

# Goin' to Nature to Reach Double Consciousness: A Du Boisian Methodological Journey to Graves of the Formerly Enslaved

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## Abstract:

*Too few W. E. B. Du Boisian scholars happen upon the fact that “double consciousness” is self-awareness or an assessment of self-identity that flows from two very different sources of memory—diachronic or accretive, and syndetic or invoked. I have borrowed Du Bois’s notion of “double consciousness” as an angle of perception to begin to theorize about what I believe occurs—knowingly or unknowingly—when some members of the African and white descendant communities visit burials of formerly enslaved people of African descent. This paper explores the significance of gravesites of formerly enslaved people of African descent as powerful sacred spaces in nature that embody and percolate ancestral memories. In so doing, it also considers one’s feelings of attachment to local landscapes of memory, one’s preoccupation with cultural identity at natural sites of entombment, and one’s relation to the visitable past. These thoughts, while they may strike some as out of place in traditional academic circles, are an acknowledgment of what we can learn from the language of rituals as structures and practices performed in nature. As such, these rituals identify cultural ethnicities and individual identities, as well as provoke reflection and understanding of social memories and embodied histories.*

## “The Olive Trees of Soller”

you must remember that this is an island  
and that these people can only remember  
the words for how many and when  
that in this quagmire of passageways and cobblestones  
horses trot toward towns that no longer exist<sup>5</sup>  
except on postcards  
and without the tour busses this plaza  
would never hold the secrets of the greengrocer’s daughter  
and that these roads run from right to left

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and upside down into both mountains and ocean<sup>10</sup>  
 and that this cave once held the charred  
 remains of three thousand Moors  
 for whom my black heart still hurts  
 and that these trees though imported  
 can not be included on any declaration<sup>15</sup>  
 that they spitefully grow away  
 from earth and rock in brutal  
 grinding spirals as if they have been pulled  
 from the nightmares of creatures  
 drawn by Chaka, Tolkien and Sendak<sup>20</sup>  
 that during movement or sleep  
 they resemble bones, blood vessels, organs  
 twisting mean, niggling and arthritic  
 tearing their way toward an uncanny blue sky  
 their expulsion from these gardens<sup>25</sup>  
 caused by light and heat  
 by excess, overuse  
 and the awful knowledge of flesh  
 and as you pass remember how every point  
 on the skin is immediately open<sup>30</sup>  
 to nerve endings  
 and that we haven't even come to the part  
 where the car hangs over the cliff  
 (Colleen McElroy 6-7)

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

How does the environment, or a sense of place, provoke reflection and understanding of the past, of history, of the human and non-human, of the spiritual, of the dead, and of transcendent moments in landscapes where one's ancestors may have dwelled? Through a mindscape of time-travel, Colleen McElroy, in her poem, "The Olive Trees of Soller," vicariously escorts and introduces her reader, somewhat presumptuously, to "this [...] island" and "these people" (ll. 1-2), and to a series of the tangible objects which register a lived history that is still inscribed in the nature of this place and retrievable from memories of it. Interjecting "ambiguity" into her language of memory, McElroy now fully captures the attention of her followers with her allusions to what "[...] these people can only remember" (l. 2), to "[...]towns that no longer exist except on postcards" (l. 4), to "[...] the secrets of the greengrocer's daughter" (l. 5), and lastly to "[...] the nightmares of creatures/drawn by Chaka, Tolkien and Sendak/[...] during movement or sleep" (ll. 19-21).

Modeling a narrative style reflective of a tour guide, McElroy conceptually stages a proverbial journey. She poetically regulates the group's movement through the town by rhythmically enumerating the specific locales: through "[...] passageways and cobblestones" (l. 4), the horses "trot" (l. 5), the tour "busses" (l. 7), etc. With each measure, McElroy continues to call up past events, interject commentaries about scenes real and imagined, seen and unseen, and people living and deceased. Nature's relationship to the narrator and her tourists is not initially apparent; but

McElroy eventually calls up and ties identity to those objects that remain rooted at this particular place and in her historical consciousness.

The details of McElroy's eco-centric journey give no hint of its purpose until she directs the reader to personalize the experience, until she provides anatomic descriptions of human reactions to memories of the landscape. Just before the tourists/readers come " [...] to the part/where the car hangs over the cliff" (ll. 33-34), McElroy pauses to prepare and steer them to reach an understanding of what matters to her, i.e. that nature embodies the past, that landscapes—both (re-)imagined and actual ones—are capable of resurrecting histories of people, places, and events. In fact, McElroy, having nearly reached her geographical goal, ends the poem, literally, with a "cliff-hanger," suspended in nature, without having abandoned the tour, and without having fallen into an abyss. Instead, having journeyed through a torrent of physical memories of the past, McElroy has traveled "[...] toward an uncanny blue sky" (l. 24), to a state of enlightenment mediated by nature.

Significantly, "eco-critics have done little to connect literary criticism's perennial concern with questions of identity with their own preoccupation with questions of place sense and place awareness," notes Eric L. Ball (3). In this essay, I want to reflect on William Edward Burghardt Du Bois's characteristically intuitive metaphor of "double consciousness" as a way of broaching the topic of place-based experiences in nature. Like Colleen McElroy, who uses poetry to demonstrate and explore nature as a visitable past, W. E. B. Du Bois poetically articulates a similar place-based consciousness and time-travel toward self-knowledge and cultural awareness. For Du Bois, Africa constitutes a consubstantial, historicized metaphor of place that is used to bridge an African past of great civilizations, of human captivity, and of diasporic movement to present-day descendants of Africans. Africa, therefore, is both mythical and actual; it is an imagined site, too, whereby the tangible realities of a continent's histories, as well as the emotional and inner realities and experiences of its ethnic peoples are registered by that one word. Because Africa figures so prominently in Du Bois, the notion of place attachment in his work is well-suited for examining and realizing the link between eco-criticism and ancestral memory.

### **Double Consciousness: Two Streams of Memory**

Too few Du Boisian scholars happen upon the fact that "double consciousness" is self-awareness or an assessment of self-identity that flows from two very different sources of memory—diachronic or accretive, and syndetic or invoked. I have borrowed Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" as an angle of perception to begin to theorize about what I believe occurs—knowingly or unknowingly—when some members of the African and white descendant communities visit burials of formerly enslaved people of African descent. More specifically, I want to explore one's awareness of particular places in nature, one's feelings of attachment to local landscapes of memory, one's preoccupation with cultural identity at these places, and one's relation to history or the visitable past. For this purpose, I have chosen to explore the significance of gravesites of formerly enslaved people of African descent as powerful sacred spaces of entombment—*spaces in nature* that embody and percolate ancestral memories. These thoughts, while they may strike some as out of place in traditional academic circles, are an acknowledgment of what we can learn from the language of rituals, i.e. a language that speaks through "order, pattern, intensity, frequency, rhythm, tone, and structure [...] in a specific context" (Neville 151).

In the review of his own work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois proclaimed that "the blood of my fathers spoke through me and cast off the English restraint of my training and surroundings" (Review

1152). He described and characterized his own perspective and writing style as African—i.e. as one “that is predestined to a certain narrowness of view, and at the same time to some clearness of vision within his limits with which the world often finds it well to reckon” (Du Bois, Review 1152). Based on these remarks, a Du Boisian gravesite experience would validate and give legitimacy to the mystical, the syndetic messages received from “beyond the grave” as well as to above ground historical, linear, diachronic knowledge. “Double consciousness”—à la Du Bois—foregrounds my own methodological agenda, which I refer to as “memory work.” “Memory work” is a process that uses a series of interrogatories to register or elicit the experiences of those who visit these particular gravesites. Like Du Bois’s metaphor, a multiplicity of multi-layered experiences would be normal—from the visual to the emotional, from the felt to the heard, from the intuited to the discerned—all of which connect them to a past once occupied by the deceased. Yet, it is not only an American past, but because of Du Bois’s use of the pronominal “we” in the “Of Spiritual Strivings” (*Souls of Black Folk* 220), he claimed African ancestry and linked himself spatially to Africa, rather—to be exact, to a history of enslaved African laborers in New World Atlantic communities, “who brought the Sorrow Songs to the Seats of the Mighty” (“The Sorrow Songs,” *Souls of Black Folk* 386).

Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness” is his *modus vivendi*. For it conceptualizes and combines his sense of his own position in the world, his sense of how the world perceived him and how he perceived it, as well as his thoughts about the history of Africa as a vibrant continent of peoples and as a diversified environmental space. Moreover, “double consciousness” is also a *locus classicus* in Du Bois’s canon and in place-based discourses that interrogate the construction of ethnicity, identity, and the status of race relations in our society and the world. This concept, therefore, stirs up conversations about the nature of human behavior in the physical world, the impact of the physical world on man’s behavior, and of the impossibility of man to judge and view his own behavior or that of others by avoiding the influence of culture, i.e. that which may not be limited to but which also partakes in part of the physical realm.

## Soul Travel—Memory Work

Du Bois lived in the present moment, but it was his belief in the inescapability of the historicity of the past that made this possible. In his writings, Du Bois has actually afforded us a view of the *spatial geography of his soul*. It is a soul always in motion, a soul of thoughts and memories always ebbing and flowing. Hence, those individuals who perform “memory work” at the burial sites of enslaved Africans can also be said to journey back in time, to rejoin and commune with the spirits of the Africans. Indeed, they engage in a form of “soul-travel.” The interrogatory nature of “memory work” effects this descent into the self, into the past, to an underground terrain, beneath the grave, to excavate the history about the gravesite and about whose grave is at the site. This plunge—beneath the past-present surface of the gravesite, behind the façade of the visitor who *reads*, narrates, and acts out at the site, beyond the present appearance and scripted narration (if applicable) of the site—is facilitated by this eclectic methodology—“memory work” drawing from history (slavery), psychology (trauma and mourning), archaeology (burials), and philosophy (ethics, justice, etc). While the recounting of the journey below is framed by the personal experiences of the sojourner, for the heritage traveler/tourist, I now see this as a process that corresponds to how Du Bois reads the past, from the frame of reference of an African Diasporian a) confessing, on the one hand, that “some revelation of how the world looks to me [I] cannot easily escape” (Du Bois, Review 1152), and, on the other hand, b) re-surfacing to the above ground level equipped with and having arrived at historical consciousness, self-awareness, and cultural understanding.

The process of remembering or reading at African-Atlantic gravesites means, in the Du Boisian sense, going first beneath “the veil,” journeying to “a place for communion with ancestors and meditation on the present—past-presence of—connections” (Pavlic 172). Indeed, before there is a re-entry to the surface, that is to say a return “behind the veil,” one must arrive at an understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of his/her blackness; one must “acknowledge and accept, not resolve, the contradictions” of his/her history” (Pavlic 172). In “Of Spiritual Strivings,” Du Bois writes that “the end” of the “striving” for a black person is:

to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten. The shadow of a mighty Negro past flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx. Through history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness (DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk* 215).

Du Bois’s reference to the need “to escape both death and isolation” introduces the second type of “memory work”—the syndetic. Yet, what Du Bois implies is that one must go beneath the grave, i.e. underground, to hear the griot’s story, the stories of those who once lived, worked, died, and were buried on plantations, in the woods, near the desolate meadows, in spaces where gravesites still remain, yet are only identifiable by the periwinkle, as illustrated in scenes below of the area at the Bethesda Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, where the formerly enslaved parishioners were buried.





Driveway and Stone border separate the location of the early 19th-century graves of whites—to the right—and blacks—to the left.<sup>2</sup>





Periwinkle in the above photographs covers and marks out the burial ground of the enslaved.<sup>3</sup>

The scholar's journey to the burial ground shown above is at first a solitary one involving border crossings, literally and conceptually. As illustrated in these visuals, the enslaved graves are divided or separated from the main church cemetery by a paved driveway (clearly seen in Photographs One and Two). This racial division gets further reinforced by an approximately five inch high linear stone border (as seen in Photographs Two and Three).

Methodologically speaking, the periwinkle ground covering (as seen, for instance, in Photograph Four) helps to metaphorically explain the scholar's journey to the graves. Because of the natural growth over the graves, the scholar, in the academic sense, will be required to go underground to dig and gather the details—to locate the facts, to write the appropriately acceptable historical text. This would suggest that Du Bois's notion of "doubleness" follows a state of aloneness, or what is even more extreme, a state of alienation. Bethesda Presbyterian Church, which dates back to 1769, racially segregated its deceased members during America's period of slavery, thereby creating what is tantamount to geographies of encounter within one landscape. Notwithstanding, these distinct spaces (as, for example, the one shown in Illustration Three) map out locations of spiritual places and gathering sites for the descendants of the deceased—i.e. of both the ancestors of blacks and whites. And at Bethesda, there were numerous known examples of black and white biological relations. The deceased share a common landscape, but not the same graveyard; however, for the living—i.e. those who visit this space—the journey to gravesites gels into a story with the sacred place constituting the essential ingredient that knits all parties—the living and the deceased—together in a joint experience. For at Bethesda, the whites buried in the main churchyard are as much a source of curiosity as the blacks who lie in the graveyard (as seen again in Photograph One). Like the scholar

who visits the graves of formerly enslaved persons, the typical sojourner (or heritage tourist) must go underground, first, in order to re-join or simply communicate with the descendant community.

## Rituals—Calling Up the Spirits

As noted above, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois introduces a “syndetic” form of calling up, calling forward the ancestral past. This practice has its roots in the Yoruban *orisha* tradition of going “beyond the grave” to speak with the spirits of divined ancestors (Aguwele 338-40). In his classic 18th-century slave narrative, Olaudah Equiano recalls the rituals of his people, the Ebo. In Chapter One, he talks about the “indispensable ceremony” of offering libations (i.e. palm wine) before meals “by pouring out a small portion of the drink on the floor, and tossing a small quantity of the food in a certain place, for the spirits of departed relations, which the natives suppose to preside over their conduct, and guard them from evil” (Equiano 35). That these memories of his ancestors’ daily lives and religious practices are palpable, present and always accessible and available Equiano demonstrates by the fluidity in his recalling of them through Chapter Three. Indeed, Equiano’s memories speak not only of the Ebo, but also of himself as coming from people grounded in a living landscape of collective memories of ancestral spirits.<sup>4</sup> Igor Kopytoff’s study “Ancestors as Elders in Africa” focuses on the Suku also revealing the primacy of the dead members of their lineage, particularly at special times (e.g. marriages, new births, periods of drought, etc.) or simply when the collective needs assistance:

At the grave or at the cross-roads [... c]ommunication with the dead takes the form of a conversational monologue [...]. One speaks the way one speaks to living people [...]. There is a pattern [...]. Everyone goes to his elder. If I am young, I go to my elders who happen to be alive. The old people go to their elders; but since these are dead, they are to be found at the grave or at the cross-roads at night. [...] The offer of palm wine is normal at all formal occasions when a junior approaches a senior [...]. (Kopytoff 130-33)

Equiano’s very memories of communal life result from his will and belief in his ability to draw on ancestral power to guide his everyday affairs. And this belief in ancestral power would also protect him in “the world of bad spirits” or the Middle Passage of Chapter Two (Equiano 55). Supporting this contention and broadening Kopytoff’s research, in his “Rethinking Ancestors in Africa,” John C. McCall convincingly “demonstrate[s] ... that] ancestor-related practices [...] provid[e] cultural mechanism with which people can make and remake their [...] world” (258).

The use of rituals as structures and practices performed in nature—rituals which create, maintain, identify and solidify African ethnicities—were also observed by Rev. Samuel J. Mills, a Missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church, during the early and mid-1800s. He records the following in his *Memoir*: “Sherbro on Thursday, 23d April 1818. It was a custom of their country, when strangers came, to pour a little wine on the graves of their fathers, and say ‘Good strangers have come to us: O bless good strangers,’ &c.; and they wanted a little wine to pour at the root of the tree, once fallen, now standing erect [...]” (Spring and Mills 204).

The writings of Mills and Equiano privilege the production of social memory and promote the importance of ritual practices in African societies. For Equiano, the memories of ancestors are key to how he remembers and to the very fact that he retains a memory of his past (i.e. life before captivity), which is evident throughout his narrative. And of these memories or “images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past,” Paul Connerton argues in *How Societies Remember*, “are



conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances” (Connerton 40). As noted from Equiano, belief in supernatural powers of the deceased pervades the ceremony and adds to the awe of and respect for the ritual. Mills (also an agent of the American Colonization Society) and his associates were welcomed to physically and spiritually participate at the center of this community’s culture; in fact, the African elders in the Bagroo country established an atmosphere of intimacy in their repeated address to them as “good strangers.” Even though Mills responded by telling “them their intimation would not be forgotten,” his *Memoir* immediately takes a different turn in recalling the event. He continues, “and having taken an affectionate leave of them, we returned on board, and sent them a bottle of wine, rather to bedew their royal lips, than to sprinkle the ashes of their fathers, or irrigate the marvelous tree” (Mills 204). Mills reveals in his *Memoir* that he and his envoy were solely interested in negotiating with the elders for land in Bagroo country and not in the latter’s ritual practices. Nonetheless, what may have influenced Mills’s recording of the event was the fact that he and his fellow travelers did not view this ceremony from the margins or a peripheral position.

Du Bois believed, as did the Africans who “flew home” across the centuries long ago, that the spirits never die. Accordingly, a Du Boisian reading of gravesites or any spaces where the deceased are believed to roam validates and gives legitimacy to the mystical, the syndetic: “[t]he inter-subjective and improvisational epistemics which underlie aesthetics of invocation depend on principles of cultural connection and combination which include but are not limited to linear, progressive, dialectical models” (Pavlic 167). Although the syndetic model provides an alternative to the diachronic, accretive model of reading the graves, it does not necessarily tie up neatly unresolved concerns that may surface from among members of the descendant community, or from among heritage tourists who visit the graves.

“Memory work,” therefore, is fundamentally designed to *extract*, and not necessarily to resolve or iron out contradictions in memory or fact. Notwithstanding this point, “memory work” appears subversive, for it constitutes the kind of source material that is so subjective as to be viewed as extremely controversial, inter-subjective, and unreliable within traditional academic quarters. Ironically, its subversive nature may often challenge the very canon of acceptable historical research. My push and that of the other heritage tourists to recount, recollect, and tell memories of and at gravesites is a self-conscious one. It, implicitly, recognizes the existence of historiography and its power to control the meta-narrative. Moreover, this self-conscious strategy functions as a subversive one since it may challenge and/or compete with the authorized texts of seasoned and privileged scholars. By using “memory work” to stimulate dialogue about the presence of slavery in particular communities, and as the process of self-searching and cultural exploration unfold, the historical narrative will be shaped and reshaped by a collectivity of memories from non-academics, as well as from new voices of professionally-trained individuals. The syndetic will automatically subvert the linear progression of history, and so may those memories which comprise the collectivity of memory. Ergo, the push to visit the graves of former enslaved Africans adheres, in part, to Jacques Le Goff’s pronouncement, in *History and Memory*, that “it is incumbent upon professional specialists of memory—anthropologists, historians, journalists, sociologists—to make of the struggle for the democratization of social memory one of the primary imperatives of their scientific imaginary” (Le Goff 99).

## **Embodied Histories or a Collectivity of Memories**

Democratization is a natural condition of heritage tours. Individual sojourners go visit graves of enslaved Africans and transport with them a splay of personal agendas. They will tell, remember, and recount individual memories. Yet, these individual memories will enter into dialogue with the collective; hence, the collective is not one-dimensional, but constitutes an organic

composite/concoction of personal stories. This synthetic coalescence gains in dimension as the syndetic process takes place. As the descendants hear and learn from the ancestors, their own journeys beneath the surface will make the loop that commences the gradual move upward. For the sojourner, the process of ascendance starts when the connection is made with the ancestors. The process of ascendance is initiated as the sojourner begins to tell his story, or to re-tell the story of the ancestors, when the meeting of one cultural reality (the past) confronts a current cultural reality.

In a critique of Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby*, Eleanor Traylor poetically described how nature—or for her simply the outdoors—could embody a visitable past of ancestral memories. She wrote:

Sometimes at dusk of evening,  
When lightning bugs would glow,  
My grandma told me stories in the dark.

Now at dusk of evening,  
When city lights burn bright,  
I live the very stories that  
She told.

(Traylor 150)

Like McElroy and Du Bois, for Traylor nature is locational. It is a space from where she draws “grandma’s stories” to convey the transmission of culture, and to affirm her own sense of agency—“I live the very stories that/ She told.” The same can be said about Margaret Parsons, a descendant of the Cathcart family of the Historic Brattonsville Plantation community (McConnells, South Carolina), whose stories similarly reach back to paternal elders. Gazing at a photograph collage of deceased relatives during a visit to a restored portion of the Cathcart family homestead, Parsons instinctively slipped into a reflective mode:

Let me tell you a story. [T] here were two little black boys in Africa, seven years old. They were captured over there and brought over here as slaves. One little boy went to the Cathcart farm, and the other little boy went to the Crawford farm. These were adjoining plantations, and so they [the two little boys] never lost touch with one another. We [the descendant members] come from two brothers but we took our owners’ names.” (Parsons unpaginated)

This dialogic interaction of the different generations stages the path toward a rich understanding of the ancestral community, of the lineal nature of heritage, and of the link between the above-ground world of the graves themselves and of the spirit world occupied by the ancestors beneath the graves.

This communion between the generations, between the inhabitants who reside in different states of reality exemplifies one dimension of Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness." On the one hand, what makes this "consciousness" double, is its diasporic quality—it stretches back into the ancient kingdoms of Africa, as he recalls in "Of Spiritual Strivings" (Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folk* 214-15.). On the other hand, what makes it "double" as a consciousness is its *overlapping* diasporic nature. The locations of most graves have been de-territorialized, de- and re-colonized, as in the case of the African Burial Ground in downtown Manhattan, which includes crypts of Africans and Native Americans. New faces, different peoples populate these larger spaces and/or their surrounding and peripheral areas. What makes the visit an exercise in "double consciousness" is the multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural complexity of both the above ground reality, as well as unique instances of the ethnically mixed below ground community.

A graveyard at the Wye Plantation in Talbot County, Maryland, famously known as Frederick Douglass's first home as a slave, historically memorializes the lives of more than one distinct group: those of enslaved Africans, and those of the whites—planters, overseers, and servants. The inscribed headstone reads: "Those who worked the Plantation of Wye House from Its Beginning."



Photograph by Lois Raimondo, courtesy of *Washington Post*, February 14, 2000.

This de-personalized, de-individualized, de-racialized gravesite is historically invested with collective memories of a past that join(ed) together all those who lived on the Lloyd plantation in a system of containment. And its marginal location on the grounds does not diminish the importance of this

memorial site. Instead, this seasonally overgrown space, though often unrecognizable and unidentifiable, is fixed and contributes to the shifts and de-centering in national and transnational re-interpretations of the site (Cronin, *Disappearing Islands* 61-64). For the memories that are heard and the memories that are narrated, merge into the historical narrative, that dimension of the meta-narrative that we owe, on the one hand, to published works about the public history of Talbot County and the other locations in the region, county, state, etc. where the graves are found, and, on the other hand, to slave narratives and other primary autobiographical documents of lives (with some few exceptions) of the formerly enslaved Africans in the Atlantic World (Leonard 2004, 376-78). This process of accretion also constitutes the “doubleness” to which Du Bois speaks.

Fundamentally and foremostly, what makes the visit to the gravesites an encounter with “double consciousness” is the impact of the experience on the self. The “double” corresponds to the mirrored reflection of the self once surfaced above ground. It is in seeing oneself that one sees one’s double. When Dr. Lisa Bratton makes her annual visits to the Historic Brattonsville Plantation, she visits the grave of her father. This experience invariably leads her to consider a seminal theme in the historical geography of the American South, i.e. that a hegemony structured and controlled the movement of races through a legalized segregation. Yet, the experiences of those who lived during and prior to the Jim Crow era share a geography/ies of memory due to social activities around which their physical mobility was governed according to race.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* foreshadowed Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, and most of her other novels, many of which are layered and nuanced with traditional black folkloric references. In spite of racialized segregation, Du Bois knew of the creolization of both whites and blacks, that the “doublings” are not just limited to blacks. Still, it is the striving of blacks to gain “double consciousness” that dominates his life’s work. He writes,

From the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American, as swept on by the current of the nineteenth while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth century,—from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence (Du Bois “Of the Faith of Fathers,” *Souls of Black Folk* 346).

The dominant structure—the “veil” serves as the mirror by which and through which one comes to realize the “doublings” of the self—the “two unreconciled strivings” of blacks—their ever “twoness,” where and how they are perceived and slotted in society. In Du Bois’s own words: “In those *somber forests* of his striving, his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission” (“Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” *Souls of Black Folk* 218; added emphasis). The soul’s sojourn into the forest attests to the power of place, for it is in the bosom of nature that the self locates its center—its sense of origin, beginnings.

## Conclusion

This “rumination” has been about using the Du Boisian notion of “double consciousness” as an angle of perception to understand the different streams and processes of memory, as well as the acquisition of embodied history that may be retrieved when individuals use the graves of former African slaves as historically significant ritual texts. In particular, this discussion is invested in a threefold embodiment of cultural memory: as embedded in key sites for the production of social memory, such as the graves of formerly enslaved Africans; as rooted in the narratives that the

descendant community and visitors construct at these sites; or as located in the very ritual practice of visiting for the first time or returning to sites of the dead to reminisce and commemorate. As noted throughout this paper, these sites—the graves of formerly enslaved Africans—provide the means by which a group (or its members) can retrieve, reconfigure, and understand its (their) past, as well as its (their) own role in the perpetuation of the group’s common identity (Connerton 36-40; Halbwachs 46-51) Whether those in attendance remain silent, speak, or display some physical behavior, each member of the group has come and gathered at this one site voluntarily, and their presence says volumes over their actions. Gwen K. Neville notes that such “gatherings for ritual celebration are [...] the visible evidences of the existence of a greater expanse of cultural forms and meanings that are at other times carried in the heads of the culture-bearers, waiting for a gathering in which to take on social shape” (Neville 161). Gravesite visitations are a common devotional practice among mourners who return to physical environments—spaces and places—where their loved ones are buried. For some, these trips are ancestry-quests, journeys back in time, or (like McElroy) journeys in search of self-enlightenment.

Given Du Bois’s own yearning to return to and complete his life’s journey in Africa, it is fair to surmise that, were he still alive, he would favor heritage tours to former burials of enslaved Africans as educational opportunities to learn the history and culture of public sites, to learn the (past and current) use of environmental spaces, to ponder the entanglement of relationships between individuals to one another, to the deceased, and to nature. Du Bois would argue that invocation of memory from the dead is easy to achieve. For in his own works, he points to natural elements—the water, forests, trees, etc.—on which we should reflect to reach the syndetic state.

Fundamentally, this paper is vested in bringing credibility to telegraphic experiences of individuals who visit the graves of those Africans, who in their life time did not legally own themselves. Journeys to graves serve a spiritual purpose for some, as well as social purposes for a wide audience that looms beyond the academy and its parochial concerns, purposes that well exceed the nostalgia of “a certain group.” Whether or not those who journey to graves are members of the descendant community or steered by a well-planned agenda, the journey itself constitutes a “reunion”—of living and deceased spirits, as poetically articulated by Lizzie Doten in her volume *Poems From the Inner Life*:

And there, as I shivered and waited,

I talked with the Souls of the Dead--

With those who the living call dead;

The lawless, the lone, and the hated

(Doten 118)

Ergo, the emphasis in this paper on late 18th to 19th century graves of former African involuntary “servants” sprinkled throughout the African-Atlantic world is intended to nuance our understanding of and spark our curiosity about: a) the construction of national/transnational identities and types of belonging-ness or allegiances; b) the range of final outcomes in the lives of former enslaved Africans; and c) the capacity and ability to leap beyond one’s own immediate cultural and personal zones of activity when one visits the grave of any stranger. Indeed, the larger goal is to focus on the academic and ethical benefits derived from visits to gravesites, for these journeys may “encourage people to

think about broader moral and political questions and to think more critically about the present by better understanding lessons from the past” (Mattson 376).

According to Dickerson Bruce, Du Bois, in his promotion of the Negro as endowed with a “double consciousness,” not only draws from the language of the early 19th-century Transcendentalists, but also privileges a distinctive African spirituality, as “revealed among African Americans in folklore, [and through] their history of patient suffering and their faith” over the American “materialistic and commercial world” (Bruce 301). While it is this spirituality which for Du Bois connects people of African descent throughout the globe, the very essence of spirituality, however, constitutes a belief in the interconnectedness of all men, of all human beings. Hence, with *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois “sought to look beyond the physical, [material and social] realities of his subject matter [...]. He wanted to glimpse and reveal the spiritual realms of life and living” (Blum 77). Likened to a “modern-day prophet,” his ecological sojourn into nature, therefore, was first and foremost a journey to a place of prayer not unlike where Jesus prayed with his disciples at Mount of Olives the night before his crucifixion, and to the Garden of Gethsemane where Mary Magdalene returned to Jesus’s sepulchre the following day (Matthew 26:-39, John 20:1-17, and Luke 22:42-43 in *King James Bible*). Of these scenes, as well as the psalmist’s lament for comfort, guidance and insight (Psalm 31:20-22), C. Austin Miles would capture in his verse --“In the Garden”:

I come to the garden alone,  
 While the dew is still on the roses,  
 And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,  
 The son of God discloses.  
 And he walks with me, and He talks with me,  
 And he tells me I am His own,  
 And the joy we share as we tarry there,  
 None other has ever known” (Miles)

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Photographs One through Four taken by Angela Leonard on September 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See footnote 2 for photographic credits.

<sup>4</sup> The canon of African diaspora history contains numerous references to the use of “palm wine” by elders during ritual celebrations, and on special occasions. For examples, see Philip E. Leis, “Palm Oil, Illicit Gin, and the Moral Order of the Ijaw,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 66. 4 (August 1964), 832. Perpetuation of the practice of palm-wine libations in North-Carolina enslaved communities and related artifacts is discussed in Patricia M. Sanford’s “‘Strong is the Bond of Kinship’: West African-Style Ancestor Shrines and Subfloor Pits on African-American Quarters,” in *Historical Archaeology, Identity Formation, and the Interpretation of Ethnicity*, edited by Maria Franklin and Garrett Fesler with Robert L. Schuyler and Fraser D. Neiman (Richmond: Colonial Williamsburg Production, 1999), 76, 80, 83-84. These articles fit into a larger body of research topically about deference to deceased elders.

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