Performance
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Hope Springs Eternal: Performing Grief, History and Resilience in Boulder's Columbia Cemetery

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ABSTRACT Columbia Cemetery is the oldest cemetery in Boulder, Colorado, receiving its first interment in 1870. It is also a hub for live performance, hosting at least two significant promenade productions in recent years. In this paper, I explore Monica Weller's 2020 MFA Dance thesis project, *The Liminal Heart*, and Historic Boulder's 2022 edition of *Meet the Spirits*, both performed on the grounds of the cemetery in the month of October. In *The Liminal Heart*, Weller and her fellow dancers offer a devastatingly personal meditation on grief and loss, inspired by the untimely death of Weller's husband; the performance featured a collective memorial audience members were invited to contribute to, and—for many—marked the first live performance they'd attended since the appearance of COVID-19. *Meet the Spirit*s, by contrast, is a biennial dramatization of some of Columbia Cemetery's most famous occupants, played by amateur actors, and timed to coincide with Halloween. Equal parts historical interpretation and family-friendly haunted trail, the popular event serves as a fundraiser for a local historic preservation organization, and seeks to draw attention to their ongoing preservation of the cemetery.

While very different in tone, *The Liminal Heart* and *Meet the Spirits* share surprisingly similar objectives: to rebrand the cemetery as a vibrant and welcoming communal space for the living, and to nudge the living and the dead into closer contact and more meaningful conversation with each

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other. In this article, I argue that both performances transform a static, sporadically visited cemetery into a dynamic, living memorial and meeting space, posing interesting questions about if and how we may ethically and lovingly (re)animate our dead.

KEYWORDS cemetery theatre; site-specific performance; grief; memorialization; Columbia Cemetery; performance and spirituality; community engagement; Boulder

Columbia Cemetery is the oldest cemetery in Boulder, Colorado, receiving its first interment in 1870, just weeks after Columbia Lodge No. 14 A.F. & A.M. ("Ancient Free and Accepted Masons") purchased the ten-acre tract of land from one of its members.[1] Proudly marketed by the City of Boulder as "the final resting place for a number of Boulder's founders and pioneers," Columbia is currently home to some 6,500 souls, and is widely considered one of Boulder's most beautiful historic sites after years of concerted maintenance and restoration.[2] The cemetery is also, improbably, a hub for live performance, hosting three site-specific productions in the last six years.

While cemeteries and graveyards—historically, burial sites affiliated with a specific church and/or located on its grounds—have long been loci for private mourning rituals and public funerary ceremonies, they have also increasingly been embraced as sites for secular theatrical performance. These site-specific performances take a variety of forms, and while many explicitly attend to grief or engage with ideas about how to best honor, remember, or commune with the dead, others do not, in active tension with a setting that some would argue invariably prompts questions about spirituality. Scholarship on this burgeoning performance form, which I broadly term "cemetery theatre," is limited, likely because it is not yet widely recognized as a distinctive subtype of site-specific performance, and because cemetery theatre's aims, theatrical conventions, and target audience can vary drastically from production to production.

In this essay, I explore the origins of cemetery theatre and propose a tentative taxonomy to address its radically different relationships to—and uses of—site. I examine two of Columbia Cemetery's most recent performances: Monica Weller's 2020 MFA Dance thesis project, *The Liminal Heart*, and Historic Boulder's 2022 edition of *Meet the Spirits*, both performed on cemetery grounds in the month of October. In *The Liminal Heart*, Weller and her fellow dancers offer a devastatingly personal meditation on grief and loss, inspired by the untimely death of Weller's husband. The performance featured a "Collective Memorial" that audience members were invited to contribute to, and for many patrons marked the first live performance they'd attended since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Meet the Spirits*, by contrast, is a biennial dramatization of some of Columbia

[1] "Columbia Cemetery History"; "Columbia Cemetery"; Mordacq, "Haunting Boulder's First Graveyard"; "Meet the Spirits Program." For an excellent early photograph of Columbia Cemetery (also known as "Pioneer Cemetery"), see Pettem, *Boulder*, 178.

[2] "Columbia Cemetery History." The cemetery was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1997.

Cemetery's most "(in)famous" occupants, played by volunteer actors, and timed to coincide with Halloween.[3] Blurring the lines between historical reenactment and family-friendly haunted trail, the popular event serves as a fundraiser for a local historic preservation organization, and seeks to draw attention to their ongoing stewardship of the cemetery.

Origins of Cemetery Theatre

Though cemeteries and burial grounds have long been the site of Euro-Christian religious drama, including passion and resurrection plays, the development of "cemetery theatre"—or secular theatre produced in cemeteries—as a compelling subset of contemporary site-specific performance is frequently associated with the theoretical writings of playwright Jean Genet.[4] In his 1967 essay, "That Strange Word…," Genet urges readers to demand that "future urban planners" install cemeteries and columbariums in plain sight "in the town," and erect theatres in these memorial sites' immediate "shadow[s]," or (better yet) "in the midst of [their] tombs": "Do you see where I'm heading? The theater will be placed as close as possible, in the truly tutelary shade of the place where the dead are kept, or in the shadow of the only monument that digests them."[5] Genet argues that a theatre built in a cemetery "will benefit both the cemetery and the theater" by ensuring death will be "at once closer and lighter," and theatre itself "more serious."[6] "Think of the spectators' exit after Mozart's *Don Giovanni*," Genet writes, "leaving amid the dead lying underground, before returning to secular life. Neither the conversations nor the silence would be the same as at the exit of a Parisian theater."[7] Genet further stipulates that the cemetery in question must be a "live" (ie. active) one to be most effective, where graves "continue to be dug" and "corpses are cooked day and night."[8]

Genet's conception of cemetery theatre as a site and artistic practice that disrupts the conventional behavior and expectations associated with traditional cemeteries and theatres shares some similarities with philosopher Michel Foucault's idea of heterotopia, which he first introduced in "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," a paper released the same year as Genet's "That Strange Word…" (1967). [9] Heterotopias, according to Foucault, are

> real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia

[3] Thornton, "'Meet the Spirits' at Columbia Cemetery and Learn About the (In)Famous Lives of Those Interred There."
[4] Carlson, *Places of Performance*, 17; Lavery, "Theatre in a Graveyard"; Taylor, "Following the Plot (Literally)"; Willis, *Theatricality, Dark Tourism and Ethical Spectatorship*, 70–71, 74; Delijani, "The Anti-Monumental Cemetery."
[5] Genet, *Fragments of the Artwork*, 103–4. As theatre and performance studies scholar Carl Lavery has demonstrated, "That Strange Word…" also "sketches out [Genet's] plans for a site-based production for his last play, *The Screens*," though his "call for a theatre in a graveyard never came to fruition": the play was ultimately staged at the Odéon Theatre in 1966. See Lavery, "Theatre in a Graveyard," 95.
[6] Genet, *Fragments of the Artwork*, 108.
[7] Genet, 108.
[8] Genet, 108.
[9] Solga, *Theory for Theatre Studies*, 73.

> in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.[10]

These "counter-sites," or heterotopias, are "concrete, ordinary places that carry the power to represent *and also to unsettle* the meanings of other concrete, ordinary places," according to feminist scholar Kim Solga, who notes that Foucault's list of possible examples includes both cemeteries and theatres.[11] In her 2019 book, *Theory for Theatre Studies: Space*, Solga argues that Foucault's essay ultimately reminds readers that "our recognition of shared social space shapes practices of power":

> Lived spaces can be conceived, seen, heard, and inhabited any number of ways; culturally, however, we often agree to look at specific places in singular ways, either through tacit mutual agreement or because a viewpoint has been shaped for us by the dominant culture in that space. When we make that tacit agreement, or submit to a dominant culture's normative spatial practice, we also agree to forget that every space holds within it the power to be seen and experienced differently—if only we might change what we choose to see of it, or whom we choose to encounter within it (and how we enact that encounter).[12]

This argument, of course, recalls Genet's delighted observation that a performance of Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* "amid the dead" would occasion very different responses from patrons exiting the cemetery than it would if presented in a traditional "Parisian theater."

In her 2020 article, "The Anti-Monumental Cemetery: Ghosts in Jean Genet's 'Quatre heures à Chatila,'" performance studies scholar Clare Finburgh Delijani argues that Genet's insistence on "theatres at the heart of cemeteries" also stems, in part, from his deep desire to "encourag[e] theatre-makers and audiences to reach beyond realism."[13] Performance studies scholar Carl Lavery, in an earlier essay, "Theatre in a Graveyard: Site-Based Performance and the Revolution of Everyday Life" (2006), also makes this point, observing that Genet often deliberately "distance[d] himself from both realist and formalist aesthetics" in his dramaturgical essays (including "That Strange Word…"), viewing realism as "a paradoxical political form" which "merely produces catharsis through identification" rather than "provoking action."[14] Lavery ultimately concludes that Genet's advocacy for cemetery theatre speaks to his lifelong commitment to "erase the gap between art and life from the inside out," as well as his fundamental "distrust of the neutrality of conventional theatre space."[15] "Theatre in a building," Lavery notes, "reassures and protects

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[10] Quoted in Solga, 73.
[11] Solga, 73–74.
[12] Solga, 74.
[13] Delijani, "The Anti-Monumental Cemetery," 599–600.
[14] Lavery, "Theatre in a Graveyard," 96.
[15] Lavery, 98.

spectators"; it does not, quoting Genet, "'set them ablaze', or 'stir up trouble in them.'"[16] If staging theatre in a cemetery has the power to "transform theatre from a spectacular diversion into an actual event, a way of disorientating the audience spatially and ontologically," Lavery writes, perhaps it can also—in Genet's view—"radically revise the spectator's habitual response to the [larger] world."[17]

Performance critic Emma Willis is also interested in cemetery theatre's political potential but chooses instead to emphasize its affective power. In her 2014 book, *Theatricality, Dark Tourism and Ethical Spectatorship: Absent Others*, Willis contends that Genet believes

> the use of such a deathly location foregrounds an existential mindfulness, from which a deep feeling might be summoned that is extra-political, deriving from the mystery of life and death. In doing so he describes a kind of theatre that is performed in recognition of the fact that our own lives *cannot* be untouched by those who have died before us and, indeed, that our own lives are always lived in the shadows of others' deaths.[18]

Willis, like Lavery, argues that Genet embraces "deathly environments" as "a powerful means of disrupting normative temporal [as well as spatial] frames, pointing to a certain end of time."[19] "This end," according to Willis, "is not so much a finite point, but an endlessness that pervades and consumes all aspects of life. Indeed, Genet refers to the devouring or digesting quality of crematoria as being most important."[20]

Cemetery theatre, like other forms of site-specific performance, acknowledges—and even depends upon—"the complex coexistence, superimposition and interpenetration of a number of narratives and architectures," according to spatial theorist Joanne Tompkins.[21] It blithely and effectively intervenes in "normative" temporal and spatial frames by affirming the dialogic relationship between site and performance, ensuring both are simultaneously visible. Clifford McLucas, Mike Pearson, and other site-specific theatre-makers have described this relationship in terms of a "host" and its "ghost"; McLucas, for example, states that "[t]he host site is haunted for a time by a ghost that the theatre-maker creates," but observes that this ghost—"[l]ike all ghosts"—"is transparent," guaranteeing "the host can [still] be seen through the ghost."[22] These "[i]nterpenetrating narratives jostle to create meanings," in Pearson's words, so that it ultimately becomes impossible for the spectator to "view one and not the other."[23] Much like double negative

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16 Lavery, 98.
17 Lavery, 99. There is a beautiful irony in the idea of cemeteries functioning as wake-up calls for the living, as the word *cemetery*, derived from the Greek, "literally mean[s] 'sleeping place.'" See Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 56.
18 Willis, *Theatricality, Dark Tourism and Ethical Spectatorship*, 71.
19 Willis, 74.
20 Willis, 74.
21 Quoted in Solga, *Theory for Theatre Studies*, 78.
22 Quoted in Lavery, "Theatre in a Graveyard," 101.
23 Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance*, 36. See also Solga, *Theory for Theatre Studies*, 78–82.

photography, these simultaneous and overlapping visions of "host" and "ghost" remain legible as distinct entities but gain power and coherence when experienced as a single image.

While it is doubtful that most twenty-first century cemetery theatre practitioners would trace their lineage back to Genet, his call for a theatre that would bring the living and the dead into closer proximity, disrupt social niceties, and unsettle spatial and temporal norms has largely been realized. Indeed, the two performances I will discuss momentarily, *The Liminal Heart* and *Meet the Spirits*, do all three of these things, consciously or unconsciously. In the next section of this essay, I will identify three distinct subtypes of cemetery theatre and articulate how each has the capacity to "benefit both the cemetery and the theater" as Genet originally envisioned.[24]

A Taxonomy of Cemetery Theatre

Cemetery theatre's emergence as a discernible nationwide trend dates to at least the early 2010s, though individual performances (like *Meet the Spirits*, first presented in 1986) long predate this. In a 2011 feature for *American Theatre*, former managing editor Nicole Estvanik Taylor briefly profiles several theatre companies producing live performances in cemeteries, and posits that these companies are driven by one of two motivations: a desire to "follo[w] Genet's advice" to "reclaim the protective darkness of death" in a society "fonder of analysis than of mystery," or the companies' "own taste for site-specificity."[25] While Taylor does not explicitly classify the performances she discusses, her article suggests that there are at least three identifiable categories (or subtypes) of cemetery theatre: performances specifically set in cemeteries, performances atmospherically enhanced by their placement in cemeteries, and performances that tell the history—and/or dramatize the occupants—of a particular cemetery.

Performances specifically set in cemeteries require little justification for their site-specificity: if the story's setting, as originally conceived, *is* a cemetery, why not stage the performance in a real one? Lindsay Harris Friel's *Traveling Light*, which takes place in a cemetery and received a "literal presentation" at Minneapolis Pioneers and Soldiers Memorial Cemetery by Theatre Pro Rata in 2010, is an example of this first category; Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, performed by Charenton Theater Company at several burial sites in Cleveland in 2003, is arguably another, as its format is a series of epitaphs delivered by the (fictional) deceased residents of Spoon River themselves.[26] This first form of cemetery theatre is admittedly practical (why build fake grave markers when you can use real ones?) but may also be invested in giving its patrons a more "authentic" experience.

Performances that benefit from staging in cemeteries, even if none (or only some) of their scenes take place in one, require slightly more justification. These iterations of cemetery theatre run the gamut from serious and celebrated contemplations of mortality to "straight-up spooky fun"; Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, produced by Black Swan Events on "a platform under a giant oak tree" in

[24] Jean Genet, *Fragments of the Artwork*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Meridian, Crossing Aesthetics, ed. Werner Hamacher (Stanford University Press, 2003), 108.
[25] Taylor, "Following the Plot (Literally)."
[26] Taylor; Combs, "'Traveling Light' among the Dead."

Austin's Boggy Creek Cemetery in 2010, is a typical example of the former, while Unbound Productions' "Wicked Lit" adaptations of classic horror stories in Altadena, California's Mountain View Mausoleum and Cemetery (timed, in 2011, to coincide with Halloween) are a great example of the latter.[27] This second type of cemetery theatre, rather than foregrounding its site's "authenticity," often seeks to channel the site's atmosphere and/or mood to influence its audience's affective response.

Artful Conspirators' *Brooklyn Underground*, performed in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery in 2011, and Burning Coal Theatre Company's annual "Cemetery Series," staged in Raleigh's Oakwood Cemetery, characterize the final category I am constellating from Taylor's article, performances interested in representing a specific cemetery's unique history (and its interred historical figures) theatrically.[28] This form of cemetery theatre is concerned with telling "true," hyperlocal stories, typically for the purposes of community building. These performances are a type of heritage theatre and frequently employ theatrical devices common to historical reenactments.

While Taylor's 2011 feature is primarily concerned with theatre companies' artistic rationales for staging performances in cemeteries, it also points to some compelling civic and financial reasons to do so. Black Swan Events' *Hamlet* "raised much-needed money for the upkeep of the [cemetery] grounds," according to Boggy Creek caretaker Dale Flatt, while California's Hollywood Forever Cemetery "thrives" by deliberately "importing films, concerts and local [performance] troupes such as Circle Theatre Company and Chalk Rep."[29] Many cemeteries that actively seek partnerships with area event and/or theatre organizations "have a need for a more youthful audience," according to Megan Roberts, director of events for the quirky travel website Atlas Obscura, which produced an incredibly popular evening of entertainment called "Into the Veil" at Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery in 2015.[30] Linden Grove Cemetery in Covington, Kentucky, held its first "Cinema in the Cemetery" series in 2017, hoping the free event—which they took pains to publicize would occur "on a lawn without graves"—would "help people realize Linden Grove's beauty," and encourage local residents to visit the cemetery not only for its memorials, but its "100 species of trees" and "variety of plants."[31]

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[27] Taylor, "Following the Plot (Literally)"; Meigs, "Review: Hamlet by Black Swan Productions." For more examples of performances atmospherically enhanced by their location in a cemetery, see Trueman, "Review: Theatre: Death and the Ploughman: Arnos Vale Cemetery, Bristol 3/5"; Kurutz, "The Cemetery as Exploratory Theater"; "Circus Phantasmagoria."

[28] Taylor, "Following the Plot (Literally)"; "Oakwood and History Plays." While not performed on location, Daryl Lisa Fazio's *Freed Spirits*, produced by Horizon Theatre in 2016, recreated Atlanta's iconic Oakland Cemetery onstage; see Alexander, "THEATER: Oakland Cemetery to Take Center Stage: Fazio's 'Freed Spirits' to Make Debut Sept. 23."

[29] Taylor, "Following the Plot (Literally)."

[30] Quoted in Kurutz, "The Cemetery as Exploratory Theater."

[31] Bruce, "Kentucky Cemetery to Become Temporary Movie Theater." While it is beyond the scope of this particular study, cemetery cinema can almost certainly be traced to the phantasmagoria presented by physicist Étienne-Gaspard Robert in—depending on the scholar—a "crypt" or "abandoned chapel" in Paris in 1798. See, for example, Bergland, *The National Uncanny*, 35; Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments*, 156.

The two performances I presently discuss at length constitute very different forms of cemetery theatre, with diverging financial and philosophical goals. *The Liminal Heart* (2020), University of Colorado Boulder student Monica Weller's MFA Dance thesis project, can be categorized as a performance enhanced by its placement in a cemetery; while Weller's choreography did not technically require her piece to be situated in a real cemetery, it's hard to imagine a more conventional staging would have been equally powerful, given the performance's exploration of personal and collective grief. Historic Boulder's *Meet the Spirits* (2022), by contrast, is a textbook example of a performance telling the history of a specific cemetery, and—in this case—(re)enacting its occupants. Weller's performance, which ran two consecutive days in October 2020, was free; Historic Boulder's event, which occurs biennially on even-numbered years on a designated afternoon in October (I attended in 2022), explicitly raises money for Columbia Cemetery's upkeep. Though radically different in tone, both performances attest to cemetery theatre's considerable affective potential, raise questions about cemetery theatre's ethical production, and demonstrate the need or more concerted research into this emergent site-specific form.

Figure 1. A patron checks in for Monica Weller's *The Liminal Heart* (2020). The event maintained strict COVID-19 protocols, as evidenced by the hand sanitizer and box of masks visible in this graph. Photograph courtesy of Heather Kelley.

Figure 2. In lieu of a traditional program, patrons received a copy of a memorial poem and a long-stemmed rose to place in remembrance of the dead. Some patrons honored deceased loved ones interred elsewhere at the "Collective Memorial," while others honored strangers buried in Columbia Cemetery. Photograph courtesy of Heather Kelley.

Figure 3. Dancers perform the socially distanced ensemble section of Monica Weller's *The Liminal Heart* (2020). The "Collective Memorial," inspired by a church's stained-glass window, is visible at center; the table to its left holds writing utensils for audience members to contribute the names of their own deceased loved ones. Photograph courtesy of Heather Kelley.

The Liminal Heart (2020)

Dancer and choreographer Monica Weller moved from Chicago to pursue her Master of Fine Arts in Dance at the University of Colorado Boulder following the untimely death of her husband, Jason. A widow at the age of twenty-seven, she said she asked herself, "How do I live with it? How do I navigate society?"[32] In a 2023 interview, Weller stated that she specifically returned to academia seeking answers to these questions, as well as a better understanding of "how we hold grief, [and] how we process it" in the body.[33] Weller's three years of research into "how grief is embodied, [and] how we ritualize it" as individuals and members of society, ultimately culminated in her thesis project, *The Liminal Heart* (2020), a promenade performance in Boulder's Columbia Cemetery.

Performed by Weller and a company of eight dancers three times over the course of two days at discrete sites throughout the cemetery, *The Liminal Heart* was initially envisioned as one-third of an "evening-length proscenium performance" shared with two other graduate students also presenting their thesis projects (none of which were thematically linked).[34] When the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced Weller and her cohort mates to reimagine their pieces—which could no longer safely be performed indoors—"most people transitioned to dance films," according to Weller, though she was personally reluctant to do the same.[35] Convinced that her project "needed to be felt, and seen, and heard, and experienced" in person, Weller ultimately decided to stage her piece as a socially distanced, site-specific promenade performance in Columbia Cemetery (see Figure 1).[36] Though this pivot was entirely "birthed out of COVID" (and necessitated countless permits and training in how to limit her performance's environmental impact on the 150-year-old cemetery), Weller quickly discovered it also gave her "permission to go against the grain."[37]

To ensure her and her dancers' safety, Weller choreographed the performance as a series of solos performed at different locations around the cemetery, which the audience could visit in any order (no map of the cemetery or suggested itinerary was provided; see Figure 2). There was also one section of movement performed by the company as an ensemble, repeated three times during each performance cycle, which required the dancers to maintain a safe distance from one another.[38] Weller's organizing structure for the performance—which included a "Wake Line," "Funeral Walk," "Ritual," and "Collective Memorial"—was inspired by the format of her late husband's funeral service and burial, which were Catholic per his family's wishes.[39] Weller, who was raised Christian, was struck by the formality and processional nature of the Catholic "cemetery burial," as well as its

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[32] Weller, Interview.
[33] Weller.
[34] Weller.
[35] Weller.
[36] Weller.
[37] Weller.
[38] According to Weller, a sound cue signaled when the dancers should begin traveling from their individual locations towards the central meeting point (near the Collective Memorial) where the group would convene and perform as an ensemble. This coming together occurred three times during each cycle of performance. Weller.
[39] Weller, "The Liminal Heart"; Weller, Interview.

fundamental incomprehensibility: as she described it to me, "the cars all follow each other [with their lights on], and then everyone walks down the path" of the cemetery to the specific site where their loved one is about to be interred, only to realize they are surrounded by countless other people's loved ones, all memorialized in the exact same way.[40]

Weller's dancers, who also identified as bereaved, "co-developed" their individual solos with her at distinct locations throughout the cemetery, which Weller referred to as "chambers," both of "grief" and "of the heart."[41] Weller writes in her thesis that these "chambers" were inspired, in part, by a line from James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914):

> [Joyce] writes, "Our path through life is strewn with such sad memories: and were we to brood upon them always, we could not find the heart to go on bravely with our work among the living." To continue living as he writes, I believe the heart creates a new chamber to hold grief. Grief is held in this chamber so it can live within us while not consuming us.[42]

As grief expresses itself differently in every human body, it was imperative to Weller that "everyone had their own autonomy" in the creation of their chamber ("I didn't want it to just be my grief," she insisted), and that each dancer be given the opportunity to explore which specific "memories, sounds, smells, [and] different things trigger elements of their [individual] grief."[43] Subsequently, every chamber had unique scenic elements and its own dedicated soundscape (including hanging bells, windchimes, and audio effects such as running water), functioning as both a memorial to that particular dancer's deceased loved one, and an incredibly personalized "love letter to them."[44] As Weller put it, unguided audience members moving from chamber to chamber should at once be "visit[ing] the dancers" and "visit[ing] their people."[45]

In performance, the highly personalized nature of each chamber was immediately apparent. Though all nine dancers were costumed similarly (in white or flesh-toned clothing reminiscent of sleepwear) and fluent in the same modern dance vocabulary, no two solos were alike, in part because each installation revolved around at least one striking set piece and/or object that dictated the

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[40] Weller, Interview.

[41] Weller. Dancers were selected via an open call and could self-identify as bereaved through a voluntary survey. Weller conducted "collective" as well as "one-on-one" rehearsals and offered dancers multiple "ways to opt out" through the emotionally taxing rehearsal process. Rehearsals typically concluded with snacks and time for the participants to reflect as needed in private journals.

[42] Quoted in Monica Weller, "The Liminal Heart: An MFA Thesis Project Exploring Aliveness Within Grief and Loss" (MFA Thesis, University of Colorado Boulder, 2021), 5.

[43] Weller.

[44] Monica Weller, "Interview," September 25, 2023, by Zoom; *The Liminal Heart*, directed by Monica Weller, 2021, 52:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uG36dlwqlbc.

[45] Weller. Weller estimated that she and her dancers likely moved a total of "two-and-a-half to three hours" per performance, as they repeated their individual solos for wandering spectators and cycled through three iterations of the ensemble movement. This emphasis on duration was deliberate: Weller stated that she was both interested in exploring "what happens when you revisit the material," and also approximating the "fatigue of grief" on the company's bodies.

dancer's engagement with it.[46] In "Exposure to Submergence," dancer Nicky Schindler performed in a shallow sandbox that left visible traces of her labor, while "Well of Consumption" featured a trough of water dancer Brittney Banaei utilized to perform a cleansing ritual.[47] Some scenic elements presented direct obstacles to the dancers' movements, such as the narrow, vertical enclosure which circumscribed dancer Rachel Halmrest's self-care routine in "Waves in My Bloodstream," or the large, window-like structure dancer Brealyn Howard found herself tied to in "Tethered."[48] Most movement phrases (though not all) were slow and sustained in duration and quality, and appeared to develop from recognizable gestures, such as a hand raised in farewell.[49] Some of the most compelling choreography was connected to discernible—if impossible—tasks, such as dancer Leah White attempting to speak to her deceased mother through a wall of eight deafening box fans ("Whispers in the Waves") or Weller trying to collect her literal tears in a jar ("Swim to Me").[50]

When I asked Weller in 2023 if she had had a specific goal for the performance, she told me that she wanted to "create an environment where grief could live, because it doesn't."[51] She wanted this "environment" to extend not only to her fellow dancers, but to the audience, who served as witnesses for the dancers' grief and were also invited to express their own via the "Collective Memorial." Inspired by a Catholic church's stained-glass window, the memorial was positioned close to the center of the cemetery, where the dancers convened for their ensemble movement (see Figure 3). Stationed just to its left on a folding table were a variety of writing utensils patrons could use to add the names of their own deceased loved ones to the memorial.

This, for me, was one of the most moving aspects of Weller's entire performance, along with the much-anticipated moment the dancers processed from their individual sites to the place where they finally performed all together, to Sol Seppy's haunting song, "Enter One."[52] I remember being brought to tears by both the beauty of the collective movement—it had been almost a year since I (and, no doubt, most of the audience) had seen a live performance—and the invitation to write the name of my maternal grandmother, who had died at the onset of the pandemic. I wondered how many of the names added to the memorial were loved ones lost to COVID, and how many more names would still be added.

This, of course, was not a dimension to the project Weller initially envisioned, though she had always sought to examine collective as well as personal grief. She told me that several patrons later commented on "how palpable it was to be at a live performance," and she certainly came to see

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[46] Interestingly, the dancers rarely if ever interacted with the architecture of the cemetery itself. Whether this was a conscious display of reverence towards the cemetery's occupants or merely a product of the performance's late displacement from a traditional theatre is unclear.
[47] *The Liminal Heart*; Weller, "The Liminal Heart: An MFA Thesis Project Exploring Aliveness Within Grief and Loss," 9, 16.
[48] *The Liminal Heart*; Weller, "The Liminal Heart: An MFA Thesis Project Exploring Aliveness Within Grief and Loss," 30, 17.
[49] *The Liminal Heart*.
[50] *The Liminal Heart*; Weller, "The Liminal Heart: An MFA Thesis Project Exploring Aliveness Within Grief and Loss," 19–20, 38–39.
[51] Weller.
[52] *The Liminal Heart*.

her own work as operating on multiple levels simultaneously.[53] I, for one, was astonished by the magnitude of my emotional response to the performance, despite my rational understanding of all the ways it was engaging my contemplation of loss. When reflecting on her own feelings after the performance concluded, Weller ultimately expressed satisfaction that she had done her project "justice": "I paid tribute. I gave it the time and the space."[54]

This time and space would have been radically different if Weller had staged *The Liminal Heart* in a proscenium theatre as she originally intended. The performance would have had a fixed start and end time, single vantage point, dictated order in which patrons experienced each dancer, and much more rigid delineation between performer and spectator. While I suspect it would have still been moving to watch each dancer process their private grief, I don't think nearly as many audience members would have accepted Weller's invitation to sit with their own.

In her thesis, Weller—following sociologist Émile Durkheim—writes about how shared rituals can engender "collective effervescence," or "a group of people coming together and simultaneously having the same action or thought," in her words.[55] I would argue that *The Liminal Heart* achieved this by embracing site-specificity. While the performance did not *have* to be situated in a cemetery, its efficacy was certainly enhanced by its placement there. Far from being exploitative, *The Liminal Heart*'s constructive use of Columbia Cemetery's site and attendant atmosphere made it possible for audience members to bear witness to their own losses in addition to the dancers'.

Figure 4. Volunteer Jamie Lammers, a University of Colorado Boulder student, portrays Louis Garbarino, a saloon owner and entrepreneur, in Historic Boulder's *Meet the Spirits* (2022). Photograph courtesy of Heather Kelley.

[53] Weller.
[54] Weller.
[55] Weller, "The Liminal Heart: An MFA Thesis Project Exploring Aliveness Within Grief and Loss," 29.

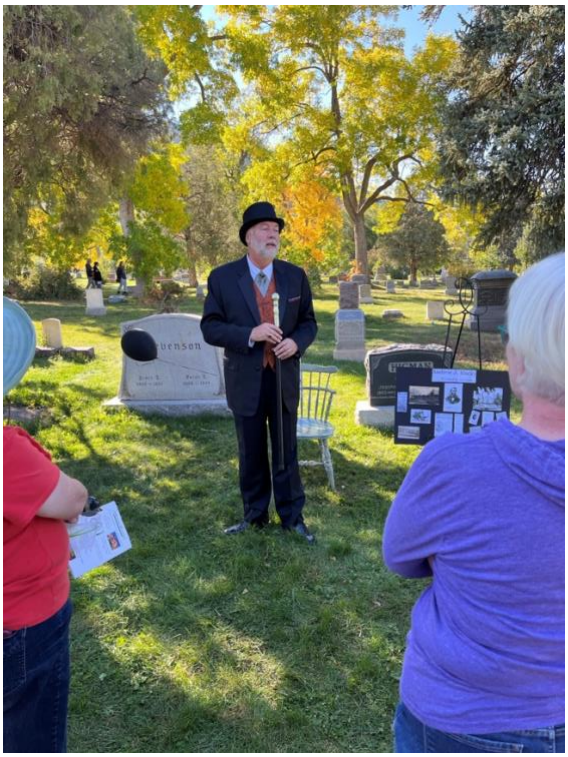

Figure 5. Volunteer Bob Yates portrays Andrew J. Macky, one of Boulder's richest citizens, in Historic Boulder's *Meet the Spirits* (2022). His accompanying "storyboard" can be seen at right. Photograph courtesy of Heather Kelley.

Figure 6. Performance sites were designated by a black balloon and numbered (graphic) tombstone; patrons received a corresponding map in their programs. This particular site's "spirit" had either dematerialized or taken a bathroom break when the author strolled by. Photograph courtesy of Heather Kelley.

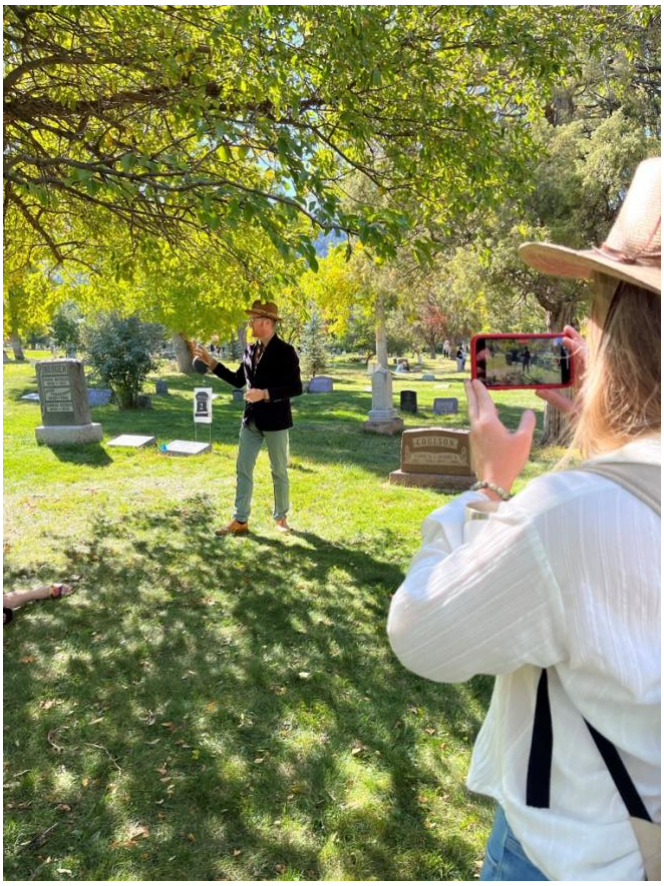

Figure 7. Volunteer Waylon Lewis portrays promoter Eben G. Fine (nicknamed "Mr. Boulder") in Historic Boulder's Meet the Spirits (2022). Photograph courtesy of Heather Kelley.

Meet The Spirits **(2022)**

While also structured as a promenade performance that, to some extent, enables patrons to "choose their own adventure," Historic Boulder's Meet the Spirits (2022) bears very little immediate resemblance to Weller's Liminal Heart. Part "self-guided cemetery tour" and part site-specific theatrical performance bordering on historical reenactment, Meet the Spirits features costumed "community volunteers" portraying "some of Boulder's dearly departed permanent 'residents'" in situ at their graves in Columbia Cemetery (see Figure 4).[56] Billed as an entertaining and educational trip "back in time," and "interactive way to learn about Boulder's history and preservation of the cemetery," the all-ages event has been offered biennially on even-numbered years since 1986.[57] Proceeds support the producer, Historic Boulder (a non-profit organization that advocates for historic preservation in the Boulder area), as well as the PLAY Boulder Foundation's fund to sustain Columbia Cemetery.[58]

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[56] Pettem, *Boulder: A Sense of Time and Place*, 210; "Meet the Spirits 2022."
[57] "Meet the Spirits 2022."
[58] "Meet the Spirits 2022"; "Historic Boulder, Inc."; "About."

As is likely evident from my description, *Meet the Spirits* is a clear example of the third subtype of cemetery theatre: performances that dramatize the history and/or occupants of a specific cemetery. Much like a "living history" museum, *Meet the Spirits* employs a "first-person" (rather than "third-person") interpretive model whereby its volunteers "speak in the first-person, present indicative tense when informing visitors about the lives and times they are portraying," essentially "perform[ing] their roles as if they were the subject on display."[59] Volunteers are cast as particular "spirits" based on their age, race, gender identity, and interests, with Historic Boulder providing "thumbnail sketch[es] from cemetery records" as initial biographical data.[60] Additional research is conducted by the volunteers themselves, who are responsible for "creat[ing] their own script, or talking points"; some even construct "storyboards with photos and information about the deceased" to accompany their performance, much like a dramaturgical display in a theatre lobby (see Figure 5).[61]

According to Historic Boulder office administrator Melanie Julian Muckle, empowering volunteers to do their own research ensures participants are invested in their historical figures and committed to portraying them accurately and ethically. "It's about engagement and learning, deep learning," Muckle told me in a 2023 interview; she also acknowledged that "allocation of labor" is a factor.[62] Volunteers, Muckle said, often become deeply attached to the deceased person they're portraying; one participant, who had played the same "spirit" for years but had to step away in 2022, initially declined to share her "script" with her replacement.[63] There is no director, or coordinated rehearsal process, for the event. As volunteer Jamie Lammers, a University of Colorado Boulder student who participated in 2022, put it, "We were given complete freedom so long as we stuck to the facts."[64]

This "freedom" translates to a high degree of improvisation in performance, no matter how familiar and/or comfortable the volunteer is with their "script," or how many years they have played the same "role." When I attended *Meet the Spirits* in 2022, it was clear that volunteers had no choice but to improvise, constantly fielding wide-ranging questions from the audience about their "characters," and coaxing patrons into more advantageous viewing positions as spectators. There were, as one might expect in any amateur theatrical production, varying levels of commitment and embodiment in the performances themselves. Some volunteers tried to "stay in character" even when no patrons were in their immediate vicinity, while other volunteers made no attempt to

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[59] Magelssen, *Living History Museums*, xxii. In a 1998 newspaper column, local historian and *Meet the Spirits* volunteer Silvia Pettem specifically characterizes the event as a "'living history' of Boulder's deceased"; see Pettem, *Boulder: A Sense of Time and Place*, 210.
[60] Muckle, "Meet the Spirits Origin Research." See also Pettem, *Boulder: A Sense of Time and Place*, 210.
[61] Muckle, "Meet the Spirits Origin Research."
[62] Muckle, Interview.
[63] Muckle.
[64] Lammers, "Re: Meet the Spirits," September 15, 2023.

disguise the fact that they occasionally needed to eat, or care for their real, uncostumed children.[65] Several volunteers (particularly those who had played their historical figure before) displayed an impressive array of ancillary props accrued over their many years of performance, including cast-iron buckets, tin cups, canteens, leather satchels, horse blankets, saddles, lassoes, reproduction firearms, walking sticks, framed photographs, and antiquated books.

"Spirits" and their living reenactors were identified by a "cast" list in the distributed program, which also contained promotions for on-site vendors, a brief history of the cemetery's founding, and a map of the cemetery itself.[66] Numbered black tombstones (twenty-one in total) on the map indicated graves accompanied by volunteers; these same icons were reproduced on mounted posters at the site to assist patrons in locating the appropriate graves (see Figure 6). While patrons could visit the graves in the order suggested by their corresponding numbers, many audience members chose to wander the cemetery with no pre-ordained path.

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of each individual performance was how the volunteer chose to initially attract and then engage potential audience members. Promoter Eben G. Fine, as played by Waylon Lewis (see Figure 7), actively recruited patrons to his station, and then made them wait at his gravesite until he had convened a sufficiently large enough crowd to begin. By contrast, Dorothy "Dot" Gay Howard, as played by Al Burgess, remained seated on a blanket on the ground, effectively willing audience members to come to her and partake in a much more intimate encounter. (Consciously or unconsciously, Burgess limited how many patrons attended each telling of Howard's story; as Burgess never stood up, their location was much less visible than many other volunteers'.) Lewis and Burgess also varied in their approaches to characterization; Lewis's speech was light-hearted, filled with puns and jokes, and delivered at a high volume, whereas Burgess's monologue was serious, imbued with a sense of reverence, and spoken at a low volume. While it's possible these differences reflect the personalities and/or performance aesthetics of the volunteers themselves to some degree, they also meaningfully reflect the volunteers' research and sense of care for their "characters": Howard, for example, was the (for many years, anonymous) victim of an unsolved homicide in the area, which made Burgess's quieter tone and refusal to sensationalize Howard's story entirely appropriate.

Volunteers also significantly varied in their identification (and signification) of an "end" to their encounters with audience members; some performers' monologues had conclusive "buttons," while other volunteers seemed unclear how or when to "end" their interactions. This confusion was often mirrored in the audience themselves, who were appreciative of the volunteers' efforts, but uncertain whether they should applaud for performances that typically concluded with specific (and, occasionally, tragic) details about a subject's death. When the audience perceived the death of a

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[65] In an email, volunteer Jamie Lammers confirmed that Historic Boulder delivered "lunches of sandwiches [to volunteers] to make sure we weren't famished by the end of the run" (the event ran from 12:00 PM-5:00 PM). See Lammers.

[66] "Meet the Spirits Program." Vendors included Psychic Horizons (offering psychic readings), The Natural Funeral (providing green burial services), and two local historical reenactment groups, the Legendary Ladies and Edward Baker and the Buffalo Soldiers.

"spirit" to be particularly violent and/or unjust, they often apologized directly to the volunteer-as-subject ("I'm so sorry that happened to you"), prompting the volunteer to then reassure the patron they had lived a long and fulfilling life, and now enjoyed a lasting legacy.

Whatever their "acting ability," every volunteer had clearly put considerable time and energy into their performance. Lammers, who portrayed saloon owner Louis Garbarino in 2022 (and had prior experience as an actor at the University of Colorado Boulder), wrote to me in an email that he particularly enjoyed the process of researching Garbarino, and sharing what he'd learned with the event's attendees (which included, he told me in a later email, a relative of Garbarino himself):

> In my opinion, it was really fun interacting with the audience because I got to educate them on a lesser-known figure of Boulder history and, in a way, be an authority on that history. It was fun getting laughs from the audience when you conveniently forgot a specific fact because you've been dead for too long (I can't remember if that was a suggestion by Historic Boulder or if I came up with that on my own, although I have a feeling that was Historic Boulder's idea). It was fun being an educational resource for people who wanted to learn more about the local history of Boulder and for those who had a genuine interest in being there.[67]

Lammers wrote that his only regret was the event's biennial scheduling: "It was just a really fun, educational experience, and I am so bummed that it only takes place once every two years, because I would go to it every year if I could."[68]

Judging from the longevity of the event and its consistently high attendance numbers, it appears most Boulderites share Lammers's view. When I attended in 2022, the atmosphere was relaxed and surprisingly festive; many audience members walked dogs, and children could participate in a related scavenger hunt (indeed, fourth graders could attend the whole event for free "in support of Colorado History Studies," according to the website).[69] In addition to the *Meet the Spirits* program proper, patrons could enjoy live music, sit for psychic readings, purchase a signed copy of *If These Stones Could Talk: Tales from Columbia Cemetery* (a local history book about the cemetery), and even take pictures of themselves in a coffin as part of a promotion for a local green burial company.[70]

According to Muckle, Historic Boulder typically receives "one nasty comment" each time they present the program, usually expressing the opinion "it's disrespectful."[71] Muckle insists that her staff and volunteers make every attempt to be respectful of the living families of all deceased individuals portrayed in *Meet the Spirits*, and have, in some cases, welcomed direct descendants—

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[67] Lammers, "Re: Meet the Spirits," September 15, 2023; Lammers, "Re: Meet the Spirits," September 20, 2023. Melanie Julian Muckle confirmed in a subsequent interview that she empowers all volunteers to use this excuse: "If you don't know [the answer to a question a patron asks you], you can say you've been dead and you can't be expected to know that. You've been dead so long, you forget a lot of things." See Muckle, Interview.
[68] Lammers, "Re: Meet the Spirits," September 15, 2023.
[69] "Meet the Spirits 2022"; "Meet the Spirits Program."
[70] "Meet the Spirits Program."
[71] Muckle, Interview.

interested in learning more about their ancestor—to the event itself. At least one *Meet the Spirits* performance has even resulted in the restoration of an anonymous homicide victim's name: local historian Silvia Pettem, who participated in *Meet the Spirits* in 1996, was so moved by a fellow volunteer's portrayal of "Jane Doe," an unidentified woman found murdered in 1954 and buried in the cemetery, that she ultimately raised funds for the woman's body to be exhumed so DNA could be extracted.[72] In 2009, "Jane Doe" was positively identified as the aforementioned Dorothy "Dot" Gay Howard; Pettem chronicles her years of painstaking research into Howard's identity in the book, *Someone's Daughter: In Search of Justice for Jane Doe* (2009).[73]

Muckle has addressed one additional criticism of *Meet the Spirits*, leveled not by a potential audience member, but a fellow stakeholder in the historic preservation community. This criticism takes the shape of, "'It's just a reenactment, it's not a preservation project,'" and "'*Meet the Spirits* isn't really our mission because it's an acting thing.'"[74] Muckle hopes she has, by now, convinced this particular individual "that's not the case," as the event draws consistent attention to Historic Boulder's efforts to "save and preserve" Columbia Cemetery, and raises significant funds for the non-profit to do just that.[75] In Muckle's view, *Meet the Spirits* is wholly aligned with Historic Boulder's larger mission, which she describes as "so much about place: the power of place, [and] the saving of place."[76]

Conclusion

While very different in tone, *The Liminal Heart* and *Meet the Spirits* share at least one objective: to honor the dead and bring them into closer proximity with the living. Much like the "cemetery theatre" first envisioned by Genet in 1967, both performances challenge standard theatrical conventions and invite audience members to relate to the space of the cemetery in novel and meaningful ways. As examples of two distinctive subtypes of cemetery theatre—performances enhanced by their placement in cemeteries, and performances dramatizing the history of a particular cemetery—these performances speak to the diversity of cemetery theatre's goals, relationships to site, and desired impacts on audiences, demonstrating the value of a taxonomy that attends to these differences.

The Liminal Heart, through its unwavering commitment to making space for personal and collective grief, spotlights the resilience of a community grappling with unspeakable losses, and offers its dancers—and patrons—opportunities for commemoration and healing. While the atmosphere of the performance is undeniably mournful, what the audience actually witnesses is

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[72] Augé, "After 55 Years, Boulder Jane Doe's Story Finally Coming Together"; Colorado Humanities & Center for the Book, "Cemetery Reenactment Hooked Silvia Pettem on Tracking Missing Persons."
[73] Augé, "After 55 Years, Boulder Jane Doe's Story Finally Coming Together"; Colorado Humanities & Center for the Book, "Cemetery Reenactment Hooked Silvia Pettem on Tracking Missing Persons." Pettem also wrote about "Jane Doe" in her history column for Boulder's Daily Camera; see Pettem, *Boulder: A Sense of Time and Place*, 93–95, 212.
[74] Muckle, Interview.
[75] Muckle.
[76] Muckle.

stubborn perseverance: the persistence of the living, finding some way to survive without the dead, and the persistence of the dead, reminding the living they are never fully gone. *Meet the Spirits*, while decidedly more playful in tone, is also concerned with putting the living and the dead in dialogue with one another (in this case, quite literally), and ensuring the community's history continues to be preserved and transmitted. This performance raises awareness of the importance of historic preservation, as well as necessary funds for the long-term maintenance of Columbia Cemetery itself, rebranding it as a vibrant and welcoming communal space for the living.

In the end, both performances—though radically different in aesthetic—attest to cemetery theatre's affective power and potential as a tool for building and nourishing a sense of community. In their transformation of an otherwise static, seldom visited cemetery into a dynamic, living memorial and meeting place, *The Liminal Heart* and *Meet the Spirits* pose critical questions about if and how we may ethically and lovingly (re)animate our dead. Just as importantly, both productions actively perform hope in a place it typically isn't associated with, and spark meaningful conversation through their varied interpretations of witnessing.

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