

Mid-Year Report - Graduate Women New Zealand, 2020

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In July 2019 I began doctoral fieldwork in New York City. Based in Brooklyn, I began gathering data about what happens when people die in New York, especially when people cannot afford a funeral. I met with policymakers and officials, activists, artists, funeral directors, city councillors, religious leaders, historians, journalists, bereaved relatives, cemetery staff and others. I visited Hart Island five times; this has been the city's paupers' burial ground for 150 years and over one million New Yorkers are buried there. Hart Island is managed by the Department of Correction which allows visitors once a month, so visiting is somewhat like a prison visit: your visit needs to be approved in advance; you must present photo ID and hand in all communications devices; the only access to the island is by DOC ferry; and you are attended by a DOC officer throughout your visit. I also spent time with people out on City Island (the closest residential area to Hart Island), where citizens are deeply invested in Hart Island's past and future. I got to know people who witnessed NYC's HIV/AIDS epidemic as this history has become particularly important for Hart Island. I also volunteered with a homeless dinner service in Manhattan.

Serendipity can be powerful. My fieldwork coincided with the biggest transformation in Hart Island's modern history: moving jurisdiction from Department of Correction to NYC Parks. This was a major victory for activists and relatives who believed that this will eventually mean greater access to the cemetery for relatives, family and friends.

with her, they now have dignity. I'll be able to visit and lay flowers on her grave whenever I want, not at the direction of the penal system.'

However, by early March, serendipity of a different sort struck. New York was speeding towards disaster and the panicked atmosphere there was frightening. Covid-19 made onsite fieldwork impossible: public services and institutions closed, people moved voluntarily into self-isolation, and NYC declared a state of emergency. I have serious asthma, and given the precarity of US healthcare, I evacuated back to the University of Cambridge, UK. From lockdown, I've continued my fieldwork remotely (just as I would have done had I remained in NYC). My project now includes New York's disaster care of the dead, in what is currently the global epicentre for Covid-19. Funeral directors face overwhelming shortages in morgue space and crematory capacity. The New York death rate reached six times higher than normal in April, and Hart Island itself has been extraordinarily busy. The social practices of funerals have rapidly changed there (as they have everywhere where morbidity has been high or social distancing has been ordered) and people are being buried or cremated without ceremony, or bodies held for long waiting periods.



However, despite the practical difficulties, I hope that the generative research potential of my project is now stronger, and that I'm well-positioned to make accounts and analysis of these rapidly changing phenomena. I will return to NYC when the situation calms and the travel bans relax. As I write, the US border remains closed, and the NZ, US and UK governments continue to strongly advise against non-essential travel, so I have no clear idea about when this will be possible.

Alongside fieldwork I have continued publishing: this year's highlights have included *Death Down Under: Twenty-first Century Dying, Death, Disposal and Memorialisation in the Antipodes* (2019; McManus, Cornwall and Raudon, eds; Cambridge Scholars Publishing) and *The Crown and Constitutional Reform* (2020; Shore, Raudon, Williams, eds; Routledge).

None of this would be possible without the support of Graduate Women New Zealand. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to do this work and to be able to strengthen my intellectual capacities and broaden my understandings through it.