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Praxis of Duality: The Sisterhood of Fuller's "Leila" and Du Bois's "Atlanta"

**ABSTRACT:** Though American writers Margaret Fuller and W.E.B. Du Bois never crossed paths, their "Leila" and "Atlanta" were both contenders in the nineteenth century's race for social reform. Through the lens of both social identity theory, developed in the 1970s, and multiple identity theory, introduced in 2002, I examine how both Fuller and Du Bois grappled with their era's social prescriptions. I argue that Fuller's *Leila*, from *The Dial*, and Du Bois's *Atlanta*, from *The Souls of Black Folk*, were autobiographical personifications of their author's struggles for social reform. Through their writing, the two revolutionaries challenged social barriers—Fuller the gender line and Du Bois the color line. I show that using Fuller and Du Bois as models, students today can shape their own ipseity to promote "multiple social identities with awareness of crosscutting memberships [which are] an effective formula" for perpetuating Fuller's and Du Bois's social progress and "the collective understanding of [any] discourse community."

Though American writers Margaret Fuller and W.E.B. Du Bois never crossed paths, their "Leila" and "Atlanta" were both contenders in the nineteenth century's race for social reform. "Margaret Fuller erupted into an era like her 'Leila,' full of purpose and power, even perhaps with 'the wind, bare and often bleeding feet, opiates and divining rods in each overfull hand, walk[ing] amid the habitations of mortals as a Genius, visit[ing] their consciences as a Demon,' sharing the mission to emancipate, enlighten and elevate. Fuller was stymied by the dominant Romanesque societal framework and expectation of nineteenth century America but negotiated and soldiered on to break ground, make her mark, and leave a legacy of prose" and poetry (qtd. Hilton 9). She is known as the most well-read American of her era, the first American female literary critic and newspaper editor, the first woman admitted into the Harvard Library, and the first American war correspondent. She was a confidant of Emerson and part of Boston's famed Transcendentalist circle. She championed education, especially for women and specifically through artful conversation.

Fuller's "Leila" was published in *The Dial: Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion* in 1841 and is "one of the most important texts that [she] wrote," according to Fuller scholar Jeffery Steele (*Transfiguring*, 83). Like Margaret herself, "Leila" resists categorization. Steele deems Leila the, "divine and dangerous female power—a being suppressed in mainstream American culture," like Margaret Fuller herself (*The Essential*, p. xx).

And, in many ways, like W.E.B. DuBois. A generation later, Du Bois similarly contested social prescriptions by identifying as a free, classically educated, black male, who, like Fuller, was also a writer and provocateur. Echoing many of Fuller's disquieting sentiments about her liminal position in society as she "struggle[ed] for self-awareness and public acceptance," (Steele, *Transfiguring*, 2) Du Bois warned that such "a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism" (164-5).

Although these were inevitable risks of conflicted identities and pitfalls into which both writers often fell, Fuller and Du Bois each rallied their complex identities to achieve intersectionality in its broadest and richest sense, to create a legacy of social reform. Just as Du Bois stressed conflicting social identities, so did Fuller. Steele points out that Fuller expressed "a doubleness of being that began to open a discursive clearing for the marginalized voices of her society" (102). In using Fuller's and Du Bois's persons and writings as models, students today can shape their own ipseity (selfhood) to promote "multiple social identities with awareness of crosscutting memberships [which are] an effective formula" for achieving and perpetuating what Fuller called "harmony." Which, in turn, nurtures "the collective understanding of [any] discourse community." Examining the similar form, content and intention of Fuller's "Leila" and Du Bois's "Atlanta" evidences how these synonymous works illuminate their authors' efforts and abilities to effect social change. This essay highlights the analogous aspects of these two works which show their authors' uncanny clairvoyance. Fuller and Du Bois gave us portraits of what social progress actually looks like—they put a name and face on social progress-- through their depiction of Leila and Atlanta. The urgent tone of both these works bespeaks the passion of their writers. The transtemporality of such pathos, often inherent in social reform rhetoric, makes it relevant to modern readers.

## FORM

First, let us examine their form. As mentioned, "Leila" resists categorization. It is neither fact nor fiction. It's a hybrid of prose and poetry infused with musical language, biblical allegory, Christian hymns, German philosophy, and Greek mythology. Steele called Leila the

"narrator's dream-self" (*The Essential*, p. xx). I'm calling the work a self-scape, a lyric meta-personal essay since at moments it merely suggests and in another moment, it is full-blown; It gestures in moving metaphors and denies the direct gaze. It might even be a first-person op-ed. Certainly "Leila" is a portrait of the heterogeneous Polyanthos recognized by Emerson (2:258).

Rachel Robertson's and Paul Hetherington's explication of the lyric essay supports my claim, stating that lyric essays "reflect on, recount and sometimes reimagine their author's personal experiences...Typically they concentrate...on what is suggestive, evocative and incomplete in an individual's experience in order to address a general topic, or create what one may call fields of abutted or juxtaposed ideas" (37-8). Lyric essays are fragmentary flashes of lucidity paired with "events seemingly lack[ing] coherence and happen[ing] without any context." Lyric essays are considered post-modern, yet their form has root in German Romanticism and can be credited to writers Novalis and Frederic Schlegel who were well-known to Fuller. Additionally, lyric essays resist linear movement through time and, instead, dance between extended and condensed time creating "a poetically charged sense of time-space..." (40).

Published a half century after Fuller's "Leila," Du Bois's fifth chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk*, entitled "Atlanta," is similarly alchemistic. Initially, a contemporary reader might ask "Why are we singing Negro Spirituals? Atlanta who? And why are we *now* reciting German opera?" "Atlanta" is richly imbued with Greek mythology, biblical allegory, classic poetry and literature, and ancient history all artfully framed within nineteenth-century events upon which Du Bois comments. "Atlanta" threatens a reader with mental whiplash. Du Bois's "Atlanta" is similar to Fuller's "Leila" in its form since it has many of the hallmarks of the lyric essay. "Atlanta" "subsume[s] representations of past events to an occurrence in the lyric present" (qtd. 41) and "open[s] out into a timeless and suggestive spatiality...consider[ing] past time [and future time] as [they] may be understood within a present instant." Du Bois personifies and folds time. In referencing Parnassus, the Greek cradle of learning, he takes us back in time. Then Du Bois adds the layers of present and future time, writing "Here, amid a wide desert of caste and proscription, amid the heart-hurting slights and jars and vagaries

of a deep race-dislike, lies this green oasis...and here men may lie and listen, and learn of a future fuller than the past, and hear the voice of Time" (69).

Steele notes that "the style of 'Leila' takes on an important performative quality that initiates a process of imaginative (and, potentially, social) liberation" while "the fluidity of Fuller's essay correlates with her effort to destabilize the ideological structures circumscribing women's being" (*Transfiguring*, 91). Moreover, the form of these two works is important since as lyric essays they may "suggest or mimic the fragmented nature of the narrator's subjectivity" (Robertson 44) which would be wholly in keeping with the subjective othering both writers experienced. Additionally, the lyrical form invited readers to "bring their own subjective awareness and brokenness to their reading experience" which bolstered the social reform rhetoric.

## CONTENT

Concerning content, at the beginning of "Leila," Fuller apologizes for the uncertainty of her frequent, deep visions, calling them vain attempts to bridge the liminal space between her reality and possibility. Leila is a "mystery," she writes (462). Likewise, DuBois locates his sketch in the liminal space of possibility "South of the North, yet north of the South...peering out from the shadows of the past into the promise of the future." Both writers have seen this misty maiden who, for Fuller, is "rare" and "seem[s] a key to all nature...suggest[ing] all [its]...elemental powers" (462). She is, in fact, "the clasp to the chain of nature" or, in other words, that which holds it all together. Correspondingly, DuBois's goddess appears in the "morning, when the first flush of day had half-roused her" (63) and mounts skyward on wings, rejecting the common "temptation of golden fruit" (71). She ultimately arrives "kneeling in the Sanctuary of Truth and Freedom and broad Humanity, virgin and undefiled."

The savior trope is used by both Fuller and Du Bois in their portrait of the future. First, Fuller personifies Christ as she speaks to Leila, quoting from the Bible, "Not mine but thine, Leila," (466). Next, Leila is Christ, becoming "pure ministry, one arrow from the quiver of God; pierce to the centre of things, and slay Dagon for evermore." Dagon is a citation to the fertility god of the Philistines. Dagon is both the name of a mythological god and the name of a city

now destroyed (Josephus), just as Atlanta is both a Greek goddess and the Southern Georgian city founded in 1837, and rebuilt after Civil War desolation.

Both characters are enlisted in a race for freedom. Atlanta flees the bondage of the "wily Hippomenes (64) while Leila flees societally imposed limitations (463). Both heroines actively engage the veil, striving to pull it aside. Atlanta confronts the Veil of Race while Leila confronts the veil of "the Isis," (463), or the feminine facet of divinity.

Again, Fuller references the Bible, writing, "the Holy Ghost descended on the globes of matter (466)." This reference is interesting because it cites the verse in Luke wherein God, says, "Thou art my beloved SON, in thee I am well pleased" superimposing on both Leila and Fuller the archetypal male savior. Fuller's famous exploration of gender, androgyny and the simultaneous man/woman does not escape "Leila." Her arguments in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* objecting to "male usurpation of divine 'prerogative' [that] had instilled in women dysfunctional patterns of social dependence and psychological abjection" (Steele, *Transfiguring* 4) are also points of contestation in Leila. Fuller depicts female power as a buried treasure, needing excavation. Fuller is both the buried treasure and the prospector. She casts both herself and man as the obstacles she must surmount to achieve her potential. "Leila" depicts Fuller's out-of-body struggle for transcendence.

Similarly, Atlanta must overcome her own carnal temptations disguised as irresistible golden apples to claim and retain her power. Ironically, Du Bois's leading lady initially fled the bondage of marriage to Hippomenes which encodes for Du Bois the freedom he hopes for his race. Du Bois's male-gendered reading includes this surprising heroine who remains prescriptively female in a world concerned only with men and he, too, remains faithful to his reputation as a champion of male privilege unconcerned with female franchise. Yet he and his readers cheer Atlanta on as she thwarts Hippomenes' advances. Both protagonists are threatened by male enslavement.

Another common trope are precious metals representing the treasures available to their protagonists. Du Bois wants his Atlanta to choose knowledge over the gold which, for him, literally signifies wealth and greed. Whereas Fuller signifies knowledge with gold, silver and diamonds. Fuller's knowledge is metaphorically treasured up "diamond[ing] her nature, transcending generations." Fuller is expecting the future to give her voice whereas presently,

Fuller confides, Leila and she are silent. However, "She knows that fires are preparing on upper earth to temper this sternness of her silent self" (465). Earth, itself, is poised to hear her voice, "lean[ing] down again and listen[ing] softly what this new, strange voice may mean." Du Bois, too, looks to the future for salvation. He writes that "The Wings of Atlanta are the coming universities of the South." (71). For Fuller, Leila is the "Saint of Knowledge." Both authors see knowledge personified as the savior for those suffering in silence.

Both essays end with an impassioned mandate for the protagonist to fly away toward a better future. "Fly, my maiden, fly, for yonder comes Hippomenes!" warns Du Bois. Fuller writes, "'Have I ever feared,' said Leila. Never! But the hour is come for still deeper trust. Arise! Let us go forth!" The punctuation and pronoun use here imply that Leila and Fuller are one and the same.

#### INTENTION

In comparing the authors' intentions, they were the same—they both wanted to "escape the emotional[,]. . .imaginative [, and very real] paralysis induced by the spectacle of white male greatness" (Steele, *Transfiguring*, p. 4). In multiple ways Fuller and Du Bois were anomalies within their social groups. Fuller was educated beyond the norm for her sex. Du Bois was educated beyond the norm for his race. They both represented the talented tenth. This kinship is not surprising since "Fuller's struggle for liberation" from gender prescriptions "followed a similar path" as the black struggle for racial equality (9). They each stretched and strained in reaching beyond what was merely offered by society and in so doing they moved society beyond its bounds toward the horizons they envisioned.

Through the lens of both social identity theory, developed in the 1970s by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, and multiple identity theory, introduced by Sonia Roccas and Marilynn Brewer in 2002, we see how both Fuller and Du Bois grappled with their era's social prescriptions. First, social identity theory, "focuses on the interplay between personal and social identities," (Ellemers 2) analyzing and predicting how individuals align themselves within a group and the derived consequences of these social arrangements. The term *ingroups* is applied to the social group with which an individual aligns themselves whereas *outgroups* are those with which the same individual does not belong. The manner in which

people "interpret their own position in different social contexts and how this affects their perceptions of others, as well as their own behavior in groups" (Ellemers 2) is evidenced in both Fuller's and Du Bois's writing and in their individual levels of efficacy as social reformers. Second, multiple identity theory examines the social group to which individuals believe they belong including race, gender, age, wealth, education, political affiliation, religion, etc. These various individual identities are the criteria by which people choose their social circles, or *ingroups*.

These theories are different than mere intersectionality in that multiple identity theory postulates that the greater the number of identities an individual has, and the greater the diversity of these identities, the more overlap their identities will have with other groups to make the individual more inclusive. Furthermore, the more complex an individual's identity is, the lower their propensity for bias and discrimination and the greater their capacity for navigating between their various multiple identity ingroups, even bridging outgroups. The message of this research is that "promoting multiple social identities with awareness of crosscutting memberships provides an effective formula for reducing intergroup prejudice" (Brewer 4). See Figure 1 of an Identity Wheel illustrating how one might chart a person's cross-cutting memberships by using Margaret Fuller as the example.

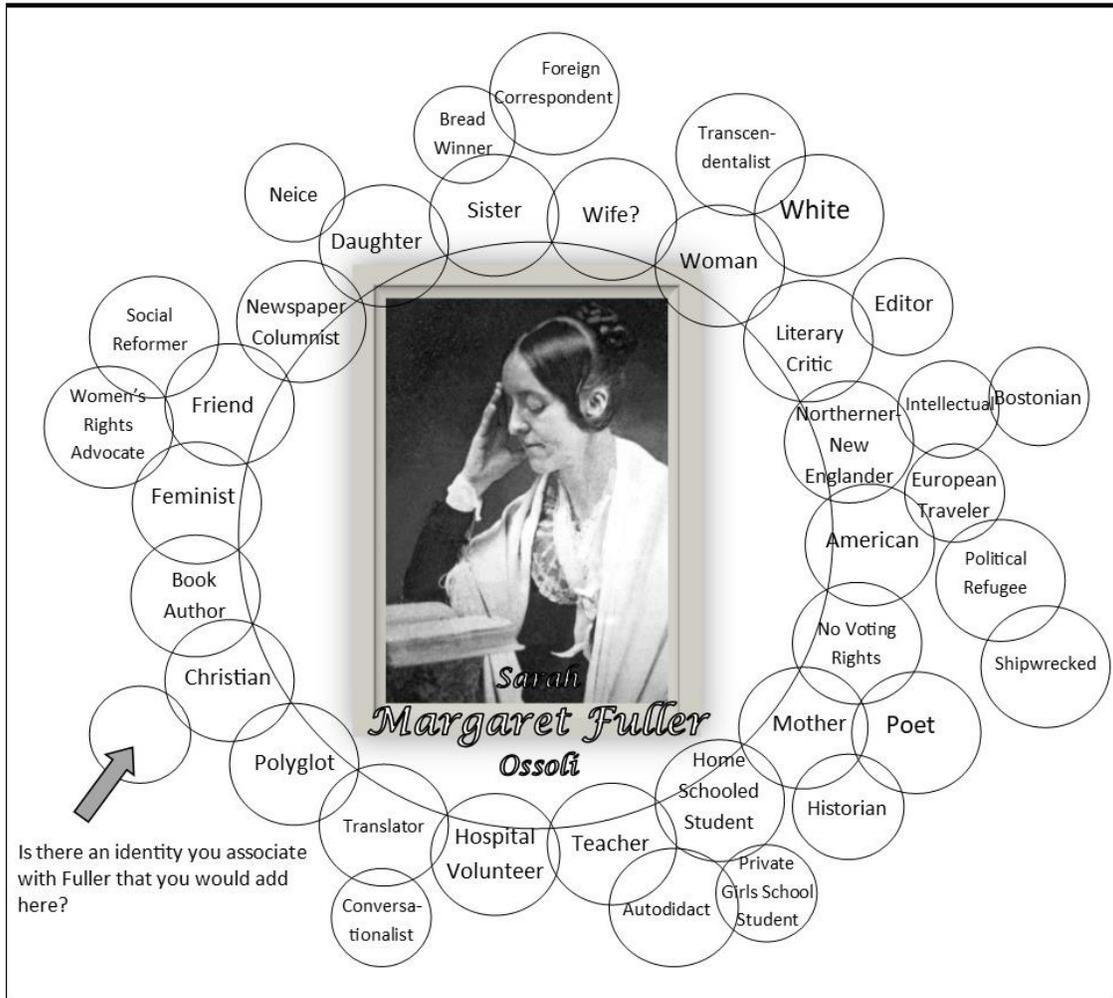


PHOTO SOURCE: Margaret Fuller family papers, Purdy & Frear (Ithaca, N.Y.), photographer. undated. MS Am 1086 (106). Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

Figure 1 This Identity Wheel depicts Fuller's multiple identities. Created by the author.

This Identity Wheel depicts Fuller's multiple identities of which I am aware. I do not claim it to be exhaustive but to merely represent the complex and crosscutting nature of her many social ingroups. I chose a circle with Fuller's photo at the center of this diagram for several reasons: first, because a wheel implies movement; second, because each identity revolves around and intersects the others—think of them spinning, colliding and interacting—to create the identity for which she is ultimately known; and, third, because the circle symbolizes unity, wholeness, the Self, both the embryo and completion, as well as eternity.

These multiple, complex qualities represent Fuller's diversity in a way that shows the necessity for her to bridge various in and out-groups. The success at which she did this is of ongoing study and has impacted her legacy. Fuller's social circles and intersectionality can inform our efforts toward social progress today.

While Fuller experienced exclusion at the gender line, Du Bois experienced exclusion at the color line. They were alike in their confrontation and efforts to cross these social barriers as they wrote for reform. As Steele points out, Fuller understood "that the achievement of 'harmony'" among diverse people "depends on the capacity" they have "to theorize the relation between diverse elements that have fallen apart into disharmony. Ultimately, at stake in this process [for Fuller] was a social vision that valued relationship over unitary development, the creation of community over the solitary expansion of the imperial self" (*Transfiguring*, 102). This social vision is what Fuller and Du Bois had in common with one another and which they shared in the essays I've examined here.

Fuller's "Leila" is what Steele calls the "feminine myth" and certainly DuBois's Atlanta is *exactly* that as he appropriates the Greek goddess to personify the American city Atlanta, Georgia (*The Essential*, p. xx). Both writers chose female protagonists to represent their desperate hope for the future. Feminine fetishization is certainly at work here. Fuller confronted the angel in the house myth head on, declaring that "Most men, as they gazed at Leila were pained; they left her at last baffled and well-nigh angry" (462). Steele concludes that "much of the imaginative power of 'Leila' resides in this figure's personification of many of the cultural contradictions confronted by middle-class white women of Fuller's generation...[who felt] a pained sense of disturbance...struggling against the confines of a society that purported to cherish womanhood while tying women's hands with silken cords." (*Transfiguring*, 91). Du Bois plays with the feminine stereotype by first allowing his "black young Atlanta" to adhere to the mythological script by being tempted by Hippomenes, defiled by "greed of gold" and "the gambler's code" (65). But then he resists the myth, re-writing it with a happy ending. He hopes Atlanta will run nobly, choosing the ideals Du Bois champions, like a university education for all blacks. Du Bois's bright forecast depends on the choice Atlanta makes. Time is a trap from which the pure female goddess must save degenerate men.

This is Fuller's prediction, too. She excuses mankind's inability to comprehend Leila writing that "who can blame them, it is almost impossible for time to bear this sense of eternity...And men called Leila mad, because they felt she made them so. But I, Leila," writes Fuller in first person, "could look on thee;--to my restless spirit thou didst bring a kind of peace..." she concludes (462-3). Fuller notes that Leila remains "a reminder to man of the temporary nature of his limitations. For she ever transcends sex, age, state, and all the barriers behind which man entrenches himself from the assaults of Spirit" and provides for man the savior he needs.

Fuller and Du Bois were revolutionaries dedicated to social reform, like their protagonists. In many ways their complex identities made them uniquely qualified to carry out their mandate for social change and provide a model for us, today. Their analogous visions of the struggle for an earthly heaven, free from bias and oppression, are lyrically communicated in "Leila" and "Atlanta."

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