The Witness of Trees: Creative Essay

MariJean Wegert

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/thenorthmeridianreview
“Indigenous peoples understand that there is no difference between the telling and the material. They understand how we all, in fact, live inside and through the narratives we tell and that the importance in telling stories is inseparable from the identity, community and history they compose and the spiritual, economic, and political realities on which they depend and which they subvert or preserve.”


Indigenous adjective
Indegenous /ɪnˈdɪdʒənəs/
(formal) “Belonging to a particular place rather than coming to it from somewhere else.”

If you want to find life, go to a graveyard.

I think of it as the trees’ revenge. Or maybe, they’re simply making the most of what they have – for when humans decided that the best way to honor their dead was by filling their body with embalming fluid, cementing them into a hole in the ground away from the beautiful, regenerative process of decomposition and rebirth – there must have been anger from the animate world. Tree anger. Hedge anger. Worm anger and beetle anger.

Who do you think you are? I hear them saying. Too good to feed us, as we fed you? But in this anthropomorphic insistence on absence, on amputatedness, on sterility, the trees claim their elder space.

When I visit a graveyard – to honor the dead, or to make space for my grief – I go there for the trees. In a graveyard I find the trees that aren’t often found elsewhere: in addition to the oaks and maples, I find chestnuts. I find linden, alder, sweetgum, and tulip poplar. Beech and elm and ash. They tower over the statues of women draped in stone, the temple-like marble vaults that worship the wealth of the departed. Their roots curl around the edges of the graves, vast invisible networks lacing fingers underground. Over time, the trees will crack them open. They’ll sidle their wild tongues, along with the fungus, the insects, the soil. But until then, they reclaim the space around the dead, teeming it with life. They seem to laugh, saying, You tried. You tried to pretend we are lesser beings. But we are still here, and we are thriving while you are alone.

I discovered the graveyard in 2019, a few miles south of Wabash, Indiana, the first electrically lighted city in the world. I followed a trail of signs to a newly opened coffee shop housed in a greenhouse on the White’s campus. Today called White’s Residential Center, the
The institute is located a few miles south of Wabash, along a tributary of the Wabash River called Treaty Creek.

Tucked in a gentle ridge in the crease of a gully and Treaty Creek, the graveyard is full of the bodies of indigenous children, many of them Sioux, buried in soil far from their families and native lands.

The graveyard is run down and unmarked. The wooden arms of the fence around the edge of the space are leaning groundward at the corners, and about half the stones are undecipherable and many of them are leaning or flat on their faces in the dirt or cracked in two. The names on the headstones, if there are any, are wind worn and barely legible. It seems like a graveyard of the forgotten.

But the place remembers what happened even if people don’t.

In early 2020, in the middle of a pandemic-ravaged country, I followed a series of calls to live in Wabash and work at the center for a season as a groundskeeper. I’d always felt the land around Wabash was mystical and mythical; poised like a strange hill country in between the flat, dusty corn and soybean fields that disgrace much of the Indiana terrain, the city itself was anomalous to most of the Midwest, offering graceful architecture, built in the sweep of a hillside, along the Wabash River. Right over the bridge jutted the strange edges of limestone and shale bluffs, blown out of the hillside by dynamite a few hundred years before to make way for a railroad.

Wabash is the site of the official signing of documentation forcing the removal of Miami and Potawatomi tribes who were settled in the area in 1826. The United States promised a half million dollars for as many acres of their settled land. The site of the “treaty” is commemorated along the river, where small cabins built like the traders’ cabins form a semicircle a ways off from the riverbank, carrying an odd celebratory vibe, as if the event had a mutually agreeable outcome for all parties.

The overlapping histories—of the city, and the ground it is built over, were both full of intrigue. But below the veneers of brick and long windows gleaming in the sunset, the place felt haunted. I couldn’t note what, but I had a feeling it had something to do with the dissonance in the proud announcement of the land trade, with the reality that our history books don’t discuss.

Today, the center offers recovery services, residential care, and a high school for children at risk of incarceration. Most of the campus leadership are practicing Christians and boast evangelical Christian values. The newly opened coffee-shop greenhouse, which drew me to the campus, boasted that it hired from the pool of these at-risk children, giving them opportunities to learn responsibility, resilience, and, of course, experience the therapeutic benefits of hanging out with plants.

Around every corner of the grounds seemed to be something anciently tended sycamores and chestnuts, lindens and alders and oaks. But the place itself, deeper than the history of the white people who built on it, thrums with a sort of connection—the very first time I laid eyes on
the campus, cupped in a hollow of trees on the way down to the greenhouse, my very body talked back: *I want to be here*, it said. The land itself talked—not with words, but with sensations. I felt *called*.

I enjoyed my seasonal job there as a groundskeeper. I loved being outside, the manual labor and the investment of my coworkers in my learning new skills. Over the course of the summer, I learned how to operate and maintain a zero-turn mower; received training with chainsaws, tractors, and backhoes; and even got some basic training on how to take care of cars from the resident mechanic. I learned a few of the basics of how to take care of cattle and listened to a lot of stories about how to run a small farm from the two elder employees, who were small-town curmudgeons in every sense of the word.

Most of my coworkers had worked on the grounds for decades. They were full of stories about how the school was run “in the old days.” They waxed eloquent about the formal boxing matches that used to be held in the back forty to dispel quarrels—a practice squarely done away with in modern times—and showed me the acres where the students used to be responsible for subsistence farming—corn, squash, beans, wheat. They also told me about one of the campus buildings; an eerie, squat building, made of concrete and with bars over the windows. Until a few years ago, according to the stories, it was where the school sent “problem kids,” students who committed acts such as trying to run away into the two miles of cornfields surrounding the hollow, or smuggling drugs or other “contrabands” into the campus. Part of their remediation was often to spend time in the building, designed to feel as much like a prison as possible.

Another coworker, a young dad who works with the “sexual divergent” group for a few seasons, talks to me of the sanctioned form of physical takedowns over a bag of *Doritos*, laughing as he says that, “These kids need to get a taste of what could happen if they don’t learn to behave.”

The solitary confinement and takedown practices were done away with for liability reasons, but the building is still there, a cold, cave-like shadow on the campus. And the coworker is still laughing remembering his glory days.

When I go to a graveyard, I can tell what people value. A body in death is treated like a body in life: individuated, preserved in shriveled objectivity instead of a vibrant, interrelational subjectivity of dirt. Words carved in stone in eternal purity. Boxes within boxes. These collective death rituals portray a civilization obsessed with sterility, with individuality, and with the trappings of the cold, hard metal of currency.

The air inside a tomb must be so old—no decay. But no life either. And no beauty. Some graves tell me smaller stories: *this person is still remembered and loved*, say the fresh flowers and the tiny pebble cairns. Some graves are so old no one tends them anymore; maybe some were never tended at all. But the trees—they tell me what the people forget.

And they also grieve.
As I spent time with the gently rolling terrain of this haunted little place, following the loop of the barn swallows in the mornings, and watching the tulip poplars flower on the hillside, I found myself drawn back to the graveyard.

I asked my coworkers about it one morning during our morning coffee break in the maintenance warehouse. The head gardener, who has been at White’s for decades, and who has the tender heart of an empath and storyteller, gives me a few hushed sentences. He tells me there was an epidemic, that the Sioux and children from several other tribes who were forced from their homes caught a plague and were all buried there.

I seek out a public record of deaths at White’s and only find a few deaths per year, but the thought doesn’t leave me. In the campus center, there are cheerful pictures of the many eras of White’s school hanging from the ceiling, a testament to their services, spanning the first era of orphan care, the years of subsistence farming, to today’s residential care. Sandwiched in between is a black-and-white photo of the years of “Indian reform school”—nightmarish pictures of indigenous children with cut hair, the uncanny combination of the cut shoulders of a white man’s suit. To the unresearched eye it could be just another picture in the legacy of White’s. There is no notation of the reality behind the picture, and there is no marker on the dilapidated cemetery sign depicting the oppression of bodies and spirits that was the Indian reform school.

The director of the place lives across the gully, in a special house not unlike the rectory of a religious institution, living on the campus. King of his hill. He invites the groundskeepers to a lunch on his swept deck one day, grilling burgers and serving watermelon in chunks from a plastic bowl. Over our plates of food, I ask him about the graveyard—maybe there is a plan, I think. Maybe this pain can be witnessed instead of glossed over.

His eyes, in fact, gloss over when I ask him—he waves his hand vaguely toward the bodies in the hillside within sight of his pristinely mown back yard. “Oh yes,” he says vaguely. “I think there is some organization interested in updating it eventually. They have plans for—sometime, in the future, I think.”

The White’s school founder and namesake, Josiah White, was a businessman, a philanthropist, and Quaker who dreamed of starting a school for underprivileged children. His dream was realized in 1860, when the school opened to students of all races—one of the few in the area that admitted Black and indigenous children. A progressive for his time, White wanted a school where any orphan could attend, and which was accessible to low-income students. White’s noble cause was quickly subverted when, twenty years later, the Indian Aid Society and Indian Bureau negotiated funding for White’s in exchange for the admission of indigenous children during their removal from their families to the infamous “assimilation schools”—a nightmare in which children would be taken from their parents, sometimes without their knowledge or consent, and stripped of their language, traditions, agency, and pride.

The history book I found about White’s did cast an apologetic tone for the atrocities, but it’s not apparent in how the institution runs currently. This graveyard is their secret: White’s, along with the many other schools, hosted indigenous children removed from their families, their native practices and language, cutting their hair (a sacred), dressing them in “civilized” clothing,
and forcing them to live and breathe as different than who they are. White’s admitted indigenous children for a decade before reformatting.

White’s was a subsistence center for many decades; children were worked hard and fed poorly. At the time the executives of the school took a harsh Victorian stance. Those children were likely buried in shrouds, or plain wooden coffins if their families could afford them. There was no concrete barrier between them and the earth and no embalming fluid to keep them from returning to dirt.

Their stories are now stored in the roots of the trees.

~

In 1883, the Wabash Weekly Courier published an announcement in its morning publication:

“THIRTY LITTLE INDIANS”

It read, “Last Tuesday morning thirty Indian children from the Indian Territory, for whom provision has been made at White’s Institute, south of the city, arrived here and were immediately taken to their new home, where they will complete their education. They were an intelligent looking set of redskins and wore the garb of civilization; in appearance they did not differ from the Indians on the reservation in this county. …All in all they are a respectable lot of kids who will some day possibly make useful citizens.”

Another article made a firm claim that “No pupil having been brought here against his will” “An Indian school—White’s Indiana Manual Labor Institute 11 May 1888.” History tells a different story.

The cited newspaper article betrays the attitude of the day: that these sites of oppression were, in fact, the saving grace for these “redskins” who, with the right structure and programming, could “possibly” become productive citizens.

But this is one storyline; there are many more.

A more accurate version of the story of the land might be told by Zitkala-Sa (also known as Gertrude Bonnin), a Dakota Sioux who moved to White’s during the late 1880s. In her books, she tells of the slow, agonizing spirit thievery of the customary assimilation practices, the oppression of body, and consequent numbing:

“In the process of my education I had lost all consciousness of the nature world about me,” she writes in American Indian Stories. “Thus, when a hidden rage took me to the small white-walled prison I then called my room, I unknowingly turned away from my one salvation.”79

Whatever practices she lost, the young Gertrude understood something about trees. In her retellings of her childhood memories, she recounts listening to telegraph poles: “Often I had

stopped on my way down the road, to hold my ear against the [telegraph] pole, and, hearing its low moaning, I used to wonder what the paleface had done to hurt it.\textsuperscript{80}

That “paleface” apparently leaves dead and dying trees in their wake.

I hop off my mower in the clearing later that week, where some of the names carved in stone are too time-worn to read. The head gardener hops off his mower too, and approaches me, with a posture of deference. “Are you acquainting yourself with the children?” he asks. I just nod.

The trees around this graveyard are sick. Some kind of leaf gall blisters on the stand of young maples planted directly around the graveyard. The old sycamore in the lowland downhill from the graves, where floodwater from the nearby ditch collects to run into Treaty Creek, shoulders a bulbous growth the size of a person. The tree itself is thick and towering, one of the widest-trunked sycamores I have ever seen. Its roots crawl into the side of the hill, and on the other side, I’m sure, reach almost to the creek, drinking up water. The growth is the size of – the size of several children, in fact. When I go near it, a shadow passes over my heart, like something cold and full of grief is held there.

Even going near the swelling growth makes me shudder. I do some research on tree cancers, finding that trees can close their own brittle skin over pathogens to keep it from infecting itself or other trees. Whatever this tree carries, it is massive, and dark. The roots plunge into the soggy soil beneath it, a floodplain of the creek, holding on for its life against the desperate weight its upper branches bear.

I kept thinking about how trauma stores in the body. How it goes deep into our cells to hide, how bodies form and twist to accommodate unwitnessed suffering. If trauma stores in our bodies, then why not in earth’s body? \textit{What if the trees know?} What if the sickness in the trees around the graveyard is the cellular memory of the place, holding on to unwitnessed sorrow? If humans are partially responsible for the stories they tell, then why not the trees? The rivers? What can we read from their stories?

I’ve come to see that such meaning-making faculty \textit{is} part of the magic and power humans were meant to have. Stories are one of the fundamental ways we were meant to interact with the world. But it’s a transhuman faculty. The trees tell the stories, too. I wonder if I was called to that crevice in time and space to witness, with the trees, what had been forgotten by humans. Part of me thinks that’s why the place wanted me there. Someone to witness. Someone to see and acknowledge what the leadership of the place must hide behind platitudes: that, despite the intentions of the original founder, the place and the people there were complicit in the erasure of a people group, in the oppression of indigenous bodies, in the death of body and spirit.

The trees remember. And now, I do too.

\textsuperscript{80} Zitkala-Sa, “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, February 1900, 186.