

**FOR MASTERS THESES: A DRAMATIC ANALYSIS OF  
PHILLIS WHEATLEY, MARTIN LUTHER KING JR, AND ALBERT B. CLEAGE JR,  
ROLE IN NONVIOLENCE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

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## Introduction

Since the beginning of the slave experience, African American preachers have interpreted the Bible to speak to the brutality of racism that their communities faced daily.<sup>1</sup> No matter where their communities were enslaved, African American preachers carefully crafted their sermons to reflect the diverse experiences of suffering. This was the case from the early colonial period through the Jim Crow era and beyond. Many African Americans took up the Bible as a symbol of hope and of the struggle for power and survival. On the one hand, they hoped that the protector and liberator God would hear their cries and respond to their suffering.

On the other hand, African Americans also used the Bible to express their anger and frustration at the oppressive systems of slavery and segregation. It was a way for them to make their voices heard and fight for justice, despite the odds stacked against them. They believed the Bible could lead them to freedom if interpreted correctly. No book captures black religious imagination in the struggle for freedom from the brutality of more racism than the book of Exodus. However, few African American scholars have connected Exodus to black life and African American struggles for freedom in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

In their time, Phillis Wheatley, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Albert Cleage Jr. took on African American struggles for freedom by fighting against inequality and discrimination. They also took on justice and fairness for others.

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<sup>1</sup> Many sources point to the sermons of Jon Marrant in 1785 as the beginning of the African American preaching tradition.

<sup>2</sup>David W. Kling, *The Bible in History: How the Texts Have Shaped the Times* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023).

## Phillis Wheatley

In the first section, I turn to Phillis Wheatley, who was among the most celebrated early black writers in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. She was captured as a child and was about eight years old when she was sold to John and Susanna Wheatley in Boston as a household servant. Throughout the late 1700s, she was educated by her Boston owners; she showed remarkable aptitude by opposing slavery, arguing that all people, regardless of race, can find salvation through Christianity.

During the same time frame, Wheatley wrote her first poem, *Religious and Moral*. This became the first poem published by an African American author, earning her worldwide fame and the acclaim of such figures as George Washington and Jupiter Hammond. She wrote letters to ministers and others on liberty and freedom, *On Being Brought to America, 1773*, and *A Dream of Freedom and the Nightmare of Slavery*.

Moreover, in one of her letters, titled *Letter Reverend Samson Occom*, which was written after Wheatley was emancipated and published repeatedly in Boston newspapers in 1774, she associated American slaveholding with that of pagan Egypt in ancient times. She writes, "Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian slavery; I do not would have been contented without it, by no means, for in every human Beast, God has implemented a principle, which we call Love of freedom it is impatient of Oppression, and pants of Deliverance; and by the Leave of our Modern Egyptians, I will assert." <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Pamela Newkirk, *Letters from Black America* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2011), 92.

Phillis Wheatley has faced many obstacles in her strivings for freedom. However, she courageously used her gifts to persevere in what she believed was true justice for all races. Though Wheatley was treated very kindly by Susanna, she was still enslaved. Her poetry would reflect her thoughts on slavery and the kindness of her mistress, whom she loved very much. Phillis' poetry would reflect the Christianity that she had learned from Susannah.

It is essential to foreground Wheatley's claim that God's saving grace reaches out to all Christians, who can join "th' angelic train."<sup>4</sup> I will say more about this later as it relates to the intellectual and rhetorical context of *On Being Brought from Africa to America*. What is more pressing at the offset is understanding Wheatley's opposition to slavery.

In *On Being Brought to America*, Wheatley writes as she recounts her story of being a slave girl who was enslaved and sold to the Wheatley family in 1761.

Wheatley wrote:

Twa's mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand.  
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eyes,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,  
May be refin'd and join th' angelic train.<sup>5</sup>

Then she wrote to *the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth*.

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<sup>4</sup> Wheatley, Phillis. "On Being Brought from Africa to America." Short Stories & Classic Literature for Readers & Teachers. Accessed March 8, 2023. <https://americanliterature.com/author/phillis-wheatley/poem/on-being-brought-from-africa-to-america>.

<sup>5</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *Bring Brought from Africa to America: The Best of Phillis Wheatley* (Ragged Hand, an imprint of Read & Co., 2020).

Should you, my Lord, while you peruse my song,  
Wonder from whence my love of freedom sprung,  
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
By feeling hearts alone best understood,  
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate.  
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat.

Aside from describing the evils of slavery, Wheatley also describes Christians who treat Blacks like inferiors. She imagines a grieving parent who has lost their young daughter when she says, says, "snatch'd from Afric's fancy's happy seat." Wheatley merges the desire and appreciation for freedom from tyranny with her argument that all people, regardless of race, can find salvation through Christianity (I will show Wheatley as a precursor to the abolition of slavery). To that end, Wheatley does not simply offer an idealized critique of America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. She further provides evidence for African Americans who fought for the rights to food, education, health, and liberty during slavery. Nevertheless, Wheatley's work led her to be recognized by many prominent figures like Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, and Thomas Jefferson and modern scholars as a forerunner of abolishing slavery-one who spoke out against systems and practices that kept slaves under control. This label of abolitionist is recognizable in *America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.<sup>6</sup> He writes, "For, as I've said, those rituals of validation scarcely died with Phillis Wheatley; on the contrary, they would become a central theme in the abolitionist era."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Book Review: 'The Trials of Phillis Wheatley,'" The Washington Times (The Washington Times, May 7, 2010), <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/may/07/book-review-the-trials-of-phillis-wheatley/>.

<sup>7</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *Bring Brought from Africa to America: The Best of Phillis Wheatley* (Ragged Hand, an imprint of Read & Co., 2020 42.h

This is necessary because I will describe how she is an essential forerunner for the abolitionist era more fully in chapter 1. Phillis Wheatley accomplished something that no other woman of her status had done.<sup>8</sup> I read Phillis Wheatley's politics as

Subversive. Much as the Hebrew wives worked under the totalizing presence of Egyptian imperial power to thwart the pharaoh's genocidal plan, Phillis Wheatley worked under the totalizing oppression of the slavery gene and used the tools at hand to convince her captors of the evil of slavery and of the humanity of captured Africans.

### **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

In section two, I will describe the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle for justice and equality for African Americans, mainly in the 1950s and 1960s. I will focus on politics that would significantly affect the trajectory of America and African Americans in general. No one had more influence on the civil rights of Black Americans through peaceful protests and speeches than Martin Luther King, Jr. In the *Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*,<sup>9</sup> Clayborne Carson introduces his readers to a man who stands up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for the truth. For me, it is true that "the young students of the South, through sit-ins and other demonstrations, gave America a glowing example of disciplined, dignified and non-violent action against the system of segregation."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Monk, "Phillis Wheatley: Her Life, Poetry, and Legacy," National Portrait Gallery, March 27, 2014, <https://npg.si.edu/blog/phillis-wheatley-her-life-poetry-and-legacy>

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther King and Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr* (New York, NY: Intellectual Properties Management, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

After four years as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association and of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) for five years, King decided to move from Montgomery to Atlanta. He would become co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and thereby have a better location to direct the South-wide campaigns of the (SCLC). King's sermons, speeches, and protests articulated the optimism of the hope for freedom and deliverance. Carson writes, "many of his speeches, sermons, letters, and unpublished manuscripts provide revealing information."<sup>11</sup>

These sermons are captured in collections of books, poetry, letters, and speeches. For example, on December 3, 1956, King preached a sermon entitled *Facing the Challenge of the New Age*, where he spoke about the increasing interdependence of states and the need for worldwide brotherhood. He charged the audience to meet injustice with love, an ethos reflected in his efforts to advance civil rights through non-violent civil disobedience.<sup>12</sup> Before addressing nonviolence and social change in Montgomery, Alabama, King faced much adversity in his preaching that brought a sense of hope in Blackness and self-respect for Black people.

In his sermon, *Rediscovering Lost Values*, King advised that society should rediscover the precious values that had become lost in the rationalizations that guided behavior in the modern world. "If we are to continue forward," he said, "if we are to make this a better world in which to live, we've got to look back. It's time to rediscover these precious values that we've left

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther King, *The Papers of Martin Luther King*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), 91.

<sup>12</sup> "'Facing the Challenge of a New Age': Martin Luther King Jr. at UWI June 20, 1965," Alumni Online Community, January 15, 2018, <https://uwi.edu/alumnionline/facing-challenge-new-age-martin-luther-king-jr-uwi-june-20-1965>.



behind."<sup>13</sup> King argued that despite the many technological advances and material comforts of American society, humanity had lost the spiritual compass provided by a deep and abiding faith in God. "The real problem is that through our scientific genius, we've made the world a neighborhood, but through our moral and spiritual genius, we've failed to make it a brotherhood."

King insisted that "all reality hinges on ethical foundations,"<sup>14</sup> "This is an ethical universe, and ... there are moral laws of the universe, just as abiding as the physical laws."<sup>15</sup> Decrying ethical relativism—"Now, I'm not trying to use a big word here."<sup>16</sup> King believed in moral absolutes that evoked enthusiastic responses from his congregation. I read King's work as a reformist in nature. He stands as Moses offering the people a new law, a law of both love and justice.

### **Albert Cleage**

In the third section, I will analyze the interpretive work of Albert Cleage Jr. He adapts and constructs meaning for Black life to meet the challenges presented by a perpetually shifting political economy. Regarding black life in Albert Cleage Jr.'s books, *Black Christian nationalism* and *the Black Messiah*, this paper will consider how Cleage advocated for the autonomy that captured an African American imagining. In addition to Cleage's challenging the oppressive

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<sup>13</sup> "Rediscovering Lost Values." The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, September 23, 2021. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/rediscovering-lost-values-0>.

<sup>14</sup> National Geographic Staff, "Martin Luther King, Jr.-Facts and Information," Culture (National Geographic, January 17, 2023), <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/martin-luther-king-jr>.

<sup>15</sup> Paul E. Johnson, *African American Christianity Essays in History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 172.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

systems of racism and discrimination, I will examine how he urges African Americans people to accept responsibility for their liberation.

Concerning the civil rights movement, this paper will respond to how he was fiercely criticized by many religious leaders, including Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. It will also respond to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s scope of liberation and religious rhetoric during the 1960s. As far as Christian ministers are concerned, Albert Cleage, Jr. has been the most vocal advocate of a radical approach to civil rights. Cleage contributed significantly to black people's education and political leadership during the 1960s. The civil rights movement and the rise of Black Power radicalized his vision of Christianity during the late 1960s. Despite believing in integration, some of the churches he served were racially mixed until the whites left, which caused him to lose hope that whites would ever help black people. As a result of his efforts in 1967, the Black Christian National Movement was founded. This movement called for the reinterpretation of Jesus' teachings to meet black people's social, economic, and political requirements. Cleage and his church on Easter unveiled the Shrine of the Black Madonna, and the Central Congregational Church has renamed the Shrine of the Black Madonna.

During the racial unrest in Detroit in 1968, Cleage published *The Black Messiah*, which described Jesus as a black revolutionary leader. The Black Christian Nationalist Movement was formally established as a separate denomination in 1972 following the publication of his second book, *Black Christian Nationalism*. According to Cleage, a church's vision should focus on social service programs, reaching out to young people, and participating in civil rights marches. Hundreds of housing units were built by him, and he organized businesses owned by black people, such as grocery stores and bookstores. As a result, Rev. Cleage's name was changed to the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church (P.A.O.C.C.). He adopted the Swahili name Jaramogi Abebe

Agyeman, which means "liberator, holy man, savior of the nation."<sup>17</sup> Its members include churches in Atlanta, GA, and Houston, TX, several cultural centers, bookstores, community service centers, and a working farm. The late Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman passed away on February 20, 2000. Through the teachings of Jesus, the Black Messiah, the P.A.O.C.C. continues to uplift and liberate the Pan-African world community.

Although black Christianity gave some enslaved and free African Americans a sense of their worth before others and enabled them to act as self-determining agents, its primary focus remained the concern for African Americans' survival. I read. Cleage's work is radical. It intends to a system of injustice with an apocalyptic rupture and calls African Americans to create a New World of their own, or they might fully thrive.

In sum, I compare Phyllis Wheatley's antebellum experience to Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rev. Albert Cleage's Civil Rights experience. Both are significant contributors to the history of the conflict over African American rights in the United States. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 marked a milestone in the long struggle to extend civil, political, and legal rights and protections to African Americans, including formerly enslaved people and their descendants, and to end segregation in public and private facilities.<sup>18</sup> The post-war era marked a period of unprecedented energy against second-class citizenship accorded to African Americans in many parts of the nation. At the same time, the church was not only the meeting place for the movement

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<sup>17</sup>"This Far by Faith. Albert Cleage," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed March 8, 2023, [https://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/albert\\_cleage.html](https://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/albert_cleage.html).

<sup>18</sup> "The Civil Rights Act of 1964," U.S. Senate: The Civil Rights Act of 1964, December 16, 2022, [https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/civil\\_rights/civil\\_rights.htm](https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/civil_rights/civil_rights.htm).

in the South<sup>19</sup> but also the center of the movement because it served as the symbol of the civil rights movement's fight for justice and equality for African Americans.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, others were using their churches to reinterpret Jesus' teachings to suit black people's social, economic, and political needs. From the slave regime onward, Black religious thought helped to undermine the white supremacist racial system that had governed America for centuries.

Although slavery was the law of the land for more than 300 years, American slavery was challenged and resisted daily by its victims, survivors, and those who found it morally unacceptable.<sup>21</sup> By the 1970s, African Americans had significant developments for the effective integration of blacks into mainstream American society. Perhaps the most important was the movement's very success in eliminating de jure and de facto discrimination in crucial areas (public accommodations, housing, voting, and employment) and getting many white Americans to see the extent to which racial discrimination violated the nation's basic creed of equality of opportunity. With this success, the interest of many African Americans in civil rights groups began to wane because many African-Americans paid greater attention to taking advantage of the opportunities wrought by the success itself.

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<sup>19</sup> Sam Hananel Director et al., "The Role of Religion in the Civil Rights Movements," Center for American Progress, October 28, 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-role-of-religion-in-the-civil-rights-movements/>.

<sup>20</sup> Sam Hananel Director et al., "The Role of Religion in the Civil Rights Movements," Center for American Progress, October 28, 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-role-of-religion-in-the-civil-rights-movements/>.

<sup>21</sup> "Resistance and Abolition: African: Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History: Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress: Library of Congress," The Library of Congress, accessed March 8, 2023, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/african/resistance-and-abolition/>.

The Exodus story has been a source of identification and conflict for African Americans. In the eyes of African Americans, they were Hebrew enslaved people pitted against white Pharaohs. The Exodus story served as a metaphor for the tension between Blackness and whiteness in the United States. Blacks were neither enslaved people nor Pharaohs but rather agents of the ruling elite.

### **Outline of the Paper Chapters**

In view of the themes articulated above, the following sections consider the work of Phillis Wheatley, Martin Luther King Jr., and Albert Cleage, Jr.

#### Phillis Wheatley, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*-

This section considers Phillis Wheatley's Poems, *On Being Brought to America to the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth*, and her use of American rhetorical form as an intervention in Black oppression during the colonial period.

The Smithsonian Institution and Poetry Foundation have helped advance a discussion examining her life, poetry, and legacy. Even so, they do not show her restrained emotion in pointing out the injustices she encounters. Henry Louis Gates' definition of her afterlife as the politics of authenticity is essential to this paper.<sup>22</sup> Politicians are perceived as authentic if they perform consistently in their personality, opinions, or character. This term will be discussed thoroughly in this chapter.

Chapter 2- The Reformist Sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr. This chapter reveals how King sought equality and human rights for African Americans, the poor, and all victims of

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<sup>22</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Trails of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounter with the Founding Fathers* (Sydney, Australia: Read How You Want, 2010).

injustice through peaceful protest.<sup>23</sup> I affirm the legitimacy of King's politics while simultaneously dealing with resistance to achieving equal rights to vote, discrimination, and other fundamental civil rights. I accomplish this by engaging three of his sermons: *Rediscovering Lost Values*, *Facing the Challenge of the New Age*, and *Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution*. Each sermon articulates a coherent political strategy that emerges from and relates to on-the-ground social movement activism.

It is my contention that the conventional framework of nonviolence should be contested to promote a study of nonviolent campaigns as a model for future politics. While I do not analyze all his sermons in this chapter, it is essential to consider his efforts to offer a plea to end racism in America.

Chapter 3: “Nothing Is More Sacred Than the Liberation of Black People:” Albert Cleage’s Method to Dismantle White Supremacy This chapter begins with the problem with ontological Blackness in *Black Christian Nationalism*. Cleage's contribution to black theology is worthy of reexamination and engagement. By engaging in Black theology, James Cone unveils the pain of black suffering and rejects a God that exacerbates or tolerates it. Anderson takes this concept further by affirming the idea of "Blackness as God," which is a distinct way of looking at the divine. Anderson believes that God is inextricably linked to Blackness and that Blackness is an essential part of the divine. He argues that to understand God, one must also understand Blackness and the history of Black suffering. James Cone argues that Blackness is “an ontological symbol for all people who participate in the liberation of [humanity] from

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<sup>23</sup> Americanbar.org, accessed March 8, 2023, [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/diversity/resources/celebrating-heritage-months/celebrating\\_martin\\_luther\\_king\\_jr/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/diversity/resources/celebrating-heritage-months/celebrating_martin_luther_king_jr/).

oppression. It is a Blackness that signifies the totality of black existence, a binding together of black life and experience.

## CHAPTER 1

### Phillis Wheatley, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*

Segregation and discrimination were prevalent in 1619 when the first Africans landed in Virginia, brought from Africa brought here against their will. Status of the negro during slavery. In 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States said in substance, "the Negro is not a citizen of the United States; he is merely property subject to the dictates of his owner."<sup>24</sup> However, in the late 1700s, Phillis Wheatley accomplished something that no other woman of her status had done.<sup>25</sup> She became the third colonial American woman, and the first enslaved woman to have a book of poetry published, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.<sup>26</sup> The Revolution-era Boston establishment could not believe that the young African American woman had written an exquisite book of poetry. Wheatley also fought against slavery as she sought to prove that no race is better than another. Not only did she write and publish poems and books that showed that enslaved people had the same capacity to create art and literature as anyone else. Her work was groundbreaking and helped to challenge the false belief that African Americans were inferior.

She was forced to undergo interrogation by eighteen men considered "the most respectable characters in Boston" before she published her renowned *Collection of Poems on*

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<sup>24</sup> "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow. Jim Crow Stories. Plessy v. Ferguson: PBS," The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow. Jim Crow Stories. Plessy v. Ferguson | PBS, accessed March 8, 2023, [https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories\\_events\\_plessy.html](https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_plessy.html).

<sup>25</sup> Merkel, "Phillis Wheatley: Her Life, Poetry, and Legacy," *National Portrait Gallery*, last modified March 27, 2014, accessed November 14, 2022, <https://npg.si.edu/blog/phillis-wheatley-her-life-poetry-and-legacy>.

<sup>26</sup> Merkel, "Phillis Wheatley: Her Life, Poetry, and Legacy," *National Portrait Gallery*, last modified March 27, 2014, accessed November 14, 2022, <https://npg.si.edu/blog/phillis-wheatley-her-life-poetry-and-legacy>.



*Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, in 1773.<sup>27</sup> In the 1860s, enslaved girls were believed to be about 18 or 19 years old when the poem was written, given widespread skepticism that anyone such as her --Black, African American, female, young -- could compose such a masterpiece. Henry Louis Gates Jr. says this in *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, “She passed her inspection with flying colors, and everything worked out well for her.”<sup>28</sup> Wheatley taught her several languages because the young girl showed remarkable intellectual promise.

Wheatley also became proficient in the traditional Greek and Latin texts at age 12. She fell in love with the English poet Alexander Pope, modeling her own work after his. At just 13, to evangelize and comment on slavery, Wheatley applied classical and neoclassical techniques and biblical symbolism. "*On Being Brought from Africa to America*,"<sup>29</sup> Wheatley's best-known poem, urges the audience during the Great Awakening to be aware that Africans are an integral part of Christianity: "Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, may be refin'd and join the angelic train."<sup>30</sup>

### 1.1 On Being Brought to America

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand.  
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

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<sup>27</sup> After Nat Turner's slave revolt in 1831, every slave state except Maryland, Kentucky, and Tennessee passed laws prohibiting the teaching of literacy to enslaved people.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 38.

<sup>29</sup> Wheatley's On Being Brought from Africa to America | ipl.org.  
<https://www.ipl.org/essay/Wheatleys-On-Being-Brought-From-Africa-To-PK9ED9B42DVT>

<sup>30</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *Bring Brought from Africa to America: The Best of Phillis Wheatley* (United Kingdom: Ragged Hand, an imprint of Read & Co., 2020).

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd and join th' angelic train.<sup>31</sup>

The poem begins with the sentence, "Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land.<sup>32</sup> That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too." The irony is obvious here. In fact, she taught her own benighted soul to understand that slavery was not God's mercy; it was the "mercy" of slave traders. They were ruthless because of money and power. They captured black Africans and brought them to America to make money. She was able to receive an education in Christianity due to the compassion of those around her who were willing to provide the resources and guidance she needed. Additionally, her benefactors enabled her to embark on her voyage through their generosity. Ultimately, she is attributing the ability to have these experiences to something greater than herself. By using the phrase "mercy brought me," she is reframing her experience of being kidnapped and sold as a slave because of divine intervention. This is a way to avoid blaming those responsible for the kidnapping. Instead, it is a way to recognize that it was a larger force, such as divine mercy, that ultimately brought her to the place she is now.

Wheatley acknowledges that the kindness of other people has helped her throughout her journey and her journey of faith. She believes that this kindness reflects a higher power, one that has guided and looked after her. She believes that this kindness reflects a higher power that has been with her throughout her journey, leading her and giving her the strength to persevere. She views this kindness as a blessing, a sign of God's love and grace in her life.

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<sup>31</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *Bring Brought from Africa to America: The Best of Phillis Wheatley* (United Kingdom: Ragged Hand, an imprint of Read & Co., 2020).

Wheatley's Christian faith is evident here. The poem discussed below depicts her faith, but we should also question the authenticity of her faith. She lived in an America where there was no freedom of choice. This was a God who lived with anger and fire. The puritans hanged their own people because they considered them to be witches.<sup>33</sup> For those who did not profess Christianity, colonial society in North America was dangerously religious during Wheatley's lifetime. Spurious accusations of practicing witchcraft could lead to various punishments, including execution. Both white and Black persons alike were vulnerable to such accusations.

In a world where black life was always tenuous and could be taken any moment with impunity, Wheatley wrote her poems using layered meanings, do you want to language, and subtle but biting critique. There is a lot that is being depicted here, but this short poem displays irony and hypocrisy. She describes being taken from a pagan land in this poem. In other words, her African origins Had not taught her about the European's God. The colonist in America would read this as extolling the benefits of being "rescued" from Africa. It was important for her masters in America to feel good about themselves since there is a slave saying that "there's a God, that there's a Savior too." Although she is a slave, she recognizes the European God as one who can save. The language intends to appease her captors because it depicts a slave who is grateful to be a slave.

The double entendre continues in the poem, "Taught my benighted soul to understand. That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too." One can read this in two ways: she loves and has a

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<sup>33</sup> Isaac Reed, "Why Salem Made Sense: Culture, Gender, and the Puritan Persecution of Witchcraft," *Cultural Sociology* 1, no. 2 (2007): pp. 209-234, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975507078188>.

willingness to suffer slavery because it brought the “benefit” of Christianity, or she was clear that she lived in an America where she had to make her masters feel good about themselves.

Immigrant experiences and the experiences of enslavement of very different. Immigrants are clear about their origins and culture. However, Wheatley did not know where she came from, but she took note of her treatment and tracked her horrific treatment by slave traders. She may not have known where she had come from, but she praised slavery for the fact that it led her to Christianity. So, it is obvious in her writing that she wants her captors to believe that she sees slavery as a savior from Africa and the opportunities she would’ve never had if she wasn’t enslaved. Clearly, she wanted her captors to believe that her education was another symbol of her “salvation “from Africa. When she was twelve, she began reading Greek and Latin classics and difficult passages from the Bible. At the age of fourteen she wrote her first poem. The Wheatley couple supported Phillis in every possible way and gave her all the sources to educate. Wheatley was strongly influenced by the works of Pope, Milton, Homer, Horace, and Virgil.<sup>34</sup>

In this poem, another line mentions the duality that existed in the United States during her time as enslaved. Much of the education for the enslaved served the interest of the plantation owners. The enslaved were taught how to be docile and accepting of authority. Plantation owners and others who held people in slavery taught the enslaved verbally because it was illegal for the enslaved to learn how to read, and penalties could be as severe as death. Though the enslaved, they taught Africans about their European God while seeing them as property. As a result of this hypocrisy, the dominant culture sent conflicting messages to the enslaved: that they can be saved and, at the same time, treat them like cattle and property.

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<sup>34</sup> John H. Jordan, *Black Americans 17th Century to 21st Century: Black Struggles and Successes* (Bloomington, Indiana: Trafford Publishing, 2013), 151.

According to Wheatley, enslavement brought her to Christianity. Although her Christian faith was genuine, it was also a "safe" subject for an enslaved poet. It may come as a surprise to most readers that she expresses "gratitude" for her enslavement. She makes the analogy between her skin color and the state of ignorance she was in at the start of her Christian journey. Benighted means "overtaken by night or darkness" or "being in a state of moral or intellectual darkness." It may be that by doing so, she is nudging the reader to take a more critical view of enslavement or at least a more positive view of those held in bondage. "Sable" is a fascinating word choice to describe her as a Black woman. Sable is a very valuable and desirable material. The next line contrasts sharply with the characterization of a diabolic die.

Alternatively, "Diabolic die" may refer to another aspect of the "triangle" trade involving enslaved people. The phrase "diabolic die" implies the randomness of life and how it takes no account of the individual, suggesting that the Black woman is a victim of fate and the vagaries of human history. In protest of enslavement, Quaker leader John Woolman boycotted dyes.<sup>35</sup>

The irony here is that Africans were expected to be refined as well as enrolled in school since they were perceived as inferior. She enrolled in school after arriving in America to become educated. Before coming to America, she had no need for European education nor any idea that she was a problem. Lastly, she uses irony to describe how Africans might be "cultured" and more importantly "saved" if they accept Christ. This is regardless of the color of the skin of Africans. Wheatley uses irony to expose white Christians' hypocrisy of condemning Blacks because of their skin color.

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<sup>35</sup> "Quakers and Slavery," University of York, accessed March 8, 2023, <https://www.york.ac.uk/borthwick/holdings/research-guides/race/quakers-and-slavery/>.

There is an ambiguity in the word "Christian" on the second-to-bottom line. She may either be addressing her last sentence to Christians—or she may be referring to Christians among those who "may be refined" and find salvation. She reminds her reader that Negroes may be saved (in the religious and Christian understanding of salvation). The implication of her last sentence is also this: The "angelic train" will include both White and Black people. Her placement of the word "Christian" emphasizes the idea that Christianity can be a unifying force between races, as it is a religion that does not discriminate based on skin color. By implying that the "angelic train" will include both White and Black people, she is making the statement that all people, regardless of race, can be saved by Christianity.

As a result of having "dyed" skin, she defined her race. She was saying that people think they are devils and trying to let people know that they can change their life to the positive by using the power of their own minds. She argues that since even the European's Bible states that all people are capable of salvation, then it should be possible for all people to be accepted and embraced. This is regardless of their race or skin color.

This poem also touches on Cain. The power of Christianity to bring people to salvation is evident in the poem. Wheatley speaks of the abundant gift of grace and mercy for everyone, regardless of race or religion. She speaks of the power of faith to open the gates of Heaven and liberation of Negro Christians. She writes, "Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain." She encourages everyone to remember to love and accept people of all races and creeds, regardless of their skin color or religion. By using the phrase "Christians, Negros, black as Cain," she conveys that no matter what a person's faith, or skin color, everyone is the same and should be treated with kindness and respect. Christians should remember to be inclusive and loving of people of all

races and not discriminate against those who are different from them. Negros is a term used to refer to African Americans, highlighting the need for Christians to be accepting of African Americans and other people of color in their communities. There is, however, a discrepancy regarding Cain. On the one hand, according to some, Cain's mark came from God turning him black since he killed his brother.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, Wheatley could be referring to sugar cane. When sugar cane is in the process of being pure sugar the darkest brown, and then it is pure white.

Wheatley's use of the commanding style of Puritan preachers reflects her newfound power as someone who had experienced enslavement and redemption. Wheatley's experience of enslavement shaped her views on power dynamics, and she wanted to use her rhetorical power to motivate and inspire others. She drew on the commanding style of Puritan preachers to emphasize the importance of her message and to emphasize her own power. Wheatley's message of redemption and liberation was a significant part of her writing, as she sought to inspire others with her own story of redemption from enslavement. She was able to find her purpose in life and a newfound appreciation for her African heritage. She felt it was merciful for her to have discovered Christianity in the way she did.

Wheatley was seen as a symbol of Blackness and intelligence that could not be ignored or denied. Wheatley was seen as a symbol of black excellence, resilience, and determination. His life story was a testament to the strength of the African American community. His work was a profound reminder of the impact that black people could have on the world. Wheatley's writing

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<sup>36</sup>David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 178.

and works of art were powerful examples of African American intelligence and creativity. Her writing was often praised for its beauty, complexity, and insight, and her work was a source of pride and inspiration for many. Consequently, her poetry was celebrated by abolitionists, as they believed it was a strong statement against slavery and the dehumanization of African Americans.<sup>37</sup>

She saw the hypocrisy in the situation and compared her fellow slaves to the biblical Egyptian slaves, admitting that they shared the same desire for freedom. She was shocked by the hypocrisy of her fellow slaves, who despite being in the same dire situation, would not support a revolt against their oppressors. She understood that they were all in the same boat, and yet they refused to stand up for each other. The biblical Egyptian slaves were enslaved by Pharaoh and were freed by Moses. Similarly, the slaves in her situation were enslaved by the slaveholders and wanted to be freed.

In the letter she wrote in 1774 regarding slavery, she wrote, “God has implanted in every human breast a principle we call the Love of Freedom; it is impatient with oppression, and it pants for deliverance.” She has included subversive cries against slavery in some of her poems, but this letter is explicitly against slavery. In her poem, she describes herself as "impatient" and "pants" for freedom, as well as points out how obvious the problem should be. Soon after its publication, several newspapers covered it. Her freedom would not come for another four years.

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<sup>37</sup> A Spotlight on a Primary Source by Phillis Wheatley, “The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History,” Phillis Wheatley's poem on tyranny and slavery, 1772 | Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/phillis-wheatley%E2%80%99s-poem-tyranny-and-slavery-1772>.



Most Wheatley's themes are celebrations of America. During her correspondence with the nation's first president, George Washington, with whom she had later the privilege of meeting, she praised this nation as glorious "Columbia."<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the names of the colonial leaders who signed the attestation that authenticated and supported *Poems on Various Subjects* to support her work suggest that she was passionate about Virgin America and religiously fervent. They included Thomas Hutchinson, governor of Massachusetts. John Hancock; Andrew Oliver, lieutenant governor; James Bowdoin; and Reverend Mather Byles, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a fervent Wheatley supporter was Dr. Benjamin Rush. In her poetry, she defended defends her race by highlighting the experiences of African Americans and the struggles they have faced due to racism. She uses her poems to draw attention to the injustices faced by African Americans and to call for change. However, some argue that her poetry is harmful to the cause of racial justice. They argue that her focus on the negative experiences of African Americans reinforces stereotypes and does not empower African Americans to fight for change but creates a sense of victimhood.

As a free black woman from Boston, Wheatley married a free Black man John Peters in 1778. They had three children, but none of them survived. It was not possible to publish a second book of poetry. Her family depended on her to work as a scrubwoman in a boarding house while she continued to write poetry. As a result of complications during childbirth, Wheatley died in December 1784. Ultimately, Wheatley's skills as a writer and artist demonstrated that African Americans could benefit from education, as well as make an invaluable contribution to American

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<sup>38</sup> "A Short Analysis of Phillis Wheatley's 'His Excellency General Washington'," *Interesting Literature*, April 22, 2022, <https://interestingliterature.com/2022/04/phillis-wheatley-his-excellency-general-washington-analysis/>.

literature. Most importantly, her work was an invaluable aid to the abolitionist movement. Her poetry, representation, and moral critique served as a model for African American rhetoric as it attempted to articulate its resistance to the slave regime amid the backdrop of a world totalized by white power. In this regard, Phillis Wheatley 's work and life make a foundational contribution to what would later become the Black struggle for freedom.

## CHAPTER 2:

### The Reformist Sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr.

One century later, the Supreme Court decided in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* that there should be a separate but equal doctrine. The ruling in this Supreme Court case upheld a Louisiana state law that allowed for "equal but separate accommodations for white and colored races."<sup>39</sup> It began in 1896 when the Supreme Court rendered a decision known as the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision, which established the doctrine of separate but distinct accommodations as the law of the Land.<sup>40</sup> Separation was always strictly enforced without the slightest intention of being equal. The *Plessy* decision plunged African Americans into an abyss of oppression and exploitation. African Americans ended up being plunged into the abyss of exploitation, where they experienced the bleakness of nagging injustice.<sup>41</sup> During Reconstruction, Black Americans' political rights were affirmed by three constitutional amendments and numerous laws passed by Congress.<sup>42</sup> The *Plessy* decision established standards of "separate but equal laws."<sup>43</sup> King wanted to see a new

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<sup>39</sup> "Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)," National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration), accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/plessy-v-ferguson>.

<sup>40</sup> "Transcript of Dr. Martin Luther King's Speech at SMU on March 17, 1966," SMU, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.smu.edu/News/2014/mlk-at-smu-transcript-17march1966>.

<sup>41</sup> "Transcript of Dr. Martin Luther King's Speech at SMU on March 17, 1966," SMU, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.smu.edu/News/2014/mlk-at-smu-transcript-17march1966>.

<sup>42</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) | National Archives. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/plessy-v-ferguson>

<sup>43</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)," National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration), accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/plessy-v-ferguson>.

legal structure for freedom and justice. The new Jim Crow laws put African Americans in a state of poverty and oppression. This had a lasting effect on the African American population and created a culture of mistrust and fear which persists today.

## **2.1 Rediscovering Lost Values**

During the 1950s, Jim Crow laws prevented African Americans from participating equally in public life, particularly from voting. *Brown v. Board of Education* was a landmark case decided by the Supreme Court in 1954. Martin Luther King Jr. encouraged people to look beyond racial inequality and injustice and to rediscover the founding values of the United States: freedom, justice, and equality for all. He believed that by doing so, the country could come together to create a more just and equitable society. "Rediscovering Lost Values"<sup>44</sup> Articulates the compelling moral vision of King and the broader African American church celebrated each year on MLK day. This speech was a sermon delivered at Detroit's Second Baptist Church before the Montgomery bus boycott that elevated him to the national stage. It is a reminder that before King became a renowned activist and public figure, he was a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. His deep faith and commitment to the latter propelled him to become the former. The sermon's correct diagnosis and searing critique of modern western culture's moral relativism, in theory and practice, is as relevant today in 2023 as in 1954. King's sermon was an appeal to the power of faith to bridge the gap between a nation divided. It was an example of the early King, who was new to the fight for justice. It reflected his idealism. The later King would give a more realistic portrait. Even today, it speaks to a need to move beyond moral relativism and embrace a

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<sup>44</sup> "Rediscovering Lost Values," The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, September 23, 2021, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/rediscovering-lost-values-0>.

higher, shared moral code. King's commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ inspired him to fight for justice and equality in a divided society.

King asserts that, as modern people, "how we live has outdistanced the spiritual ends for which we live."<sup>45</sup> The profound problems the world faces cannot be solved with more information or more economic resources. Early in his ministry, King believed, much as white evangelicals did, that problem lies within the hearts and souls of human beings and results from leaving behind the value of there being a God-given ethical, social, and sacred fabric in our universe. King likens this to the story of Joseph and Mary accidentally leaving behind Jesus as a boy in Jerusalem while returning to Nazareth (Luke 2:41-52). King believed that the root of society's problems was not in its laws or governments but rather in its disregard for spiritual and moral values. He used the story of Jesus being left behind to illustrate the importance of reconnecting with our spiritual and ethical foundations to move forward. This early King had yet not offered a critique of the systems that held black people in oppression. He focused his attention on transforming the individual as the key to transforming society.

## **2.2 Facing the Challenges of the New Age**

The writings curated in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr* show how Dr. King struggled to mediate between his detractors and to advance civil rights through non-violent civil disobedience and resistance.<sup>46</sup> Social change was evident in

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<sup>45</sup> "Rediscovering Lost Values," The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, September 23, 2021, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/rediscovering-lost-values-0>.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Luther King and James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1991).

his address, delivered on December 3, 1956, at the First Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change in Montgomery, Alabama. King looked back at the success of the Montgomery bus boycotts and looked forward to an improved world in which "all men will respect the dignity and worth of all human personalities."<sup>47</sup> In this speech, he offered specific suggestions about how people should view their work.

### **2.3 Growth through the Struggle**

In the *Brown* decision of 1954, a central provision of segregationist policy, "separate but equal" education, was declared discriminatory. A year later, Black protesters using mass boycotts won their fight against the segregated bus system in Montgomery, Alabama. In his speech, "*Facing the Challenge of the New Age*,"<sup>48</sup> an optimistic and confident King described the philosophy behind the boycott.

He talks about fighting a systemic evil, not the people who may be caught up in this evil. It offers solutions to dealing with the challenges of this evil, as well as the retribution that follows. There are two solutions he offers, one of which is unity and one of which is confronting violence. He advocates for a peaceful approach to fighting evil, with the understanding that there will be consequences for those who use violence. He argues for a unified effort, understanding that only together we can successfully combat the evil that plagues America. In the speech, King begins with a commentary on the worldwide social and economic exploitation of people of color. King argues, "we must free ourselves from the narrow confines

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<sup>47</sup> " Martin Luther King and James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1991), 14.

<sup>48</sup> What Is the Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? - HuffPost.  
[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-is-the-legacy-of-dr\\_b\\_8953482](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-is-the-legacy-of-dr_b_8953482)

of our individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.”<sup>49</sup> This is a harsh call to action to love all of humanity. King argued, “Nonviolence seeks friendship and understanding with the opponent. Nonviolence does not seek to defeat the opponent. Nonviolence is directed against evil systems, forces, oppressive policies, and unjust acts, but not against persons. As a result of a reasonable compromise, both sides come up with a plan of action to resolve the injustice. Each act of reconciliation is one step closer to the 'Beloved Community.’”<sup>50</sup>

Martin Luther King Jr. frequently referenced the Exodus narrative as a motif throughout his speeches and writings. There was a time when King saw himself as Moses. King fought for the rights of his people against the Pharaoh of his day, the Jim Crow laws of the South that were prevalent at the time. Just as the Israelites struggled for freedom against the suffering, humiliation, and discrimination in Egypt, the Exodus played an explicit and implicit role in sustaining Black people through the pains of racism in America. Interestingly, the same Exodus also played a central part in the resistance to and the ongoing work of dismantling the suffering and humiliation of Black people in America.

For King, freedom is worth any cost:

“Finally, if we are to speed up the coming of the new age, we must have the moral courage to stand up and protest injustice wherever we find it. Wherever we find segregation, we must have the fortitude to resist it passively. I realize that this will mean suffering and sacrifice. It might even mean being sent to jail. If such is the case, we must be willing to fill up the jail houses in the South. It might even lead to physical death. However, if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing could be more honorable.”<sup>51</sup> There is

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Luther King and Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, NY: IPM Intellectual Properties Management, Inc. in association with Warner Books, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> The King Philosophy - Nonviolence365® - The King Center.  
<https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>

nothing in the whole world greater than freedom. It is worth paying for; it is worth losing a job; it is worth going to jail for. I would rather be a free pauper than a rich, enslaved person. I would rather die in abject poverty with my convictions than live in inordinate riches with a lack of self-respect.”<sup>52</sup>

King emphasized the idea that freedom is the greatest gift. This is the key sentiment expressed here. It is more significant than material wealth, status, or comfort. For King, sacrificing one's life to free their child from a life of psychological death is honorable. He maintains further that it is better to be a free pauper than a rich, enslaved person. It is worth going to jail or sacrificing one's job to maintain one's freedom. King demonstrated that even when faced with the ultimate price, freedom is worth the cost. For many, the only way to truly be free is to be willing to sacrifice everything for the cause, even if that means life itself.

King believed such freedom was a universal good and that African Americans should look beyond their own suffering to join with the oppressed in other parts of the world. In April 1967, American civil rights leader Martin Luther King delivered a speech at a New York church in which he criticized U.S. action in Vietnam and called for a change in policy.

"Somehow, this madness must cease. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam and the poor of America who is paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, death, and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as an American to the leaders of my nation. The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop must be ours. This is the message of the great Buddhist leaders of Vietnam. One of them recently wrote these words: "Each day the war goes on, the hatred increases in the hearts of the Vietnamese and those of humanitarian instinct. The Americans are forcing even

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<sup>51</sup> Paul's Letter to American Christians, Sermon Delivered to the ....  
<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/pauls-letter-american-christians-sermon-delivered-commission-ecumenical>

<sup>52</sup> “Facing the Challenge of a New Age," Address Delivered at the First Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change,” The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, May 24, 2021, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/facing-challenge-new-age-address-delivered-first-annual-institute-nonviolence>.



their friends into becoming their enemies. It is curious that the Americans, who calculate so carefully on the possibilities of military victory, do not realize that they are incurring deep psychological and political defeat in the process. The image of America will never again be the image of revolution, freedom, and democracy, but the image of violence and militarism."<sup>53</sup>

King claimed that the war was draining the resources of the United States and doing immense damage to the war-ravaged Vietnamese people.<sup>54</sup> He also argued that the war was morally wrong, that it was a war against the poor and a war against people of color. He argued that the war was perpetuating a cycle of violence that would lead to more violence in the future.

Beyond the global use of military power, King drew attention to the global economy and the ways that the advancement of technology has made it increasingly clear that no nation can exist in a vacuum. "I would like to deal with the challenges that we face today because of this triple revolution that is taking place today. First, we are challenged to develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone, no nation can live alone, and anyone who feels that he can live alone is sleeping through a great Revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one."<sup>55</sup> For King, the global economy is becoming increasingly connected. In this regard, King's words were prophetic. The challenges that the world now faces are often global in nature, such as climate change and global pandemics.

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<sup>53</sup> Martin Luther King and Cornel West, *The Radical King* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2016), 211.

<sup>54</sup> "“Beyond Vietnam,”” The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, September 22, 2021, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/beyond-vietnam>.

<sup>55</sup> "Martin Luther King, Jr. at Oberlin," "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www2.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/BlackHistoryMonth/MLK/CommAddress.html>.

## 2.4 Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution

Five days before his assassination, King delivered a speech at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., on April 4, 1968, called "*Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution*."

The speech urged society to remain attentive and engaged in the social, political, and economic transformations that were a part of the spirit of the times.

"There are all too many people who, in some great period of social change, fail to achieve the new mental outlooks that the new situation demands. There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that a great revolution is taking place in our world today. It is a social revolution, sweeping away the old order of colonialism. And in our own nation it is sweeping away the old order of slavery and racial segregation. The wind of change is blowing, and we see in our day and our age a significant development. Victor Hugo said on one occasion that there is nothing more powerful in all the world than an idea whose time has come. In a real sense, the idea whose time has come today is the idea of freedom and human dignity. Wherever men are assembled today, the cry is always the same, "We want to be free." And so, we see in our own world a revolution of rising expectations. The great challenge facing every individual graduating today is to remain awake through this social revolution."

As Dr. King said in his time, "all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change," one of the outstanding liabilities of life today. However, they fail to develop the new attitudes and mental responses that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution."<sup>56</sup> King saw so this as a time for a change, yet he was frustrated that there were still people who refused to recognize the changes and adapt to them. They were "sleeping through a revolution" because they weren't ready or willing to embrace the change that was happening around them. In context, missing out on an opportunity to take part if could potentially shape the future of one's country or community can be a heartbreaking experience.

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<sup>56</sup> "Martin Luther King, Jr. at Oberlin," "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www2.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/BlackHistoryMonth/MLK/CommAddress.html>.

Those who are asleep during a revolution may feel like they have let themselves and their community down and that they have missed out on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "It is a social revolution, sweeping away the old order of colonialism" is evidenced by the increased focus on international governance and human rights, as well as the emergence of post-colonial nations that have become more empowered, sovereign, and independent.

“And in our own nation it is sweeping away the old order of slavery and racial segregation.” For King, this meant replacing prejudice with justice, and hatred with love. It is bringing our people closer together and creating a more just and equitable society. It is ushering in a new era of hope and progress. This transformation is the result of decades of struggle, both in the courts and in the streets, to secure the basic rights and freedoms to which all people are entitled. It is a recognition that all people, regardless of their race, religion, or gender, deserve to be treated with respect and dignity and be given the same opportunities to succeed.

In a hopeful exhortation, King claimed, “The wind of change is blowing, and we see in our day and our age a significant development.” He believed that society was transitioning to a new era where technology was at the forefront, where human communities were becoming more interconnected, and where the possibilities were seemingly endless. King challenged humanity to develop a world in which all nations, individuals, and cultures are respected and appreciated. Serve yourself.

On February 4, 1968, at Martin Luther King Jr.'s home church, Ebenezer Baptist Church, in Atlanta, Georgia. Scholars have claimed that in this sermon, King eulogized himself. It is called "*The Drum Major Instinct*." He said,

“If any of you are around when I must meet my day, I do not want any long funeral. Moreover, if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long, tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize; that is not important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or 400 other awards; that is not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.”<sup>57</sup>

He wanted people to focus on his impact on the world and the legacy he left behind. He wanted to be remembered for the work he did and the lives he changed, not for awards or where he studied. Instead, emphasize how his contributions made a positive difference in the world and how his work will be remembered for years to come. For example, he developed an innovative method of protest that allowed people to resist more effectively and quickly. This method has been adopted by many around the world to lead peaceful protests to fight racial injustice in the United States.

Martin Luther King Jr. dedicated his life to making a better world and was a champion of peace and justice. He sought to bring about social change through non-violent means and worked to provide food, clothing, and care for those in need. He believed that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect and that love was the only way to make a lasting impact.

In the same speech, King celebrates, “Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness. Moreover, all the other shallow things will not matter. I will have money to leave behind. I will not have the fine luxuries and things of life to leave behind.

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<sup>57</sup> “Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ‘The Drum Major Instinct’ Sermon Turns 50,” Beacon Broadside: A Project of Beacon Press, February 4, 2018, <https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2018/02/martin-luther-king-jrs-the-drum-major-instinct-sermon-turns-50.html>.

However, I just want to leave a committed life behind."<sup>58</sup> The celebratory closing demonstrated the value King placed on ideals –justice, peace, and righteousness – over material possessions.

In his final sermon entitled delivered on the eve of his assassination at Mason Temple Church in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968, King concludes:

"Well, I do not know what will happen now. We have some difficult days ahead. However, it does not matter to me now. Because I have been to the mountaintop, I do not mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. However, I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. Moreover, God has allowed me to go up to the mountaintop. Moreover, I have looked over it. Moreover, I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. However, tonight, I want you to know that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I do not fear any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."<sup>59</sup>

In effect, the conclusion attests to the consistency in King's values from the beginning of his work until his untimely end. He had devoted all to the movement for freedom just as he had challenged others to do. Ultimately, King closes his last sermon with the culmination of the exodus story: he stands in the tradition of Moses and sees the Promised Land.

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<sup>58</sup> "Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'The Drum Major Instinct' Sermon Turns 50," Beacon Broadside: A Project of Beacon Press, February 4, 2018, <https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2018/02/martin-luther-king-jrs-the-drum-major-instinct-sermon-turns-50.html>.

<sup>59</sup> "I've Been to the Mountaintop" by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>.

## CHAPTER 3

### **“Nothing Is More Sacred Than the Liberation of Black People:” Albert Cleage’s Method to Dismantle White Supremacy**

According to Albert Cleage, Jr., "there is no greater dignity than liberating black people."<sup>60</sup> The pronouncement guides the Black Christian Nationalist Movement. That struggle for liberation is still evident in ongoing battles against structural racism in mass incarceration and economic disparity and against the vestiges of the slave regime and Jim Crow, segregated schools, and redlining. Cleage was ahead of his time in terms of the way he addressed community building, raising children, and education. This chapter analyzes how Cleage advocated for economic empowerment, criminal justice reform, educational equality, and access to building strong communities. I read Albert B. Cleage’s work as an exercise in radical politics oriented towards apocalyptic rupture.

In the 1960s, Detroit was rife with racial conflict. Black life was surveilled and contained by various mechanisms of enforcement, particularly the police. The Cynthia Scott killing was an example. On July 5, 1963, Cynthia Scott was walking home with a companion, Charles Marshall. Detroit police officer, Theodore Spicher, accosted the couple and, without cost, attempted to arrest her. As she walked away, he shot her twice, killing her. As Albert Cleage, Jr. protested Cynthia Scott's arrest; he saw many young black men targeted by police for

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<sup>60</sup> Jawanza Eric Clark, “Nothing Is More Sacred than the Liberation of Black People: Albert Cleage’s Method as Unfulfilled Theological Paradigm Shift,” *Albert Cleage Jr. and the Black Madonna and Child*, 2016, pp. 39-57, [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54689-0\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54689-0_3).

abuse. According to Cleage, the Detroit Police Department's discretionary policy of arresting Black people for investigations is based on mere suspicion without "reasonable doubt."<sup>61</sup> Evidence amounts to mass racial profiling. As a result, he claimed that many "African American arrests were illegal and that "any citizen has the right to resist an arrest."<sup>62</sup> Officer Speicher, therefore, was "guilty of murder."<sup>63</sup> Because Cynthia Scott had every right to refuse to obey his illegal and arbitrary orders, Cleage argued that such a policy was a violation of the Fourth Amendment, which prohibits unreasonable searches and seizures. It was also a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, which guarantees all citizens of the US equal protection under the law. Thus, Scott had the right to resist her arrest, and Speicher's use of deadly force was unjustified.

During traffic stops, police officers used explicit language toward African Americans. When they didn't comply, they would assault them, detain them, and assault them again. In response, Cleage argued, "the Black community must control the police who patrol the Black ghetto."<sup>64</sup> He wanted the African American community to not tolerate oppression and

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<sup>61</sup> Jawanza Eric Clark, "Nothing Is More Sacred than the Liberation of Black People: Albert Cleage's Method as Unfulfilled Theological Paradigm Shift," *Albert Cleage Jr. and the Black Madonna and Child*, 2016, pp. 39-57, [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54689-0\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54689-0_3).

<sup>62</sup> *Protesting the Cynthia Scott killing · Detroit under fire: Police violence, crime politics, and the struggle for racial justice in the Civil Rights Era · Omeka Beta Service*, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://policing.umhistorylabs.lsa.umich.edu/s/detroitunderfire/page/protesting-the-cynthia-scott-killing>.

<sup>63</sup> *Protesting the Cynthia Scott killing · Detroit under fire: Police violence, crime politics, and the struggle for racial justice in the Civil Rights Era · Omeka Beta Service*, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://policing.umhistorylabs.lsa.umich.edu/s/detroitunderfire/page/protesting-the-cynthia-scott-killing>.

<sup>64</sup> *Protesting the Cynthia Scott killing · Detroit under fire: Police violence, crime politics, and the struggle for racial justice in the Civil Rights Era · Omeka Beta Service*, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://policing.umhistorylabs.lsa.umich.edu/s/detroitunderfire/page/protesting-the-cynthia-scott-killing>.

police brutality by succumbing to white supremacy. He urged the Black community to take charge of their own safety and not be subjected to the oppressive power that had been forced upon them. He saw this as the only way for the community to move forward toward freedom.

In the summer of 1967, it saw urban riots in several large cities, including Newark, New York, New Jersey, and Detroit. A hundred fires raged in Detroit. City blocks were under siege, and people were forced to leave. Forty-three people died, and over a thousand people were injured. The damage cost the city \$50 million. Triggered by a combination of the long-term economic decline of Detroit, the city's high unemployment rate, police brutality, racial tensions, and the civil unrest of the time, the riots were a major consequence of the social and economic injustices suffered by African Americans in Detroit, and they exposed the systemic racism and inequality that had been plaguing the city for decades.

In the same year, Albert B. Cleage, Jr. launched his church, black Madonna, and child, at Central United Church of Christ and the Black Christian Nationalist Movement in America. Which was seen as a symbolic gesture intended to emphasize the importance of African-American identity, as well as to help bring attention to the injustices experienced by African-Americans in Detroit. It was a sign of hope and a call to action to fight inequality and systemic racism and the symbolic beginning of Cleage's radical theology of Black Christian Nationalism. Black Christian Nationalism was a turning point in the history of social justice in Detroit, and it continues to serve as a reminder of the power of collective action in the face of injustice. This unveiling also marked a methodological shift with radical ecclesiological ramifications. By creating a physical representation of the power of the people, the unveiling provided a tangible way for the community to come together and make their voices heard. This event not only had



immediate implications for how people interact with one another but also set a precedent for how to fight injustice in the future. Also, to fuel the black revolution in America, Cleage restructured the black church in such a way that it became the engine of the black revolution. "The black church must free the minds of Black people from psychological identification with a white society that seeks their destruction in every way," he said. "If black people dream of integration, they perpetuate the mechanisms that enslave them. As a result, they have been programmed to destroy themselves. For black men to be liberated from the tyranny of traditional Protestant theological methods, the Black church must fight to free their minds to restructure or destroy these institutions that perpetuate their enslavement. However, for such a restructuring to succeed, black churches, pastors, and theologians had to be freed."<sup>65</sup> For Cleage, traditional Protestant theology has long been a tool of the oppressive white power structure. It has been used to uphold the status quo and to keep Black people in positions of subordination. He believed that for Black people to be liberated, then they must reject these oppressive religious structures and create their own systems that reflect their own values and beliefs.

### **3.1 Black Power: Cleage's Stance Against Police Brutality**

Cleage desired a Black-led religious organization that empowered Black people and protected them from systemic racism. Religious organizations such as the Nation of Islam have provided a model where Black people created a new system that reflected their values and beliefs. Cleage wanted African American Christians to do the same. Cleage articulated a clear vision that granted black communities' autonomy, full employment, and freedom from police

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<sup>65</sup> "The Black Church," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/godinamerica-black-church/>.

brutality, among other benefits. Additionally, he called for the end of racial discrimination in the labor market and the respect of radical political power. In addition, he argued that black people should have the right to determine their own destinies.

In the Debate on Police Brutality in 1971, he says,

“Everybody knows police brutality exists for police officers to take our time to waste the time of an entire nation talk about they never heard of police brutality they don’t know what black people are talking about they can’t prove it they know in Detroit. Any time a black person is brutalized by the police he goes into court, and he’s arrested for assault and battery now the basic issue is so simple, and nobody will touch it because you’re afraid to touch it you are deliberately trying to evade the issue.”

Cleage saw disproportionate levels of violence and injustice against black people in the criminal justice system as a direct result of police brutality.

### **3.2 Black Power and Education**

African Americans in the colonial world were mostly denied access to formal education. Those who did manage to gain access were often limited to a few basic skills, such as reading and writing. African Americans were not allowed to attend college, and most were not even allowed to attend public schools. For Cleage, the lack of education was a source of motivation. He worked hard to obtain an education, eventually graduating with honors from Wayne University and moving on to earn a doctorate in philosophy. Later he became an outspoken advocate for African American civil rights. For instance, he organized boycotts of businesses that would not hire African Americans and held protests to bring public attention to the problems of his community.<sup>66</sup> He also established several organizations to help African Americans access

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<sup>66</sup> Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1989), 126.

education and employment opportunities. He articulates his program, Black Christian Nationalism, in two monographs, *The Black Messiah* and *Black Christian Nationalism*.

### **3.3 The Black Messiah**

Cleage believes God is a Black Messiah and not a White Messiah.

*The Black Messiah* is an attempt to build a Christian theology for the Black church that is focused on the liberatory needs of Black People. Cleage States, “the present crisis, involving as it does the black man’s struggle for survival in America, demands the resurrection of a Black church with its own Black Messiah.”<sup>67</sup> He argues that the Black Church should not only be a source of spiritual guidance but also provide an opportunity for African Americans to shape their political and economic destiny in the United States. As a cultural center, the black church in Cleage's vision would empower the African American community and create a sense of solidarity and collective identity.

Cleage's theology is rooted in liberation theology, which has had a significant impact on the Black Church. It has inspired African Americans to embrace their identity and resist oppression and injustice. Cleage's theology has been widely accepted and embraced by Black Christians.

For Cleage, an individual cannot rebel against the opposition. An Individual cannot deconstruct systems of oppression alone, but they can speak up. Only a person who is a witness to unfair or biased treatment or unlawful discrimination can fight for power and not accept the

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<sup>67</sup> Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1989), 9.

institutional conceptions of our current reality. As an African American man, I never stopped standing up for and fighting for the power of being recognized as a man. However, the most significant aspect of both race and identity is how he thinks of God as a Black Messiah.<sup>68</sup> It is imperative for the Black Church to be concerned about African American male influence in society. This is a critical theological statement because Jesus has met the social, economic, and political needs of African Americans. Cleage chastised African Americans who believed that if they behaved in ways that were acceptable to white power structures that, they would merit and be given the social, political, and economic rewards enjoyed by their white counterparts. He admonished African American men to become more proactive in their own development and take more ownership of their lives. Become more involved in their communities and be encouraged to take more risks and pursue more opportunities. The Black Church can help provide the mentorship and support that can help African American men achieve their goals. All of this was apparent in the life of Albert Cleage Jr. with Black nationalism and Black power; he understood the process of Black faith. Albert Cleage Jr. was an example of a Black man who was empowered by his faith and his community. He used his faith to speak out against injustices, and he used his community to create opportunities for advancement and growth. His Shrine of the Black Madonna continues to be an example of how the Black Church can provide mentorship and support to help African American men reach their goals and become more involved in their communities.

He argued that the church should advocate for Black Power, not just as a political concept, but as a spiritual one as well. For Cleage, who disputed nonviolence's value both as a

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<sup>68</sup> Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1989), 43.

political strategy and a philosophy, the urban rebellions of the late 1960s. Black Power became an important part of his theology. He argued that the church should be a tool for liberation and should take a stand against white supremacy. Cleage wrote, “the black man cannot accept America as it is.”<sup>69</sup> He argued that nonviolence had been ineffective in achieving true liberation and that Black people needed to take more direct action to fight oppression. He believed that the church should be a place of refuge and a tool to fight against white supremacy and to empower Black people to take responsibility for their own liberation and not rely on the goodwill of white people.

### **3.4 Black Christian Nationalism**

Cleage’s moral compass is as clear as his theology: "if it supports the liberation struggle of Black people, then it is appropriate. If it is in opposition to the liberation struggle of Black people, then it is bad." By the late 1960s, Rev. Cleage, Jr., had become an important figure in both Black Christian Nationalism and the Second Civil Rights Community in Detroit<sup>70</sup> In this way, African American religion and African American theology were linked to African American nationalism and African American power. He was, notes theologian James H. Cone, "one of the few black ministers who has embraced Black Power as a religious concept and has sought to reorient the Church-community based on it."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1989), 127.

<sup>70</sup> Albert B. Cleage and George Bell, *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* (Detroit, MI: Luxor Publishers of the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church, 1987), 33.

<sup>71</sup> Cone, James H. *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994.

Cleage used his church and congregation to inaugurate the Black Christian nationalist movement. He explained this in his 1972 book *Black Christian Nationalism: A New Direction for the Black Church*.

"In its place, we will build a Black Liberation movement that derives its basic religious insights from African spirituality, its character from African communalism, and its revolutionary direction from Jesus, the Black Messiah. We will make Black Christian Nationalism the cornerstone of Black men's struggle for power and survival. We will build a Black communal society that can protect the minds and bodies of Black men, women, and children everywhere."<sup>72</sup>

Cleage fought to get the Detroit Board of Education to hire Black teachers and provide a decent education for African American children.<sup>73</sup> Cleave would argue today that the struggle for integration is far from over. It remains a struggle for policing to provide safety and security for all people regardless of race; the policy prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, and religion.<sup>74</sup> The reason being the wealth gap is now more comprehensive than it was under the policy and system of segregation or discrimination on grounds other than race. In fact, between the 1970s and 2020s, African Americans echoed civil rights and anti-war marches. A spike in the cost of living revived the painful memories of a decadelong economic malady of high inflation and economic stagnation. However, between the

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<sup>72</sup> Albert B. Cleage and George Bell, *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* (Detroit, MI: Luxor Publishers of the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church, 1987, 16.

<sup>73</sup> Cleage, Albert B., and George Bell, XXXV.

<sup>74</sup> "Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Race, Color, National Origin, Sex, Religion, or Age in Law Enforcement Programs, Services, and Activities Receiving Assistance from the United States Department of Justice," The United States Department of Justice, December 16, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/nondiscrimination-basis-race-color-national-origin-sex-religion-or-age-law-enforcement-programs>.

1770s and 1970s, African Americans waged a war of words and resistance against the United States government in their fight for personal freedom. Rev. Cleage thought it was essential to change the idea of a "white" Jesus to a "black" Jesus for the African American population and establish national liberation. Others like Phillis Wheatley address white people's attitudes towards the "sable race" or those of African descent. She then contrasts outer darkness with inner darkness, arguing that African people are equally capable of reaching salvation and accessing the "angelic train." The term "angelic" is strongly associated with heaven, creating an effective contrast with the imagery of darkness.

Cleage says, "We have too much money tied up in Black churches to just turn and leave them. We need them in the Liberation Struggle. Which means that we must change the church radically."<sup>75</sup> I know that there will be many African American churches all over the United States, and there will be pious exhortations to African American congregations.

For Cleage, African Americans should be in control of their own destiny and institutions. He would like African Americans to be able to protect what we build. He would like for "The church to fight for African American community control of their schools. For he believes "white people can no longer be permitted to destroy the minds of Black children."<sup>76</sup> The message of the heroic Bible stories of the Hebrew Bible were prophets who used their voice to restore the

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<sup>75</sup> Albert B. Cleage and George Bell, *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* (Detroit, MI: Luxor Publishers of the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church, 1987, 34.

<sup>76</sup> Albert B. Cleage and George Bell, *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* (Detroit, MI: Luxor Publishers of the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church, 1987, 247.

Israelite's identity to its original identity, which Cleage took to be a black identity. He worked to bind the Black church and black people together under black theology and black power.

### **Conclusion**

This paper frames Phillis Wheatley's work as an exercise in subversive politics, Martin Luther King Jr.'s work as an exercise in reformist politics, and Albert Cleage's work as an exercise in radical politics. By taking this approach, Phillis Wheatley's work is an exercise in subversive politics. By writing about themes such as freedom, justice, and religion, Wheatley was able to push back against the oppressive systems of slavery and racism. Her work served as a form of protest the established order and enabled her to express her own unique perspective. For instance, in her poem *On Being Brought to America*, she celebrates her survival despite the hardships of the journey and her resilience despite the oppressive conditions. She conveys her hope for a better future, and her words have inspired many generations of African Americans.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s work was an exercise in reformist politics. He sought to create a more just society by challenging oppressive systems of power and inequality and by encouraging non-violent civil disobedience. He worked to create a society built on the principles of fairness, justice, and equality. For instance, he passionately advocated for the creation of social programs to assist the poor and for laws that ensured fair and equal employment opportunities for all races. He also fought for civil rights and for an end to racial segregation. He believed that everyone should have access to the same opportunities regardless of race, gender, or wealth. He was a champion of non-violent protests to bring about social change.



Albert Cleage Jr works as an exercise in radical politics. He was a leader who believed in the Black Power movement. He argued that African Americans needed to create their institutions and take control of their destiny to achieve true freedom. Albert Cleage Jr was a leader who believed in the Black Power movement. He argued that African Americans needed to create their institutions and control their destiny to achieve true freedom. He believed that African Americans should have control of their economy, education, the justice system, and other aspects of life that could help them achieve true equality. He argued that African Americans should embrace their culture and history instead of assimilating into white supremacy. He embraced the idea of black power. He sought to empower African Americans by encouraging economic self-sufficiency, establishing black-owned businesses, and pushing for more political representation. He also encouraged the black community to practice self-determination and self-reliance.

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