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Myths Laid to Rest: Death, Burial, and Memory in the American South

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"Precious is the memory of the dead! And precious to me ... is the memory of the black loved ones who left me in the thoughtless, unremembering, laughing hours of boyhood, for that peaceful shore, where, now recollecting and sighing, I would give all of earth to meet them."

–　　　Edward Alfred Pollard, 1859.[1]

The performance of distinctive rituals associated with the burial of the dead establishes a basis for the creation not only of a cultural identity, but also of communal memory. For the enslaved population in the antebellum South, the burial of fellow slaves provided a means of cultural expression. Nonetheless, funeral services for deceased slaves created a source of contention between slaves and slave owners—not simply because Southern whites sought complete control over the actions of their slaves, but because of the deep-seated cultural differences that resulted from the transatlantic transfer and appropriation of disparate traditions. The presence of African-based burial rituals in slave funeral services appeared strange and pagan to white commentators. Even though American-born slaves adopted Anglicized burial practices over time, shifting the rituals away from African-based traditions, Southern whites continued to view slave funerals as barbaric in nature. The perceptions of these traditions, in turn, fed into the creation of myths surrounding the institution of slavery. By producing myths of grand slave funerals and bereaved masters, Southern whites used mortuary rituals to reinforce constructed memories of benevolence. Examining the narratives of both Southern whites and former slaves highlights contrasting perceptions, which in turn reveal how the act of burying the dead helped create the mythical idealization of life on the Southern plantation.

This article examines differing funeral customs on America plantations, revealing how perceptions of cultural difference shaped not only the memory of slaves but also of Southern whites, who constructed myths regarding slave funerals.[2] Although historical inquiry into slave burial practices has enriched the current historiography on American slavery, historians have yet to reconstruct the complete cultural context in which these practices occurred. Indeed, studies that examine the funeral

practices of American slaves often focus on funerary customs and traditions in isolation. Burial traditions among Southern whites and transatlantic influences on mortuary practices also remain understudied. Of the literature that explores the cultural makeup of slave burial traditions, some of the more prominent works include Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion*. [3] Both Genovese and Raboteau explore the rituals surrounding slave funerals, the cultural carry-over from Africa, and the views of slave owners concerning these practices. Nonetheless, these authors' concerns remain fixed on the practice of funerals among slaves.

In contrast to Genovese and Raboteau, other scholars—most prominently Orlando Patterson – have claimed that the institution of slavery resulted in the "social death" of those captured within it.[4] This social death involved the complete separation of the slaves from their ancestors. The spirits of ancestors were essential to African burial traditions. As the living believed they were the caretakers, the "custodians of custom," it was important for family members to carry out specific rituals in order to ensure that the departed would rejoin other ancestral spirits.[5] The continued practice of certain African burial traditions among the enslaved population in the American South calls into question the strength of the social death argument since an examination of mortuary rituals suggests the persistence of African customs.

Examining the funeral and burial practices of slaves in America demonstrates the survival of a critical element of African culture in slave communities, and shows how the varied cultural background of slaves, originating from a multitude of regions in Africa, produced a perceptibly different African-American culture over time. Using the archaeological excavation of slave burial grounds in New York, Ross W. Jamieson directly challenges Patterson's thesis by pointing to the lingering presence of African customs in the burial practices of slaves in America. [6] Nonetheless, Jamieson also illustrates the challenges facing scholars seeking to locate the origins of slave cultural traditions in Africa. He states that the limited availability of comparative data from Africa about burial practices complicates the ability of scholars to trace specific rituals to an exact region in the African continent, leading at times to false or misleading generalizations. Jamieson argues that, if scholars intend to trace African-American practices to Africa, both sides of the Atlantic

must receive equal attention.[7] It remains difficult to determine how culture traversed the Atlantic, and the ways it changed when appropriated into a new society, but a transatlantic perspective is necessary to understand this movement.

Investigating the adaptation of customs to a new society not only helps to place certain societal behaviors in context; this approach also offers insight into the formation of collective memories. According to W. Fitzhugh Brundage, social context and collective memory inherently, and unnoticeably, influences the creation of private memories. According to Brundage, "Nearly all personal memories, then, are learned, inherited, or, at the very least, informed by a common stock of social memory."[8] Ritualistic behavior feeds into the creation of collective memory such that the ritual itself serves as a marker of cultural identity. The use and quality of caskets, the style of music performed, the display of mourning dress, and other aspects that comprised the burial ritual were cultural performances, learned through observation and repetition, which distinguished one social group from another. Alon Confino explains how communal practices and symbolic representations shaped individual perceptions of the past, which are discernible in the actions taken by mourners as they buried and honored the dead. Through the study of imagery, myths, and values of particular societies or groups, it is possible to reconstruct a broader view of culture and society that made up a part of collective memory.[9] Perceptions of burial rituals, from Southern whites as well as American-born slaves, helped to create collective memories as well as myths surrounding the burial practices of slaves. Southern whites, in turn, used these to present their own benign memory of the antebellum South.

Freedom in Death and the Cultural Divide

The white community in the South viewed slave funerals as strange, and at times unsettling, events that were inherently different from their own customs. Reverend Charles Colcock Jones, who developed a reputation for his paternalistic actions toward slaves, recorded his own experience attending a slave funeral in 1833, emphasizing the peculiarities of the burial traditions he witnessed. Jones described a funeral for a slave named Sharper, and he stated that out of the three to four hundred in attendance he was the only white man. Funerals for slaves like Sharper typically occurred at night. As Genovese has noted, slaves preferred

night funerals because it allowed neighboring friends to attend, while simultaneously persevering cultural ties to Africa. David R. Roediger expands on this point, arguing that the practice of holding funerals at night was in keeping with an African tradition, one that slaveholders endorsed, as night funerals prevented conflicts with daytime labor. [10] To Jones, the nighttime atmosphere had a powerful effect on the overall mood of the service. The sense of mystery brought by the moonlight caused Jones to comment that "the living had come to commune with silence and the dead."[11] Southern whites commonly identified the nighttime service as customary to the slave population. W.H. Russell of the *London Times*, who recorded his journey through the American North and South, mentioned this particular practice, claiming it to be "one of the most solemn and characteristic of the customs of the negroes."[12] Although holding funerals at night worked to the advantage of slave owners, who did not have to coordinate time away from labor for the service, this practice helped create a visibly distinctive characteristic of slave funerals that separated African American mortuary practices from the traditions of Southern whites.

In addition to the time of day, the presence of drumming and singing "shouts" helped distinguish slave burials from Anglo-American traditions, while maintaining cultural links to Africa. But whereas slave owners approved of nighttime services, they did not always encourage use of drums and singing at funerals. As Rachel Anderson, a slave in Georgia, described, "[the slaves] used tuh alluz beat duh drums at fewnuls. Right attuh duh pusson die, dey beat um tuh tell duh uddahs bout duh fewnul … On duh way tuh duh grabe dey beat duh drum as dey is mahchin long. Wen duh body is put in duh grabe, ebrybody shout roun duh grabe in a suckle, singin an prayin."[13] Some slave owners attempted to stop the use of drums and the practice of loud singing at slave funerals. These customs appeared "heathenish" to Southern whites, but not all slave masters were successful in ending these particular acts. Indeed, when a master attempted to break up the gathering of seventy-five to one hundred slaves after the commotion of a funeral disturbed his sleep, he ultimately failed to end the ceremony. Following that experience, the owner reportedly allowed the slaves to practice funeral ceremonies as they pleased.[14]

Singing comprised a significant aspect of life for slaves in America, and its importance carried into burial services as well. Charles Stearns, a slave owner, commented that singing was a principal part of the slave funeral. "[It] is a pretty as well as a melancholy sight to witness one of their funeral processions," he noted, "the whole company keeping up a continued singing from the time they leave the house, to the moment of placing the body in the grave."[15] For other observers, singing of this nature reinforced notions of uncivilized behavior that white commentators associated with slave funerals. W.H. Russell commented that the unison singing of "a barbaric sort of madrigal" were melancholy expressions that he dismissively described as "quaint."[16] The terminology presented in Russell's account leaves little doubt that he perceived this particular ritual as vulgar in comparison to the superior style of singing present in Anglicized burial traditions. It also reinforces the notion that whites understood the mortuary practices of slaves as fundamentally distinct from their own.

One aspect of slave songs that whites struggled to understand was the interest in death often reflected in the songs' lyrics. For slaves who expressed this desire, death appeared as the ultimate escape from bondage and forced labor. One song, "I Can't Stay Behind," from the American southeast raises a poignant call to heaven and an invitation for death:

O, my mudder is gone! my mudder is gone!

My mudder is gone into heaven, my Lord!

I can't stay behind!

Dere's room in dar, room in dar.

Room in dar, in de heaven, my Lord!

I can't stay behind.[17]

The longing for death also appears in the lyrics of songs that depict slaves laying in the grave awaiting the end to their mortality.[18] Certain songs sung at slave funerals celebrated the freedom obtained by the deceased. The song "These are All My Father's Children," which slaves sang to honor the father of a family after he died, exemplifies this sense of celebration. William Francis Allen, who compiled the songs for

publication, states that slaves would march around the body singing this song shortly before burial. The lyrics repeat the phrases, "Dese all my fader's children, Outshine de sun. My fader's done wid de trouble o' de world, Outshine de sun."[19] This song shows that slaves recognized and commemorated the freedom brought by death. Certain songs also suggested comfort in death, as in "We Will March Through the Valley," which proclaims, "When I'm dead and buried in the cold silent tomb, I don't want you to grieve for me."[20] Although slave funerals were not typically joyous in nature, they did feature singing, dancing, and the playing of drums, elements that Southern whites came to view as peculiar African characteristics of slave burial traditions.

The drums and distinctive songs that characterized slave funerals were not the only cultural oddities that elicited Southern whites' comments; they often referred to decorated graves and headstones as well. Slaves commonly decorated graves with personal objects that belonged to the deceased. These items typically consisted of cups, bottles, pipes, or any other object the slave valued or favored in life. Slaves perpetuated this practice because they believed that placing objects on the grave helped the spirit find their belongings. If a slave received a good funeral with personal objects left on the grave, slaves believed the spirit of the departed would not bother the living.[21]Jamieson states that the placement of grave goods varied widely in African practice. In the Mandara Highlands, the greatest concern was to provide the departed with items of sentimental value, or those that might serve them in the afterlife. For the Tio, however, offering grave goods was reserved for individuals who held high social status. And among the Yoruba, grave goods were generally not valuable objects, but personal items put on display during the funeral service and not placed in the grave with the deceased.[22]

Among the Southern whites who commented on this tradition, Charles Stearns briefly noted decorated graves while criticizing slaves for stealing objects from whites. In the midst of his complaint, Stearns acknowledged that slaves' tendency to engage in thievery did have limits, explaining, "They will never molest tools left on a newly made grave, where they are usually allowed to remain several weeks after a burial."[23] To Stearns, this practice was an oddity deserving little more than an offhand remark, but the refusal to move or take belongings left on a grave demonstrates

the cultural importance of those objects in ways that would have been easily recognized in the Mandara Highlands or in Yoruba. Francis Butler Leigh, the daughter of a slave owner, also noticed this particular practice when her father died in 1867. Her father's former slaves, who remained with the family after the Civil War, reportedly found the death difficult to handle, and Leigh described the slaves as acting "like a sheep without a shepherd."[24] After the burial of her father, the former slaves placed objects on his grave including a basin, water, and towels. A former slave explained to Leigh that the objects were for "massa's" spirit; since the master always called for water and towels in the morning, the servant, Nanny, wanted to ensure his spirit knew she did not neglect her duties. [25]

Although these rituals featured traditions that appear in several African belief systems, they assumed an increasing level of cultural importance in the Antebellum South. The idea that the living were responsible for assisting the deceased to the spirit world through a proper burial appears in several African cultural groups, including the Asante and the Tio. Jamieson points to such actions as demonstrating a clear continuance of African beliefs in American mortuary practices, showing that, in spite of Patterson's claim that the slave was socially and culturally isolated, a transatlantic transfer of cultural beliefs and mortuary rituals did occur. [26] This transfer not only shaped the cultural practices of slaves in America. It also distinguished the burial traditions of Southern whites from slaves, and also American-born slaves from those born in Africa.

Despite continued cultural ties to Africa, the funerals of American-born slaves also developed distinctive rituals that differentiated their practices from African ceremonies. Charles Ball, the slave to a South Carolina planter, recalled the death of a fellow slave's son. The father of the boy was an African-born slave, and Ball assisted the family with the child's burial. Ball states that the father buried his child with a small bow and several arrows, a bag of parched meal, a sharpened stick with a nail attached at the end, a miniature canoe measuring around one foot in length, and a small paddle. The father also included small figures painted with blue and red colors. These objects each held a specific purpose for the child. The canoe and paddle would allow the boy's spirit to travel across the ocean to return to the land of his ancestors, with the bag of meal to eat along the way, and the color on the figures would signify to

the father's countrymen that the boy was his son. Having arrived in his father's homeland, the spirit of the child would then use the weapons buried with his body for hunting. After witnessing the burial service, Ball stated, "I could not but respect the sentiments which inspired his affection for his child; though it was the affection of a barbarian."[27] Ball's reference to the "barbaric" acts of the father shows the perceived cultural divide that separated slaves born in Africa and slaves born in America. Though American-born slaves continued to embrace certain aspects African burial traditions, direct connections to Africa itself grew marginalized over time. As American-born slaves adopted more Anglicized cultural practices into their mortuary rituals through the influence of Christianity and persistent interaction with Anglo-American culture, the presence of African traditions in slave funerals weakened, creating a cultural divide between slaves such as Charles Ball and the man he describes. To African-born slaves in America, death offered the opportunity to return to the land of their ancestors, but this belief began to shift as generations of slaves born in America developed new perceptions of burial traditions and rituals surrounding death.[28]

In developing a new religious identity, American-born slaves created distinct funerary rituals that remained recognizably different from both African-born slave rituals and those of the Southern white community. Ball's commentary on the burial of the African slave's son captures how Christianity shaped the perceptions of slaves born in America. Older African rituals took on a barbaric appearance to a witness like Ball, but for Southern whites, the Christianity practiced by Anglicized slaves likewise retained the appearance of inferiority. Gayraund S. Wilmore argues that the Christianity of American-born slaves always remained "something less and something more" than what is generally understood to be Christianity.[29] Charles Colcock Jones, a Presbyterian minister who actively pursued missionary work in slave communities, often complained of the corruption of the religious doctrine among slaves, viewing their understanding of Christianity as confused.[30] Slave owner Edward Alfred Pollard commented on the peculiarities of religion among slaves, stating, "It is true that the slaves' religion is greatly mixed up with superstitions, that it is ostentatious and loud, and that it has some comical aspects."[31] The appropriation of Christian beliefs helped create an overall new experience for the slave community in America, as well as

a unique African-American identity that furthered the cultural divide between American-born slaves and those from Africa.[32]

Though Christianity's influence on the religious beliefs of slaves contributed to this divide between African-born and American-born slaves, slaves' views about Christianity remained mixed. As slaves came to understand the Protestant Christianity practiced by the white community, some expressed contempt for their Christian slave owners, who they perceived to be hypocrites.[33] Charles Ball, despite viewing African burial traditions as barbaric, criticized the Christian belief in a heavenly afterlife. Ball remarked, "Heaven will be no heaven to him, if he is not to be avenged of his enemies."[34] Ball's perspective on heaven reveals the underlying tension and spiritual frustration that slaves encountered as they absorbed white Christian practices. In this statement, Ball's anger toward those who enslaved him emerges in his mention of the afterlife, and he implies that eternal peace would always remain out of reach if he failed to avenge himself upon those who bought and sold slaves. Another anonymous slave justified belief in hell by remarking that enslaved men and women already lived in hell. To slaves, the ideal of a just God did not fit with their owners' belief in salvation, and they struggled to see how slave masters deserved eternal peace. Some slaves, like John Anderson, thought their masters deserved only to go to hell. He refused to accept the notion that slave owners could be good Christians; as for heaven, Anderson expressed hope that his spirit would arrive in paradise but only if the spirits of slave owners were not there. When a slave named George heard from his dying master that he would receive a nice coffin at his own death and a burial plot next to his owner, George stated, "I like to have good coffin when I die … [but] I fraid massa, when de debbil come take your body, he make mistake, and get mine."[35] In spite of these views, many slaves embraced Christian ideals, though they were careful to distinguish their beliefs from the hypocrisies they perceived in in their owners' beliefs. In this way, slaves were able to assimilate Christian beliefs into their own understandings of the world, while maintaining a sense of separation from the rituals practiced by Southern whites. Christianity, therefore, served to create distinctions between the burial traditions and views of the afterlife not only of American-born slaves and slaves born in Africa, but also of the surrounding white community.[36]

The hypocritical nature of slaveholders' Christianity may have resulted in scorn from some slaves, but the influence of the religion on funerary customs and ritualistic expressions remained prominent. As discussed, music made up an important part of slave funerals, but it also served as a way for American-born slaves to express their own unique understanding of Christian beliefs. The perception of death as a release from bondage complimented the message of eternal salvation present in Christian doctrine, and it was frequently a pronounced aspect of songs that developed into slave spirituals. The combination of African rhythms with the message of Christianity created a new style of music that shaped the tone of slave funerals.[37] For white commentators such as W.H. Russell and Col. Higginson, the music appeared as either barbaric or haunting, but the understanding that there existed a separation between slave songs and those of Anglo-Americans remained constant.

Mortuary Rituals in Southern White Society

The peculiarities of slave funerals, such as the playing of drums, the style of singing, and the decorating of graves, appeared to be cultural oddities to Southern whites who observed such practices at funerals. For nineteenth-century Anglo-Americans, the death of a loved one required a complex ritual that developed into a form of social obligation.[38] This ritual featured connections to the burial traditions of inhabitants in medieval Europe, and Christopher Daniell has shown that these practices extended as far back as the late Roman era.[39] The most striking Anglo-American customs surrounding death were separate from the funeral ceremony itself as the bereaved emphasized outward displays of mourning.[40] Indeed, clothing was one of the more important ways in which mourners displayed their grief. The color and style of clothing worn was especially important for women who, depending on their relationship with the deceased, would wear mourning dresses for a determined length of time. The first six months following the death of a spouse was the time of "deep mourning" in which the widow would not engage in any social or recreational activities and the person in mourning had to monitor their overall behavior during all social interactions.[41] These displays of grief stood apart from the funeral service, but whites considered this aspect of honoring an individual's death and memory as important as the burial ceremony. Black was the

color of death and mourning; like the undertaker, funeral attendees wore all black, or the darkest suit available.

Caskets also were important symbols to Southern whites, for whom the quality of a casket was evidence of the deceased's social station. The use of caskets as social markers became standard around 1850, and the aesthetics of a casket's appearance changed with popular fashion trends over time. Caskets of a higher quality could be made with wood and cloth, wood and metal, or metal and glass, and after 1880 the overall size and form of a casket became standardized with distinctions made through the style of decoration.[42] The practice of placing a body into a casket was one that persisted with the movement of Europeans to the American continent. This particular ritual was not a common practice in the African tradition, but slaves adopted this aspect of Anglo-American burial into their own funerary customs.[43] The coffins made for slave funerals, however, were consistently of a low quality, constructed with the most basic materials required. As Roediger has noted, slave owners would sometimes donate wood and nails for the coffin as a way to fulfill their paternalistic duties.[44]

The importance of the casket's appearance to Southern whites explains why slaves in some cases received materials to make simple and plain receptacles for the body, and in others received no materials at all. If slaves wanted to bury a deceased family member or companion, they were responsible for constructing the casket themselves, unlike Southern whites who relied upon undertakers for the task.[45] If slaves did not receive the materials to make a casket, then the body would have to be interred with nothing to separate it from the earth in a manner similar to the burying of animals.[46] The tension that developed around the availability of materials to construct coffins for fallen slaves demonstrates the cultural shift that occurred in the American-born slave population. Slaves criticized the lack of interest displayed by their masters in ensuring a departed slave received the appropriate materials for burial. Rachel Adams, a former slave who worked in Georgia, stated that slave owners wasted little time in disposing of a slave's dead body. Adams claimed to have no knowledge of what a funeral entailed, as she never witnessed one herself. "If a Nigger died dis mornin'," she observed, "dey sho' didn't waste no time a-puttin' him right on down in de ground dat

same dey. Dem coffins never had no shape to 'em; dey was jus' [unreadable] pine boxes. Now weren't dat terrible?"[47]

Jamieson argues that although burial rituals provided opportunities for slaves to express their unique symbolic ideals, the shift away from African-based traditions to those of Anglo-Americans demonstrates the desire to mask the socioeconomic differences that existed between African-Americans and the broader Southern culture.[48] When viewed in contrast to the burial practices of African-born slaves, though, this shift could also be a part of the development of a distinct African-American culture. Slave communities had little choice but to exist in conjunction with a domineering white population; the adoption of certain white cultural practices, such as the use of caskets in burial rituals, should not come as a surprise, especially as slaves often attended white funerals, particularly for fallen masters or members of the master's family. The influence of Christianity, as well as the transfer of burial practices from the white community to slave communities led to the adoption of ritualistic practices that the white community neglected to recognize as their own.[49] Over time, slaves developed an understanding that caskets were a necessary part of the burial ritual, but Southern whites expected the overall quality of those caskets to reflect the social standing of the body it contained.

The standard funeral ceremony of Southern whites consisted of three parts: the wake, the service, and the internment of the body. The wake provided mourners the opportunity to view the deceased body in the family's home, while also serving as a but the wake also served as a time for socializing, with the host family offering refreshments for their guests.[50] Southern funerals could be grand occasions, with neighbors travelling several miles due to the spacious nature of the plantations. James Williams remarked that the funeral for his "young master" was "great and splendid" with numerous friends and family in attendance. [51] After the wake and religious ceremony, a carriage, followed by the procession of mourners, took the body to the graveyard where internment occurred. While certain ceremonies undoubtedly featured personal elements, the three aspects of a wake, religious service, and burial served as the general model for Southern white funerals. [52]

Although the funerals of white Americans did include music and ornate caskets, the central purpose of the service was to perpetuate feelings of

sadness.[53] Unlike the funerals of slaves, whose songs and drumming celebrated the freedom brought by death, the songs featured in white funerals emphasized the sorrow of loss. This reflects the overall division between the perspective with which slaves viewed death and that of Southern whites. To slaves, death was a release from bondage, but whites generally found death fearful. In spite of the heavenly aspirations held by Christian whites on the cusp of death, caution remained. Lewis O. Saum refers to this as a "trembling hope;" religious consoling hedged with inescapable apprehension.[54] The division in perceptions of death between slaves and Southern whites is clear in funerary traditions. The celebratory aspect of release from slavery appeared in the singing and dancing of slaves, but the somber environment of white funerals show that whites did not view death as a newfound freedom worth celebrating. This caused the funerals of Southern whites to stress mourning and honoring the memory of the dead over extolling the life that awaited the deceased in heaven.

Similar to the views Southern whites had of slave funerals, slaves perceived the funerary rituals of the white community as distinctive and even, at times, inadequate. Charles Ball documented his thoughts on the turbulent events surrounding the capture of a white woman by a mulatto kitchen worker and her subsequent rescue. Ball, who participated in the search party, offered an eyewitness account of the woman's death a few days following her rescue and of her funeral. His account reveals his own perceptions of white funeral traditions. Even though the woman did not live at the plantation owned by Ball's master, she was buried in the plantation's graveyard anyway, allowing Ball to witness the ceremony. Ball described the wake, stating:

[On] Sunday, whilst the dead body lay in my master's house, there was a continual influx and efflux of visiters [sic], in carriages, on horse-back, and on foot. The house was open to all who chose to come; and the best wines, cakes, sweet-meats and fruits, were handed about to the company by servants … the visiters remained but a short time when they came, and were nearly all in mourning [dress].[55]

The woman's funeral occurred the following day, and Ball described the procession as including several hundred individuals. The funeral procession followed the body to the gravesite where a preacher delivered a short sermon before the burial. Following the internment, the

attendants once again received refreshments and by four o'clock that afternoon the funeral guests began to leave. Ball states that by sundown, "the plantation was as quiet as if its peace had never been disturbed."[56] This remark reveals the absence of the elaborate mourning and sense of celebration that permeated the funerals of slaves. The white community did not share the same cultural concerns as the enslaved population; the purpose of a funeral was not to guide the spirit of the deceased to the afterlife, nor did they uphold the sense of freedom brought by death as did bereaved slaves. For whites, a funeral emphasized the feelings of sadness connected to the loss of life, and wearing mourning clothes and singing somber hymns expressed that sense of sadness and loss. To Ball, the general gathering, socializing, and mourning of a white funeral seemed inadequate, as his comment on the peaceful atmosphere of the plantation following the departure reflects.

The Myth and Memory of Benevolence in Death

The rituals that shaped the ways both whites and the enslaved population of the American South laid their dead to rest created a sense of community that, in turn, shaped the collective memory of both groups. The repetition of the cultural practices surrounding funerals served to propagate a shared identity, and ritual itself resulted in an experience that helped unite the participants across otherwise intractable social lines. The distinctions that both whites and slaves observed in their funerary traditions created two memories: those of the slave owners, who believed allowance of funeral services for slaves was compassionate, and those of the slaves, who generally found such concessions wanting. Indeed, the narratives of both whites and slaves contrast starkly when the topic of death and burial appears. For the white population, the existence of ritualized burial traditions among slaves, though perceived to be strange in practice, afforded an opportunity for the creation of myths that glorified Southern life prior to the end of slavery. These myths promoted a collective memory that Brundage so succinctly described as "the willfully recalled and deliberately forgotten past."[57] Through these myths, Southern whites fashioned a new memory of antebellum life that ignored the violence and exploitation of slavery and instead focused on expressions of grief and elaborate ceremonies given for beloved slaves.

A common figure in the narratives of Southern whites that helped recall this genteel perception of antebellum life is a bereaved slave, who

expressed feelings of intense grief following the death of the plantation master. One such narrative that features this figure is the work of Susan Dabney Smedes, who provides an account of a master's funeral as told by another house slave. This narrative indicates the expectations Southern whites held regarding the appropriate behavior of a slave at the time of a master's passing. "Mammy" Harriet, Smedes's "faithful nurse," discussed the reaction of a slave, another mammy-figure named Gannie Annie, to the death of Smedes's grandfather. Grannie Annie reportedly, "sot wid de coffin up-stairs – all by herself; lay by de corpse all night long, put her arms roun' de coffin, an' hold on to it, cryin' all night long."[58] Grieving slaves also appear in Charles Colcock Jones's account of the death of fellow slave owner Joseph Jones in 1846. As Joseph Jones lay on his deathbed, the slaves on the plantation filed past, each shaking his hand. Charles Colcock Jones states that some of the slaves kissed the master's hand and most of them wept. A slave driver named Pulaski, who knew Joseph as a boy before becoming his slave, even allegedly bowed his head to his owner's hand and kept it there for ten to fifteen minutes grieving with "tears of unfeigned sorrow."[59]

Slaves were not the only mournful figures in these narratives, as masters or members of a white, slave owning family expressed their own feelings of deep grief following the passing of a beloved slave. James Battle Avirett detailed such experiences while recording his memories of growing up on a plantation. He mentions a particular slave boy who died suddenly in an accident involving an ox cart. Avirett refers to the boy as a favorite playmate, who regularly carried the bait when he went fishing. Avirett recalls receiving the news of the slave's death with "young, tearful eyes and sympathetic heart," and he remarks how deep of an impression this event had on his own life.[60] In Avirett's account of the boy's funeral, he refers to the grave as a "veritable republic" in which all individuals are equal, whether or not they were slave or free.[61] Similar sentiments appear in Pollard's narrative, in which he confesses his own personal attachment to certain slaves, particularly his mammy, Aunt Marie. According to Pollard, even years after this slave's death, his eyes filled with tears when recalling her memory. The slave owner uses his memories surrounding the death and burial of favorite slaves to display his own grief at the loss of the slaves' lives. Constructing a scene of recalled mourning, Pollard expresses his sorrow for another favorite slave named Uncle Nash, stating, "Many years have gone by since then,

but I can never forget the scene of the deep, red grave, in which the old Christian slave was laid."[62] The narratives of both Avirett and Pollard both demonstrate how individual, willfully recalled memories of lost slaves created a portrait of grieving masters, haunted by the loss of their enslaved property.

When attempting to emphasize paternalistic bonds, white narratives often mentioned the way slave masters and their families honored the passing of certain, favorite slaves. In the midst of his mournful recollection of the death of his mammy, Pollard commented on the comfort and grief given by a white family for a fallen slave, stating:

The death scene, confronted by the man of God, and watched by white faces wet with tears, was that of a slave. But seldom is it, that the slave is left to meet his death as the white pauper in his rags and desolation. His master and mistress and the white family are always by to visit him in this great need of humanity.[63]

As framed by Pollard, the weeping faces surrounding the body were not those of the departed's fellow slaves, but of the family that owned them. In this account, the slaves do not attend to the deceased; instead, it is the master and mistress and the rest of the white family. Patriarchal masters felt great sorrow at the passing of favorite slaves, but Genovese points out that such funeral services were not for the surviving slaves, but for the white masters. Indeed, by taking control of the ceremonies in this way, the other slaves never received the opportunity to express their own grief in their own culturally distinct way.[64] For Southern whites, the memory of laying favorite slaves to rest emphasized the paternal bond and the concessions that they provided for a slave's burial. Pollard, for example, believed that placing his mammy in a pauper's grave was unacceptable, and many masters demonstrated their favor for certain slaves through more elaborate funeral ceremonies and the placement of commemorative headstones. Crucially, however, these were the mortuary rituals that were important to Southern whites, not to the slaves themselves, and masters' control over these slave funerals deprived other slaves of the opportunity to grieve for favored slaves.

The narratives of Southern whites that emphasized grief and sorrow following the death of a slave received critical scorn from some slaves who questioned the depth of emotion felt by whites. Harriet Jacobs, a

former slave, condemned her master and mistress for their attempt to express their own sorrow at a slave's funeral. She criticized the owners' presence at the ceremony, stating, "Dr. Flint's carriage was in the procession; and when the body was deposited in its humble resting place, the mistress dropped a tear, and returned to her carriage, probably thinking she had performed her duty nobly."[65] Other slave narratives reveal the kind of burial provided for slaves who did not receive the patriarchal favor of their masters. A slave named Samuel Andrews recalled the burial of his father, which did not involve a funeral ceremony. Instead, an ox cart carried the body to a hole in the ground where a simple burial occurred. As in burial of favored slaves, the master took control of the ceremony, denying Andrews and his fellow slaves the opportunity to mourn the loss through distinct ritual display. Indeed, no one was able to mourn the loss of this slave, as even the family members of the departed did not receive permission to halt their work to attend the burial.[66] Roediger quotes an unnamed slave who stated, "… dey didn't have no funerals for de slaves, but jes' bury dem like a cow or a hoss, jes' dig a hole and roll'em in it and cover 'em up."[67] Though slave owners regularly allowed funeral ceremonies for slaves to occur, instances where masters intervened proved influential over the perceptions expressed in slave narratives.

The narratives of slave owners exalted the memories of beloved mammies and emphasized the deep grief felt at the passing of favorite family slaves, but the views expressed in slave narratives, such as those by Jacobs and Andrews, present an alternative memory. For the slaves, memories of death and burial often feature a frustrated sense of inadequacy; the masters denied their slaves the opportunity to honor the memory of the dead and perform the necessary rituals that would help guide the slave's spirit to the afterlife. The contrasting perceptions of slave funerals reveal the tension that existed over the issue of death and mortuary ritual. For whites like Avirett, Pollard, their actions demonstrated the benevolence of slavery as an institution and a fulfillment of their paternal roles, but for the slaves pushed aside so that the white masters and their family could mourn a departed slave, the funeral ceremony was instead a lost opportunity for the slaves to celebrate the life of the deceased.

In addition to using slave funerals to illustrate the emotional connection between master and slave, Southern whites presented instances of grand processions given for deceased slaves to argue for the superior quality of life slaves held in the antebellum South. In an account of her visit to Savannah, Georgia in March of 1855, Lillian Foster describes a procession of colored mourners gathered to celebrate the life of a slave. The details, recorded by Foster four years after the funeral occurred, largely center on the ceremony's opulence. The procession honoring the unnamed slave, who served as an ordained deacon for the Third Colored Baptist Church in Savannah, included four fire companies, fifty-two carriages, members of the Porters' Association, members of three female benevolent associations, several individuals on horseback, and up to 2,500 attendants.[68] Foster stresses the expensive nature of the slave's funeral, claiming that a white worker in the North would have difficulty obtaining such an elaborate ceremony. Limiting her focus almost entirely to the funeral procession's grand nature, she used it as proof that blacks lived better lives as slaves in America than they had as free people in Africa. Foster states, "There is no country, and no place upon the face of the globe, where the negro race have such security for a wholesome living, as the slaves in the United States. The condition of an African slave in America is as far superior to that of a chief on the coasts of Africa, as day is superior to night."[69] Similar to the myths of mammies and bereaved masters perpetuated in white narratives, Foster uses the funeral procession to demonstrate the benevolent concessions provided to slaves. In this account, however, it is not the whites mourning a favorite slave; the processing mourners are black. Through this narrative, Foster claims that the comfortable life given to slaves allowed then to celebrate the life of a fellow slave through elaborate pomp and ceremony. Indeed, the myths of bereaved slaves and masters and the grand processions provided to slaves in order to honor their dead, all contributed to a collective white memory that glorified life on the plantation and justified the enslavement of the human beings that operated it. Indeed, white narratives about slave funerals provided Southern whites with the opportunity to congratulate themselves for fulfilling their paternalistic obligations and, in so doing, to perpetuate a romanticized view of life in the antebellum South.

Death, Burial, and the Construction of a Collective Memory

Funerary rituals, though perceived as inherently distinct between whites and slaves, influenced the formation of collective memories in the American South that reflected the complexity of slave relationships. The cultural divide that separated white funeral practices from slave mortuary traditions directly influenced the construction of social memories among white southerners and their slaves. Brundage argues that ritual observances make up a central aspect of historical memory, and the burial traditions of Southern whites, American-born slaves, and African-born slaves serve as an example of such ritual.[70] White observers utilized slave funerals to both reinforce notions of cultural superiority and to propagate myths of paternalism and the benevolence of slavery. For slaves, however, the perceived inadequacy of slave funerals aided in the construction of a memory that emphasized the cultural and personal horrors of slavery. As slaves in the American South developed distinctive mortuary rituals, it became clear that those rituals required time to perform, time that remained in the control of masters. Slave owners, too, also could take over the ceremony, thereby preventing slaves from celebrating the freedom through death of their fellow slaves and severing their cultural ties that bound them to Africa. Slave funerals offered masters a way to perform their compassion and sadness for the loss of a slave; a memory intentionally constructed to obscure the realities of life on the Southern plantation.

As shown through an examination of slave funerals in the antebellum South, the funerary traditions of American-born slaves helped preserve African burial traditions, while simultaneously serving to create a unique African-American identity. The rituals surrounding funeral ceremonies, through repetition and the emphasis on commemoration, contributed to communal identities and provided a sense of continuity and connection to the past. The understanding of this past, though, developed in stark contrast to the memory of the same events as perceived by the white population. By attempting to uphold an ideal of paternal benevolence, Southern whites used these rituals to create a compassionate portrait of slavery, directly influencing perceptions of the South that increased in magnitude following Emancipation and the end of the Civil War. The act of honoring the dead no longer entailed the memory of the individual lost, but instead came to represent a way of Southern life forever lost through the end of slavery. By utilizing the mythical perceptions and constructed memories of slaves and the way Southern whites

accommodated their burial, former slave owners were able to reinforce an idealized life on the plantation. In the eyes of the former slaves, however, this memory would always remain an inadequate, inaccurate, and inauthentic view not only of the purpose of burying the dead, but more importantly of their experiences in bondage.. Indeed, slave funerals were not merely celebrations of the deceased. They also embodied the restriction of cultural expressions, the master's power over their behavior, as well as the promise of freedom offered by the grave.

[1] Edward A. Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South* (New York, 1859), 87-88.

[2] For a useful collection of essays on memory in the American South prior to and following Emancipation, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Studies of slave mortuary practices outside of the antebellum South include Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). Brown offers a compelling study of the death and the burial of slaves and slave owners in British Jamaica.

[3] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Other works that examine the development of slave religion and black churches in the American South include: Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975); Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*(Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1972).

[4] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: a Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[5] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 12-13, 30. Raboteau states that the influence of African religious beliefs on Afro-American societies led to the development of ancestor worship, among other practices.

[6] Ross W. Jamieson, "Material Culture and Social Death: African-American Burial Practices," *Historical Archaeology*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1995): 39-58.

[7] Jamieson, "Material Culture," 41-43.

[8] W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "No Deed but Memory," in *Where these Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, edited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3-4.

[9] Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 102, no. 5 (Dec., 1997), 1389.

[10] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 197; David R. Roediger, "And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death, & Heaven in the Slave Community, 1700-1865." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 22, no. 1 (Spring, 1981), 166.

[11] Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 165.

[12] W.H. Russell, quoted in William Francis Allen, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York, 1867), 19. In *Sabin Americana*. Gale, Cengage Learning. The slave song, "The Graveyard," upon which Russell likely commented upon, features the line "I know the moonlight, I know starlight/I'm walkin' troo de starlight;/Lay dis body down." Songs with lyrics of this nature not only indicate nighttime burials, but they possibly served to enhance the overall atmosphere, as commented on by Jones, by bringing attention to the darkness that surrounded the funeral participants.

[13] Anderson quoted in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 71-72.

[14] Roediger, "And Die in Dixie," 168.

[15] Charles Stearns, *The Black Man of the South, and the Rebels, or, The Characteristics of the Former, and the Recent Outrages of the*

Latter (New York, 1872), 332. In *Sabin Americana*. Gale, Cengage Learning.

[16] Russell quoted in Allen, *Slave Songs*, 19.

[17] Allen, *Slave Songs*, 8.

[18] Allen, *Slave Songs*, 19. The particular line from the song "The Graveyard," that states "I lay in de grave an' stretch out my arms/Lay dis body down," presents this kind of imagery. Allen quotes Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson as stating about the verse, "Never, it seems to me, since man first lived and suffered, was his infinite longing for peace uttered more plaintively than in that line."

[19] Allen, *Slave Songs*, 101.

[20] Allen, *Slave Songs,* 73.

[21] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 83-85.

[22] Jamieson, "Material Culture and Social Death," 49.

[23] Stearns, *The Black Man of the South*, 343.

[24] Francis Butler Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War* (1883; reprint: New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 73.

[25] Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation*, 77. While Leigh took this act as a display of affection for her father, Raboteau explains that this act could be the former slave's attempt to keep the spirit of her old master from bothering her. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 85.

[26] Jamieson, "Material Culture and Social Death," 51; Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5.

[27] Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains, or, The Life of an American Slave* (New York, 1858), 197-198. In *Sabin Americana*. Gale, Cengage Learning.

[28] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 45.

[29] Gayraund S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1972), 1.

[30] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 10.

[31] Pollard, *Black Diamonds*, 87-88.

[32] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 162; Jamieson, "Material Culture and Social Death," 39.

[33] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 13; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 291.

[34] Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 150.

[35] George quoted in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 292. John Anderson's views on Christian slave owners and heaven in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 291-292.

[36] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 294.

[37] Romeo B. Garrett, "African Survivals in American Culture," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 51, no. 4 (Oct. 1966), 241.

[38] Steven J. Richarson, "The Burial Grounds of Black Washington: 1880-1919," *Historical Study of Washington D.C.*, vol. 52 (1989), 318.

[39] Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England, 1066-1550* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 27. The cultural carryover from medieval burial practices in Europe to the antebellum South include the cleansing of the body, the providing of mass (or a church service for the deceased), a procession of mourners that followed the body to the grave site, and the casting of earth into the grave prior to burial. Following the Reformation, burial traditions tended to fall in line with the common Catholic rituals. Daniell states that the 1549 Book of Common Prayer presented a four-stage ritual for burial, which included the procession to the church or gravesite, the burial and casting of earth over the body, a commemorative ceremony, and a final communion. Puritanical approaches to burial shifted concern away from the well-being of the soul to the ritualized laying of the remains. Daniell, *Death and Burial*, 195.

[40] For more on the expressions of mourning in nineteenth-century America, see Karen Halttunen, *Cofidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).

[41] Robert W. Habenstein and William M. Lamers, "The Pattern of Late Nineteenth-Century Funerals," *Passing*, Charles O. Jackson, ed., (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 92-93. As the mourning period progressed, the color of the clothing grew lighter, and once the time for mourning ended all restrictions on social behavior lifted as well.

[42] Habenstein and Lamers, "Pattern of Late Nineteenth-Century Funerals," 95. By the late nineteenth century, mass-produced coffins available to both whites and blacks offered a form of social equalizing, as common materials became readily available for both social groups. Jamieson, "Material Culture and Social Death," 53.

[43] Jamieson, "Material Culture and Social Death," 53.

[44] Roediger, "And Die in Dixie," 166.

[45] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 230.

[46] Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 62. The idea that humans were distinct from other creatures perpetuated beliefs that burial for humans required greater care than for animals. The ideal of having a "good death" or a decent burial called for the practice of ritualistic ceremonies to honor the dead, which included the use of a box to act as a barrier between the body and the earth. The absence of a casket in some form served to debase the value of the body, placing its burial on the same level as an animal.

[47] The Federal Writers' Project, *Georgia Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in Georgia from Interviews with Former Slaves* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 2006), 5.

[48] Jamieson, "Material Culture and Social Death," 54.

[49] One particular act that slaves adopted from white burial rituals was the throwing of earth over the coffin prior to burial. Genovese states that the practice of throwing dirt into the grave was not restricted to Africa, but Jamieson claims that the act conformed to European Christian traditions. Both authors agree that this ritual was common in white funerals, but nineteenth-century commentators frame the act as peculiar to the black community. Slave owner Edward Alfred Pollard specifically described this act as in accordance of "the negro custom," and slave

narratives, such as those of Solomon Northrup and Harriet Jacobs, also mention the throwing of dirt into the grave during the internment of a deceased slave. This act, viewed as a last farewell, exemplifies the cultural transfer that occurred between the burial rituals of Southern whites and slave communities, even though both groups continued to see the respective rituals as discernibly distinct. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 200; Jamieson, "Material Culture and Social Death," 50; Pollard, *Black Diamonds*, 89; Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northrup* (1855), 85; Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston, 1861), 18. In *Sabin Americana*. Gale, Cengage Learning.

[50] Leroy Bowman, *The American Funeral: A Study in Guilt, Extravagance, and Sublimity* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1959), 16-17; Margaret M. Coffin, *Death in Early America: The History and Folklore of Customs and Superstitions of Early Medicine, Funerals, Burials, and Mourning* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1976), 91.

[51] James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams: an American Slave Who was for Several Years a Driver on a Cotton Plantation in Alabama* (New York, 1838), 34. In *Sabin Americana*. Gale, Cengage Learning.

[52] Coffin, *Death in Early America*, 91.

[53] Habenstein and Lamers, "Pattern of Late Nineteenth-Century Funerals," 94.

[54] Lewis O. Saum, "Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America," *Passing*, Charles O. Jackson, ed., (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 84.

[55] Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 190-191. Ball describes the plantation graveyard, which was separate from the graveyard for slaves, as measuring around one acre, with one side reserved for family, the other for strangers and the local poor.

[56] Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 192.

[57] Brundage, "No Deed but Memory," 6.

[58] Susan Dabney Smedes, *A Southern Planter* (New York: James Pott & Co., 1890), 20.

[59] Clarke, *Dwelling Place*, 244.

[60] James Battle Avirett, *The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House and Cabin Before the War* (Chicago: F. Tennyson Neely Co., 1901), 128.

[61] Avirett, *The Old Plantation*, 129.

[62] Pollard, *Black Diamonds*, 38-39; 89.

[63] Pollard, *Black Diamonds*, 95.

[64] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 196.

[65] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 222.

[66] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 230.

[67] Roediger, "And Die in Dixie," 166-167.

[68] Lillian Foster, *Way-Side Glimpses, North and South* (New York, 1860), 109. In *Sabin Americana*. Gale, Cengage Learning.

[69] Foster, *Way-Side Glimpses*, 109-110.

[70] Brundage, "No Deed but Memory," 9.

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