's good enough for me.”

Predictably, all of the families had very strong opinions on the state of the cemetery. In contrast to other visitors to the cemetery, family members overwhelmingly discussed how the differences between Holt and other New Orleans cemeteries were centered around its lack of upkeep. While understanding that the price of a cheap burial was that it was the family's responsibility to maintain the grave site, they felt that the city could do more to maintain the graves that had been abandoned or forgotten over the years. One woman explained that if you didn't put a marker on a grave, it would be lost; there was no other system of mapping or recording who was buried where. I received mixed responses as to how much the cemetery had changed after Katrina. One man explained that Holt had been under several feet of water for weeks, destroying the wooden frames marking grave plots and knocking over many headstones, though whether the cemetery was considered to be in better or worse condition presently followed no kind of trend, with some people claiming maintenance improved after the storm while others maintained Holt was left in an even worse state of disrepair.
While a few individuals claimed they had never seen bones on the ground surface, the rest of the family members confirmed that yes, there were many bones visible in the cemetery and they were indeed human. Reactions to this were, understandably, always negative, with some individuals expressing the sadness of this fact to others calling it “disrespectful” and even “ridiculous” (a stark change from the days when children would play with exposed bones at a funeral, as noted by Roach above—though a child’s reactions to exposed human remains might indeed be more irreverent than those of an adult who attributes more significance to them). None of the families mentioned incidents of people taking the bones or robbing graves, though all 16 family members expressed that they wished there was better security and protection for the cemetery, even if all that meant was the addition of a fence to surround its boundaries. Others simply wanted the grass to be cut. Interestingly, several individuals expressed a desire for a definition of “spaces” within the cemetery, clearly outlining Holt's boundaries, graves, and pathways (some of which are so overgrown that they are only discernible to those who have visited the cemetery for years and remember where they're supposed to be). None of the family members explicitly stated that they liked Holt in any way. Everyone was concerned with the state of the cemetery and saw much room for improvement, while “liking” the cemetery came from having family or friends buried within it. One man informed me that there was a time when Holt was such a locus for the community that on holidays like Easter it was almost impossible to find parking near the cemetery as families would come to picnic with their deceased relatives, setting up blankets, tables, and chairs and staying for hours. Only one woman I spoke with expressed an enthusiastic interest in being buried in Holt one day herself, saying she wanted a stone angel as tall as herself to mark her grave. The uniqueness of the votive material or expressive culture seen in Holt went unmentioned.
The remaining visitors who came to Holt (n = 5) contrasted in almost every respect from those who came to visit family. They were exclusively white, females and males fairly equally represented and ranging in age from their early thirties to their late sixties. A married couple I interviewed had brought their very young son and daughter with them, while another woman (from the immediate neighborhood and white) I spoke to briefly but was unable to get an interview with had her three-year-old daughter with her, making up three children under ten years old I met in the cemetery but whom I have decided to leave out of my sample as they were not interviewed. Individuals came from as close as New Orleans Uptown to as far away as Vancouver, BC.

These visitor’s reasons for coming to Holt varied widely. Four people were visiting New Orleans for the first time and had heard from locals that Holt was more unique than the other more famous cemeteries in New Orleans. One man was a photographer from Houston who had a long tradition of visiting Holt whenever he passed through New Orleans (the same man reported having once seen a frog nailed to a tree in the cemetery), while a New Orleans local I spoke with casually (not included in my interview sample), working as a poet and musician, had come to pay homage to the great jazz players buried within Holt. The reactions of these non-family members were overwhelmingly positive, with individuals expounding on the personality of Holt alongside its cultural uniqueness. One tourist called the cemetery fascinating, “conceptually archaeological” in its layout and with the scattered materials on the surface, and actively challenging the ideas of what an official historic site should look like. All of these visitors stated that Holt was indeed very different from other cemeteries in New Orleans, but none felt that this was due to a lack of upkeep. Instead, most of these visitors commented on the votive material and the sense that the cemetery was both historic and active. Instead of being offended by the
bone fragments on the surface, they were fascinated by them; one man stated that while it was “unfortunate” they were sometimes taken there was something “poetic” about them being visible on the ground. Another woman pointed out a fragmented rib to her son with the comment, “See? We're not so different from the animals we eat.”

I was fortunate enough to be in the cemetery one late afternoon when one of the city's many “haunted”/“spirit” tours passed through and allowed me to follow along. The tour guide (a white, New Orleans native) gave an accurate account of the history of Holt cemetery and touched on the key points of its uniqueness and current problems, and while she left several small “offerings” to the “spirits” within the cemetery in the form of small candies (by the North-West oaks), no rituals were performed and there was no discussion of hauntings or supernatural occurrences in the cemetery besides the guide's casual mention that she had many “spirit friends” there. She explained to her tour group that she had grown up close to Holt, which, in contrast to the other cemeteries in the city had the atmosphere of a “nightclub” when she was younger; people frequented the cemetery (particularly Delgado students), and it was popular to visit the cemetery on Halloween night and dare one’s friends to stand alone in the circles of oaks. She is the only individual I encountered within Holt (the official efforts of Save Our Cemeteries aside) who claimed to do any restoration of the graves or leave offerings without having any family members buried there. As a scientist I appreciated the lack of sensationalism on the part of this ghost tour guide, though there are many haunted tour companies within New Orleans and I cannot speak to the behavior of their tour guides or tourists within Holt, especially concerning whether or not they leave Voodoo-related material on the graves.
Besides this unique exception, concern over changing the cemetery was almost non-existent, one individual claiming that getting the city involved would somehow ruin the character of the cemetery. For these visitors, the disarray of Holt, even the fragmented skeletons on the ground surface, was part of the cemetery's tragic and poetic “charm.”
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Holt Cemetery is an active demonstration of the continued tensions that exist along race and class lines in New Orleans. In many ways it is the most recent example of the city’s long history of exploiting and abandoning its “indignant” population, in death as in life. Nevertheless, this population, in keeping with its own strong, cultural traditions, continues to defy this exploitation through expressive devotion to and celebration of the deceased. Why, however, when Holt is in active use and an important site of cultural expression in New Orleans, is it allowed to exist in its current ramshackle state? Who is taking the bones and why...and who is not taking the bones? Many people, from residents I spoke with in the surrounding neighborhood to the Save Our Cemeteries volunteers, have expressed concern that “Voodoo” rituals take place in the cemetery, or that the exposed bones are targeted for ritual purposes. I argue that this is not the case. As discussed previously, while I can't rule out that bones are taken out permanently and possibly used in Voodoo rituals or those of other Syncretic African religions such as Santeria or Palo Mayombe, the human remains present show no clear evidence of unusual cut/saw marks or conspicuous adherent material that would indicate they had been used in a cauldron or on an altar (recall that some of these rituals insist on the return of the bones to the cemetery after they have been used). Furthermore, among the votive material examined there were no conspicuous items such as feathers, coins, or a large number of animal bones. Nevertheless, the distribution of osteological material, with a high prevalence of skull and long bone fragments, could suggest that these parts are being preferentially targeted. Skulls are the most desirable bone for either occult or medical/academic purposes, being most identifiably human and symbolically the part
of the skeleton most associated with death. The high number of skull fragments alongside the number of graves depressed at the head end could be evidence of grave robbers attempting to remove the skull (which, being extremely delicate, is broken with attempted extraction). While this may occur, I would further hypothesize that a number of small or fragmented bones are simply removed by curious tourists to be kept as souvenirs, absent of any ritual intentions, for no other reason than it’s possible to do so without consequence (a rare opportunity in a cemetery).

Conclusions surrounding the current state of Holt are more complicated. It appears that only visitors with no family connections to Holt are intrigued by the “charm” and uniqueness of the unkempt state of the cemetery—a luxury of opinion available to them because they have no family in the cemetery and are able to depersonalize the human remains they encounter. They paint the disrepair of Holt in a poetic light that may be ultimately said to be overly romantic and unrealistic regarding the very real and often negative role the ramshackle cemetery plays in the lives of associated families. These families—the individuals who visit, maintain, and decorate the graves with the votive material that makes Holt so characteristic—are overwhelmingly upset with the state of the cemetery. I would suggest that Holt is allowed to remain in its current state because, simply, it is a potter’s field and is now, as it always has been, treated as such. The city—already willing to offer reduced prices for the burials of individuals within the cemetery—does not feel obligated to maintain the cemetery in any way. That is for the families to do, and when a grave is abandoned or forgotten, the individuals within it are subject to the same disregard they experienced from the city in life. Unable to do anything about unmarked or unrelated graves—and certainly unable to do anything about the skeletal material on the surface—families are only able to concentrate their efforts and devotion to the graves of their families and friends. The distinctiveness of the votive material seems to be a way to defy the
“ugliness” of the surrounding area, an expression not only of the deceased’s continued place within the family, but also a family’s way of making their burial in Holt—so frequently undesirable—more bearable. By bringing their family members toys or cigars, and seeing that their plot is always weeded and well kept, the dead can perhaps forgive the fact that they are buried in Holt.

Of course, Holt does not have to remain in its current state. While I hope that the efforts of the original projects put in place to preserve and document Holt eventually come to fruition, simply heeding the suggestions of the family members would be sufficient to preserve the cemetery. The addition of a gate, more security (such as lights or even a sexton present on site during the day), and some maintenance landscaping would be enough to afford Holt some of the same respect given to other cemeteries in New Orleans. These efforts would not only ease the minds of family members but discourage grave robbers from entering the cemetery. Involvement from local university students focusing on archaeology, anthropology/anatomy, and even funeral studies (like at Delgado) to deal with the human remains in a respectful way, could reduce the number of bone fragments visible throughout the cemetery by seeing that the material is properly identified and covered. On this same theme, conservation efforts should be focused on Holt instead of exclusively on cemeteries more “attractive” to tourists; official restoration efforts that happened even once a month could be enough to keep Holt well-kept; even in its current state it could be an attractive location for history-focused tours, such as those that frequent Lafayette and St. Louis #1. Finally, Holt Cemetery should be recognized for its historical significance and afforded the respect and attention given to other historical spots in the city. As the final resting place of many pioneers of jazz music, United States veterans, and especially hundreds of the
original residents of New Orleans who are no less important for having been lost in time, Holt
deserves far more consideration than it has so far been given.
APPENDIX A

1. Visitor’s Survey

[Introduction] Hi, I'm a student at Tulane University, and I'm doing a study on Holt Cemetery. I was wondering if you have a few minutes to answer a few quick questions about the cemetery and about what you think of it. I'm writing a Master's Thesis with the results of the survey.

[Participant consents.] Okay, great! Just so you know, if there are any questions you don't know the answer to or that you want to answer, that's okay. You can also stop at any point if you want; I won't be offended.

1. What brings you to Holt? (Friends, family, tourist)
2. How often do you visit?
   2a. When do you visit? On special occasions?
   2b. Do you usually visit alone or with friends/family?
   2c. How long do you stay per visit?
   2d. What do you do during your visits? (Pray, perform a ceremony, etc.)
   2e. How many different graves do you visit?
3. Where do you currently live? (to give an idea of how far people come)
4. (If not answered above) Do you help with upkeep of the grave(s) you visit? Do you leave offerings/decorations?
5. Do you know who decorates the graves? What do you know/think about what the decorations mean? (If interviewee decorates) Do other people also decorate the grave(s) you decorate? Who?
6. Do you know anything about the (other) burials in the cemetery? Like, who's buried here? Are there families here? How long have the graves been here? Who is in the unmarked plots?

7. Do you feel Holt is different from other New Orleans cemeteries?

   7a. If so, how?

8. Is Holt different now than it was before the storm?

   8a. If so, how?

9. How do you feel about the upkeep at Holt?

10. Have you ever seen bones on the ground here?

   10a. If so, what kind of bones?

   10b. (If they know/believe they're human) How do you feel about them being on the surface?

11. What do you like about Holt?

12. Is there anything you would change about Holt?

13. Do you think Holt should be preserved/better kept?

   13a. Why or why not?

   13b. If yes, what would you like to see done first?

**Demographics**

Age:

Sex:

Race:
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BIOGRAPHY

Jordan Andréa Krummel completed two Bachelor’s Degrees with honors at Tulane University in 2012. Originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico, New Orleans has been her adopted home since she began her studies in 2008. Jordan’s academic interests within the field of physical anthropology include pathology, forensics, human evolution and human variation. Outside of academia she enjoys music, language, and adventure.