What lies beneath: reading the cultural landscape of graveyard and burial grounds in African-American history and Literature

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ABSTRACT

HUMANITIES

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WHAT LIES BENEATH: READING THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF GRAVEYARDS AND BURIAL GROUNDS IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY AND LITERATURE

Advisor: Dr. Susan Wright
Dissertation dated: July 2008

This study probes beneath the surface of history, culture, and memory to unearth what lies beneath the socially constructed landscapes of African-American graveyards and burial grounds. The purpose is to examine “the roots” in the cultural landscape of graveyards and burial grounds to discover how African-American writers have attempted to recapture and reclaim the cultural history and memories associated with these ancestral landscapes. To provide an appropriate historical and cultural context for analysis, this study “reads” the cultural landscapes of graveyards and burial grounds as depicted in African-American literature alongside actual historic African-American graveyards and burial grounds. In addition, this study positions the cultural landscapes of graveyards and
burial grounds—their natural topography, artifacts, and human associations—within the broader context of the African-American cultural landscape. The graveyard itself is mapped as a microcosm of the larger society and is examined as a reflection of the social relationships and cultural heritage of African Americans.

The literary works in this study: Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*, Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*, and Alice Walker's "Burial" all provide examples of the purposeful use of historic landscapes—and especially ancestral graveyards and burial grounds—to perform various literary functions: as symbols of African-American heritage and the continuity of cultural tradition, as depictions of sacred places for ritually accessing African ancestral spirits for assistance and spiritual support, as representations of loss through death and absence, and as sites of memory for recovering the symbolically buried past as a means for healing the living spirit.

Within the literature analyzed in this study, the influence of African beliefs regarding the ongoing relationships between the living and the dead has appeared as a significant factor in the establishment of the identity of the individual, the community, and the culture of African Americans. As this study demonstrates, all of the writers examined in this analysis depict the cultural landscapes of graveyards and burial grounds as sacred ancestral grounds that function as potently significant repositories of African-American history, memory, and culture.
WHAT LIES BENEATH: READING THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF GRAVEYARDS AND BURIAL GROUNDS IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY AND LITERATURE

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SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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CHAPTER 1

What Lies Beneath

A solemn procession wound through Manhattan's otherwise deserted streets on the evening of October 4, 2003. Flickering candles held aloft, a stream of people—some attired in African traditional dress, others clad in either the dark or white clothing their cultures traditionally reserve for mourning—prayed, sang, and chanted the ancestors back to their spiritual home.

Twelve years earlier in May 1991, the excavation of human remains from a construction site in Lower Manhattan had ignited a storm of cultural debate throughout the nation. The dispute focused on the ethics of appropriate research methods and the proper treatment of the bodies that had been disinterred from an eighteenth-century New York African burial ground. Making the find even more significant, the newly rediscovered burial ground highlighted the paucity of information regarding the early history and contributions of African Americans to the development of New York City.

On February 26, 2006, a proclamation issued by U.S. President George Bush established the African Burial Ground National Monument to “promote understanding of related resources, encourage continuing research, and present interpretive opportunities and programs for visitors to better understand and honor the culture and vital contributions of generations of Africans and Americans of African descent to our Nation.” The high visibility and ongoing controversy related to the recovery and re-consecration of the New
York African Burial Ground have increased public awareness regarding the significance of historic burial sites to our understanding of the past. The wide availability of the archeological and historical reports on the findings from the New York African Burial Ground project has provided access to a wealth of cultural data yet to be completely analyzed. African-American graveyards and burial grounds provide a valuable and tangible link to the past, and the cultural analysis of these sites provides a means for understanding the complex historical forces that affected the development of African-American communities and social life. This study “reads” the cultural landscape of graveyards and burial grounds—fictional settings as well as actual physical landscapes—to examine the connections between history, memory and culture in African-American history and literature. Concern for the sanctity of death and burial touches many cultures, especially in cases of historical neglect and forgetting, and as the commemoration of the New York African burial ground illustrates, graveyards and burial grounds occupy a special place in the African-American cultural landscape.

Just as the rediscovery of the New York African Burial Ground has captured the interest and imagination of people across the United States, the rediscovery and recovery of American history, in general, has become a pursuit of great interest and concern, especially among African Americans. Thus, the movement to recover African-American history through imaginative literature has also gained momentum. African-American writers repeatedly turn to history for literary inspiration, and historic landscapes often play a significant role in African-American literature, particularly ancestral landscapes of death, such as graveyards and burial grounds. The literary works in this study—Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, David Bradley’s
The Chaneyville Incident, Edward P. Jones’ The Known World, and Alice Walker’s “Burial”—provide examples of the purposeful use of cultural landscapes to convey specific themes in African-American writing. In addition, these writers have all created fictional landscapes that can be mapped either directly to actual historic landscapes or indirectly to representative historic settings. The literary landscapes in this study either focus on, or include, a graveyard or burial ground. The authors chosen for this study have employed historic landscapes, and especially ancestral graveyards and burial grounds, to perform various literary functions: as symbols of African-American heritage and the continuity of cultural tradition, as depictions of sacred places for ritually accessing African ancestral spirits for assistance and spiritual support, as representations of loss through death and absence, and as sites of memory for recovering the symbolically buried past as a means for healing the living spirit.

This study demonstrates that the cultural landscapes of graveyards and burial grounds function as potently significant repositories of history, memory, and culture in African-American literature. The literary depiction of death and burial is examined from several perspectives to provide context for the historical and cultural significance of African-American graveyards and burial grounds. These perspectives include the social acts of burial, the context of the graveyard within the larger cultural landscape and society, and African retentions in African-American burial practices. The social acts of burial—including preparation of the body for interment, wakes, and rites performed in the graveyard and after burial—are considered for their impact upon the development of African-American beliefs regarding death and burial and their evidence of African cultural retentions. The cultural landscape of the graveyards and burial grounds—their
natural topography, artifacts, and human associations—are examined within the broader context of the African-American cultural landscape. The graveyard itself is mapped as a microcosm of the larger society and is examined as a reflection of the social relationships and cultural heritage of African Americans. African-American agency, cultural traditions, and issues of race and its impact on the development of the cultural landscape are also considered. This study also examines acts of symbolic death, burial, and resurrection in several forms, and these are considered alongside actual physical deaths and burials. Underlying this study is the foundation of a pre-colonial African worldview that maintains that physical death is insignificant. The belief in the release of the spirit upon the death of the physical body holds cultural implications for the historic perception of death and burial among African Americans. African-American burial practices provide evidence for the persistence of the pre-colonial African worldview of death and dying—often with overtones of Christian doctrine. Despite the sometimes conflicting beliefs between African and Christian religious attitudes, historically, these beliefs have been blended in the religious practices of African Americans, resulting in a uniquely African-American view of death and dying.

This study builds upon previous research that has addressed fictional representations of African-American death and dying. Two recent studies include Patricia Holland’s *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000) and Karla Holloway’s *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (2002), but these inquiries primarily emphasize the social and cultural practices associated with death and burial. They do not focus on ancestral landscapes of death as the genesis and repository of heritage and cultural practice. An exception is Anissa Janine Wardi’s *Death and the*
Arc of Mourning in African American Literature. Wardi positions the African-American graveyard within the Southern pastoral tradition as a symbol of the buried, unacknowledged history of African Americans. She draws parallels between the “geography of death” as depicted in the landscape of Jean Toomer’s *Cane* and twentieth-century representations of death and mourning in the writings of Gloria Naylor, Ernest Gaines, and Toni Morrison, among others. While the current study also addresses the African antecedents for funeral rites and burial practices in African-American literature, it also expands Wardi’s analysis of the fictional graveyards in the Southern landscape by aligning fictional landscapes with actual, physically similar, landscapes for historical and cultural comparison. The cultural landscape analysis of actual historic African-American graveyards and burial grounds provides a rich historic and cultural context for the examination of the literary functions of graveyards and burial grounds. As in Wardi’s analysis, this study also emphasizes the role of the ancestor as a significant historical and cultural influence upon these sites of memory in the landscape.

Timothy Mark Robinson explores the literary function of the ancestor as a site of memory for connecting to the past in his dissertation, *In the Presence of the Ancestor: History, Culture, and the Literary Imagination in African American Fiction*. Robinson’s approach to interpreting sites of memory classifies ancestors and other ancestral manifestations of history and memory as “ancestral artifacts.” Applying Robinson’s definition, this study classifies African-American graveyards and burial grounds as ancestral artifacts that represent and memorialize a past that is rooted in African ancestry. The significance and power of the cultural landscapes of African-American graveyards and burial grounds derive to a large degree from their association with African ancestral
origins. While some historians believe that forcible enslavement and separation from the African continent severed cultural connections for African Americans, vestiges of traditional practices have survived in the New World. According to Keith Gilyard and Anissa Wardi, “the Middle Passage was both symbolically and literally a voyage of death, and rituals concerning the dead survived the ordeal. Certainly, African-American burial grounds and the accompanying mortuary customs are material signs of the vitality and continuation of African cultures in America” (4). Since very little material culture from Africa has survived intact in America, historic graveyards and burial grounds are the most prominent and widespread cultural feature of African heritage, and for many communities these cultural landscapes may be the only surviving material evidence of African culture retentions.

In the absence of material artifacts, African-American literature has been a crucial means for capturing and preserving African-American culture—from an African-American perspective. African-American writing focuses particularly, almost obsessively, on the recovery of personal and cultural connections to the ancestral past through the reconstruction of history. Often the process is performative, requiring the historical and cultural reconstruction of physical and imaginative landscapes as a “stage” for the act of reconstruction. For example, in The Chaneysville Incident, David Bradley focuses on the landscape and its changing weather as the backdrop for a quest that requires the protagonist to navigate successfully through a wilderness setting—a physical path that symbolically parallels the character’s emotional journey. That journey leads to the graveyard, and the graveyard becomes the catalyst for resolving the character’s dilemma. In addition, the role of the landscape may expand beyond its obvious
significance—as a stage or setting—to become an actor in the reconstruction.

Specifically, in *Mama Day*, Gloria Naylor imbues the island of Willow Springs with intent; the island is characterized as a force of nature with the potential to influence the destiny of its inhabitants through its storms and topography. Within this setting, the Day family’s graveyard is established as the cultural axis of the island’s African-American heritage. Thus, not only the graveyard but also the entire landscape of Willow springs becomes a site of memory for the island’s cultural heritage. Indeed, Gloria Naylor and all of the writers examined in this study highlight ancestral burial spaces as an integral part of the total landscape. The broader cultural and physical setting of African-American graveyards and burial grounds is key to understanding the significance and function of these powerful symbolic spaces within the landscape. Moreover, all of these landscapes, whether functioning as stage or actor in the reconstruction of history, are infused with cultural memories that otherwise have been forgotten or “written out” of conventional, authorized histories.

The use of the literary imagination in the recovery and documentation of African-American history is especially practical when there are few or limited facts from which to glean historical information. As an example, in *The Chaneysville Incident*, David Bradley imaginatively recreates a previously undocumented historical event that establishes a site of memory for a piece of forgotten history. Bradley’s novel serves as a *lieu de memoire* as defined by Pierre Nora in his often-quoted work on the intersection of history and memory, “Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Memoire” (translated as *Sites of Memory*). Nora asserts that “the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de memoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting . . . to immortalize death, to
materialize the immaterial” (19). The cultural landscapes in African-American literature function as *les lieux de memoire* to embody memory and prevent forgetting in the manner that Nora has described. David Bradley’s fictional interpretation of the lives of twelve escaped slaves aims to recover their history within the cultural memory. The cultural landscape that he creates in the process of recovering this lost history is essential to the interpretation of the slaves’ story. The reconstruction of cultural landscapes, in the form of *les lieux de memoire*, predominates in African-American writing as a deliberate creative and cultural performance designed to “decolonize” history through the gathering and recording of African-American cultural memories (Nora 22). By Nora’s definition, the resulting texts are themselves *les lieux de memoire* when “imagination invests [them] with a symbolic aura” (19). All of the works in this study, then, become sites of memory as cultural and textual repositories that recover—and at the same time symbolically, through the use of the imagination, represent the recovery of—African-American history and memory. Toni Morrison has commented on the literary necessity of using imagination and cultural memory in her short essay, *Site of Memory*. Morrison’s process for recovering African-American history acknowledges the place of autobiography—in the form of the slave narrative—as her literary heritage, and she emphasizes the point that recollection and memory form the landscape (she uses the term “subsoil”) of her literary work. Morrison has found that in order to create a site of memory, to put flesh on the bones of her characters and to give them an interior life, she must move beyond her own recollection and the memory of others, to a place where, she insists, “only the act of the imagination can help me” (192).
Sites of memory, as represented by actual landscapes—and recovered in imagined fictional settings by African-American writers like Morrison—persist because of their power to illuminate our cultural values and beliefs. Though Nora laments the loss of “milieux de memoire,” (real environments of memory) in France, American cultural landscapes persist, he believes, because the United States is “a country of plural memories and diverse traditions” (10); but Nora also contends that “history is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it” (9). The response of African-American writers to the threatened erasure of African-American memory has resulted in their obsessive reclamation of the past. The widespread preoccupation with history and memory among African-American writers has become so instilled in the métier of African-American literary production that it has become a defining element of African-American literature.

As this study will show, history and memory are inextricably tied to the cultural landscape, and African imprints on American soil are still being uncovered and examined for cultural significance. Wherever African-Americans have lived and died, whether in slavery or in freedom, they have impacted the landscape by their presence, and in many cases, they have created distinctly African-American cultural landscapes. Graveyards and burial grounds are the most obvious of the African-American cultural landscapes, but by definition, any landscape that has been impacted in some manner by the presence of humans may be defined as a cultural landscape. The historic significance and the perceived cultural value of certain landscapes, especially sites of memory such as graveyards and burials grounds, set them apart from other cultural landscapes. How the dead are remembered or treated can reveal significant information about a culture. For
example, the adaptation of cultural traditions from Africa to America demonstrates the impact that tremendous changes in society and culture, such as the African Diaspora, can have on traditional burial practices. It is precisely these differences in burial rituals and the maintenance of the landscapes of the dead that make the investigation of these practices and beliefs culturally significant in African-American history. Specifically, in *Mama Day*, Gloria Naylor depicts an African-inspired ritual of “standing forth” to speak to the deceased—to “place a dead person’s past and future side by side to put present pain in perspective” (Meisenhelder 124). The pre-colonial African worldview of death that resonates in such literary representations of traditional burial practices, such as the “standing forth” ritual that Naylor imagines, gives insight into the societal norms of behavior and customs in African-American life. Graveyards and burial grounds are effectively microcosms of society in that their landscapes represent the lives, values, and social conditions of the people who are interred within them. The plantation graveyard in Jones’ *The Known World*, in particular, is an example of social relationships mapped in the landscape of the burial ground. Like the church graveyards in Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Walker’s “Burial,” the family graveyard in *Mama Day*, and the slave burial grounds in Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident* and Jones’ *The Known World*, African-American graveyards and burial grounds, as depicted in history and literature, simultaneously establish and maintain the cultural heritage of African Americans.

Literary representations of the cultural significance of African-American graveyards and burial grounds are abundant in American literature—from nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century slave narratives to contemporary novels that attempt to
reconstruct and recover the African-American past. In each of the literary works discussed in this study, the authors probe beneath the surface of history, culture, and memory to unearth what lies beneath the socially constructed landscapes of African-American graveyards and burial grounds.

Chapter 1 of this study, “On Sacred Ground: The Power of Providence in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,*” analyzes Jacobs’ depiction of a “slave burying ground” where Jacobs seeks comfort and strength at the graves of her parents before fleeing north to freedom. This chapter focuses on the significance of a nineteenth-century graveyard in Edenton, North Carolina, as an integral element within a powerful African-American communal space. Chapter 2, “Mapping the Family Plot: Land, Legacy, and Loss in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day,*” charts the ancestral landscape of the island of Willow Springs and positions the family graveyard as the symbolic repository of a cultural and genealogical legacy. From Sapelo Island, Georgia, to Daufuskie Island, South Carolina, African-American burial traditions can be seen in the landscape of graveyards throughout the Sea Islands. Though Willow Springs does not exist on any map, the landscape upon which it is based has its roots in Georgia and South Carolina’s Sea Island culture. Chapter 3, “Unburying the Past: History, Genealogy, and Imagination in David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident,*” analyzes the process of recovering the past through a quest for personal, familial, and cultural identity that imaginatively reconstructs the history and genealogical mapping of a slave cemetery in Bedford County, Pennsylvania. The exact location of the graves of twelve fugitive slaves cannot be established through documentation, but the oral history regarding the slaves’ death and burial is persuasive. The need to retrieve and reconcile the past with the present is played
out in the cemetery where history, genealogy, and imagination converge. Chapter 4, “A Tapestry of Color and Class: Mapping the Landscape in Edward P. Jones’ The Known World, explores a Virginia plantation graveyard as a physical representation of the relationship between an African-American slaveholder and the African Americans he holds in bondage. Though master and slaves are of the same race, and their lives are inextricably interwoven by social and economic circumstances, law and tradition in life as well as in death dictate their separation. Chapter 5, “ ‘Came to Death’: Family, Tradition, and Memory in Alice Walker’s ‘Burial,’” explores the emotions and memories that Walker experiences on a visit to the grave of her step grandmother Rachel, the inspiration for the character of Celie in Walker’s novel, The Color Purple. The small rural church and graveyard of Wards Chapel A.M.E. Church in Walker’s hometown of Eatonton, Georgia, is the setting for Walker’s poem. The Conclusion: “The Dead Are Not Dead,” completes the study by providing a summative cultural analysis of the New York African Burial Ground National Monument—a powerful cultural repository of African-American history and ancestral memory.
CHAPTER 2

On Sacred Ground: The Power of Providence in Harriet Jacobs’
*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary be at rest. There the prisoners rest together; they hear not the voice of the oppressor; the servant is free from his master.

—Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Harriet Jacobs’ Providence was a small enclave of community structures, including a church and burial ground, erected by African Americans, in 1818, on the outskirts of Edenton, North Carolina. According to the local history of Edenton, an unknown number of African Americans lay buried in the unmarked, overgrown graveyard dating back to the early days of the town. Undocumented, but not lost to the memory of the local African-American population, Providence today retains the power of community and the historical regard that the passage of time accrues to sacred places containing the ancestral memories of a people.

Humans appropriate certain rights and privileges when they occupy and make use of the natural landscape. The occupants of Providence, by manipulating the landscape, building and occupying dwellings, and exercising control over the use of the land, exerted influence and power over their physical and social environment. Harriet Jacobs’ life and her resulting narrative were significantly influenced by her experiences of growing up within the cultural landscape of Providence. Today, Providence retains historical and cultural significance only in part because it is the cultural repository that shaped the life narrative of Harriet Jacobs. Providence is also historically significant.
because it reflects the type of community building that made possible the survival of African-American culture during slavery. In *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender and Community in Early African American Women's Writing*, Katherine Clay Bassard describes the literal process of community building in African-American landscapes, such as Providence, as a performative act. The church and its accompanying graveyard and the other buildings in Providence served as a community gathering place for both religious and secular purposes. According to Bassard, the residents of Providence performed community by “engaging in and (re)producing cultural forms and practices whose central function is community building and the production of the terms by which African Americans come to identify themselves as people” (128).

Human occupation is a deliberate and assertive act that empowers people and drives culture. Providence reflects the cultural and social attitudes of the African Americans of Edenton; they developed Providence as an independent district for the African-American community, a place where they could exercise their free will in the construction and use of the property. In *Theology of Culture*, Paul Tillich writes,

> It is the basis of the desire of any group of human beings to have a place of their own, a place which gives them reality, presence, power of living, which feeds them, body and soul. This is the reason for the adoration of earth and soil, not of soil generally but of this special soil, and not of earth generally but of the divine powers connected with this special section of the earth (32).
Providence qualifies as "special soil," as Tillich says, and within this landscape, the graveyard is a divine, sacred place, a powerful repository for ancestral bones and cultural heritage.

During the nineteenth century, the Providence church and its burial ground were an important African-American community resource. Four African-American men, two free and two enslaved—Alfred Churton, Thomas Barnwell, Jeffrey G. Iredell, and George Bonner—purchased the property in 1818 (Yellin 19). What we know today about Providence, its purpose and its significance to the African Americans of Edenton, is owed to Harriet Jacobs who wrote the only extant description of the Providence church and burial ground in her narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Slave narratives are a revealing source of details concerning the living conditions of enslaved African Americans, and they provide historic documentation of actual events, places, and people from an African-American perspective. However, as Karen Beardslee has pointed out, important cultural information contained in slave narratives has at times been obscured by their original use for abolitionist purposes (37). More recently, scholars have recognized the value of slave narratives as historical documentation that details the family structures and social relations among enslaved people, their working and health conditions, and the rituals and shared beliefs of enslaved communities (Beardslee 37). *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* became one of the most popular slave narratives published during the nineteenth century though it differed significantly from previously published slave narratives. Jacobs' narrative illustrates various aspects of the life of enslaved and free African Americans in Edenton through the depiction of culturally significant traditions such as burial rituals—as seen through the eyes of an enslaved
female protagonist. While other slave narratives focused on the lives of enslaved males, Jacobs’ story portrays a courageous young woman willing to make considerable personal sacrifices to achieve freedom for herself and her children. Stephanie A. Smith calls Jacobs’ narrative “a truly representative feminist tale” (193) that, once authenticated by the scholar Jean Fagan Yellin, forced critics and historians to abandon their “fixed racist and sexist preconceptions” about the lives of enslaved women and to reexamine their definitions of the slave narrative within a new context (191). According to Smith, Yellin can be credited with “single-handedly” changing the “status and shape of what could be understood more broadly as ‘authentic’ slave narrative” (189). Jacobs’ narrative pointedly differs from those of her male counterparts in its focus on the deep sense of connection to family that pervades her story. Despite the privations of enslavement, the theme of family commitment is central to Jacobs’ narrative and refutes the notion that enslavement denied African Americans the socializing influence of familial bonds.

Jacobs specifically illustrates the strong family ties between her family members through two descriptive passages that highlight the significance of the slave burial ground as a communal space that binds the family members even in death. The graveyard in Jacobs’ narrative is a sacred place that she returns to repeatedly for strength and spiritual support. The graveyard provides access to memories of her deceased family members and represents the continuity of familial ties beyond the grave. The graveyard is near the Providence church, which is another symbol of the spiritual connection between the communities of the living and the dead. The physical landscape containing the church and its graveyard forms a cultural space for the practice and continuity of the community’s traditions.
Incorporated in 1722, the town of Edenton has been occupied by African Americans from its beginnings in the American colonial era. Both free and enslaved African Americans made the waterside village their home, and they were employed on the waterfront as well as on the nearby plantations where many of the African-American inhabitants of Edenton were held in slavery. Though local laws limited their social interaction, the free and enslaved African Americans of Edenton formed a close, supportive community that spanned generations. In March 2000, the exact location of the historic Providence burial ground was confirmed. Beneath untold years of overgrowth, the 1½-acre graveyard is full of burial depressions and mounds, but only two remaining markers have been identified. Though most of the graves are unmarked, local records have revealed the identity of several of the African Americans interred in the Providence church burial ground, including Molly Horniblow (Aunt Marthy in the narrative), the grandmother of Harriet Jacobs. Molly Horniblow was one of several freed African Americans in Edenton who owned and operated her own business, a bakery and tearoom. Other notables buried there include Thomas Barnswell, a noted builder, and Jonathon Overton, Private of Continental Line of Captain Jones Company, 10 regiment. In February 2001, the Providence church burial ground in Edenton, North Carolina, was ceremonially re-consecrated.

The burying ground of the enslaved African Americans in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* resonates with personal meaning and memories for Jacobs. It is the place where she seeks solace in the memory of the comforting voices of her parents and strength for the ordeal ahead of her. By the age of 13, Harriet Jacobs had experienced the deaths of both of her parents. In her narrative, she tells us that they are
interred in the slave burying ground, and she notes that she has “frequented” the spot for more than ten years by the time she finally makes the decision to flee north to freedom. Jacobs’ regular visits to her parents’ graves illustrate the continuing close ancestral relationship that she maintains with them. When Jacobs determines that she has no other choice but to escape from her slaveholder—knowing that she might die in her attempt to escape, yet willing to take the risk for her children—she goes to her parents’ graves a final time. In the pre-colonial African worldview, the deceased are routinely sought out for advice and comfort, and Jacobs’ actions demonstrate the continuity of that tradition among the descendants of Africans in nineteenth-century America.² Beardslee, likewise, interprets the “sustained role” of Jacobs’ parents in her life “even in death” as an illustration of Jacobs’ African heritage (41). In accordance with the pre-colonial African worldview of death, the spirits of Jacobs’ parents continue to live, in another plane of existence; they continue to influence her life, and she is able to seek comfort and strength from their memories. Jacobs writes, “I knew the doom that awaited my fair baby in slavery, and I determined to save her from it, or perish in the attempt. I went to make this vow at the graves of my poor parents, in the burying-ground of the slaves” (137).

Through the act of visiting the slave burial ground, Jacobs ritually recreates and strengthens her connections to her deceased family members. This act of spiritual reconnection to the source of ancestral power strengthens her resolve and enables her to carry out her plans for escape. Ann Taves links Jacobs’ graveyard vow to the practices of the Bakongo people of West Africa who employ minkisi, literally translated as “sacred medicine,” in the form of various artifacts, typically placed in some type of container or vessel, as a means to facilitate their communication with the dead (70).³ The graves of
her parents are potent symbols for Jacobs—the physical manifestations of their spirits that have become the artifacts, the vessels, in her ritual of ancestral communication. For Jacobs to access and maintain this ancestral connection, she must overcome the lack of concern displayed by slaveholders for the familial concerns of the enslaved. Upon the death of her father, Jacobs reports that her slaveholder insisted that she continue her work rather than taking the time to mourn and “prepare [her father’s] way to the next life” (Beardslee 40). Jacobs writes, “What cared my owners for that? He was merely a piece of property” (18). Orlando Patterson writes of the “natal alienation” imposed by the system of slavery that did not recognize the parental bonds of enslaved persons (5). He notes that enslaved African Americans were not only denied the right to assert legitimate or binding connections to parents and other living relatives, but by extension, they were also denied their right to claim a genealogy of ancestors and descendants (5-6). Because Jacobs is unable to participate in the ritual preparation of her father’s body for burial, in addition to the grief and shock caused by the sudden loss of her father, she experiences the anguish of being unable to fulfill her filial duty as required by her African heritage.

Jacobs’ description of the location of the burying ground indicates that it is typical of African-American burial grounds of the slave era. Located on the edge of Edenton’s town limits, the land was bounded on one side by Filbert Creek, which regularly flooded and further isolated the area from the town. Jacobs describes the spot on which the church and graveyard stands as wooded and isolated, and it has a “death-like stillness,” yet Jacobs recognizes that “never had it seemed to me so sacred as now” (138). Despite its isolation and deteriorating condition, Jacobs emphasizes the pastoral elements of the
slave burying ground, and her description of the landscape includes a quote from a nineteenth-century poem entitled “Burial Hymn,” by Henry Hart Milman (1791–1868):

BROTHER, thou art gone before us,
And thy saintly soul is flown
Where tears are wip’d from every eye,
And sorrow is unknown.
From the burden of the flesh,
And from care and sin releas’d,
Where the wicked cease from troubling,
And the weary are at rest.

Popular nineteenth-century sentiments concerning death and burial tended toward the romantic, and Jacobs’ planned flight to freedom runs parallel with Milman’s lines: “Thy saintly soul is flown (2), and later, “thy spirit brother, soars away” (29). By paraphrasing Milman’s verse, Jacobs pointedly compares the aspect of a Christian death to the attainment of freedom from slavery.

In “Power and Resistance in Harriet Jacob’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” Debra Humphreys also notes Jacobs’ reference to the interred slaves as prisoners—not only freed and reunited by death “but freed from the gaze and whip of the slave master” (159). Humphreys identifies Providence as one of the “liminal” or marginal spaces, as defined by the dominant society, that nevertheless have significance to the people that occupy them. She points out that these spaces are “illegitimate” precisely because they are not recognized by the dominate culture; however, she also notes that spatial and political relationships are mapped within the boundaries of the landscape, and she
contends that these places become sources of power for the inhabitants, places where they can exercise control over their lives. The slave burial ground in Edenton, North Carolina, though located in an isolated wooded area of little obvious material value, nevertheless figures large in the experience of African Americans, especially the enslaved and disenfranchised. The remoteness of the location, in fact, adds to the sense of separateness and autonomy of the African-American community, and as Humphreys emphasizes, “The graveyard appears as a privileged, sanctified place because there the oppressor’s gaze is rendered impotent” (143).

Likewise, Jacobs’ family exercises a limited form of power by invoking its right to bury family members together despite the conflicting wishes of the white slaveholders. By controlling the funeral service, Jacobs’ family can ensure the dignity of a proper burial. According to Ross W. Jamieson, “Funerals may have been one of the few times that antebellum slave communities could assume control of the symbolism around them, and thus create the dignity at death that negated the “social death” of their slave status” (55). Unconcerned about the preferences of the enslaved family members, however, the white slave mistress desires to have Jacobs’ Aunt Betty Horniblow (Aunt Nancy in the narrative) buried in the white family’s plot. The slave mistress considers the planned interment an ultimate show of respect for Aunt Betty and desires to have the “body of her old worn-out servant . . . buried at her feet” (222). Though Jacobs notes, “No colored person had ever been allowed interment in the white people's burying-ground,” Jacobs’ family does not consider the offer an honor (221). Jacobs questions the motives of the slaveholder in suggesting the arrangement: “I suppose she thought it would be a beautiful illustration of the attachment existing between slaveholder and slave” (222). The
interment of Aunt Betty in the white family’s plot would have created a rupture in the traditions of death and burial in Edenton. It is the clergyman who must approve the interment, and though he professes no objections to burying Aunt Betty in the white burial ground, he suggests that Aunt Betty’s mother might “have some choice as to where her remains shall be deposited” (221). Jacobs describes the scene and marvels at the slaveholder’s callousness:

It had never occurred to Mrs. Flint that slaves could have any feelings. When my grandmother was consulted, she at once said she wanted Nancy to lie with all the rest of her family, and where her own old body would be buried. Mrs. Flint graciously complied with her wish, though she said it was painful to her to have Nancy buried away from her. She might have added with touching pathos, ‘I was so long used to sleep with her lying near me, on the entry floor.’ (222)

In this confrontation with the slaveholder, the enslaved family members prevail, and Jacobs’ aunt is buried in the slave burying ground with the other family members—away from the influence and “gaze” of the oppressor. In *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, Eugene D. Genovese remarks upon the manner of whites in appropriating the burial rights of the enslaved African Americans whom they favored. He points out that these funerals “were for the whites. The blacks never had the chance to show their own grief and their own respect in their own black way” (196). Jacobs’ family fights and retains their familial rights over the disposition of their loved one’s remains, a significant assertion of cultural power. Jacobs’ uncle requests permission to pay for his sister’s funeral, and again the slaveholders oblige. In this manner, the family exercises as much
control as possible over the funeral arrangements though they still are unable to direct the proceedings without the presence of whites. Jacobs describes the funeral:

The arrangements were very plain, but perfectly respectable. She was buried on the Sabbath, and Mrs. Flint's minister read the funeral service. There was a large concourse of colored people, bond and free, and a few white persons who had always been friendly to our family. 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. It was talked of by the slaves as a mighty grand funeral. (222)

Beardslee suggests that Jacobs' use of “contradictory adjectives” in the passage above, specifically the juxtaposition of “plain” and “grand” to describe her aunt's funeral, points to the complexity of the African-inspired rituals of death and burial practiced by African Americans—and she points out that a typical African-American funeral might feature exchanges of gifts, preaching, singing and dancing (42). Jacobs mentions none of these activities, however, and it seems more likely that the “plain, but perfectly respectable” style of the funeral describes a Christian rather than an African perspective—and reveals a touch of social snobbery on the part of Jacobs. Though the funeral is “plain” as befitting a humble Christian, it is also “respectable” as appropriate to the social status of a freedwoman like Molly Horniblow. As Jacobs points out, the funeral would only seem “grand” to the enslaved people.

As for the whites in attendance at her aunt’s funeral, Jacobs’ disdain for the counterfeit sentimentality of the slaveholder’s actions is clear, but during slavery, the
slaveholder legally controlled even the most intimate aspects of the lives of enslaved people, and that control did not end upon their deaths. Not only the legal authority of slaveholders but oftentimes specific legislation regarding interment, regulated the funeral rites and burials of enslaved African Americans. As early as 1687, a Virginia law forbade slave funerals at night to deter unsupervised gatherings of African Americans taking place under the cover of darkness (Genovese 194). Many nineteenth-century whites feared, and perhaps rightly so, that unsupervised funerals would provide the opportunity for African Americans to gather and arrange plots of insurrection and rebellion similar to those waged by Gabriel Prosser in 1800 and Nat Turner in 1831.

Despite the control that the Jacobs' family eventually exercised over the funeral ceremony of Aunt Betty, Jacobs writes that the tears of the slaveholder at the gravesite would have presented a pretty display of affection for outsiders who did not comprehend the horrors of slavery:

Northern travellers, passing through the place, might have described this tribute of respect to the humble dead as a beautiful feature in the "patriarchal institution;" a touching proof of the attachment between slaveholders and their servants . . . We could have told them a different story. We could have given them a chapter of wrongs and sufferings, that would have touched their hearts, if they had any hearts to feel for the colored people. (222-223)

Jacobs uses the description of the burial scene pointedly to remind her readers that as outsiders their superficial knowledge of slavery does not reveal the harsh heretofore hidden truths regarding the peculiar institution. Indeed, the initial reception of Jacobs'
narrative strained the credulity of many readers, and the authenticity of her narrative continued to be questioned until Yellin’s research revealed the historical accuracy of Jacobs’ account.

As is apparent from Jacobs’ description of the slave burial ground, historically, African-American cemeteries were located in marginal spaces in isolated, swampy or rocky land deemed to be of little value for other purposes. Graves were seldom marked or marked only with a natural marker such as a fieldstone or shrub. Jacobs finds her parents’ graves because of her familiarity with the burial ground, but only “a black stump,” the remnant of a tree that Jacobs’ father had planted, marks her mother’s grave (138). Robert Farris Thompson describes the practice of planting trees over graves as an African cultural antecedent that represents the soul or spirit of the deceased (128). The roots of the tree go down into the spirit world. Graveyard trees symbolize the immortality of the human spirit. Though Jacobs does not define the species of tree planted over her mother’s grave, cedar trees with their evergreen foliage were commonly used as grave markers in nineteenth-century African-American cemeteries to represent the undying spirit. The spirit of the ancestors continues to influence the lives of the living, and though the visible portion of the tree that adorns the grave of Jacobs’ mother is burnt and apparently dead, the living roots, which cannot be seen, are firmly attached in the spirit world. However, Taves offers a different interpretation of the burnt and blasted tree, and citing Thompson, she notes that “a flourishing tree meant that all was well with the departed spirited spirit” (71). For this reason, Taves suggests, “it is possible that Jacobs associated the blackened stump with the disgrace which Jacobs believed she had brought upon her mother,” thereby providing an important symbolic context for her
vow to escape the bonds of slavery for her children’s sake and “to mollify her mother’s spirit” (71). Jacobs’ mother, Delilah Horniblow, died in 1819 when Harriet was six years old. The perfection of the young Harriet’s memory of her mother reveals a loving and nurturing maternal relationship. Jacobs relies upon her memories of her mother for spiritual sustenance and as a model for measuring her own success as a parent:

I had received my mother’s blessing when she died; and in many an hour of tribulation I had seemed to hear her voice, sometimes chiding me, sometimes whispering loving words into my wounded heart. I have shed many and bitter tears, to think that when I am gone from my children they cannot remember me with such entire satisfaction as I remembered my mother. (128)

At her mother’s grave, Jacobs renews the maternal bond and gathers strength to move ahead with her plans. She hides in the attic crawlspace of her grandmother’s house—an ordeal that would last seven years—as she awaits the opportunity to escape to the North. During Jacobs’ exile in the attic, her children are taken care of by her grandmother, but Jacobs’ self-imposed absence from their lives has denied her the ability to provide her children with a “satisfactory” mother. Through the subterfuge of letters postmarked from the North, Jacobs maintains the fiction of a successful escape, and her children believe that she is alive and free. However, after five years in hiding, Jacobs emerges from her hiding space to reveal herself to her daughter as she prepares to send the child away from Edenton. Another two years pass before Jacobs reveals herself to her son on the eve of her own escape. He, in turn, acknowledges that he had known of her presence in Edenton and kept her secret for fear of exposing her whereabouts. In
preparation for what could be a lasting separation, during final tearful meetings, Jacobs’ children receive their mother’s promise to be with them again. Though Jacobs laments what she perceives as the imperfect nature of her relationship to her own children, her concern highlights her cultural perception of the necessity of supportive maternal links between the generations of her family. The sentimental focus on the bond between mother and child in this passage serves to support Stephanie Smith’s conclusion that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is “far more concerned with domesticity and inter-relations than any other slave narrative” (195).

Jacobs’ father Elijah Knox died in 1826. Jacobs’ request to go immediately to her father’s house upon hearing of his death had been denied by her slaveholder; her efforts, instead, had been directed to arranging flowers for her slaveholder’s party decorations. In Jacobs’ own words, she ironically relates: “I spent the day gathering flowers and weaving them into festoons while the dead body of my father was lying within a mile of me” (18). Jacobs accompanies her father’s body to the graveyard for burial, and she notes that those who “knew [her] father’s worth . . . respected his memory” (19). But, in the eyes of the slaveholders, Jacobs’ father had spoiled his children by teaching them to feel they were human beings rather than property. It is her father’s example of independence that propels Jacobs to attempt the flight to freedom for herself and her children, and her return to the graveyard allows her to replenish her own flagging spirits. Jacobs relates an incident involving her brother that demonstrated Knox’s attitude and his actions regarding the importance of his family:

> My father, by his nature, as well as by the habit of transacting business as a skilful [sic] mechanic, had more of the feelings of a freeman
than is common among slaves. My brother was a spirited boy; and being brought up under such influences, he early detested the name of master and mistress. One day, when his father and his mistress both happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said, ‘You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first.’

‘You are my child,’ replied our father, ‘and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water.’

(17)

Elijah Knox, though enslaved, set an example for his children that contained both the appearance and actions, if not the legal substance, of the exercise of free will. This is his legacy to Jacobs and her brother. After her father’s death, Jacobs and her brother had despaired over ever attaining their freedom. The desolation of the graveyard echoes the despair that Jacobs feels, but her “spirit is overawed by the solemnity of the scene” (138). Jacobs’ emotional reaction to the graveyard where her parents are buried is a somber reminder that her father’s desire for freedom for himself and his family ended with his death. Next to the blackened stump that marks her mother’s grave is her father’s weathered wooden headboard. Jacobs does not reveal who made and placed the marker on her father’s grave, but it too has suffered over time. Jacobs describes its deterioration: “His grave was marked by a small wooden board, bearing his name, the letters of which were nearly obliterated” (138). Just as Jacobs is able to communicate with her mother’s spirit in the graveyard, the memory of her father’s voice becomes apparent to her also.
"As I passed the wreck of the old meeting house, where, before Nat Turner's time, the slaves had been allowed to meet for worship, I seemed to hear my father's voice come from it, bidding me not to tarry till I reached freedom or the grave" (93). Hazel Carby notes that "the transition from death as preferable to slavery to the stark polarity of freedom or death was made at this narrative moment" [italics mine] (60). The often-repeated conception of "death as preferable to slavery" typically places enslaved persons in a position of passive resistance, persevering in bondage until the release of death. However, Jacobs' active bid for freedom changes the balance of power between the enslaved and the enslavers when she declares her preference for "freedom or death." It is significant that the ruined church and the reference to Nat Turner's rebellion figures in her narrative at the point in which Jacobs confirms her goal of freedom.

The destruction of the Providence church is a physical and symbolic reminder of the continuing control of slaveholders over the lives of the African Americans of Edenton. Though the African-American residents had attempted to preserve some semblance of autonomy at Providence, their efforts resulted in failure and the destruction of their church. The church graveyard is not desecrated, most likely because it is not understood or perceived by local whites as a threat to their power. However, it is in the graveyard, in the shadow of the ruined church, that Jacobs finds hope and strength. She performs a personal ritual at the graves of her parents: "I lay down and kissed them and poured forth a prayer to God for guidance and support in the perilous step I was about to take" (138). Jacobs combines the traditional African practice of communing with the ancestors for assistance and spiritual support with a prayer to God as befitting her Christian beliefs. Likewise, Taves also notes that Jacobs' "concern for her standing in
the eyes of her dead parents, her sense of the sacrality of the graveyard, and her attention
to their grave markers suggest that aspects of her African heritage were alive within a self-consciously Christian framework” (71).

The gravesites of Jacobs’ parents today no longer bear any sign of physical markers in the landscape. Eventually, natural markers such as wooden headboards or plant material, such as those erected over the graves of Elijah Knox and Delilah Horniblow, deteriorate and return to the soil. Consequently, many African-American graves eventually sink into the landscape, and without markers, are unrecognizable to the casual observer. Anissa Janine Wardi has described the sinking and return of graves into the pastoral landscape as a natural occurrence (161), but unmarked graveyards and burial grounds—and the personal and community history that they represent—may be completely lost to history and memory when they are allowed to return without regard into the landscape. Fortunately, Jacobs has provided a lasting memorial to her parents in the form of a material artifact, the site of memory that is her narrative. Jacobs’ narrative record preserves and documents details of the history and memory of what lies beneath the Providence burial ground that otherwise might have been lost. Though the exact location of the graves of Harriet Jacobs’ parents in the burial ground is unknown, the burial place of Jacobs’ maternal grandmother, Molly Horniblow, who died in 1853, has been verified. Her stone grave marker was identified in the Providence burial ground which is today associated with the reconstructed Providence Baptist Church. The survival of this permanent marker is a testament to the public standing of Molly Horniblow in the community of Edenton during her lifetime. Jacobs cites her
grandmother’s vow to “be a mother to her grandchildren, in so far as she was allowed to do so” (17).

After the death of her parents, Jacobs depends upon the support, both emotional and monetary, of Molly Horniblow. Her grandmother’s support shields her from some of the harshness of childhood slavery. Jacobs notes that though she was threatened by her slaveholders with punishment for stopping at her grandmother’s house, “there was always something there for me . . . for my breakfast or dinner” (19). During the time Jacobs is interred in her “living grave” under the eaves of her grandmother’s house, she finds a “loophole of retreat” (173), as this chapter of the narrative is entitled, from the mental anguish that has become a part of her life. Jacobs’ retreat is a form of “social death” that all but removes her from the daily course of human interaction. The small dark space in which she lives for almost seven years appropriately defines the narrow existence of her life in hiding; yet, it is still preferable to the unwanted sexual attentions of her slaveholder. Humphreys cites Valerie Smith’s interpretation of the literal and symbolic connotations of “the loophole of retreat” as ambiguous (144). Nonetheless, Jacobs is obviously using this title with ironic intent. Her purpose is to focus the reader on the complex “power play” she makes in retreating to the garret, lying in wait and manipulating public opinion regarding her supposed flight, while plotting her eventual escape. Molly Horniblow’s house provides the loophole of retreat, a space of resistance and a source of support for Jacobs where she is able to exercise at least a limited degree of control over her life. Even after her successful escape to freedom and her grandmother’s death, Jacobs’ “tender memories” of her grandmother serve to sustain her (295). Karen Beardslee compares Jacobs’ description of Molly Horniblow to the skilled,
spirited African female elders who performed “a central role in the community,” and as Beardslee points out, despite Molly Horniblow’s failure to free her own children from slavery, she instills in Jacobs “the African concern for the next generations’ ability to define themselves while keeping the ancestors’ dreams, visions, and overall culture alive” (39). Jacobs’ narrative repeatedly turns to the strong ties that bind the generations of her family, a theme aptly supporting John Blassingame’s observation that “although it was frequently broken, the slave family was an important buffer from the rigors of slavery” (191).

Cultural landscapes such as Providence, built by the African Americans of Edenton, provided relatively “free” spaces where African Americans, enslaved and free, could practice cultural traditions and celebrate the bonds of extended family and community. Providence, for a time, provided the African-American residents of Edenton with a place where they could perhaps more freely express themselves—a place of their own away from the watchful eye of the slaveholders on the plantation and outside the confines of the white controlled town. Yellin speculates that Harriet Jacobs’ father, Elijah Knox, may have found in Providence the only place where he might have been able to express his “independent spirit” (18). The cultural enclave of Providence included not only the church and its burying ground but also “two or three small buildings they put up” (Yellin 19). Perhaps these additional buildings provided space for secular activities or practices, such as conducting a school, which needed to be shielded from the white community. An 1830 North Carolina law prohibited enslaved persons from learning to read or write or from being given books or pamphlets (Bassett 48-49). As laws also existed to prohibit the mingling of free and enslaved African Americans in
their homes, these buildings might have also provided a space for lodging, refuge, or recreation that was outside the control of whites.

The white population of Edenton challenged the cultural attachment of African Americans to Providence in the wake of the Nat Turner rebellion. In Edenton, Jacobs recorded that African Americans were whipped and jailed in an effort by whites to elicit information about the Turner rebellion. Jacobs wrote that despite the entreaties of the African-American population, church meetings were outlawed, and eventually whites destroyed the Providence church:

The slaves begged the privilege of again meeting at their little church in the woods, with their burying ground around it. It was built by the colored people, and they had no higher happiness than to meet there and sing hymns together, and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer. Their request was denied, and the church was demolished. (103)

Humphreys correctly cites the church as another African-American “place of power” linked to the graveyard, and in prohibiting the African-American population access to their church, whites fearful of further plots of slave rebellion were attempting to exert control over that power or any semblance of communal autonomy and solidarity that Providence had afforded its owners. In the aftermath of the Nat Turner rebellion, not only in Edenton but also across the South, the law required the attendance of whites during the gatherings of African Americans.

Upon the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Lydia Maria Childs, Jacobs’ friend and the editor of her narrative, was accused of creating *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as a fictionalized account of slave life for use as abolitionist
propaganda. More than a century later, historian John Blassingame questioned the credibility of Harriet Jacobs’ narrative, declaring it to be “not credible” and too “orderly” (373), though he acknowledges the fact that Childs herself readily revealed that her editorial contribution included the “orderly arrangement” of Jacobs’ original material. Yellin’s subsequent research has verified many of the incidents and people in the life of Harriet Jacobs, and her biography of Jacobs has broadened the account and bolstered the events in Jacobs’ narrative with the historic record.

The Historic Edenton Visitor Center conducts guided tours of Edenton, and upon request for a special tour, docents will include details concerning the life of Harriet Jacobs. The docents at the Historic Edenton Visitor Center describe the landscape of the Providence burial ground as “well maintained.” However, when questioned as to the location of the graves of Jacobs’ parents, they were unsure whether the two were actually buried in the Providence burial ground. Tourist information provided by the Explore North Carolina website (www.visitnc.com) states that there are “26 contemporary markers noting many local names, numerous round brick vaults, and impressions of many other graves in an attractively landscaped location.” The Providence burial ground is listed as one of the historic sites on the North Carolina Public Schools’ Regional Field Trip Experiences as a “burial ground of prominent African-Americans, free blacks and military people from late 18th century and 19th century [sic].” The preservation and current recognition of this historic site by various entities underscores the broad acceptance of Providence and its burial ground as an important site of cultural memory for African Americans and a significant cultural landscape in Edenton’s history.
Harriet Jacobs died in Boston in 1897. She is buried at Mount Auburn Cemetery alongside her brother, John, and her daughter, Louisa. Mount Auburn is a National Historic Landmark, a designation that recognizes the cemetery as one of the most significant cultural landscapes in the United States. Mount Auburn, founded in 1831, is the first large-scale designed landscape in the United States, and its design set the standard for other Victorian-era garden cemeteries and, eventually, the nation’s first public parks. Mount Auburn’s landscape was designed as “a place for the living,” and it boasts a number of ornate funerary markers and monuments and a large variety of ornamental plants and trees as well as a lake, fountains, and chapels. Though never restricted based on race or class, it was not until the late 1800s that African Americans began purchasing lots at Mount Auburn. During this time, Louisa Jacobs purchased four lots. Harriet Jacobs’ simple headstone, stained by time and nature, is no longer entirely legible to the casual viewer, but her biographer, Yellin, has recorded the inscription chosen by Jacobs’ daughter: “Patient in tribulation, Fervent in spirit serving the Lord” (260). These words, as Yellin notes, are an inverted transcription of verses from the Epistle of Paul to the Romans: “Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord” and “Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer” (Rom. 12:11-12). Yellin finds it significant that Louisa has omitted the words “Rejoicing in hope” and placed the emphasis on her mother’s patience by positioning those words first on her headstone (260). The years Jacobs spent in hiding in the coffin-like confines of her grandmother’s garret indeed reflect the character of a woman of great patience. Her self-imposed “burial” illustrates her persistent and fervent belief in her hope for eventual freedom for herself, her children, and her people. Largely forgotten by the public at the time of her
death, Jacobs' final resting place in the peaceful, park-like setting of Mount Auburn
belies the tragic incidents in her life. Her interment in the professionally designed
cultural landscape of Mount Auburn lies in stark contrast to the slave burying ground that
contains the graves of her parents.

While Jacobs' narrative relates the story of one woman who struggled against the
degrading system of slavery, it also depicts the struggles of the community in which she
lived. The people of Providence faced the challenges of creating a communal space that
allowed them a modicum of freedom and autonomy within the limited life expectations
for African Americans during the era of slavery. The Providence burial ground is the
surviving cultural landscape that embodies the values and beliefs of the earliest African-
American residents of Edenton, North Carolina. It is sacred ground, the “special soil” of
a powerful communal space that nurtured and sustained the culture of a people. This
historic landscape provides a focal point for reclaiming the history and memory of
African-American life in Edenton.
Notes

1 Jean Fagan Yellin, in Harriet Jacobs: A Life, examined historical documents which linked Jacobs’ narrative to the actual events, places, and people that appear in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. The actual historic names are used to refer to people and places referred to by aliases in the narrative.

2 The practice of seeking ancestral guidance through communication with the deceased has led outsiders to believe mistakenly that Africans worshipped their ancestors as Gods, but ancestor “veneration” is perhaps a more accurate term than ancestor “worship.”

3 Minkisi are essentially containers devised from various types of receptacles—gourds, animal horns, shells, or cloth bundles—that can be filled with graveyard dirt and other items that are infused with the spirit of the deceased. As the repositories of the dead, graves are also considered an especially powerful minkisi, and minkisi have been referred to as “portable” graves by Monica BlackmunVisonà in The History of Art in Africa. In the American South, the belief in the power of graveyard dirt is evidenced by its ritual collection and use in various forms of root work and Vodun.

4 In Black Thunder, Arna Bontemps uses the historical incident of Prosser’s rebellion to highlight the African cultural retentions of enslaved African Americans. A funeral scene depicts African-inspired burial customs and is used to provide a covert means of planning the rebellion.

CHAPTER 3

Mapping the Family Plot: Land, Legacy, and Loss in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*

Everything he needed to know could have been heard from that yellow house to that silver trailer to that graveyard.

—Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*

On the island of Willow Springs, life does not end at the graveyard, and for those who are willing to listen, the voices of the ancestors can still be heard there. In *Mama Day*, Gloria Naylor establishes the cultural landscape of the Day family graveyard on Willow Springs as the defining symbol of the Day family’s heritage. The cultural landscape of the graveyard functions as a portal to the past, a site of memory that allows the living descendants to access the ancestral spirits for guidance and support. The title character, Mama Day, is Miranda Day—the family matriarch who maintains the connection to the ancestral spirits and serves as a conduit to channel the spiritual power of the community’s past and present. She facilitates memory and embodies the values and traditions of the island’s African heritage. *Mama Day* re-envisions and restores African-American cultural heritage by illustrating the continuity of tradition, from Africa to America, through the generations. Furthermore, Margaret Earley Whitt asserts, “The structure of the novel takes its shape out of the history and way of life and death that is the heritage of Willow Springs” (118). As Whitt’s statement suggests, the intersection of history, life, death, and heritage, specific elements that come together in the cultural landscape of the graveyard, are integral to the structure of *Mama Day*. Naylor
interweaves the islanders’ cultural beliefs about life and death with the common places of everyday life in Willow Springs. She plots a specific narrative space that is defined by the path from the yellow house of Mama Day’s sister Abigail, to the silver trailer belonging to Mama Day, to the Day family graveyard in the west woods. These three locations play a significant part in establishing the parameters of the island’s cultural geography, but the graveyard is the narrative landscape that is the critical site of the Day family’s legacy and loss. The island map and the family tree that Naylor provides in the front matter of the novel define both the genealogy and the geography of the island of Willow Springs. The map provides a geographic reference point that places Willow Springs outside the mainland and its cultural space, while the Day family tree illustrates their family’s true cultural connection through the African matriarch, Sapphira Wade—the cultural and spiritual mother of all of the islanders. According to Helene Christol, genealogy and geography, then, are the twin elements of the narrative landscape that converge in the Day family graveyard (348). All of the paths in the lives of the Day family, and indeed the paths traveled by all of the residents of Willow Springs, lead to and from the graveyard.

Christol emphasizes that the connection Naylor establishes between the people, the history, and the landscape of Willow Springs is a prerequisite to the reinvention of American history and myth, a “genealogical revisionism” that is essential to the reconstruction of African-American history (348). Naylor achieves just such a genealogical revision in her construction of the cultural landscape of Willow Springs and the Day family graveyard. Accordingly, she has given the residents of Willow Springs total autonomy in creating their own history by placing the island outside of the political
boundaries and control of any governing body in the United States. The exact geographic location of Willow Springs defies legal description. Though the island has no local political ties to the mainland, the residents of Willow Springs are proud to say that they have been registered to vote since Reconstruction and that Willow Springs has been represented in every national election. Neither South Carolina nor Georgia has historic right to ownership of the island, thus the island remains an entity unto itself. It lies off the coast of both states—the bridge at the midpoint between the two states defines the midpoint of the island. The significance of this political and geographic separation allows Naylor to position Willow Springs outside the conventional cultural history of America in preparation for the truth of an alternate version of history as lived by the inhabitants of Willow Springs.

Just as their African ancestors formed strong bonds with the places they called home on the African continent, the inhabitants of Willow Springs have culturally imprinted the landscape with their heritage and claimed it as their own. As the narrator says of Willow Springs, “So who it belong to? It belongs to us—clean and simple. And it belonged to our daddies, and our daddies before them, and them too” (5). Willow Springs functions as a symbolic cultural manifestation of the connection between the dislocated Africans and their American descendants on the Sea Islands. The Sea Islanders developed a strong sense of place that grew out of their intimate knowledge of the American landscape in which they were forced to labor. They planted and harvested crops and became skilled at reading the coastal weather and the seasons; they hunted and trapped game acquiring knowledge of the movements and habitats of the island wildlife; they fished the shores of the ocean and the inlets of the sound and learned the rhythms of
the moon and tides. Their communal lifestyle strengthened their sense of place and
developed "strong kin networks" within their geographic communities (Stewart 179).
Karen Holloway suggests, "The translucent presence of a metaphorical Africa survives
on [these islands] because of the intimate bonding between place and community" (138).
The community of Willow Springs is founded upon a natural, intimate relationship to the
land and the legacy of its African ancestors.

Though the strong community ties of Willow Springs help to preserve the island's
cultural traditions, many young people on the island have crossed over to the mainland to
attend school and find jobs. Consequently, they have adopted some of the cultural ways
of the mainland, causing the elder island residents to question the effect of mainland
beliefs and values on their young people. When one islander's son produces an
ethnographic study of Willow Springs—effectively demonstrating his lack of
understanding of his own cultural heritage—the islanders' suspicion of the "the people
who ran the type of schools that could turn our children into raving lunatics" is
apparently confirmed (8). Mama Day and the other islanders have perhaps purposely
stymied the efforts of the young ethnographer because of his inability to ask the right
questions—and to listen. As the narrator suggests, "Everything he needed to know could
have been heard from that yellow house to that silver trailer to that graveyard" (9). If the
young ethnographer had called upon Mama Day,

She woulda stopped him from walking just by a patch of oak: she reaches
up, takes a bit of moss for him to put in them closed leather shoes —
ythey're probably sweating his feet something terrible, she tells him. And
he's to sit on the ground, right there, to untie his shoes and stick in the
moss. And then he’d see through the low bush that old graveyard just down the slope. And when he looks back up, she woulda disappeared through the trees; but he’s to keep pushing the moss in them shoes and go on down to that graveyard where he’ll find buried Grace, Hope, Peace, and Peace again. Then a little ways off a grouping of seven old graves, and a little ways off seven older again. All circled by them live oaks and hanging moss, over a rise from the tip of The Sound. Everything he needed to know coulda been heard from that yellow house to that silver trailer to that graveyard. (9-10)

Naylor’s emphasis on the graveyard as the key to understanding the cultural heritage of Willow Springs is significant. Anissa Wardi purports, “Cemeteries and other interment sites are complicated ancestral spaces of mourning and remembrance,” and the ethnographer’s misconceptions about the culture of Willow Springs illustrate Wardi’s point (51). He has failed to access the most potent source of cultural memory on the island—the Day family graveyard.

The narrator suggests that the young ethnographer could have also followed in the path of Mama Day’s niece, Cocoa, when she returns to Willow Springs for her annual visit. Like the young ethnographer, Cocoa also represents a blending of island and mainland cultures—but she respects tradition, and she believes in the old ways and in the persistence of the living spirit after death. Thus, Cocoa’s annual return to Willow Springs always includes a trip to the graveyard. In accordance with the pre-colonial African worldview of her island forebears, she performs the necessary rituals of ancestral
reverence and communication. In the graveyard, Cocoa also passes time with her dead husband, George, sharing memories of their past life together:

[Cocoa] stops and puts a bit of moss in her open-toe sandals, then goes on past those graves to a spot just down the rise toward The Sound, a little bit south of that circle of oaks. And if he was patient and stayed off a little ways, he'd realize she was there to meet up with her first husband so they could talk about that summer fourteen years ago when she left, but he stayed. (10)

For the young ethnographer, or for any outsider, to truly understand the Willow Springs that Naylor has created, it is necessary to recognize that reading the cultural landscapes of graveyards and burial grounds is a complex cultural process—one that requires not only the knowledge of cultural beliefs regarding death and burial, but also the willingness to accept alternative cultural perspectives.

In its geographic isolation and retention of African cultural traditions, the cultural landscape and graveyard of Naylor’s Willow Springs bring to mind life on Georgia’s Sapelo Island. In her book, God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man, Cornelia Walker Bailey, a Sapelo resident and descendant of the island’s enslaved inhabitants, declares, “We’re the last majority black population on a Georgia island that is reachable only by boat. Matter of fact, we’re about the last majority Geechee/Gullah population living on a major island unconnected to the mainland in the entire string of Sea Islands, from South Carolina to Florida” (333). The cultural landscape of the fictional island of Willow Springs exhibits many of the characteristics of the Sea Islands generally, and of Sapelo Island specifically. The cultures of the coastal islands of Georgia and South Carolina are
“commonly known as the Gullah or Geechee-speaking communities” (Jones-Jackson 5). The African Americans who were enslaved on these isolated islands retained cultural connections with their African ancestry in many of their traditions, habits, and behaviors, some of which persist today. Lindsay Tucker contends, “The distinctive Gullah heritage, that is both social and cultural, makes of the Sea Islands an actual and symbolic African presence” (150). In *Mama Day*, Naylor uses the cultural landscape of Willow Springs in just this way. Willow Springs symbolizes the tension between the dominant American culture and traditional cultures like that of the Africans who were brought to the Americas. Like the actual Sea Islands, Willow Springs illustrates the struggle of African Americans to retain African culture traditions while adapting to contemporary American culture.

Just as the current residents of the Sea Islands continue to practice the customs of their ancestors, the residents of Willow Springs also retain many of their ancestors’ traditional practices—though the origin for some of those practices have been obscured by time and erased from cultural memory. For example, when Cocoa’s husband, George, questions the reason for putting moss in their shoes before entering the family graveyard, Cocoa admits that she does not know, but she says that “it shows respect” (218). Amy K. Levin states that, even though the sources of some sea island traditions “have been largely forgotten by those who still practice them . . . these traditions surface in novels [including *Mama Day*] . . . rendering a multicultural angle of interpretation” (73). The residents of Sapelo Island have also reported the tradition of asking permission to enter their island’s community burial ground, Behavior Cemetery (Georgia Writers Project 160; Bailey 237). Though the islanders cannot identify the source of this cultural gesture,
as Cocoa’s character in *Mama Day* explains—and as Sapelo Islanders believe—not following the tradition represents a breach of cultural etiquette that would disturb the spirits of those interred in the graveyard. Naylor’s purpose in incorporating actual traditional practices into the text of *Mama Day* serves to reinforce and reclaim traces of the African ancestral presence beyond the communities in which these practices still occur. Cocoa does not expect her husband George to understand what she intuitively knows because of her connection to the culture of Willow Springs:

> It would have been too much to ask for you to understand those whispers as we passed through my family plot. As soon as I put the moss in my shoes, I could hear them all in the wind as it moved through the trees and stirred up dust along the ground. (223)

Cocoa’s family have been residents of Willow Springs for at least six generations, and her family’s heritage is the source of Cocoa’s culturally mediated knowledge of island traditions. The cultural knowledge that Cocoa has inherited from her ancestors has been passed down through the generations by the descendants of Sapphira Wade, an enslaved conjure woman who, according to the Day family’s oral history, bewitched and killed the island’s original owner, a slaveholder named Bascombe Wade. After Wade’s death, Sapphira acquired the island to which the Days currently hold title. Because Naylor places the legend of Sapphira Wade at the center of the novel, history and ancestral heritage function as significant factors in the narrative, providing a dramatic cultural backdrop for the events in *Mama Day*. Dorothy Perry Thompson likens Sapphira to “the ancestor/goddess,” which Thompson identifies as “a recurring figure in the fiction of African and African-American women writers” such as Naylor (93). On Willow Springs,
Sapphira’s legend has taken on dramatic proportions and has become common cultural knowledge:

Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched, grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four. It ain’t about right or wrong, truth or lies; it’s about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both the words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge. (3)

The “whole new meaning” that Sapphira brings to light is the foundation of the alternate perspective of cultural history and truth that Naylor depicts “beyond the bridge” on the island of Willow Springs. Sapphira’s character appears repeatedly in the stories told by the Day family members in the novel, and the living descendants continue to feel her ancestral influence in their lives. As Toni Morrison suggests in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Sapphira is the “sort of timeless [person] whose relationships to the characters [is] benevolent, instructive, and protective, [she] provide[s] a certain kind of wisdom” (343). Indeed, the legend of Sapphira Wade is the foundation of Cocoa’s cultural heritage, though she has moved away from Willow Springs to avoid claiming that inheritance. The plot of Mama Day focuses on Cocoa’s return, both physically and
spiritually, to Willow Springs. Cocoa’s first husband, George, accompanies her to the island in the fifth year of their marriage, as the narrator says, “a summer fourteen years ago when she left, but he stayed” (10). George is a native New Yorker and her polar opposite both in temperament and birthright. A man of a practical nature, he has been raised in an orphanage with no cultural ties to his past, while his wife, Cocoa, has been steeped in the myth and magic of Willow Springs and nurtured by her extended cultural family all of her life. Through his own immersion journey into the culture of Willow Springs—and his eventual death through self sacrifice—George becomes the “bridge” that allows Cocoa to return to accept her cultural destiny as a descendant of Sapphira Wade.

In present-day Willow Springs, the name Sapphira has been lost to time—as the narrator tells us, “Sapphira Wade don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form words” (4). This statement underscores the islanders’ belief in the unconscious cultural connections between generations (Levin 77). Though current island residents may have no conscious memory of Sapphira Wade, they unconsciously share, and will pass on, a cultural memory that they have inherited from their ancestors. Levin suggests that the prophetic dream in which Mama Day finally learns Sapphira’s name is a form of ancestral communication indicating that “Sapphira inhabits a powerful realm beyond the level of consciousness” (77). Ancestral communication is commonly achieved through dreams where the past and the present can become more readily joined in the unconsciousness of the dreamer, especially in one as cognizant of her ancestral legacy as Mama Day. As in the pre-colonial African worldview, the ancestors—symbolically represented in Mama Day by the character of Sapphira Wade—play an active role in the
lives of the island residents. Accordingly, Karla Holloway describes Naylor’s depiction of the ancestral presence in Mama Day as “an imaginative, cultural (re)membrance of . . . West African spirituality” (2). Notably, Naylor does not draw distinctions between acts of communication with the ancestors and communication between the living members of the community in *Mama Day*. Ancestor communication is a part of the everyday magic of Willow Springs,¹ and most often, the ancestors will speak from the cultural landscape of the Day family graveyard.

The Day family graveyard in Willow Springs is a “wild garden” in the west woods of the island that illustrates the influence of African cultural traditions (217). The landscape is full of flowering trees: magnolia, yellow jasmine, wisteria—more than in any other location on the island. Patricia Jones-Jackson notes that “by ongoing tradition, Sea Island burial places are densely wooded and are considered to be the sacred abodes of the spirits” (26). The Day family graveyard is familiar, sacred ground to the members of the Day family, “a lovely stretch of land within a circle of live oaks,” a spiritual and cultural paradise within paradise (117). Robert Farris Thompson traces the custom of wooded burial grounds and the general “planting of trees to signify the departed spirits” to Kongo-Angola influences (138-139). More pointedly, Lindsey Tucker specifically makes the connection between the live oaks surrounding the Day family graveyard and the importance of oaks in Bakongo burial traditions (150). Ancestor and spirit cults are important to the Bakongo people, a group that inhabited parts of the contemporary countries of Bas-Zaire, Cabinda, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon and northern Angola. In the nineteenth century, large numbers of Bakongo people were transported through the transatlantic slave trade into Georgia and Florida, and their descendants today still inhabit
the Sea Islands. To the culturally uninitiated, African-American cemeteries in wooded areas might appear "abandoned," and unmarked graves might be perceived as a sign of disinterest or lack of care. Yet, the unmarked grave of Jonah Day, lying "under a blanket of morning glory vines tangled among the sweet peas," is a sacred reminder of his continuing influence in the lives of the Day family members: "They know he's there, 'cause they listen" (151). To accept the Day family's view of their sacred burial ground is to acknowledge the significance of disparate cultural practices, a perception that is essential for understanding the need for a revision of American cultural history that promotes a more culturally inclusive perspective. Notwithstanding the evidence of African cultural retentions in the location and appearance of burial sites, the cultural landscape of African-American graveyards is an illustration of the cultural differences that have been ignored and denied by the dominant society's narrow interpretation of American history and culture.

Like the Day family graveyard, the actual Behavior Cemetery on Sapelo Island also reflects African cultural influences. It is equally "sprawling and wooded," which, as noted above, is typical of African-American coastal cemeteries (Bailey 237). The grounds are not formally landscaped: grass, and other vegetation, is allowed to grow naturally among the graves. Contemporary stones appear among older island-made stones of tabby on the grounds of the Behavior Cemetery, and in the past, many of the graves were reportedly covered with personal belongings of the deceased—crockery, glass bottles, and other items that represent the African-inspired tradition of placing "grave goods" at the burial site. Lindsey Tucker notes that "Naylor's choice of location [for Mama Day] has obviously been dictated by the historical relationship of the islands
to the perpetuation of African culture, for these Sea islands are, with the exception of New Orleans, the most African of places in America” (150). Interestingly, though Naylor obviously intends to create a strong link from Willow Springs to Africa through African-inspired traditions of death and burial, the Day family graveyard apparently does not include grave goods of any sort. Rather, according to the Day family’s own custom, the height of the tombstones reflects the age of the deceased, and each stone is inscribed only with a first name. No mention of other burial customs, as practiced specifically by the Day family, is included in the novel. However, Naylor does provide a detailed description of the design of the Day family’s burial plot and the family’s tombstones. While the Day family graveyard dramatically reflects African cultural influences within the landscape, it also mirrors the unique heritage of the Day family’s lineage—illustrating the diversity of African-American cultural adaptation.

The unique appearance of the Day family graveyard is seen in the arrangement of the interments, which are grouped by generations, forming a family tree of sorts in the landscape. In a conventional cemetery, grave markers with surnames and dates are used to indicate the relationship between family members and to record the life span of the individual. However, in the Day family plot, the size of the grave marker not only reflects the length of the individual’s life but also indicates the corresponding influence of the individual. Cocoa’s husband, George, considers the design of the Day family graveyard “odd.” As an urban bred outsider, he has ideas regarding the proper appearance of a cemetery that are far removed from the cultural environment of Willow
Springs. George comments upon the “self contained” nature of the Days—who from his perspective have apparently “redefined time” in the design of their graveyard (118):

I was entering the oddest graveyard I had ever seen. The tombstones — some granite, some limestone — were of varying heights with no dates and only one name. You explained that they were all Days so there was no need for a surname. But what, as in your case, if a woman married? You live a Day and you die a Day. Early women’s lib, I said with a smile. A bit more than that you answered. You showed me how they were grouped by generations: the seven brothers and then the seven before them. The sizes of the headstones represented the missing dates — but only in relationship to each other. There was a Peace who died younger than another Peace and so her stone was smaller. There was your mother’s stone — Grace — and she had obviously died younger than her sister Hope. Mama Day, you said, would have the tallest stone. She’d already lived longer than any Day before her. The closeness of all this awed me — people who could be this self-contained. Who had redefined time. No, totally disregarded it. (218)

Notably, the Day family’s graveyard does not include a headstone or grave for the family’s African matriarch. In the absence of a marker for Sapphira Wade—whose influence in life and legend could not in any way be signified through a physical marker—it is fitting that Mama Day’s stone will be the largest in the graveyard. The spatial arrangement of the Day family graveyard and the relationship between the stones, their placement and their size, records the unconventional history of the Days.
Yet, the graveyard also represents the family’s loss through death and absence. Willow Springs residents still speak of Sapphira’s mysterious departure from the island, tales that recall the “flying Africans” who escaped the bondage of slavery and flew back across the water to Africa. Because she “flew away over the water,” Sapphira Wade left no earthly body behind for burial (111). Like Sapphira, Bilail—Sapelo Island’s African patriarch—has no tombstone in Behavior Cemetery. Bilail, a Muslim believed to have been born in Guinea around 1760, was the enslaved overseer for Thomas Spalding, the island’s major landholder prior to the Civil War (Bailey 285). Bilail, who was literate, spoke Arabic. Reportedly, he was also quite skilled in managing the Spalding plantation’s slaves, and similar to Sapphira, he exercised a powerful personal influence within his community. Just as the stories of Bilail’s intelligence and resourcefulness represent the Sapelo Island residents’ cultural inheritance of independence and self-sufficiency, so too does Sapphira’s legend exemplify the same independent spirit—a trait that won her an island and a home for her descendants and the residents of Willow Springs. Bilail’s descendants are numerous today. His influence and the significance of his presence in the history of Sapelo Island have made him a legend, like Sapphira.

According to Cornelia Bailey, Bilail “has become the father of us all” (334). Though many on Sapelo Island can claim kinship with Bilail through blood or marriage, those who cannot claim him through genealogy still revere him as a cultural and spiritual father.

Extant headstones in Behavior Cemetery date from 1824, though the location of the grave of Bilail, who is believed to have died in 1855, has not been identified. The parallels between the legends—and the significance of the African ancestral presence—of
Bilail and Sapphira are readily apparent. Both figures remain prominent in the collective memory of their respective communities as ancestral resources, and thus, they both function as cultural repositories for their community’s African heritage. The lack of an earthly grave contributes to the mystery surrounding the lives and deaths of Sapphira and Bilail, leaving the nature of their deaths and the disposition of their remains open to conjecture. Likewise, the body of Sapphira’s granddaughter-in-law, Ophelia—who “flew off the bluff” thereby committing suicide—was never found, thus Ophelia has no tombstone in the Day family graveyard, either. The missing tombstones of Sapphira and Ophelia are absent components in the landscape of Willow Springs that nevertheless play an important role in the interpretation of the geography of the graveyard. The absent components are a tragic reminder of past conflicts and ruptures in the historic fabric of the family’s heritage. They represent not only the loss of the absent family members but also the continuing affect of mourning and remembrance upon the existence of the living.

Naylor reinforces the theme of mourning and remembrance with each narrative return to the landscape of the graveyard. The graveyard images recur throughout the text—the circle of oaks, the seven graves, and beyond them seven more—as a means of infusing the present with the legacy of the past. As a site of mourning and remembrance, the Day family graveyard specifically functions as a portal to the past for Mama Day and Cocoa. As they approach the graveyard,

They’re walking through time . . . The shadows erase the lines on the old brown woman’s face and shorten the legs of the young pale one. They near the graveyard within the circle of live oaks and move down into time.
A bit of hanging moss to cushion each foot and they’re among the beginning of the Days. (150)

Both Mama Day and Cocoa hear the voices of the ancestors in the family graveyard. The voices relate their past life experiences and impart information that lies beyond the memory of the living. Naylor emphasizes that the voices of the ancestors speak to those who know how to listen. The graveyard is the physical representation of the family, a place where the ancestors, like Sapphira’s grandson, John-Paul, tell their stories:

John-Paul waits to guide them back as they thin cut the foxglove at the head of his stone. I had six brothers born before me, five that lived. Matthew, Mark, Luke, Timothy, and James. But I carry the name of the one that didn’t make it — John. (151)

Cocoa’s annual visit to the island includes this ritual of return to the graveyard where her ancestors lie buried, including her namesake, her great-grandmother Ophelia, and her mother, Grace. In the graveyard, Mama Day and Cocoa are able to recover the past as part of a healing process that ensures the growth and continuation of the Day family line—through the acts of tending the graves, listening to the voices of the ancestors, and sharing memories of deceased family members:

The young pale woman and the old brown woman look at each other over those mounds of time. The young hands touch the crumbling limestone as her inner mind remembers. A question from those inner eyes: the two graves that are missing? The breeze coming up from The Sound swirls the answer around her feet: Sapphira left by wind. Ophelia left by water. (151)
Mama Day and Cocoa perform these acts as rituals of ancestral reverence that are integral to their pre-colonial African worldview. The ancestors provide Cocoa’s “inner eyes” that allow her to read the landscape of the graveyard and the significance of the missing tombstones. However, when the graveyard voices come unbidden, they at times arouse fear of death, the supernatural, and the unknown. When Cocoa hears the voices warning that she will break her husband’s heart, she becomes fearful and agitated, wanting to “scream at all those silent whispers” (223). At another point, Mama Day purposely avoids the graveyard, acknowledging the burden of her role as the traditional protector of Willow Springs, while recognizing the limitations of her powers to affect future events. She feels “something in the air” but cannot define its nature other than the sense of foreboding it brings:

The graveyard is just up at the turn, but she won’t go past it today.

Tomorrow maybe or the day after. She heaves a deep sigh. I ain’t up to all this, Lord. I’m an old woman. And I’m tired, tired of knowing things I can’t do nothing about. Whatever is waiting in here today, I just ain’t ready to face. (175)

Through the character of Mama Day, and the connection that she maintains to these unseen forces, Willow Springs “represents a worldview in which boundaries between animate and inanimate, secular and sacred—even living and dead—are blurred” (Tucker 150).

Significantly, the Day family graveyard—with its missing tombstones—provides the only access to the Day family homeplace. Known only as “the other place” to island residents, it is the island’s oldest home, built as a gift for Sapphira by the slaveholder and
original owner of Willow Springs, Bascombe Wade. Several generations of Days have occupied the house at “the other place,” but most of them now occupy the graveyard. The child Peace, sister to Abigail and Mama Day, drowned in the well at “the other place,” and their mother Ophelia’s unremitting grief, and subsequent suicide, have tainted the sisters’ childhood memories of their homeplace. Abigail’s own daughter, also named Peace—in a defiant naming act designed to restore the lost “peace” in the family’s tragic history—also died at a young age. Abigail’s abandonment by her husband had forced her to return to “the other place” where she would bear and eventually lose her child. Mama Day, Abigail, and Cocoa are the only surviving family members, and they no longer live at “the other place” which has become a “mysterious, magical, yet tragic site of memory” for the Day family (Eckard 131). But even at night, alone in the woods, Mama Day has nothing to fear from interlopers at the Day family homeplace, because, as she says,

Even in broad daylight, they not gonna make it much past the graveyard.
Where do folks get things in their head? It’s an old house with a big garden, that’s all. Me and Abigail and Peace was born there. My daddy and his brothers as well. And it’s where my mama sat, rocking herself to death. Folks can get the craziest things in their head. But then again there was the other place. . . . (117)

Even as Mama Day attests to the benign nature of “the other place,” her words also imply the existence of something more than “an old house with a big garden.” The significance of “the other place” as a site of ancestral maternal power—for which, like the graveyard, Mama Day is also the conduit—is underscored by the islanders’ superstitious avoidance of the place, which has been the site of many of the Day women’s personal tragedies.
As the head of the Willow Springs matriarchy, Mama Day, a midwife, is also a skilled practitioner of traditional medicine. The garden at “the other place” provides much of the material that Mama Day uses in her medicines. She has been given the honorific “Mama” by Willow Springs residents though she has no children of her own. Levin writes that Mama Day “offers a model of mothering based not on biological kinship or the Freudian reading of the nuclear family, but on female solidarity and a vision of women’s leadership that can be traced to West African women’s traditions” (70). The prevalence of female gods in African traditional beliefs offers support for those who perceive a matriarchal hierarchy in the clearly maternal influences evident in Willow Springs society. Levin identifies “the other place” as a “female enclosure” despite its construction by Bascombe Wade as a place to bind and hold Sapphira to him (78).

Though Sapphira was legally held in slavery by Bascombe Wade, as Cocoa’s husband George recognizes, “a slave hadn’t lived in this house” (225). The matriarchal African society that Naylor has created in Willow Springs is the cultural foundation for the revision and reclamation of African-American culture and history in Mama Day (Fowler 103).

While “the other place” is a physical manifestation of memory and tradition—where like the graveyard, Mama Day is able to access and communicate with the ancestors—it is not the source of the Day women’s powerful legacy. The origin of Sapphira’s legacy of ancestral power is linked to the island’s unique ritual of “Candle Walk,” held annually on December 22. The celebratory ritual is said to have been initiated by an encounter between Sapphira Wade and God, when “he found Himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth” (110). In its earlier days,
Candle Walk had been associated with the east woods and the bluff beyond, the reputed site of the departure of Sapphira Wade, who left Willow springs “in a ball of fire to journey back home east over the ocean” (111). Mama Day’s personal journey at the end of Candle Walk Night takes her to the graveyard in the west woods, but upon this occasion, she finds no comfort there:

Got Miranda’s daddy and his six brothers buried there. Got her daddy’s daddy and his six brothers. Got Peace, Grace, Hope, and Peace again. They never found her mama’s body, although John-Paul and three of his bothers dragged the bottom of The Sound for a week. Mother flew off that bluff screaming Peace. And she coulda been put to rest with Peace — and later on, Peace again. Ophelia. No comfort in that graveyard for Miranda tonight. (115)

Mama Day is thwarted in her efforts to reach “the other place” beyond the graveyard on Candle Walk Night. “The light from her candle [played] tricks with the dark . . . bringing up shadows to look like rocks . . . she’ll go to step over and find she’s only stepping on air” (111). The fact that the landscape of the west woods has become strange to Mama Day presages the coming storm that will ravage the island, and it also highlights the emerging conflicts between the people of Willow Springs and the forces of the natural and spiritual worlds. The storm will test Mama Day’s powers and cause her to return to “the other place” in search of Sapphira’s help.

By focusing on the “distinctly female and African” aspects of African-American heritage—through the power she invests in the characters of Sapphira and Mama Day—Naylor effectively negates the myth of dominant American, and male-centered, culture
(Levin 71). Even in the storm that ravages the island, Naylor has invoked the African female god, Oya. Like Oya, guardian of the ancestors and the gatekeeper of cemeteries, Mama Day is the guardian of Willow Springs, a champion for its culture, its community, and its future. Moreover, Oya serves as a mediator between the living and the dead in much the same way that Mama Day maintains the history and culture of the inhabitants of Willow Springs. Oya controls the breath of life and death and thus is the goddess of storms that originate on the shores of Africa. Cartwright compares the stormy movements of the African winds to the winds that powered the ships through the Middle Passage: “Moving off the African coast in trade winds that carried Africans to the Americas, Oya’s hurricanes work the most dramatic and traumatic links between Africa, the Caribbean, and the coastal South” (746). In a similar manner, Naylor describes the “simple breeze” that started on the shores of Africa—to become the powerful and destructive storm winds that batter Willow Springs—as “the workings of woman” (251).

In the aftermath of the storm, the island is strewn with debris, and trees have been toppled in the east and west woods. The storm spares “the other place” and the graveyard, but in a critical narrative development that forces a confrontation between cultural beliefs, the bridge to the mainland is destroyed.

The destruction of the bridge highlights the natural isolation of Willow Springs. The bridge to the mainland has functioned to develop and maintain the unique cultural heritage of the islanders. The Sound, a natural environmental barrier that separates and buffers the island from the mainland, has cultural connections for the islanders as a traditional source of food that contributes to their livelihood. It is also potentially dangerous to cross over the Sound by ways other than the bridge because of an
undercurrent the islanders call “the Devil’s Shoestring” (277). The islanders, recognizing
the potential danger to their cultural traditions that the mainland represents, maintain their
autonomy and their culture by controlling the access to their island, physically by means
of the bridge, and otherwise by their own resistance to the presence and interference of
outsiders. The island residents exercise total control over the building and maintenance
of the bridge, their only connection to the mainland and outsiders.

Naylor presents “outsider” views of the Willow Springs community and its
traditions most vividly through the eyes of Cocoa’s husband, George, whose practical,
non-intuitive nature is nevertheless stimulated by the natural beauty of the island. Willow
Springs is an isolated island community, “another world” in George’s eyes, “where even
the word paradise failed once [he] crossed over The Sound” (175). The landscape of
Willow Springs is sparsely populated with a few “sleepy” wooden storefronts and
scattered houses of various types of contemporary building material. The island
vegetation is typically subtropical—two hundred-year-old live oaks laden with moss,
stands of saw palmettos, and swampy marshland. Patricia Jones-Jackson comments upon
“the striking resemblance” of the Sea Islands to the topography of the African homelands
of the Sea Islanders’ ancestors (7). When George crosses over the bridge, he notes that
the saltwater in the marshes “dated back to an eternity” (185), and his perception is that
the humid air “thickens so that it seems as solid as the water” (175). Thus, the very air
one breathes on Willow Springs is saturated with the same ancient feel as the water and
the land. Naylor’s bucolic description of the natural landscape of Willow Springs is
veiled with ancient mystery to the eyes of an outsider like George, but the “atmospheric
haze” that Jones-Jackson observes in the landscape of the Sea Islands is clearly familiar terrain to Mama Day and the residents of Willow Springs (7).

Mama Day’s relationship to the natural landscape of Willow Springs has always been an intensely personal one. From childhood, she has roamed the woods in every part of the island. She remembers her father’s voice admonishing her to “learn to move around” potential obstacles in the landscape . . . these woods been here before you and me, so why should they get out of your way” (78). Mama Day exhibits her natural cultural inheritance at an early age:

The whole island was her playground: she’d walk through in a dry winter without snapping a single twig, disappear into the shadow of a summer cottonwood, flatten herself so close to the ground under a moss-covered rock shelf, folks started believing that John-Paul’s little girl became a spirit in the woods. (79)

Mama Day’s spiritual connection to the landscape and to her ancestral past facilitates her knowledge and use of herbs and natural medicine. As the island’s doctor, she travels to every part of Willow Springs much as she did when she was a child, gathering herbs and roots for use in her practice of tending to the sick of Willow Springs. Mama Day easily fits the “composite picture” of the conjure woman as described by Lindsey Tucker in “Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day”:

One important feature involves ancestry: Conjurers are said to be closer to their African roots than other, more acculturated African slaves. Also, conjure abilities are found to run in families; the conjure man or woman inherits his/her aptitude and the mantle of power, along with an expertise
in herbal medicines. Conjure women often carry the name Mother and hold considerable power within their communities, and conjurers are, almost without exception, especially gifted with psychic abilities, or are known to have second sight. Often they are spoken of as being “two-headed.” (176)

As a skilled and insightful conjure woman with acknowledged psychic abilities, Mama Day is still relied upon for her midwife services and other remedies on the island, though some of the residents of Willow Springs have turned instead to the doctor across the bridge. The islanders’ diminishing belief in the efficacy of traditional medicine parallels the growing tendency of some of the island’s residents to ignore the past and tradition. When Bernice, a young childless Willow Springs resident, becomes frustrated with her attempts to conceive, she attempts to hasten conception by the use of a modern fertility drug acquired through questionable means. When she becomes ill, her husband, Ambush, turns to Mama Day, who provides some relief to Bernice but also calls the doctor beyond the bridge, Dr. Smithfield, who regards Mama Day as a “fellow professional.” According to the narrator, Dr. Smithfield is not a believer in the practice of conjure, but “being a good doctor, he knew another one when he saw her” (84). Likewise, while Mama Day is disgusted with the false claims of Willow Springs’ self-named Dr. Buzzard and his “cures,” she also recognizes that the expertise of an academically trained doctor at times is advisable. Dr. Smithfield respects Mama Day’s medical knowledge, but “being an outsider he couldn’t be expected to believe the other things [she] could do” (84). Mama Day is well known beyond the bridge. In fact, Lindsey Tucker rightfully claims that Mama Day “serve[s] as the mediating figure of the
community, the bridge between the everyday world and the sacred world of her African foremother,” the powerful Sapphira (152).

Being a direct descendant of Sapphira Wade has special significance on the island of Willow Springs and “springing from the seventh son of a seventh son” heightens that influence. Because Willow Springs is an independent geographical entity, a matriarchal island society governed exclusively by its African-American inhabitants, the social order of the island is dictated by longevity and tradition. Repeated attempts to turn the island into a “vacation paradise” have failed because the residents of Willow Springs have refused to sell their land to outsiders. The Day family is undoubtedly the leading family on the island, and the narrator tells us that there was no question of selling when outsiders attempted to buy land on Willow Springs because “if Mama Day said no, everybody said no” (6). To outsiders, even to George, the island is an unexploited paradise. (The unspoiled beauty of Willow Springs can be compared to Hilton Head and Daufuskie—before the arrival of land developers.) The islanders respect Mama Day’s impressive lineage, but that respect is tinged with awe and some fear concerning her powers, and because of this “nobody was gonna trifle with Mama Day” (6). Social boundaries established by island tradition generally serve to insulate the Day family members within their community, but a notable exception is the use of conjure on Cocoa by Ruby, a jealous Willow Springs resident who believes that Cocoa is pursuing her husband. Even Mama Day finds it inconceivable that Ruby would dare to act against one of her family members: “She can’t know me or she wouldn’t” (265). Ruby’s use of conjure illustrates the negative side of the power that pervades the landscape of Willow Springs. Ruby has acquired the knowledge but not the reverence or respect for the source of her power.
Mama Day “facilitates” nature for the benefit of others (Kubitschek 84). By contrast, Ruby manipulates it for her own selfish purposes, and for this reason, the islanders view the lightning bolts that destroy Ruby’s house—notably, after the storm has passed—as an unnatural, but “deliberate and definite sign,” in effect, a retribution for Ruby’s “host of sins” (274). There is also evidence that the lightning bolt which destroys the bridge to the mainland was “facilitated” by Mama Day as a measure to ensure that George, in his haste to seek help from beyond the bridge, does not remove Cocoa from the island before she can be cured of Ruby’s conjuring. The destruction of the bridge creates the need for a metaphorical bridge for Cocoa “to walk over,” a bridge between cultures symbolized by Mama Day and George ultimately joining forces to save Cocoa’s life—an action that is required to ensure the continuation of the Day family and the cultural traditions of Willow Springs (285).

Though Naylor positions the Day family graveyard as the primary cultural repository in *Mama Day*, significantly, the burial ground is restricted to members of the Day family. The boundaries of the graveyard create both a spiritual and geographic separation between the members of the Day family and the other islanders. All other Willow Springs residents are apparently buried in the community graveyard at the island’s church. The church and its graveyard represent a cultural adaptation that accommodates both Christian and non-Christian aspects of the islanders’ spiritual heritage. As an outsider, it seems to George that the church and the presence of the minister are merely the islanders’ concessions to Christianity. He has the feeling during the “standing forth,” as it is called in Willow Springs, that this funeral ritual to acknowledge the earthly death of Ambush and Bernice’s son was not meant to be held in
a church. The Christian aspects of a funeral—sermon, music, tears—are absent from the ritual of “standing forth.” The “standing forth” does not mourn death, rather, it celebrates life and the abiding memory of the deceased—whose presence will continue to be felt until “when I see you again.” Though this particular ritual has not been traced to a specific African-inspired cultural practice within the Sea Islands, Lene Brondum observes that “Naylor’s fictitious ceremony invokes the old African/Sea Islands belief in the survival of the spirit” (159). When Bernice stands forth, she asks her son’s forgiveness because she “did not remember for a moment that you were still here” (269). In the pre-colonial African worldview, the continuing presence of the deceased in the life of the living is assumed (Thompson 94). In Bernice’s initial grief over the physical loss of her son and her anguished request of Mama Day to bring him back, she embodies the duality of the two beliefs—hence her plea to her dead son for forgetting that he was not truly gone from her life. Brondum suggests that “Naylor creates and mythologizes cultural traditions,” such as the “standing forth” ceremony and “Candle Walk,” to recreate the “essence” of the Sea Islands culture while “disrupt[ing] the dominant EuroAmerican Christian tradition” (159).

Whitt notes that the ritual formula of the “standing forth” ceremony is also mirrored in the narrative structure of Mama Day. As in the ritual, the opening and closing words are the same: Cocoa’s narrative in the novel begins with a description of when she first sees George and ends with the words, “when I see you again.” George and Cocoa’s story is played out repeatedly over a time span of fourteen years, just as the history of the Day family—the women’s search for peace and their husbands’ efforts to sustain them—is played out in George and Cocoa’s story—a story of land, legacy, and
loss. The landscape of Willow Springs is the stage upon which the action transpires, and the Day family graveyard is highlighted as the cultural focus within the landscape. George's self-sacrificial death is honored through his interment in the Day family graveyard. Once considered an outsider, he has gained membership in the community of Willow Springs through the immersion journey/ritual that leads to his death (Wardi 146-147). Through his death and burial in the Day family graveyard, George, born a "cultural orphan," becomes a part of the island and its history (Wardi 157). Though the landscape of Willow Springs has changed over time and will continue to change, the main narrative remains the same, and though the actors change with each generation, the basic elements of the story remain the same. Mama Day's legacy from Sapphira Wade will pass to Cocoa, and the spirits in the graveyard, including George, will assist her as she assumes her inherited role in the cultural landscape of Willow Springs. As George finds "total peace" (302) in death, Cocoa survives and is "given the meaning of peace" (312) that will allow her to listen to the voices from the graveyard and understand the knowledge and power of her ancestral legacy.
Notes

1 Elizabeth T. Hayes points out that “this matter-of-fact juxtaposition of the supernatural with the everyday is the salient characteristic of the literary mode magic realism in which “magic is not subordinate to realism but is an organic part of the whole” (177).

2 These sacred traditions have become endangered as the islands attract more tourists and outsiders looking for vacation homes. Visiting youngsters unfamiliar with the burial customs of African Americans have removed grave goods from Behavior’s grounds (Bailey 238). Other cemetery decorations at Behavior have apparently been recognized and taken precisely for their cultural value as African-inspired artifacts (McFeel 32).

3 Various historical accounts refer to an early-nineteenth-century slave rebellion on St. Simons Island that resulted in the apparent suicide of a group of enslaved Igbo people. African American oral history supports the notion that they either walked or flew back over the ocean to return home to Africa rather than remain enslaved. Wendy Walters contends that Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon and Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow transform the legend of the flying Africans to “articulate a counter-discursive historiography of slavery,” an interpretation that requires “a break with a Western scientific ordering of reality” (4). The recognition of this alternate version of history occurred in 2002, when the Ekwe Nche Organization, a not-for profit organization committed to research in Igbo history and culture, joined the St. Simons African-American Heritage Coalition in the designation of Ebo Landing as holy ground. This ritual act provided the ancestors the proper burial that they had not been given and allowed the souls of the enslaved Africans to rest. Naylor’s legend involving Sapphira’s
return over the ocean serves the same purpose of presenting an alternate non-Western view of American history.

4 In her dissertation, *Ah Tulk to de Dead All de Time: Religion Among Gullah/Geechee Women of the Carolina Low Country*, LeRhonda S. Manigault describes the experiences of several contemporary Sea Island women for whom “the deceased, though physically transitioned, are very much alive. The dead are not interpreted as inactive or silent but as consistently present” (137). Manigault concludes that, for these women, talking to the dead is a spiritual experience that reflects, not a belief in ghosts, but a strong faith in the continuing connection between the living and the dead (278).

5 According to Cornelia Bailey, the original Dr. Buzzard came from Africa to St. Helena, South Carolina. Said to be “as powerful as a buzzard” with the same patience, he was dubbed “Dr. Buzzard,” and root doctors in the Sea Islands have since that time been known by that name (190).
CHAPTER 4

Unburying the Past: History, Genealogy, and Imagination in David Bradley’s The Chaneysville Incident

And before I’d be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord, and be free.
—“Oh Freedom,” A Spiritual

John Washington, the protagonist in The Chaneysville Incident, first hears the words to the spiritual, “Oh Freedom,” at the funeral of his father, Moses Washington, though he had heard Moses humming the tune for as long as he could remember (21). It is this song and the theme of death and history that resonate throughout David Bradley’s novel (Rushdy 69). In The Chaneysville Incident, three generations of Washington men—C. K., John’s great-grandfather; Moses, John’s father; and John—pursue a quest for personal freedom and identity in the process of reconstructing their family history. According to historian and genealogist Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Reconstructing our individual family’s past, finding all of its branches and confronting all of its complexities, piece by piece, bit by bit, is the only way to begin to re-create, to retell, the larger narrative of American history” (Finding Oprah’s Roots 14). David Bradley employs the Washington family’s story to recreate the missing pieces of African-American history, within the nation’s history, by recounting an incident that, according to local legend, took place near his hometown in Bedford, Pennsylvania. Locals recall and still tell the story of a group of runaway slaves who preferred to die rather than be returned to captivity. The plot of the novel traces John Washington’s personal journey as a historical
reenactment of the journeys taken by C. K. and Moses Washington before him, a path that impels him to pursue the details of the long-buried history and myth surrounding the fate of the twelve runaway slaves. Reading the landscape of the graveyard is the key to unraveling the mystery of the slaves’ death and burial. For the men of the Washington family, the graveyard represents a site of memory for recovering their buried past and healing the living spirit in the present. John Washington undertakes a literal and metaphorical journey into the past in an effort to understand his ancestral heritage, and in the process—lacking hard evidence—he must use his imagination to confront issues of race and historical interpretation. As a trained historian, at first he resists but finally realizes that he needs to go beyond his academic knowledge to use the techniques of the genealogist, along with his imagination and cultural intuition, to recover the lost and forgotten part of his cultural inheritance. In Finding a Place Called Home, genealogist Dee Palmer Woodtor encourages the process of “imagining our ancestors,” as John must do, to ask the appropriate questions that will serve to guide his ancestral research (6).

John Washington’s need to reconcile the past with the present is played out in the context of the graveyard where history, genealogy, and imagination converge.

David Bradley uses the graveyard and its rituals as a site of discourse that represents the relationships among narrative, family, and race (Rushdy 69). Functioning as sites of discourse, the various funeral and graveyard scenes in The Chaneysville Incident vividly highlight the cultural and familial connections among the living, the dead, and the yet unborn. As Rushdy points out, burial also plays a structuring role in The Chaneysville Incident—opening with the funeral of John’s father, Moses Washington; continuing with the funeral of Old Jack Crawley, John’s surrogate father,
midway through the narrative; and concluding with the slaves’ “funeral scene” toward the end of the novel (69). However, the narrative frame also includes the funerals of other significant persons in John Washington’s life—the public military funeral of his brother, Bill, a brief mention of the funeral of his maternal grandfather (also known as the Professor), and the unexpectedly “amazingly opulent burial” of Uncle Josh White (25).

John’s own symbolic funeral scene in the final pages of the novel completes the cycle of life, death, and burial that recurs throughout the narrative. These acts of burial, as well as John’s lengthy academic monologues on death and dying—or “dissertations,” as the author calls them—all serve to ground the novel in its primary theme of returning home to recover the personal and ancestral past as a means to achieve healing and to create a foundation for the future (Miller and Blake 27). According to Angelika Kruger-Kahloula, trips to the family graveyard are often included in homecoming rites, and “the graveyard, locus mémoriae in the literal sense, provides the members of a given community with geographic and historical roots. It is a place to return to, in life or in death” (“On the Wrong Side of the Fence” 145).

While the narrative frame of the The Chaneysville Incident focuses on John Washington’s journey home, the story at the center of the novel is based upon a scrap of local oral history that the author’s mother, Harriet Bradley, collected while conducting research for the bicentennial celebration of Bedford, Pennsylvania, the Bradleys’ hometown. The known information is scanty, and the provable information is nonexistent. A local farmer named liames reported the escaped slaves’ story to Harriet Bradley, who recorded it, albeit briefly, in the bicentennial history and passed it along to her son, David Bradley. According to a member of the current generation of the liames
family, twelve graves marked only by fieldstones lie grouped on a part of his family’s property near his ancestral graveyard. Locals recall that the story of the unknown graves involved runaway slaves who died in the vicinity and were buried there. Bradley confirmed the existence of the graves on the Liames farm—“it’s very clear where the Liames family starts and these people stop [because] the gravestones are of a different character” (Miller and Blake 24). The pattern that John Washington discovers and reads in the landscape of the graveyard in The Chaneysville Incident is a plot device “which allows him to reconstruct the family structure and everything else” (Miller and Blake 25).

The local residents of Bedford County can identify the probable burial ground of the escapees, but the significant details such as “Who were these people?” Where did they come from?” and “Why did they do this?”—questions that Bradley asked himself—remained unanswered (Blake and Miller 25). The desire to know the answers to these questions prompted Bradley to write The Chaneysville Incident. Matthew Wilson describes the novel as “a counter-history . . . one that resists dominant History [sic] and rewrites it in resolutely local terms” (100). Bradley uses his protagonists’ journey home as a vehicle to explore the history of the escaped slaves. John Washington’s journey takes him from his Philadelphia apartment, which he shares with his white lover Judith, back to his childhood home in an African-American neighborhood in rural western Pennsylvania where his surrogate father, Old Jack, is dying.

Since his brother’s death in Vietnam, John Washington has refused to return to the Town where he grew up. John’s return home begins his narrative journey into the past. He revisits the places of his childhood—the Hill where he grew up in an all African-American community, the graveyard of Mount Ross where his father and brother
already lie buried, and the far side of the Hill where Old Jack’s cabin becomes his refuge following the death of his father, Moses Washington. The day of Moses Washington’s funeral signals John’s initiation into his father’s world and the beginning of John’s quest. Moses Washington’s death brought “nearly a hundred” attendees to the funeral including “everyone on the Hill who was both old enough to respect death and young enough to walk to meet it” (21). Despite Moses Washington’s disdain of convention and “society” during his lifetime, the entire community of the Hill turns out for his funeral. Karla Holloway asserts that community-wide involvement in African-American funerals—such as in the scenes depicting Moses Washington’s funeral service—is derived from West African cultural practices that highlighted death and burial as an “important, public, elaborate and lengthy social event” (174). Because Moses’ burial instructions pointedly exclude the church, the funeral takes place in the yard of the Washington home, and that is where the community gathers. Later, at the gravesite in the Mount Ross cemetery, the minister delivers a conventional eulogy, but there is no “standing forth” at the funeral service—neither in the yard of the Washington home nor during the burial in the graveyard. Rather, as a whole, The Chaneysville Incident serves as a “standing forth” for Moses Washington, whose life is told and retold throughout the novel in Old Jack’s stories.3

As the crowd makes its way toward the graveyard through the dry dust and oppressive heat of the August afternoon, they sing the lines from “Oh Freedom,” the spiritual that Moses Washington had requested: “And before I’d be a slave I’ll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord, and be free.” John wonders how the funeral goers can sing in the dust and heat of the Mount Ross graveyard, and this image conjures an
echo of the songs that enslaved African Americans sang while toiling in the fields. John notes the song "rose like the dust itself" recalling the ritual phrase from "dust to dust," meaning, we come from dust, we return to dust. The coffin is lowered "in the old way" and the "ritual spades of earth" are cast onto Moses Washington's coffin, a final act of closure before the mourners turn away from the burial site. Notably, when John later seeks to understand his father, through "the task of unraveling the whys and wherefores of Moses Washington," he does not return to the graveyard; he goes to Old Jack's cabin and later to Moses' attic—the places where the spirit of Moses Washington speaks to him with the most clarity (143-144). Edward Pavilic refers to these sites of ancestral memory—the cabin and the attic—as "ritual grounds located within enclosed, controllable, and solitary spaces" (171). Perhaps unwittingly, Pavilic has described the exact characteristics of the graveyard, and the narrow confines of the grave. John remembers his adolescent years of historical study and research in his father's attic library of books and historical documents as a "magic time," but his first efforts to unravel the mystery surrounding the story of the escaped slaves have resulted in failure (143). As an adult, John retraces his path through these ancestral spaces—recreating the rituals of his youth that he had abandoned—as he again takes up the search for Moses Washington.

John’s return home requires him to face the painful memories of his father and brother’s deaths. His last visit to the graveyard was during the funeral of his brother, Bill, and circumstances surrounding his brother’s death have kept John away from home for years. The graveyard where John’s father and brother are buried is a site of memory that also serves to exemplify the racialized social mappings of John’s hometown. The
Mount Ross graveyard is a marginalized geographic space that illustrates the racial
divisiveness that still pervades the Town—where the separation of the races is preserved,
both in life and in death. John’s hostility toward the whites of his hometown is belied by
his casual explanation to Judith of the local brand of racism: it’s “nothing official, like
down South . . . but . . . we have our places and they have their places” (75). John is
specifically referring to the existence of locally segregated cemeteries, but his
explanation accurately reflects the segregation evidenced in most of the Town’s public
places. Though he offers no description of the cemetery for whites, he describes the
Mount Ross graveyard by contrast, as “a little shabby . . . no gardener . . . no graveled
walks” (75). Of his brother Bill’s funeral, John remarks with angry sarcasm: “It was a
great funeral . . . the mayor was there . . . the town council . . . the lieutenant governor . . .
all the boys who had played on the football team with him . . . the TV people [and]
newspapers. There were ten different eulogies. And then they left. We got to bury him
in private” (75). John’s statement regarding burying his brother “in private” does not
refer to a private family service at graveside. No doubt, the entire African-American
community of the Town accompanied Bill Washington’s body to its earthly grave at
Mount Ross to perform the culturally appropriate graveyard rituals. The final funeral
service took place away from the view of whites, outside the constraints and opinions
espoused at the church service eulogies by the whites in the Town.5 Because of the
traditional, though not legally segregated burying practices of the Town, the whites, “who
did not want to get their feet muddy,” did not go to Mount Ross for Bill Washington’s
interment (75).
Later during the funeral of Old Jack Crawley, John gives more details concerning the condition of the cemetery. He describes the roadway through the landscape of the African-American graveyard in his character's typically wry manner—it was a "rutted, muddy track that only the charitable or the deluded could call a road" (215). As stated in an earlier chapter, the significance of the sanctity of death and burial to African Americans cannot be measured by a superficial evaluation of the maintenance of landscaping elements in the graveyard. African-American cemeteries, especially in rural areas, often appear in stark contrast to "the common expectation . . . of neat rows of stones and markers on a well-mowed green lawn" (Vlach 139). As is shown in the funeral scenes in *The Chaneysville Incident*, the rituals of death and burial, rather than the physical condition of the landscape, convey culturally significant African-American values, traditions, and beliefs concerning death. As John Washington notes, "The Africanisms . . . exist in all of us, independent of our knowledge or our volition" (213).

Africanisms, cultural retentions that survived the African Diaspora, can be traced in the funeral scenes throughout the novel, especially in the social acts surrounding the internment, such as the community-wide outdoor gathering at Moses Washington’s funeral. The notion of a proper burial to ease the passing of the spirit survived the Middle Passage and continued to be a part of the traditional burial rituals as practiced by Africans in America. As an example, the words to "Oh Freedom," the spiritual sung at Moses Washington’s funeral, illustrate the persistence of the enslaved Africans’ belief in life beyond slavery and death. In addition, the stories in *The Chaneysville Incident*, most of which are told by Old Jack, contain traces of African beliefs regarding death. As Alan Warren Friedman emphasizes in *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise*, "History
is the story, or stories of death . . . so death is narrative as well as occurrence” (117).

Bradley’s narrative technique details the rituals of death and dying as an integral part of
telling lives and history through stories. Within the narrative frame that comprises John’s
personal quest, a series of stories and storytellers serve to ground the narrative and
illuminate the themes of death, burial, and history. In the storytelling mode, Old Jack
relates to John a series of tales about the life of Moses Washington. Each tale begins
with the ritual opening, “you want a story . . . then fetch me the candle” (37). More
formally, in an academic mode, Bradley allows John Washington to present a series of
historical “dissertations.” John’s dissertations on the cultural differences between
European and African perspectives on death and dying are especially significant for
understanding the cultural framework of The Chaneysville Incident. As John states,
“Before the white men came [bringing Christianity] black people did not die,” that is,
their physical deaths did not mean the end of their existence or influence in life on earth
(208). While Christianity affected the cultural perspectives of Africans in America, it did
not totally replace their African beliefs. As illustrated in The Chaneysville Incident, the
blending of African and European attitudes concerning death and dying creates a
significant degree of cultural tension that John Washington must struggle to acknowledge
and resolve.

One of Old Jack’s stories that John often hears is the tale of the runaway slaves
that was first told to Old Jack by Moses Washington. A dozen slaves who had come
north on the Underground Railroad were tracked and cornered in the County. Old Jack
cannot answer John’s question regarding the exact nature of the slaves’ deaths—whether
they committed suicide or begged someone to kill them. Local stories still circulating in
Bedford County today have supported both claims. It is Old Jack’s opinion that they took their own lives. He “doubt[s] the killing part, [because] they ain’t dead . . . they’re still here. Still runnin’ from them dogs an’ whatnot. I know, on accounta I heard ‘em. They’re jest runnin’ along. An’ the sound you hear is the sound of ‘em pantin’” (63).

Old Jack’s doubt “about the killing part” expresses a belief in the pre-colonial African worldview of death. The slaves did not die but simply passed on to a different level of existence. John, however, continues to look for evidence, for facts to explain the incident, though Old Jack tells him, “don’t nobody know exactly what happened down there” (63). The lack of confirmable facts confounds John’s best efforts in historical research. As a historian, he obsessively seeks the facts to ground his knowledge of the world and its history, especially the “history of atrocities,” which he claims as his professional specialty (186). However, the facts cannot explain the sounds in the wind. Both Old Jack and John hear the sounds—to John it sounds like singing. When John uses the principles of physics to analyze the cause of the sounds in the wind, he revels in the “power of knowing” the true source (383). But when he stops trying to convince Old Jack with his newfound knowledge and begins to listen, logic fails him: “I had heard singing . . . trying to perceive the sound as I had known I should, trying not to hear voices in it, trying not to hear words. But I heard them anyway” (383). Years later, when he returns home because Old Jack is dying, John again hears the singing wind. “I had promised myself that I would never hear it again, that I would never go up into the mountains again. I had kept that promise, until now. Only now I knew where the lie had been: I had stopped hearing, but I had not stopped listening” (383). This passage indicates that John has not entirely lost the knowledge and perspective that he has learned
from Old Jack’s cultural teachings. Moreover, Klaus Ensslen observes that Bradley’s use
of the motif of voices in the wind elevates John’s quest to “a more imaginative and
magical level” that blends “history, landscape, and personal voices” by “ritually
reenacting as well as . . . intellectually recapturing . . . a largely lost tradition” of the pre-
colonial African worldview of death (288). Though John has attempted to distance
himself from his cultural beliefs, the evidence that he hears with his own ears, and the
cultural intuition that he has gained from his experiences with Old Jack, can no longer be
ignored.

Old Jack also teaches John “woodlore,” how to track, hunt, and survive on the
land, because Moses Washington was an expert hunter and woodsman. George
Henderson emphasizes the role of the landscape in John’s quest: “John turns to landscape
when the facts run out, in order to make it do what the facts would do if they could. But
to make the landscape speak its facts, he must turn to the divinations of tracking and
trailing taught to him by Old Jack” (141). Because Moses Washington was a hunter not a
historian, he left trail markers as clues for John to follow in his quest—the books in the
attic, the old maps of the Town and County, and C. K. Washington’s journal. When John
later discovers that his father took his own life, he concludes that Moses Washington did
not commit suicide in the conventional sense. “Not suicide,” he determines, “I was
wrong about that . . . [it] was really a hunting trip” (388). When Judith suggests that
Moses Washington was not hunting, but chasing ghosts—and by inference that John is
doing the same—John corrects her by saying: “Ghost is a word that was invented by
people who didn’t believe . . . ancestors is a better term” (388). After years of listening to
Old Jack’s stories of his father’s exploits, John finally begins to believe “that the stories
were not just stories” (45). They are part of the clues left behind by Moses Washington to help John in his own hunt for his ancestors.

Another clue left behind by Moses Washington, which John finds but fails to recognize, is the photo of his father in the dining room family photo gallery. In the photo, Moses Washington, unusually for him, dressed in a black suit, “suitable for a funeral,” poses calmly in front of a low stone wall. His relaxed stance and his father’s “deceptively sane eyes” make John wonder at the location and the occasion of the photo (126). By careful examination, he is able to determine the direction from which the photo was taken, the topography of the landscape, the time of year, and even the paper type. But John is unable to determine the mysterious origin of the photo, which had appeared shortly before Moses Washington’s death. As so often happens in family history research, John hits a dead end that genealogists commonly refer to as a brick wall: “And so my research had ended, as it always did, at a stone wall” (127). This double entendre acknowledges the clue that Moses has left for John to discover. The stone wall in the photo is a barrier to identification and also literally the wall of the burial ground for which John unknowingly is searching.

Bradley also uses John’s dreams, more specifically his nightmares, as a form of ancestral communication in which Moses Washington provides more clues as to the fate of the escaped slaves. Though John persists in blaming his lack of imagination for his failure to resolve the historical facts into a reasonable conclusion, his dreams contain clues to the answer. Unconsciously at least, John is imaginatively arranging the facts that he knows in an effort to create a solution. Significantly, in John’s dream Old Jack draws John’s attention to various elements of the landscape—a landscape that later figures
prominently in John’s eventual reconstruction of the story of the escaped slaves. In the
dream landscape, Moses Washington arduously builds, and then purposefully tears down,
a cairn of triangular stones like those that he has used to build the foundation of his
house. Martin Gliserman notes the symbolism of the stones in the foundation of the
Washington home and in John’s dream:

John grows up in a house marked by death. His father built the house from
stones cut like the graveyard markers in the Chaneysville cemetery that
John will eventually have to explore to fill in the gaps of his history. The
triangular stones of Moses' house are iconographic hints to John. John
eventually discovers the graveyard, the scene of his father's suicide and
the burial site of John's great-grandfather and twelve runaway slaves
whose untold tale awaits John's hearing. Moses' house is a tomb for the
living, a monument for the dead. (159)

Yet, Moses Washington has purposefully made his home “marked by death” in another
fashion. Gliserman fails to mention that the triangular stones in the foundation of the
Washington home have been taken from the foundations of the houses on the Far Side of
the hill, from the houses of the typhus victims who were left to die in isolation. The
Washington home is also a monument for the dead on the Far Side of the Hill, a site of
memory for another historical “incident” that occurred in Chaneysville.

Markers of death appear in the landscape throughout the novel—though they may
not always be recognized from a Western cultural perspective. In one of his many
“dissertations,” John Washington discusses the pre-colonial African worldview of death
and dying, and he professes that, before the Slave Trade, “black people did not die”
This statement foreshadows a story told in the latter part of the novel by an elderly slave named Azacca who is of Haitian ancestry (248-9). Azacca recounts the tale of the Great Sky God who gave Legba a message for humankind that explained “The Stillness That Comes to All” in order to relieve man’s fear of death. In the pre-colonial African worldview, according to Azacca’s story as told to him by his father, “death was not an ending of things, but a passing on of spirit,” a time not for grief but for rejoicing at the release of the spirit from the physical boundaries of the body (428). John notes that while African Americans have lost some of their beliefs, that Africa “is not lost to us” (213). Dying is still “passing away” or “going home” whether the reason for these expressions is known or not. John explains that while there was “dying” in Africa that “the decedent . . . simply took up residence in an afterworld.” (208)

Among African-Americans, upon the death of a family member, relatives and extended family gather to celebrate the completion of earthly life with funeral and burial rituals, popularly called “homegoing” celebrations. It is no coincidence that funerals appear to have the same characteristics and functions as family reunions. Social acts of burial reunite family members in communal rites that are designed to redefine and sustain the family. Ritualized funeral services and graveyard ceremonies serve to solidify family ties in the wake of death, when family relationships are disrupted by loss and absence. Friedman acknowledges the role of the funeral ceremony as an act of community preservation and restoration, and he compares this function to the performance of narrative (118). He notes, “Beginning where experiences ends, both narrative and funeral concern absence, separation, displacement; both seek to shape and regularize transitional processes” (118). At this point, the similarities between the European and African views
of death diverge; the pre-colonial African worldview would not support the “ending of experience” in the life of the deceased. In one of John Washington’s dissertations on death and dying, he comments upon the continuing presence of the deceased in the lives of the living in “recently observed African practices”:

Following an expiration, it is common for the living to report seeing the deceased, and carrying on conversations with him. It is also common practice to build him a house and to leave food about for his nourishment. Liquids, including alcoholic beverages, are poured out on the ground for the deceased to enjoy. (208)

The funeral service acknowledges the familial role of the deceased and may even identify a successor (or successors) to the vacated role. As the family comes together to mourn and celebrate the passing of the deceased person, familial relationships are strengthened and renewed, and the family is reconstituted around the loss of the deceased. The deceased person assumes his place among the ancestors. As Rushdy concludes, the primary importance of funerals lies in the process of “creating ancestors” and “recreating family” (74). Relationships among the living family members begin to shift to accommodate the loss of the deceased and the new roles of the living family members. The funeral and burial rituals are the beginning of this process. It seems that Moses Washington’s family does not actually move through this process, at least not as a result of the funeral and graveyard rituals they undergo upon Moses’ death. John and his younger brother Bill are confused, saddened, and unsure about what is happening. While the other women cry openly at the gravesite, in John’s words, their mother “remained brisk, efficient, and dry-eyed throughout” (22). In his analysis of the scene, Keith
Byerman deems that Moses Washington has purposely sacrificed his family in exchange for the freedom to pursue his quest into his ancestral past, earning the hatred of his eldest son as a means to ensure that John will continue the quest (135).

Critics have compared John Washington’s personal dilemma of balancing his Western attitudes toward history and his African cultural foundation to the DuBoisian quandary of “double-consciousness” which recognizes the “twoness” inherent in African-American lives. John’s conflict is essentially an internal one. He must recognize the values of two distinct heritages. In the presence of two different cultural traditions, John says, there is “no hope for the eventual synthesis” (213). John’s view of double-consciousness is that “those of us who count black people among our ancestors . . . must live forever with both our knowledge and our belief” (213). Edward Pavilic contends that “knowing himself in connection with all of his ancestors” must be part of John’s ultimate goal (166). John continues his dissertation by comparing the European and pre-colonial African worldviews concerning death:

The quandary is that there is no comfort for us either way. For if European knowledge is true, then death is cold and final, and one set of our ancestors had their very existence whipped and chained and raped and starved away, while the other set—a larger proportion than any of us would like to admit—forever burns in hell for having done it to them. And if the African belief is true, then somewhere here with us, in the very air we breathe, all that whipping and chaining and raping and starving and branding and maiming and castrating and lynching and murdering—all of it—is still going on. (213)
Rather than attempt synthesis through a DuBoisian process that might elevate elements of one culture above the other, John must instead follow the Yoruban concept of syndetic understanding; that is, he must allow these separate cultural “truths” to remain distinct, yet find a way for them to coexist in his personal belief system. Pavilic warns that “any move toward a resolution of the dissonant, convergent flows of African-American ancestry results in a reduction of the complexity from which African-American experience emanates” (174). John’s Western education has been based upon a hierarchy in which his African cultural knowledge base is considered subordinate—if the legitimacy of alternate cultural approaches has been recognized at all in his academic environment. John’s journey home allows him to reconnect with the methods and cultural practices that his academic life has not allowed. John’s participation in the social rituals of death and burial are a necessary process in the recovery of his connection to his community and to his ancestral past.

Old Jack is John’s strongest cultural connection to his ancestral past. In turn, John is the heir to Old Jack’s legacy. Appropriately, when he realizes that he is dying, Old Jack asks for John, not wanting anyone else to see him so weakened. As “next of kin” and according to tradition, John cleans and dresses Old Jack’s body and carries it respectfully to the Hill for burial. Though Old Jack has passed on, John treats his corpse with care, for in the African tradition the living spirit persists.

I cradled him carefully as I carried him, protecting his arms and legs from collisions. It would have been a far easier proposition had I slung him over my shoulder, but I could not do that. And so the trip was difficult; I slipped to my knees countless times, and twice I fell heavily, twisting to
take the impact on my back so as to spare him. I cried when my foot slipped and his shoulder struck a boulder; cried and told him I was sorry.

(115)

In accordance with tradition, John “sits up” with the body of Old Jack in his mother’s house. He has positioned Old Jack comfortably in a chair, his feet on a hassock and his head on a feather pillow. He pours coffee for two. Whether consciously or not—and such distinctions do not matter in cultural practice—John is performing the traditional African family rituals in preparation for the funeral and burial of the body. In modern times, professional funeral directors have taken over the task of preparing the body for burial, but for John it is important to do the right thing by Old Jack by performing the appropriate rituals himself. When John phones Judith to tell her of his plans regarding Old Jack’s funeral, he realizes, “that she did not understand—she thought he was dead” (160). This comment serves to highlight the cultural differences between the European concept of death, as represented by Judith, and the African perceptions of death and dying to which John adheres. Old Jack’s funeral scene depicts certain ritual aspects that further illustrate these cultural differences.

John and his mother both, but not jointly, attend to Old Jack’s funeral arrangements. While John’s mother ensures that the funeral trappings are of the highest quality and appearance, “the casket was top-of-the-line . . . guaranteed for five thousand years or until the Day of Judgment, whichever came first,” she wants to put Old Jack in a suit and John disagrees, “insisting that he be outfitted properly” (214). During Old Jack’s illness, when John attempts to get him to see a doctor, Old Jack had objected to John’s promises to provide him with anything he needs to make his hospital stay more
comfortable. Old Jack protested, "what I need don't travel" (68). But John makes sure to prepare Old Jack for his final journey with all that he would need:

I had got the things myself: a new union suit of comfortable cotton, a warm flannel shirt by Woolrich, new overalls, Big Murphs, which look a little baggy but wear like iron, wool-cotton blend socks and a woolen watch cap, cotton painter's gloves, all he would need with the weather turning warmer. I had bought him a new pair of shoes too, good sturdy hiking shoes by Georgia Giant, but shoes are a tricky thing, and I had thought it best to put his old pair in with him just in case the new ones hurt his feet. (214)

As he proceeds with the burial preparations, John continues to treat Old Jack as a living being, taking care with his selections, even giving thought to the comfort of his shoes. Into the coffin, John places Mail Pouch chewing tobacco and a mason jar of Georgia Moon corn whiskey along with Old Jack's shotgun and a supply of ammunition. The open casket funeral causes "quite a few" shaken heads and a "good deal of whispering" (214). In following the tradition of placing personal belongings in the grave with the deceased, John is adhering to an African-inspired burial custom, a version of which was described in The Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man originally published in 1858:

I assisted her and her husband to inter the infant . . . and its father buried with it, a small bow and several arrows; a little bag of parched meal; a miniature canoe, about a foot long, and a little paddle, (with which he said it would cross the ocean to his own country) a small stick, with an iron
nail, sharpened and fastened into one end of it; and a piece of white muslin, with several curious and strange figures painted on it in blue and red, by which, he said, his relations and countrymen would know the infant to be his son, and would receive it accordingly, on its arrival amongst them. (265)

In Ball’s account, the child, like Old Jack, is outfitted for a journey to join the ancestors. While various African traditions survived the Middle Passage from Africa to America, African Americans modified their practices to adapt to a new geography. Stephanie Smallwood cites the adaptive inclusion of the canoe and paddle, items that would not have been considered necessary in the rejoining of the ancestors if Africans had not been transported across the Atlantic. As ties to Africa became more tenuous and cultural memories dimmed, traditional practices continued to evolve away from their original forms, and some were discarded altogether. David Burrell points out that the funeral scene in Ball’s account offers “insight into the beliefs and customs that differentiated native Africans from second- or third-generation African-Americans.” His point is made clear by the shaken heads at Old Jack’s funeral that illustrate how much has been forgotten by the inhabitants of the Hill regarding the old ways. John, whose actions confirm strong ties to his African cultural roots, declares the funeral service to be “pretty good,” not high church but still managing to be “stately and dignified” (214). The combination of John’s African-inspired burial customs and his mother’s more conventional Christian approach meets with John’s approval. In this instance, John has satisfactorily blended cultural traditions without placing one above the other.
In the graveyard, during Old Jack's internment, the differences in tradition, and the blending of traditions, become clearer. Guided by the spirit, the African-American community participates in a spontaneous, yet ritual, tribute of stories and songs for Old Jack, similar to the "standing forth" ceremony that Gloria Naylor imaginatively depicts in *Mama Day*. John observes the discomfort of the whites in attendance during this portion of the service: "The white men were looking confused, not sure what would happen next, lost without a printed order of service" (217). In *Passed On*, Karla Holloway notes that the length of African-American funerals may have a "generative relationship" to West African funeral traditions (175). She cites the "traditional call-and-response and the performative and participatory dimensions" such as the standing forth, as elements particular to the African-American funeral tradition. These practices make the typical African-American funeral substantively longer than funerals of white Americans (175). The source of John's contribution is the Bible, but "not their Bible," he insists, still intent on highlighting the difference between himself and the residents of the Hill. John begins with Ecclesiastics 41:1: "Do not dread death's sentence; remember those who came before you and those who will come after . . . In their descendants there remains a rich inheritance . . . their offspring will last forever, their glory will not fade . . ." and ends with Song of Solomon 1:5-6: "I am black but comely . . ." (221). John's funerary tribute to Old Jack recalls the pre-colonial African worldview of life after death and the genealogical inheritance of the ancestors. Old Jack's death does not signal the ending of a tradition because he has passed along his stories to John. John is a descendant to Old Jack, who is his cultural father, and John is the keeper of his legacy. Accepting his legacy as the storyteller whose purpose is to keep alive the traditions of the past, John
Washington imaginatively reconstructs the last hours of the twelve runaway slaves, ultimately giving them the culturally requisite burial rites that might have been afforded them even in slavery. His memorialization of the escaped slaves reenacts the practice of "second burials" that routinely occurred on Southern plantations. After the initial speedy burial that the warm climate typically required, a second funeral service was conducted, at times held months later—without the presence of the deceased. Latrese Adkins notes, "As a result, the dead bodies of enslaved Southerners were reclaimed at least twice: once for the burial that nature necessitated and then again in a more sacred space, the slave funeral." However, Anissa Wardi insists, "The burials accorded to enslaved African peoples often were characterized by indifference and expediency," and there is some evidence for her opinion (28). Slave narratives collected in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration provide a rare source of firsthand information regarding the funeral and burial practices of enslaved African-Americans. Interviewees reported various levels of control that were exercised by slaveholders over the proceedings. Night funerals, for example, were apparently a common occurrence. Though some scholars view this as oppressive interference by slaveholders who wished to save daylight hours for work, evidence from the slave narratives collected as part of the Georgia Writers' Project also indicates that night funerals were a custom practiced on the African continent (182).

Significantly, John's reconstruction of the escaped slaves' "funeral scene" takes place at night. The nighttime setting carries overtones of the cultural retentions of African burial practices, and the elements of the "service" echo the pervious funeral scenes in the novel. John recreates the details of the final days and hours of the escaping
slaves as C. K. leads the group, navigating and guiding them through the landscape, as they run to evade pursuit. “He could hear the breathing as they ran behind him . . . they were running swiftly now, and he knew that they could keep it up” (427). When they see a line of torches in the night blocking their escape, they realize that their earthly flight is at an end. The line of torches that the escaping slaves see in the distance is reminiscent of the torches at the night funerals of slaves as reported in the WPA narratives. The group gathers closer together and, moved by the spirit, the funeral ritual commences—Azacca begins to hum, then croon, a wordless chant prior to telling the group a story, “an old story . . . a tale of Death” that becomes a eulogy for his listeners. Critics have compared Azacca’s character to that of Old Jack. Both men are elders and storytellers. Azacca passes on the pre-colonial African worldview of death, “the Stillness That Comes to All . . . not an ending of things, but a passing on of spirit, a change of shape, and nothing more” (428). Azacca tells the story of how this knowledge was covered up by the pale men and the fear of death was used to control the men of darker skins. When some of the darker skins guessed the truth, they were beaten, chained, and starved. But these things did not matter because they believed the truth. Azacca’s story reconnects the group to their lost and forgotten heritage and assists them in summoning the strength to take their own lives rather than return to slavery.

As John imagines the scene, he interweaves knowledge of the funerals he has previously experienced with the few facts he has gleaned from his great-grandfather’s journal and Moses Washington’s research. From his great-grandfather’s journal, John has learned that C. K. Washington was “a fugitive slave who had risen to social prominence, who had been both author and outlaw, gentleman and murderer, husband
Moses Washington has spent his life literally following in the footsteps of his grandfather, attempting to piece together the last days of C. K. Washington’s life. When Moses located the graveyard and the thirteenth grave marker, he believed he had discovered C. K.’s grave, but not how and why C. K. died. Moses Washington committed suicide as a means of following his ancestor’s path. In duplicating his father’s quest, John Washington arrives at the same conclusion—that C. K. Washington also took his own life and died along with the escaping slaves he was attempting to help—but the trail Moses Washington leaves for John to follow ends at the graveyard.

Taking the pre-colonial African worldview, it is entirely feasible to imagine Moses Washington standing on the gravesite of the runaways and coming to the realization that his “escape” too was possible, as long as he believed in the ancestors. Kamau Kemayo acknowledges that Moses Washington’s actions are “almost unconceivable in a Western context” (118), but as John himself concludes, “you don’t throw your whole life away if you’re not sure that the dead really are there, waiting for you” (389). John is ostensibly referring to Moses Washington’s suicide, but this statement also applies to John himself. His entire search has been focused on creating a link between his life in the present and the traditional beliefs of his ancestors. Though he has had significant proof of their existence, in the voices of the wind over the landscape and in the stories that Old Jack tells, he needed to confront his doubts and confirm his belief in the ancestors before moving forward with his life.

As John imagines the slaves’ funeral scene, he recalls the scene of Moses Washington’s funeral. The song he had heard Moses Washington humming all of his life
is the same song that the slaves sing before their death: “And before I’d be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord, and be free.” Bradley’s choice of this particular spiritual as the anthem for the escaping slaves provides a historical link in the Washington family from C. K. to Moses Washington (Byerman 143; Rushdy 86). As a young man, John Washington would have also heard “Oh Freedom” as a popular protest song during the Civil Rights movement. It is fitting that John, the historian and descendant to the Washington legacy, imagines this song in his reconstruction of the final moments of the lives of C. K. and the escaping slaves. The song is a tribute to the historical resistance of enslaved and disenfranchised African Americans and illustrates the recurring theme of freedom through death in preference to slavery. As their voices faded, “the song went on . . . because now the wind sang” (430). The sound of singing voices in the wind—that John has heard since childhood—is now explained along with the panting that Old Jack hears of the running slaves. With this imagined thread between the lives of C. K. and Moses, John completes his father’s quest.

The graveyard is the only remaining material evidence of the existence of the runaway slaves. When John discovers the location depicted in his father’s photograph, he recognizes the south facing hill and the low stone wall. It is when he steps over the stone wall—a barrier to finding the graveyard—that he begins to discover a pattern that reveals the answers to some of his questions regarding his father and the fate of C. K. Washington. He reads the pattern of grave markers in the landscape and can only conclude that whoever buried the slaves (he suspects that it was the white farmer Liames) grouped the interments based on “who loved who” (431). Missy Kubitschek notes the significance of the makeup of the group of escaping slaves. Bradley has refashioned the
traditional male-focused slave narrative through John’s interpretation of the pattern in the graveyard. Kubitschek says, “John reconfigures the slave narrative to include women and children—and this reconfiguration itself is a movement toward African epistemology, for it adds a story to the existing stories of the ancestors” (43). John paces through the graveyard identifying the plots of the adults and children who would have been in the group of runaways. When Judith wonders at his ability to reconstruct the relationships from the placement of the stones, he responds, “you wanted to know all about the County . . . well, it’s all right here in this graveyard” (378).

The graveyard scene is a quiet revelation of some essential facts regarding Moses Washington’s death and apparent suicide. When Judith stumbles upon the thirteenth marker, John contradicts her assessment that someone marked C. K. Washington’s death. John knows that it is only a grave (381). Again, John’s perceptions are informed by his belief in the persistence of the spirit beyond death. He believes that the grave does not mark death because death is not an option in the pre-colonial African worldview. Dying is simply passing on to another existence—so there is no death to be marked. The grave is only a symbol of the discarded physical body. The treatment of historic African-American graveyards and burial grounds supports this perspective. There is no attempt to create a “heaven on earth” by creating a garden in the landscape to memorialize the dead. The dead are not there.

Ultimately, the death and rebirth of John Washington constitutes the true narrative frame of this novel. A death in the family removes something from the family unit, a piece of something from everyone in the family unit, even as it reconstitutes the family. After the death of a family member, the family is restored, but differently. A little bit of
John dies with every death that he experiences, but that same small death is a recognition of a connection that, once broken, is restored to fill the missing space. In the pre-colonial African worldview, this process is continuous—the breaking and rebuilding of the family—and each break is renewed by the rejoining of the ancestors. The potential of the ancestral bond is stronger with each family member who joins the ranks of the ancestors, so potentially the family is stronger as well—if the process of renewal is recognized and the traditions are passed on.

The final death and funeral scene in the novel occurs at Old Jack’s cabin and focuses upon John Washington’s apparent, though by no means certain, death by suicide, as critics disagree on the interpretation of John’s final actions. After “setting the place to rights,” John ritually replaces Moses Washington’s books, the pamphlets and diaries and maps, “ready for the next man who would need them” (431). John mimics the actions of his father—just as Moses Washington had put his affairs in order prior to his death. Throughout the novel, John has emulated his father and great-grandfather, recreating their life stories through his own actions. Kemayo notes that John’s repetition of the actions of his ancestors allows him to attain a “kind of communion with them” (118). When John succeeds in reconstructing the events and imagining the gaps in the stories, he can move beyond this phase and begin to create his own life. His journey almost complete, John gathers up “the tools of [his] trade, the pens and inks and pencils, the pads and the cards,” which have proven to be of little use to him in his personal quest for knowledge and understanding, and he builds a “funeral pyre” to destroy them (431).

To fully emulate Moses Washington and his great-grandfather would require John to take his own life—to facilitate his final passage into understanding. However, Martin
Gliserman disagrees, insisting, “John is released from reenacting by telling the tale” (168). Some critics have argued that John commits suicide symbolically, while others have argued that John’s words, “I wondered if [Judith] would understand when she saw the smoke go rising from the far side of the Hill,” refer to his future life with her and thus confirm his decision to live (432). Jeffrey Leak is in agreement with those critics who contend that John has reconciled himself with the past and is ready to move on; however, Leak’s argument is based on the fact that John’s narration is in the past tense, requiring that he would “have to narrate the story from the grave” (128). To reiterate a previous quote by Kamau Kemayo, obviously to Leak, and perhaps other critics, this is simply another idea that would be “almost unconceivable in a Western context” though it would be perfectly plausible within the pre-colonial African worldview (118).

When John takes up his father’s legacy—the folio containing the historical records of C. K. Washington—he reseals it as Moses Washington had left it, builds a funeral pyre, and thinks about all of it, “one last time” (432). The sense of finality in these words bolsters the arguments of those who believe in John’s physical suicide, but as Dee Palmer Woodtor explains, “African-American genealogy often focuses more on merely revealing and confronting the past rather than documenting the past in a strict genealogical sense” (21). Using Woodtor’s Afrocentric assessment, John’s statement then refers to a completed phase of his genealogical quest through which he has confronted the past and then moved beyond it. He has achieved his purpose and has no further need of his notes or any type of documentation. To complete the quest and end this cycle of his family legacy, John must be willing to die and be reborn with the ancestors—willing to believe that they are waiting for him. He completes this act, not as
his father and great-grandfather did, through physical death, but through a spiritual reconnection with the ancestors. With his symbolic death, John leaves the constraints of the academic body that have bound him to his unimaginative existence and becomes, as Azacca’s story explains, “a spirit who could fly wherever he willed” (428).

Ultimately, whether or not John actually commits suicide is not the point of the novel. Bradley’s point is that facts represent a relatively small portion of the truth. As John Washington remarks, “a heritage is something you believe in . . . one cannot become a believer by knowing facts” (212). John’s story becomes complete when he is able to contextualize geography and genealogy within his personal and cultural narrative. In the process of unburying the past, he successfully reads and navigates the cultural landscape of the slaves’ graveyard that has provided the pattern, the catalyst, for his ability to imaginatively reconstruct his family history as a larger part of the American narrative. It is when John immerses himself in the story of his ancestors that he begins to find the parallels in his own life that allow him to reconcile the past with the present.
Notes

1 The reading of Moses Washington’s will reveals that he has provided for the funerals of his two closest friends, Old Jack and Uncle Josh White.

2 Bradley’s use of the generic terms “Town” and “County,” and his detailed, intimate depictions of the natural and built environment of the novel’s setting, recall the self-contained cultural landscapes created by William Faulkner in the Snopes trilogy.

3 In Chapter 2, Margaret Earley Whitt compares the narrative structure of Mama Day to the ritual formula of the “standing forth” ceremony that Gloria Naylor imaginatively reconstructs in Mama Day.

4 Many cultures and religious groups around the world practice the custom of shoveling spades of dirt or throwing handfuls on dirt on a coffin. Eugene D. Genovese agrees that the practice “has not been restricted to Africa and Afro-America . . . and it does not in itself prove cultural continuity” (200). Though he offers no evidence for his assertion, nevertheless, Genovésé concludes that “there is no reason to doubt that the blacks of the eastern tidewater and low country brought it from Africa and made it their own in the New World” (200). Genovese cites Edward A. Pollard, a nineteenth-century journalist who referred to the practice of tossing handfuls of dirt on the coffin as “the negro custom.” In The Chaneysville Incident, years after Moses Washington’s death, John again participates in dropping the ritual spades of earth on the coffin of his maternal grandfather, the Professor.

5 In Chapter 1, the slave’s burying ground at Providence provided the African Americans of Edenton with a refuge away from the control and influence of whites.
The persistence and practice of African religion among the enslaved Africans in Haiti continues to influence Haitian culture today.

The Sea Islands culture described in Chapter 2 demonstrates the retention and persistence of African traditions despite the practitioners’ apparent lack of knowledge concerning the origins or significance of specific traditions.

John’s comment echoes the description by Harriet Jacobs of her Aunt Nancy’s funeral in Chapter 1: “The arrangements were very plain, but perfectly respectable.” Just as Jacobs’ family struggled against the white slaveholders for control over the funeral proceedings and choice of burial place, John must negotiate with, and ultimately defy, his mother and her European notions of a proper funeral, in order to “outfit Old Jack properly.”

Bradley’s choice of text from Song of Solomon recalls Toni Morrison’s use of the same biblical text for her novel of the same title published in 1977. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has theorized that African American texts signify on each other whether or not the authors are consciously aware of the attribution (Signifying Monkey). On the contrary, in an interview, “The Business of Writing,” Bradley protests that “writers don’t read that much . . . you’re sort of generally aware of what other people are doing . . . but I never read them, so I’m not aware of them” (36).

In Chapter 1, the choice of death as preferable to slavery is illustrated in Jacobs’ narrative as an act of wrestling power from the enslaver.

Lamen, the father of Moses Washington, is only briefly mentioned in the novel. Bradley has acknowledged that he needed to “make the generations work out,” so Lamen Washington functions primarily as a historical device, a placeholder in time, that
completes the chronological connection between the antebellum past and the bicentennial present of the novel’s narrative framework. However, according to Trudier Harris, Lamen is also an important sign. As a successful middle class undertaker, Lamen apparently has adopted, and lives by, Euro-American cultural values. Lamen, born in 1856, would have few memories of his father—as C. K. died in 1859. Harris contends that Lamen “broke the chain of African connection, became Christian, lost interest in his own father, and denied that there was something physical after death” (164). When Lamen finds Moses reading C. K.’s anonymously published history, he destroys it. Though the source of possible tension between Lamen and Moses is noted in this incident, it is never examined by Bradley as an issue of cultural continuity or conflict. Harris’ statement evaluating Lamen’s beliefs regarding death and dying cannot be fully supported by the events in the text. Lamen prepares his wife’s body for burial, which can be interpreted as a traditional act of family ritual, but again Bradley does not allow us to see those preparations, thus it is not possible to draw further conclusions about Lamen’s cultural beliefs.

12 In *The Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, William J. Switala writes that the Liames farm was a stop on the Underground Railroad, but this is apparently conjecture on Switala’s part as his statement is based solely upon an interview with Harriet Bradley regarding the story she collected about the escaped slaves.

13 In *Mama Day*, George is a primary narrator who speaks to his wife, Cocoa, from beyond the grave. Their dialogue forms a significant portion of the novel.
CHAPTER 5

A Tapestry of Color and Class: Mapping the Landscape
of Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*

The dead in the cemetery have risen from there and they, too, stand at the cabins where they once lived. So, the slave cemetery is just plain ground now, grass and nothing else.

—Edward P. Jones, *The Known World*

Edward P. Jones' *The Known World* begins with the death of Henry Townsend, an African-American slaveholder. Because Townsend is an emancipated slave, not only color but also class distinctions are significant within the social dynamics of the Townsend plantation. Set in the fictional county of Manchester, Virginia, the cultural landscape of the Townsend plantation is a complex tapestry of color and class that illustrates the multifaceted relationships of race and society in the antebellum South. Though master and slaves are of the same race—and their lives are inextricably interwoven by social and economic circumstances—law and tradition, in life as well as in death, dictate their separation. Within the cultural landscape of the plantation, the graveyard functions as a microcosm of antebellum society. The segregated burial ground on the Townsend plantation is, in fact, two distinct graveyards, one for the slaveholders and one for the enslaved. Thus, the pattern of plantation life, reflecting the social blueprint of broader antebellum society, continues through death and burial, and the plantation becomes a site of memory—a geographic text of legally conscribed social relationships mapped in the cultural landscape.
The life and death of the slaveholder, Henry Townsend, and the plantation world that he creates, signify the impact of the social forces that have determined the pattern and texture of his life. Henry Townsend is a tragic hero whose life illustrates the inevitably disastrous consequences of the errors committed by a tragically flawed protagonist. Reflective of the imperfect nature of the human condition, he evokes our sympathy, for he represents an extreme example of “double-consciousness” in his role as an emancipated slave and slaveholder. Like many emancipated slaves, Henry’s freedom was purchased—in this case by his father, Augustus Townsend. The elder Townsend is a highly skilled woodworker, who hires out his own time, paying part of his wages to his slaveholder, William Robbins, and keeping some of the money for himself. In this way, Augustus is able to earn enough to purchase first himself, then his wife Mildred, and finally his son Henry. After the purchase of Henry’s mother, William Robbins’ influence on Henry grows in the years before his father acquires Henry’s freedom. Despite his parents’ attempts to nurture Henry, he learns to admire the power and authority vested in the position of the slaveholder. “It was Robbins who taught him the value of money, the value of his labors, and never to blink when he gave a price for his product” (113). Because of his fondness for the young enslaved boy, Robbins deliberately delays Henry’s emancipation. When Henry becomes a slaveholder, Augustus realizes that his decision to buy his wife’s freedom first might have been the wrong choice. Augustus feels that Robbins’ influence on his son has prevented Henry from seeing the wrong in owning another human being. When his mother accuses him, “Why do things the same old bad way?” Henry replies, “I ain’t, mama. I ain’t” (137). Struggling against the stereotype of racial inferiority and his desire for success in the white world, Henry Townsend aspires to
“be a master different from any other, the kind of shepherd master God had intended
[with] good food for his slaves, no whippings, short and happy days in the fields” (181). Henry’s naive arrogance and pride serve to bring about his downfall. His desire is to be
“a better master than any white man he has ever known [but] he did not understand that
the kind of world he wanted to create was doomed before he had even spoken the first
syllable of the word master” (64). When William Robbins, Henry’s former slaveholder,
assists Henry in acquiring his first slave, Moses, Henry defends his actions to his father,
“I ain’t done nothing I ain’t a right to . . . I ain’t done nothin no white man wouldn’t
do . . . I ain’t broke no law” (139). But Henry has broken a natural law in the eyes of
many. “It took Moses more than two weeks to come to understand that . . . indeed a
black man, two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made” (9).
And Moses would finally conclude that, “God had indeed set [the world] twirling and
twisting every which way when he put black people to owning their own kind” (9).

Henry’s dedication to his goal of self-improvement is admirable, but his
ambitions place him in a morally questionable position. While he acquires both literacy
and financial security through hard work and persistence, as John Lowe notes, “literacy—
always pictured as the route to emancipation in African-American literature—in this case
can foster elitism, and, indeed, even the desire to own slaves” (197). Henry, who “sees
slave owning as a clear path to personal advancement,” begins to realize that being a
slaveholder also requires forceful intimidation and even brutality—if he desires to
maintain absolute control over the enslaved people within his power (Lowe 197). Henry
Townsend’s misfortunes arouse our pity, for apparently there is no resolution for his
dilemma. He is unable to attain his idealistic goal of practicing a benevolent and paternal
slavery, and he belatedly realizes that redemption through suffering and death provides his only means to triumph over the self-inflicted tragedy of his chosen life as a slaveholder.

Though Henry’s tragic condition is largely a function of society, it is also a result of the decisions that he has made given the limitation of his choices, “moral compromises,” as Valerie Smith contends, “to justify [his] collusion with the system of slave ownership” (182). Thus, the Townsend plantation—and especially, its graveyard—are a tragic reflection of Henry’s social standing as a slaveholder and his acceptance of the status quo of color and class in antebellum Virginia. The graveyard not only illustrates the relationships between the people interred in the burial ground but also establishes a social pattern that is intended to be maintained for generations to come: “There was a good-sized plot at the back and off to the left of the house where Henry had planned for himself, his wife, Caldonia, and their generations to be buried. It was on the same piece of land where slaves were buried, but separate, the way white slave owners did it” (70).

Though Henry and Caldonia have no children after three years of marriage, Henry lays out the cemetery in anticipation of his progeny. By inference, Henry’s children will inherit the plantation, and the slave cemetery will contain the generations of enslaved people that will be inherited by Henry’s descendants. Jones describes the proximity of the two cemeteries: “Both cemeteries were on a rise, both guarded by trees, some apple, some dogwoods, a stunning magnolia, and some trees no one could make head or tail of. The cemeteries were separated by a hop, skip and a jump” (71). Though the physical distance is negligible between the family cemetery and the cemetery for the enslaved
people, the social distance between those interred in the two separate plots of earth is immeasurable. Henry and his wife Caldonia aspire to the same class privileges as white slaveholders and maintain their different status through strictly enforced social separation from the enslaved African Americans on their plantation. Henry and Caldonia “were members of a free Negro class that, while not having the power of some whites, had been brought up to believe that they were rulers waiting in the wings” (287). Henry and Caldonia’s perspective could only be made possible, as Valerie Smith suggests, “by decoupling the condition of slave ownership from whiteness and the condition of enslavement from blackness,” an environment that Jones has established in *The Known World* (180). In their minds, Henry and Caldonia, and their society of free people of color, are “much better than the majority of white people, and it was only a matter of time before those white people came to realize that” (287). Henry and Caldonia’s notions of society and class extend to the segregated burial grounds of the Townsend plantation where the division between the slaveholders and the enslaved people are clearly marked. In Anissa Wardi’s words, “necrogeographic mappings underscore societal hierarchy” in the plantation graveyard (31).

While the Townsend plantation is the material manifestation of Henry’s accomplishments in life, his failings are poignantly illustrated in the instant of his death. Jones anthropomorphizes death—“it steps into the room” as Henry lies dying, and thus Death also becomes a character in *The Known World*. Henry’s wife Caldonia sits near his sickbed talking quietly with her friend and former teacher, Fern Elston, another free woman of color. They were discussing a Thomas Gray poem that Henry “thought he knew . . . but as he formed some words to join the conversation, death stepped into the
room and came to him: Henry walked up the steps and into the tiniest of houses, knowing with each step that he did not own it, that he was only renting” (11). The list of goals in Henry Townsend’s life included building a “big” house, “that even white people [would] say, ‘What a nice house that Henry Townsend got’” (136). Henry’s disappointment at the size of the house that he enters upon his death is only overshadowed by his dismay that he does not even own it. Henry’s ambitions to acquire wealth and social standing in life are shown to be misguided; even his perception of death had included material manifestations of wealth. Henry Townsend lives according to the values established by the white dominant society of Virginia. Though he participates in this society in severely circumscribed fashion because of his race, he follows its conventions as a means to achieve success and a socially limited form of “equality” with whites. It appears that Henry’s death is a disappointment because it conflicts with the image of an afterlife that he had envisioned: “Whoever was renting the house to him had promised a thousand rooms . . . he found less than four” (11). Henry Townsend has rationalized his position as an African-American slaveholder as he aspires to rise above the limitations of his color and class. While Timothy Spaulding properly argues that The Known World “complicates our understanding of what have become almost archetypal figures in American literature: the enslaver and the slave,” Henry Townsend’s actions and beliefs show that he has exercised the same type of racial and class prejudice as the dominant white society (125).

Henry Townsend’s death does not immediately disrupt the social order that he has created within the world of the Townsend plantation. As the enslaved house servant, Loretta, notes on the day of Henry’s death, no one has to give directions or work orders
to any of the enslaved people, because, “death was giving all the orders,” and the necessary work of running the plantation continued even without Henry commanding it to be done.

Though there was to be no work in the fields that day, there were things to be done if the world was to go on. Milking cows, a mule to be shod, eggs collected, a plow to be repaired, cabins to be swept if more dust and dirt were not to join what was already inside. And the bodies of slaves and animals required nourishment and fires needed tending to. (69)

Death also makes necessary the tasks of preparing the body for burial and digging the grave. Henry Townsend’s grave is dug by hand in the usual manner of the time. In a collaborative effort that crosses the barriers of class, Henry’s friend Louis—the mulatto son of the wealthiest slaveholder in Manchester County—and Caldonia’s twin Calvin, who was born free—share the task of digging the grave with Henry’s father Augustus, Moses the enslaved overseer, and Elias and Stamford, two enslaved men on the Townsend plantation. These men represent the various classes in the hierarchy of African-American antebellum society: “free” mulatto, free Negro, emancipated slave, enslaved overseer, and slave. At age thirty-one, Henry’s estate, which includes “thirty three slaves and more than fifty acres of land that sat him high above many others, white and black and Indian in Manchester County,” placed him at the pinnacle of this class hierarchy (5). Henry’s family members and friends participate in the preparation of the grave as an honor to Henry. The enslaved men are required to participate. Notably, only the enslaved men, Moses, Elias, and Stamford, will work to fill Henry’s grave after the graveside funeral.
While the men handle the digging and filling of the grave, the women are responsible for preparing Henry’s body for burial. In the mid-nineteenth century, the process of preparing a body for internment involved first washing, then clothing the body, sometimes in a shroud or winding sheet. Because embalming would not become a common practice before the latter part of the nineteenth century, even the remains of prosperous men were quickly prepared for burial and interred within a day or two, and viewing of the body was therefore limited. The preparation of the body was typically handled by servants, house slaves, or female relatives, other than the spouse or immediate kin. The narrator does not mention who is preparing Henry’s body for burial, but the task would have most likely fallen to Loretta, Caldonia’s personal maid, assisted by one or more of the other enslaved woman, and very likely supervised by Fern Alston, Caldonia’s former teacher, and later, friend and confidante. After the women complete the washing and dressing of Henry’s body, it is placed upon a cooling board while his coffin is being made. Mildred and Augustus have arranged to bring the lumber for Henry’s coffin. Augustus is a highly skilled carpenter, “a wood carver whose work people said could bring sinners to tears,” but Henry’s coffin is plain pine, in the manner of the local custom, and constructed by the enslaved men on the Townsend plantation:

The men then collected the lumber from the wagon Augustus and Mildred came in and took it to the second barn, where they made Henry a coffin.

The wood was pine, which just about everybody in Manchester County, in Virginia was buried in. The slaves sometimes got pine, if they had always done the right thing and their masters thought they deserved it. (72)
“Everybody” in the above passage obviously refers to whites, as the majority of Manchester County’s African-American residents are enslaved. Coffins were not perceived to be a necessity for slaves, and the privilege of being interred properly in a coffin was proffered as a reward for good behavior. The decision made by the slaveholder prevailed in determining the disposition of the bodies of the enslaved. Slaveholders used the threat of an ignominious burial as a means of ensuring cooperation from the slaves. In antebellum Virginia, “death without benefit of clergy” was the penalty for various crimes committed by enslaved African Americans (Gould 114). Ironically, no member of the clergy will be present at Henry’s funeral service.

Henry and Caldonia Townsend have adopted a Euro-American perspective regarding death and burial that eschews the “moaning, singing, and shouting” that would have otherwise been expected during Henry’s wake and burial. The emphasis placed upon the practice of appropriate mourning rituals survived the Middle Passage and was perpetuated in the burial traditions of nineteenth-century African Americans who adhered to the beliefs of their African ancestors. “Sitting up with the body” and participating in sometimes loud, rather lengthy lamentations was an African-inspired burial ritual that African Americans continued to practice even during slavery. In contrast to traditional African-American burial rituals, Henry’s wake is conducted soberly: “Up in the house Calvin lit another set of candles, preparing to sit the night with Henry. Louis was soon to return to share the duty, and Zeddie’s man Bennett would join them sometime during the night. As Calvin lit the candles, Loretta covered Henry’s face with a black silk cloth—she felt he had best rest before the trip in the morning” (75).
The covering of Henry’s face increases the somber atmosphere of his wake, the cloth further separating the mourners from sentiment and effectively dampening any emotion that might be stirred inadvertently by the viewing of the body. Moreover, apparently Loretta feels that Henry’s spirit might need a respite as well. The trip for which she is preparing him does not necessarily end at the graveyard. According to African beliefs, the process of dying frees the spirit to travel home. But, the tragedy of Henry’s life is evidenced by its early culmination, because “as with many other ethnics . . . premature death is a tragedy and calls for mourning” in African culture (Asante and Nwadiora 70). Augustus and Mildred do not sit with Henry’s body that night, but in a dialogue that is reminiscent of a eulogy, they “start talking . . . all about Henry, from his birth to his death, starting a weeks-long project of recalling all that they could about their son” (75). According to African beliefs, in the wake of death, appropriate rituals of ancestor reverence must be performed. While Henry has not kept the traditions, his parents do. The elder Townsends will keep Henry’s memory and spirit alive. Following African tradition, they provide the ancestor reverence that would normally be the responsibility of Henry’s offspring.

Henry’s graveside funeral is also a small, somber affair. Though Henry has gained the wealth of a slaveholder, he is not accorded the full social standing of the position by whites, and his former slaveholder and mentor, William Robbins, is the only white person in attendance at Henry’s funeral. Within the world of the Townsend plantation, Henry has been required to maintain his social status by distancing himself from the society of the enslaved people. As a result, neither is he accorded the traditional African-inspired funeral rituals. Funeral rituals practiced by enslaved African Americans
were commonly reported to include large funeral processions with singing or chanting during the walk to and from the graveyard, and again at the gravesite. No mention is made of singing during the processional to and from Henry’s grave, and the service at the graveside is short and informal. The following passage emphasizes the relative brevity of Henry Townsend’s funeral—as opposed to the sometimes rather lengthy African-American funerals of the nineteenth century:

Henry’s funeral lasted a little more than an hour. All the slaves he owned surrounded his family and friends and the hole where they put him.

Because Valtims Moffett [the preacher] was late, they started without him. Not knowing when Moffett would arrive, Caldonia decided that there, at the end, God would not hold it against Henry Townsend for not having a proper conductor on his last train. (143)

The preacher Moffett never arrives, and the funeral proceeds without him. Caldonia’s easy dismissal of Moffett’s failure to appear for Henry’s funeral illustrates the lack of significance she attaches to the preacher’s presence.

Though Henry and Caldonia both profess a belief in God, theirs is a lukewarm belief. They dutifully provide a preacher for the enslaved people, but they attend religious services on the plantation only occasionally. Tea in the dining room with the preacher following the service for the enslaved people “pass[es] in their minds as a kind of service, as communion with God” (88). The image of Moffett as a “proper conductor” on Henry Townsend’s last journey also conveys a lack of regard for the spiritual significance of death and burial in the pre-colonial African worldview. The author portrays the preacher as a purveyor of an especially simplistic brand of Christian
doctrine. During his weekly visits to the plantation, the preacher Moffett exhorts the enslaved people “to obey their masters and mistresses, for heaven would not be theirs if they disobeyed” (87). Thus, the enslaved people are all in attendance at Henry’s funeral, as would be expected, but they are silent observers.

Henry’s mother, Mildred, speaks at his gravesite and addresses Henry directly. In her grief, she indulges in a lengthy, rambling dialogue with the dead Henry. Those attending the service are sympathetic to Mildred’s effusive display of grief, and “everyone knew that was fine,” and even expected (87). When Mildred speaks to her son, she anticipates the time when she will see him again: “You make a soft place for me in the bye and bye, son . . . and I’ll be along directly” (144). The phrase “in the bye and bye” is repeated by other characters in the novel that part in life, not expecting to see each other again until after death. The source of the text can be found in the spiritual, “O Bye and Bye,” in which the speaker longs for heaven and a chance “to lay down my heavy load.” Fern Alston, a free woman of color who had been Henry and Caldonia’s teacher and who is now their friend, is the only other active participant in the funeral service. Though her affection and respect for Henry is apparent, Fern experiences a lapse of memory during her song, and this provides a tragi-comical touch to Henry’s service further diminishing the decorum of the proceedings. No preacher, a mother overcome with grief, and a botched solo comprise Henry’s last rites. Henry Townsend’s funeral services reflect his lukewarm beliefs regarding both his religion and his heritage.

A stone marker bearing his name and dates will be erected for Henry Townsend in the slaveholders’ section of the plantation graveyard, and no doubt, a similar stone will be placed next to him for Caldonia when she dies. The Townsends’ tombstones, with their
genealogically valuable information, will document their lives for future generations. In
the section reserved for the enslaved people, there are no markers and no family
groupings—a distinction that also marks the division between slaveholder and slave—the
enslaved people and their family members belong to the slaveholders and not to
themselves.9 Angelika Kruger-Kahloula explains that the absence of stones is directly
related to the missing and misappropriated history of African Americans: “Tombstones
provide a visible and tangible proof of genealogy and history. As black people have long
been dispossessed of their history, it comes as no surprise to find only a few traces of
them in pre-Emancipation cemeteries” (“Homage and Hegemony” 317).

The prospect of maintaining the continuity and history of the African-American
family during slavery was nearly impossible, as the experience of Stamford, an enslaved
man on the Townsend plantation, illustrates. The disruption of family units under the
strain of slavery fragmented families and often dispersed family members far apart.
Stamford dreams of the plantation where his family lived before he was taken away from
his mother and father, but he cannot recall his parents’ names. Stamford mentally
envisions them in an attempt to remember:

He closed his eyes and took his parents in his hands and put them all
about the plantation where he had last seen them... outside the
smokehouse... in front of the master’s big house... in the fields [and] in
the sky, and at last he put them before the cemetery where there were no
names. And that was it: His mother’s name was June, and so he opened his
right hand and let her go. His father’s name did not come to him, try as he
might to put him all about the plantation . . . [he] slept and just before
dawn he awoke and said into the darkness, "Colter."

He went into a kind of mourning for his parents. (193)

In the act of recalling their deaths—though there are no tombstones inscribed with names
in the cemetery—Stamford is finally able to recall the names of his parents, and he begins
a delayed mourning process. According to African tradition, "When the living can no
longer remember the deceased personally by name then the process of death is complete,"
thus Stamford, whether or not he recognizes the cultural basis for his actions, keeps alive
the memories of his parents by speaking their names. (Asante and Nwadiora 26).

Perhaps because of the early loss of his parents, Stamford fears his own death, and
he has been following the advice of an elderly man who recommended that "young stuff"
would keep him alive. Stamford, at forty, has lost much of his appeal to young women,
and he despairs that he will live much longer. He becomes depressed and asks God to
"just take me on home. Or spit me down to hell, I don’t care anymore. Just take me
away from this" (200). Stamford recalls that he has heard of a poison plant that one man
had taken to get to "the other side,” but Stamford had been only a youngster at the time
and "had not taken note of what the plant was or where it could be found" (202). He also
remembers hearing of “a real pretty woman” who had committed suicide by cutting her
wrists with a sharpened stone (202), and he considers that her act, though effective in
freeing her from slavery, was a terrible waste of “young stuff.” When Stamford is caught
in a lightning storm, and a strike sets an oak tree afame, he sees his own opportunity for
escape, “and [goes] toward the lightning, toward his death,” but the lightning moves
away from him (203). Two lightning-struck crows lie on the ground beneath the oak in
the aftermath of the storm. Stamford beseeches the crows, “Don’t be stingy with what you got,” as he rubs their feathers with moistened fingers in an effort to transfer the lightning’s killing force into his own body (204). When the crows’ ruined nest begins to fall from the tree, Stamford is covered in yolk and shells from the broken eggs. In his search for death, he is instead anointed with the life-giving symbol of the eggs and their yolks—“he looked as if someone had called his name” (205). As if performing a burial ritual, he takes some of the eggshells and places the pieces under the wings of the birds, then rubs the yolk over their bodies: “And when he was done the ground opened up and took the birds in” (205). Overcome with emotion, Stamford weeps, but his experience does not end with the earth’s burial of the crows. He looks into the sky, and though the storm has passed, a cabin from the quarters is flying through the air. Like the main character, Joe, in the Broadway musical and subsequent MGM film, Cabin in the Sky, Stamford must decide between the attractions of pursuing “the good life,” in Stamford’s case, “young stuff” to prolong his existence, and the challenges of forging a family life that will result in creating generations that will preserve his name. The narrator tells us, “This was the beginning of Stamford Crow Blueberry, the man who went on with his wife [Delphie] to found the Richmond Home for Colored Orphans” (205). Stamford and Delphie’s great-granddaughter would successfully petition the city of Richmond to name a street in their honor. Unlike his parents, Stamford and his wife, Delphie, will not join the ranks of anonymous souls in the plantation graveyard.

The majority of the unmarked graves in the slaves’ section of the Townsend plantation burial ground contain the remains of children. Based upon statistics gathered from nineteenth-century plantation records and other documents, Richard Steckle
estimates that the infant mortality rate for African-American children was “roughly double” the rate for white infants (qtd. in Bryant). On the Townsend plantation, the small occupants of the graveyard illustrate this trend: “There were ten infants in the slave cemetery, five girls, five boys, only two of them related; none had seen their second year of life” (70). Enslaved children succumbed to a variety of causes from “failure to thrive” to “teething.” Teething related deaths were typically either a result of infection caused by lancing the gums to provide relief or the result of malnourishment brought about by weaning an infant on watered milk. Life threatening illnesses and injuries were exacerbated by the relatively primitive state of nineteenth-century healthcare coupled with the privations of slavery. The infants in the Townsend plantation graveyard succumbed to various causes:

- An inability to digest even mother’s milk, an infection from a burn from a flying ember, a silent, unexplained death during the night as if not to disturb her mother’s sleep. One had died strapped to his mother’s back as the woman worked in the fields two days before the end of harvest, the day Loretta the maid and Caldonia the mistress were away and Zeddie the cook took sick and was unable to look after the baby. (70-71)

As the deaths of the children on the Townsend plantation illustrate, the children of slaves suffered disproportionately from poor prenatal conditions and low birth weights—and later from inadequate diets and childhood diseases—often with fatal results (Bryant 198). In a particularly striking example of the tragic effect of slavery on women of childbearing age, Elias and Celeste’s youngest child is stillborn while Celeste is laboring in the field. Moses, the overseer, has forced her to work despite her pain. Her scream brings Elias
running from his own row in the field. “Before Elias could reach her, the baby in her was coming. He was down to her, holding her, when the baby arrived and settled in a bloody puddle in the furrow, still connected to her mother” (327). Before burying the baby, Delphie, an enslaved woman who “knew something about roots,” cuts a lock of the baby’s hair at Elias’ request (68). In an act resembling the African practice of wearing a charm for protection, Elias places the dead child’s hair in a piece of cloth that he pins inside his shirt. The day after the baby’s death and burial, Celeste and Elias remain in their cabin, but the other enslaved people return to the fields. Later, they visit the grave of baby Lucinda, who has been buried without ceremony by Delphie. Among the Yoruba people of Africa, “children who die do not receive any rites because they are deemed ‘one born to die,’ and instead [like baby Lucinda] are buried immediately” (Asante and Nwadiora 32).

The twelfth child to be buried in the Townsend plantation graveyard, Luke, who has survived childhood illnesses and therefore seems destined to reach adulthood, is doomed to an early death by a plantation system that does not recognize or respect the necessity of a childhood for enslaved children.

The only child over two years in the cemetery was twelve-year old Luke, a gangly boy of a sweet nature, dead of hard work on a farm to which he had been rented for $2 a week. A boy Elias and Celeste had loved. Henry had Luke’s mother brought in for the funeral from two counties over, but no one could find his father. (71)

The parentage of enslaved African-American children was often difficult to prove. Sometimes a slaveholder might be an unacknowledged father, and often a child, as in
Luke's case, would be separated from his enslaved parents at an early age. Thus, the
presence of Luke's mother at the funeral of her son, especially considering the distance
that she has to travel, would have been unusual. But, nineteenth-century principles of
successful slave management recommended avoiding actions that might cause
disgruntlement or dissatisfaction among the slaves, especially under circumstances that
could otherwise be tolerated by the slaveholders. Apparently, according to interviews
from the WPA slave narratives, some slaveholders accepted that attendance at funerals
was considered an essential practice among the enslaved people. Thus, they viewed
attendance at funerals by enslaved persons from neighboring plantations as a necessary
social act that mitigated issues of potential unrest. Ultimately, it was the will of the
slaveholder that dictated if an enslaved person could attend the funeral of a loved one.10

In *The Known World*, the slaveholder Merle, who had rented Luke's time and in
whose possession he died, also attended Luke's funeral, though in reality it is doubtful
that he would have done so. Merle had balked at paying compensation to Henry
insisted the price of $100 was "fair business," Henry was finally compensated. Perhaps
Merle's notion of "fair business" extended to his attendance at Luke's funeral. Elias had
petitioned Henry Townsend to work in Luke's place, for Merle was known to be an
especially harsh slave driver, but Henry, who had already granted Elias' request to marry
Celeste, "did not want to grant [Elias] two wishes in one year" (103). Consequently,
Henry Townsend might have considered the presence of Luke's mother at her son's
funeral as a conciliatory gesture on his part, for it is Henry whom Elias perceives as
graveside service, but “no one said more than Elias and at the last [Celeste] his new wife had to put her arms around him to bring an end to all the words” (103).

While Luke’s death at age twelve was tragic, it was hardly unusual. For enslaved children like Luke who were fortunate enough to survive infancy, their death rate nonetheless remained twice that of whites through age fourteen, and “the average life expectancy of a slave at birth was just 21 or 22 years, compared to 40 to 43 years for antebellum whites” (Mintz). One of thirteen enslaved women on the Townsend plantation, forty-three year old Delphie, “had already lived longer than any ancestor she had ever had . . . to live to see fifty was a wish she was beginning to dare to have” (63). The narrator notes that Henry Townsend had not been a master long enough for his adult slaves to die of old age and populate the cemetery, though according to Mintz, “compared to whites, relatively few slaves lived into old age.” Only two adults had been interred in the Townsend plantation’s slave cemetery prior to Henry’s death. The year before Henry’s death, Peter, “father to an unborn girl,” was trampled by “two horses, frightened by something in the barn only they could see” (69). The injured Peter is taken to the quarters where he dies, and his wife May leaves their cabin for the “requisite month” to allow Peter’s spirit “time to say goodbye and then find its way to heaven” (69). In the following months, during Henry’s illness, Augustus and Mildred use the cabin on two separate visits to the Townsend plantation. May interprets this as “Peter’s way of telling her that he was home and settled in,” so she finally moves back into the cabin (69). May’s superstitions regarding death, burial, and the continuing presence of her husband’s spirit after death are beliefs that pervade nineteenth-century African-American culture. According to African beliefs, the departed continue to have influence in the lives of the
living, and although those influences are typically salutary, the prospect of a disturbed spirit causing problems for the living was always a possibility.

The other enslaved adult interred in the Townsend plantation graveyard is Sadie, an unmarried woman of forty, who "fell asleep on an empty stomach after fourteen hours in the field and never woke up."

Sadie . . . had lain twice with a man from another plantation. That slave's master, a white man of five slaves to his name, allowed the slave to come to Sadie's funeral though he warned Andy that if the funeral went on too long, as nigger funerals sometimes did, Andy was to step away and come straight back home. He wrote Andy a pass that expired at two o'clock in the afternoon. (70)

The circumstances surrounding Sadie's death and burial were apparently common in the antebellum world. The WPA narratives detail similar incidents. Lina Hunter, interviewed in Georgia, recalls a large funeral for a woman that dropped dead just as suddenly as Sadie. In the case that Hunter related, a young enslaved mother had died on the path where she walked as she returned from the field to nurse her baby. John Glover of South Carolina reported in his interview that slaves generally walked to funerals, like Sadie's Andy, and that patrollers would stop a slave who did not have a pass as attendance at funerals was governed by the approval of the slaveholder.

Other scenes of death and burial in *The Known World* take place outside the plantation graveyard, though they are no less revealing of the social mappings of the cultural landscape of the plantation, and, correspondingly, the antebellum South. When Augustus and Mildred make the final payment for Henry's freedom, Rita, who has been
Henry's surrogate mother in Mildred's absence, begs them not to leave her behind on the Robbins plantation. Despite the inherent danger of assisting her, Augustus arranges for Mildred's escape in a coffin-like box of walking sticks that he ships to a merchant in New York. The analogy of burial in this scene is further illustrated by the ritualistic formula used to address the interred person—in this instance, Rita—in that it expresses a belief in a future meeting between the two women, Rita and Mildred:

Before he nailed her in, Mildred said, 'Rita, honey, I see you in the bye and bye. Lord willin.' Rita said, 'Mildred, baby, I see you one day in the bye and bye. The Lord wouldn't hurt us so we couldn't see each other in the bye and bye.' Rita held on to the [walking] stick with Adam and Eve holding up their descendants, and that was the last the three of them ever saw of her. Mildred would dream about her often. She would be walking in a cemetery and would come upon a body, Rita's, that had not yet been buried. 'I see you later,' the dead Rita would say. 'Yes, you promised you would,' was all Mildred could manage as she picked up a shovel to begin digging. (48)

This scene reiterates the significance of proper burial in the pre-colonial African worldview and the blending of African and Christian beliefs in African-American burial practices. The Adam and Eve walking stick that Rita holds symbolizes the continuity of the generations, and it foretells Rita's successful arrival in New York and the survival of her own future progeny. However, denied knowledge of the success of Rita's escape, in her dreams, Mildred worries that Rita may not have survived, and she shows her concern for Rita's proper burial when she digs a grave for Rita.
Enslaved persons, like Rita, who sought to escape, placed themselves and those who helped them—in Rita’s case, the entire Townsend family—in extreme danger. Rita’s escape in the box of walking sticks recalls the story of a similar daring escape by Henry “Box” Brown, a writer and abolitionist. Brown fled to England after passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, which allowed slaveholders to hire professional slave catchers to locate and return the escapees—a financially rewarding legal enticement that masked the illegal kidnapping of free persons of color for transport and sale “down South.” Though Augustus Townsend and his family would avoid penalty for their participation in Rita’s escape, some of the local whites of Manchester County eventually betray Augustus by taking his freedom papers and selling him to a white slave catcher, Darcy. Darcy and his enslaved assistant, Stennis, take Augustus south along with other kidnapped and illegally acquired free people of color. Among those kidnapped is a young girl named Abundance, who dies in route. Stennis unceremoniously disposes of her body without benefit of a proper burial. Augustus Townsend protests at leaving the girl’s body unburied:

Stennis had dumped the dead child, Abundance, on the side of the road long before they hit North Carolina, the child who had been coughing since Manchester. ‘We should bury that poor baby,’ the chained Augustus said as Stennis got back in the wagon after dropping the girl’s body in the weeds. Augustus had held the dead child for miles, not wanting to believe she was dead. ‘Don’t leave that poor baby out there like that.’ (275)

When Stennis complains that they do not have a shovel, Augustus offers to dig the grave with his hands. The other kidnapped people in the wagon recognize the cultural
importance of a proper burial, and they offer to help. Though Darcy, as Stennis’ slaveholder, has the final word, he ostensibly looks to Stennis for his opinion on the necessity of burial for Abundance: “Should we bury her Stennis?” he asks (275). While Stennis might appear to be ignorant of his cultural heritage or simply indifferent to the sanctity of death and burial, his behavior and attitude are dictated by society and circumstance. The enslaved Stennis, who acknowledges that Darcy is his “bread and butter [and] jam, too” can only recommend an action that he knows Darcy will approve (284). Thus, Stennis declares, “Lotta trouble for something that won’t cause no more trouble in this world” (277). Darcy agrees, and the group is forced to move on, leaving the body of Abundance unburied among the weeds. Wardi has proposed that the South itself is a burial ground for the “disremembered”, such as Abundance, where “the denial of proper funerary rites—or even a recognized burial—amounted to a repudiation of the sacred” within the pre-colonial African worldview (30).

Of the four adults kidnapped by Darcy, three will be sold before the group reaches Georgia. The last of the three is Willis, a thirty seven year old brick maker. When Willis is sold, he and Augustus perform the ritual words of departure: “As Darcy . . . counted the money, Willis said to Augustus, ‘I be seein you. I be seein you in the bye and bye.’ Augustus said, ‘And I’ll see you Willis. I’ll see you in the bye and bye. I promise’” (279). There is little chance of the two encountering one another again, but the prospect of reaching heaven, in “the bye and bye,” binds them spiritually. Augustus’ sale for $53.00 is ultimately a loss for Darcy. However, in the illegal slave market, prices varied dramatically with the circumstances of the sale. Augustus’ passive resistance during the trip south has worked to delay his sale until Darcy and Stennis become desperate to be
relieved of him. Once Augustus is sold and free of his chains, he immediately turns north to begin the long walk back to Manchester County, but the white farmer who has purchased Augustus, with the $53.00 that constituted his life savings, would rather shoot him that let him go. Determined to regain his freedom and return to his family, Augustus accepts the risk of dying as an alternative to slavery and is shot down as he walks toward freedom. Augustus Townsend’s death illustrates the African belief regarding death as a journey home: “He rose up above the barn where he had died . . . and he walked away quick-like, toward Virginia. He discovered that when people were above it all they walked faster, as much as a hundred times faster than when they were confined to the earth. And so he reached Virginia in little or no time” (346). Once back in Virginia, Augustus’ spirit returns to his house and gives Mildred a final kiss while she sleeps. She awakens and knows that her husband is dead. The same socially constructed system of race and color that had allowed Mildred’s son to become a slaveholder had taken her husband’s life and made her a widow.

In the aftermath of Henry Townsend’s death, the social hierarchy of the plantation becomes vulnerable, and the balance of power between slaveholder and slave is challenged from within the plantation landscape. As Caldonia Townsend begins to exercise her new authority as slave master, she also begins to depend upon Moses, the enslaved overseer, for support: “Moses spoke to her all the while as she walked [through the slave quarters], letting her know what he and the slaves would be doing when they returned to work” (75). Moses begins coming to the house to report to Caldonia in the evenings, and her willingness to listen to him increases his sense of self and self-importance. With this perceived encouragement, Moses begins to form the notion that
perhaps something beyond being an enslaved overseer is within his reach—he begins to think of freedom, and more. In addition to his nightly work reports, Moses begins to spin stories about Henry in an effort to distract Caldonia from her grief. It is at this point—through the sharing of memories about Henry—that Caldonia first begins to respond to Moses as a person, rather than as her slave. Later, when Moses comforts her physically, Caldonia does not repulse him, and the two become lovers. “That evening was the first time Moses would think that his [slave] wife and child could not live in the same world with him and Caldonia,” a world where he was “on his way to “becoming Mr. Townsend” (292-293). Now, Moses begins to realize the social differences between the world of the enslaved and the world of free people of color. By severing his social ties to slavery, as represented by his slave family, he believes that he can erase his identity as a slave, allowing him to move into the new world he has begun to envision for himself as a free man and slaveholder. For her part, Caldonia “wonder[s] if Virginia had a law forbidding such things between a colored woman and a colored man who was her slave” and she asks herself, “Was this a kind of miscegenation?” (292). While the definition of miscegenation clearly refers to the practice of marriage, cohabitation, or sexual relations between different races, Caldonia’s question emphasizes the general anxiety of free people of color in the antebellum South concerning their social status. This issue is particularly significant for Caldonia because social status, not race, is the only distinction between herself and the people she holds in bondage. When Caldonia accepts Moses as her lover, the balance of social power between them begins to shift.

Tragically, like Henry Townsend, the enslaved Moses has assimilated the values of whites, and despite the legal and social restrictions placed upon his race, he too aspires
to be elevated to the position of master. As Henry Townsend’s first purchase, Moses has been with Henry from the beginning, helping to build his plantation house and working the fields, while Henry acquired more land and slaves. Upon making Moses his overseer, Henry’s own words established the plantation hierarchy, “I’m countin on you to run this place . . . you be the boss of this place . . . there’s my word, then my wife’s word, and then there’s your word” (332). Moses has acquired a sense of responsibility and ownership for the land: “The only thing in his small world that meant as much as his life” (2). He displays a strong attachment to the landscape of the plantation—he often tastes the dirt of the fields to determine the state of the soil, and he works the fields as if they were his own, beginning his day before the others and ending it sometimes long after he has dismissed everyone else for the evening. Moses, perhaps justifiably, feels a deep sense of commitment and pride in his labor. As John Michael Vlach explains, “After years of toil in the fields, slaves sometimes began to feel that the harvest was their achievement rather than their master’s. He may have owned the crop, but they had created it” (15). Overseers, like Moses, necessarily negotiated the social margins between slaveholders and the enslaved people they supervised. Moses’ position is further complicated by the fact that Henry Townsend, not only an African-American slaveholder but also one who had formerly been a slave, would appear as a model of success in the white world, a model that Moses could aspire to emulate. Before Moses can achieve his goal of becoming the new master of the Townsend plantation, he must find a way to rid himself of his slave family.

Alice, “the [enslaved] woman who wanders in the night,” will eventually provide a solution for Moses’ dilemma by guiding his family to freedom. Alice has donned a
guise of insanity—based upon a story she has concocted about being kicked in the head by a mule. In the guise of an insane woman, Alice is left alone—free to wander about the countryside at night unrestrained. Consequently, her physical world is larger than that of the other slaves on the plantation, and her understanding of the world beyond the plantation is much greater as well. Alice’s ruse of insanity is an attempt to escape the world in which she is enslaved. Alice recalls the story of one woman who successfully found a way to leave the world of enslavement and return home: “On the last plantation she had been on, a woman had jumped into the well, vowing to swim her way home. And she had done it too, without a blessing from a mule kick” (294). Regarding the well, the contrasting views of the enslaved people and the slaveholders are illustrative of the cultural distinctions between the two groups:

No one ever again drank out of the well the woman dove into to swim home. It had been the one used by the white people, and even after they had their new one dug, they wouldn’t let the Negroes use the well the slave woman swam home in. Every slave on the place wanted to taste the water that gave a woman the power of a fish, but the white people bricked over the well. Some said they poisoned the water before they did it. (296)

To the enslaved people on the plantation, the well water has been transformed into something miraculous; however, the slaveholders see only contaminated water tainted by a slave’s decaying corpse. To the enslaved people, the watery grave of the well is a passage to home that has now been closed to them, and the whites have poisoned the well, they believe, to keep them from gaining the fish woman’s knowledge, and hence the power to escape slavery and return home.
When Alice wishes for death as a release from the world in which she finds herself enslaved, she uses the cover of madness to communicate with the angels. An African woman has told Alice “that some angels were hard of hearing, that it was best to speak real loud when talking to them.” When Moses confronts her, Alice thinks, “Maybe if she lifted her arms . . . [the angels] would reward her for all that singing in the past and raise her up up to freedom” (293). But Alice’s escape to freedom will depend upon her own resourcefulness. Alice’s detailed knowledge of the local landscape gives her an advantage over the other slaves. She is prompted, in part by Moses, to attempt a physical escape to freedom. Initially suspicious of Moses’ intentions, Alice finally agrees to flee and take Moses’ family with her. However, when the three escapees cannot be found, Moses is suspected of killing them. Because of Moses’ callous handling of Celeste and the resulting death of baby Lucinda, Caldonia has re-established her authority over him. Realizing that he will not be able to depend upon Caldonia to free him, Moses attempts to escape alone, but unlike Alice, he is “world stupid” and becomes lost.

In his clumsy and misguided attempt to escape, Moses eventually comes upon the homestead of Augustus and Mildred Townsend, which is south, not north, of the Townsend plantation. When the sheriff and his deputy determine his hideout, they come for Moses, and Mildred confronts them carrying a shotgun. Her response to their request for her to “surrender the property” is answered by two words, “no more.” And then, “No more. No more men from here. No more men from anywhere. Not one more” (364). Mildred takes a solitary, courageous stand against the system of slavery—that she perceives has caused the social death and destruction of African-American men—an act that results in her death.
Mildred’s death at the hands of the white sheriff is the culmination of a sequence of events that eventually lead to Moses’ downfall. Indirectly, Moses is responsible for Mildred’s death. Even though he realizes the danger that his presence in her home presents, he seeks refuge there, and Mildred dies in the act of protecting him.

As soon as the shot blew Mildred’s heart to bits, she was immediately standing in that doorway. It was late at night and she had been somewhere she could not remember. She went into the dark house and up the stairs and found the door to Henry’s room open. Caldonia was beside him in the bed and she told Mildred that Henry had had a hard time going to sleep but now he was resting quite well. Henry did not stir as his mother looked down on him and Mildred was grateful for that. She left the room and found Augustus in their bed, also asleep, and she got in and made herself comfortable in his arms. (364)

Mildred’s spirit seeks the unity of her family—Henry resting peacefully in his bed with Caldonia at his side, and she reunited with Augustus. The memory of the world of slavery has fallen away.

In a simulation of the ritual preparations of burial, Moses lays out Mildred’s body on the kitchen table. He covers her with a tablecloth remembering that Mildred “loved a good tablecloth . . . would rather have a good tablecloth over a good quilt any day” (374). He “said some words over her body,” but he cannot remember the details of the funeral service and settles instead for thanking Mildred for helping him (374). As he closes her eyes, he thinks, “A slower death would have given her all the time she needed to lie down and close her own eyes” (374). Moses laments the fact that he cannot provide Mildred a
proper burial; he has not attended to the proper rituals, but he simulates them as well as he can. He realizes that his efforts are not sufficient, “had I only listened, he berated himself” (374). Captured, hobbled, and returned to the plantation, Moses experiences an emotional and physical decline that will characterize the few remaining years of his life as a slave.

Moses’ wife and child, guided by Alice, reach Washington, D.C., where they live as free people of color. Caldonia’s brother encounters them on a trip to the city where they are living and working in an inn that caters to African Americans. After her successful escape, Alice develops as an artist. She creates her vision of the world that she knew during slavery in a pair of wall hangings that depict a God’s eye view of Manchester County and the Townsend plantation. The first wall hanging is the “Creation” as described in a letter from Louis to Caldonia:

A grand piece of art that is part tapestry, part painting, and part clay structure—all in one exquisite Creation, hanging silent and yet songful on the Eastern wall. It is my Dear Caldonia, a kind of map of life of the County of Manchester, Virginia. But a “map” is such a poor word for such a wondrous thing. It is a map of life made with every kind of art man has ever thought to represent himself. Yes, clay. Yes, paint. Yes, cloth. There are no people on this “map,” just all the houses and barns and roads and cemeteries and wells in our Manchester. It is what God sees when He looks down on Manchester. (384)

The artistic composition of Alice’s wall hanging defies categorization. “A map of life,” it contains all the elements of art and life. Not only is it visual art, it is also “songful.”
Louis describes the second wall hanging, as another “Creation,” and again attributes to Alice a kind of divine vision in the creation and placement of all of the natural elements, animals and plants, in the tapestry.

This one is about your home, Caldonia. It is your plantation, and again, it is what God sees when He looks down. There is nothing missing, not a cabin, not a barn, not a chicken, not a horse. Not a single person is missing. I suspect that if I were to count the blades of grass, the number would be correct as it was once when the creator of this work knew that world. (385)

Louis’ admiration grows still further when he contemplates the people of the plantation as Alice has configured them in the landscape.

In this massive miracle on the Western wall, you, Caldonia, are standing before your house with Loretta, Zeddie and Bennett. As I said, all the cabins are there, and standing before them are the people who lived in them . . . Each person’s face, including yours, is raised up as though to look in the very eyes of God . . . The dead in the cemetery have risen from there and they, too, stand at the cabins where they once lived. (386)

Notably, Henry Townsend is the only figure who has been buried and is not “resurrected” in Alice’s tapestry. The world illustrated in Alice’s tapestry represents the pre-colonial African worldview of death as another level of existence beyond the life of the physical body. To Henry Townsend—who has adopted the beliefs and habits of whites through his slave ownership—death and separation from the living is final. Moreover, in the
world of Alice’s tapestry, the social divisions of class and color are no longer represented by the segregated burial ground. The slave cemetery is absent from the landscape:

So the slave cemetery is just plain ground now, grass and nothing else. It is empty, even of the tiniest infants, who rest alive and well in their mother’s arms. In the cemetery where our Henry is buried, he stands by his grave, but that grave is covered with flowers as though he still inhabits it. (386)

Thus Alice’s tapestries, not the cemetery, become the site of memory, the cultural text of the world of the plantation. The process of death and burial that changes the relationships of the people on the plantation is illustrated through the death of Henry Townsend at the beginning of the novel and the demise of the Townsend plantation at the novel’s conclusion. What remains is the vision that Alice captures in her tapestry. From a perspective far beyond that of Henry Townsend or any of the other characters, Alice is able to artistically perceive and capture the complexity and the continuity of life in the plantation world. The plantation is ancestral ground that holds the memories, history, and often the bodies of enslaved family members, and it is a tragic reminder of the physical, emotional, and social degradations endured by those who lived in slavery.
Notes

1 In 1832, the state of Virginia passed a law stating, "No free Negro shall hereafter be capable of acquiring ownership, except by descent, to any slave other than his or her husband, wife or children" (Guild 107). In 1858, the Virginia law was further restricted, "No free Negro shall be capable of acquiring, except by descent, any slave" (Guild 120).

2 The DuBoisian concept of double consciousness is expressed in Henry’s dual role, and that of other free people of color, in their ability to see their status through the eyes of the white dominant society, and at the same time recognize that they are part of, but still apart from, the larger American society. While Henry Townsend responds to the experience of racial inequality by adopting the values of white society, DuBois by contrast says, "Had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me, I should have probably been an unquestioning worshipper at the shrine of the established social order and of the economic development into which I was born" (155).

3 Virginia passed and amended several laws during the 1700s and 1800s that governed the hiring out of slaves. In 1801, the prevailing law stated, "If any person permits his slave, or any slave hired by him, to go at large or hire himself out, the slave may be sold" (Guild 70).

4 John Blassingame acknowledges that while enslaved adults had little authority over their families, they did have the primary responsibility of rearing their children, and thus had an opportunity to instill in them "values different from those their masters tried to instil [sic] in them" (151).

5 Thomas Gray’s wide popularity with nineteenth-century American audiences probably rested in large part upon the reputation of a single poem, "An Elegy in a Country
Churchyard.” Fern Alston, Henry’s tutor, would likely have considered this poem appropriate subject matter for Henry’s education.

6 The WPA narratives contain various descriptions of cooling boards. Robert Shepherd of Georgia described a cooling board for a WPA interviewer: “A coolin' board was made out of a long straight plank raised a little at de head, and had legs fixed to make it set straight.” The use of coffins became prevalent in the United States by the early nineteenth century. In larger towns, a carpenter might offer coffin making as a service to his customers. On larger plantations, an enslaved carpenter might have the responsibility of preparing the coffins, but generally, the enslaved people made the coffins themselves. Elaborate mortuary display, in the form of ornamental coffin hardware, would become common in the later years of the nineteenth century as a sign of wealth and status. Even those of modest means would adopt the practice as a way of enhancing their social status through the costly appearance of the burial. However, in antebellum plantation society, most coffins were constructed simply, with few or no distinctions to indicate social class or status.

7 In a WPA interview at his home in Alabama Sol Webb recalls, “When anyone ceased on the plantation, us all quit work and would set up at night and sing and holler and shout.” When Neal Upson of Georgia was interviewed by the WPA, he stated that “when somebody [died] folks would go from miles and miles around to set up and pray all night to comfort the family.”

8 When asked about slave funerals, Annie Davis of Alabama stated, “They had a regular funeral procession singing hymns along the way.” Arrie Binn of Georgia reported that after the wake, “de next day had de funeral an' when dey started to the burial ground with
the body everybody in the whole procession would sing hymns. I've heard 'em 'nough times clear 'cross the fields, singin' and moanin' as they went."

9 Headstones for the enslaved people would have been unusual except in the case of a highly favored slave.

10 Some slaveholders apparently did not agree with the mollifying influence of funerals on the enslaved persons under their control. William Williams, a WPA interviewee from Ohio, remembers, “No one quit work except relatives and they stopped just long enough to go to the funeral.”

11 Devastated by the sale of his wife and children, Brown paid a white shoemaker to ship him in a box of dry goods to the Philadelphia office of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society.

12 John Lowe suggests that Jones employs another historical incident that parallels the kidnapping of Augustus Townsend with the slave narrative of Solomon Northrup. In 1853, Northrup published *Twelve Years a Slave*, the story of his kidnapping and return to slavery after living a free life in the North.
CHAPTER 6

“Came to Death”: Family, Tradition, and Memory in Alice Walker’s “Burial”

Not for the dead, but for memories. None of them sad. But seen from the angle of her death.

—Alice Walker, “Burial”

In August 1921, Rachel Little married Henry Walker of Eatonton, Georgia, a recently widowed farmer living with his five children on Wards Chapel Road. Less than two months earlier, Walker’s eleven-year old son, Willie Lee, had held his dying mother, Kate Nelson Walker, in his arms, as she lay bleeding on a dirt road near their home. Kate had been shot with a pistol by her spurned lover as she and her son Willie Lee were walking toward home. Kate Nelson Walker was buried in the graveyard of the Wards Chapel A.M.E. Church, the same church where her husband, Henry, and Rachel, the woman who would care for Kate’s motherless children, would soon be joined in a quick marriage of convenience. The violent death of Kate Nelson Walker, Alice Walker’s great-grandmother, is one of several intersecting family stories that form the historical context for Walker’s poem, “Burial.” Walker often uses her personal experiences of living in the South as the foundation for her writing. Thadious Davis proposes that “perhaps Alice Walker alone of her generation of black women Southern writers persistently identifies herself and her concerns with her native region ... in a specified landscape that becomes emblematic of American life” (25). In Walker’s poem, “Burial,”
the "specified landscape" that exemplifies life in Alice Walker's hometown of Eatonton, Georgia, is the graveyard of the Wards Chapel A.M.E. Church.  

In the aftermath of the American Civil War, the Wards Chapel A.M.E. Church was one of many southern congregations that were re-organized by African-American missionaries dispatched from northern African Methodist Episcopal churches. According to Walker's biographer Evelyn White, "a member of a prominent plantation family" in Putnam County, Sarah H. Ward, donated the land and church building to local African Americans in Eatonton, "after the end of slavery." Later, the church, the surrounding community, and the road that separated the church from the church cemetery, all became known as "Wards Chapel" (White 12). Alice Walker's birthplace is less than a mile from the church, and she attended Sunday services and many funerals at Wards Chapel while growing up in the Wards Chapel community. Several generations of the Walker family are buried in the Wards Chapel graveyard along with Kate Nelson Walker. The Wards Chapel graveyard is an integral part of Walker's homeground, and thus it is a part of the landscape of both her geographic and genealogical legacy, a legacy that at times has been filled with strife—internally, within her own family, and externally, against racial and gender discrimination within the broader society. Alice Walker has described the Georgia countryside of her youth, as "beautiful," but her early life was financially impoverished, and despite memories of "neighborly kindness and sustaining love" (In Search of Our Mother's Gardens 21, hereafter referred to as ISMG), the seemingly tranquil landscape of Putnam County, Georgia, did not relieve her general hatred of the racist Southern environment. Born into a sharecropping family—generations of whom toiled in poverty, some of whom had also toiled under the system of American slavery—
Walker acknowledges the dual quality of the southern landscape in its ability to inspire both nostalgia and hatred.3

“Burial” is a tribute to Walker’s southern roots and ancestral heritage. Throughout the poem, Walker interweaves the memories of several generations—the living and the dead—to narrate the history of her family and the Wards Chapel community. In “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience,” Alice Walker emphasizes the significance of her southern upbringing on her writing: “What the black Southern writer inherits as a natural right is a sense of community” (ISMG 17).

Walker recreates this sense of community with the story of Rachel Walker, her step grandmother, who is the focus of “Burial.” The poem was first published in Walker’s 1973 poetry collection, Revolutionary Petunias. “Burial” is one of several poems focusing on Walker’s early memories that are included in the first section of the collection, titled “In These Dissenting Times . . . Surrounding Ground and Autobiography.” This section begins with the text, “To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves, that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps, to God; or to Gods.” Walker’s concept of her duty to her family lineage echoes the Akan saying “God is the Great Ancestor” (Asante and Nwadiora 1). In “Burial,” Walker explores her ancestral heritage and the emotions and memories that she experiences during the funeral of her step grandmother, Rachel Walker, who passed away in 1971.

“Burial,” ninety short lines in length—some of which contain only a single word—is divided into six untitled stanzas, each covering an aspect of memory and history that expresses the poet’s reflections upon the significance of the life and death of
Rachel Walker. Stanza I begins with observations of change and continuity, both in the landscape and in the poet’s perspective. Stanza II emphasizes the importance of generations and traditions. Stanza III highlights gender differences in the traditional context of the funeral service. Stanza IV compares the dreams of youth to the reality of the perspective gained from adulthood. Stanza V ponders the loss of childhood innocence, and Stanza VI concludes the poem from the perspective of death. As a whole, "Burial" depicts the poet’s return to a “sacred ancestral landscape” that allows her to examine the “connection[s] between the living community and the dead,” between the past, the present, and the future (Gilyard and Wardi 4).

Stanza I begins with a past perspective that concedes changes in the landscape while emphasizing the continuity and tradition within the community. The poet notes the altered landscape and the conditions that have changed it since her last visit:

They have fenced in the dirt road
that once led to Wards Chapel
A.M.E. church,
and cows graze
among the stones that mark my family’s graves. (1-6)

The road leading to Walker’s family church has been paved, and a fence now runs alongside it, but the modern road is not necessarily an improvement in the eyes of the poet. In “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience,” Walker writes eloquently about the properties of southern dirt and the physical contact of dirt with bare feet that provokes visceral memories of her childhood home (ISMG 21). Walker laments the encroachment of modern development that has altered the landscape of her youth. The
farmhouses have been razed and replaced by “big ugly” houses like the one where Walker was required to ask permission to view the grave of her great-grandmother, Sally Montgomery Walker. Though she can have no memory of the burial of her great-grandmother, Walker writes of “the simplicity and eerie calm of a black funeral, where the beloved one is buried way in the middle of a wood with nothing to mark the spot but perhaps a wooden cross already coming apart . . .” (ISMG 19). Walker’s descriptive detail is uncannily close to the actual physical landscape in which her great-grandmother’s grave was located. The common practice of placing graves in the existing landscape—without modifying the terrain—along with the use of natural markers such as small trees and shrubs, is characteristic of African American graveyards and burial grounds. In her study of historic African American cemeteries, Lynn Rainville has found that manicured lawn-style green spaces are rare; rather, the focal point of these graveyards and burial grounds is the natural landscape. No doubt, Walker saw many such wooded gravesites in the southern landscape surrounding Wards Chapel. Often lacking grave markers and conventional cemetery topography, the naturally wooded cultural landscapes of rural graveyards and burial grounds are now threatened by changes taking place in the landscape.

In the landscape of the Wards Chapel graveyard, the most prominent “marker” had been an immense oak tree that stood upon the edge of the property for as long as anyone could remember. However, time has affected the oak tree as well. Upon the poet’s return to the gravesite,

The massive oak is gone from out the churchyard,
but the giant space is left
unfilled;
despite the two-lane blacktop
that slides across
the old, unalterable
roots. (7-14)

The familiar sight of the oak tree is absent from the landscape, but the age and
“immortality” of the tree prevents its roots from being altered, even though the new
asphalt road runs over the tree’s deep, extensive root system. According to Anissa
Wardi, who discusses Walker’s poem, “Burial,” in Death and the Arc of Mourning in
African American Literature, “These underground roots that link people, place, and
history give way to gravestones, another family tree” in the landscape (161). The
absence of the massive oak represents the threat to the still largely unrecognized legacy
of African-American history and communities, a legacy that cannot be replaced because
the space that it takes up is too vast, so that the “giant space is left unfilled” (9-10), thus
the cultural reminder of the oak is absent, yet still present. Wardi interprets the oak’s
death as a personification of the profound “sense of loss and change” (161) that the poet
experiences upon viewing the dramatic transformation in the landscape of her home. The
oak, however, is also a symbol of strength, and though it has been cut down, the source of
that strength—the roots that symbolize the undying source of the community’s history
and heritage—remains. The memories of the community also remain. In “The Black
Writer and the Southern Experience,” Walker writes, “In one’s memory, there remain all
the rituals of one’s growing up: the warmth and vividness of Sunday worship (never mind that you never quite believed) in a little church hidden from the road . . .” (ISMG 18).

The “old unalterable roots” also refer to the Walker family’s heritage and its deep connection to the community and its “little church.” The ties that bind the members of the family and the community run deep and can never be obliterated by the passage of time or the selling of the surrounding land. Today, the Piedmont Scenic Byway ties together miles of former farm holdings now occupied by several new housing developments around Eatonton. Yet, the roots of Alice Walker’s community of Wards Chapel remain, and several sites of memory for the Walker family have been designated as historic sites on the scenic byway—the Wards Chapel A.M.E. Church, the Wards Chapel Cemetery, and Alice Walker’s birthplace. Travis Hicks, a landscape artist and a resident of the Wards Chapel community, has undertaken the task of documenting the vanishing countryside of Eatonton in his paintings. In May 2000, Hicks painted the Wards Chapel A.M.E. church as a gift for Alice’s sister, Ruth Walker Hood. In Hicks’ painting, the aged church, though weather beaten and dilapidated, retains the pastoral charm evident in many rural Southern landscapes, but the idyllic scene belies the horrific destruction by fire of the original church structure in 1919, an act of terrorism thought to have been orchestrated by the Ku Klux Klan. Like the oak tree—absent, yet still present—in the cultural landscape of the reconstructed church, the event is recorded in the memories passed from generation to generation.

In an act that illustrates the continuity of sustaining tradition and memory through the generations, the poet brings her child to the cemetery with her. In Stanza II, several generations are represented—the poet’s great-grandmother, who already lies buried in
the Wards Chapel cemetery (16-17), her grandfather, Henry, who is burying his second wife, Rachel, that day, and the poet’s father Willie Lee: 9

Today I bring my own child here;

to this place where my father’s grandmother rests undisturbed

beneath the Georgia sun,

above her the neatstepping hooves

of cattle. (15-20)

Ikenna Dieke likens the tone of this passage in “Burial” to Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” but she misreads Walker’s intent when she interprets Walker’s state of mind as “grieving” and “distraught,” resulting from being alone in her mourning over the “neglect and desolation” of the church graveyard (199). Rather, this stanza reinforces the peacefulness of the place: “My father’s grandmother rests undisturbed” (17-18). The cows grazing among the headstones has been interpreted by Dieke as a desecration—representing neglect—however, the tone of the poem is serene, and the grazing cows with their “neatstepping hooves” (19) are an established part of the bucolic landscape. Though generations of the dead lie buried in the graveyard, the changes that have occurred have not disturbed them. Dieke also ignores the fact that the poet has taken the opportunity of a family funeral to pass along the family’s heritage to her own child who accompanies her to the burial ground. The graveyard is not a desolate, forgotten place; it is a cultural repository for the Walker family’s heritage.
While the dead may lie quietly in their graves, undisturbed by the changes of time, the landscape—and the graves within the landscape—are depicted as active and ever changing:

Here the graves soon grow back into the land.

Have been known to sink. To drop open without warning. To cover themselves with wild ivy,
blackberries. Bittersweet and sage.

No one knows why. No one asks. (21-25)

The poet describes the graves as “grow[ing]” (21) back into the land as they are reabsorbed and return to the landscape. They “drop open” (22) unexpectedly—apparently without human intervention—also a part of the process of returning to the landscape. Anissa Wardi says that Walker’s use of “these powerful verbs [grow, sink, drop, cover] suggests that the genealogical trees—oak roots and ancestral graves—are viable entities linking the living to the dead” (161). Indeed, if generations of elapsed time could be telescoped, the graves would in fact appear to be moving, seemingly seeking a way to reintegrate their manmade structures with the soil of the landscape.

In the process of returning to the landscape, the graves “cover” themselves with rich vegetation filled with the symbolic powers of the flora kingdom. Apparently, the old knowledge of the associations and properties of the graveyard plants has been forgotten or lost because the poet tells us: “No one knows why. No one asks” (24), but significantly, all of the plants that grow to shroud the graves possess symbolic powers associated with protection, healing or long life—wild ivy, blackberries, bittersweet and sage. Ivy is a plant whose evergreen qualities suggest immortality, and for its ability to
cling, it represents true love and friendship. It also offers protection and healing. Ivy is often found in late-nineteenth-century cemeteries, like Wards Chapel, where it covers graves—and graveyard trees. The “massive oak” that once towered over the graves in the Wards Chapel cemetery was probably covered in ivy as well. Only the eventual death and removal of the oak tree would have disrupted the ivy that had clung to it.

Blackberries and bittersweet also grow over and among the graves in the Wards Chapel cemetery. These plants are used in traditional herbal medicines for protection and healing. Sage represents immortality, or longevity, and protection. When crushed underfoot, the sage releases its strong, pungent odor into the air as if in a protective cloud.

On the traditional “Burning Off Day” (26), the Wards Chapel community gathers to clear the graves “haphazardly,” killing and burning the vegetation—and any snakes they encounter—that have taken refuge in the natural undergrowth:

When Burning Off Day comes, as it does some years,
the graves are haphazardly cleared and snakes hacked to death and burned sizzling in the brush . . . The odor of smoke, oak leaves, honeysuckle. (26-31)

Burning Off Day comes unpredictably, though the poet does not indicate how the members of the church community know when, or how, to perform this task. Because “no one asks,” the symbols of protection and healing are destroyed—along with the snakes—by the local residents who come to clean up the cemetery (25). Although Wardi
suggests that the snakes in “Burial” are phallic symbols, and that the violent hacking and burning represents the lynching of African-American men (186), a less sinister cultural interpretation can be made based upon the prevalence of snakes in wooded landscapes and the symbolic associations of snakes throughout history. Secretive by nature, many snakes spend most of their time underground or under cover. Because of these habits, among some ancient civilizations the snake was considered a symbol of “the underworld and the realm of the dead;” they were also seen as "guardians of the treasures of the earth" (Biedermann 310). The ancient symbolic meanings provide an appropriate analogy for snakes found in the cultural landscape of graveyards and burial grounds.

Current preservation wisdom—which discourages the practice of burning off a cemetery—recommends protecting and preserving the historic and natural elements of the cemetery’s cultural landscape. Honeysuckle, another natural element of the landscape, adds fragrance to the smoke that rises from the graveyard fires of the Wards Chapel cemetery, “The odor of smoke, oak / leaves, honeysuckle” (30-31). This fragrant clinging vine symbolizes the bonds of love. The fact that “no one asks” (25) does not indicate a lack of concern or love for the deceased; rather, as Wardi claims, this attitude represents a type of benign resignation, “an acceptance that the grave is part of the terrain and . . . should return to the land” (161). Modern notions of preservation are flawed by ignorance of the characteristics and traditions associated with African-American cemetery landscapes, like the Wards Chapel cemetery. Well-intentioned, though sometimes misguided, efforts are often made to sanitize the landscape by removing its natural and cultural elements. Sometimes even grave markers and decorations—that may appear to the culturally unaware as “garbage”—are removed. As the poet relates, “no
one knows why” the graves drop open without warning, but burning off a cemetery is a harmful practice that has already reshaped the landscape of the Wards Chapel graveyard (24). The destruction of the natural vegetation has destabilized the landscape, causing the graves to collapse.

In contrast with the acceptance of some African-American communities, such as Wards Chapel, regarding the natural and traditional processes that reshape the cultural landscape of the graveyard, the “desolation” that Dieke perceives in Walker’s description of the Wards Chapel cemetery is typical of a Euro-American sensibility regarding the acceptable appearance of burial grounds (199). With its infrequent maintenance, and the organic nature of the graves returning to the earth, the appearance of the Wards Chapel graveyard is characteristic of many rural African-American church cemeteries. By contrast, Walker’s search for the grave of her literary foremother—author Zora Neale Hurston—took place in a weedy, unkempt cemetery, unfittingly named the Garden of Heavenly Rest, where she says, the “neglect [was] staggering,” conflicting dramatically with her cultural acceptance of the “haphazard cemetery-keeping that is traditional in most Southern black communities” (ISMG 104). This is an important distinction. To culturally unaware eyes, an African-American cemetery that has developed within the natural landscape and a formally landscaped cemetery that has fallen into disrepair might appear to be the same—simply illustrating neglect of different proportions—but as stated previously, this is not the case.

Walker’s discovery of Hurston’s grave—she literally falls into it—also provides autobiographical material for a passage in The Color Purple in which Celie and Shug “locate” the graves of Celie’s parents: “By the time us go to the cemetery, the sky gray.
Us look for Ma and Pa. Hope for some scrap of wood that say something. But us don’t find nothing but weeds and cockleburs and paper flowers fading on some of the graves” (182). Celie’s parents lie buried among the same uncharacteristic graveyard weeds of “dis-memory” in which Walker finds Zora’s grave hidden. Undaunted, Celie and Shug locate and mark the graves with a giddy ceremonial dance: “Shug picked up an old horseshoe somebody horse lose. Us took that old horseshoe and us turned round and round together until we were dizzy enough to fall out, and where us would have fell us stuck the horseshoe in the ground” (183).

The Wards Chapel churchyard in Eatonton, the Garden of Heavenly Rest in Ft. Pierce, and the fictional cemetery where Celie’s parents lie buried, all represent ties to the past that bind the young to their homeground and the elders—despite the distances of time and geography.10 As illustrated in “Burial,” Walker’s writing most often focuses keenly on her “homeground” and the legacy of family and community. As Robert James Butler notes, a “sense of place and continuity with the past” suffuses the landscapes in Walker’s work (99). The graveyards, especially, serve to illustrate continuity with the past and the place where generations of family members have lived and died. Thadious M. Davis observes that Walker “returns to her roots in order to regenerate herself and to comprehend the pervasive impact of social environment” (31). The graveyard functions as the “root” of tradition situated in the social landscape of funeral rituals and other acts of remembrance. It reinforces the history and strength of family connections—between the living and the dead—which are spiritually beneficial to the living.

The tradition of returning home to bury the dead prompts the return of the youth to homeground, if only temporarily. The poet refers to the “old dead (34),” the elders
who have lived and died on the land, in contrast to the “farflung young” (33), the younger generations who have moved far away. The historical migration of African Americans from the South to the North provides a common theme in African-American literature, and Walker’s analogy of migrating birds in lines 32 and 33 implies that the members of the younger generation of the Wards Chapel community have fled North:

Forgetful of geographic resolutions as birds,

The farflung young fly south to bury

The old dead. (32-34)

The young may experience some feelings of wistfulness for the South as homeground, as Walker herself has suggested, but they eventually return to their own distant homes leaving behind promises to return—but only to bury “the old dead” (34). As Karen Holloway has suggested in Moorings and Metaphors, the cultural landscape of the graveyard is a cultural mooring for the displaced young and a spiritual metaphor for the ancestral dead that they leave behind in the southern landscape (1-2). In “Burial,” the cemetery functions as a cultural mooring for the young in the Wards Chapel community in their migratory flight from and temporary return to their homeground.

Leaving home and returning home are also analogies for the rituals of death and burial. The funeral scene in Stanza III is reminiscent of the ritualized leave takings in Edward P. Jones’ The Known World. In the novel, the narrative refrain, “I’ll see you bye and bye,” is spoken upon parting by those who do not expect to see each other again until they meet after death. In “Burial,” during Rachel’s homegoing service, the elderly women participate in the ritual of speaking to the deceased Rachel. They address Rachel
directly and reverentially touch her body, an African-inspired ritual that is respectful and at the same time intended to convey a last message.\textsuperscript{11}

The old women move quietly up
and touch Sis Rachel’s face.

“Tell Jesus I’m coming,” they say.

‘Tell Him I ain’t goin’ to be
long.” (35-39)

The women use this traditional act to convey messages to Jesus through Rachel, illustrating the blending of African and Christian beliefs. The elderly women emphasize through the italicized “be,” an acknowledgement of their own age and mortality, and perhaps even the anticipation of relief at the thought of heavenly rest.

The men attending the funeral, neither the old nor the young, take part in the leave-taking ceremony.\textsuperscript{12} Often unseen or obliquely referenced, male characters in Alice Walker’s writings have been characterized by their emotional distance from the women in their lives. Louis H. Pratt refers to this practice as Walker’s “penchant for portraying her men indirectly,” and he observes that “many never speak; they are presented to the reader through the eyes of another person—usually a woman” (7). In “Burial,” Walker presents various details to describe Rachel’s husband, Henry Walker:

My grandfather turns his creaking head

Away from the lavender box.

He does not cry. But looks afraid.

For years he called her “Woman;”
Shortened over the decades to

"Oman." (40-45)

Stanza III focuses on Henry Walker—but only from the poet’s perspective. Walker describes the turning of her grandfather’s “creaking head,” (40)—a reference to his advancing age—“away,” from the grandmother’s coffin (41). His action of turning away is apparently not prompted by grief, but rather by an emotion that Walker describes as fear—“he looks afraid” (42). Upon the death of Rachel, Henry Walker would probably experience fears and concerns similar to those that he felt upon the death of his first wife. Though Henry would no longer be taxed with the responsibility of rearing children, he would need to deal with household chores and the potential loneliness of single life. Now that she is gone, perhaps Henry realizes that the loss of his wife will cause his life to change in uncomfortable ways. Another detail that provides a possible key to understanding Henry and Rachel’s relationship is Henry’s use of the gruff, impersonal appellation “Woman” when he refers to Rachel. From Henry’s perspective, this could perhaps be intended as a term of endearment, but more likely—considering Walker’s less than flattering comments regarding her grandfather’s demeanor—it is an indication of the early lack of intimacy between Henry and his wife in their marriage of convenience. In fact, Walker has indicated that her step grandmother received little affection from her husband, and the poem’s reference to “Saturday night battles” might be interpreted as indications of routine abuse in the Walker household (21). However, as Rachel Walker is the acknowledged inspiration for the character of Celie, the protagonist in Walker’s novel, *The Color Purple*, this passage might also be read with a more generous interpretation of Henry’s behavior, as Walker has also indicated that her grandfather’s
conduct became more tractable with age. In the conclusion of *The Color Purple*, Celie and Mr. _____ create a companionable existence that apparently is a comfort to them both. Perhaps in their declining years, Rachel and Henry Walker have achieved this comfort in their own relationship, despite their hasty marriage of convenience. This may explain the look of fear on his face... she has suddenly left him alone.

Walker goes on to reveal other details that describe her grandfather’s character and his relationship with her grandmother:

> On the cut stone for “‘Oman’s’ grave
> He did not notice
> They had misspelled her name.
> (The stone reads *Racher* Walker – not “Rachel” –)
> *Loving Wife, Devoted Mother.* (47-50)

The impersonal nature of her grandfather’s manner of addressing his wife denies her individuality and confirms her status as a replacement wife—necessary only because of Henry Walker’s need for someone to care for his household and children. Rachel has been the nameless, replaceable “woman” in their relationship. It also implies a distance between the couple that is reinforced by his failure to see that his wife’s name has been misspelled on her gravestone. The importance of recalling names in maintaining cultural connections and the continuity of family history has been emphasized in Chapter 4.13 “‘Oman’s” nameless state robs her of a personal history; she is defined simply by her role in Henry Walker’s household. “Burial” is Walker’s attempt to provide Rachel with a history of her own.
Rachel’s married life was full, if not of love, then at least full of the everyday
demands that serve to fill a life. In Section IV, Walker, in essence, performs a eulogy for
Rachel. The poet questions, “As a young woman, who had known her?”—as if asking
for those who knew her step grandmother to come forward and testify to the life of young
Rachel:

   As a young woman, who had known her? Tripping
eagerly, “loving wife,” to my grandfather’s
bed. Not pretty, but serviceable. A hard
worker, with rough, moist hands. Her own two
babies dead before she came. (51-55)

The first section of Stanza IV reveals a little of Rachel’s life before her marriage to Henry
Walker. She is not considered an attractive young woman, but her lack of physical
beauty is compensated by her willingness to perform hard work, and she has the
roughened hands to prove her worth. In Walker’s poem, “Women,” which also appears
in the first section of Revolutionary Petunias with “Burial,” the women that Walker
remembers were decidedly strong—like Rachel—though apparently they, too, were not
pretty or especially feminine in a conventional way. Rather, they were,

   Husky of voice—Stout of
Step
With fists as well as
Hands (3 -6)

While the poet does not show Rachel’s “fists” in the poem, nor describe a transformation
in Rachel’s thinking or life that would mark her liberation from her primary role of
domestic servitude, Walker does offer documentation that Rachel Little Walker, the nameless wife, possessed a life before becoming Henry Walker’s “Woman.” According to the 1900 Census, Rachel Little was born in 1898 to James and Mattie L. Little.14 Rachel’s father James apparently died in the early 1900s, and Rachel’s mother Mattie married for the second time to Albert Walker, Alice’s great-grandfather. The 1910 Census lists Albert Walker with his wife, the former Mattie L. Little, and seven children, including three stepdaughters—Rachel, Mandy, and Kattie, the daughters of James Little. By 1920, census records indicate that Albert Walker’s blended family was living on Wards Chapel Road two households away from Henry, his son, and Kate Nelson Walker (Alice’s grandparents). The following year, Kate Nelson Walker would die a violent death. Evelyn White, in her biography of Alice Walker, describes the events following Kate Nelson Walker’s death that would suddenly, and unexpectedly, affect Rachel Little’s future:

As a widower with five children, the oldest of whom was eleven-year-old Willie Lee, Henry Walker was eager to find another woman to manage his household . . . According to Ruth [Alice’s sister], her grandfather [Henry] approached a neighbor who had several daughters, hoping that he could hire one of them to cook, clean, and take care of the children. (19)

Apparently, the “neighbor” in Ruth Walker’s family story—who would suggest that Henry Walker marry his “daughter” to keep house for him—was actually Henry’s father, Albert Walker. According to Ruth, Albert Walker had described his stepdaughter, as “smart, a hard worker,” but Ruth admits that all concerned considered the union “strictly a marriage of convenience” (20). The epitaph on Rachel Walker’s stone, “Loving Wife,
“Devoted Mother” is counterbalanced with a blunter version of truth in Walker’s poem—“not pretty, but serviceable” (53). Like Celie in The Color Purple, Rachel is a replacement wife, chosen for her services as a household manager rather than for love. Whether, like Celie, Rachel also suffered abuse from her stepfather prior to her marriage to Henry Walker is not documented. In addition, according to Ruth Walker Hood, Henry Walker’s philandering ways were public knowledge, and his true love was Estella “Shug” Perry, a “loose” woman of whom his parents did not approve. (Shug Perry is the prototype for the singer Shug Avery in The Color Purple.) Years earlier, Albert Walker had encouraged his son to marry Kate Nelson, rather than the flamboyant Shug. Thus, for the second time, Albert Walker would choose a wife for his son Henry. First, a loveless marriage to Kate, then a second marriage of convenience to Rachel, prevented Henry from pursuing Shug—though he fathered two children with her. Louis H. Pratt surmises, “The men in Walker’s fiction are so miserable because there is an absence of love in their lives which leads them to abuse their wives and children” (10). While Pratt’s assessment is based on Walker’s fictional men, it has also been applied to the real men in Walker’s life. She has described both her grandfathers as brutal men who "mellowed” as they aged.

In addition to Walker’s memories of her family members, historical records provide additional evidence of Rachel’s life. Though the details gleaned from census records indicate just how closely Rachel’s story matches Celie’s, the similarities are not as readily apparent in White’s 2004 biography of Alice Walker. The family tree illustrated in the front matter of the book lists Rachel Little only as “Rachel,” with no surname—a startling similarity to the circumstances of Rachel’s married life in which she
was also denied her proper name. The family tree includes the dates of Rachel’s birth and death but not the names of her parents. Though Rachel’s first and apparently only marriage is to Henry Walker, the poem indicates that, “before she came,” Rachel had given birth to two children of her own who had died. This is another parallel to the character Celie, who believed that her two children, the result of repeated sexual abuse by her stepfather, were dead—instead they had been “given away” by her stepfather. It is unclear to what degree the circumstances of Rachel’s life were changed upon leaving her stepfather’s house for marriage to Henry Walker, but the litany of life’s chores listed in Stanza IV can be read as suggestive of the hard work and struggle of her life after marriage. Upon entering into marriage, Rachel “came to” a life full of children, housework and fieldwork. Walker’s italics in the following lines emphasize the rhythm of the exacting physical labor of Rachel’s days as Henry Walker’s “Woman”:

_Came to seven children._

_To aprons and sweat._

_Came to quilmaking._

_Came to canning and vegetable gardens_  
big as fields.

_Came to fields to plow._

_Cotton to chop._

_Potatoes to dig._ (56-63)

The difficulty and drudgery of Rachel’s life was harshened by the uncertain nature of the sharecroppers’ lifestyle, but the details of Rachel’s life remained unchanged, no matter where the family made their home. Often changing residences from year to year,
sharecropping families continued to move from farm to farm in an effort to find a better situation. The following lines also reveal the passage of time, and the family’s movement from farm to farm, through use of the words “multiple,” (64) and the plural, “houses” (67). The dilapidated condition of the “leaning” (67) houses and the lack of a well for drawing water indicate that perhaps Rachel’s situation is worse than before her marriage:

_Came to multiple measles, chickenpox,
and croup._

_Came to water from springs._

_Came to leaning houses one story high._ (64-67)

Lines 68 through 71 reveal the small intimacies of Rachel’s married life, the passion of “rivalries,” (64) with unspecified foes—though likely they are the women that Henry Walker continued to pursue, despite his marriage. The battles Rachel endured with her husband on Saturday nights were just another weekly occurrence that was as expected and accepted as preparing for Church services on Sunday:

_Came to rivalries. Saturday night battles._

_Came to straightened hair, Noxzema, and Feet washing at the Hardshell Baptist church._

_Came to zinnias around the woodpile._

_Came to grandchildren not of her blood Whom she taught to dip snuff without Sneeze._ (68-74)

The only mention of natural beauty in this section of the poem is a stand of zinnias growing “around the woodpile,” an illustration of the pitiable lack of beauty in Rachel
Walker’s life (71). In her essay, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” Walker has eloquently celebrated the beauty of her mother’s “ambitious gardens” in contrast to the typical “straggly country stands of zinnias,” that probably more accurately describes the flowers that her grandmother Rachel “came to” in her marriage (ISMG 214). Appropriately, zinnias are also symbols of absence and sorrow. The members of Henry Walker’s household would have been deeply affected by Kate’s absence, and the children, especially Willie Lee, apparently suffered much sorrow over her loss. Despite the hardship of Rachel’s life, there is evidence that she succeeds in creating a degree of harmony and comfort for her adopted family. Rachel’s life included caring for Kate’s grieving children, and later, as a step grandmother, caring for the children of those children, who were—and yet who were not—her own. Like the characters, Celie and Shug, in *The Color Purple*, Rachel does not bear and nurture her own children. As Bell Hooks suggests, in *The Color Purple* Walker has “revision[ed] mothering so that it becomes a task any willing female can perform” (227). In “Burial,” by positioning motherhood in the same manner, Walker casts Rachel’s sudden immersion into the role of mother as a wholehearted act of love and compassion. As a spiritual sister to the deceased Kate, Rachel symbolically joins her in the act of caring for “their” children, and later, grandchildren. Even the simple, traditional practice of dipping snuff, that the poet recalls Rachel passes along to her grandchildren, is an example of the continuity and stability that Rachel’s presence has brought to the Walker family. Rachel Walker “came to” love the children in her care and nurtured them as her own, and they came to love and respect her, though Willie Lee, Alice’s father, would always refer to her as “Miss Rachel” and never “mama” (White 20).
The repetition of the phrase, "Come to" in lines 56-72 conveys the fact that not only has Rachel Walker entered a life filled with an unrelenting list of household chores, but the list in Stanza IV also chronicles her accomplishments in life, concluding with her final act, as she "came to death" (75). The poet uses a blank line to create a visual separation between the lines of the poem detailing the litany of Rachel’s chores and responsibilities and the blankness that characterizes the description of her death:

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_Came to death blank, forgetful of it all._

_When he called her "‘Oman” she no longer listened. Or heard, or knew, or felt._ (75-77).

In death, Rachel becomes a blank slate, unmarked by the passage of time—neither by the harshness, nor by the fullness of life. The name Henry Walker called her—not her name—does not conjure her from the dead, nor does it provide the appropriate ritual of respect for a deceased loved one. According to the pre-colonial African worldview, Rachel’s spirit inhabits a different plane of existence after her death, but her name must be remembered by those who knew her if she is to survive as an ancestor. The ‘Oman that Henry Walker knew is gone, but Rachel is named and will continue to exist in the tribute that Walker pays to her in “Burial.”

The poem continues with the poet’s reverie in Stanza V that focuses on Walker’s early memories and the nostalgia associated with the lost innocence of childhood—both Rachel Walker’s and her own. Walker insists that she is not "nostalgic for lost poverty,” but she recognizes the “solidarity and sharing” that a “modest existence can sometimes
bring” (ISMG 17). The poet recognizes that her grief is larger than her own life and that it encompasses the memories of the lives and losses of those who have lived before her.

It is not until I see my first-grade teacher
review her body that I cry.
Not for the dead, but for the gray in my first-grade teacher’s hair. For memories Of before I was born, when teacher and grandmother loved each other; and later (78-83)

Walker connects these feelings to the past in a way that also connects her to the ancestors, as she recalls and grieves “For memories / Of before I was born” (81-82). She mourns the memories of the past—a time that she has not experienced, but that she can imagine. She mourns for her grandmother’s lost youth and the memories of love and support that Rachel received from a faithful friend—love and support that Rachel may not have experienced in her adult life. The poet recalls her own experience of emotional bonding with her grandmother’s friend, who was also Walker’s first-grade teacher.

Susan Willis notes, “The strength of Alice Walker’s writing derives from the author’s inexorable recognition of her place in history; the sensitivity of her work, from her profound sense of community; its beauty from her commitment to the future” (81).

Walker recognizes her role in preserving the history of her family and the heritage of her community. In “Burial,” she creates a sensitive portrait of her step grandmother’s life that acknowledges not only the older woman’s existence but also defines her contribution to the family’s heritage and continuity.
In the lives of the loved ones she has left behind, Rachel Walker’s influence continues to be felt by the young and the old. The poet is the connection between the past and the present, as represented by her relationship with her step grandmother’s friend and Walker’s first teacher, Birdie Reynolds, who “lived down the road from the Walkers” (White 13). The poet recalls the guiding hand of her teacher:

above the ducks made of soap and the orange-legged chicks Miss Reynolds drew over
my own small hand
on paper with wide blue lines. (84-87)

It is Alice’s memory of the woman who first opened the world of books and writing to her that moves her to tears. The passage of time reflected in the teacher’s gray hair reminds her of the gray in her grandmother’s hair. Walker also acknowledges the deep significance of the relationship between her teacher and her grandmother with the phrase, “the two loved each other” (83). The poet cries not for her grandmother but for the memories represented by the living who embody the past:

Not for the dead, but for memories. None of
Them sad. But seen from the angle of her
Death. (88-90)

Walker’s poem ends with the recognition that the dead are not the focus of her tears or longing, and that the emotion that she is experiencing is not sadness. Rachel Walker’s death provides perspective for the poet’s act of looking back upon the landscape and the people that she knew. She is older and now realizes that the memories of her childhood are a significant part of her life. Her self-perception is further awakened by the
acknowledgement of her “generational ties to the land” (Davis 31). Though Walker criticizes “Burial” as merely a “photograph” that does not “creat[e] a new way of seeing,” the poem vividly captures the cultural history and the continuity of the African-American community in which Walker was nurtured (ISMG 271). Specifically, it highlights the significance of the cultural landscape in the ancestral community, and like Harriet Jacob’s Providence,15 the Wards Chapel A.M.E. Church and cemetery provide a central focus for its African-American residents. Participation in the ritual cleaning of the graves, and ongoing burials in the graveyard, strengthen community, family, and ancestral ties between the elder residents and their “farflung youth” (34). Family and community become the important link between the past and the present, and the life of Rachel Walker illustrates the continuity of family, tradition, and memory in Alice Walker’s ancestral heritage.
Notes

1 A New York Times article dated May 29, 1919, “Negro Churches Burned: Georgians Seek Arrest of Supposed Revivers of Ku Klux Klan,” reported that Wards Chapel “was over one hundred years old.” Local authorities believed that members of the Ku Klux Klan burned the church along with four other Putnam County African American churches, two African American schools, and a lodge building.

2 In a poem entitled “You Had to Go to Funerals,” Walker notes the importance of community wide attendance at funerals: “Even if you didn’t know the people / Your Mama always did / Usually your Pa.” (Revolutionary Petunias 7).

3 The plantation environment of The Known World occupies a similar position—that of a “problematic” site of memory for the descendants of enslaved African Americans.

4 In 2004, members of the Walker family rediscovered the location of the grave of Sally Montgomery Walker (Speech). In a journey similar to the one that the poet undertakes in “Burial,” Walker’s trip home to place flowers at her great-grandmother’s grave is another “ritual of return to landscapes of the dead” (Wardi 160). Sally Montgomery Walker’s gravesite is not in the burial ground of the Wards Chapel churchyard. It is located on a piece of property (likely a parcel of the former Montgomery plantation) that is now accessible only through one of the new subdivisions in the Eatonton area. A photo of the gravesite, included by Evelyn White in Alice Walker: A Life, shows a sharply canted stone, almost completely dislodged from its badly tilting base. The obstacles that Walker encounters when visiting the grave of her great-grandmother echo the world of her enslaved ancestors whose lives, as property, were controlled by slaveholders. Walker says, “Now this part of where I grew up is like so much of the world. It’s being
completely overrun by rich white people. So in order to get to this grave, we had to ask permission of these white people (Speech).”

5 The prevalence of trees and the African cultural associations of oaks, in particular, in African and African American graveyards has been discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 2, the Day family graveyard is surrounded by a circle of oaks. The retention of the practice of planting trees in the graveyard is traced to Bakongo tradition.

6 Alice Walker’s birthplace was torn down many years ago. The land is now the site of an upscale housing development and golf course. Signs erected on the Piedmont Scenic Byway in November 2007 mark her childhood church and family cemetery, a childhood home, her birthplace and the home where her mother was born.


8 Walker may be referring to her great-grandmother, Sally Montgomery Walker, whose gravesite the family might have assumed was in the Wards Chapel Cemetery at the time “Burial” was written. Kate Nelson Walker’s father is identified on her death certificate as Thomas Nelson. The identity of her mother is unknown by the informant, Wiley Little. In the 1910 Census, nine-year-old Kate Nelson is living with her widowed grandfather, Pheriby Harrison.

9 Walker’s father, Willie Lee Walker, who died in 1973, and her mother, Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker, who died in 1994, are both now interred in the Wards Chapel cemetery.

10 Walker placed the marker at Zora Neale Hurston’s grave in 1973.

11 Informants interviewed in the WPA Project that produced Drums and Shadows, reported that placing hands on the corpse was a part of the funeral service, to say a final
goodbye to the deceased and pass on a last message. It was considered bad luck not to do it (113).

12 In her poem, “The Old Men Used to Sing,” Walker describes her memories of the participation of men in funerals and recalls, “The old men used to sing / And lifted a brother / Carefully / Out the door / I used to think they / Were born / Knowing how to / Gently swing / A casket” (Revolutionary Petunias 3).

13 In Chapter 4, Stamford, an aging enslaved man, struggles to remember the names of his parents in an effort to banish his sense of rootlessness and the fear of a lonely death.

14 In the 1900 Census, Rachel’s sister Mandy is listed with the same birth month and date, December 1898, but in the 1910 census, Rachel is listed as 11 and Mandy, 10.

15 See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the significance of the Providence church and burial ground in Harriet Jacob’s life.
CHAPTER 7
The Dead Are Not Dead

On October 5, 2007, the New York African Burial Ground National Monument was formally dedicated and opened to the public. Designed as a place of reflection, the memorial commemorates more than 15,000 Africans who were interred from 1612 to 1794 in the “Negro Burying Ground” of Lower Manhattan. The one-third block space that the memorial occupies is the only tangible evidence of the nearly seven-acre original burial ground. In a series of celebratory events that echoed African funeral rites, those in attendance performed the rituals of ancestor reverence that had been neglected since the early nineteenth century when the burial ground was covered over and forgotten: a ceremonial torch was carried from the Statue of Liberty to light the monument for the first time; hundreds marched in a candlelight procession from Battery Park to Foley Square; and traditional African music, songs, and dances were performed to honor the ancestors. At the opening ceremony, Dennis Reidenbach, Northeast Regional Director of the National Park Service, emphasized the significance of the memorial and the need for interpretation of the burial site: “We must tell the stories of all Americans and the burial ground is a place where we reach into the past and have an opportunity to touch the future by telling the stories of the Africans who worked to make New York City and the nation strong” (U. S. Department of the Interior).

Reidenbach’s words echo the meaning of the Adinkra symbol, Sankofa, which was chosen as an icon for the African Burial Ground Project. Sankofa literally means,
“To go back and get.” It is interpreted by Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima, producer of the 1993 film, “Sankofa,” as returning to one’s roots to "reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we understand why and how we came to be who we are today.” In the same way, the purpose of this study has been to examine “the roots” in the cultural landscape of graveyards and burial grounds—to discover how African-American writers have attempted to recapture and reclaim the cultural history and memories associated with these ancestral landscapes. Like the New York African Burial Ground, the cultural landscapes analyzed in this study retain a traceable African influence that persists in the cultural history and memory of the descendents of Africans in America.

In addition to the Sankofa symbol, the poem “Spirits” by the Senegalese poet and storyteller Birago Diop is included in the interpretive material designed for the African Burial Ground memorial. The following lines are excerpted from Diop’s poem:

Those who are dead are never gone:
they are there in the thickening shadow.
The dead are not under the earth:
they are in the tree that rustles,
they are in the wood that groans,
they are in the water that runs,
they are in the water that sleeps,
they are in the hut, they are in the crowd,
the dead are not dead.

Diop’s verses capture the essence of the pre-colonial African worldview of death.

Various African cultures—Yoruba, Ashanti, Bakongo, among others—practice rituals
and perpetuate cultural beliefs related to the veneration of the dead. As shown in this study, African-American writers have documented the persistence of the pre-colonial African worldview of death that survived in the rituals of death and burial practiced by nineteenth-century African Americans. In a more limited context, some of these practices naturally continue today. However, for cultural celebrations such as the commemoration of the African Burial Ground National Monument, African-inspired rituals are reconstructed and consciously practiced for the purpose of revitalizing cultural connections to the past. African-American literature that focuses on African cultural retentions serves this same purpose—to revitalize and reconnect African Americans with their cultural history and memory.

The desire of African-American writers to recover the lost history of Africans in America—along with the need to acknowledge the continuing influence of the African ancestral legacy in America—is vividly illustrated in the design of the New York African Burial Ground National Monument, which blends African and American elements in its construction. A map of Africa occupies the center of the monument with radiating spirals that connect the continent to Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean. A twenty-five foot high ancestral chamber echoes “the door of no return” which led from Africa to slavery in America. Rodney Léon, the designer of the memorial, expresses the significance of the burial ground as a site of memory for acknowledging and accessing the spirit of the ancestors. He explains the inspiration for his design: “Their story began in Africa, and the origin of my design was born there too. By traveling to Africa and incorporating the shapes and forms, as well as the essence of the culture and people, I have created a living memorial to the ancestors and their stories” (“Rodney Leon”).
The New York African Burial Ground memorial provides a means of capturing and telling the stories of the ancestors in a manner similar to the perpetuation of African-American history and memory in the writings of African-American authors. This study has examined the writings of several African-American authors—Harriet Jacobs, Gloria Naylor, David Bradley, Edward P. Jones, and Alice Walker—who have incorporated the cultural landscapes of ancestral graveyards and burial grounds into literary settings. Historic cemeteries, like the New York African Burial Ground, were included in the study as appropriate historical contexts designed to enhance the literary analysis and interpretation. When African and African-American practices and beliefs concerning death and dying were also examined, the connections between history, memory and culture in African-American literature became readily apparent in the writers' literary depictions of the cultural landscapes of graveyards and burial grounds. A strong sense of community—and the significance of tradition, memory and cultural connections in sustaining African-American communities—emerged as a central theme in all of the literary works examined. Through community performance of the social acts surrounding death and burial, graveyards and burial grounds have developed into cultural repositories representing the history of people and their communities. As such, the cultural landscape of graveyards and burial grounds are microcosms of society—they provide a historical record that not only captures the past but also expresses the beliefs and values of a culture. The authors in this study used the cultural landscapes of graveyards and burial grounds to illuminate the cultural beliefs and practices concerning death and burial in African-American communities. The same theme of cultural tradition and community is echoed in the development of the New York Burial Ground National
Monument. Michael Blakey, a physical anthropologist at Howard University, served as scientific director of the New York African Burial Ground Project. Blakey commented on the cultural significance of the project as a representation of "the common heritage and group identity of African Americans who came together as a distinctive group in order to preserve and respect a plot of land that they consider their collective, sacred ground." All of the writers in this study presented the cultural landscapes of the dead as "sacred ground" that emphasized the influence of the past upon the present and the future. The influence of African beliefs regarding the ongoing relationships between the living and the dead were perceived by the writers in this study as a significant factor in the establishment of the identity of the individual, the community, and the culture of African Americans.

The literary graveyards and burial grounds analyzed in this study perform the same cultural functions as the New York African Burial Ground National Monument. As a symbol of African-American heritage and the continuity of cultural tradition, the monument marks a sacred place for reflecting upon the presence of the ancestral spirits. It represents loss through death, absence, and forgetting—coupled with the warning that such oversights cannot be allowed to occur in the future. Finally, the monument has been designed as a site of memory for recovering the symbolically buried past and healing the living spirit of descendants and the community. A dedication inscribed on the ancestral chamber reads: "For those who were lost. / For all those who were stolen. / For all those who were left behind. / For all those who are not forgotten."

In honor of the dead who are not dead, it is necessary to continue to recover and reclaim the history of Africans in America. This study has combined literature with the
historical record to provide a context for understanding some of the cultural practices of death and dying among African Americans. Future studies would benefit from an even more vigorous interdisciplinary approach by combining not only literary analysis and historiography but by also bringing together methods and tools from the fields of cultural geography and anthropology, or from any discipline whose aim is to better understand human culture through the study of cultural landscapes. A holistic, multidisciplinary approach would further enhance future comparative analyses of fictional and historical settings in literature—especially in the examination of culturally potent landscapes, such as African-American graveyards and burial grounds.
Notes

1 Gerima is a self-described “third-world filmmaker” living in the U.S. His 1993 film, *Sankofa*, examines the collective history and memory of African and African Americans of the Diaspora and the relevance of these experiences for shaping the future.

2 The “door of no return” is in the House of Slaves on Goree Island, Senegal. It is the symbolic point of departure for enslaved captives from Africa.

3 Rodney Léon, president and co-founder of Aarris Architects, was one of five designers selected from the original sixty-one applicants who submitted design proposals. The five finalists presented their designs for public comment. After each designer revised their designs based on the feedback they received, Léon’s design was chosen by the National Parks Service and the General Services Administration.
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