

Buried History: Exploring the Sacred Bond Between African Americans and Their Cemeteries

Troy Johnson, Department of Sociology & Anthropology
Advisor: Dr. Pam Frese



INTRODUCTION

Growing up, my grandparents taught me the significance of cemeteries within African American culture. These sacred spaces were places of the collective memory, where the legacies of our ancestors were honored. Through their stories, I developed an appreciation for the importance of preserving African American cemeteries, inspired to carry forward the traditions of remembrance they held dear. However, there are instances of racial violence that highlights the need to recognize these sites. Many spaces are disappearing due to neglect, systemic racism, and development pressures, resulting in a loss for African American communities.



Covered Grave Marker

BACKGROUND

- **Historical significance of African American cemeteries**
 - African American cemeteries stand as sacred grounds bearing witness to the enduring struggles and triumphs of marginalized communities.
- **Preservation Efforts & Community Engagement**
 - Scholarship on African American cemeteries explores community preservation efforts and advocacy campaign to safeguard these cultural treasures.
- **Collective Memory and Identity**
 - Collective memory and identity are intricately woven together, shaping the narratives, values, and sense of belonging within communities

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- **Double Consciousness – Du Bois**
 - “This sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”
- **Structural Violence – Farmer**
 - A form of violence where social structures or institutions harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs
- **Forms of Capital – Bourdieu**
 - The exchange between the different forms of capital (social, cultural, and economic) and how they interact to shape individuals’ life chances, social mobility, and positions within social classes

METHODS

- **Participant observation** - Visited a Baptist Church in Wooster, Wooster Cemetery
- **Interviews** - 3 African Americans

RESULTS

- **Complexity of Loss:** Loss is inevitable and manifests in various ways. From the absence of loved ones to the erosion of identity and belonging.
- **System of Marginalization:** Inequality reveals how systemic injustices perpetuate and exacerbate the impacts of loss, compounding vulnerability and social divides.
- **Celebration of Life:** Counterpoint causing moments of joy and triumphs that foster belonging, agency, and collective action for African Americans. A form of resistance in racial conflict, allowing for marginalized communities to challenge dominant narratives of oppression. Data reveals celebrations as sites of affirmation and solidarity.

Map of Wooster Cemetery



CONCLUSION

This research underscores the profound significance of African American cemeteries as repositories for cultural heritage and identity. Despite facing centuries of loss, inequality, and adversity, African American communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience in reclaiming and preserving their ancestral connections. Through acts of remembrance, resistance, and renewal, these sacred spaces have been transformed into vibrant hubs of collective memory and cultural affirmation. Moving forward, it is imperative to continue honoring and amplifying the voices and experiences of African American communities in preserving their cemeteries. By doing so, we not only honor the legacies of those who came before us but also ensure that these stories remain integral parts of the broader narrative of American history for generations to come.

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Connect with more participants
- Spend more time at the Wooster Cemetery to locate the missing graves
- Work closer with the Baptist church