Black Religious Leadership in the Public and Political Spheres: A Critical Analysis

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Religion

May 14, 2021

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This dissertation is dedicated to the enduring memory of my late grandparents,
Hazel Mae Alene Brooks, Isaac King, Jr., and Margaret Jewel King
and to my late advisor,
Dale P. Andrews, Ph.D.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my committee members for their profound contributions to my academic development and success. From coursework to conversation, I have gleaned so much from your intellect and insight. To John S. McClure, you have pushed me to be sharp and precise in my thinking and writing and have impacted my pedagogy in innumerable ways. To Hortense J. Spillers, you have forever changed the way I think about the idea of black culture, and it has been a privilege to be a student of yours. To Emilie M. Townes, you have been a guiding light since I was a master's student, and I thank you for seeing and supporting my academic pursuits then and now. Finally, to my advisor, Victor Anderson, I thank you for the countless hours of tutelage and training, for your intellectual and collegial generosity, and for being a mentor and friend of the highest order.

I would like to thank the Forum for Theological Exploration, the Lilly Foundation, and the Louisville Institute for grant support as I completed this project.

To a cadre of black men who have been brothers – Joshua Brandon Bennett, Jamall Andrew Calloway, Wesley Jarel Morris, and Jeremy Scott Vinson – I thank you for your consistency and courage, your humor and brilliance, your belief in all that I am and can be. You are written into these pages.

To Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, my sister in the struggle, my co-laborer in academic life, thank you for a friendship forged in truth, love, and accountability.

To Rufus Burnett, Jr., thank you for the many evenings of conversation and laughter that sharpened my thinking and enhanced my life in Nashville.

To my immediate family – my mother, Karen Corner, and my siblings Kenneth Brooks, Kellen Brooks, Kristopher Brooks, Kary Choice, Karis Choice, and Karlis Pulley – and the extended Brooks, King, and Ridgell families, thank you all for continual love, support, and encouragement. I hope I have made you all proud.

To the extended community that has journeyed with me throughout this process, thank you for your faith and comfort, your encouragement and your belief, and for holding me accountable to a deep purpose and a strong vision. I am because you are.

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Introduction

On Wednesday, May 25, 2016, near the intersection of Mount and Presbury Streets, the 148th gathering of West Wednesday convened in West Baltimore at the Tubman House, an abandoned row home turned community center.[1] This gathering was one in a long series of weekly assemblies led by Tawanda Jones in protest of the July 18th, 2013, killing of her brother, Tyrone Antonio West, by Baltimore police officers. In attendance at this gathering was prominent black pastor and public figure Jamal Harrison Bryant, founder of the Empowerment Temple African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Baltimore, MD.

As Bryant departed, Baltimore community activist PFK Boom (Davon Neverdon) confronted him on the sidewalk. In the brief encounter, Boom criticized Bryant for his shortcomings in public leadership. Boom began this colorful exchange with a brief but significant assertion: "I'm the streets, man." His words function in multiple ways: as a naming of Boom's orientation to and affinity with the public community that informs his organizing; as a means of differentiating himself from Bryant's social and political posture; and, intentionally or not, as an affirmation of his capacity as a representative speaker for "the streets." Boom's verbal salvo suggested that he assumed a similar representative capacity and responsibility in Bryant, as he reminded the pastor "you got our people all up in your church…you supposed to led (sic) these people."[2] Boom communicates an implicit set of expectations from Bryant's role as a minister.

[1] Baltimore BLOC, "Jamal Bryant G CHECKED by PFK Boom & Shy Lady Heroin," *YouTube* video, 3:09, May 25, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_ECdKuAgxo&feature=youtu.be.
[2] Ibid.

Boom chastised Bryant for being a latecomer to the various organized actions in Baltimore: "Tyrone [West] been on the ground like…300 and something days, you down here now."[3] But beyond the temporal concerns, Boom's criticism extended into the qualitative effects of Bryant's compromised presence, a presence Boom read as death-dealing and in alignment with problematic authorities in the city of Baltimore: "And then you fucking with our oppressors…you fucking with [Mayor Stephanie] Rawlings-Blake and all of them, man. You tryna kill us man…the streets feel like you killin' us, man."[4] Boom marked Bryant as a familiar other, a simultaneous friend of the Baltimore establishment and foe of the Baltimore citizenry. Once more, Bryant's proximity to the community supported a reasonable expectation of meaningful presence, while also underscoring the potential for his perceived absence or political loyalties to be read as intimately betraying. Bryant, by any measure, was deeply embedded in the milieu of Baltimore social and political life, and as such, his performance within that context came under great scrutiny.

The climax of the encounter featured Boom urging Bryant to leave the city permanently. Boom's sentiments again illuminated the representational function of his rhetoric: "Don't come down here no more. Boom said it. Me! As a man! The streets don't want you here. I'm speaking for them."[5] However, the intensely personal nature of his words cannot be overlooked. Even as Boom insists that he speaks as proxy for a community of people, his assertions are reinforced by particular confrontational language that reminds us that at the heart, this is a conflict between two grown black men.

[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

I describe this scene in detail as a way of delving into the various implications of this amplified rhetorical battle. First, a host of power relations are crystalized through this encounter. One can observe how the conflict between Boom and Bryant is a struggle along lines of social location and social distance, orientation to and affiliation with the political establishment, notions of sacred and secular roles and responsibilities, and intra-racial conflicts around representational authority. All at once, the contention between Boom and Bryant is just as much about interpersonal dispute as it is about conflicting approaches to realizing the social, material, and political flourishing of Baltimore's black citizenry.

Second, the virality of this encounter depends upon Bryant's own recognizance as a public figure and minister. Noticeably, the events in question are initiated by Boom as Bryant departs, seemingly unaware what is about to transpire. Furthermore, a camera is recording them even before the conversation begins, suggesting an anticipatory posture. A public dispute on the city street is hardly a remarkable or unusual event in and of itself. Additionally, in an age of smart phones and portable video devices, the recording of seemingly mundane or quotidian occurrences is common. However, these features, when coupled with geographical and ideological contexts, contribute to a discursive landscape in which Boom's vigorous speech thoroughly and swiftly disrupts Bryant's perceived authority. Bryant's rhetorical disarmament is accented both by the differential between his and Boom's public profiles and the audiovisual repetition of this event over time. The prolific minister who thrives on his verbal prowess is humbled and muted by the forthright, no-nonsense activist.

Third, this scene presents a thoroughly masculine-centered conflict. It is not merely the fact of two black men engaged in argument. Rather, the entire performance – aesthetically, rhetorically, and contextually –buttresses black representative authority by way of

androcentrism. Women are audibly and visually peripheral to the recorded scene. While the voices of women are heard in the background as Boom and Bryant engage one another, the first woman to speak on screen, a rapper by the name of Shy Lady Heroin, enters as a corollary to the main dialogue. Her brief rap, which critiques Bryant as well as other Baltimore city leaders, comes across as a prepared coda to the preceding dialogue. Her rhetorical entry is displaced from direct engagement with Bryant; she speaks *about*, but never *to* him. Boom's own words belie a particular emphasis on his status as a man, seemingly as a way of underscoring his authority to dismiss Bryant from the city. His final words to Bryant accentuated the point: "Empower what? Dis dick, nigga!"[6] On the basis of literal and figurative manhood, Boom asserts his claim to representational authority over and against Bryant.

I interpret this scene as an instance of what literary scholar Erica Edwards calls "the *charismatic scenario*, a cosmology, mythology, and performative technology for African American mass mobilization that has structured public desires for black political leadership throughout the long twentieth century, from Reconstruction to the present."[7] The conflict between Boom and Bryant is an arranged scenario that reveals an attempt to claim and authorize leadership supremacy through the performance of word and deed. It reflects a larger, longstanding script that has been the dominant logic of popular black sociopolitical leadership in the United States. That logic has privileged figures whose speech, aesthetics, and comportment align with a performative ideal. Particularly, this performative regime has been oriented around charismatic male religio-political personalities. As such, much of the public discourse on black

[6] Ibid.
[7] Erica Edwards, *Charisma and the Fiction of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), ix.

political leadership, especially since the civil rights era of the mid-twentieth century, has been dominated by the narrative hagiography of leaders in this mold.

This narrative speaks, in some degrees, to the social demand for such leaders. In no small way, this demand is connected to the historical position of black clergymen as both wide-ranging representatives for black communities and public figures afforded a hearing with white audiences. As such, black clergymen were well situated as public arbiters of the communicative conditions between black religion and politics. However, a problem arises when such historical arrangements are accepted as always and already structuring the past, present, and future(s) of black sociopolitical discourse. As the discord between Boom and Bryant suggests, there is not universal assent to these assumed hierarchies. Yet, such moments have not stalled the reproductive impetus to groom, ratify, and elevate leaders in the selfsame fashion.

The histories of black social movements reveal the extent to which sociopolitical change has depended upon collaborative, grassroots efforts carried out by the frequently unsung and unseen. Contemporary coalitions such as the Movement for Black Lives reflect a veritable ecosystem of decentralized groups and leaders not bound to traditional frameworks for social change. These realities coexist with the ongoing distillation of complex struggles for black freedom into heroic stories of exceptional leaders rising above the fray to articulate the hopes and aims of the black masses. There has been a perennial narrative concern oriented around the question Robert Penn Warren posed in the title of his civil rights oral history: who speaks for the Negro?[8]

Who, indeed, speaks for the Negro, for the black masses? At first glance, such a query seems anachronistic in an era marked by the fragmentation of the boundaries, aims, interests, and

[8] Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

aesthetics of black life and politics. It seems implausible that any *one* figure can hold together these myriad concerns in any sustainable way. That being said, the twentieth century black religio-political tradition reveals a leadership genealogy of sorts situated *precisely* around these sorts of representative figures. That genealogy is the product of social, cultural, and historical contingencies. Arguably, from the civil rights era to the present, three people emerged as the dominant personalities of this genre of public expression: the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, Sr., and the Reverend Al Sharpton. These three men – black Baptist clergymen, civil rights leaders, and political activists – have at different times been the most visible spokespersons for black sociopolitical interests in the twentieth century and beyond. Their relationships to one another and to their discursive contexts help to explicate the phenomenon and limits of black representational leadership at the religio-political nexus.

This dissertation closely reads the public discourses of three monumental figures in black religious discourse - Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Jackson, and Al Sharpton – in order to trace how a personality-centered model of black public leadership has emerged and sustained itself through the fusion of oral communicative strategies and charismatic action. I argue that these three figures are emblematic of different communicative typologies that are contingent upon the unique historical, cultural, and aesthetic spheres in which they are embedded. As such, their forms of leadership are neither inevitable nor accidental; rather, these forms constitute powerful narrative structures through which these figures have effectively 1) bolstered their identity and authority as spokespersons for black sociopolitical interests, and 2) engaged in public theological praxis. Their varied measures of success notwithstanding, I assert that we must ultimately reimagine the possible forms and content of black public leadership beyond the limited scope and reproductive possibilities engendered by black Christian clergymen.

Though King, Jackson, and Sharpton each practice differing narrative styles in their ascent to public prominence, this project does not aim at a mere comparative analysis of the three. Rather, it interprets the dynamic relationship between their moments in order to decipher the overarching forces that bring about these narrative profiles. This project charts the collective aspects of the public sphere wherein King, Jackson, and Sharpton become part of a larger communicative drama of speech and action. This evolving public sphere impacts these figures in such a way that, despite their shared classification as black Christian ministers, they manifest starkly different narrative profiles in their quests to name and address the complex social, political, and theological concerns of a black American constituency.

Chapters 1 and 2 trace how the ethos of the black preacher's socio-ecclesial role is carried over into the functions of black religious leaders in the public sphere. I assert that black religious leaders in the twentieth century and beyond have been able to secure a public following in part through their merging of oral communicative strategies and charismatic action drawn from the vein of African American preaching and clerical traditions. I examine how these roles and performances of black religious leadership unfold within public spheres, and how they function within the dramatization of black public leadership.

Chapters 3 – 5 examine scenarios of black religious leadership in the lives and work of King, Jackson, and Sharpton. In recounting of the rise of charismatic leadership in African American political culture, Erica Edwards describes the *charismatic scenario* as "a malleable historical container, a loosely scripted series of directions that serves as the basis for reenactment, ritual, and role-playing, and other forms of performance that transmit and transport history and historical knowledge."[9] The charismatic scenario serves as a structuring fiction; it

[9] Edwards, *Charisma,* 19.

organizes familiar accounts of power, leadership, and aesthetic presentation by guiding the placement and movement of the given actors. With repetition, these accounts solidify as social, political, and historical realities: stories that become dominant frames of collective memory. The repeated use of the charismatic scenario establishes a *charismatic aesthetic*, composed of various elements and acts that (re)construct political authority. Black charismatic leadership takes on not only discrete form, but also clear style. Sight, sound, and affect are intertwined in ways that evoke old patterns and new improvisations on themes of authority.[10] The charismatic scenario situate figures in and before the world, as recipients and reproducers of a tradition of leadership.

Chapter 3 interrogates the charismatic scenario of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (August 28, 1963). While the speech is one of the iconic moments in the cultural memory of this event, I dig into the various elements that help construct the social and political stage on which the speech unfolds. I engage the correspondence between black queer lawyer, activist, and later Episcopal priest Pauli Murray and A. Philip Randolph, the chair of the march's organizing committee, wherein Murray decries the disparity between black women's active grassroots labor and their virtual invisibility in the realms of public leadership and policymaking. I also discuss the extensive role of Anna Arnold Hedgeman, the lone woman on the March's planning committee, and how her perspective on the March's events reflects the troubling gender politics entangled in the representation of black leadership on the public stage. King's speech, even in its declaration of a utopian vision, rhetorically reinforces a notion of singular moral leadership and its particularly masculine formations and embodiments. I situate an analysis of the speech within Eboni Marshall Turman's discussion of the moral problem of "making men" through a kind of "Morehousian ethos"

[10] Ibid.

cultivated by Benjamin E. Mays, who served as president of Morehouse College and as a highly influential mentor of King's. I argue that the leadership model that evolves from King's public engagement is ultimately bound up in contingent factors that are not readily repeatable or necessarily as effective in evolving sociopolitical contexts.

Chapter 4 looks ahead to Jesse Jackson's address at the 1988 Democratic National Convention. Jackson, as an acolyte of King, retains some of the contours of King's public leadership style, but makes a distinctive turn towards electoral politics. Jackson's speech, in particular, moves towards a more lyrical style distinguished from King's more traditional and deliberate oratory. I draw upon Adolph Reed's pointed critique of the state of twentieth century African American politics, an era he argues is marked by "a charismatic model of political authority and a corollary, intransigent assumption of black attitudinal uniformity."[11] Reed asserts that that Jackson's ascent to consideration for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination was grounded in his claims to being an authentic representative of black interests, claims that are tied to an organic leadership style which Reed understands to be anti-democratic and anti-procedural. In the context of his address, Jackson, as black preacher and rising politico, constituted a potential vessel for drawing together a broad swath of black leaders, sociopolitical interests, and constituencies into a unified whole. However, at the same time, the unifying possibility of his ideological symbolism was challenged by a perceived lack of political substance behind his claims to moral leadership, a category Reed argues has no categorical significance in the political world.

Chapter 5 takes up Al Sharpton's 2014 eulogy for Ferguson, MO, resident Michael Brown, who was murdered by police officer Darren Wilson. This chapter explores Sharpton's

[11] Adolph Reed, *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 32.

reframing and deployment of the religio-political leadership pattern of King and Jackson. I argue that Sharpton is emblematic of the expansion of the visual sphere of black popular culture, evidenced by the hypervisibility of his leadership activity and his destabilization of normative categories of political performance and engagement. His ongoing visual transformations reflect one aspect of his multifaceted adaptation to the dynamic cultural circumstances he inhabits. However, the underlying patterns of his leadership practices remain tethered to the models he inherits via King and Jackson. I draw upon Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* to help contextualize the sociopolitical stakes that engender radically different approaches to the question of black liberation from previous generations, as well as the tensions that arise in that departure from Sharpton's approach.

The dissertation concludes with reflection on the long arc of black public leadership at the intersection of religion and politics, evaluating how the tactics and aesthetics of black religion and politics have necessarily shifted in light of contemporary concerns. In the end, these developments raise questions of whether we have reached the limits of established representational leadership, and how we might creatively reimagine the communicative frames of public theology and politics beyond the scope of singular charismatic figures.

Chapter 1

Black Preachers and Black Preaching: Historical Formations and Contemporary Challenges

In her 1933 essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston offers a beautifully comprehensive sketch of the unique style and substance of black expressive culture. Beyond a merely descriptive account of particular activities, Hurston makes an important claim about black life and being from the onset: "The Negro's universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama."[12] The unique ability to mark speech, movement, and affect in others gestures towards a sense of the everyday as an occasion for stylized expression. Every moment carries the potential for illumined illustration. This is not playacting, but the elevation of common speech and practice to the level of art. Hurston reads the linguistic offerings of African American people as powerful acts of adornment and embellishment, trafficking in beautiful metaphor and double description, proving the inexhaustibility of beauty and flair.

If, as Hurston asserts, drama lies at the core of black life and expression, it stands to reason that one could view the breadth of black life and culture as some larger dramatic fabric wherein particular scenes of speech and performance become embedded in public and personal

[12] Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard (F. Ungar Publishing Company, 1970), 24.

consciousness. Among available forms, the practices of black preaching have a unique and enduring quality. The style and substance of the practitioners and the art evoke a powerful synthesis of spoken and embodied language. What is more, these figures and their practices, while emerging from religious contexts, do not remain confined there. Even as they draw from a wide range of source materials (sacred texts, folklore, popular culture, philosophical thought) their work is implicated in a host of other locations of social and political significance. Specifically, the migration of black preachers and their communicative aesthetics into the realm of sociopolitical movement leadership captures my attention as a necessary site for further investigation. In no small way, black religious leaders have been powerful examples of the dramatic intrigue involved in elevating the social and political contentions of black life to greater public visibility. The contours of black moral leadership in the public sphere have been powerfully shaped by the public rhetoric and theology of such leaders.[13]

Hurston's commentary on the particularity of black speech takes on even greater significance when overlaid with her remarks on dance. She refers to dancing within black expressive culture as a form of dynamic suggestion, wherein the spectator's own sensory faculties – imaginative projection, hearing the rhythms, internalizing the time signature – enable them to carry out the performer's plan. The black dancer, she writes, "is restrained, but succeeds

[13] By "public sphere," I refer to the social space in which varied opinions, general concerns, and collective solutions are expressed. In essence, it is the arena of societal communication. This communication is sustained and extended by way of mass media and online networks. The German *öffentlichkeit*, from which the English term "public sphere" is derived, can refer to either the collective speakers and listeners in that sphere (i.e. "the public") or to being prone to visibility and scrutiny by the public (i.e. the state of "publicness"). I elaborate on Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere later in this chapter. See Hartmut Wessler's and Rainer Freudenthaler's entry on "public sphere" in *Oxford Bibliographies*, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0030.xml#obo-9780199756841-0030-bibItem-0006.

in gripping the beholder by forcing him to finish the action the performer suggests."[14] I understand this interplay between performer and spectator as an apt analog to the exchange between preacher and audience. The preacher suggests a possibility by means of a communicative matrix that is audible and embodied. The dance is brought to full expression through the response of the audience, completing a circle of feedback through which a mutually reinforcing relationship is established. This is a form of what might commonly be referred to as the *call and response* tradition. What it implies, I believe, is that the preacher and audience relationship is thoroughly grounded in dynamic suggestion such that the representative authority afforded the preacher is not merely a function of their own rhetorical prowess, but also tethered to the willingness of an audience to assent to the possibilities being suggested. If we expand this idea to the public sphere, I believe the same dynamic carries over into the relationship between black religious leaders and their engagement with sociopolitical constituencies.

This chapter traces how the ethos of the black preacher's socio-ecclesial role is carried over into the functions of black religious leaders in the political sphere. I assert that black religious leaders in the twentieth century and beyond have been able to secure a public following in part through their merging of oral communicative strategies and charismatic action drawn from the vein of African American preaching and clerical traditions. The deployment of these strategies in the American public sphere suggests that religious communication holds some social and political purchase outside of merely religious assembly. By virtue of this framing, I am situating my study of black religious leaders (and their speech and performance) within the scope of American civil religion.

[14] Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," 27.

Robert Bellah describes American civil religion as the set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals through which the public religious dimension is expressed.[15] Charles Long makes the case that American civil religion is marked by the religious meanings embedded in the nation's founding documents (The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution) as well as the idea of salvific possibility contingent on belonging to American national community.[16] However, Long is critical of the approaches to American civil religion, arguing that the cultural language of America renders the religious reality of non-Europeans invisible.[17] In his estimation, black freedom struggles are a response to this cultural language and mythology. This response generated a black communal recognition of mutual humanity and visibility, a deep acquaintance with American cultural language (and its progenitors), and knowledge and experience of *another reality* not bound by oppressing forces.[18] I situate my subjects within this realm of black freedom struggles and the alternative civil religious discourse that it produces. In this project, I am concerned with how black religious leaders have taken up beliefs, symbols, and rituals in order to generate a kind of publicity for black social and political concerns, through evolving means and with varying degrees of efficacy. The figures of my study are active within the religious dimension of American political life, and I am concerned with the means by which they access that dimension and the consequences of their performances for shaping public understandings of black social and political interests.

[15] Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus*, Vol. 117, No. 3. (1988), 100.
[16] Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 1999), 161.
[17] Long, *Significations*, 162.
[18] Ibid, 166.

"People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm": Rhetorical Roots of Black Preaching

To speak of black preaching in the American context is to speak of practices and practitioners marked by a convergence of African, American, and European cultural sensibilities and practices. Kenyatta Gilbert situates African American preachers at this intersection by grounding their person and speech in the West African concepts of *muntu* (poet/prophet) and *nommo* (the sacred generative power of the word), tracing the cultural signatures of contemporary preaching to the early slave preachers, medicine men, and conjurers.[19] Gilbert asserts that African American Christian worship fostered a unique medium for creative expression, and African spirituality was incorporated into black preaching and faith practices in ways that helped fuel the "invisible church" in the era of American chattel slavery.[20] Gilbert's conceptual linkages between African spirituality, speech and oratorical production, on the one hand, and black preaching on the other, prompt a necessary consideration of how and to what degree African cultural practices were retained in the New World. This is the contention at the heart of the famed academic debate between Melville J. Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier.

Melville J. Herskovits was an acclaimed anthropologist whose work and influence situated him as a founding scholar of African studies in the United States.[21] E. Franklin Frazier, a prominent sociologist who became the first black president of the American Sociological Association, devoted significant study to black American life and identity, as well as to the

[19] Kenyatta Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 35. The significance of *nommo* will be addressed at length in my discussion of African rhetorical traditions.
[20] Gilbert, *African American Preaching*, 35 – 39.
[21] Suzanne Preston Blier, "Field Days: Melville J. Herskovits in Dahomey," *History in Africa*, Vol. 16 (1989), 1.

matter of African retentions in group culture.[22] These two figures represented opposing points of view with respect to the substance of African-American culture. Even up to the 1960s, it had been a widely held view that chattel slavery in the Americas had fundamentally stripped away the cultural ideas and practices of Africans. Such a view ran counter to the idea of African-American culture as a distinct cultural entity emerging from the unique interactions of people from Africa, Europe, and the Americas.[23] The conflict between Herskovits and Frazier was emblematic of the larger question about how the cultural practices and artifacts of black life should be interpreted.

In his treatment of the debate, Albert Raboteau characterizes the central problem as a conflict between two primary points of view: 1) that the process of enslavement thoroughly decimated the cultural life of the African (Frazier's position), and 2) that considerable Africanisms survived and presently influence African American culture (Herskovits' position).[24] Herskovits puts forth his argument most prominently in his 1941 text *The Myth of the Negro Past*, in which he sought to counter the notion that black Americans lacked a significant cultural and historical past sophisticated enough to persist after encountering European civilization.[25] He primarily concerns himself with parsing out a way of thinking through cultural difference in the American context outside of racist frameworks. In this attempt, Herskovits encounters strong criticism from Frazier, who pushes against the overstatement of African retentions by arguing that Christianity became the cohering framework of social life and meaning in the wake of

[22] Dean E. Robinson, "Review of *E. Franklin Frazier and the Black Bourgeoisie*," In *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 109, No. 5 (2004), 1217.
[23] John P. McCarthy, "The Evolution of the Study of African Culture in America," In *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Article 2 (1995).
[24] Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 48.
[25] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 48.

cultural destruction.[26] Raboteau holds that there is valuable truth in both positions. He attests to Herskovits' meaningful denunciation of the myth of the Negro past, notably through Herskovits' theory of mutual cultural reinterpretation in the encounter of African and European cultures, which succeeds in demonstrating the survival of African culture and behaviors. At the same time, he upholds Frazier's challenge to Herskovits, both for his emphasis on significance and meaning as the terms for discussing African retentions as well as his differentiation of black American cultures from other black diasporic cultures.[27]

Taken together, Herskovits' theory of mutual cultural reinterpretation and Frazier's concerns for the meaning of cultural retentions suggest that African religious thought and practices persisted in the United States as hybridized forms with western Christian thought and rhetoric. I argue that oral tradition was a prime site for the blending of these practices. In particular, preaching as an oral and embodied mode of communication is shaped by theological inquiry and by cultural ideas and social practices. African American preaching traditions reflect a unique trajectory of proclamation that conjoins the homiletical inheritances of the Christian church with African cultural and rhetorical models.

Although my primary focus concerns the development of African American preaching and preachers, it is important to note that the history of Christian preaching has long been marked by transformative cultural reinterpretation. For example, the encounter of the Christian church with Greek culture brought about a shift towards preaching models heavily influenced by Greco-Roman rhetoric. Guerric DeBona notes that over time, *didache*, or teaching, characterized by an emphasis on the unity and authority of episcopal tradition, became a dominant paradigm of preaching. He further asserts that the Latin *sermo* proved to influence Christian preaching to an

[26] Ibid, 52-53.
[27] Ibid, 86.

even greater extent. Specifically, Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, or *On Christian Doctrine* (396), "synthesized Latin Christian preaching into a distinct, rhetorical discipline and would echo classical rhetoric's emphasis on a balance of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*."[28] Much later, in post-Enlightenment Europe, DeBona notes a specific emphasis on *ethos* in the fervent preaching of figures such as John Wesley and George Whitefield, whose work situated the preacher as a particular witness to the gospel.[29] *Ethos* in preaching suggests something of the moral, emotional, and charismatic character of the preacher that reinforces their ability to be both persuasive and authoritative. These evolving understandings of preachers and preaching contribute, I believe, to the rhetorical bridge that enables the intermingling of Protestant religious practices and African oral traditions.

An inquiry into practices of the *word* in African contexts sheds light on the longstanding importance of the relational dynamic between the speaker and the audience. The ability to command the power of the word meant the ability to name, define, and call forth worlds of possibility. It was and remains nothing less than a practice of divine creativity, and through such a practice, one begins to parse how speech and authority are mutually reinforced in the person of the speaker. In the effort to provide a brief overview of this vein of African oral tradition, I turn to the works of Jacob Carruthers and Molefi K. Asante.

As a critical historian of African Studies, Jacob Carruthers took seriously the political ramifications of historical knowledge production. Namely, he asserted that the apparatus of European historiography reinforced political and economic supremacy by way of intellectual and moral justifications. In lieu of reproducing that ideological tradition, Carruthers insisted that a

[28] Guerric DeBona, *Fulfilled in Our Hearing: History and Method of Christian Preaching* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 11-12.
[29] DeBona, *Fulfilled in Our Hearing*, 15.

proper understanding of African history and culture could only be reclaimed through an African-Centered worldview.[30] In both the content and method of his work, Carruthers models an important trajectory for thinking about African contexts of language and knowledge production apart from exclusively Western rhetorical and epistemological frameworks. In his text *Mdw Ntr – Divine Speech*, Carruthers addresses historical and philosophical matters related to the body of what is called African Deep Thought. This term broadly refers to the content and practices of African philosophical traditions that predate and have been disrupted by European domination. Carruthers frames his work as an effort to liberate African thought from both erasure/nonexistence and its role in the formation and emergence of European philosophical tradition.[31] Of particular interest is his exploration of the role of language as "both the container and the preserver of African Deep Thought," as a means of intellectual conveyance and a catalyst of social change.[32] Carruthers underscores the longstanding significance of African oral tradition as a primary means for thought and remembrance. This framing is invaluable for understanding the eventual emergence of black preaching and the authority ascribed to its practitioners.

Carruthers' explication of African Deep Thought begins with the debate between the "authentic philosophers" and the defenders of African traditional philosophy. By “authentic philosophers,” he means those who view the tools and texts of the European philosophical traditions as essential to a comprehensive understanding of African knowledge, reasoning, and thought. In contrasts, the adherents of African traditional philosophy understand the African context as fully sufficient for clarifying its own epistemological grounds. Both camps, he notes,

[30] Kamau Rashid, “Jacob H. Carruthers and the African-Centered Discourse on Knowledge, Worldview, and Power,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol.5, No.4 (2012), 26-7.
[31] Jacob Carruthers, *Mdw Ntr: Divine Speech – A Historiographical Reflection of African Deep Thought from the Time of the Pharaohs to the Present* (London: Karnak House, 1995), xvii-xviii.
[32] Carruthers, *Mdw Ntr*, xii.

agree that African philosophy exists in some form. The former, however, insist on the necessary development and reclamation of African Deep Thought through the scientific methodologies shaped by the ancient Greeks and the modern Europeans, an approach they argue was absent from African tradition. The traditionalists conversely insist that all essential philosophical developments take root in African thought, and thus Africans have the most legitimate claims to philosophy.[33] Carruthers comes to the conclusion that it is best to abandon the term *philosophy,* given its weddedness to particular historical conditions where the wisdom tradition emerged and developed. He turns instead to the vocabulary of Kemet (or ancient Egypt) and proffers *Mdw Nṯr* (Medew Netcher), "roughly translated into English as Divine Speech or into 'universal,' scholarly Europeanese as Theology," and *Mdw Nfr* (Medew Nefer), or Good Speech. This terminology, he suggests, does not negate the association of African Deep Thought with the activities of philosophical inquiry, but it does differentiate the objectives of the European quest for wisdom from the African one.[34]

Carruthers explains that Medew Netcher (Divine Speech) denotes the formal written language of the Kemetic people, but more broadly, it encompasses human speech as a gift from the Creator, as well as wisdom in general. It was through the consistent practice of Medew Nefer (Good Speech) that human beings could achieve Divine Speech.[35] The Kemetic wisdom tradition is outlined in the Shabaka Text, a philosophical treatise written around 700 B.C. on a plaque in the Temple of Ptah. Carruthers lifts up a section of the translated passage that underscores the epistemological foundations in Kemetic thought:

> All divine speech happened in the thoughts of the mind and the commands of the tongue...So all works and arts were made, the making of the two hands, the walking of the two feet, the movement of all limbs; in accordance with his command. The speech of

[33] Ibid, 32.
[34] Ibid, 35-36.
[35] Ibid, 40.

> the thinking mind comes forth from the tongue and makes the specialization of everything...So Ptah was satisfied after making all thing, that is all divine speech (or all speech is divine).[36]

Explicating this passage, Carruthers makes the case that in Kemetic wisdom tradition, speech is the means by which one comes to knowledge. It is speech that governs and imparts meaning upon natural and human events, such that "speech and creation are inseparable, and all of what we call theology, philosophy, science and even technology are aspects of divine speech."[37] Following this, human activity in the world is but a reenactment of Divine Speech, a practice of moving from thought to word to deed. It is through Good Speech (which Carruthers defines as morally correct language) that human beings approach the generative power of Divine Speech.

Carruthers' discourse on the Kemetic wisdom tradition is a critical tool for comprehending the longstanding significance of speech within the thought and practice of African people. He emphasizes that Divine Speech as a central fixture of African thought can be observed through the West African "Griots," whose oral tradition is exhibited through practices such as naming ceremonies and secret formulas. Furthermore, he understands these and other practices as evidence supporting Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop's theory of the "cultural unity of Black Africa."[38] Without universalizing the breadth and depth of activities under the banner of African thought, I understand Carruthers' work as offering a basis for understanding speech as a creative and narrative technology that remains manifest in and coherent with contemporary black rhetorical traditions.

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[36] Ibid, 43.
[37] Carruthers, *Mdw Nṯr*, 44.
[38] Ibid, 61. Cheikh Anta Diop's text *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa, The Domains of Matriarchy and of Patriarchy in Classical Antiquity* (London: Karnack House, 1989) makes a case for an Afro-centric perspective on world history and cultural development, advanced in part through his cultural and linguistic linkage of Ancient Egypt to Sub-Saharan Africa.

Molefi K. Asante's work in the realm of African American rhetoric and communication is an invaluable bridge from Carruthers' project. Asante's work as a communication theorist and proponent of African philosophy provides an essential lens to the study of black preaching. Asante insists that a proper understanding of African American experience must be situated in connection to African history, wherein Africans are regarded as subjects and not peripheral objects to European thought.[39] In this way, his approach to the rhetorical situation of Africans in the New World considers the meaning of their communication beyond the geographical setting and presumes the significance of its African origins. Asante extends the discussion of African oral traditions into the American landscape by way of his text *The Afrocentric Idea*. His pursuit of an Afrocentric perspective on discourse aims to define the rhetorical situation wherein African American oratory is used to call forth *nommo*, the creative force of the spoken word. In its own way, Asante's work builds a bridge from the concept of Divine Speech to the oratorical practices of an African American context, demonstrating how ancient notions of word-force inform the construction of a new discourse reality.[40] I argue that this construction is ongoing in the practices and ethos of black preaching and preachers. I propose that the public significance of black religious leadership is ultimately bound up in the construction of a discourse reality by way of orature.[41] That is, the spoken word shapes the conditions of reception for such leaders *and* helps to reinforce the maintenance of their public roles and status.

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[39] Molefi K. Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea - Revised and Expanded Edition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), xii-xiii.
[40] Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, 22.
[41] By "discourse reality," I mean a substantive world of spoken communication. My use of "discourse" throughout this chapter refers generally to spoken communication. Where I employ modifiers (e.g. hierarchical discourse, alternative discourse, resistant discourse), I am referring to spoken communication that performs that particular function: speech that imposes arrangements of status (hierarchical), speech that operates alongside or in lieu of *other* speech (alternative), or speech that works in opposition to a given circumstance (resistant).

Of particular importance to my argument are two movements within Asante's text. First, Asante sets out to clarify the rhetorical situation wherein African American communication – both its content and structures of speech – emerges and is shaped. For Asante the rhetorical rules of a given culture embody that culture's assumptions about power relations. This belief informs his definition of a *rhetorical condition* as "the structure and power pattern a society assumes or imposes during a rhetorical situation."[42] He asserts that the rhetorical condition is determined by the form of discourse one chooses from the outset, and among the ranks of black American leaders, the sermonic form is most often chosen. The sermonic form, he suggests, exists within the political and ideological context of the speaker. It is also a type of communication that assumes certain hierarchical and structural realities and relationships. All of this is reflective of the kind of resistance that Africans in the United States have had to necessarily exercise over and against an oppressive discourse of racist critique. In other words, resistance to a situation of political and ideological hierarchy required (and requires) a hierarchical discourse in response.[43] Thus, the rhetorical situation of African American communication is one of inequality that can only be transcended by reimagining the intellectual and rhetorical terms of order. For Asante, the concept of *Afrocentricity* represents the theoretical and methodological undertaking of this imaginative task.

The second movement involves Asante's description of the means by which African American communication was invented and developed as a rhetoric of resistance to the human condition of oppression. At the intersection of African heritage and American experience, he locates the generation of myths whose central heroic figures transcend their circumstances of

[42] Ibid, 28.
[43] Ibid, 30-33.

oppression.[44] In a context marked by legislated antiliteracy, as well as the ongoing contentions for humanity, basic rights, and care of oppressed communities, the transformative significance of vocal expression was preeminent in African American life. We see this fact evidenced through the black articulators of rhetoric against white supremacy, whose speech embodies "psychological-political resistance that constitutes a universe of alternative discourse."[45] Within this alternative discursive universe, myth-making is a primary tool for explaining the human condition, contending with racist society, preserving cultural history and ancestral connection, and expressing eschatological hope and possibility. These functions are all acts of African American resistance to the totalizing effects of the material, social, and ideological impositions of Euro-American culture. Indeed, Asante affirms that the rhetoric of resistance is fueled by the mythoforms and archetypal figures that offer an architecture for combatting such cultural realities.[46]

Asante's work describes the originating conditions of African American communication and the means by which that speech antagonizes the oppressive milieu. Against a backdrop of Europeanizing influence, African American orators and writers took up the available materials and language as tools of discursive combat. This was nothing less than the proclamation and establishment of a new discourse reality in which black liberation could be voiced and pursued. However, it is important to note the extent to which the messianic idiom came to be the predominant motif of radical black discourse. The messiah archetype, Asante argues, is the

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[44] Ibid, 93.
[45] Ibid, 99.
[46] Ibid, 109-112, 122. On pg. 110, Asante writes, "In the language of the African American speaker, myth becomes an explanation for the human condition and an answer to the problem of psychological existence in a racist society." He goes on to name various folk figures (Brer Rabbit, Ananse, John Henry, Stagolee) whose cunning and heroic exploits become influences for the concrete enactment of black resistance - in word and deed – to white oppression.

manifestation of an individual sense of mission to stand as deliverer of a people. This sense of mission comes forth in the force of radical speech in search of *something better*; that is, the articulation of another kind of world. In the crucible of social, cultural, and economic oppression, Asante locates a mutually generative circumstance wherein oppressed people sought a Moses figure and various leaders, in turn, took up the messianic role.[47] Significantly, Asante reads this as a phenomenon of the American context:

> Yet messianism has no tradition in Africa; it became for the African in the United States, enslaved and abused, the one tenet of an apocalyptic-Judaic-Platonic heritage that immediately made sense. Domination by whites insured the individual transformations that would give meaning to the dynamics of liberation discourse even if they dressed up and went to church. The enormous emancipatory possibilities were present because someone dared to risk life to make them so.[48]

I take Asante's reading as an indicator of the double-edged nature of the white cultural imposition upon African American protest rhetoric. The response to such an imposition necessarily draws from the materials – philosophical, rhetorical, mythical – made available within the sociopolitical circumstance. The transformation of those materials into a resistant discourse is marked by the limits of the individualist, messianic mode. The protest speaker's necessary belief in their own suprarational call to deliver their people from bondage sequesters them as uniquely qualified even as it binds them to those whose liberation they seek. These are the powerful and perilous grounds on which the protest speaker, "like messianic spirits before and after him (sic)...moved in an artificial environment, created by his own deception and maintained by that of his followers."[49] I understand this *deception* between speaker and

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[47] Ibid, 139-140.
[48] Ibid, 139.
[49] Ibid, 144. Here, Asante writes specifically of Nat Turner's own messianic call to rebellion. However, given Asante's own assertion of the historical and contemporary uniformity of the messianic idiom, I think it is fair to take this description of Turner's activity as a commentary on the general scheme by which the idiom operates, soliciting both the primary figure and their followers in a mutually reinforced sphere of belief in the givenness of this messianic arrangement.

constituency as an artful, agreed-upon fiction, as opposed to an outright artifice. It is only *artificial* in the sense that it is a fabrication, that is, an arrangement that is neither given nor inevitable but nonetheless real.

Through Carruthers and Asante, we can trace a movement of African oral tradition into the American context wherein African American communication germinates. Speech in the Kemetic tradition is a means of participation in the divine ordering of the world and the creative production of new worlds. One's ability to successfully practice such languaging confers a measure of authority, evidenced by the ability to transmit knowledge and articulate possibilities for social transformation. In the African American context that Asante describes, the word-force, *nommo*, channels the creative energies of black speech into the production of a new discourse reality: a rhetoric of resistance.

"Made You Look" - The Emergence of the Black Preacher

How does this come to bear on the black preaching traditions? First, inasmuch as black preaching is an expression of theological content and perspective, it falls within the parameters of Carruthers' framework of Divine Speech. It is a particular enactment of word-force that seeks to orient a given listening community to more immediate concerns and responsibilities. The speech of the preacher aids in the construction of a communal ethos and apparatus for re-entering the world as empowered agents of structural and social change. Black preaching has served as an alternative discourse offering means of psychic, social, and spiritual resistance to oppression in various forms, whether in the midst of chattel slavery, Jim Crow segregation, or ongoing sociopolitical inequalities. These are both creative and protective functions that make and preserve space for the fullness of black life where it might otherwise be constricted and reduced.

However, these functions unfold within a rhetorical condition that, in Asante's view, is marked by oppression and overcome through the internalizing of mythical forms and archetypes. Black preachers traffic in myth by way of folk stories and biblical texts, in an effort to cultivate and express means of social, cultural, and spiritual navigation through the world. The ability to carry out this guiding task becomes its own affirmation of moral and spiritual authority. Following Asante's insistence of the dominance of the messianic idiom in black discourse, it seems reasonable to say that the role of the black preacher becomes strongly tethered to a messianic ideal. Indeed, in the rhetoric of nineteenth century preachers such as Nat Turner and Henry Highland Garnet, Asante sees powerful strains of messianism that would inform their black liberation missions. To perform within this discourse is to inhabit and internalize a particular moral, emotional, and charismatic character: an expressive ethos.

The expressive ethos serves as the crucial juncture of black discourse and Protestant preaching. The black preacher, straddling these conjoined communicative realms, engages in speech practice that extends *nommo* in the African American rhetorical condition and converses with the Greco-Roman rhetoric filtered through the development of Christian preaching. The expressive ethos is a kind of self-understanding fostered through the black preacher's rhetorical practices. The black preacher becomes a participant in the narrative fabric of myth shaped by and extending traditions of black discourse. The black preacher engenders the trust and allegiance of their audience by way of this expressive ethos.

It is worth noting that particular strands of Greco-Roman traditions of rhetoric inform this communicative mode as well. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion."[50] Within this realm of persuasive

[50] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 6.

speech, he suggests that the communicated character of the speaker generally makes them more fully and readily believable, even more so in instances when absolute certainty is not achievable.[51] Beyond the demonstrative speech of a given argument, Aristotle emphasizes the interplay between speaker and audience, wherein the perception of the speaker's good sense, good moral character, and goodwill inspire an audience to believe an argument apart from any given proof.[52] The audience's perception extends beyond mere acknowledgment and into adjudication of the speaker's ability to produce a decision.

Aristotle's observations suggest a dynamic whereby the authority and validity of speakers within a given sphere is co-constructed. On the speaker's part, the pursuit of the most viable means of persuasion is an artful execution of skill. It is a function of accrued capacity, situational awareness, a kind of audience exegesis that ascertains the conditions of assent. One must know to *whom* one speaks: to the fears, hopes, longings, and desires that animate the collective will to live and be. Of course, such knowledge does not inherently conduce to productive ends. Rather, it makes possible various ends and outcomes. To engender an audience's agreement to the terms and aims of one's speech demonstrates a form of circumstantial efficacy that is not coextensive with fundamental or universal validity. The speaker operates within a realm of expectations shaped by the rhetorical condition, the societal pattern of structure and power that Asante describes earlier in this writing. The audience's preexisting beliefs about the nature of power relations exert a force that shapes the rhetorical possibilities of the speaker.

We can observe a similar address of the audience's role in shaping the expressive ethos of the speaker in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria.* As a whole, Quintilian's discussion of rhetoric concerns the comprehensive instruction and development of the orator. In Book 11 of the text, he

[51] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 7.
[52] Ibid, 60.

devotes particular attention to the relationship between the character of not only the speaker and those for whom he speaks, but also the character of the audience. Namely, the power, rank, and status held by the audience conditions the speaker's mode of engagement.[53] In the context of the chapter, Quintilian is largely concerned with the suitability of style, tone, and form for given occasions and settings. That said, I read his discourse as a reminder that assent to the speaker's speech and reasoning is, in great measure, a function of audience perception. He takes great care to elaborate on the necessary alignment of attitude and delivery, so that the proper impression is formed for the audience.[54] A fitting emotional, moral, and charismatic tenor must be struck in order to minimize the possibility of dissonance between word and act. Thus, the speaker's purpose is bound up in the ability to perform to proper expectations of their role and circumstance: a role and circumstance fashioned through the relational dynamic with the audience.

Beyond the general interplay between speaker and audience, Aristotle directs attention to the specificity of oratory in the political realm. Political oratory, he suggests, is a future-oriented form of rhetoric that urges a particular course of action while seeking to establish either the expediency or harmfulness of said action.[55] The efficacy of this form of rhetoric is related both to

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[53] "The character of the speaker and of the person on whose behalf he speaks are, however, not the only points which it is important to take into account: the character of those before whom we have to speak calls for serious consideration. Their power and rank will make no small difference; we shall employ different methods according as we are speaking before the emperor, a magistrate, a senator, a private citizen, or merely a free man, while a different tone is demanded by trials in the public courts, and in cases submitted to arbitration." Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian,* trans. H.E. Butler (London: William Heinemann; New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1921 – 1922), 179.

[54] "For example, when a man is accused on a capital charge, and, above all, if he is defending himself before his conqueror or his sovereign, it would be quite intolerable for him to indulge in frequent metaphors, antique or newlycoined words, rhythms as far removed as possible from the practice of every-day speech, rounded periods, florid commonplaces and ornate reflexions. Would not all these devices destroy the impression of anxiety which should be created by a man in such peril, and rob him of the succour of pity, on which even the innocent are forced to rely?" Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 183.

[55] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, part 3.

the appearance of the orator's character before a given audience and to the orator's enactment of right feelings towards the audience.[56] It is useful to think about this description alongside Asante's framing of black speech as a form of psychological-political resistance. Such speech, by pressing toward *something better*, by discursively fashioning a new world, calls for particular action in the sociopolitical realm. One is again at a rhetorical juncture marked by the contours of Carruthers' analysis of Good Speech and Divine Speech. If one takes seriously Carruthers' statement that human activity in the world is a reenactment of Divine Speech, of a practice of moving from thought to word to deed, then the language and expression of psychological-political resistance can be taken as the sort of moral communication (Good Speech) that aims toward creative synthesis (Divine Speech) at the level of the individual and the communal.

In contexts marked by the sociopolitical restriction of black life and flourishing, black preachers, historically and contemporarily, have represented critical actors whose language and performance have been conduits for thought and remembrance. In light of the claims I have made here, the labor of these figures can be read as comprehensively social, political, theological, and psychological in character, aimed towards the forging of holistic resistance. This is a product and extension of African oral tradition in the American context. It is also the product of an ongoing negotiation between speaker, audience, and setting. This set of mutually informing relationships suggests that the role of such speakers is neither given nor inevitable. That role is a functional response to particular conditions of oppression, situated around specific personalities and responding communities. This is a crucial point in light of Asante's argument that an African American rhetoric of resistance has been and is fueled by mythoforms and archetypal figures.

[56] Ibid, Book II, Part I.

I think it is fair to say that the person and performance of the black preacher have become, over time, a mythoform, an archetypal frame tethered to a messianic idiom and grounded in the agreed-upon fiction between speaker and audience. In the attempt to explain and respond to the human condition of oppression, the black preacher takes on a mythical quality, a larger than life presence. There is a danger, however, in the single story, in the reduction of responsive imagination to one register. Such singularity is the crucial limitation of the messiah archetype, and, by extension, a fatal flaw in the conception of the black preacher as the primary and unchallengeable vessel of emancipatory possibility. The question bears asking: *how* and *why* does such a fiction take shape and root?

"I'm What the Game Made Me": The Evolving Sociopolitical Role and Significance of Black Preachers

Up to this point, my discussion has focused on the rhetorical aspects of black preaching in light of Jacob Carruthers' and Molefi K. Asante's theories on African speech. However, it is essential to consider how this particular mode of communication is always and already bound up with the producers thereof. Asante gestures towards this thought by acknowledging "a correlation between the effectiveness of the word and the power of the speaker as expressed by his or her personality or status."[57] Who the speaker is and how they are perceived has great bearing on the efficacy of their speech. It is not only the expression of personality and status, but also the expectation and receptivity cultivated amongst the listening audience. A closer look into the evolving practices and contexts of black preaching reveals a unique mixture of social, political, and religious factors that collectively influenced the aesthetic styling of the speech and

[57] Asante, The *Afrocentric Idea*, 81.

embodiment of the black preacher. Furthermore, I assert this aesthetic reinforcement has contributed to certain archetypal (and at times, stereotypical) understandings of the black preacher figure in ways that have generated a pernicious expectation and reliance on black clergymen as the primary and unquestioned leaders of black activist and institutional efforts.

H. Beecher Hicks describes the nascent slave religion of black people as "an outgrowth, an extension of the religious foundation and heritage of Africa which, when transplanted to these shores, adjusted and accommodated itself to a new situational experience and began the process of developing new structural and functional partners."[58] From a structural and functional standpoint, the slave religious communities that would develop into the black church were undergirded by the institutional infrastructure of the Protestant Christian denominations. Hortense Spillers elaborates on the formation of the black church within a primarily Southern colonial context, wherein it drew many of its stylistic cues from the Baptist and Methodist denominations (whose dominance became pervasive in South in the 1750s).[59]

This relationship between Protestant denominations and black slave communities was facilitated by the development of antebellum plantation missions, which aimed to reinforce a rule of gospel order in which slaves' and masters' salvation hinged upon conversion.[60] Henry Mitchell attests to some of the efforts toward and consequences of conversion among the black slave communities. In particular, he describes how Baptist and Methodist churches functioned as rather welcoming spaces for black religious expression, owing to their worship styles, doctrines, and relatively low preoccupation with certain theological and educational demands.[61] The

[58] H. Beecher Hicks, *Images of the Black Preacher: The Man Nobody Knows* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1977), 28.
[59] Hortense Spillers, "Fabrics of History: Essays on the Black Sermon" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1974), 14.
[60] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 152.
[61] Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 24.

emphasis on conversion, a hallmark of revivalist Protestantism, informed a measure of ecclesial and social egalitarianism, a tendency that Raboteau asserts "opened the way for black converts to participate actively in the religious culture of the new nation as exhorters, preachers, and even founders of churches, and created occasions of mutual religious influence across racial boundaries whereby blacks converted whites and whites converted blacks in the heat of revival fervor."[62] It was not merely the fact of black participation, but also the public nature of it, thus, producing an occasion for the expanded visibility and reception of black religious expression and leadership before and among a white populace. In this way, black and white church participants alike were engaged in a complex process of social and religious familiarization whereby the black preacher would emerge as a familiar and acceptable figure.

The attempts at Christian catechesis and conversion of black slave communities were intended to produce a docilizing effect upon the enslaved. But to the contrary, the interplay of religious inculcation with an African American biblical hermeneutic produced active, tangible self-determination on the part of black religious communities and leaders. One manifestation of this resistance is the slave revolts. Raboteau describes two notable events of this sort: first, the Denmark Vesey conspiracy of 1822, wherein Vesey's reading and proclamation of scripture against slavery was intertwined with the conjuring practices of "Gullah" Jack Pritchard, whose charms were said to protect the conspirators; and second, Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, in which his roles as prophet and preacher directed his mediation of a divine imperative to lead a violent revolt against slaveholders.[63] Herbert Marbury describes the activities of African American biblical interpretation as an aggregation of "successive attempts from the antebellum period onward to reclaim black bodies from Euro-American discourses and their

[62] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 152.
[63] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 163-164.

epistemologies."[64] Through the slave revolts, one observes a contention not merely on the grounds of bodily freedom, but also on the authority of knowledge production about the self and the world. Through Vesey and Turner, a specific performative mold is cast for the black religious leader. Within that mold, the black religious leader claims spokesmanship and becomes a visible locus for internalizing, reimagining, and redeploying text and speech in the service of black liberation. Vesey and Turner certainly espoused and enacted an overtly radical public theology.[65] Yet, it was not only the militant end of their theological commitments, but also the very existence of black preachers, lecturers, and catechists at all that threatened the maintenance of social hierarchy over and against the egalitarian tendencies of Christian instruction.[66] Thus, in many respects, the possibility of the black preacher was enabled and resisted by the mechanisms of Christian inculcation.

Despite this ambivalence toward black preachers, their acceptance as viable voices by a white populace was reinforced through the appeal of their preaching skills and through the perceived effects of such preaching on the enslaved. James Weldon Johnson notes the work of pioneering black ministers such as George Liele and Andrew Bryan, who preached to white and black audiences alike in Augusta and Savannah, Georgia, respectively, in the 1770s.[67] In particular, the history of Liele's ministerial prominence reflects the complex of sensibilities and practices that afforded black clergymen a hearing and a measure of respect amongst white

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[64] Herbert Marbury, *Pillars of Cloud and Fire: The Politics of Exodus in African American Biblical Interpretation* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 5.
[65] Though there are many ways of framing the term, I favor Victor Anderson's definition of public theology as the deliberate use of religious languages and commitments to substantively influence public debates on matters including morals and policy. In this light, I interpret Vesey's and Turner's speech and actions as radical forms of this task. See Victor Anderson, "The Search for Public Theology in the United States," in *Preaching as Theological Task: World, Gospel, Scripture*, eds Thomas Long and Edward Farley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).
[66] Ibid, 170-171.
[67] Johnson, *God's Trombones*, 3.

populaces. Carter G. Woodson notes that Liele's ministerial prowess among Georgia's slave population prompted his master to grant him manumission so that he might work without interruption.[68] Liele's effectiveness was certainly aided by his rhetorical gifts. However, Woodson suggests that Liele's reception by white people of religious and social influence was thoroughly informed by his diplomatic engagement with masters and overseers, his focus on the mere message of Christ (against the more egalitarian tendencies of Baptist and Methodist missionaries), his respectable image as a family man, and the "wholesome influence" of his preaching.[69] We might take these revelations as an indicator that the reception of the black preacher as an authoritative public figure was quite often linked to his ability to become legible as an asset to white social, political, and economic interests. This is not to say that *all* black clergymen fit into this performative scheme. Rather, I am suggesting that the enduring salience of the black preacher as a symbolic figure is not divorced from that figure's historical accrual of credibility and familiarity before white audiences, even as this figure retains the ability to signify in multiple registers. Charles Hamilton says: "[T]he black preacher in those instances where he served as pastor for whites was the only person of his race during slavery who occupied a position of authority before whites. He spoke; whites listened."[70] In the person of the black preacher, we find no mere token moments of address but genuine influence.

This quality of multiplicity, this possibility of inhabiting multi-positionalities with a variety of verbal and kinesthetic performances is a most beautiful and dangerous characteristic. By genealogical and contextual necessity, the black preacher became "the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong,

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[68] Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1921), 44.
[69] Woodson, *Negro Church*, 46-47.
[70] Hamilton, Charles V., *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: Morrow, 1972), 43.

and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people," says Dubois.[71] This was real power, an amalgam of inherited conjuring and imposed catechism, that gave shape to a transitional architecture for the gathering and maintenance of black communities. At times, this meant performing a function of comfort and pacification. At other times, it entailed breaking away from convention and gathering new communities of faith.[72] Whatever the case, the black preacher as an archetype of black public leadership represented the capability for many different forms of social and political activity, whether passive or resistant, legal or (un)civilly disobedient.

These diverging functions have been highly dependent on the perceived necessary responses to the historical moment. H. Beecher Hicks' analysis of the self-perception and public image of the black preacher strongly suggests that the social and historical milieu of chattel slavery provided the most generative and significant era of black preacher activity, producing a model that bears rehabilitation and contemporary deployment. He goes so far as to contend that "the slave preacher is yet a viable model for the contemporary black preacher in terms of the roles and priorities he brought to the ministerial office."[73] Hicks' argument is from the position that the black preacher of the slave era was uniquely integral to black institution building and religious formation, and that the historical image and purpose of this figure must be reclaimed from the maligning force of a racist social climate that has persisted from the days of slavery.[74] Hicks' elaborations speak to the black preacher's necessary expertise in attending to the

[71] DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 196.
[72] Hamilton, *The Black Preacher*, 43-50. Hamilton describes the diversity of black preaching functions in the northern and southern United States, citing the work of George Liele in southern Georgia, as well as the dramatic departure of Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and William White from the Methodist Episcopal church.
[73] Hicks, *Images of the Black Preacher*, 22.
[74] Ibid, 18-19.

personhood, psychological wellbeing, and theological resiliency among the enslaved. This expertise was, in his estimation, a necessary form of leadership in the midst of the cultural disruption that produced slave communities.

However, the implications raised by the desire to vindicate a particular narration of the function and public image of black preachers are intriguing and troubling. Hicks' larger argument depends on an interpretation of contemporary American society as a continuation of plantation society and, by extension, a circumstance producing (if not demanding) a response from black preachers virtually identical to that seen in the chattel slavery era.[75] The particular leadership practices of the black preacher, then, are understood as a past and present necessity for ensuring the holistic wellbeing of black people. Hicks is very clear that his is a reclamation project, and as a black clergyman himself, his personal investments in the outcome cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, his is an endeavor to remediate this image from the negative impressions fostered by literature, theater, media, and daily life.[76] There are at least two problems that arise. First, the centrality of the black preacher's functions and public image are contingent upon a particular space and time wherein such a role was the primary means of organizing and communicating with black community. while Hicks merely names the *fact* of this arrangement, he does not engage *why* this was a contingent reality and necessity in the moment. The question is why does (or should) an historically contingent circumstance translate to a likewise mode of leadership praxis in the present? Secondly, Hicks' assertion that the slave preacher led every aspect of community life does not account for the transformations of black communal life and the position of the black church in the twentieth century. Even if such totalizing leadership were normative (or necessary) during the chattel slavery era, one could

[75] Ibid, 43.
[76] Ibid., 60.

scarcely argue that the social and political landscape for black communities remained utterly unchanged. Following Hicks' line of reasoning to its logical conclusion would suggest that the authority to define and address black social and political interests lies first and foremost within the purview of black clergymen, a conclusion I ultimately find untenable. At the very least, to argue that the basic features of American social order remain thoroughly unchanged since slavery gives the impression that the modes of leadership employed then were more akin to social maintenance than liberating disruption.

A significant argument against Hicks' line of reasoning can be found in Adolph Reed's discussion of the 1984 presidential campaign of the Rev. Jesse Jackson. Reed posits that Jackson's ascent to consideration for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination was grounded in his claims to being an authentic representative of black interests. This authenticity, as it were, coalesced around Jackson's own emergence from within what Reed calls the "protest elite," leaders who came to power in the context of extraelectoral political mobilization.[77] The 1960s brought about the accrual of a critical mass of black elected officials. This development positioned them as the only leaders within black communities who were held accountable by popular ratification. The overall structural integration of black people into national and local politics placed the onus for converting black concerns into public policy on elected officials. Reed argues that this fact underscores black politicians' initial resistance to Jackson's presidential candidacy, demonstrating a tension between elected officials and the "traditional" protest elite.[78] Reed argues this tension between protest and electoral leadership elements illuminated the question of which leaders operate as the legitimate definers of black interests

[77] Adolph Reed, *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 4.
[78] Reed, *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon*, 4.

(and recipients of the benefits of this status). Contemporaneous with this struggle for public authority, Reed highlights the efforts by the Congressional Black Caucus and Andrew Young in the 1980s to formalize a national black political leadership structure with diverse roles, adding that "a generally expressed theme was the need to dispense with the notion that a central, individual spokesperson is either possible or historically appropriate."[79]

From Reed's description of the evolving context of black political contestation, two features strike me as immediate refutations of Hicks' position on the *sui generis* nature and totality of black clerical leadership. First, Reed's fundamental argument proceeds on the grounds that "the developing tension between black protest elites and electoral political elites reflects both competition for occupation of race leadership niches and conflicting principles of legitimation."[80] Such a conflict suggests that there was consensus on neither the composition nor mechanisms of formal recognition of black public leadership. Hicks' description of the black preacher in the slave era asserts a then-unparalleled position of sociopolitical authority. However, the contemporary reality outlined by Reed reveals a circumstance in which clerical identity does not confer an unquestioned right to political spokesmanship or representation. This crisis of legitimation reflects the fissures in a contemporary black politics, evidenced by a lacking unity of purpose or action on the part of black elites. The fact that such an autonomous leadership contention is even socially or politically possible suggests a set of conditions and possibilities dislodged from the particular constrictions of the chattel slave plantation, whose rubrics of order and structure, Hicks argues, define the urban plantation existence of black people and their communities.

[79] Ibid, 5.
[80] Ibid, 31.

Second, the work of Andrew Young and the Congressional Black Caucus gestures toward a shift *away* from a leadership model centered on specific personalities. Hicks' recovery of the slave preacher's praxis emphasizes the preacher's role as the personality that functions as "the unifying source, the mobilizing agent, the planner of protest, the harbinger of hope" in the context of the slave community.[81] However, Reed gives an account of the situation of African-American politics in the twentieth century that seems incommensurate with such a role. This era, in Reed's estimation, was characterized by "a charismatic model of political authority and a corollary, intransigent assumption of black attitudinal uniformity."[82] These features reflect an appeal to organic, *natural* authority (i.e. inherent, not conferred power) built on the idea that black ideological interests can be marshaled into a narrow scope (and thus effectively addressed by a narrow framework of persuasive leadership). Hicks' slave preacher model seems to assume not only its own givenness and necessity but also the unchanging quality of black personal and communal concerns. Reed argues that within a twentieth century black sociopolitical context, this organic leadership style is thoroughly anti-democratic and anti-procedural for two reasons: 1) it reveals a hortatory and charismatic aspect that tends quite naturally toward authoritarianism, and 2) it is beset by the fact that this leadership was normally attained and authenticated outside of the black community.[83] Thus, what Hicks espouses as an inherent and integral feature of black clerical leadership is, in reality, profoundly shaped and influenced by figures external to the experiences and sociopolitical interests of black communities. One could argue that this mode of

[81] Hicks, *Images of the Black Preacher*, 39.
[82] Reed, *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon*, 32.
[83] Ibid, 33-35. As a consequence of the inaccessibility of electoral legitimization for black communities, "entrenched white elites, through a monopoly over political resources required by black leaders, functioned as arbiters for aspirants to spokesmanship status among Afro-Americans" (32).

leadership has been *naturalized* within black communal contexts, but it hardly exists as a pure, unchallenged form of individual and collective care and mobilization.

To be clear, I am not after a wholesale refusal or disposal of the historical or contemporary significance of black clergymen in the sustenance of ecclesial or secular communities. Rather, I find it necessary to understand something of how the ethos and identity of the black preacher have become primary symbolic elements of black social and political leadership and advancement. The formation and emergence of this figure represents a unique mélange of African cultural practices and American cultural contexts, religious syncretism and hermeneutical invention, the production of spiritual devotion and righteous resistance. It makes sense that the black preacher, as a product of complex origins, would be a welcomed personality through which varied black communal interests could be interpreted, articulated, and ultimately redressed in the present. Reed's examination of the presidential campaign of Rev. Jesse Jackson sheds light on an era of diverse, often antagonistic, figures wrestling with questions of public authority in the guidance of a national black constituency. In the midst of such conflict, Jackson, as black preacher and rising politico, constituted a potential vessel for drawing together a broad swath of black leaders, sociopolitical interests, and constituencies into a unified whole. As Reed writes, "Jackson's paramountcy was also seen as the long-awaited ideological symbol around which the diverse leadership elements could unite. But this symbol's attractiveness consisted mainly in its lack of concrete substance."[84]

What I understand Reed critiquing by way of his assessment of Jackson is the idea of an organic, all-encompassing form of moral leadership idealized in the person and personality of the black preacher. The idea of Jesse Jackson as a transcendent moral force hinges upon the notion

[84] Ibid, 9-10.

of an organic political connection to a broad base of black supporters. This tenuous notion is bolstered in part by particular understandings of the relationships between historical and contemporary black church congregations and their leadership. However, Reed asserts, "Moral leadership constitutes no challenges to the status claims of either elected officials or their civil rights counterparts, because it has no *categorical meaning* in the political world. [emphasis added]"[85] Reed is suggesting that, with respect to electoral politics, moral leadership is a nonspecific designation that does not offer any concrete grounds on which to pronounce the superior viability or political efficacy of certain leadership figures (such as black clergymen) over against others. The mechanisms of leadership ratification at the ecclesial level are not coextensive with those for the public electoral political sphere. If the clerical leadership from within black churches claims its authentication and validity from a moral/ethical authority of this sort, then Reed's claims about the lack of categorical meaning for moral leadership in the political realm would suggest that mere identification as black clergy and/or identification with a black church constituency does not constitute in and of itself a claim of entitlement to political spokesmanship in this contemporary moment.

I assert that the rhetorical craft, ethos, and public imaging of the black male preacher have been inaccurately imagined as wholly or primarily constitutive of moral leadership in black social and political mobilization. I see this pattern as *perhaps* an inadvertent attempt to flatten the irreducible complexity of black life, interests, and desires, into a form most manageable by the accrued forces of individual personality. Hicks suggests that the image of the black preacher is most profoundly developed at the level of the individual preacher in the midst of working towards liberation and justice.[86] However, the purpose of such pursuits, at the core, is *not* the

[85] Ibid, 10.
[86] Hicks, *Images of the Black Preacher*, 71.

work of public self-making, but the manifestation of new social and material realities that reflect more equitable human relations. Such equitable possibilities would also entail understanding anew the distribution of power and authority as engendered by public speech and performance. To imagine black moral leadership as primarily generated by the work and person of the black preacher not only occludes various producers and sources of moral and ethical proclamation, but also implicates the systems by which the access to that position of authority is regulated (and often blocked altogether). It is necessary to further explore how the linkage between the black preacher and moral leadership in the sociopolitical realm is bound up in the broader development of black religious leadership in the twentieth century public sphere.

Thus far, I have offered a genealogical description of how African, European, and American influences came together to shape the roles and practices of black preachers. Those roles and practices have grown into a layered tradition that has evolved over time to serve varied functions in and outside of ecclesial contexts. While the black preacher has served over time as a model for public leadership, I have argued that the social and political significance of that role is neither fixed nor inherent. Consequently, the role of the black preacher cannot be assumed as a singular template for public leadership functions. Nonetheless, the imagery of that figure retains a popular attractiveness. In the following chapter, I elaborate on the ways the public sphere serves as a venue for black religious leadership, and how the rhetorical spaces within that sphere impose their own shaping force on the forms and figures of black religious leadership.

Chapter 2

The Black Public Sphere and Black Religious Leadership

"Streets is Watching" - Black Religious Leadership and the Public Sphere

In this chapter, I examine the particulars of black religious leadership in the public sphere. I am concerned with illuminating how such leaders attained and maintained public status. I am of the mind that public rhetoric played (and plays) a critical role in the social ratification of such leaders and, as was shown in the previous chapter, when overlaid with the evocative imagery of the black clergyman. This ratification plays out within a layered context defined by a black public sphere where rhetoric, ethos, and image co-construct the model of an idealized, charismatic black religious leader. What I provide here is an outline of those elements and their interactions in order to demonstrate how they have collectively produced what has been an enduring (and rather illusive) model for black social and political mobilization. This product is nothing less than the construction of a particular kind of remembrance, a veritable *re*-membering of the performative acts that generate a specific recollection of black leadership.

The public emergence and reinforcement of black religious leadership is contingent upon the nature of the relationship between said leaders and the constituency that follows them. Houston A. Baker Jr. undertakes this exploration by way of examining black modernity in the United States. As a scholar of African American literature, Baker situates his intellectual project at the nexus of literary theory and the histories of African American life and being. Specifically, he has argued for the ways a black collectivity has creatively asserted itself alongside and against white American efforts at suppression. In his view, black creative production – by way of

musical, verbal, and visual artistry – is engaged and sustained in relationship to a black public collectivity.[87] Baker's theorizing on the black collective is vital for understanding how black life, experience, and knowledge become visible and accessible in broader ways. It offers insight into how black leaders accrued and sustained authority through an artful harnessing of public speech and creative expression. As I will explain later, Baker makes the case that the black masses are absolutely essential for any sustainable social and political project. As such, his work helps to clarify how those masses enabled black leaders to build public traction for their articulations of social and political possibility.

In his essay "Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere," Baker begins his argument with the assertion that this modernity is articulated through the rhetorics of *nostalgia* and *critical memory*. Nostalgia (re)constructs the past in gilded terms, in ways that sharpen certain features and blur others, aiming towards a memory that best serves one's desired framing of historical events. Critical memory, however, "renders hard ethical evaluations of the past that it never defines as well past." The work of such a memory "is the cumulative, collective maintenance of a record that draws into relationship significant instants of time past and the always uprooted homelessness of now."[88] In one way or another, these two ways of speaking about contemporary black life collude to shape a narration of the historical antecedents that have brought us to this present moment. Baker contends that black conservative nostalgia offers a portrait of history that obscures the role and presence of the black masses. However, this black majority and its institutions, he asserts, offer "the only imaginable repository for the formation of a self-interested

[87] Richard J. Lane, *Fifty Key Literary Theorists* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5-6.
[88] Houston Baker, "Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere," in *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, eds. Dan Ben-Amos and Liliane Weissberg (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 264.

and politically engaged black public sphere in United States."[89] In essence, he sees the potential for black social and political mobilization but only inasmuch as it is grounded in a broader black populace. This line of reasoning suggests that the nostalgic remembrance, which underscores the narration of individual black leadership as the primary, essential generator of social and political progress, is ultimately antithetical to the critical memory that more effectively evaluates the relationship between black leaders and the black majority.[90]

This relationship between leaders and the majority plays out within a black public sphere. In order to ascertain the significance of that unfolding relationship, it is important to more concretely define what is meant by the "public." Jürgen Habermas speaks to the problems that arise with the imprecision of the term. For instance, he describes how events and occasions are named as "public" by virtue of their accessibility to all people. On the other hand, a "public building" is considered such because it houses a state institution, not because general public accessibility is assumed.[91] Neither of these, however, function in accord with the most common category of the term through expressions such as *public opinion* or *publicity*, the latter of which has evolved in meaning from being merely a function of public opinion to being "an attribute of whatever attracts public opinion."[92] All things considered, Habermas asserts that our notion of "public" is inherited from Greek origin by way of Roman influence. Participation in the Greek public sphere hinged upon one's private freedoms as the master of a household, and it was in this public sphere, Habermas relates, where private existence was made visible, where one found a space for open discussion and honorable distinction, a forum where "citizens indeed interacted as

[89] Baker, "Critical Memory," 265.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 1-2.
[92] Habermas, *Public Sphere*, 2.

equals with equals (*homoioi*), but each did his best to excel (*aristoiein*)."[93] Habermas maintains that the ideological framework of the public sphere has remained with us, expanding its scope even as its functions decrease in significance, and in the attempt to understand its sociological and historical underpinnings, we might apprehend a better understanding of our present society.[94]

Baker's reading of Habermas is a critical aspect of apprehending an understanding of the black public sphere in contemporary American society. Habermas elaborates on the formation of the bourgeois public sphere, "conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as the public," a space of political confrontation against the public authorities by way of the public use of reason.[95] He summarizes its development in this way: "The public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters; through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society."[96] Thus, we see the emergence of a space inhabited by those with access to private freedoms and authority, on the one hand, and on the other, access to the means of literate communication. Baker highlights this threshold of compulsory intersection, arguing that "[w]hat ultimately emerges as Habermas' ideal of the early public sphere is an associational life of male property owners gathered to exchange rational arguments and critical opinions shaped and mirrored by novels and the press."[97] Habermas' notion of the public sphere depends on both (white) male ownership and male literacy as constitutive elements for inclusion. As Baker notes, Habermas demonstrates the contradictions in this bourgeois public sphere model, given its equation of 'property owners' with 'human beings' (and the maintenance of a private sphere of commodity exchange and social labor, to the

[93] Ibid, 3-4.
[94] Ibid, 4-5.
[95] Ibid, 27.
[96] Ibid, 30-31.
[97] Baker, "Critical Memory," 268.

exclusion of lower social and economic classes).[98] Thus, participation in a public of this design is highly dependent upon a personal nexus of social, political, and class privileges. These problems and limitations notwithstanding, Baker argues that Habermas' idea is attractive to a black populace on an aesthetic basis, given "the possibilities of structurally and affectively transforming the founding notion of the bourgeois public sphere into an expressive and empowering self-fashioning."[99] What Baker is hinting at is the possibility of a pluralism of public spheres, a notion I believe is bolstered by his assertion that the forms of expressive publicity used by black Americans have always been engaged in complex relationships with other modes of producing authority through public expression in America. [100] In short, a black public sphere, as such, strives against a narrow set of rubrics of access to the fashioning of public selves, making room for the sort of deconstructive proclamation that critiques the functions of the public authorities and the structure of society itself. If the dominant sphere does not offer ready access, then a new sphere must emerge in order to place the interests, ideas, and identities of those historically and contemporary regarded as subaltern (and thus, barred from 'public' participation) in a context whereby they become visible and audible. In this way, we can see how Baker's rhetorics of nostalgia and critical memory play significant roles in fashioning a black public existence and giving voice to the complex, layered lives, which were being experienced yet overlooked within a white public consciousness.

Baker suggests there is a kind of imaginative black cultural work that is engaged in inventing its own modernity. As a prime example, he lifts up the black creative agency under Jim Crow, particularly as embodied by the modern civil rights movement, within a time and space

[98] Ibid, 270.
[99] Ibid, 271.
[100] Ibid.

that, "particularly during the decade 1955-65, exemplifies the active working of the imagination of a subaltern, black American counterpublic."[101] In the vein of this movement, he argues, Martin Luther King, Jr's voice and language made the black public sphere in America more visible and audible than it might have been otherwise.[102] Baker suggests King's work used black imagination and the black public sphere in an attempt to restructure capitalist arrangements. Notably, he emphasizes how King's oratory paved the way for a new black American publicity, manifested through resistance and artistic production. Keeping in mind Habermas' description of the bourgeois public sphere as a means by which private people become public, we could read King's (and, I presume, many others') oratory as one means by which the always and already existing private concerns and identities of black people become immediately and viscerally present on the macroscale. That visibility and presence constitutes what Baker describes as the sort of publicity that is itself authority. To render this knowledge visible and accessible is to accrue a narrative and political power, whereby one both tells the story of a people's relationship to public authorities *and* articulates otherwise relations to said authorities and other publics. Within a society thoroughly unprepared (if not entirely unwilling) to imagine black lives and identities as fully participating in the commonly recognized public, proclamation beautifully threatens to disrupt the structural and affective reality and expose it as an oppressive fiction in need of rewriting.

Baker elaborates on the advent of this expressive oratory in various manifestations throughout the nation. He describes the transformation of black American media into a specific medium of liberation. Song was an expressive mode that was especially attractive to young people in the movement. This music, Baker stresses, marked the transformation of associative

[101] Ibid, 274.
[102] Ibid.

and communicative norms in black American culture, as traditional black religious songs took on new meaning in various black contexts, thus, becoming the sonic catalysts for movement organization and activity throughout the American South.[103] What seems clear is that the oral articulation of a black public sphere was not the exclusive province of elites. Rather, the expressive communication of this moment was deeply democratic and inclusive, hardly bound to rarefied spaces of authority. The members of the general black populace were active agents in the creation of their own niche within the public imaginary. Still, it is the particular speech and presence of Martin Luther King, Jr., that Baker raises as critical features of the struggles for liberation in the black public sphere during the civil rights movement:

> Yet, at the same time, an adequate reading of the black public sphere during the decade between 1955 and 1965 is unthinkable without the "indispensable" and unique leadership of Martin Luther King. A struggle, and indeed a successful one, may well have occurred, but without King, it could never have been significantly informed or profoundly inscribed as a modern form of black publicity. For King's oratory was absolutely emblematic of his genius for identifying with a black public constituted in the poverty and exclusion of the Jim Crow system. King felt this economically impoverished public history, spirit, local knowledge, and leadership like the very beating of his heart. His voice was always tuned by and attuned to its deepest registers. King's goal, therefore, was to transform the invisible deprivations of black day-to-day life into a national *scene*.[104]

Baker makes a case for the specific sort of public amplification that a figure like King could bring to the conditions of black life. At face value, it would seem to support the idea that the black clergyman and his oratorical offerings were and are worthy of primacy in the realm of sociopolitical spokesmanship. Baker certainly does not shy away from emphasizing the unique efficacy of King's oratorical engagement in the production of select structures of black modernity. That said, I contend the passage above offers clues to a reading of King that situates the heightened impact of his oratory, ethos and public visibility within a very specific contextual

[103] Ibid, 278.
[104] Ibid, 279.

frame. What I am suggesting is that his successes are best understood as the product of an intersection of unique skills, awareness, and circumstances that are not readily reproducible or seamlessly transferable to the contemporary situation of black modernity. King's body of public work, for better or worse, lends itself well to the sort of narrative hagiography (or nostalgia, in Baker's terms) that ensconces the black male clerical paradigm (along with its expressive oratory) as the preferred and organic form of leadership in the black public sphere.

It is important to note Baker's focus on a specific frame of temporal reference. He highlights the period from 1955 – 1965, which encompasses the heart of the modern civil rights movement. For Baker, King's ability to speak to the moment enhanced the degree to which this movement struggle was informed and inscribed as black publicity that is, as an expression of visible power and significance in the public sphere. His absence would not have negated this struggle, but his presence helped fuel the ethos of the movement. The timing of King's emergence is essential toward understanding his dramatic influence. Citing sociologist Aldon Morris, Baker notes that King's broader work in black America begins at a time when the black church was essentially the lone popularly-based black institution that by and large retained economic and political independence from white authorities, enabling it to become an apt staging ground for black protest movement activity.[105] Of course, the black church is also a staging ground for the performance of the black preacher. In that setting, the ethos and identity of the black preacher are dominant forces in the formation of congregational consciousness. One could expect that a movement developing within these confines would bear marks of both the institutional culture and its leaders. Certainly, the practical and rhetorical cross-pollination between the leadership and constituencies of the black church and the civil rights movement

[105] Ibid, 283.

cannot be denied. However, it is just as vital to understand this connection as a function of the temporal reality of Jim Crow segregation that severely inhibited other institutional avenues for social and political self-determination.

Within the poverty and exclusion of Jim Crow, Baker sees a uniquely manifested black public with which King was uniquely acquainted and to which King could uniquely speak. "The black public sphere of church, college, and community in a segregated South," where King learned "the contrasting codes and conceits of black American critique."[106] Baker asserts that King's embeddedness in the deep South, by way of the Baptist Church and his historically black collegiate experience, conferred upon him "a legacy of black collectivity that is virtually inconceivable amid the fragmentation and rubble of today's American world."[107] I read these descriptions as indicators of the specific socio-cultural features that fostered not only King's oratorical and leadership competencies but also the landscape in which those skills unfolded. Furthermore, to classify King's cultural and experiential inheritance as "virtually inconceivable" in a contemporary context suggests that the skills and circumstances that made King so effective in his time are, perhaps, not readily repeatable in the present day. This is not to diminish King's contributions to the public articulation of black life and experience. On the contrary, it is acknowledgment of the temporality of those contributions and of the ultimately limited efficacy of any singular figure in addressing an evolving sociopolitical landscape.

Baker himself hints toward these limitations when he notes that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership is firmly grounded in a black Southern public sphere. Yet, "the real stakes of modernism were in the ethnically divided cities of the North and West, where there were jobs,

[106] Ibid, 284.
[107] Ibid, 281.

economic security, gleaming cars, and sturdy homes: symbols of a fulfilled American dream."[108] King's oratory demonstrated his ability to distill the complex intricacies of American race relations into a coherent program for social reformation pursued and enacted publicly through the civil rights movement. But by Baker's estimation, King eventually found himself in a moment that required a different kind of language better suited for an urban black public sphere.[109] Baker is describing the evolution of black public life under the influence of social, political, and geographical factors that diverged from those that shaped King's rhetorical and performative presence. King's frames of reference were well-suited to a black constituency forged in the crucible of Jim Crow segregation, the black church, and the black South. Yet, his perspective was not all-sufficient for articulating the development of differentiated black identities and interests beyond the scope of the civil rights movement.

Taken together, Habermas and Baker enable us to understand the public sphere as the place where private life becomes visible and audible, and wherein critiques can be offered against public authorities and societal structure at large. Within an American public sphere that reinforced and affirmed the social and political subjugation of a black populace, a black public emerged. The shape and contour of this black social and political presence were profoundly expressed through public speech that amplified the visibility and audibility of black life and concerns. The social and spiritual rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr., reflected a deep

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[108] Ibid, 290.

[109] Ibid, 280. Baker points to a late sermon of King's wherein he asks to be eulogized as a "drum major for justice." He argues that this phrase "can be read as both a vibrant *conceit* and a type of mounting or performative trope for an aesthetics of *montage.*" He writes, "Conceit is the trade name given by literary critics to the figurative language that combines dissimilar images and, in the words of 18th-century lexicographer Samuel Johnson, 'discovers the occult resemblances in things [that are] apparently unlike.'" Thus, Baker lauds King's ability to harness language in the service of creating unique imagery to describe the social, political, and spiritual strivings of black people, while also acknowledging the limits of King's specific perspective.

identification with the black majority and underscored Baker's belief that leaders can only regenerate themselves by tapping into the language of this majority.[110] The black public sphere, in this way, served as a stage for performative occasions, whereby leaders rhetorically juxtaposed the demands for black liberation against the longstanding realities of American injustice while simultaneously redefining the misapprehensions of black life that dominated the white imaginary.[111]

While Baker foregrounds the unique impact of King's role in shaping the black public sphere, King was far from alone on that stage. Indeed, a number of contemporaries performed the task of addressing black social and spiritual interests through public oratory and leadership. The eminent African American social ethicist Peter Paris' study of black religious leaders examines four of these figures, (Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Joseph H. Jackson, and King, in order to explicate the logic behind their public leadership. Paris argues that each of these figures embodies a different archetype of religious leadership, characterized by the distinct relations between their political and religious viewpoints.[112] He categorizes these black religious leaders according to four fundamental types. Paris argues that Jackson operates in the role of the *priest*, who is understood as a primary interpreter of the symbols of the faith and the administrator of rituals of the faith, who perceives the fundamental good in the basic structural elements of society. He places Powell within the framework of the *political* type, who views religion and politics in tenuous relationship and aims towards pragmatic decision-making. Paris designates Malcolm X as the *nationalist* type, one who performs an iconoclastic role in leading

[110] Ibid, 292.
[111] Ibid, 286. Baker describes King's leadership as a "performative occasion," whereby he sought to redress centuries of American injustice and reframe problematic traditional images of black religion that had abounded in white imagination.
[112] Peter Paris, *Black Religious Leaders: Unity in Diversity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 13.

followers to disconnect from present societal norms and begin fashioning a radically different social order. Finally, Paris situates King as the *prophetic* type, one who seeks reform by challenging the status quo, reorienting the trajectory of dangerous social practices so that they align with fundamentally good social structures and values.[113] Ultimately, Paris makes the argument that the perspectives of King, Jackson, Powell, and Malcolm X, constitute a holistic perspective that can be concretized through coalitions and embodied through sufficiently pluralistic political affiliations.[114]

Altogether, Paris' black leadership types represent a constellation of strategies for producing the kind of publicity that Baker suggests transforms the quotidian struggles of black life into a national scene. Each of Paris' types takes up different aesthetic practices of public speech and performative style, compelling the devotion of followers who come to believe in the efficacy of the leader's vision for social change. The leaders in Paris' study worked to reinforce the authority (moral and otherwise) of their positions within ideological disagreement, all the while combating a common enemy of racism. They engaged this battle while situated between black constituencies and white institutional authorities, negotiating the terms of social and political transformation via national public platforms.

Noticeably, Paris' black leadership framework draws none of its explicit architecture from outside the ranks of prominent male religious figures. The political theological rhetoric and performance of a specific set of black men become the basis of his formal explication of the strategies and postures intrinsic in the leadership of anti-racism movements. While aiming to present a leadership typology that describes the logic of *all* past and present black religious leadership, he seemingly does not account for the logics that shape the rhetorical and

[113] Paris, *Black Religious Leaders*, 18 – 23.
[114] Ibid, 281.

performative modes employed by his figures of study.[115] Namely, the rhetorical art of preaching and the charismatic appeal of the preacher are structured and interpreted in ways that presume the manhood and masculinity of their practitioners. If the pathways to black leadership are accessed by way of these practices, then the gendering of those practices serves to reinforce a narrow scope of representative possibilities. Paris' study derives its types from an analysis of the performative occasions of a specific set of black figures. Those occasions rest upon mechanisms of public engagement that, in their given social and political contexts, fortified the expectation of black male clerical figures in public leadership.

While outlining the ongoing political and theological differences between his figures of study, Paris does not address the seeming givenness of this general scheme of black religious leadership. That is, his sketch stops short of interrogating what, if anything, made these sorts of figures and their performances of leadership *necessary* or *expected*. They emerge within contexts already conditioned towards a social imagination in which spokesmanship for black social and political interests was a thoroughly patriarchal province. These black male religious leadership types arise and operate within a public sphere that anticipates both the masculine embodiment of the preacher and the charismatic presence enacted through such a body. If we characterize the relationship between speaker and community as a dynamic of call and response, then it makes sense to elaborate on the sorts of conditions that call forth a leadership response channeled through the rhetoric, physical presence, and personality of these black male religious figures.

[115] Ibid, 15.

"What's the Scenario" - Rhetorical Spaces and Charismatic Performances of Black Public Leadership

In *The Gendered Pulpit*, Roxanne Mountford contends with how the physical body and the means of delivery figure into given rhetorical situations, especially preaching. Mountford's work is valuable here for the way she explores communicative events as matters of material and cultural significance. Her focus on the physical and spatial implications and histories of Protestant American preaching adds a necessary dimension to rhetorical study. The engagements between speakers and audiences are more than verbal events. Their communicative meaning is expanded by virtue of how material, cultural, and genre structures are used to shape conditions of reception and delivery. Mountford's investigation of rhetorical space as "the geography of a communicative event" offers a more topographical lens on how speech, setting, and style collude to produce the sorts of effects I observe in the public charismatic performances of black leaders.[116]

Mountford asserts that preaching constitutes a rhetorical performance whose gendered nature plays a critical role in the reinforcement of the hearers' beliefs, and to analyze such performances requires acknowledging the body as an expressive instrument and an object of meaning itself.[117] One speaks *through* the body, but the body itself speaks and signifies, conveying thought and meaning beyond words. The speech that emanates from any given person is situated in specific rhetorical spaces. Mountford expounds on this concept of "rhetorical

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[116] Roxanne Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 17. Mountford frames rhetorical space as a landscape that "may include both the cultural and material arrangement, whether fortuitous or intentional, of space. The cultural is the grid across which we measure and interpret space but also the nexus from which creative minds manipulate material space. The material – a dimension too little theorized by rhetoricians – often has unforeseen influence over a communicative event and cannot always be explained by cultural or creative intent."

[117] Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit*, 4-6.

space" and applies it to the material circumstances in which communicative events are situated, theorizing that the material dimension impacts communication in ways that cultural and creative intent do not fully explain.[118]

A prime example of this material impact can be found in the pulpit. Mountford examines the pulpit as a rhetorical space of masculine performance and clerical authority to express how place profoundly impacts how one interprets communicative events. She turns to philosopher Henri Lefebvre, whose work suggests that spaces can not only imply symbolic associations but also frame our relationships to other people and to the space itself. Spaces exert power over human behavior and perspective. The space of the pulpit has traditionally enacted power over human relations by reinforcing male authority and establishing physical separation between congregations and ministers.[119] The pulpit's own status, as a sacred space, rests on a longstanding entanglement with gender hierarchy. Its restrictive dimensions are both physical and ideological, a fact that Mountford explains through the trope of *a woman's place*. This trope suggests that women are to enact a posture of silence and subjugation, an idea that "makes no sense unless we imagine silence attached to a rhetorical situation that necessarily involves material space: a woman sitting silently in a church pew when a man preaches."[120] These hierarchical relations are intentionally solidified as a way of using physical space to mark the status of people in the social imaginary. By extension, the very rhetoric that emerges from such physical spaces as the pulpit is socially marked as are the persons positioned as speakers or hearers.

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[118] Ibid, 17. Mountford writes, "As I argue in this chapter, the pulpit is a gendered location and therefore a rich site for exploring rhetorical space. To make such a claim is to argue that rhetorical spaces carry the residue of history within them, but also, perhaps, something else: a physical representation of relationships and ideas."
[119] Ibid, 24-26.
[120] Ibid, 27.

The physical space of the pulpit not only designates the status of the persons present, but also describes the relationship of these persons to one another. Mountford notes that a primary function of church design is to put into practice "the myth of the preacher as messenger from God, chosen and set apart from the people."[121] The pulpit, then, helps reproduce the power dynamics that establish the preacher as the mediator of divine authority and speech. It is significant that she refers to this spatial enactment of difference as a myth. I do not read her use of *myth* as a declaration of patent falsehood. Instead, I read it as an acknowledgement of a traditional idealization of the role and status of the preacher. The order of relations produced through the physical arrangement of the church and the pulpit is neither inevitable or impervious. It is, however, consequential. The church and the pulpit are physical manifestations of authority: an authority that is both sacralized and channeled through the body and presence of the preacher. And in the Christian tradition, Mountford argues, access to the pulpit and, by extension, to its amplification of rhetorical power, has been governed by one's ability to demonstrate requisite status and masculinity.[122] Thus, the role of the preacher derives a profound measure of its influence and significance from physical spaces of performance that serve as a junction of masculinity, divinity, and status before/above other people.

Recalling Mountford's mention of the mythology of the preacher as a divinely authorized and endowed figure, it seems plausible that this logic is not confined exclusively to the space of the pulpit. If we frame this mythology in terms of the *charismatic* – that is, in terms of conferred power or talent – it seems reasonable to ask where else this complex of rhetoric, personality, and perceived giftedness is enacted. The activity from the pulpit reflects an emphasis on the preacher as a singular vessel of revelation, the lone figure embodying charismatic leadership and speech

[121] Ibid, 34.
[122] Ibid, 37.

for the gathered masses. It is quite easy to see how this performative structure manifests in other spaces. Erica Edwards (*Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*) theorizes that this model of the single charismatic leader has served as an enduring fiction within the scheme of black American politics. Specifically, charismatic leadership as a primary force in the pursuit of liberation has been minimally interrogated while still serving as a powerful narrative tool, what Edwards describes as a "structuring fiction." Not unlike Mountford's mythology of the preacher, the fiction of charismatic leadership reinforces forms of historical, social, and epistemological violence that collectively result in antidemocratic, hierarchical arrangements between singular leaders and the masses they ostensibly represent. Complex social and political histories are reduced to footnotes in service of an overlaid story of charismatic male leadership.[123]

I see an important convergence between Mountford's discussion of "rhetorical space" and Edwards' elaboration of the "charismatic scenario." Mountford highlights the means by which physical space literally and figuratively frames rhetorical performance and one's own status in the social imaginary. In recounting of the rise of charismatic leadership in African American political culture, Edwards describes the *scenario* as "a malleable historical container, a loosely scripted series of directions that serves as the basis for reenactment, ritual, and role-playing, and other forms of performance that transmit and transport history and historical knowledge."[124] Much like when a preacher steps into a pulpit, entering the charismatic scenario enlists one in a narrative fabric. Both the pulpit and the charismatic scenario serve as structuring fictions; they organize familiar accounts of power, leadership, and aesthetic presentation by guiding the placement and movement of the given actors. With repetition, these accounts solidify

[123] Erica Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xv.
[124] Edwards, *Charisma*, 19.

as social, political, and historical realities: stories that become dominant frames of collective memory. Edwards notes how the repeated use of the charismatic scenario establishes a *charismatic aesthetic*, composed of various elements and acts that (re)construct political authority. Black charismatic leadership takes on not only discrete form but also clear style. Sight, sound, and affect are intertwined in ways that evoke old patterns and new improvisations on themes of authority.[125] The pulpit and the charismatic scenario situate figures in and before the world as recipients and reproducers of a tradition of leadership.

Mountford and Edwards prompt me to think about black charismatic leadership from a dramaturgical perspective. The concept of dramaturgy is prominent in the theater arts, and its use can imply the multiple, simultaneous notions of observing a performed work, the whole of the performance's context, and the myriad elements of the performance's structure. It presumes the live nature of theatrical performance, an ongoing process that is both circumscribed and open to interruption. Dramaturgy offers a framework within and against which performance can dynamically unfold, and it is invoked here to describe not only the scripting of dialogical and interpersonal social encounters but also the manufacture and use of physical structures to purposely bring about various kinds of live performances.[126] I am after a way of reading the evolving live performances of charismatic leadership, specifically as enacted through black clergymen in scenarios of social and political gathering. I take into account rhetorical and performative occasions that do not stand alone, detached from any antecedent scripts or contextual meanings. These moments of charismatic performance are compositions that repeat, rehearse, and reference beyond themselves, signifying on the cultural memory in whose fabric

[125] Ibid.
[126] Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance – Revised Edition* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 5-6.

they are intricately woven. They are shaped by their staging, the physical locations, the backdrops and props, the particular audiences and their responses, the inherited and improvised scripts.

By invoking the notion of *charisma*, I am gesturing towards Max Weber's elaboration of the term. In his landmark *Economy and Society – An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Weber describes the means whereby systems of domination (authority) seek to obtain legitimacy. He categorizes the "pure types" of authority according to their means of claiming that legitimacy. My primary interest lies in his description of *charismatic authority*, which is grounded in 1) the commitment to the heroism or giftedness of an individual figure and 2) that figure's expression of normative patterns or order.[127] He goes on to state that charisma and the charismatic leader are validated by the recognition of those subject to that authority. However, this kind of authority is ultimately transitory unless it takes on a more institutional structure, which helps to routinize the relationship between charismatic figures and their followers. The challenge of such a transition is evident when such leaders disappear and a plan of succession must be developed.[128]

It is this specific crisis, namely, the loss of the charismatic leader, that prompts my analysis of the scenarios in which such leadership is enacted. Weber's parameters of charismatic authority call to mind Baker's description of the conditions in which Martin Luther King Jr.'s unique and timely brand of public speech and leadership were powerfully effective. At the same time, Baker names how the black collectivity in which King's language, symbols, and experiences were steeped gave way to a fragmented contemporary cultural landscape and

[127] Max Weber, *Economy and Society - An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 215.
[128] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 241-246.

changing black constituency. What seems apparent is that the conditions which enabled and sustained King's charismatic authority were in decline even before his assassination.

I believe the subsequent matter of charismatic succession after King presents a critical problem for the trajectory of black religious leadership in the public square. Namely, the maintenance of this mode of authority requires, as Weber notes, a transformation into a more traditional or rational structure. Part of what must be sustained in this transformation is a claim to the myth, the fiction, the idealization of the special role and status that animate the charismatic figure and reinforce their claims to validity. I contend there is a way in which King's leadership within a given charismatic scenario, that is, an historical structure and script for the performance and transport of knowledge, falls prey to a form of nostalgic remembrance that, rather than giving way to other performative possibilities of black leadership, underscores a desire to routinize the form and functions of said leadership.

With respect to the study of black religious leadership, I seek a critical analysis of the instantiations of charismatic scenarios that not only encapsulate King, but also subsequently encompass the work of successors who operate similarly as representative figures for black social and political interests. By focusing on situated moments in their leadership, I engage critical memory in the way that Baker outlines as an ethical evaluation of past events and a record of their relationship to our present moment. In the case of King, I seek an evaluation of the material, social, and historical structures and relationships that coalesce in a prominent moment in his public career, namely his "I Have a Dream" speech at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. This engagement accounts for the material settings, the particular audience and their responses, King's inherited and improvised scripts, as well as the social and historical antecedents that help to set the stage, as it were, for King's embodiment of

charismatic authority. I also consider the milieu of black cultural production that informs the historical and social moment of the march. In this way, I challenge the sorts of social, political, and historical narratives that solidify around these charismatic scenarios and prompt their perpetual restaging. To the extent that black religious leadership in the public sphere constitutes a rhetoric of resistance, it is just as urgent for that work to resist an uncritical adherence to a charismatic aesthetic over and against an assessment of what the present historical circumstances demand of leaders.

In this chapter, I have described how black religious leaders participated in the expression and expansion of a black modernity, utilizing their speech and performance as creative tools for illuminating black social and political aims. These practices have been categorized within an array of leadership typologies that, while revealing a diversity of approaches, reproduce a narrow scope of black male representation. Furthermore, the rhetorical spaces in which these activities unfold are permeated by histories and power dynamics that confer authority to particular figures and bodies. The overall result has been the routinizing and restaging of charismatic scenarios that enable a recurring form and style of black religious leadership to emerge and entrench itself. In the forthcoming chapters, I will explore how this overarching logic of black leadership is expressed through the life and work of major black religious leaders, beginning with the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Chapter 3

Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Making of a Religio-Political Archetype

On August 21st, 1963, a week before the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, civil rights activist, attorney, and Episcopal priest Pauli Murray penned a letter to A. Philip Randolph, founding president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and national director of the march. The tone and tenor of the letter's message are far from congratulatory about the impending march. Rather, Murray's words cut to the core of underlying tensions beneath the public surface of what has come to be popularly known as the modern civil rights movement. Murray forcefully addresses Randolph:

> I have been increasingly perturbed over the blatant disparity between the major role which Negro women have played and are playing in the crucial grass-roots levels of our struggle and the minor role of leadership they have been assigned in the national policy-making decisions. It is indefensible to call a national march on Washington and send out a Call which contains the name of not a single woman leader. The time has come to say to you quite candidly, Mr. Randolph, that "tokenism" is as offensive when applied to women as when applied to Negroes, and that I have not devoted the greater part of my adult life to the implementation of human rights to now condone any policy which is not inclusive.[129]

Murray's displeasure was grounded in the longstanding struggle for the free exercise of black women's leadership in the ongoing movement for black freedom. Like so many other capable black women, she had given her time, energy, and talents to movement labor but had been denied equal access as a public spokesperson and decision-maker. These conditions of constriction were emblematic of activist Mary Church Terrell's description of the dual problem of race and sex faced by black women.[130] Murray's letter underscores black male movement

[129] Pauli Murray, "Letter to A. Philip Randolph," August 21, 1963, Box 39, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Papers, National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, Wilberforce, Ohio.
[130] Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2005), 34. Terrell writes of the "double handicap of race and sex" that uniquely challenged black women.

leaders' persistent inattention to the consequences of their own practices of gender inequity while championing sociopolitical equality for the race. For women in the movement, the frontline battles for racial justice were waged in tandem with intramural struggles to be treated with equal regard among their own activist brethren.

To be clear, black women's activist and intellectual labor had been foundational to civil rights and church work throughout the twentieth century, and they had doubtless proved their prowess and capability in the public sphere. Historian Jennifer Scanlon notes how, by the early 1960s, the National Council of Negro Women, led by Dorothy Height, had achieved status as a preeminent civil rights organization of the era. Among her friends, Height counted Pauli Murray and Anna Arnold Hedgeman, the latter of whom was a prominent civil rights activist and the only woman on the organizing committee of the March on Washington. Despite her tremendous profile, and Hedgeman's advocacy, Height was not offered a formal role in the march and neither were any other women. Thus, one of the most significant public events in the movement for civil rights unfolded without a single woman being granted a speaking opportunity.[131]

The intersection of race and gender politics in the modern civil rights movement had significant implications for the development of models of black public leadership. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was a moment where the contours of this intersection crystallized. The event was marked by black male leaders' active resistance to women's presence as speakers on behalf of the movement. As such, it constituted a rhetorical space where women were present but only men formally spoke. The myriad excuses offered for this exclusion only

[131] Jennifer Scanlon, *Until There is Justice: The Life of Anna Arnold Hedgeman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 163-4. Scanlon notes the "meager" Tribute to Negro Women Fighters for Freedom, during which Daisy Bates briefly offered a collective female pledge to movement leaders such as Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., and Roy Wilkins (168). Aside from Bates' brief words, women were featured only as musical performers during the program.

served to reiterate how the march functioned as a venue for the implicit and explicit shaping of images and ideas of black public leadership. The march's structure suggests the willingness to employ black women as accent and adornment to the centerpieces of black male charismatic authority and rhetoric. Its content reflects the dominance of black male voices in the narrative construction of movement history. Perhaps no voice or figure is more dominant in the popular memory of the march than that of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the delivery of his now-iconic "I Have a Dream" speech.

This chapter interrogates how the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom served as a charismatic scenario through which Martin Luther King's rhetoric and representative functions fueled and reinforced an exclusive model for black public leadership. The popular memory of King places him in suspended animation, overshadowing the mass movement that fueled his public emergence and flattening the sharp, critical edges of his words on that August afternoon.[132] Much of this is the result of the nostalgic reduction of his larger body of public ministry and prophetic witness to a generally inoffensive message of nonviolence. That said, King's own formative experiences as a black clergyman and public figure up to and beyond the point of the march are steeped in the sorts of gendered mechanisms that elevated the comportment, aesthetics, speech, and embodiment of black men as markers of inherent leadership capability and authority.

Following from chapters 1 and 2, I argue that a religio-political leadership pattern develops from the idealization of: 1) the black male preacher, 2) the sermonic quality of his public discourse, and 3) the charismatic features of his public performance. Specifically, I assert that King's public oratory and leadership are problematically deployed as evidence of the

[132] Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 1.

primacy of the black male clerical paradigm to the advancement of sociopolitical movements. As such, he figures into the formation of a religio-political model that shapes and influences a host of leaders after him with varying consequences.

I initiate this argument with a discussion of Benjamin E. Mays' influence on King prior to his emergence as a public theologian and political leader. Next, I shift my focus to the work of black women in the march, with specific focus on how Anna Arnold Hedgeman's labor and leadership before, during, and after the march disrupts the narrative hagiography that would center charismatic black male leadership as the march's and by extension, the movement's driving force. Finally, I consider King's "I Have a Dream" speech, giving attention to how its rhetorical and reception histories complicate the notion that the work of articulating and executing a vision for black sociopolitical progress was and is grounded in the singular charismatic leadership of black clergymen.

"All Eyes On Me" - Benjamin E. Mays and the Making of Public Leadership

In their introduction to the 1996 edited volume *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*, historians Brian Ward and Tony Badger make note of the principal scholarly concerns in the outpouring of literature on King and the movement. Earlier works in the wake of King's death focused heavily on the roles of King and the major protest organizations (e.g. NAACP, CORE, SCLC, SNCC). They also tended to chronologically situate the core of civil rights activity between the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott and the 1965 Selma campaign.[133] Gerald Horne argues that this is part of the mythology that has developed around the civil rights movement, to the neglect and distortion of certain and often inconvenient

[133] Brian Ward and Tony Badger, introduction to *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*, eds. Brian Ward and Tony Badger (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 1.

facts and the relationships between them. Such mythmaking does not constitute outright falsification, but it complicates the sorts of contemporary lessons one might garner from these historical events.[134]

Historian, Adam Fairclough asserts that the 'Montgomery-to-Selma' framing "places far too great a burden of historical explanation on the shoulders of Dr. King" and "exaggerates the importance of the black church, failing to appreciate the complexity of the social networks that sustained black protest." [135] The narrative centrality of King's life and work to various accounts of the civil rights era is coupled with the lionizing of black church institutions. Nonetheless, Fairclough notes that part of what uniquely marks the era of increasing black protest between 1955 and 1965 is the momentum that was built as "the *struggle* for civil rights became the civil rights *movement*."[136] My interest is in assessing how King's own formation sets the stage for his public role in this movement. My contention is that the forces that contributed to King's suitability as an effective public champion for black protest activity in that era also contribute to the enduring dominance of a traditional mythology of black male clerical leadership as that activity's primary motive agent. In the end, the momentum that characterizes this period of protest exerts its own profound force on King's public emergence and remembrance.

Of the various influences that fueled King's development into a religio-political leader, the impact of the black social gospel looms large. American social ethicist Gary Dorrien argues that this oft-overlooked tradition, grounded in black religious response to various forms of racialized oppression, most clearly describes King and his fellow leaders in the civil rights

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[134] Gerald Horne, '"Myth" and the Making of Malcolm X,' *American Historical Review* 98 (April 1993), 440-1.
[135] Adam Fairclough, "The Civil Rights Movement in Louisiana, 1939 – 1954," in *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*, eds. Brian Ward and Tony Badger (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 20.
[136] Fairclough, "The Civil Rights Movement," 19.

movement. Among the significant theologians whose social gospel orientations were instrumental in King's progress, Dorrien names Drs. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, a Baptist minister and the first African American president of Howard University, Howard Thurman, mystic prophet and African American philosopher, and Benjamin Elijah Mays. president of Morehouse College.[137] In particular, Mays' enactment of the social gospel in the context of black American public life stands out. Womanist ethicist and theologian, Eboni Marshall Turman elaborates on the connection between the social gospel's theological and social task of "saving bodies" and Mays' project of "making men" in the context of his presidential role at Morehouse College. In so doing, Turman raises vital questions and concerns about the social and moral fractures that can result from the mishandling of these projects.[138]

Mays was born on August 1, 1894, ten miles from the town of Ninety Six, South Carolina, the youngest child from the union of Hezekiah Mays and Louvenia Carter Mays. Mays describes a childhood steeped in familial affirmation of his blackness and the admiration of black male heroes such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Paul Laurence Dunbar.[139] His earliest memory, however, was the terroristic activity of white mobs during the Phoenix Riot in the fall of 1898. Randal Maurice Jelks describes this riot as an outgrowth of the civil religious notion of the Lost Cause, whereby white southerners, characterizing themselves as victims and heroes, created monuments to Confederate figures and enacted brutal, strategic violence on the

[137] Gary Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 1-2.
[138] Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 130.
[139] Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 1-2.

black populace. This political terrorism, Jelks argues, informed Mays' formation of "an antiracist theological framework to eradicate Jim Crow's effects on black people."[140]

Mays' framework of resistance found its roots in the black Baptist church and the affirmations of his mother. His theological and educational pursuits were thoroughly intertwined, and served as means by which black claims to citizenship and humanity could be reaffirmed.[141] Mays writes of the burdensome impact of white supremacy and its persistent threat of violence, "a situation that had shadowed [his] early years and had killed the spirit of all too many of [his] people."[142] Those circumstances prompted him to seek further education at Bates College, a pursuit he described as an effort to disprove the falsehoods of white superiority through direct competition with them.[143] At Bates, Mays was exposed to the social gospel writings of Walter Rauschenbusch and the socio-historical method of Shirley Jackson Case. This theological instruction would aid in his development of a critical assessment of white racism.[144]

One of the enduring examples of Mays' application of this intellectual inheritance is his dissertation, which was subsequently published as *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (1938). Mays' sweeping project explored theological transformations in black religious thought along the lines of socially constructive and traditionally compensatory notions of God. Mays describes traditional compensatory ideas as those that, rather than supporting social rehabilitation, are conducive towards complacent attitudes and an otherworldly theological perspective that God will eventually work things out.[145] In contrast, he describes socially

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[140] Randal Maurice Jelks, *Benjamin E. Mays, Schoolmaster of the Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 11.
[141] Jelks, *Benjamin E. Mays*, 11.
[142] Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 49-50.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic*, 114.
[145] Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 245.

constructive ideas as those that reflect a more this-worldly emphasis, conducive towards emancipatory ends and the need for psychological and social readjustment.[146]

Though Mays was thoroughly critical of the compensatory theological patterns therein, he maintained a sense of hope in the black church and its ability to be a transforming social and spiritual force.[147] He understood that the shifting patterns of African American theological articulation were tethered to the devastating social, political, and economic upheavals of American society at large. Mays made note of the strong trend of ethically constructive ideas in black mass literature in the pre-Civil War era as well as the extension of this pattern into the post-Reconstruction era. However, he argues that in the post-World War I era, compensatory ideas of God were employed to help black church constituencies face the harshness of an increasingly troubled social reality. Despite his own resistance to those theological directions, Mays held strongly to the belief in a God who was both invested in the social wellbeing of the world and active through faith communities as a participant in the struggle against America's original sin, racial discrimination.[148]

Mays' own attempts to reconcile the tensions of his religious upbringing with his secular education were reflective of his desire to staunch the disengagement of African American elites from faith traditions, religious institutions, and their leaders. He attributed particular notions of black intellectual disillusionment with religion to the social, political, and economic situation of black people post-World War I.[149] Mays' project was an undeniably personal one in which his

[146] Mays, *The Negro's God*, 248-9.
[147] Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic*, 113.
[148] Ibid, 118-9.
[149] Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 63-4.

own life's trajectory was implicated. His intellectual and theological evolution as a black man would figure prominently into his theo-political vision of education at Morehouse College.

Womanist religious scholar, Barbara Dianne Savage clearly articulates this dynamic, identifying Mays' conviction that faith in God had particular efficacy for saving black men from violent means of obtaining their rights. "For Mays, religion was still the avenue through which black manliness and the rights of black manhood could be achieved peacefully. His ideas about progress for the race rested on gendered notions of black religious and political leadership—an ideal later embodied through his leadership of Morehouse College."[150] Savage evaluates Mays alongside two other twentieth century scholars of African American religious and political ideas, W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. Within their work, she identifies their shared sensibility that black church leadership was challenged not only by the insufficiency of male leaders but also by the obdurate authority of the women who supported them. Thus, in order for the church to fulfill these scholars' institutional vision as a spiritual center and site for black sociopolitical assembly, a critical mass of black male ministerial leaders would be essential in order to "control and harness the power of the overwhelmingly female membership."[151]

In 1940, two years after the publishing of *The Negro's God*, Mays was elected to the presidency of Morehouse College.[152] From the start, he acknowledged his belief in the college's characteristic spirit, an ethos that could uniquely embolden and empower black men with a sense of mission and purpose. Mays was clear: "This spirit, and the challenge to preserve and perpetuate it, clinched my decision more than anything else to accept the presidency."[153] Furthermore, this interest was in no small way intertwined with his desire to see Morehouse

[150] Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, 65.
[151] Ibid, 66-7.
[152] Jelks, *Benjamin E. Mays*, 138.
[153] Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 173.

maintain and strengthen its earliest intents to equip men for the work of pastoral leadership.[154] Mays' tenure at Morehouse was nothing less than a theological, political, and social project in which the salvation of black life was contingent upon the ability to construct a counter-narrative to white supremacist ideologies and practices. This construction was centered on the development of black men as the appropriate vessels for carrying out such a calling. Turman expresses it plainly: "Mays's God was concerned about the social consequences of being black in twentieth century America, and lest this God fade into obscurity, Mays had no choice but to employ his leadership at Morehouse as a 'kingdom-building' opportunity whereby he was able to make good within an imperfect historical context."[155] Such kingdom-building came to dramatic fruition through the life and work of his most famous student, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

At the youthful age of 15, Martin Luther King, Jr., matriculated at Morehouse College in fall of 1944, as a third-generation student preceded by his father and grandfather.[156] He arrived through Morehouse's early admission program, established during World War II as a means of bolstering the enrollment for both numerical and financial purposes and drawing academically gifted young men to the school.[157] This college environment was uniquely aligned with the background and trajectory of King's life as the son of a Baptist minister and member of Atlanta's black bourgeoisie. As a private establishment with church affiliations, the college carried the expectancy of rigorous moral instruction alongside academic engagement, and Mays took advantage of this, using his Tuesday chapel lectures as opportunities for speaking to the

[154] Ibid, 234.
[155] Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic*, 123.
[156] Peter J. Ling, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 18.
[157] Jelks, *Benjamin E. Mays*, 160-1.

theological, social, and political concerns of ethical leadership.[158] While King's theo-political voice would also be profoundly shaped by a diverse array of instructors, it was Mays whom he esteemed as his primary intellectual and spiritual influence. In Mays, King had a model for the applied synthesis of black religious traditions, public theological engagement, and intellectual inquiry.[159] In the role of president, Mays actively exercised his duties in a way that reflected his strong belief in the deep necessity and broad reach of the black minister. As Jelks puts it, "The Morehouse presidency was not simply a job to Mays – it was his pulpit on the national and world stage."[160] It seems fair to say that King's eventual public leadership during the modern civil rights movement evolved into a similar expression of pulpit rhetoric and performance with national and global reach and visibility.

In many respects, King's public work marked the apotheosis of Mays' Morehouse project. He was the fulfillment of Mays' desire for educated black male clergy who were equipped for political influence at the local level and beyond. This was precisely the sort of leadership Mays believed was essential "to preserve and further the gains then being made through litigation and changes in the laws of segregation."[161] Yet, his almost single-minded dedication to the production of a black male leadership class must be considered in light of its ethical implications. Mays certainly was not ignorant of the significant contributions of black women to the sustenance and elevation of black institutions and sociopolitical activism. Savage notes the educational and professional accomplishments of his wife, Sadie Gray Mays, who was

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[158] Ibid, 161.
[159] Lewis V. Baldwin, *There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 26-9. Baldwin names Gladstone L. Chandler (professor of English), Samuel Williams (minister and professor of philosophy), George D. Kelsey (minister and director of Morehouse's religion department), Walter Chivers (advisor in sociology) among the well-known professors who directly informed King's intellectual and spiritual development.
[160] Jelks, *Benjamin E. Mays*, 145.
[161] Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, 223-4.

a graduate of the University of Chicago and active as a social worker, activist, and fundraiser. Alongside her work, Mays was particularly vocal about the various social and professional restrictions placed on women at large and black women in particular.[162] Benjamin E. Mays' challenge, then, was not one of lacking awareness of women's leadership and labor. Rather, in Turman's words, Mays' project, then and now, presents a moral problem "because its grounding principle deduces that those *made* to lead are the arbiters of a very specific embodied perfection."[163] In this way, a specific representative, rhetorical, and even aesthetic authority is conferred upon *made* men by virtue of being shaped and formed from within the Morehouse confines.

Here, I find it helpful to recall Jelks' description of the Morehouse presidency as Mays' public-facing pulpit. Such language imbues the role with a sacred purpose. As Roxanne Mountford reminds us, the pulpit constitutes a rhetorical space through which the clergyman engages in "the manly art of preaching," and in the preaching manuals of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, she observes the reinforcement of the practices and practitioners as expressly masculine.[164] This instructive disciplining is a matter of shaping ideology, practice, and aesthetic appeal, all collaborating to recover and reproduce visions and symbols of a rightly-ordered, male-led world. To imagine Morehouse as pulpit, then, is to understand it as carrying a measure of the ideological freight that accompanies the presumed cultural authority and significance of preaching and clergymen. From such a space, Mays expressed a sermonic idealism, aimed towards the cultivation of manly character and integrity in young men who would establish and sustain a righteous order.[165]

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[162] Ibid, 213-16.
[163] Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic*, 129.
[164] Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit*, 40-2.
[165] Jelks, *Benjamin E. Mays*, 148.

However, the inner workings of black churches and sociopolitical movements reflect the extent to which Mays' vision, for all its intentions, was ultimately insufficient. The emphasis on producing a black male leadership class does not account for the preexisting conditions of challenged sexual-gender relations within the aforementioned entities. Womanist social ethicist Marcia Y. Riggs argues that sexual-gender oppression presents a powerful socio-ethical dilemma for black churches. She describes a stark state of affairs:

> The black church since [E. Franklin] Frazier has functioned as a "surrogate world" wherein African American men as clergy have perceived themselves as securing the rights of patriarchal privilege denied them elsewhere. At last, as the "father" of the household of God, African American men are able to garner the respect of and dominance over women that some maintain that they have not been granted in the larger society, and consequently cannot achieve even in their own homes.[166]

Riggs' analysis speaks to the internal conflicts and contradictions of black churches. Their leadership in self-determined struggles against racial and economic injustice was not and has not been met with an equal zeal for ensuring sexual-gender justice within their confines. What has resulted, Riggs insists, is the development of a "normative patriarchal institutional ethos" within the black church, whereby "inconsistency between justice and 'control of women'" renders the church context a site of moral corruption.[167] She echoes the assertion of womanist theologian, Delores S. Williams, who argues that the African-American denominational churches have been double-edged swords that have maintained a measure of theological space for black women while simultaneously deploying patriarchal theological and biblical interpretations to suppress critical interrogation of women's oppression.[168] Reconstructing the moral life of the black

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[166] Marcia Y. Riggs, *Plenty Good Room: Women Versus Male Power in the Black Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 80.
[167] Riggs, *Plenty Good Room*, 86-9.
[168] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), xiii.

church, then, requires an ethical vision of communal leadership that is not grounded in the retrenchment of gender hierarchy.

Within the sociopolitical institutions of the Civil Rights Movement, similar challenges to black women's leadership persisted in ways that mirrored the black churches. Womanist social ethicist Rosetta Ross draws specific attention to the moral formation and logic that informed the activist work of numerous women during that era. In her *Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights,* Ross delves into the life and work of Ella Baker, one of the key architects of the movement, and speaks to Baker's application of inherited moral perspectives to the work of civil rights activism. Baker, who was instrumental in the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), aimed to practice an egalitarian leadership ethos but found herself frustrated by the hierarchical practices of various civil rights groups.[169] She especially found conflict within the SCLC, whose clergy-led body leaned heavily on charismatic leadership and often obstructed the talents of lay persons.[170] Even within SNCC, a group notably resistant to hierarchical leadership and performances of respectability, there was palpable resistance to the value and pedagogical significance of the public speeches of activist and organizer Fannie Lou Hamer. Hamer's unvarnished vernacular and humble trappings were regarded as lacking development or

[169] The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were two of the most prominent civil rights organizations to emerge from the modern civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. The SCLC, spurred by the trio of Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, and Stanley C. Levinson, was founded in 1957 with the aim of capitalizing on the mass action of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. SNCC was founded in 1960 as a student-run organization dedicated to non-violent, direct action strategies. Though often at ideological odds, the organizations were frequent collaborators in the formative years of the movement. See Adam Fairclough, "The Preachers and the People: The Origins and Early Years of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1959," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (1986) and The Martin Luther King, Jr. Encyclopedia, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/student-nonviolent-coordinating-committee-sncc.

[170] Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 43-5.

authoritative weight. Nonetheless, through her ability "to channel growing but inchoate feelings of dissatisfaction into compelling rhetorical action," Hamer powerfully displayed the content and style of black religious thought and leadership, marked by her clear and practical application of theological analysis to the sociopolitical situation of black people. [171] For Baker and Hamer alike, the challenge was not a question of their own capabilities but of the intransigent nature and masculinist biases of hierarchical systems of institutional leadership.

These accounts, while not wholly comprehensive, highlight the unresolved matters of sexual-gender politics embedded within the structural apparatuses for black spiritual and sociopolitical flourishing. In spaces dominated by black male leadership, there remained and remain active obstacles to the free, inclusive involvement and encouragement of women in roles of rhetorical, representational, and intellectual authority. These practices of active suppression and disregard aid and abet the formation of alternative histories that obscure complex truths in favor of descriptive simplicity. Such histories tend toward the centering and celebration of what Victor Anderson describes as a "cult of heroic genius", embodied by figures whose speech and acts within given circumstances become characteristic symbols of racial progress.[172] This sort of reductive imagination runs the risk of binding the means and mechanisms of movement labor to essentialized black aesthetics and burdens of racial representation, Anderson argues.[173]

Arguably, Mays' vision to produce a black male leadership class is an instance of precisely this sort of problem. Mays did not *deny* black women's leadership but understood

[171] Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck, eds., *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 8-11. Brooks and Houck cite James Forman's autobiography *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: Open Hand, 1985), wherein Forman describes the situation of Hamer's disregard by black separatists within SNCC.
[172] Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 157.
[173] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 157.

leadership as one of the essential and definitive attributes of black masculinity.[174] Bolstered by the heroic exemplar of King and the emergence of other black preachers in the same era, Mays continued to proffer a gendered imagination of the necessary forms of authority and guidance for the black church and sociopolitical arenas. While his public address of gender and black women's issues denoted a measure of sensitivity and sympathy, his larger body of work demonstrated a paradoxical inattention to the work and person of black religious women such that his attention to "the failings and indispensability of black men rendered those black women invisible in his vision for the reformation of the black church."[175] In this way, the aesthetics and responsibilities of racial progress become tethered to a masculine ideal, even as black women's active engagement in movement labor unfolds on numerous fronts with significant impact.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom furnishes a prime example of the overlap between Mays' manifested vision of black male leadership and the significant, though underappreciated, labor of black women as architects and enactors of public movement events. A closer look at the contributions of these women reveals the extent to which the nostalgic framing of such historical moments is overwhelmingly focused on black male speech and charismatic performance from within authoritative rhetorical spaces. This view neglects critical forms and figures of leadership that are vital to assembling the various elements of the charismatic scenario through which such speech and performance become possible. Through the experiences of three women leaders, namely, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Pauli Murray, and Dorothy Height, a different understanding of the genesis and execution of the March emerges, disrupting hagiographical accounts of the black freedom movement.

[174] Savage*, Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, 223.
[175] Ibid, 231-2.

"Ladies First": Black Women's Leadership in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

The front panel of a tri-fold mailer implored its readers that "the time is NOW for all Americans black and White to join the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." This call to action was undersigned by the prominent black civil rights leaders who came to be known as the Big Six: James Farmer, Martin Luther King, John Lewis, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young. The third panel listed additional leaders, directors, and administrators for the March. In total, 24 figures were listed; 23 of them were men.[176]

The lone female exception, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, was hardly a negligible figure. In the preceding decades, she had proved her leadership acumen in a wide variety of roles spanning civil rights advocacy, policymaking, education, politics, and religious organizations. By any measure, Hedgeman's profile far exceeded her relatively modest presence in the unfolding of the March's events. The March on Washington became the bellwether for a host of other mass mobilization efforts across various movements. In her biography *Until There is Justice: The Life of Anna Arnold Hedgeman*, Jennifer Scanlon speaks to the vital roles that Hedgeman and her black women counterparts played in offering the leadership styles and intellectual understandings that would help define the movement. She asserts that "Hedgeman's contributions to the march…provide a critical new lens for understanding the civil rights movement's limits as well as its legacies."[177] In light of this statement, I see Hedgeman's life and work as a fitting starting point for reassessing the internal dynamics and outcomes of the March on Washington.

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[176] "March on Washington Flyers," PBS LearningMedia, accessed April 25, 2019, https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/iml04.soc.ush.civil.mowfly/march-on-washington-flyers/.
[177] Scanlon, *Until There Is Justice*, 4.

Anna Arnold Hedgeman was born in 1899 in Marshalltown, Iowa. Her parents were William and Marie Arnold, descendants of black migrants who sought to build lives in the territories of the North and the West. Hedgeman was reared in Anoka, Minnesota, a mill town north of Minneapolis and St. Paul, populated by laborers in agriculture, logging, and factory work.[178] Reared intentionally by her parents outside of city life, she, in her words, "had grown up without any 'sense of the Negro, any real image of him as he is.'"[179] In Anoka, the poverty and hunger emblematic of the urban centers was scarcely present. Her surroundings were spacious, her house was large, and the growing things of the natural world were abundant. Hedgeman's early life was defined by the austere, disciplined habits of her parents, who ensured that she and her siblings attended to household assignments, rigorous study, and piano practice.[180]

Nevertheless, her deliberately cultivated upbringing did not shield her from the complex realities of a world deeply marked by racial hierarchy and categorization. She recalled an incident in which a young girl named Isabel, who lived along her route home from school, once asked her, "Anna, are you really a nigger?" This moment of rejection remained a scar for Hedgeman as her racial consciousness began to form in ways that disrupted the relative security offered by Anoka. Anoka was a place where Anna, by her own admission, had not experienced any continuous pressure or animus around color. Anna's mother counseled her to dismiss this and other racist insults as marks of ignorance, opting to pray for the forgiveness of such offenders. Such a posture made sense given the Arnold family's own deep engagement in the

[178] Ibid, 5-6.
[179] Anna Arnold Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds: A Memoir of Negro Leadership* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1964), 7.
[180] Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 7-8.

communal life of their town.[181] However, Anna would soon confront those tensions outside of the confines of Anoka.

Anna went on to matriculate at Hamline University, a private liberal arts institution in St. Paul, Minnesota. As the school's first black student, her time there would be marked by moments that profoundly shaped her racial and religious consciousness. Anna befriended a fellow first-year student, Mary Poston, a white woman from northwest Minnesota, whose own upbringing mirrored the socially and religiously conservative values with which Anna was reared. The friends would later be separated in their public speaking class by a professor who thought "that it was right for Negroes to attend college, but unnecessary for anyone to be *friendly*" with them. Though Anna performed admirably in the course - despite the professor's dismissive attitude – she eventually regarded him in the way her parents had taught her to regard all behavior of this sort: as ignorance to be quickly forgotten."[182] Nonetheless, the pernicious effects of the color line would only come into clearer view for Anna.

In Anna's sophomore year, her Spanish professor urged her to attend an upcoming lecture by a prominent Negro leader, to be held at a church in St. Paul, Minnesota. Anna decided to attend and found herself impressed by the speaker's poise and eloquent discourse on matters of black people, colonialism, and freedom. The speaker was none other than W.E.B. DuBois. In his words, Anna found a sense of understanding and an articulation of the double consciousness that had punctuated her experiences at Hamline. In retrospect, she would characterize her time at Hamline as lacking "a more progressive study of the workings of religion and race."[183] For all

[181] Ibid, 9-10.
[182] Ibid, 15.
[183] Scanlon, *Until There Is Justice*, 23.

that her formal education could not offer, Anna's ongoing personal and professional journey would furnish a framework for her own progressive religious and racial advocacy.

Anna departed Minnesota in the fall of 1922 and entered the Jim Crow South, where she taught at Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, a railroad town in Marshall County. Her description of the train ride to Mississippi emphasizes the swift but certain lessons she learned about the practices of segregation and the means by which black people responded to them. She was unaccustomed to the rough accommodations as well as the rough appearance and raucous demeanor of some of her fellow black travelers. On the train and in the stations, the color line was clear and deep, from the cars to the lavatories, and Anna lamented that "those two words, 'white' and 'colored' were to haunt me during the next two years."[184] Scanlon describes Hedgeman as being reared with an ethos of *socially responsible individualism*, whereby one's privileges and advantages were to be used in the service and leadership of their communities. In rural Mississippi, she was forced to confront the limitations of individual behavior as a response to structural racial oppression. While her parents reared her to understand her behavior, bearing, and accomplishments as the critical factors in a flourishing life, Anna came to see that for southern whites, she and her counterparts would always be black first and foremost.[185]

Anna's two years at Rust College cultivated in her a deep animus against southern whites and the conditions under which black people struggled to work, study, and live. For her, this discontent was a challenge to the grounds on which such and denial of human freedoms could exist and persist. In Holly Springs, life for black residents of the city was circumscribed by the sharecropping system, which kept families at a consistent financial disadvantage while also profoundly impacting the educational schedule of their children. They labored under dreadful

[184] Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 19.
[185] Scanlon, *Until There Is Justice*, 31.

working and living conditions on the plantations with little if any recourse. The conditions of schooling for black children and youth were just as dire. At the time, Holly Springs did not even offer a high school program for black students. In fact, only three communities in the entire state provided this. As a result, Rust College provided this educational opportunity for black families in Marshall County.[186]

Anna's second year of teaching was marked by the tutelage of the dean of the college, Dr. Leonard J. Farmer. A scholar and father of noted civil rights activist James Farmer, Farmer aimed to temper the effects of Anna's exposure to the depths of racist deprivation lest she think the black citizens of the town merely conceded these circumstances without question. He guided her extracurricular studies in histories of black life and resistance, helping her to cultivate a more holistic approach to race relations that could hold together both righteous anger and reasoned awareness of the struggles that had preceded her own.[187] At the same time, Anna was still strongly tied to her northern biases, believing that "Courageous southern Negroes had to be rescued from the kind of white people [she] had seen in the South."[188] Even while comprehending a new depth to the intertwined freedom struggles of black people across the land, Anna's return to the North would be a jarring reminder that even there, she was "not a teacher or even an American," but indeed "a Negro – not wanted and not expected."[189] The borders that defined the difference between the North and the South were but elaborate fictions, all the more with respect to black people. The narrative of white supremacy, in all its alternately brazen and clandestine forms, held sway in the everyday structures of social life through which it was

[186] Ibid, 33-35.
[187] Ibid, 41.
[188] Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 28.
[189] Ibid, 28-30.

codified. Color, far more than Mason-Dixon, was the bold line that marked the limits of possibility for black people in America.

In the decades leading up to her involvement in the March on Washington, Anna Arnold Hedgeman would build a significant career that sharpened her leadership skills across an array of organizations and issues. Her years as an executive director in the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) placed her in a position to grapple with the complexities of race relations in the context of religious belief. Though she found herself frustrated with the contradictory and racist behaviors of white Christians, her experiences deepened her recognition of the multiple layers of resistance to black women's work and flourishing. Anna's time at the Harlem branch of the YWCA would energize her and immerse her in a thoroughly black social and professional milieu. In the years to follow, she advocated for fair employment practices in Washington, D.C., during World War II, worked as an assistant to Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr. (New York City), ran for public office multiple times, and helped to pass civil rights legislation.[190] By the time of the March, Hedgeman had accrued a track record as a thoroughly experienced and prepared leader in religion, politics, and social policy to an extent that far outpaced many of her more visible and celebrated colleagues. At home and abroad, Hedgeman had established herself as a forceful speaker, thinker, strategist, and activist of merit.

The circumstances of Hedgeman's upbringing, education, and career provide a necessary context for understanding the significance of her inclusion among the organizational leaders of the March on Washington. Far from any token figure, she was uniquely suited to help guide the strategic planning and execution of the event at various levels. Her breadth of experience in the leadership of various religious and sociopolitical organizations had equipped her with the social

[190] Scanlon, *Until There Is Justice*, 2.

and relational capital to assemble diverse coalitions around shared interests. Indeed, along with Pauli Murray, her organizing and activist prowess contributed to her inclusion in the original March on Washington Movement led by A. Philip Randolph in the 1940s.[191] Upon learning of the SCLC's concurrent plans for a march, Hedgeman organized the meeting between Randolph and King that would enable them to settle their differences and unite their efforts in planning what we now know as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.[192] Furthermore, in her role on the National Council of Churches' Commission on Religion and Race, she was tasked with rallying 30,000 white Protestants to join in the March.[193] It is no understatement to say that the course, substance, and remembrance of this historical event would be dramatically altered if not for the unique and timely religio-political leadership of Anna Arnold Hedgeman.

Her instrumental role notwithstanding, Hedgeman rightfully lamented the recurrent patterns of gendered leadership hierarchy that aimed to keep her and other women on the periphery of the public movement platform. In the penultimate committee meeting, she noticed the absence of even a single woman speaker on the program. A proposal was made to have Randolph acknowledge the contributions of black women while they stood and merely bowed at the end. Out of a desire to refrain from embarrassing the male leaders, Hedgeman refrained from commenting.[194] Her personal reflections during the March are telling: "We grinned; some of us, as we recognized anew that Negro women are second-class citizens in the way that white women are in our culture."[195]

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[191] William P. Jones, "The Unknown Origins of the March on Washington Movement: Civil Rights Politics and the Black Working Class," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Volume 7, Issue 3 (2010), 36-37.
[192] Scanlon, *Until There Is Justice*, 157-8.
[193] Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 177.
[194] Ibid, 178.
[195] Ibid, 180.

This was the tenor communicated in Pauli Murray's terse letter to A. Philip Randolph a week before the March. The movement politics of the moment reflected the extent to which the sociopolitical position of black women remained woefully disregarded. Murray's written discontent was the culmination of events that prompted her to question the commitment of movement leaders to the concerns of black women. Not long before the March, Murray learned that Randolph had been invited to speak before the National Press Club, a professional and social organization for journalists that, at the time, excluded women from membership and required them to sit in the balcony if and when they attended club events.[196] Though the club would eventually permit women as full participants that day, the die was already cast, as the male movement leaders operated with a mistaken belief that the improvement of black men's lives would inherently improve the lives of women.[197] Murray was not at all convinced. She believed that black women should be front and center, and that their needs required a place alongside those of black men. In her view, the intersecting racial and gender situation of black women placed them in a space of socioeconomic precarity that could not go ignored.[198]

Brittney C. Cooper argues that Murray's theoretical framing of discriminatory sex bias – what Murray would term "Jane Crow" – was embedded in a context of black intellectual history "that sought not only to institutionalize particular definitions of racial freedom but also to formalize a narrative of proper race manhood and womanhood."[199] Further, Cooper names how this articulation outlines the "socio-spatial race and gender formation" through which black

[196] Rosalind Rosenberg, *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 266.
[197] Scanlon, *Until There Is Justice*, 166.
[198] Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 269.
[199] Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 102.

women's knowledge production and intellectual leadership were shaped.[200] In this way, Murray's contention for black women's full inclusion represented resistance *against* and *within* a performative regime through which black men were upheld as rhetorical and intellectual standard bearers for the appropriate expressions of black freedom and personhood.

Murray's insistent petitioning for black women's full inclusion with respect to both public leadership and policy concerns was nothing new. During the first March on Washington Movement, Murray informed Randolph that she saw herself as one of his "lieutenants" in the struggle for racial equality.[201] She rightfully regarded herself as intellectually and strategically capable as the men with whom she worked, But years of engagement with civil rights leadership had not changed the internal culture of sex bias. The events of the march were an extension of the socio-spatial problem of Jane Crow. Up to the very morning of the march, Murray and others appealed for a woman speaker. But Bayard Rustin, a longstanding friend of Murray's and executive director of the march, was unrelenting. As Dorothy Height writes, "Bayard Rustin held fast that women were part of all the groups – the churches, the synagogues, labor – represented on the podium…[his] stance showed us that men honestly didn't see their position as patriarchal or patronizing. They were happy to include women in the human family, but there was no question as to who headed the household!"[202]

Rosalind Rosenberg notes these events as a turning point in Dorothy Height's feminist awakening. In her extensive tenure as one of the few female leaders of a major civil rights organization, Height had felt she was a peer among the men in the movement. However, Murray and Hedgeman illuminated the inferior treatment she received among them, and how even

[200] Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 102.
[201] Ibid, 96.
[202] Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 145-6.

moments of token inclusion left her unnamed and unseen. The devolution of civil rights into a struggle for black *men's* rights underscored just how thoroughly the cause and presence of black women had been rendered invisible.[203]

The events of August 28th, 1963, were solidified in public memory by the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. However, August 29th marked a quiet response and resistance that should inform our interpretation of the march. Due to security concerns, organizations based in Washington, D.C., were asked not to hold additional meetings so that the thousands of visitors could depart the city. But Height, the lone woman among the leaders of the major civil rights groups, felt an urgent need to process what had transpired: "I was determined to bring wise women together to learn and gather strength from the experience. Quietly, on August 29, we assembled at our [National Council of Negro Women] offices and at the Shoreham Hotel."[204] Gathering under the theme "After the March – What?", Height and her colleagues acknowledged a need for greater attention to the acute daily concerns of women and children.[205] In so many ways, The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom became a prominent embodiment of the double-bind of race and gender against which black women found themselves perpetually struggling. Against its rhetorical and performative backdrop, King's impassioned appeal to America's failed promise of equal rights neglected to name black women as equal partakers in the selfsame dream.[206]

Height's decision to gather the women of the movement registered a powerful counterpoint to the hierarchal arrangements of power and authority in their contemporary black freedom struggles. Recalling that Jane Crow presents both a social and spatial problem, Height's

[203] Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 267-8.
[204] Height, *Open Wide*, 146.
[205] Ibid, 146.
[206] Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 270.

gathering was a manifestation of the need to establish alternative contexts for social and political community amongst black women. Building on this impromptu gathering, Height would later invite Murray to be the keynote speaker at the convention of National Council of Negro Women. In her remarks, Murray spoke to how the struggle for civil rights exacerbated the marginalization of black women under the dual burden of Jane and Jim Crow. She deftly articulated the interrelationships between stereotypes of black women's dominance and immorality and their limited opportunities for education and employment. The overall result was a bleak situation of continued marginalization "[The] Negro woman…" she argued, "must prepare to be self-supporting and to support others, perhaps, for a considerable period or for life."[207] Furthermore, Murray believed that black women could not depend on the support of black men, who were not only striving against white liberals for the reins of movement leadership but were also continually selected by news media as the primary spokespeople for black community interests. In the final account, Murray's speech was a direct repudiation of the idea that racial advance depended on black women's subordination and acceptance of *their place*.[208]

The collective witness of Hedgeman, Height, and Murray offers a corrective to any uncritical view of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom as a thoroughly egalitarian event. On the contrary, the events, before, during, and after, reflect the extent to which the centrality of black men's power, authority and visibility were reinforced as a social, political, and rhetorical necessity. In this way, the March serves as a public exhibition that extends, explicitly and implicitly, a specific framework for the remembrance and understanding of the larger civil rights struggle in distinctly masculine ways. Over time, the March has become a kind of avatar, a representative icon distorting some of the complex textures of its situation and agents. As I see it,

[207] Ibid, 270-1.
[208] Ibid, 271.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and his "I Have a Dream" speech are implicated in this distortion. The dream of equal rights is filtered, rhetorically and bodily, through the idealized charismatic male figure. Through means of visual and auditory reproduction, this performance is established as a normative model of and for religio-political leadership in ways that do not attend to the unseen and overlooked labor and leadership that build and sustain the platforms for such performances in the first place. In light of the movement landscape described by Hedgeman, Height, and Murray, King's speech warrants revisiting for its role in the coalescence of that religio-political model.

"It Was All a Dream": The Sermonic Rhetoric of King's "I Have a Dream" Speech

In his biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., American studies scholar, Peter Ling draws attention to Ella Baker's strong opinion that King was very much a product of the movement and that heroic mythology should be foregone in favor of attending to the stories of ordinary folks. Baker's view is a logical way of negotiating the various threads of experience and activity that contribute to the history of such deep and broad events in history. Ling affirms this perspective, acknowledging that if not for the collective activities of the movement, King might have been remembered as simply another well-spoken black Baptist preacher.[209] Indeed, in his thorough assessment of the complexity of King's political leadership and public engagement, Ling underscores the idea that King was much better as a mobilizer than an organizer.[210] If we consider King through this lens, his landmark speech makes greater sense as a tool of charismatic force generating a brief but powerful enthusiasm whose effects were magnified through its

[209] Ling, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 1-2.
[210] Ibid, 4.

capture and dispersal by the media. King was central to this moment, but its enduring significance is a function of a confluence of factors not entirely of his own orchestration.

In their edited volume on King's public discourse, speech communication scholars Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites describe how King's articulation of his dream dovetails with a romanticized American conception of selfless heroism and messianic action. In their view, this oratorical event is too often characterized as the representative case for his political and moral leadership in ways that lend a somewhat mystical quality to his public emergence as a symbol of the civil rights movement. These realities, notwithstanding, their text emerges from a belief that King's significance as a leader is greatly bound up in the sermonic quality of his public rhetoric. That is, his public discourse functions as an ongoing practice of sermonizing grounded in and extending beyond his identity as a preacher.[211] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites expound on the matter of the sermon:

> The sermon refers generally to a form of religious exhortation in which a preacher admonishes a congregation to *understand* and *to act* in accord with a particular interpretation of the sacred values of their shared, religious community. It is thus both a hermeneutic and rhetorical enterprise. In the Judeo-Christian tradition sermons typically consist of three parts: the statement of scripture, the exegesis, and the application. Sermonizing does not serve an exclusively ecclesiastical function, however, and in one form or another sermonic discourse has assumed a significant and powerful role in the civil and secular lives of Anglo- and African-American society since at least the seventeenth century.[212]

This framing is crucial to my notion that the embedded receptivity to charismatic black clergymen as sociopolitical spokespersons is not merely based on their sermons as such. Rather, by focusing on the *sermonic function* of their broader discourse in the public sphere, we are able to access an interpretation of their secular and civil addresses that reads these oratorical events as

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[211] Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites, introduction to *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, eds. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 1-2.
[212] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, *Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, 3.

contiguous with the moral and political landscape of their clerical leadership. Thus, my analysis of King in this dissertation, – as well as the subsequent figures of study in this larger work, is not dependent on his *sermons* but on the discursive, sociopolitical function of *sermonizing* and how that work situates him in public memory.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, I understand King's "I Have a Dream" speech as an event unfolding within a particular charismatic scenario, an historical structure, and script for the performance and transport of knowledge. Given this perspective, I want to think about how the sermonic function of the speech is enacted through the scenario of the March on Washington. My claim is that while the event as a whole becomes the platform for a heroic narration of King's *sui generis* leadership, an examination of the content, structure, and response reveals the multiple streams of influence that shape his oratory that day. Thus, what is frequently viewed as King's personal shining moment is more appropriately understood as an instance of communal thought and ideology funneled through a single figure.

The communal nature of King's representative leadership is quite apparent from the wide range of contemporaries who, in their own ways, advanced sociopolitical aims through religio-political frameworks. Even if we just consider black Protestant clergymen, figures such as Ralph David Abernathy, Albert Cleage, C.L. Franklin, Joseph H. Jackson, Joseph Lowery, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Samuel Dewitt Proctor, Fred Shuttlesworth, C.T. Vivian, Wyatt Tee Walker, Hosea Williams, Andrew Young, and numerous others come to mind as active participants in the public theological enterprise intertwined with the civil rights movement. On the most fundamental level, King was far from alone as a black clergyman with the ability to articulate capably the sociopolitical interests of the black masses. This is not to take away from his own gifts in and attunement to the public sphere. Rather, this is an acknowledgement of the plurality

of leaders simultaneously operating in a similar vein. It was not *inevitable* that King would emerge as the most prominently remembered of his peers. He was doubtlessly influenced by them in great measure. However, the variables of timing and circumstance combined with his content to produce a now-symbolic image of the ethos and activity of the civil rights movement.

The content of the "I Have a Dream" speech is notable not only for how King articulates it, but also for its derivation. Historian, Dennis Dickerson examines the life and work of two black AME clergymen from Chicago, IL, Archibald Carey Sr. and Jr., both of whom were social gospel proponents operating within a preacher/politician model. Dickerson takes up their shared histories as a case study in clergy activism in the public sphere.[213] Of special relevance is the fact that King's speech draws from an earlier address by the younger Carey, which was delivered at the 1952 Republican National Convention. Carey Jr., who served as one of a handful of GOP aldermen in the staunchly Democratic city of Chicago, was invited to speak before the convention delegates. In his speech, Carey challenged the Republican party to draw African American voters through a forthright commitment to the full freedom of all Americans, deriding the gradualist tendencies and broken promises of the Democratic Party. Carey's focus on the plight of African American people was grounded in a belief that their deepest desire was not special treatment of any sort but access to equal opportunities for full participation in the rights and privileges of their American citizenship.[214]

Despite their distinct political and temporal circumstances, Carey's speech dovetails with King's in a way that reflects the shared patterns and tropes of black folk preaching across individual speech acts. Specifically, the celebratory climax of King's speech draws upon Carey's

[213] Dennis Dickerson, *African American Preachers and Politics: The Careys of Chicago* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 13-5.
[214] Dickerson, *African American Preachers*, 119-20.

earlier words. Carey's speech invokes the anthem "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," using the final words of the first verse ("let freedom ring") as a refrain to express the necessary spread of freedom across geographical and racial/ethnic terrain.[215] King takes up this refrain in similar fashion, echoing Carey's description of the mountainous regions of the United States as he proclaims a vision of freedom and unity amidst racial, religious, and political difference. These moments in both speeches are examples of what rhetorical studies scholar, Keith D. Miller describes as voice merging.

Through voice merging, Miller asserts that black folk preachers craft personal identities by way of identification with sacred traditions through borrowed homiletical materials. This practice frequently emerges in the conclusion of such sermons, often through chanting and singing of hymns. Part of what animates this practice is an inherited typological epistemology, that is, a system of interpretation that organizes sacred events and figures, which in Miller's words, "affirm that knowable and repeatable types of human experience recur from generation to generation."[216] In so doing, preachers are able to situate their audiences within an expansive continuum of activity and memory.

Miller makes the case that King's use of borrowed language is really a reanimation of language, that is made possible through his ability to both produce typological resonance with his audience and evoke a sense of what religious historian Mircea Eliade calls sacred time.[217] Sacred time, as Eliade describes it, is time that is contemporary with creation, "reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present that is periodically reintegrated by means of

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[215] Archibald Carey Jr., "Let Freedom Ring!" (1952) in *Race and Liberty in America: The Essential Reader*, eds. Jonathan Bean and Gail Saari (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 202-3.
[216] Keith D. Miller, "Voice Merging and Self-Making: The Epistemology of 'I Have a Dream,'" in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Volume 19, Number 1 (Winter 1989), 23-25.
[217] Miller, "Voice Merging and Self-Making," 26.

rites."[218] In light of this conceptual background, we can read King's speechmaking as a kind of rite that effectively interrupts the temporal and spatial boundaries of the historical present. The sociopolitical context of the March on Washington becomes an occasion for rhetorically constructing a time and space wherein a sacred dream of equality and justice is made manifest.

Miller ultimately reads King's modification of Carey's language as a take on Carey's vision of a utopian future, as an articulation of a dream wherein the multiple voices of American society are merged through the lens of a typological epistemology.[219] On the basis of the spoken words, I believe this is an accurate assessment. At the same time, it is worth noting the less than utopian circumstances in which the speech and its performance unfold. The enduring commitment to singular leaders as rhetorical representatives of a civil rights movement constituency belies some measure of belief in such figures' ability to merge the collective sociopolitical voice. However, the responses to King's speech, and to his elevation as a singular leader, reflect resistance to the idea that such a merging is effectively accomplished. On the contrary, his speech and performance occur within a charismatic scenario whose design is a functional exclusion of essential voices and embodiments of movement leadership. The overall result is something less than a thorough vocal merging and more akin to the fusion of philosophical and political ideas to an iconic framing of King's person.

Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites suggest that speakers engage the sermonic power of public discourse by way of situating communal values and collective action in relationship to one another. "This process," they write, "entails three separate but related rhetorical processes: the identification and definition of core communal values, the structuring of a values hierarchy, and

[218] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Harcourt, 1957), 70.
[219] Miller, "Voice Merging and Self-Making," 29.

the performative display of communal existence."[220] This framework organizes my approach to assessing the sermonic thrust of King's speech, as well as the speeches of the subsequent figures in this study. Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites advance that the focus and function of King's public discourse, from the founding of the SCLC to his final speech in 1968, was the enactment of the notion of beloved community, an appeal to the radical manifestation of core American values.[221] An examination of the "I Have a Dream" speech reveals a kind of sermonizing characterized by a belief in an alternative imagination and practice of a communal American dream.

Core communal values, according to Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, constitute the grounds on which the communication of ideas proceeds with a given audience. A rhetor forges a communal identity among an audience by signifying a desired arrangement of values through persuasive language. Such values tend to be vague and idealized preferences; the speaker gives shape to their meaning and significance for a specific community.[222] In the case of the "I Have a Dream" speech, King frames the events of the day as a dramatization of national shame. He appeals to the intended aims of the founders of the nation, proclaiming that there has been a collective national failure of the sacred obligation to ensure the values of freedom and justice are fulfilled in the lives of all Americans.[223] Following this notion, King's speech extols freedom and justice as the proper and expected manifestations of American national and cultural identity, as

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[220] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, *Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, 3.
[221] Ibid, 8. The term 'beloved community' is derived from the philosophical ethics of Josiah Royce, who posited that such a community would consist of persons dedicated to loyalty, truth, and reality itself, constituting "a kind of second order life that extends beyond any of their individual lives." See Kelly A. Parker, "Josiah Royce", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/royce/.
[222] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, *Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, 3-4.
[223] Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writing and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 217.

fundamental linchpins of the society's construction. Freedom and justice emerge as the core values of King's speech and the unifying ideas for his audience. In so many words, King dramatizes the failure of the nation to carry out these values with respect to the welfare and wellbeing to black Americans.

However, the nature of core values tends to be rather abstract, so that effectively expressing their situational meaning and their preferential status among competing values require the establishment of a hierarchical system. Such hierarchies are often located within a sacred text.[224] King anchors the opening paragraphs of his speech in landmark documents that speak to his sense of the promise of the nation at its best. He first cites the Emancipation Proclamation, emphasizing the role of Abraham Lincoln, whom he refers to not by name but rather as "a great American" whose action "came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves." That action sits in the long shadow cast by the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, the documents that King interprets as "a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir."[225] King's appeal to these texts underscores the notion that freedom and justice are inextricably wedded to the foundations of the country. Freedom and justice, then, are, for King, *sacred* values. They are intrinsic to any meaningful understanding of American identity, and they are the rightful inheritance of every inhabitant in the nation. Within King's framing, to withhold that inheritance from black Americans is fundamentally antithetical to the very texts claimed as the articulations of the American national ethos.

Here, it is helpful to recall Charles Long's discussion on American civil religion, namely his argument that the cultural language of America – and its religion – centers on the deeds of

[224] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, *Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, 4.
[225] King, *A Testament of Hope*, 217.

white conquerors.[226] As Long sees it, the dominant story of American identity and culture as reinforced "a normative historical judgment and ideology of the American experience," centering the tradition of "great and mighty acts" and violently resisting the uncovering of American reality.[227] In short, King must necessarily confront the cultural language of the nation's founding documents and how that language misinterprets the American situation through imagined white innocence and the violent denial of black experience. In this way, King produces a counternarrative that rhetorically illustrates the contradiction between the stated hierarchy of American values – which esteems freedom and justice as basic attributes of national identity – and the application thereof. A given community's history reflects the extent to which it holds its values as foundational. The historical failure to meet the needs of a community's diverse members demands a reinterpretation and recrafting of the value hierarchy. In King's speech, we see the illumination of this failure by way of a call to reexamine what it means to materially ensure the promises of life and liberty for all Americans. This is the sermonic function of public discourse: to invite creative envisioning of the necessary actions for accommodating the broader interests of communal life.[228]

The third movement in this sermonic arc is the performance of communal existence, whereby speakers and audiences publicly display beliefs and practices that reflect a common vision of unity.[229] In King's speech, his movement towards dream rhetoric marks the enactment of this communal performance. It is important to note the degree to which this sermonic conclusion was an improvisational moment of voice merging. King's dream rhetoric was neither new nor planned for this particular moment. Civil rights activist and politician, John Lewis, one

[226] Long, *Significations*, 162.
[227] Ibid, 168.
[228] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, *Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, 5.
[229] Ibid.

of the speakers on program that day, writes that the dream motif had become a favorite of King's. He had invoked it in a speech in Detroit just a week prior to the march. Lewis notes that as King approached the end of the speech, he seemed to be falling short of the power he often tapped into at other times. It was the acclaimed singer Mahalia Jackson who leaned in behind King and urged him, "Tell them about the *dream*, Martin."[230] This moment marks the binding together of speaker and audience, enacting a call and response through which speech "calls attention to the phenomenological presence and power of community."[231] In this moment, the dream moves beyond words into an active experience of communal assent. King's hope of beloved community takes on visible and audible expression in the unified collective.

Lewis describes his and others' awareness of how this familiar dream speech came to life in an unprecedented way:

> But this was a different audience, a different time, a different place. This was truly history, and Dr. King knew it. We all knew it. We'd known it with our own speeches, and he knew it with his. He was responding to the occasion. He was speaking not just to the massive audience before us, but to the President, to Congress, to the nation, to the world. He felt the immensity of the moment, and he delivered.[232]

I am drawn to Lewis' language of *responding to the occasion*. It calls to mind the fact that this occasion does not merely arise but was structured as a charismatic scenario. Not denying King's skillful capitalization on the rhetorical moment, it cannot be denied that the event's design enabled such an apex moment. By no means did it guarantee such a dramatic outcome, but King's positioning as the concluding speaker was a logical move whose efficacy presumed his charismatic speech and performative visibility. Retrospectively, this moment became one of the

[230] John Lewis, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 225.
[231] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, *Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, 6.
[232] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, 225.

most popular reinforcements of the paradigmatic fiction that charismatic authority most effectively produces political advancement.[233]

The enduring visibility and memory of the "I Have a Dream" speech is made possible in part by what Erica Edwards calls the "hidden transcript" - those collective practices, ideas, and communications that remain in the background of the dominant narratives and charismatic figures of the black freedom struggle. Edwards articulates a model for thinking about this tension between the seen and unseen, the nostalgically remembered and the willfully forgotten, through her notion of the *vanishing point*. A vanishing point refers to the point at which receding parallel lines viewed in perspective appear to converge or even disappear in the distance. Edwards uses the vanishing point as a metaphor for how the post-World War II black freedom struggle was characterized through public performances that gestured towards a hidden transcript of resistance. [234] The repetition and reproduction of King's public performance, especially in its audiovisual forms, highlights the essentially symbiotic relationship that developed between emergent television media and the black freedom struggle. This bond fueled the narrative desire for charismatic heroes and ideological tropes through which the variegated stories and events of the civil rights movement – its hidden transcript – could be flattened and simplified.[235]

Within that hidden transcript, we can locate figures such as Anna Arnold Hedgeman, whose own reflections on the march and the speech reflected her misgivings. King's phrasing ("*I* have a dream") struck her as a detachment from the breadth and depth of black history. As Jennifer Scanlon writes, "[Hedgeman] wished he had said, "We Have a Dream," acknowledging the collective labor, the collective joy and sadness, the multitude of women and men whose

[233] Edwards, *Charisma*, 106.
[234] Ibid, 107.
[235] Ibid, 110.

dreams had drawn, led, and summoned so many to the nation's capital that day."[236] Pauli Murray, while buoyed by the crowd's display of interracial solidarity, lamented the marginalization of women, both in the march and in King's speech, which acknowledged America's defaulted promise of equality for black men but with no mention of black women at all.[237] They, along with other women in the movement, knew all too well what it meant to carry out essential and constructive political labor and resistance amidst the bright celebration of charismatic performance.

The hypervisibility of King's charismatic performance lent itself to repetition and reproduction in ways that obscured or distorted the complex politics of the broader movement and even King's own politics. As Peter Ling asserts, "[h]owever misrepresentative of his overall philosophy, King's nationally broadcast "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in late August 1963 fixed him in the public memory more than any other event. But it did so in a selective idealistic way that was somewhat at odds with his necessarily calculated protest style."[238] Its popularity, in good measure, stemmed from its interpretive flexibility. What the dream constituted, it seems, was not wholly specific. John Lewis, while praising the majestic and enduring spirit of King's speech, did not deny its lack of substance.[239] As a former aide to King, Jesse Jackson would also lament the degree to which the national fixation on the Dream shrouded the more radical political elements of King's vision for economic equality, affirmative action, and denunciation of the Vietnam War.[240]

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[236] Scanlon, *Until There is Justice*, 169.
[237] Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 270.
[238] Ling, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 137.
[239] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, 227.
[240] Eric J. Sundquist and Mark Crispin Miller, *King's Dream: The Legacy of Martin Luther King's I Have a Dream Speech* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 3.

In the obfuscation of King's politics, as well as the relegation of women's movement labor to background status, we see substantive evidence of charismatic leadership as a kind of violent prescription for men and women alike. As Edwards writes, charisma as an epistemology of black social movements obstructs and restricts "the history of radical collectivity as a collection of communitarian, democratic practices at the center of which have been women."[241] In a June 19th, 1968 interview, Ella Baker speaks to such a communitarian ethos in her critique of charismatic dependency. Concerning King's leadership, she acknowledges the potential symbolic usefulness of his pronouncement as a great leader in the wake of movement activity in Montgomery, while also naming the insufficiency therein:

> You see, I've never felt it necessary for any one person to embody all that's needed in a leadership for a group of people. This comes back, again, to my old cliché about a leader-centered group as over against a group-centered leadership. The group comes first in my mind. So, as far as Martin was concerned, as far as anybody else is concerned, they were only a part of a whole. And the most important thing was, and still is in my mind, is to develop people to the point that they don't need the strong, savior-type leader.[242]

In the wake of King's assassination, Baker's words reflected a wise assessment of the need for sustainable forms of movement leadership. However, the untimely demise of the civil rights movement's most visible protagonist did not quell the desire for symbolic authority figures in the same vein. While so much work remained ahead of him, King's "I Have a Dream" speech solidified his iconic status such that a charismatic die was cast.

In this chapter, I have examined how King's formation as a religio-political leader was profoundly influenced by the project of Benjamin E. Mays at Morehouse College. Mays' project of "making men" was reflective of a limited and gendered imagination of black sociopolitical

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[241] Edwards, *Charisma*, 129.
[242] John Britton, "Oral History/Interview, Ella Baker, 1968, The Civil Rights Documentary Project," Civil Rights Movement Archive, Tougaloo College and the African American Civil Rights Network, accessed June 20, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/nars/baker68.htm.

leadership in public life. Through the narratives of Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Pauli Murray, and Dorothy Height, I demonstrated how hagiographic accounts of black male leadership within the freedom struggles obscured the essential grassroots labors of black women. Finally, using the March on Washington as an exemplar, I made a case for the layered ways in which the "I Have a Dream" speech contributed to a simultaneous expression of black collectivity and a problematic flattening of King's political aims and interests into a popular charismatic template. As I state in the previous chapter, Max Weber's framework of charisma informs us that such authority is ultimately transitory without a clear plan of succession. Though none could repeat the unique circumstances of King's rise to symbolic supremacy, one man would fashion himself as representative successor. In the next chapter, I explore how the Rev. Jesse Jackson enacts his own interpretation of religio-political leadership in the post-King landscape of the black freedom movement, leveraging charismatic authority in service of electoral aspirations.

Chapter 4

Jesse Jackson and the Trajectory of Post-Civil Rights Black Leadership

On the uncharacteristically cool evening of April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was slain by an assassin's bullet. King's close friend and colleague, Ralph Abernathy recalled rushing to his side immediately, desperately coaxing him to hold on to life while King's eyes locked with his, "and it seemed as if he was saying, 'For God's sake, don't let me down. You are the only person in the world I can depend on."[243] In the immediate wake of the shooting, those around Abernathy looked to him for leadership and guidance through a most difficult circumstance. However, it was the young man whom he once identified as a potential asset to the SCLC who would seize the moment and capitalize on the leadership vacuum left by King's demise. That man was Rev. Jesse Jackson. To be certain, that vacuum was not an utter absence of capable leadership but was a space of public representation whose symbolic significance could not be denied. While many could testify that the black freedom movement *made* Martin, rather than the other way around, they would be hard pressed to deny the degree to which his abrupt death shook the movement to its core. The man who played a pivotal role in illuminating the privations of black life in America had been silenced. However, the end of King's particular charismatic spectacle, in the sense of a visually striking performance or display, occasioned the appearance of another.

Civil rights activist and SCLC leader Rev. Hosea Williams, who also bore witness on that fateful Memphis day, found himself shaken from the throes of grief and thrust into simmering anger. As word spread of the shooting, reporters from major news networks came to the scene.

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[243] Thomas H. Landness and Richard M. Quinn, *Jesse Jackson and the Politics of Race* (Ottawa, IL: Jameson Books, 1985), 2.

Ben Branch, a saxophonist scheduled to play at the rally that evening, stated that Jesse Jackson told him not to speak to the reporters. Instead, Jackson himself began to speak with the reporters. Williams left his motel room to go and hear what was being said. It was then that he overheard Jackson making the apparently *false* claim that he was the last person to whom King spoke. In a fit of rage, Williams ran to chastise Jackson, but he was subdued before he could reach him. Williams was incensed that Jackson would use such an occasion to leverage King's name and image for personal publicity.[244]

That incident would only be the beginning. Jackson, who returned to Chicago that evening, appeared at 6 am the next morning on the "Today Show" on NBC. He was adorned in the same shirt from the previous night, but it was stained in blood that he claimed belonged to Martin Luther King, Jr. He appeared in the shirt again while addressing the Chicago city council that evening. In the weeks that followed, Jackson's profile would only grow as he made moves to embed himself in public consciousness as the heir apparent to King. He knew better than most just how instrumental the press had been and would continue to be shaping the public reception of a national black spokesperson, and he leveraged that knowledge to significant effect.[245]
Erica Edwards elaborates on Cedric Robinson's formulation of the charismatic relationship, making the case for two distinct ways of conceptualizing charisma: charisma as singular dominance over the many (Max Weber) and charisma as a form of radical collectivity (Robinson). Edwards argues:

> [In] choosing the former over the latter – that is, by positing the black freedom struggle as a liberal rights struggle produced by gifted leadership rather than as a series of collective attempts to remake the world that ranged from the liberal rights struggle to the

[244] Landness and Quinn, *Politics of Race*, 3.
[245] Ernest R. House, *Jesse Jackson & the Politics of Charisma: The Rise and Fall of the PUSH/Excel Program* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988, 9-10.

> radical attempt to preserve an alternative mode of being – the official narratives of the civil rights movement mistake the very nature of black resistance in the Americas.[246]

I make the case that Jackson's attempts to reproduce and extend the spectacular effect of King through his own iteration of public leadership capitulates to the former understanding of charisma. While acknowledging the situational usefulness of black spokesmanship in generating publicity for various sociopolitical concerns – and appreciating Jackson's body of activist work – I argue that the longer arc of Jackson's charismatic leadership ultimately falls short as a singular strategy, especially in an era of widely differentiating black political interests.

In this chapter, I explore Jackson's adoption and transformation of the religio-political leadership model crafted from the contours of King's life and work. Jackson's eventual foray into electoral politics is certainly a departure from the path of his predecessor. Yet, in the relationship between King and Jackson, we can observe King's recognition of Jackson's leadership potential, in ways laudable and troubling, and Jackson's aspiration to King's public stature. While King was, in some respects, thrust into a role that would grow exponentially and lead to his veneration as a civil rights icon, Jackson proactively sought a rise to prominence shaped by King's example. Jackson's preternatural ability to aesthetically frame and proclaim his political aims to varied audiences enabled him to navigate the long, winding road from an SCLC staff position to becoming a nationally recognized black leader who would launch successive campaigns for the presidency of the United States of America.

Jackson's efforts to establish himself as a fixture in American cultural life and memory reveal the extent to which his enactment of public leadership rested on a charismatic religious ethos. The ability to manufacture political attention through such an ethos failed to translate into electoral success. I suggest that this failure calls into question the efficacy of black charismatic

[246] Edwards, *Charisma*, 119.

religious leadership as an effective means of transforming sociopolitical fervor into collective political advancement. Jackson's successful entrance into the narrative media pantheon of black national leaders was a double-edged sword whose symbolic value was challenged by its conformation to the "great man" ideological motif. The mode of leadership he sought to inhabit was, for better or worse, precisely the kind to which the American public had already been attuned.

This chapter examines Jackson's roots, his relationship with King, and his movement through the ranks of the SCLC. Next, I turn to Jackson's rise in national prominence, exploring the antecedents and outcomes of his two presidential campaigns. Finally, I reflect on Jackson's address at the 1988 Democratic National Convention, an event I assert which functioned as a charismatic scenario for his merging of prophetic and political roles, securing his popular reception while limiting his campaign to a symbolic victory. I read this period of Jackson's public preeminence as a variation on the theme of religio-political authority practiced by King. Jackson's turn to electoral politics reflects a palpable shift in the communicative conditions between black religion and politics. In the end, that shift illuminates the captivating features of his public career and the limits of this genre of black representative leadership.

"Started From the Bottom": Jackson's Early Days

To understand the unusual drive and determination that fueled Jackson's hunger for representative leadership, we must consider the circumstances of Jackson's background. While seeking to model himself in the image and bearing of King, Jackson's own roots reveal familial complexity of a different sort. In her biography of Jackson, Barbara Reynolds recounts a particularly painful experience from his youth when, as a ten-year-old boy, a group of boys

taunted him, questioning the legitimacy of his parentage and declaring that he was a nobody. Jesse Louis Jackson was born on October 8, 1941, in Greenville, South Carolina, to Helen Burns, next door to the home where his biological father, Noah Louis Robinson, lived with his wife and 3 stepchildren. Jesse, like his mother, suffered the indignities and cruelty that accompanied his being born out of wedlock at that time. Reynolds suggests that such experiences are essential to comprehending the enigmatic personality of Jackson, a man driven to demonstrate his worth before others and to "the critic most difficult to convince – himself – crying out for new forms of proof."[247]

Jackson's challenging entry into the world was bolstered by the deep love of his mother and grandmother. Like Jesse, Helen was born out of wedlock to her mother Matilda, who herself was only 13 years of age. As a teenager, Helen was a talented dancer and singer whose prowess as a soprano had garnered numerous scholarship offers from music schools. Though her plans were dramatically altered by Jesse's birth, she devoted herself wholeheartedly to rearing him.[248] Jesse's grandmother Matilda, though initially distressed by her daughter's pregnancy, gave unconditional love and support in her determination to see Jesse flourish. Matilda, known as Aunt Tibby, served as a powerful moral force in Jackson's youth, admonishing him to avoid idleness and remain actively involved in productive pursuits. Her moral authority, notwithstanding, young Jesse found time to engage in the activities of his neighborhood counterparts, learning to play, gamble, and hustle right alongside them, developing a sense of camaraderie, connection, and comfort that would serve him later in life.[249]

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[247] Barbara Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson: The Man, The Movement, The Myth* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1975), 19-21.
[248] Marshall Frady, *Jesse: The Life and Pilgrimage of Jesse Jackson* (New York: Random House, 1996), 77.
[249] Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 27-29.

The recollections of Jackson's friends and family reveal his early and ongoing sense that he was meant to elevate himself beyond the bounds of Greenville's racial stratification and channel his ambition into a kind of moral heroism. Jackson biographer Marshall Frady frames Jackson's hopes in light of Colin Wilson's 1956 text, *The Outsider*, in which Wilson describes a characteristic type: "the prodigally gifted but displaced loner who undertakes to compensate for his alienation from the world around him by resorting to extraordinary, and often tragic, exertions to reinvent himself in heroic proportions."[250] The dispossession engendered by the circumstances of his birth only reinforced Jackson's striving for a place in the world. His inchoate aspirations to greatness would take more definite shape throughout his youth. His keen awareness of his surroundings, his uncommon industriousness, his oratorical gifts, and even his athletic abilities, would all contribute to his growing belief that he was born to lead. It was the church that would serve as his first public stage, where he sharpened his speaking gifts and confidently asserted himself as a dynamic leader. He began to envision himself leading from the pulpit, and at the age of fifteen, Jackson declared to a friend that he would become a minister.[251]

Jackson's promise on the gridiron would earn him a scholarship from the University of Illinois, where he matriculated in 1959. The opportunity afforded him a seeming escape from the immediate racial provincialism of his southern hometown. While he embraced the chance to immerse himself in the trappings of collegiate athletic and social life, he found that life in the North was marked by its own racial slights and humiliations that left him despondent and discouraged. The racism of Greenville, SC, he suspected, was in fact a widespread attitude across the country. After a year in Urbana, IL, Jesse would return to the South as a transfer student at

[250] Frady, *Jesse*, 112.
[251] Ibid, 116.

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College (now University), an historically black institution in Greensboro.[252]

Jackson's time at North Carolina A&T would significantly shape his trajectory towards becoming a dominant figure in black religio-political life. While there, Jesse would make the acquaintance of Jacqueline (Jackie) Brown, whom he would later marry. In Jackie, Jesse found a partner who held similar desires of moving beyond the confines of small-town life and producing significant change in the world. Theirs was a shared sense of responsibility for the black communities from which they emerged.[253] At the time that Jesse began dating Jackie, he had been engaged in local activities of the civil rights movement in Greensboro. By 1963, Jackson had become the leader of the sit-ins being organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), spearheading an almost-daily procession of demonstrators into segregated businesses over the course of ten months. His reputation on campus and in Greensboro grew, and he was eventually elected as the president of the North Carolina Intercollegiate Council on Human Rights.[254]

Jackson's life and leadership while at North Carolina A&T were dramatically impacted by the singular presence and influence of the Rev. Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor, then president of the university. Historian Adam Bond describes Proctor as a complex figure. He was a celebrated educator, Baptist preacher, and administrator whose life and work reflected a desire to bring public faith to bear on the formation of a racially diverse and morally grounded spiritual community in the United States.[255] Over time, Jackson and Proctor developed a significant relationship. That relationship prompted Jackson to consult Proctor when, after much reflection,

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[252] Ibid, 139-41.
[253] Ibid, 151.
[254] Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 37-39.
[255] Adam L. Bond, *The Imposing Preacher: Samuel DeWitt Proctor and Black Public Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 3.

he acknowledged his call to preach. To be sure, Jackson held some disdain for traditional preachers, whom he saw as abundantly focused on the hereafter and insufficiently concerned with both the immediate world and the substantive needs of the black masses. Nonetheless, he sought after Proctor's advice on how to proceed. The Rev. Dr. Proctor impressed upon him that one's calling was a consciousness of a necessary role or mission that must be carried out, and that seminary would be a viable next step.[256]

After his graduation from A&T in 1964, Jackson would head north with his wife Jackie, making the 600-mile drive to Illinois and to the campus of Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS). His first order of business was seeking a job to provide for his growing family. He met with Chicago mayor Richard Daley, who advised him to seek a political apprenticeship in one of his precincts, but Jackson could only garner an offer to become a toll collector for the city transit system. He flatly rejected this position. As fate would have it, Jackson attended church with the mother of *Jet* and *Ebony* magazine publisher John Johnson. Johnson, upon meeting Jackson, observed his talent for communication and put him to work in sales, a position that enabled him to build a deep familiarity with Chicago's black neighborhoods. Johnson recognized both Jackson's specific gifts and a shared impetus to succeed despite humble beginnings, and he would become a significant supporter of Jackson.[257]

Jackson's early days in Chicago were marked by his desire to focused firmly on his seminary studies, resisting the allure of the movement even as it spread North. His reputation from the A&T demonstrations preceded him, and many of his fellow students encourage him to apply that same energy in their shared context. Jackson would eventually become engaged as an organizer with the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO), which would

[256] Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 40.
[257] Frady, *Jesse*, 187-89.

become a major part of King's organizational base during his Chicago Campaign.[258] Some months after his seminary career began, Jackson's zeal for justice work would again be stoked by the advent of the SCLC's voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama, under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. On a spring day in 1965, Jackson assembled an aggregation of seminary students and led them to Selma to lend their efforts to the movement work.

"I'm The King" – Jackson, King, and the SCLC

While in Selma, Jackson made an impression on Ralph Abernathy, the SCLC's second in command.[259] Almost immediately, he inserted himself into the fray, offering his services to the leaders of the SCLC and asking how he could deploy his people to help. Andrew Young, one of King's closest aides, recalled Jackson's bold moves to the frontlines of leadership, dispensing directions from the steps of the movement headquarters at Brown Chapel AME Church as though he were already on staff. Jackson's oratorical performance and eager self-confidence invited some trepidation from veterans of the movement, but Abernathy came to admire Jackson's assertiveness, eventually granting him an audience with King. In that meeting, Jackson would implore King to broaden the movement's scope to include Chicago, and he offered himself as a helpful presence on the ground. Young acknowledged that Jackson's boldness and courage, while inviting criticism, were also the very sorts of qualities that he and other movement leaders sought as their worked moved from place to place.[260] Those brief few days in Selma would prove to impact dramatically the trajectory of Jackson's charismatic movement leadership.

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[258] Ibid, 189.
[259] Roger D. Hatch, *Beyond Opportunity: Jesse Jackson's Vision for America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 10-11.
[260] Frady, *Jesse*, 191-93.

Young's remarks on the desirability of a unique sort of courage and vision in the leadership of the movement through the SCLC invite reflection on how and why such emphases existed in the first place. At its roots, the organization that came to be known as the SCLC (formerly the Southern Negro Leaders Conference and the Southern Leadership Conference) emerged from a desire and necessity to channel the outcomes and energies of the Montgomery movement into a platform for broad-based civil rights activity in the South. In the eyes of many, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) had moved away from more democratic roots to a closed operation wherein King's voice was becoming more prominent to the chagrin of older, established leaders.[261] At the same time, King's own star was rising, in no small part due to media profiles that highlighted his own background and the details of the Montgomery movement. His commitment to mass direct action fit well with the emergence of a highly visible and outspoken model of leadership that leaned heavily on rhetorical prowess as well as religious themes and language. Indeed, the SCLC had come to be understood as the ministers group, owing to the makeup of its leadership body, and its 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom became an occasion for King's pronouncement as the preeminent black leader of the moment.[262] Jackson's entry into the SCLC years later meant integration into a civil rights collective that drew heavily upon the black church's capacity and autonomy to reinforce its activities. Jackson fit the mold of a religio-political leader firmly rooted in the spiritual underpinnings of the SCLC's contention for justice and equality.

The SCLC's decision to advance their movement front in Chicago was no mere happenstance. King had been contemplating the possibility of launching a campaign from

[261] David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 88.
[262] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 91, 94.

Chicago in order to illuminate the fact of anti-black racism in the seemingly more egalitarian confines of the urban North and to underscore that the civil rights struggle was not only an issue for southerners. Among major urban centers such as Boston, New York, and Los Angeles, Chicago emerged as an ideal location where the impact of racism could be dramatized in service of elevating the civil rights movement to national scope and impact. King's hope was that a focus on issues of education and housing inequality could be the foundation for dismantling the systemic forces that produced slums and general conditions of poverty.[263]

Upon his return to Chicago, Jackson began laying the groundwork for his own establishment as a critical linchpin in the northern shift of the SCLC's movement labor. Jackson's commitment to the spiritual thread of the movement doubtlessly motivated his efforts to foster a receptive sentiment among Chicago's black clergy for the potential entry of King and his leadership cohort. On Sunday, July 4th, 1965, Jackson, while driving down a Chicago highway, found himself moved by a powerful voice emerging from his radio, tuned to Chicago's WVON station. It was the voice of the Reverend Clay Evans, the pastor of Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church, singing "I Must Tell Jesus." Jackson and his friend Henry Hardy abandoned their destination and directed the car towards Evans' church. Evans recalled his encounter with Jackson, noting his casual, confident familiarity as he settled onto the couch in the pastor's study as though he had known him for years. Jackson would join Evans' congregation in the following weeks.[264] Their meeting that day was the beginning of a close friendship that would be pivotal in Jackson's later work in the city.

[263] Zach Mills, *The Last Blues Preacher: Reverend Clay Evans, Black Lives, and the Faith that Woke the Nation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 192-93.
[264] Mills, *The Last Blues Preacher*, 188.

Jackson's relationship with Evans was no unqualified assurance of an easy path forward among Chicago's other pastors. On the contrary, he came across staunch resistance from the black ministerial community, notably in the person of Dr. Joseph H. Jackson, then president of the National Baptist Convention and a prominent critic of King. A great number of the black ministerial and political communities were firmly integrated, politically and financially, into Mayor Richard J. Daley's machine. Some even held a press conference rejecting the idea of King and his collective coming to Chicago. The overall impact was a significant distrust of Evans and especially of Jackson. Undaunted, Jackson pressed forward, working tirelessly to convince ministers to join the cause for remediating the conditions of Chicago's slums.[265]

King knew all too well that the support of the black ministers in Chicago was essential to establishing a firm footing for the SCLC's campaign. Their ability to reach different pockets of the city's black populace would greatly facilitate mobilizing people to organize local action for social change. Collaboration with local ministers was no easy task, owing to the competitive nature of their contentions for power and authority under the Daley regime. Amid this, Jackson situated himself as a go-between who used his analytical and strategic experience to help Evans more clearly see the pervasive extent of racism in the city's urban enclaves. Evans came to agree with Jackson's and King's perspectives on the city's inequalities, and as president of the Baptist Ministers' Conference in Chicago, he decided to lend his considerable influence toward King's efforts to establish a northern campaign. He organized a meeting at True Light Baptist church to introduce Operation Breadbasket's project to local ministers. Jackson recalled that the meeting ended in chaos, with the pastor, Rev. B.F. Paxton, chasing everyone out of the church with pistol in hand.[266]

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[265] Frady, *Jesse*, 198-99.
[266] Mills, *The Last Blues Preacher*, 193-95.

Despite the ongoing skepticism of the black church leaders, Jackson's recognition and reputation were building across the city. Six months after his foray into Selma, Jackson would be appointed to the staff of the SCLC, and, soon thereafter, to the leadership of the Chicago branch of Operation Breadbasket.[267]Along with James Bevel, a key SCLC assistant of King's, Jackson began managing the action committee of the CCCO, whose aggregation included a broad coalition of groups working towards racial justice in Chicago. The CCCO's civil rights work in the city was a motivating factor in the SCLC's decision to choose Chicago as a site for the expansion of its movement front, and the convergence of their work with the SCLC would later become known as the Chicago Freedom Movement.[268]

Operation Breadbasket officially launched its Chicago branch in February of 1966, and Jackson was at the forefront of its leadership.[269] Jackson's appointment was due, in no small part, to the reluctance of black clergy in the city to take the helm. King handed him the reins of the Breadbasket Steering Committee, and Jackson took to the work. He was joined by his seminary classmate, David Wallace, who became his assistant. As the work expanded and required full-time staff, both Jackson and Wallace decided to drop out of school and devote their full energies to Operation Breadbasket.[270] In his history with Operation Breadbasket, the Reverend Martin L. Deppe, who worked with the program from its inception to its conclusion, described Jackson as "the quarterback" of the proceedings, owing to his taking charge, summarizing the program's progress, and clarifying the goals and expectations moving forward.[271] Jackson was unafraid to take ownership of the process and eager to prove his mettle among the experienced leaders.

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[267] Frady, *Jesse*, 199.
[268] Mills, *The Last Blues Preacher*, 198; Hatch, *Beyond Opportunity*, 11.
[269] Hatch, *Beyond Opportunity*, 11.
[270] Martin L. Deppe, *Operation Breadbasket: An Untold Story of Civil Rights in Chicago, 1966-1971* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 20-21.
[271] Deppe, *Operation Breadbasket*, 24.

Operation Breadbasket pursued its economic goals through a six-step praxis. First, they would contact companies and seek data on their employment picture and salary distributions. Next, they would evaluate this data and refine a demand – a minimum percentage of African American employment - before proceeding to negotiations and education with the companies. If a satisfactory agreement were not reached, the pastors would initiate "Don't Buy" campaigns, which were swiftly effective and usually led to meetings and eventual agreement. A formal pact would be publicly signed with company executives and Breadbasket leaders present, and the pastors would follow-up with companies to ensure that the agreements were being upheld.[272] With Jackson at the helm, Operation Breadbasket became quite a successful endeavor. A November 1969 interview in *Playboy* described the effort as "the most impressive demonstration of black economic and political power in the United States."[273] In that interview, Jackson explicated the program's purpose, emphasizing the desire for black people to have control over the critical financial and material resources of their communities, utilizing their purchasing power to force the hand of businesses and influence the American economy in ways that would bring more equitable participation. Jackson's remarks also revealed the ever-present linkage between spiritual mandates and material consequences:

> Our programs are dictated by the private enterprise economy in which we find ourselves. In my heart, however, I know that the entire system is a corruption. To me, the earth belongs to everybody; it's just a very successful rumor white folks have going that the earth belongs to them. The earth is the Lord's, and no man creates anything that didn't come from other things that God put here. No man really takes anything away, either. No man can claim that he made soil or wool or milk. White folks can make airplanes, but they can't make mountains. They can make syrup but not water. *Genesis* says that the

[272] Ibid, 21-23. Deppe cites Martin Luther King's description of the original five-step plan in *Where Do We Go From Here* and acknowledges the modifications that the Chicago cohort made to the plan as employed in Atlanta, among them the removal of the "purification stage" of spiritual preparation before direct action and economic withdrawal.

[273] Arthur Kretchmer, "Jesse Jackson: A Candid Conversation with the Civil Rights Leader," *Playboy*, last modified February 24, 2014, https://playboysfw.kinja.com/jesse-jackson-a-candid-conversation-with-the-civil-rig-1528367166.

> Lord created the earth and everything therein and gave man, not white man, dominion over it and created a dominion sufficient for everyone to be able to survive and prosper. Now the concept of *Genesis* has obviously been destroyed, and it is our concern to rid America of some of her arrogance and control of God's resources by saying that the food belongs to all the people.[274]

It is critical to note the underlying religious sensibilities and interests embedded in the form and function of Operation Breadbasket. Rev. Evans' framing of the program before his assembly of black ministers emphasized Breadbasket's legitimacy as a program for Baptist ministers.[275] Rev. Deppe, in his context as a local Chicago pastor, understood Breadbasket as an extension of church ministry, joining congregational power with concrete strategies for economic justice and the fulfillment of the Gospel.[276] Over time, the meetings of Operation Breadbasket would come to take on a strong religious fervor, replete with band and Gospel choir. It was as much a work of material remediation as it was soul restoration. The style, substance, and aesthetics of the gatherings reflected the merging between the familiar trappings of black church culture and the anxious contention for civil rights exigencies. What materialized was a platform apt for Jackson's own ascension as an embodiment of a black spiritual and political expression of public leadership.

In a sense, Jackson's leadership of Operation Breadbasket was not unlike the occupation of a pulpit in all its symbolism and gravity. This reality is essential to understanding how and why Jackson, in the wake of King's assassination, arose as the most prominent and visible leader from among the ranks of the SCLC, despite Ralph Abernathy's official organizational succession to King's position. In many ways, Jackson's work in Chicago marked a shift of the grounds, literal and figurative, on which the articulation of the civil rights struggle would progress. As I discuss in Chapter 1, King was steeped in the deep South, in specific institutions and forms of

[274] Ibid.
[275] Mills, *The Last Blues Preacher*, 195.
[276] Deppe, *Operation Breadbasket*, 27.

black collectivity whose structures, boundaries, and logics were not arranged identically with their counterparts in the urban North. Houston Baker invokes the concept of publicity to describe King's ability to render the communal concerns of black people more visible and present to a national populace. In his dual roles with CCCO and SCLC, I maintain that Jackson demonstrated his ability to accrue and express narrative and political power through his galvanization of black ministers on the ground in preparation for King's arrival and the evolution of the Chicago Freedom Movement. Chicago constituted the location of a public sphere in which King could certainly operate, but through which Jackson could thoroughly construct a leadership presence that would transcend his acolyte status. Jackson's ambitions would not succumb to any normative schemes of succession within the SCLC. Rather, his ability to become an irresistibly attractive force on the new frontlines of the freedom struggle would carry him into the center of the spotlight after King's demise. Jackson took the idiomatic inheritances of the black church pulpit and crafted them into a comportment that, while not wholly imitative of King, would certainly capture the public imagination in similar ways.

The Chicago Freedom Movement would mark a challenging chapter in the life of the SCLC. The politics of the North proved to be a unique obstacle for King and his comrades. Their status as protest elites confronted the challenge of a united front of white and black powerbrokers operating under the auspices of Mayor Daley. The campaign built early momentum by way of public actions, notably was a massive nonviolent demonstration at Soldier Field on July 11, 1966, which gathered tens of thousands of supporters. This culminated in King leading an aggregation to City Hall, where he affixed to the door of the building a list of forty demands, ranging from a citizens' review board to teacher desegregation and nondiscriminatory

mortgages.[277] Days later, the black masses on Chicago's West Side voiced their frustrations through physical dissent as the temperatures soared and tensions increased. A month later, a march through an all-white Chicago neighborhood resulted in hostile attacks, with bottles and bricks being thrown at the attendees. Desiring to bring a swift end to the demonstrations, Daley met with King and various housing boards, negotiating an agreement whereby the Chicago Housing Authority and Mortgage Bankers Association committed to make changes to their public housing and mortgage practices.[278] Ultimately, these provisions would not be upheld in the longer term. As biographer Barbara A. Reynolds describes it. Mayor Daley's notion of negotiating a deal emerged "from the deck of expediency, issuing out the type of concessions that provides temporary relief but never permanent cure."[279]

Regardless of how one ultimately perceives the legacy of the Chicago Campaign, what cannot be denied is how events catalyzed Jackson's transformation into a national presence. Jackson's zeal for the Breadbasket work was intertwined with his desire to garner media publicity around its impact. His ability to operate in the spotlight spurred the SCLC's decision to turn Breadbasket into a national program. As he began to travel across the country, Jackson sharpened his gift for commanding public attention, recognizing that in certain contexts, the only way to shed necessary light on movement activity was to draw it through force of personality and speech.[280] Jackson's ambitions were no secret to those in his sphere of influence, but the fruition of those hopes for greatness would be the source of much conflict in the SCLC.

[277] Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 57-58.
[278] "Chicago Campaign," accessed February 28, 2020, *The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute*, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/chicago-campaign.
[279] Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 75.
[280] Frady, *Jesse*, 202-3.

Well before the campaign in Chicago began, King had raised the grim, but necessary, specter of a succession plan for the presidency of the SCLC in the event of his untimely death. In his discussions with the leadership board, he sought to have the bylaws amended so that his chosen successor, Ralph Abernathy, would automatically be installed. Privately, colleagues were upset with the way the situation unfolded, including C.K. Steele, who had served at length as the vice-president. Nonetheless, the board supported King's choice of Abernathy.[281] The dynamics of the SCLC's leadership were quite often charged, and it is not difficult to imagine King making this move in anticipation of the potential fallout of a resulting leadership vacuum. What he did not - and perhaps could not - realize is that fallout would be inevitable, and that the contestation for movement spokesmanship would be a difficult protracted affair.

Jackson's relationship to the SCLC was inextricably bound up in his desire to draw near to King. His background stood in stark contrast to King's comfortable upbringing. Whereas King developed a strong sense of self, reinforced by familial, communal, and ecclesial affirmation and support, Jackson was a perpetual outsider struggling to shape an identity and make a place for himself. His desire for approval and acceptance was clear to King and the rest of the SCLC leadership. In King, Jackson found a kind of father figure, a hero whose persona and spirit cast a model for Jackson's own dreams of a life of meaning and consequence. But more than heroic, King, in the period that Jackson joined with him, was taking on a prophetic consciousness squarely aimed at the spirit of the American empire, a messianic vision of social transformation from the very heart of society. Jackson had in King a model of oratorical command and moral courage that could be channeled into the fulfillment of a radical vision.[282]

[281] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 416-17.
[282] Frady, *Jesse*, 208-16.

As Jackson drew close to King and others, ascending the ranks of the SCLC, many saw in his intense aspiration an upstart and self-promoter. King himself had some reservations about Jackson's independence, his motives, and his level of commitment to the collective work of the SCLC.[283] Without question, King admired the energy and intelligence that Jackson held, and by various accounts saw something of himself in the young North Carolina native. He had an appreciation for Jackson's fearlessness and daring, though, in the same breath, he was concerned about his volatility and unpredictability. That measure of recognition enabled King to see something in Jackson that others might not readily apprehend. King was living an experience that Jackson would come to occupy in his own way. King wrestled with the complexity of his own internal life and struggles in the face of criticisms that were not terribly different from those lodged against Jackson: accusations of his own grandiosity and self-importance, as well as being branded as an opportunist and an egomaniac.[284] Perhaps better than most could, King could see the double-edged sword of Jackson's gifts and talents.

It is worth noting that the SCLC had long been occupied by challenging personalities. Jackson, then, was no great exception to the rule. Andrew Young noted that the leadership was full of strong egos who constantly irritated one another. Staff meetings occasionally became contentious affairs, and in the heat of some arguments, tables and chairs were thrown. Young mused that perhaps to some degree, all of these leaders wished to be like Martin Luther King, but Jackson's emulative desire was more flagrant than the others."[285] Concerns over the dangerous effects of charisma and celebrity on movement work were nothing new. Ella Baker, one of the critical figures in the founding of the SCLC, lamented years earlier how King's preeminence

[283] Bruce J. Dierenfield and John White, *A History of African-American Leadership - 3rd Edition* (Pearson, 1990), 254
[284] Frady, *Jesse*, 217-18.
[285] Ibid, 221.

obscured the voice and visibility of other leaders with lower profiles. As she saw it, an increasingly complex and expanding movement could not be effectively managed by any one person, and even the humblest leaders with egalitarian ideals still had to make room for new leaders. To Baker's mind, the future of the movement required a reimagined sense of leadership around the development of capable and connected individuals over saviors or magic men.[286] Nevertheless, the wrestling for authority continued.

The final months of King's life and leadership would find the SCLC turning its attention to new projects. One of them, the Poor People's Campaign, was a call for economic justice, spurred by federal diversion of funds from the Vietnam War effort towards impoverishment and feeding the hungry. King called for economic justice in the form of wealth redistribution and a guaranteed basic income, among other actions. His advisors and co-laborers in the ranks of the SCLC had their doubts and concerns about his bold, brash plans.[287] Through Operation Breadbasket, Jackson was an advocate of pursuing black emancipation through capitalist economic empowerment, which was firmly at odds with the socialist inclinations of King. Bayard Rustin and Roy Wilkins, two of King's trusted colleagues, were against the project, and various SCLC leaders thought it was poorly timed and lacked relevance.[288] While he eventually convinced them to go forward with the plans, King found himself depressed at the opposition and the SCLC's general state of affairs. His particular mode of leadership was losing traction in the midst of fractured and frustrated movement.[289]

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[286] Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 188.
[287] Dierenfield and White, *African-American Leadership*, 255.
[288] Sylvie Laurent, *King and the Other America: The Poor People's Campaign and the Quest for Economic Equality* (University of California Press, 2018), 141.
[289] Dierenfield and White, *African-American Leadership*, 255.

Those fractures would come into clear view as King, still contending for the Poor People's Campaign, responded to a call to intervene on the behalf of black sanitation workers who were on strike in Memphis. Once again, Jackson and others were concerned about the split focus of SCLC and the idea that, in a time of declining popularity and attention for the SCLC, Memphis was too small a target to take on. King insisted he could not let the workers down, and he and Abernathy journeyed to Memphis, where they attempted to lead a march that eventually turned riotous. A despondent King spent almost the next week alone before asking the leaders to come to Atlanta for a Saturday meeting at Ebenezer Baptist Church. At that meeting, King railed against his staff, imploring them to turn from their separate agendas and share in the load. He had intense words especially for Jackson, informing him, "if you want to carve out your own niche in society, go ahead. But for God's sake, don't bother me!"[290] More than merely a rebuke of Jackson's aspirations, King's frustration reflected his disappointment in the fragmentation of the leadership body and his belief that their unified efforts could help heal the soul of the nation.

The wound in the soul of the nation grew deeper in the following days as King's assassination created a social, political, and spiritual reverberation. The narrative heroism that followed King in his life took on a mystical quality in his death. The death of the religio-political leader did not necessarily mean the end of the movement, but it certainly meant a dramatic transformation thereof. As I describe in Chapter 2, Max Weber's framing of charismatic leadership suggests that the maintenance of such authority requires transformation into a rational structure that sustains the mythic regard for the leader's role and status and reaffirms their claims to validity.[291] In other words, the succession of charismatic leadership requires codifying the transfer of the leader's mantle of authority. Occupying the social, political, and spiritual void left

[290] Frady, *Jesse*, 224-25.
[291] See Chapter 2, 64.

by the charismatic figure means tethering their legacy to the presence and performance of the successor.

From the literal wounds of King, Jackson fashioned his own claim to his leadership mantle. In the aftermath of the shooting, Andrew Young recalled Ralph Abernathy retrieving a piece of cardboard and a jar, which he used to scoop up King's blood. Abernathy spoke of the blood in terms commonly attributed to Eucharistic liturgy where King's blood was precious, and it was shed for them. Young likewise recounted Jackson dipping his hands in the blood and wiping it on his shirt, which he continued to wear in the days following, during many media interviews. In Young's estimation, these acts were not so strange: "We Baptists, you know, we believe there's power in the blood – power that's transferable."[292] This is an ancient notion, the idea that sacrificial blood is efficacious. Tertullian, a theologian of the early Christian church, insisted that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church, and to be certain, the faith of many adherents was strengthened by the remembrance of the martyrs' brave deaths. Medieval historian Joyce E. Salisbury underscores that martyrs in the ancient sense did not *seek* death but were those who *accepted* death rather than forsake the witness of their convictions. Yet, she asserts, "change is effected by the living, not by blood spilled."[293] Shed blood, then, may be a catalyst for the responsive actions of the living, who strive to make meaning of traumatic loss and find a way to carry on that witness for which the martyred were slain.

Jackson's pursuit of "power in the blood," as it were, could be read as a symbolic narrative of his anointing and commission to carry on as the primary charismatic force in the pattern of King. Jackson directly asked Don Rose, the publicist for CCCO, whether he thought

[292] Frady, *Jesse*, 232.
[293] Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 90.

he could assume the leadership role. Rose related that by dint of age, oratorical prowess, and facility with both the establishment and youth audiences, Jackson seemed like the most likely of any candidate.[294] The proof of that likelihood manifested soon thereafter at the first Breadbasket meeting after King's assassination, where a crowd of over 4,000 people gathered in memorial. Evoking the late civil rights icon in speech and tone, Jackson captivated the audience with powerful words and warm greeting. Seemingly overnight, the 26-year-old acolyte of King had become the dominant personality of black leadership in the post-King era.

"Unfinished Business" – The Preacher Turns Politico

In the years to come, Jackson's national profile continued to grow. The structures of the SCLC proved to be stifling for him as he grew accustomed to being a significant draw on his own. None of the other leaders could rival Jackson's charisma, and the organization could not compel his compliance with either their staff schedule or their fiscal procedures.[295] His fierce independence did not allow him to tolerate anything less than a major role in SCLC, and he held deep opposition to the authority of Ralph Abernathy, King's chosen successor. Jackson, it seemed, had outgrown the SCLC, and it was only a matter of time before he began crafting his own machinery for the advancement of personal and political agendas.

Jackson, surprisingly, remained with SCLC until 1971, three years after King's death. In that time, the tensions between he and the organization grew significantly. The final straw came with the fallout from Jackson's handling of the Black Expo. The Black Expo was an event aimed at showcasing black businesses, entrepreneurship, and entertainment. It was a major affair, eventually drawing up to 800,000 attendees and garnering even the attention and support of

[294] Frady, *Jesse*, 234-35.
[295] Ibid, 263.

Mayor Daley, who decreed a Black Expo Week. The event was ostensibly organized and held under the auspices of SCLC. However, it was discovered that Jackson wholly conducted the event through a group of Chicago sponsors rather than the organization. Abernathy, incensed at Jackson's maneuvering, met with the staff, and the decision was reached to suspend Jackson for sixty days.[296] Abernathy remarked that the work of liberating black and poor people was far more important than spending precious energy on Jackson. The specter of suspension, it seemed, was utterly intolerable for Jackson. Not long after the suspension was issued, he resigned entirely from the SCLC.[297]

Jackson spent much of the 1970s on a publicity campaign of his own. He was almost constantly in motion, addressing myriad civic and professional groups, making television appearances, and even promoting political candidates. On Christmas Day of 1971, Jackson appeared before an assembly in a South Side Chicago theater to announce the creation of People United to Save (later "Serve") Humanity also known as Operation PUSH. Though Jackson made much of his divestment from the SCLC, he did not leave emptyhanded. The files, material resources, and human resources of Operation Breadbasket came with him.[298] PUSH became his primary vehicle for publicizing and enacting his vision for the world. PUSH pursued economic and educational opportunities for black people and communities with the express aim, in Jackson's view, of shifting the focus from merely civil rights to civil economics as well. In many respects, this new organization was a broadening of the basic foundational elements of the former program into a larger social program and interracial movement, what he referred to as a "rainbow coalition."[299] In the main, PUSH was an organized apparatus for carrying out Jackson's

[296] Ibid, 263-64.
[297] Dierenfield and White, *African-American Leadership*, 257.
[298] Frady, *Jesse*, 265.
[299] Dierenfield and White, *African-American Leadership*, 257.

personal inspirations, blending elements of church and political action, but not in a clearly defined way. In a manner of speaking, Jackson *was* the organization, and its form and function reflected his own methods of operation.[300]

We can observe Jackson's rhetorical and political commitments to religious identification through his Saturday sermons at the Operation PUSH headquarters. On February 26, 1977, Jackson addressed the Saturday assembly in his usual manner. His sermon that day, "Our Spiritual and Prayer Roots," is instructive for clarifying Jackson's firm belief in the foundational role of the black church in the sustenance of black life and struggles for freedom. It reveals meaningful insight into Jackson's appeal to his status as a churchman as a base for maneuvering towards electoral office.

Jackson began his sermon with an acknowledgement of the gathering's Black History Month theme, noting the recurring requests for him to speak about the fruits and achievements of contemporary and historical black life. However, he found himself returning to the roots from which the political, academic, economic, and creative output of black people emerged. Jackson's central thesis is simple and direct: the roots and foundation of black American life and flourishing are found in the black church. He articulated this thesis after offering a litany of black figures who have achieved exceptional acclaim in their respective fields. Jackson argued that such black exceptionalism is a double-edged sword, describing how white institutions and leaders have "always had a way of taking the best of us and ignoring the rest of us, turning our grapes into raisins and letting them become bitter."[301]

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[300] Frady, *Jesse*, 266.
[301] Reverend Jesse L. Jackson Sr., *Straight From the Heart*, ed. Roger D. Hatch and Frank E. Watkins (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 115-16.

Jackson extended his case by underscoring the unique contributions of the black church to black life and institutions. First, he argued that the black church provides a *why* for living, rooted in its connection to African religious experience where black people learned to worship God's varied manifestations in the created world. Within the black church's confines, Jackson identified the first stirrings of an organized pursuit of self-reliance through the creation of businesses and the formation of educational institutions. Furthermore, he insisted that both early struggles for political emancipation and later movements for civil rights owe their development to the black church, as evidenced by how their respective leaders drew inspiration and direction from their faith commitments.[302] From Jackson's perspective, the black church is and was the organic incubator of black life and production.

The climax of Jackson's sermon centers on the black church prayer tradition, the unvarnished language of invocation and hope that sustained scores of predecessors. His emphasis on the power of prayer is concurrent with his emphasis on the humble lives and circumstances of people like his grandmother and his father. Through the language and community of the black church, a kind of personal and cosmic significance is conferred, evocative of the sense of *somebody-ness* that is thematic in Jackson's religio-political expressions. Within the roots of the black church, he identified a foundational tradition of black kinship that impacts social, economic, and political realities, which he illuminated through his storytelling of the humble, yet significant black figures of his own South Carolina upbringing.[303] The black church as rock and refuge furnished a context for the cultivation of fruitful gifts, material sustenance, and unshakable faith to endure storms of spiritual and natural provenance.

[302] Jackson, *Straight From the Heart*, 116-17.
[303] Ibid, 118-21.

Taken altogether, Jackson's sermon provides a useful sketch of his overall aims and intentions within and beyond Operation PUSH. On the most basic level, his words reflect a desire to equalize the social and political terrain. His message presents an inversion of expected values and order, setting aside the famous and laudable figures for the lesser-known champions of his youth, whose words and deeds provided for the needs of their communities. What he expresses is the power of common folk to produce transformative effects as a function of their grounded connection to spiritual resources. It is not difficult to imagine the impact of these words for an audience filled not with Chicago elites but with ordinary citizens. The overarching tenor of Jackson's sermon is an appeal to a transcendent spiritual tradition that holds the exceptional and the everyday together as part and parcel of the wide array of black possibility. Jackson's critique of the leveraging of the black cultural elite lands with a measure of irony, especially when one considers his own strivings to achieve exceptional status as the de facto black religio-political spokesman of his time. Jackson's own aspirations were in no small way a reflection of his refusal to accept becoming, in his words, a grape turned bitter raisin. Almost six years after his departure from the SCLC, and nearly nine years after the death of King, Jackson was well into the maturation of his own platform. He was making clear strides to establish himself at the front of the black leadership class, differentiating himself from the protest elites and pivoting towards electoral ambitions. Arguably, Jackson's own expanding reputation placed him at the same risk of the sort of co-opting he warned against.

Jackson's emphatic support of the black church as the root of black life serves a dual purpose of not only establishing the context of his rallies, but also undergirding his own authoritative claims as a black clergyman. Jackson's sermon narratively signaled the reach and influence of the black church in the social and political publics. One could infer that it also

suggests something about the reach and influence of the black clergyman as the historical custodian of the black church's communal life and practices. The arc of Jackson's sermon invites inquiry about the public theological and political role of the black preacher. Jackson does not "take a text," as it were, for his sermon, but he exegetes black life and experience as testaments to the primacy of the black church. The testimonial features of the message reflect Jackson utilizing his own history as confirmation of his argument. He is the living, speaking embodiment of the fruit of the black church's sacred roots. Ultimately, Jackson sketches a specific view of black achievement and striving that provides a rationale for extending the clerical role into the leadership and maintenance of sociopolitical life beyond the pulpit.

Jackson's weekly PUSH rallies themselves were nothing less than revivals in their aesthetics and content. Jackson aimed to create a feeling and sentiment that could animate the hearts of the people gathered. He understood his weekly gathering as a space for revitalizing a spiritual loss and producing excitement for the public work. Beyond the large gospel choir, intricate staging, and bright lights, large pictures of both Jackson and King hung behind the podium. Jackson's staging established a clear visual reminder of his position as heir to the legacy of King's public leadership. Jackson, however, was a far cry from the staid presentation that characterized his predecessor. He took to the stage as an imposing physical figure, clad in dashiki, bell-bottoms, and a gold-plated medallion crafted in honor of King. He created momentum and excitement through the leading of his signature chant: "I am – Somebody!"[304] The rallies were a coalescence of his longstanding desires to *be* somebody, to prove his worth and influence, and to demonstrate a kind of messianic fulfillment of King's vision.

[304] Dierenfield and White, *African-American Leadership*, 258.

Jackson's appeal to charismatic spectacle is key to understanding the confluence of factors that led to his eventual presidential campaigns. While King's public leadership came into view in the thick of the Jim Crow South, Jackson found himself trying to become "a similarly momentous figure in what had become an essentially unmomentous time."[305] Jackson was a latecomer to an already-waning era of protest movement leadership, and he did not have a singular conflict on the scale of the Montgomery bus boycotts to confront. He did, however, have the advantage of the burgeoning television media. While King certainly garnered attention for his moral witness and proclamation, he was not confronted by the task of bridging a violent caesura in movement leadership. Jackson was confronting a circumstance to which the approach and comportment of his hero were not best suited. He had to produce his own framework of expression, a framework that, while bearing the genotype of King, manifested a different charismatic phenotype.

A prime example of this self-making can be found in Jackson's appearance as master of ceremonies at the 1972 Wattstax benefit concert in Los Angeles, California, held in remembrance of the 1965 Watts riots. Jackson's opening speech was a rousing incitement of black pride and self-determination. On a stage at the heart of Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, Jackson stood front and center, flanked by two gentlemen, his towering Afro and loose-fitting dashiki cutting a striking contrast to their more formal jackets and slacks. Jackson was the mouthpiece for an event that a then-obscure Richard Pryor called "a soulful expression of the living word." Jackson's rhetorical direction of the festival proceedings was described as "a fine balance between get-down entertainment, raised-fist political rally, and stand-up spiritual revival: a revealing expression of the powerful currents driving black American life and culture in the

[305] Frady, *Jesse*, 245.

post-civil rights, Vietnam era."[306] Before a crowd of over 100,000 attendees, Jackson embodied the characteristic spirit of the times and asserted his place as the representative firebrand of black empowerment.

Jackson's introductory speech could be likened to an extension of his weekly addresses to Operation PUSH. He emphasized the power of their collectivity and unity that enabled them to "take care of black business!" What mattered was not the genre of the music that day but the ability of that music to facilitate the essential connection to the heart of people: "All of our people got a soul. Our experience determines the texture, the taste, and the sound of our soul." Jackson proceeded through a chiastic series of proclamations, reminding the people that the circumstances they endured were not inherent features of their being; they were *in* the slums, *in* the prisons, but the slum and the prison were not *in* them. His words aimed toward the affirmation of black dignity and self-worth. Jackson brought his opening words to sermonic climax by imploring the people to stand, raise their fists in the air, and join in what he called their "black national litany," his famous chant of "I am – Somebody!"[307] On that day, Jackson inhabited a structure of feeling, hope, and desire through which he enacted a popular black social, political, and spiritual authority through word, deed, and dress, generating a compelling attractiveness through the signs, symbols, and language of black power.

Jackson's performances of authority in these moments should be considered within their narrative fabric of charismatic black male leadership. Wattstax, the PUSH meetings, and the host of public spaces in which Jackson operated enabled him to stage his own development into the most visible black leader of that era. As I describe in Chapter 1, charismatic scenarios such as

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[306] "Wattstax," *POV*, last modified September 4, 2004, http://archive.pov.org/wattstax/film-description/.
[307] *Nightloop*, "Jesse Jackson's - Wattstax Music Festival Opening Speech (1972)," August 24, 2014, video, 3:09, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTVwT3j_zqY.

these situate figures in and before the world as recipients and reproducers of a tradition of leadership. Jackson's tradition was a distinctly masculine and black one, extended through a stylized rhetoric, appearance, and embodiment. Barbara Reynolds' description of Jackson in this context is telling: "As Jackson leans forward on the podium, it is little wonder that the audience worships this man. Sensuous in black leather vest, striped T-shirt, and tight leather pants; 220 pounds of muscle rippling through a six-foot two-inch frame; billowing Afro; a sculpted face; the Country Preacher projects all the manly qualities that most blacks respect."[308] The worship and respect to which Reynolds spoke are tethered to this projection, to a representative masculine image and likeness that points toward an imagined ideal.

The imagined ideal, however, is not coextensive with concrete substance. It cannot be denied that part of Jackson's strength in this time was an attitudinal and rhetorical malleability. He had a feel for moving through different dialects, for maneuvering between displays of militancy and racial pride or negotiations with the white power structure, for fulfilling a public appetite for movement and excitement.[309] There was a perennial lament that the 1970s represented an era of crisis for black political circles, given the apparent lack of any presence capable of unifying the purpose and action of the black masses.[310] Jackson's public appeal seemed to make him an apt figure for filling such a role. At the same time, Jackson operated outside of the realm of electoral politics, in spaces where a clearly defined platform was not essential. Jackson trafficked in the generation of publicity. Popularity constitutes a form of legitimation but does not translate seamlessly into political force. However, in the absence of any substantive challenge for supremacy, Jackson's path forward was wide open.

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[308] Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 208.
[309] Ernest R. House, *Jesse Jackson & the Politics of Charisma: The Rise and Fall of the PUSH/Excel Program* (Westview Press, 1988), 16.
[310] Reed, *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon*, 9.

He reflected on that path in his 1983 essay, "The Advantages of a Black Presidential Candidate." Jackson saw such a campaign as a means for producing more significant involvement of black leaders in the shaping of party policy and programs. It was not just a political matter but also a means of accruing self-respect and recognition as a collective. A black candidate, in Jackson's estimation, could redress the marginalization of a black constituency from the heart of party. Importantly, Jackson argued that carrying out such a campaign "require[d] the masses, machinery, and money. A black candidate must have the ability to galvanize the masses and to define, interpret, and defend the national interest generally and the interests of black, non-white, poor, and rejected people specifically."[311]

Over a decade before Jackson's essay, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm became the first black person to run for president from within one of the two major parties. Chisholm, a longtime politician and activist, built a significant political career as a New York State assemblywoman and as the first black woman elected to the US Congress.[312] By the time of her presidential primary run in 1972, she had been engaged in electoral politics for more than twenty years. Chisholm's entry into the field of contenders was situated on an extensive base of local relationships with a diverse constituency and political heavyweights, which were developed over the course of her long-term work as an educator, advocate, and representative.

Chisholm's run for the presidency bears significance for Jackson's later attempts. What Chisholm's and Jackson's campaigns bore in common were a measure of appeal to brokerage politics, using the leverage of potential black votes to bargain for advancement to higher status among the senior leaders within the national party conventions.[313] Additionally, Chisholm's

[311] Jackson, *Straight From the Heart*, 64-67.
[312] Barbara Winslow, *Shirley Chisholm: Catalyst for Change* (Westview Press, 2014), 46, 56.
[313] Evelyn M. Simien, *Historic Firsts: How Symbolic Empowerment Changes U.S. Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 14.

campaign sought to rally a diverse coalition of the marginalized and disadvantaged, a goal emulated in Jackson's later call for a rainbow coalition, a call which, in many respects, never fully materialized during his campaign.[314] Chisholm's earlier run can and should be understood as a critical intervention in the political establishment, which laid groundwork for Jackson's later presidential runs. Often, it is given short shrift in light of the latter's ability to harness a different degree of popular visibility and charismatic fervor.

Buoyed by the slogan "Run, Jesse, Run!", Jackson launched his first Democratic presidential campaign during the summer of 1983. His stated goal was to generate a higher level of voter registration among the members of the "Rainbow Coalition," and his campaign certainly held appeal among various minoritized populations. Jackson also found support among white liberals, activists, and the working class. To some, support for Jackson's candidacy was considered a protest against both a conservative Democratic slate and a white Democratic establishment that failed to reciprocate the support of black constituents in concrete ways.[315] Unquestionably, Jackson saw himself as qualified for such an undertaking as expressed in the rubric he provided. His description of the appropriate candidate hews closely to the means of his own leadership claims as an organizer and interpreter of the masses. That said, this framework is beset by the problems put forth in Adolph Reed's assessment of organic leadership.

Reed argues that organic leadership is an antidemocratic mode in which distinctions between the interests of leaders and constituents are collapsed, and the objective of leadership are presumed identical with constituent interests. Consequently, there is no space for contesting that leader's specific articulation of political goals. According to Reed, this logic organizes black

[314] Simien, *Historic Firsts*, 54.
[315] John White, *Black Leadership in America: From Booker T. Washington to Jesse Jackson, 2nd ed.* (New York: Longman, 1990), 185.

protest politics and lies at the heart of Jackson's campaign, which Reed insisted "was not so much a political campaign as a crusade."[316]

In his overview of Jackson's 1984 campaign, Reed argues that Jackson's rise was facilitated by the intersection of 1) his own self-promotion within a context of black political and social malaise, 2) the uncritical reproduction of his claims to popular support by mass media, and 3) the inability of the white Left to challenge the campaign's image as a movement of the dispossessed. The overall result is a circumstance in which Jackson's claims to black leadership primacy are authenticated on the basis of form over substance, and wherein black political activity is ghettoized in ways that overlook the ambiguities and complexities of black communities and their relationships to designated spokespersons.[317] Reed's summation is direct:

> This is the real, albeit inadvertent, significance of the Jackson phenomenon. Because of its celebrity status, it crystallized in a highly visible fashion both the contexts and the immediate terms of the political crisis that it reproduced. By fomenting and projecting an unambiguously false image of a popular, emancipatory Afro-American politics, the Jackson campaign hinted negatively at factors and conditions for which a politics must account.[318]

Jackson's 1988 campaign reflected a more studied and ambitious approach to the political fray. He was able to garner presidential primary victories in states such as Michigan and Wisconsin, the latter of which held a black population under 4 percent. Even in his loss in New York State, he carried nearly the entire black vote in New York City and over 60 percent of Hispanic voters there. He also tripled his performance among white voters versus the 1984 primaries. Notwithstanding these victories, Jackson's campaign would again fall short of the nomination. What linger are the intriguing characterizations of Jackson's performance and its form.

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[316] Reed, 34-35.
[317] Ibid, 106-20.
[318] Ibid, 121-22.

For detractors, he represented a confusing, contradictory figure: at turns prophet and political opportunist, black capitalist and defender of the impoverished, demagogue and preacher. Most telling may be the reference to Jackson's campaign activities as "continued political preaching to a national 'congregation,'" an indicator of the enduring understanding of Jackson's public leadership.[319] That understanding is reinforced by perhaps the single most important charismatic scenario of Jackson's career, namely, his speech at the 1988 Democratic National Convention in Atlanta, GA. Without a doubt, it stands among Jackson's finest oratorical performances. It also marked an occasion of political spectacle that, while the zenith of his political exploits, re-inscribed the limits of black representative spokesmanship.

"Start the Show": Jesse Jackson at the 1988 Democratic National Convention

The atmosphere for Jackson's convention appearance was set well before his arrival. He came up with the idea to organize an elaborate caravan from Chicago to Atlanta, dubbing the collective aggregation the Rainbow Express. For three days, Jackson and an assortment of supporters, reporters, and photographers set out on a journey from the Midwest to the South, making stops along the way where Jackson would deliver his signature brand of political theater in energetic rallies. His primary challenger, Michael Dukakis, had teased the possibility of selecting him as a vice presidential running mate. Which never came to fruition. Jackson's entrance into Atlanta was a final show of bravado and popular influence, and he was welcomed by an aggregation of thousands who were eager to show their support in any way possible.[320] The unfolding of his speech reflected both the charismatic power of his rhetorical performance and the ephemerality of its political grasp.

[319] White, *Black Leadership in America*, 186-87.
[320] Frady, *Jesse*, 408-9.

By 1988, television media had come into full bloom, and with it came the exponential growth of Jackson's audience. The New York Times reported that approximately 55 percent of the American television audience across the country was tuned into the convention proceedings on the evening of his speech.[321] Besides Jackson, the slate of speakers during the convention included his opponent, Michael Dukakis, Arkansas governor and future president William (Bill) Jefferson Clinton, and future Texas governor Ann Richards. On the Democratic Party's largest stage, Jackson would prove to be the most intriguing figure, and his performance would be the enduring symbol of a nascent but ultimately unrealized political possibility.

The introduction to the speech was carried out dutifully by Jackson's five children, each articulating platitudes in honor and support of their parents. It is a moment perfectly suited to its television medium. Starting with the youngest daughter, the Jackson siblings shared words that spoke to their own accomplishments and credited their parents' foundational work in shaping their collective spiritual, social, and political consciousness. The final, most extensive words were given to Jackson's namesake, his eldest son, Jesse Jackson, Jr. His remarks bore semblances of his father's cadence and style, as well as nods to historical events & figures and rhetorical flourish. Jackson Jr. situated himself as part of a generation benefitting from and born out of predecessors, like his father, who had long fought and sacrificed for equality and freedom. This new generation had neither given up "the dream" nor abandoned its ideals but recognized the urgency of the freedom struggles it had inherited. Jackson Jr. also echoed the appeal to domestic economic justice and diplomacy abroad, key tenets of his father's own political platform.[322]

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[321] Peter J. Boyer, "Jackson a High Point as Convention Is TV Hit," *New York Times*, July 21, 1988, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/21/us/jackson-a-high-point-as-convention-is-tv-hit.html.
[322] Jesse Jackson, "Jesse Jackson 1988 Convention Speech," C-SPAN video, 1:26:54, July 19, 1988, https://www.c-span.org/video/?3504-1/jesse-jackson-1988-convention-speech.

The presentation of the Jackson siblings performs an intriguing set of functions. It reveals a measure of the domestic life of the Jackson family, which by all appearances fit into the expected nuclear conventions of political life. This arrangement also stands in stark contrast to the Rev. Jackson's own circumstances of familial origin. The Jackson siblings do not merely appear but do so in ways that bespeak a measure of excellence and exception. They give account of themselves as erudite, world-wise, and polished. As such, they are affirmations of the "somebodyness" of their father. The Jackson siblings, in this moment, are established as the scions of an influential family in the realm of American politics. One senses a measure of self-awareness of this fact, given Jackson Jr.'s climactic words during his introductory remarks. As he put it, "The legacy of this day will live forever. And I have the honor of saying I'm sure that the children in the King family are proud to be Kings. And I'm sure that the children in the Kennedy family are proud to be Kennedys. But we the children of Jesse and Jacqueline Jackson are proud to be Jacksons."[323] In those brief words, the Jackson family name was rhetorically woven into the same fabric with the iconic figures of electoral and protest politics in the heart of the civil rights era. The presence and performance of the Jackson siblings served as nothing short of a sonic and visual staging of legitimation, laying the groundwork for the charismatic apex of their father's speech.

After the Jackson sibling departed the stage, a video presentation began playing. It began with an animated journey down a road heading towards a city with a sign that read "Entering Reagan/Bush's America." Images of opulence, wealth, and leisure accompanied a narration of how the Republican Party had proffered an illusory vision of American life. The video described the Democratic party, in contrast, as being on a quest to rediscover its soul and offer a vision of

[323] Ibid.

hope and action. The presentation reached its emotional peak with various scenes from across the country, overlaid with Jackson's voice articulating the various constituencies for which he fights. It concluded with Ray Charles' rendition of "America, the Beautiful," playing over scenes of various landscapes, national monuments, and political rallies before ending with footage of the Statue of Liberty surrounded by fireworks.[324] The presentation as a whole drew upon the materials and aesthetics of Americana, knitting together a framework of universal connection and harmony galvanized by the work, speech, and presence of Jesse Jackson. Jackson, through this lens, was meant to be understood not merely as a *black* candidate, but as a thoroughly *American* candidate, capable of uniting the disparate and dispossessed masses under a new sociopolitical vision.

Jackson's speech, entitled "Common Ground," struck the tone of political mobilization through what he describes as the *real* rainbow coalition, the multicultural masses of American society. His preamble invoked civil rights leaders and martyrs, family and friends, all of whose efforts made way for the space and time that he and his audience occupied. Jackson distilled his objectives in two brief sentences: "We meet tonight at the crossroad, a point of decision. Shall we expand, be inclusive, find unity and power; or suffer division and impotence?"[325] Jackson's quest for common ground was a call for the expansion of democratic participation and the inclusion of oft-disparate groups and perspectives into a united, interdependent front. To the extent that he was attempting to express a direct connection between collective action and communal values, Jackson was engaging in the sermonic function of discourse.[326]

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[324] Ibid.
[325] Reverend Jesse L. Jackson Sr., *Keeping Hope Alive: Sermons and Speeches of Reverend Jesse L. Jackson Sr.*, ed. Grace Ji-Sun Kim (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), 65.
[326] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, *Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, 3.

We see this function work through Jackson's use of the rhetorical processes that Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites highlight as key features of their rubric of sermonic public discourse.[327] The first rhetorical feature of sermonic discourse is the clarification of shared communal values. In his speech, Jackson used *common ground* as a recurring motif to establish the shared communal values of his audience, both in and beyond the convention. He reiterated this phrase as a way of emphasizing that political victory is only possible through coming together, citing the campaigns of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Jimmy Carter as instances of party unification and ultimate success.[328] Underneath this phrase, one discovers the core values that serve as the grounds of his communication. Jackson narrowed the focus of the convention in this way: "And so this night, we choose not a false sense of independence, not our capacity to survive and endure. Tonight, we choose interdependency, and our capacity to act and unite for the greater good."[329]

Having identified interdependency and the greater good as the core features of "common ground," Jackson elaborated on these values in the context of the Democratic Party's quest to regain the White House. Common ground, he asserted, is found at the point of one's particular challenge and not necessarily in hallowed halls of political debate and policy formation. Here, Jackson makes a claim for how his campaign disrupts the usual structures of electoral engagement and instead presents politics "as a moral arena where people come together to find common ground."[330] Jackson's sense of politics dovetails with organizer Edward Chambers' Aristotelian description of politics as the capacity for gathering with fellow citizens for the sake

[327] Ibid. Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites assert that sermonic discourse "entails three separate but related rhetorical processes: the identification and definition of core communal values, the structuring of a values hierarchy, and the performative display of communal existence."
[328] Jackson, *Keeping Hope Alive*, 66.
[329] Ibid, 67-8.
[330] Ibid, 68.

of communication that produces strategic planning, action, and reflection for the common welfare of the whole body of people.[331] This is significant for multiple reasons. First, it speaks to Jackson's own roots outside of the electoral field in the realm of organizing and activism. As he petitions to lead the Democratic Party in the rediscovery of its political soul, he returns to populist sensibilities that locate the heart and soul of social change at the interactions of common people. Furthermore, Jackson's invocation of the language of politics as a *moral arena* appeals to an authority not predicated on one's status as a political figure but on demonstrated behavior and character. Jackson, who had never held any elected political office, positioned himself as a viable candidate whose influence and credibility were forged outside of the electoral realm and legitimated by his grass roots charisma and the moral authority conferred via his clerical role.

Jackson's subtle framing of the moral arena hints at the second rhetorical maneuver of sermonic discourse, the structuring of a hierarchy of values. The hierarchy of values establishes between the speaker and the audience a sense of the foundations that form and support their communal life. Earlier in the speech, Jackson named *common ground* as the core value, which is specifically expressed through the practices of *interdependence* and the active search for the *greater good*. Common ground is obtained and acted upon in the overlaps of human interactions at places of social, material, and political challenge, the *moral arena* of daily life. Jackson turned to metaphorical language to establish the hierarchy of values within this arena. He spoke of his childhood in Greenville, South Carolina, where his grandmother, unable to afford new blankets, would make quilts from scraps of material. In his view, the Democratic Party must knit the varied experiences and interests of the American people into "a great quilt of unity and common

[331] Edward Chambers, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 6. Chambers makes the case that this form of what he calls *politicalness*, to distinguish it from contemporary partisan politics, is essential to sustainable social change in a thoroughly inclusive and democratic way.

ground," where no single constituency's interests subordinate another's.[332] Jackson's quilt metaphor highlights his belief in broad-based political equality and inclusion as the highest values in the communal life of the Democratic Convention. In his conception of the moral arena, the sociopolitical challenges delineated by race, class, gender, sexuality, and political orientation were coequal in standing and inclusion, and they required a collective address through a united democratic front. Jackson opted for a pluralistic approach to American politics that narrowed the distance between political elites and the everyday citizen. Jackson reaffirmed this stance through his use of mythification, framing contemporary circumstances through religious symbolism in order to validate his cause.[333] He echoed the sacrificial discipline of his Christian faith: "As Jesus said, 'Not my will, but thine be done.' It was his way of saying there's a higher good beyond personal comfort or position."[334] In this way, Jackson signaled that his commitment to the greater good of political unity is a matter grounded not merely in his own interests but in the interests of a supra-rational power and authority.

The third rhetorical maneuver of sermonic discourse – performing communal existence – solidifies the impact of the message. At large, Jackson's body of work reflects his clear ability to lyrically enjoin himself to his audiences. The interplay between Jackson and the convention audience in his "Common Ground" speech furnished the substance for communal identity and belonging. He achieved this by making use of the various aspects of his rhetorical context, which in turn shapes his rhetoric of common ground. It must be said that rhetorical context is shaped not just by the physical location but also by temporal, social-psychological, and cultural

[332] Jackson, *Keeping Hope Alive*, 69-70.
[333] Felicia R. Walker and Deric M. Greene, "Exploring Afrocentricity: An Analysis of the Discourse of Jesse Jackson," *Journal of African American Studies* 9, no. 4 (2006): 65.
[334] Jackson, *Keeping Hope Alive*, 67.

influences. Furthermore, one's rhetorical content is shaped and motivated by the context.[335] Jackson's speech performance was indicative of his ability to analyze the setting, mood and attitudes of the people present and to respond accordingly.

Jackson's opening signaled his attentiveness to physical and temporal aspects of the context. He reminded the audience that twenty-four years earlier, the very same convention denied entry to Fannie Lou Hamer and Aaron Henry, who were leaders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. He went further in characterizing their geographical location, Atlanta as "the cradle of the Old South, the crucible of the New South," an acknowledgment of the evolving significance of their common ground.[336] Jackson invoked the historical and contemporary significance of his and the audience's time and space as a way of emphasizing their linked destiny to reimagine political possibility. The entire speech is laden with references to sites of social, political, and economic struggles for justice across the globe. Further, Jackson brought his broad vision of leadership down to scale in a way that solicited his audience as essential partners in the work.

Jackson's connection to the audience is secured through his identification with the everyday interests and activities of the marginalized. His penchant for detailed accounts and storytelling vividly illustrates his acquaintance and empathy with their experiences. For example, Jackson characterized leadership in the moral arena of life as a simple desire to "take common sense to high places."[337] In his view, it was common sense to reject the Reagan administration's economic policies in favor of addressing the fundamental moral challenge of economic violence. Jackson's acknowledgment of the working poor is not only descriptive but also testimonial:

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[335] Walker and Greene, "Exploring Afrocentrity," 65.
[336] Jackson, *Keeping Hope Alive*, 64-65.
[337] Ibid, 70.

"Most poor people are not lazy. They are not black. They are not brown. They are mostly white and female and young. But whether white, black, or brown, a hungry baby's belly turned inside out is the same color – color it pain; color it hurt; color it agony…I know. I live among them. I'm one of them. I know they work. I am a witness."[338] Jackson spoke as an insider for whom struggles for economic justice are not abstract talking points but matters of personal acquaintance.

Jackson's performance of communal existence elided his position of visibility and authority with the lives and struggles of the economically distressed. However, it was not enough for him to merely *suggest* this solidarity by style and delivery. On the contrary, the coalescence of community between speaker and audience is a consubstantial enactment of values and hierarchies. That is, the speaker and audience are of the same substance or essence, bound together in a shared understanding of vision and their respective roles.[339] Jackson fortified this mutual recognition and belonging by recounting the privations of his youth in South Carolina. He anticipated the rightful skepticism of his current prestige and deftly turned it on its head, asserting that those who observe his run for the White House "don't see the house I'm running from."[340] Jackson's climactic story revealed his multiple points of identification with the working poor: the sense of abandonment, the literal experience of being rendered nameless, meager accommodations and delayed meals. His story was *their* story, and by extension, his candidacy was theirs, too: "when you see Jesse Jackson, when my name goes in nomination, your name goes in nomination."[341] His ascendance was rhetorically emblematic of the rise of a sociopolitical community whose humble roots qualified them to recognize the fundamental terms

[338] Ibid, 71.
[339] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, *Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, 6.
[340] Jackson, *Keeping Hope Alive*, 76.
[341] Ibid, 77.

of common ground. Jackson's striving for the presidential nomination became a reflection of a communal mandate to wield political authority.

For all of the symbolic weight of the events and Jackson's speech performance, they did not translate into electoral success. Jackson would not capture the Democratic Party nomination, and ultimately did not hold any elected office. One is left to reckon with the meaning and effect of these happenings. Whatever interpretations might be produced, what is pertinent is that Jackson's pursuit of candidacy was not a quest for symbolic or moral victories. On the contrary, it was a pursuit of concrete *electoral* legitimation for organic political leadership and representative authority. That his pursuit was unsuccessful is not the primary metric of evaluation; many worthy campaigns result in electoral defeat. Rather, it is meaningful to evaluate Jackson's political foray in light of other qualitative factors.

Writing on Jackson's first campaign, historian Manning Marable makes the case that its relative success – meaning his sustenance beyond the New Hampshire primaries – was due to two primary considerations. First, he argues that Jackson perceptively grounded his campaign in the idealism and religious enthusiasm that informed the modern desegregation movement, an era of activity Marable asserts was anchored in the black church. In essence, the revivalist atmosphere of Jackson's campaign created a venue for bringing a moral protest tradition to bear on contemporary electoral politics and galvanizing the support of black church leaders and denominations across the country.[342] Second, Marable lifts Jackson's multiracial emphasis, an outgrowth of his inclusive "Rainbow Theology," as a key factor in the success of the campaign. Ultimately, Marable posits that this moral impetus for inclusivity and connection enabled

[342] Manning Marable, "The Rainbow Coalition: Jesse Jackson and the Politics of Ethnicity," *CrossCurrents* 34, no. 1 (1984): 25-26.

Jackson to attract a broad array of supporters beyond a black constituency, situating himself as a national leader beyond expected niches.[343]

While it can certainly be argued that the fervor and excitement of Jackson's presidential pursuits helped bring about positive outcomes in voter registration and turnout as well as on-the-ground political activity, significant issues remain unresolved.[344] First, there is no clear sense that the political mythology attached to the black church and its black male clerical leadership furnishes a lasting output beyond temporary captivation and representative affinities. Marable reads Jackson as taking his place within the redemptive religio-political discourse of the "Black Moses" who challenges systemic racism and prophetically articulates a new social order in salvific, transformative terms.[345] To be clear, this leadership narrative constitutes something more than mere romantic idealism, even as it problematically reproduces an overwhelmingly masculinist tradition. However, with respect to electoral politics, it cannot be definitively said that such a model offers a uniquely viable means of generating meaningful outcomes. As perceptibly left of center candidates, both Chisholm and Jackson exhibited appeals to pluralist politics of racial uplift and coalition building, while generating corresponding descriptive-symbolic connections with their supporters. Arguably, while accounting for the different contexts and variables of their moments, Chisholm's and Jackson's candidacies could be read as *similarly* effective catalysts with respect to political group identity and progress towards American political inclusion on a broad scale.[346] In this way, Jackson's drawing upon the organic

[343] Marable, "The Rainbow Coalition," 27-28.
[344] Simien, *Historic Firsts*, 53-54.
[345] Marable, "The Rainbow Coalition," 40-41. Among these "Black Moses" figures, Marable names Malcolm X, A. Philip Randolph, and Martin Luther King Jr.
[346] Simien, *Historic Firsts*, 130.

authority of the black church does not translate into an unprecedented or unparalleled political effect.

Additionally, Marable's reference to the "Black Moses" discourse recalls the potential contradictions generated by simultaneous appeals to the roles of prophet and politician. Jackson sees the dynamic between the prophet and the politician as a creative tension where present conditions and future ideals are contemplated. He puts charismatic leadership and confrontational rhetoric to use in his aim to occupy simultaneously he roles of prophet and politician.[347] Hebrew Bible scholar, Walter Brueggemann asserts that a contemporary understanding of prophecy arises from the tradition of Moses, who operates as the dominant figure in Israel's historical narrative. The work of Moses, he suggests, is a thorough dismantling of the mythical and political validation of imperial Egypt.[348] By extension, to interpret Jackson's person and role within the theme of a "Black Moses" is to understand him as dismantling the mythical and political validations of his American context.

That said, Brueggemann makes the case that Moses' primary interest was the development of a counter-community with a counter-consciousness, not a re-imagination or reformation of Egypt. Moses' aim was the demolition of the ruling regime and the emergence of a wholly new reality, a radical vision best suited to sectarian sensibilities.[349] It seems reasonable to assert that prophetic imagination in the vein of the Mosaic tradition implies stark departure from the mechanisms and structures of imperial life and politics. It also implies an embedded conflict of aims and roles. Jackson's "Common Ground" speech outlined his desire to pursue a

[347] Michael J. McTighe, "Jesse Jackson and the Dilemmas of a Prophet in Politics," *Journal of Church and State* 32, no. 3 (1990), 587.
[348] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination – 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 5-6.
[349] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 21-22.

more inclusive and expansive realm of democratic participation. To the extent that it was a critique of the political order, it reflected his prophetic leanings. At the same time, it was his own appeal to take up the reins of that very order, reshaping its boundaries but not utterly replacing it. This presents a problem for the countercultural trajectory of the prophetic tradition within the bounds of electoral politics. It is difficult to position oneself as both an insurgent against the sociopolitical structure and an aspirant to its highest office.

Beyond these conflicts, there is also the question of the evolving context in which prophetic activity functions. In his study on religion and politics in the US, James Reichley argues that church leaders have frequently invoked the prophets of Israel in expressing their duty to be socially prophetic. Such an idea, he insists, overstates the contemporary relevance of a precedent from a different social situation. Reichley writes that the prophets of the Hebrew Bible undertook their work within a non-democratic society lacking any institutional equivalent to an opposition party, a free press, or various other political avenues available to the socially-aggrieved masses.[350] In this light, one risks being anachronistic in drawing an uncritical equivalency between the original context and the contemporary situation. Jackson's self-image is thoroughly intertwined with the idea of being an instrument of God, a notion that animates his political engagement.[351] However, to style and shape oneself in the tradition of the prophets is to constrain oneself to an oppositional identity that is not so seamlessly integrated into the frameworks of electoral political life. If the 2008 election of President Barack Obama is any indicator, it may be that the ascent to electoral leadership lies precisely in the truncation of radical tendencies and an appeal to centrist ideals, a far cry from prophetic disruption.[352]

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[350] James A. Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1985), 352.
[351] McTighe, "Dilemmas of a Prophet," 586.
[352] Simien, *Historic Firsts*, 101.

The work of the prophet calls to mind the Hebrew Bible account of the prophet Elijah and his apprentice, Elisha. Elijah symbolically marked their connection by placing his mantle on Elisha's shoulders, and Elisha left his agricultural trade to follow him. Before ascending into the heavens, Elijah consented to grant a double portion of his spirit to Elisha, who claimed Elijah's mantle after it fell to the ground.[353] This story is instructive in multiple respects. It underscores the supra-rational means by which prophetic power and authority were conferred. It is not a story of democratic or popular validation but of a singular and specific call and response. It is also a window into a time and space where the role of the prophet entailed the declaration of a radical alternative to imperial subjugation, a life apart from political integration. Elisha followed in the footsteps of his prophetic mentor and carried the discernible power of his spirit.

Through the sociopolitical message of the Rainbow Coalition, Manning Marable argues that Jackson "achieved his real objective: to become worthy of the mantle of Martin Luther King," and in so doing filled the perceived vacuum of black moral and political leadership.[354] It is hardly disputable that Jackson, for a time, was the dominant personality of black sociopolitical life in the United States. As well, one cannot deny the degree to which that dominance was secured through his artful deployment of charismatic engagement, sermonic rhetoric, and his penchant for ritualistic spectacle. In countless ways, Jackson's post-civil rights era trajectory owes much to his being the prophetic predecessor in King. Yet, the mantle of King was not inherited so much as it was seized by force of will. In the aftermath of the civil rights era, Jackson carved out a significant space for himself, in some ways parting political waters that his predecessor never approached. Cloaked in the charisma, language, aegis, and aesthetics of his ministerial office, Jackson translated protest praxis into a campaign strategy, captivating both

[353] II Kings 2:9-13.
[354] Marable, "The Rainbow Coalition,"

loyalists and detractors alike. But whereas Elisha received a double portion of Elijah's spirit, Jackson inherited a dual dilemma in the form of competing ideological interests.

Jackson's attempt to reconcile the prophet and the politician into a singular role revealed the limits of such aims. The rhetoric and spectacle of his 1988 convention speech suggested a desire for broad, inclusive political transformation centered in the will of the collective. However, Jackson's rise to this platform can be read as another entry in the long narrative tracing a linear path "from Moses to emancipation to civil rights to black presidency."[355] That narrative tradition depends on an allegiance to messianic leadership as the primary mode of black sociopolitical advancement. It reinforces the authoritarian model of power and control through strong men, a model E. Franklin Frazier describes as a significant feature of the historical black church.[356] At the crux of the prophet-politician dynamic is the fact that such roles appeal to different grounds of legitimacy. The prophetic mode is not subject to democratic or participatory processes, but to a sense of divine call and conferral of authority. The electoral political mode is legitimated and secured through the certification of a voting population. Jackson, in presenting himself as the ideal realization of the two roles, attached himself to a core myth of modern black politics, which is the notion that singular charismatic leadership is the superior method of liberation. Rather than developing a political counter-consciousness, such a myth ensures a continual allegiance to sanitized, illusory conceptions of leadership romance.[357]

The era of Jackson's public and political heights was indicative of the ongoing contestation over, in Richard Iton's words, "the issue of what the proper source of political legitimacy might be: the pulpit, the protest march, and the polling booth or the nightclub, dance

[355] Edwards, *Charisma*, 190.
[356] E. Franklin Frazier and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America/The Black Church Since Frazier* (Schocken Books, 1974), 90.
[357] Edward, *Charisma*, 193.

floor, and festival stage?"[358] Jackson, to be certain, was a multifarious individual who trafficked in a wide variety of venues. His political authentication was sourced by various publics beyond formal institutional boundaries. His transformation from King disciple to polished presidential candidate demonstrated a necessary adaptive capacity. As Iton writes, the grounds of political contestation are fluid and require continual recalibration, and it is arguable that the contextual challenges facing black people in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries could not be adequately met by post-civil rights era understandings. Additionally, the dramatic public emergence of black popular culture and visual technologies in the 1980s onward certainly complicated the ways that black progressive politics would be generated, sustained, and authenticated.[359]

Few figures of contemporary political significance capture this quandary better than the Rev. Al Sharpton, whose own rise to prominence in the 1980s was followed by successive – and highly visible – transformations that have sustained his visibility in the public eye well into the twenty-first century. Sharpton, at turns an activist, preacher, presidential hopeful, and political commentator, resists easy categorization, and has made use of a wide array of media in service of his brand of black progressive leadership. At the same time, he has courted controversy for his methods, aesthetics, and supposed opportunism. In the following chapter, I interrogate the complex visual and rhetorical assemblages of black sociopolitical leadership produced through the public work and life of the Rev. Al Sharpton.

[358] Richard Iton, In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 98.
[359] Iton, *Black Fantastic*, 103.

Chapter 5

Al Sharpton and the Evolving Spectacle of Black Politics

Few events dominated the American political and cultural landscape of the 1980s quite like the unfolding case of Tawana Brawley. On November 28th, 1987, Brawley, a fifteen-year-old black girl, was discovered, apparently brutalized and barely conscious, covered in fecal matter and scrawled epithets. According to her account, Tawana Brawley had been the victim of abduction and sexual abuse at the hands of six white men. Over the course of the next year, the matter was fiercely contested, both in legal courts and in the court of public opinion, with a New York grand jury determining in the fall of 1988 that Brawley's claims were effectively false.[360]

The graphic and sensational details of Brawley's alleged attack were matched only by the eventual media spectacle. In its early stages, the case was only covered regularly by local Hudson Valley newspapers, an effort that seemed lacking in journalistic rigor and rife with confusion and contradiction.[361] However, major outlets could not ignore the dramatization of unrest led by none other than the Reverend Al Sharpton. Sharpton, one of the advisors to Tawana Brawley, had already established his reputation as a masterful agitator and protest organizer in previous cases, notably the attack on a group of black men by a white mob at Howard Beach in Queens, NY.[362] He reprised this role in his efforts to draw attention to Brawley's case and petition against any miscarriage of justice. Along with attorneys C. Vernon Mason and Alton Maddox, Sharpton was part of the team assembled to assist with the case and bring it to a victorious resolution. They were portrayed as a threatening trio bent on exacerbating racial

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[360] Jonathan Markovitz, "Collective Memory, Credibility Structures, and the Case of Tawana Brawley," *Discourse* 22, no. 1 (2000): 31.
[361] Robert McFadden, et al, *Outrage: The Story Behind the Tawana Brawley Hoax* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 143-4.
[362] McFadden, et al, *Outrage*, 7.

conflict and promoting their own influence as ostensible spokespersons for the black community. It was Sharpton, though, whose role focused on media and the public forums outside of the courtroom.[363]

Sharpton's gifts for protest mobilization and press engagement made him a logical partner for Mason and Maddox, who had worked with him during the Howard Beach case. Sharpton was a scene stealer whose rhetorical abilities and keen sense of performance rarely, if ever, failed to capture the ears and cameras of the eager media. In *Outrage: The Story Behind the Tawana Brawley Hoax*, reporters from the *New York Times* describe Sharpton and his role in vivid terms:

> The rotund preacher with the semiautomatic mouth straddled the worlds of news and entertainment, promotion and boxing, religion and community activism, the media and the mob. Stuffed into running suits like a plump sausage, his long hair straightened and permed, Sharpton cut an outrageous figure – but one that had made him an easily recognizable celebrity on the evening news. There was something wonderfully comical, even vulnerable, about this blustering rogue who was never at a loss for words, something that fascinated the media despite his broken promises and blatant lies. Sharpton liked to say he didn't hold reporters at gunpoint and force them to cover him. That was true – they were like moths drawn to the flame. His wit was ever ready, as when a reporter asked whether the large Martin Luther King, Jr., medallion Sharpton always wore around his neck was heavy. Sharpton barely paused. "To me," he rejoined, "it's not."[364]

Sharpton's words undoubtedly carried a measure of bravado, but they hinted at something more than mere showmanship. The weight of his jewelry was of far less concern than the metaphorical weight of its image. For all of the ways the media lampooned his image and actions, Sharpton understood himself clearly as an inheritor of a particular tradition of public leadership. It was an inheritance that, regardless of appearances, he took quite seriously.

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[363] Markovitz, "Collective Memory," 35-7.
[364] McFadden, et al, *Outrage*, 107.

In the more than three decades since the Tawana Brawley case, Sharpton has cultivated an enduring public presence that, while not without controversy, is remarkable for his chameleonic transformations. He has been, at turns, a road manager for the Godfather of Soul (James Brown), a candidate for the U.S. presidency, a fixture in the White House during the administration of President Barack Obama, a frequent eulogist for high-profile funerals, a perennial protest leader and spokesman, and the host of his own radio and cable programs. Amidst these shifting roles, he transformed his physical appearance by embarking on an exercise regimen and embracing a vegetarian lifestyle, all the while retaining his trademark permed hairstyle. Though he had – and still has – his share of detractors, what cannot be denied is Sharpton's unique ability to attract publicity and wield that power in service of varied aims as a representative of black sociopolitical interests.

Sharpton represents a link to the civil rights era by way of its leadership lineage. As an adolescent, he served as the head of the Youth Division of the Operation Breadbasket chapter in Brooklyn, New York.[365] His early connection to Jesse Jackson blossomed into a relationship that has been at turns collaborative and contentious. The similarities between the two are numerous, with Sharpton mirroring many of his predecessor's public maneuvers. However, Sharpton's contemporary significance is grounded in the terrain of a much different social, cultural, and political landscape from Jackson's. That difference of landscape contributes to the manifestation of Sharpton's unique and complex expression of charismatic leadership. Sharpton's deployment of an array of visual and oral vocabularies is situated within an increasingly fluid context.
This chapter explores the development of Al Sharpton's practice and active reimagination of the religio-political leadership pattern of King and Jackson. I argue that Sharpton is emblematic of

[365] Martin L. Deppe, *Operation Breadbasket: An Untold Story of Civil Rights in Chicago, 1966-1971* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 82.

the expansion of the visual sphere of black popular culture, evidenced by the hypervisibility of his leadership activity and his destabilization of normative categories of political performance and engagement. His ongoing visual transformations reflect one aspect of his multifaceted adaptation to the dynamic cultural circumstances he inhabits. However, the underlying patterns of his leadership practices remain tethered to the models he inherits via King and Jackson. I posit that this retreat to and retread of the logics of singular charismatic leadership does not produce a wholly adequate response to the hyper-fragmentation of the contemporary political and cultural situation. Sharpton's seeming ubiquity as a visual communicator and religio-political presence is certainly not negligible. That said, I find it necessary to disambiguate his popular accessibility and presence from notions of his supremacy as the primary voice of contemporary black sociopolitical interests.

I begin by attending to the roots of Sharpton's charismatic and masculine formation by way of his religious upbringing and his collective of black male mentors, which includes figures such as Bishop F.D. Washington, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., William Augustus Jones, Jesse Jackson, and James Brown. Next, I examine the role of visual spectacle and staging in Sharpton's establishment of his religio-political leadership and status. Following this, I examine some of the popular cultural artifacts that reflect both the character and caricature of Sharpton's moves towards a mainstream political career. Finally, I turn to Sharpton's role as a frequent eulogizer of black victims of extrajudicial killing, reckoning with the religio-political significance and cultural ambivalence attached to his public priestly function. Sharpton resists easy categorization by virtue of the multiplicity of his roles and the dramatic arc of his public engagements over the course of several decades. Ultimately, I read Sharpton as a marker of a transitional threshold between the "great man" leadership models of the civil rights era and the

decentralized nodes of sociopolitical leadership and mobilization in the present day. His liminal position invites us to contemplate what sort of niche charismatic authority occupies in the contention for black political futures.

"I Know You Got Soul"- Sharpton's Charismatic Leadership Roots

The soul of Rev. Al Sharpton's quest for leadership was forged in the days of his youth in Queens, NY. At the age of 4, he began preaching before he could even read, frequently dressing the part in his mother's robe.[366] Sharpton describes the peculiarity of his early sense of call, a circumstance that often subjected him to teasing from classmates and prompted his self-denial of the carefree pleasures of his peers. He honed that sense of call and affinity for preaching in the pews of Washington Temple Church of God in Christ in Brooklyn, NY, where he obsessively absorbed the nuances and traits of famous figures such as Mahalia Jackson, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Rev. C.L. Franklin, father of acclaimed singer Aretha Franklin. His pastor, Bishop F.D. Washington, was openly grooming him for denominational leadership. However, Al knew he wanted most to emulate the religio-political models he observed in Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson, and Adam Clayton Powell Jr., "men who were called to serve both God and their people through activism."[367]

Similar to his future mentor Jesse Jackson, Sharpton's own experiences of fatherly absence and abandonment spurred his quest for validation and the affirmation of male authority figures. Al Sharpton Sr. abandoned his family and took up with his teenaged stepdaughter, leaving behind young Al, his mother Ada, and his sister. Amidst his desperate search for a father

[366] Greg Howard, "Al Sharpton, Reconsidered," *New York Times* (New York, NY), March 9, 2018.
[367] Al Sharpton and Nick Chiles, *The Rejected Stone – Al Sharpton and the Path to American Leadership* (Cash Money Content, 2013), 11-12.

figure to anchor him, Sharpton found a sense of connection and comfort in the church. Bishop Washington cultivated Sharpton's preaching gifts, and Al's prowess grew so rapidly that at age 9 he was chosen to tour with Mahalia Jackson as her opening act.[368] Sharpton's charismatic gifts found an early platform that would only expand over time, and the desire for fatherly affirmation was no small influence on his performances.

In his adolescence, Sharpton became enamored with the preaching and leadership style of Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the pastor of the venerable Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, NY. He frequented the worship services there, trying as he might to curry favor with the politician pastor. In a video interview, Sharpton reminisces on spending time at a black nationalist bookstore in the neighborhood of Hollis, Queens, during his school lunch hour. While there, he saw a book with a preacher on the cover wearing a clerical collar. The man was Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Sharpton saved his money in order to purchase that book, and he grew enchanted with the stories of how Powell leveraged his authority in the black church politically and spiritually.[369] Sharpton recounts the experience of going to Powell's office after service one Sunday and asking the secretary if he could meet with the pastor. The secretary, somewhat amused, asked who she should say is calling. He replied, "The Reverend Alfred Sharpton." She left, and upon returning, invited young Al to follow her to the back. Upon meeting the pastor, Sharpton was surprised to find that Powell knew who he was, owing to Powell's relationship with Bishop Washington and young Al's reputation as a boy preacher. Powell invited Al to join

[368] Sharpton and Chiles, *The Rejected Stone*, 16-18.
[369] TransAtlantic Productions, "Al Sharpton on Adam Clayton Powell," November 24, 2017, YouTube video, 1:04:40, www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxRcnZN2lfw.

him at Red Rooster that afternoon, and from then on, Sharpton took every opportunity to attach himself to the preacher-politician.[370]

As a teenager, Sharpton's mother introduced him to the Rev. Dr. William Augustus Jones. Jones, the pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in Brooklyn, NY, became a critical mentor and eventual pastor of Sharpton's. His longstanding record of activity within the civil rights movement positioned him as a key figure in the local and national scenes. Jones was the leader of Operation Breadbasket's New York branch, and he appointed Sharpton as the head of its youth division.[371] Their developing relationship directly led to Sharpton's introduction to one of his most pivotal advisers, Jesse Jackson. While on a trip to New York, Jackson went to see the local leaders of Operation Breadbasket, and while there, Jones took the time to introduce "Reverend Jesse," as they called him, to young Al.[372] Sharpton describes his memory of meeting Jesse, noting Jesse's youthfulness and style, his charisma and flamboyance, and their shared upbringing in homes fractured by the absence of their fathers. Jesse and Al were kindred spirits, and Al did his best to mimic the aesthetic, style, and movement of Jackson.[373]

In Jackson, Sharpton recognized something of the energy and flair of Adam Clayton Powell Jr. In an interview with *New York* magazine, Sharpton remarked that Jesse's first words to him were an admonition to stay focused, finish his education, choose his targets carefully, and to be wary of elder leaders who might use him. Jesse's words of caution and focus would be prescient for their relationship. Sharpton hewed closely to Jesse's movements and activities, but

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[370] Al Sharpton and Anthony Walton, *Go and Tell Pharaoh: The Autobiography of the Reverend Al Sharpton* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 39.
[371] Ellen Warren, "Al Sharpton: Reinventing himself," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), November 20, 2003.
[372] Sharpton and Walton, *Go and Tell Pharaoh*, 48.
[373] Al Sharpton and Karen Hunter, *Al on America* (United Kingdom: Kensington Publishing Corporation, 2003), 192.

over time, their own connection would grow strained. Sharpton describes the complexity of their relationship:

> "'I love Jesse,' he began. 'He taught me everything I know. He introduced me to every important person I know. He will always be my mentor. Our families are close. I'm close with his children. I am his son.
> But that's why 98 percent of our differences are personal. Because I owe Jesse so much, therefore Jesse thinks I have to obey him, agree with him about everything out of loyalty. But I don't agree, so we fight sometimes. It's about pride, respect, envy, hurt feelings, deference.'"[374]

Sharpton's imitation, it seems, was not always received as flattery by Jackson. They developed a familial closeness that at times bred contempt. Certainly, Jackson recognized a familiar potential, ambition, and foolhardiness in his protégé. It was not altogether different from his relationship to King, who knew both his great capabilities and his worrisome traits. A critical distinction lies in the fact that Jackson, unlike King, lived to see the rise of his apprentice. The relationship between Jackson and Sharpton has played out at greater length, with greater visibility and significant media focus. While Jackson drew from the memorialization of King's legacy, Sharpton fashioned himself in the living image of his mentor, contending for the very same sphere of influence and leadership until he surpassed him.

Sharpton differentiated himself in ways that pushed against Jackson's recommendations. He dropped out of Brooklyn College, forgoing the formal education that his mentor urged him to pursue. More pointedly, Sharpton locates a critical source of his first tensions with Jackson in the development of his relationship with the acclaimed musical performer James Brown. Jackson was no stranger to the spotlight or to keeping company with famous figures. However, Sharpton suggests that Jackson saw his burgeoning connection with James Brown as a distraction from his

[374] Jack Newfield, "Rev Vs. Rev," *New York Magazine* (New York, NY), January 7, 2002.

focus on civil rights activism. Moreover, Sharpton hints at Jesse's possible jealousy over the fatherly role that Brown came to occupy in his life.[375]

Whatever the case may be, Jesse's misgivings can be understood as part of the broader set of anxieties concerning the blurred boundaries of politics and popular culture. Richard Iton names this blurring of black space, performance, and identification as an inheritance from the civil rights movement. He opines that figures who straddle the political and popular cultural divide disrupt the normative assumptions of propriety and call into question the structures that kept them separate in the first place.[376] Brown's profound influence on the personal and public dimensions of Sharpton's leadership trajectory is a prime example of this disarrangement. Arguably, the ongoing evaluation of Sharpton's person and performance hinges precisely on the inability to neatly catalog his activities. It aligns with Sharpton's self-understanding as a misfit among competing movement leaders and ideological interests. Author and musician James McBride captures this sentiment:

> Sharpton admired both King and Malcolm X; he shared common ground with all of the radical movements, yet fit with none of them. How do you follow God in a world that is gray? What do you do when black power turns out to be a cobweb of continual adjustment, where the Baptists like King and Jesse Jackson looked down their noses at the Pentecostals like him—even as they needed a young voice like his? He saw no space for himself, so he created his own.[377]

In James Brown, Sharpton found a figure whose contributions to black expressive culture offered a creative template for his political endeavors. The course of this relationship sheds light on the means by which Sharpton has crafted and maintained contemporary relevance.

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[375] Sharpton and Hunter, *Al on America,* 193.
[376] Iton, *Black Fantastic*, 21, 32.
[377] James McBride, *Kill 'Em and Leave: Searching for James Brown and the American Soul* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2016), 107.

Sharpton first met Brown in the early seventies as a teenager and director of the National Youth Movement. Brown's late son Teddy had become friends with Sharpton after getting involved in the movement, and Brown had agreed to play a concert honoring Teddy and promoting voter registration. In their initial encounter, Brown took Sharpton under his wing and promised to carry him to unimaginable heights if he followed him closely. He instructed Sharpton to handle the promotion of the benefit concert. Sharpton went to work, and both shows sold out. In the dressing room between shows, Brown urged Sharpton to recognize that the key to success was being an original. He saw Sharpton as a unique young man with the heart to be something special: not the next Jesse Jackson, but the first Al Sharpton. Two weeks later, Brown beckoned Sharpton to accompany him to Los Angeles as his road manager, forging a relationship that would last until Brown's demise.[378]

McBride characterizes Sharpton as a political manifestation of Brown's music but with greater versatility, blending staunch religiosity with unapologetic forthrightness and embodying equal parts gospel preacher and Brooklyn gangster.[379] Under Brown's tutelage, he came to harness the gifts shaped by the difficult days of his early life. The roughhewn stardom of Brown was born out of a particular hardness, an obdurate discipline through which he decided and enforced the terms of his performance and compensation with brutal elegance and a loyal cadre of men. Brown's bold, brash style and uncompromising ways refined young Al's hunger, wit, and talent into a form capable of navigating a host of public and political battlegrounds. It was James Brown who taught Sharpton to be big, to "kill 'em and leave," to recognize that "success was making it as you were, not changing who you were to make it."[380] Unquestionably, the

[378] McBride, *Kill'Em and Leave*, 107-10.
[379] Ibid, 113.
[380] Ibid, 117.

fatherly and professional guidance of James Brown is part and parcel of the contemporary multifarious figure of Rev. Al Sharpton.

Notably, Sharpton's adoption of Brown's trademark permed hairstyle has been a visible marker of their relationship and a source of both curiosity and dismissal. It has, at turns, been regarded as a symbol of racial denial and denigration, the evidence of misguided thought, and a reflection of his desire for public acclaim and celebrity.[381] Sharpton's account of his hair underscores not only his awareness of the narrative power of visual symbols but also his loyalty to Brown's ethos of unyielding authenticity. This visual performance is preceded by Sharpton's foundational assertion that more than anyone in the civil rights movement, James Brown taught him how take hold of self-determination and be a man. He comprehended Brown as much more than a performer, as a true father figure who instilled within him a deep sense of pride and validation.

On the occasion of Martin Luther King's Birthday in 1981, Ronald Reagan invited James Brown to visit the White House. He insisted upon bringing Sharpton with him, but before the visit, they went to see Brown's hairstylist in Georgia. Brown instructed her to style Sharpton's hair like his, because he wanted the press at the White House to see Sharpton as his son. In the midst of the process, Brown asked Sharpton to promise that he would wear the style until Brown's death, and Sharpton assented.[382] In his biography years later, Sharpton writes that more than anything, Brown's request represented an affirmation of his worth. There was a deep fulfillment that came from being asked to emulate a man of his stature.[383] While it did not erase

[381] Scott Sherman and Al Sharpton, "Just Keep Talking," *Transition*, no. 91 (2002): 62.
[382] Sharpton and Walton, *Go and Tell Pharaoh*, 71-2.
[383] Sharpton and Chiles, *The Rejected Stone*, 22.

the trauma of his father's departure, it reinforced the depth of Brown's care and concern for his holistic development as a man of character, integrity, and discipline.

Sharpton and Brown's mutual embrace highlights multiple dialogical tensions between politics and popular culture as well as between varied modes of black performance. Brown's admonition to Sharpton, that he would be true to himself in his rise to prominence, brings into relief the complexity of how Sharpton's public activities have been read simultaneously as art and artifice. Performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson argues that black performance – particularly in the register of manipulation for the sake of survival – has been and will always be integral to liberationist struggle.[384] Inasmuch as Sharpton's enactment of a public agenda for civil rights has aimed towards liberation, it has trafficked in the useful slippage that emerges from playing with the expectations of black performance in the public sphere. However, that same slippage also becomes the material from which complex assessments and representations of Sharpton's efforts emerge.

"I Ain't No Joke" - Sharpton and the Realm of Public Spectacle

Over the course of his career, Al Sharpton has proved to be remarkably resilient in withstanding deleterious opinions of his public activity and persona. This is in no small way attributable to his grounding in the lessons from mentors such as Brown and Powell. Brown was no stranger to public contention during his musical career, whether for issues related to money problems, his relationships, or troubles with the law. However, Brown did not shy away from his missteps. Rather, he employed them as object lessons for his young charge, teaching Sharpton to

[384] E. Patrick Johnson, "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures," in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 452.

own his flaws and learn from them.[385] In similar fashion, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. taught him that exposing his own weaknesses ensured that no one could ever hold them over his head. He modeled a commitment to boldness and openness that left a significant impression on Sharpton in his younger days.[386]

By the early eighties, Sharpton found himself desiring to leave behind the busy trappings of his life with James Brown, and he returned to New York with the aim of establishing himself in his work as a minister and activist. His reemergence was spurred by a December 1984 incident in which Bernhard Goetz, a white man who became known as the "Subway Vigilante," opened fire on a group of black male youth on the 2 train in Manhattan. Sharpton responded by staging protests highlighting the racial implications of the attack, once again entering the spotlight.[387] He continued in this vein, organizing black demonstrators to march through the predominantly white Howard Beach community in Queens, NY, in 1987 to protest during the trial of white youths accused of pursuing a black man, Michael Griffith, to his death on a highway.[388] Sharpton's leveraging of the public sphere has involved a willful appeal to spectacle in his roles as activist and agitator. His willingness to become a focal point for matters of civil rights and social justice has invited a measure of criticism and even caricature. However, his refusal of normative terms of political engagement reveals a strategy of dramatization that, even while garnering detractors, serves to reinforce his popular cultural visibility. One of the more infamous examples of this strategic engagement is found in Sharpton's involvement in the case of Tawana Brawley.

Sharpton himself admits that the Brawley case has perhaps overshadowed every other public act of protest in his career. The fallout of the controversial events prompted all manner of

[385] Sharpton and Chiles, *The Rejected Stone*, 80.
[386] Sharpton and Hunter, *Al on America*, 187.
[387] Sharpton and Chiles, *The Rejected Stone,* 84.
[388] McFadden, et al, *Outrage*, 108.

response in television and print media, and for many the entire matter cast a pall over his activist proclivities. Sharpton, however, understands the episode as an indicator of his character in choosing to believe a young black girl's story despite pressure to disregard her statements.[389] The more intriguing concern is how Sharpton's activities in this case exemplify his deployment of alternatives to formal procedural politics. Sharpton has likened himself to a transforming leader versus a transactional one. The latter, he argues, adhere to traditional mechanisms of soliciting resources for their constituencies. He, however, has preferred confrontational tactics whose disruptive activity accentuated the dire conditions of life and death for black people.[390] Sharpton's protest methodology, rather than being shaped by notions of propriety, was driven by both situational urgency and the expediency of producing public attention. And for Sharpton, all of the attention was useful.

Sharpton applied that principle in his deft elevation of a largely local news story to national prominence. On Saturday, December 5th, a week after Tawana Brawley was discovered in her dreadful state, Sharpton convened a news conference, recognizing that a slow news day would mean prime coverage. At the United Auto Workers hall, he took centerstage amidst a collective of public leaders and officials and held court. Sharpton lambasted Governor Mario Cuomo for his silence on the Tawana Brawley case, referring to New York as "the Mississippi and Alabama of the eighties" and declaring Brawley's attack "the most shameful act of racism of our times."[391] Without question, many reporters thought Sharpton's hyperbolic antics were worthy of dismissal. However, by the time of the Brawley case, Sharpton had spent years honing his dependable brand of drama and punchy statements, attuning himself to the aesthetics and

[389] Sharpton and Chiles, *Al on America*, 229-30.
[390] Sharpton and Chiles, *The Rejected Stone*, 128-9.
[391] McFadden, et al, *Outrage*, 114-15.

substance of television reporting that lived and breathed by the language of the soundbite. Sharpton's presence in any given scenario virtually guaranteed significant coverage by the television media.[392]

Sharpton's animated handling of the public commentary surrounding the case was compounded by his and the lawyers' encouragement of the Brawley family's noncooperation with authorities handling the case. Sharpton declared that they had evidence that the crime against Brawley had been propagated by both a law officer and an assistant district attorney. He insisted that Brawley would not speak with the appointed special investigator, attorney general Robert Abrams, arguing that it would be akin to "asking someone in a concentration camp to talk to Hitler."[393] In the midst of the victim's silence, Sharpton became the primary spokesperson, using his exaggerated register to bring both the legal system and the state of New York under indictment.

During the ensuing investigation, Glenda Brawley, Tawana's mother, was subpoenaed by Abrams to testify before the grand jury. When presented with her options, she ultimately refused to cooperate with the order. Sharpton and his colleagues took to the court of public opinion, building a narrative of a racist social milieu and judicial system and emphasizing the righteousness of Glenda Brawley's defiance and parental protectiveness over her daughter.[394] As pressure mounted to explain Brawley's refusal to appear in court, Sharpton orchestrated a plan to hold her in sanctuary in a local congregation, Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, and ensured that word spread about the fact. Against the pastor's wishes, Sharpton called local reporters and

[392] Mike Taibbi and Anna Sims-Phillips, *Unholy Alliances: Working the Tawana Brawley Story* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 42-3.
[393] Michael Winerip, "Revisiting a Rape Scandal That Would Have Been Monstrous if True," *New York Times* (New York, NY), June 3, 2013.
[394] McFadden, et al, *Outrage*, 268-73.

created a scene outside of the building. Forced to vacate the premises, Sharpton turned to his old SCLC friend and mentor, William Augustus Jones, who opened the doors of his Brooklyn church to Sharpton and his coterie.[395] There, Sharpton and company formed a secured community over the course of several weeks, daring the police to risk the messy public fallout of pursuing Glenda Brawley. Weeks into Brawley's stay at the church, television personality Phil Donohue took his NBC talk show on the road from its Manhattan studio to the Bedford-Stuyvesant church, where hundreds gathered to see Sharpton, Maddox, Mason, and Glenda Brawley hold forth. Sharpton argued Brawley's case on national television, asserting that if a white girl had been at the center of the matter, she would never be asked to prove how the assault took place. Sharpton celebrated that their public stand had forced the media to "come into the ghetto and deal with race relations in New York."[396]

In the end, a seven-month investigation resulted in a New York State grand jury filing a 170-page report declaring that Brawley's allegations were categorically false. According to an analysis of the various pieces of medical, scientific, and eyewitness evidence, the jury determined that Brawley had fabricated her condition and created a fictitious narrative around her abduction and assault. The grand jury also cleared the accused – assistant district attorney Steven A. Pagones and police officer Harry Crist Jr. – from any culpability. In the face of these results, Sharpton led hundreds of supporters in marching through the streets of Manhattan to the offices of the New York Times in protest against the newspaper's coverage of the events. Along with Mason and Maddox, Sharpton took to the WLIB radio station in New York to decry the jury's report as a wrongful outcome and further evidence of a racist conspiracy in the case.[397] In

[395] Ibid, 296, 301.
[396] Ibid, 309-10.
[397] Robert D. McFadden, "Brawley Made Up Story of Assault, Grand Jury Finds," *New York Times* (New York, NY), October 7, 1998.

the aftermath of the case, Sharpton and his colleagues came under legal fire when Pagones sued them in the outrageous amount of 800 million dollars for defamation of character.[398] A decade later, they would ultimately be held responsible for defaming Pagones and paying damages for their statements. Sharpton himself was found culpable for seven findings of defamation. Even then, he resisted the implication of the findings. From his perspective, his actions were out of obligation to a mother aiming to defend her child. He insisted that his supporters would always back his activities on behalf of Tawana Brawley, and that his political aspirations would not be obstructed by these events.[399]

Erica Edwards points to charisma as "the cultural material that authors and authorizes the official story of the civil rights movement through spectacle."[400] In Sharpton's attempts to fashion a strategy of liberative political activity through spectacle, I read an ironic return to the documentary logics of civil rights movement documentation. Sharpton's claim as a transforming leader, as a rejector of conventional approaches to societal transformation, rests upon an appeal to narrative authorship and supremacy. Under his framework, circumventing traditional structures of authority entails a performative restaging of the terms of sociopolitical engagement. Outside of any *official* capacity, Sharpton creates scenes that force an acknowledgment of hyperbolic spoken and visual rhetoric. Regardless of how their *meaning* might be construed, these scenes are platforms for Sharpton's charisma. He choreographs these moments, making use of the popular media as a primary avenue of distribution. Against the idea of a juridical or electoral account of events, Sharpton sanctions his own articulation of moral and political reality, made true and authoritative by its sensational appeal. We see this in the demonstrations, in the

[398] McFadden, et al, *Outrage*, 369.
[399] William Glaberson, "The Brawley Ruling: The Overview; Sharpton Liable for Defamation in Brawley Case," *New York Times* (New York, NY), July 14, 1998.
[400] Edwards, *Charisma*, 136.

marches, in the methodical arbitrariness of his sudden appearance in a venue or behind a microphone. We see this in the leveraging of daytime talk shows and evening news features, in the creation of revival-like atmospheres of energy and affect. Sharpton's activities are organized within the rubric of charisma that Edwards describes as "a performative and storytelling regime: a portable structure, formed under conditions of terror, that works to authorize itself precisely through its deployment, in performance after performance, of the erotic relationships between leader and people, past and present, lack and prosperity."[401]

In many ways, this charismatic trajectory reflects the performative admonition of James Brown to Sharpton: "kill 'em and leave." That model is itself emblematic of the interplay Edwards describes between spectacular presence and absence. The wake of the spectacular event does not leave in its place any mechanism for political engagement that does not appeal once more to the familiar modes and stages of the charismatic scenario. Sharpton's treatment of the extant political structures and authorities as irrational and inadequate gives way to his own understanding of political common-sense. Under such circumstances, history, authority, and political power continue to be framed as the province of priestly men, among which Sharpton is counted.[402] Thus, Sharpton's public campaign on behalf of the Brawley family is still tightly tethered to his holding of suprarational authority, and thus presumes his popular representative sovereignty in ways that do not dislodge the political norms against which they contend. His attempts to fashion an alternative narrative of civil rights leadership serve to reify the old fictions of political advancement via the divinely gifted male presence. Put another away, the script of the charismatic ideal remains Sharpton's modus operandi even as he fashions himself as a departure from the tradition. He exists as part of the changing same of post-civil rights era

[401] Ibid, 35-6.
[402] Ibid, 73.

leadership, trading in spectacle that differs primarily in style and degree of visibility, but not in ultimate intent.

"Laugh Now, Cry Later" – Popular Media and Sharpton's Political Presence

Sharpton's reiteration of the charismatic script contributes to the material through which black popular culture in the post-civil rights era challenges and reimagines the ideal of black charismatic political authority. Such cultural productions satirize and signify on both movement figures and their associated histories. In the case of Sharpton, he is situated as both an object of attention and a producer of the same. On the one hand, the trajectory and content of his spectacles of political leadership become part of the comedic signification on charismatic authority and its oft-absurd features.[403] At the same time, Sharpton makes use of the same visual culture to establish command of his own political narrative in ways that his predecessors did not have available. The kaleidoscopic effect of Sharpton's appearance and representation in visual culture is produced in large part by its relationship to the rapid expansion of black visual culture in the late twentieth century.

Cultural theorist Richard Iton describes this transformative moment as the post-post-civil-rights era, a moment characterized by the rise of the black superpublic. The black superpublic, Iton asserts, constitutes the expansion of black creative output and imagery, aided by the rise of various visual technologies. A consequence of this expansion is an increased number of stages for black performance, along with an increased prevalence of visual modes of communication. Iton makes the case that these developments complicated the performative norms of black politics and popular culture, hindering attempts to generate and support a black progressive

[403] Ibid, 147.

politics.[404] It could be argued that this disruption of political and popular norms was a perfect storm for the rise of a leader whose own political and popular activity challenged prior conventions. For these reasons, I turn to Sharpton's multiple (re)presentations within the realm of popular visual culture.

One example earlier in Sharpton's protest career appeared in the form of author Tom Wolfe's 1987 novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. In the text, Wolfe unfurls a biting social commentary on class, racism, and politics in 1980s New York City. Amidst the colorful characters, there is the Reverend Reginald Bacon, a bombastic Harlem minister and activist who serves as a powerbroker positioning himself for personal and political gain.[405] Though Wolfe does not attest to it, the character is widely thought to be a take on the Reverend Al Sharpton. The character seems especially prescient given the fact that the book debuted mere weeks before Sharpton would become infamous for his role in the Tawana Brawley case.[406] Whatever the case may be, the 1991 film adaptation of the novel enfleshed Reverend Bacon in ways that reflect an undeniable caricature of Sharpton's style.

In the story, Bacon is recruited by a journalist generate intrigue and publicity on the behalf of Henry Lamb, a black youth who is the victim of a hit and run by a wealthy white driver. In an early scene, Bacon strolls calmly onto the site of a public protest, walking arm in arm with Lamb's mother, while a gospel choir trails after them singing a rendition of "The Storm is Passing Over." Bacon's style is far from subtle: a dark suit with a bright gold shirt, gold-rimmed sunglasses, multiple gold chains, a large belt buckle, and a Jheri curl hairstyle. As his journalist colleague expresses trepidation about the impending scene, Bacon makes a telling

[404] Iton, *Black Fantastic*, 104-6.
[405] Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1987), 147.
[406] Anne Bernard, "No Longer the City of 'Bonfire' in Flames," *New York Times* (New York, NY), December 10, 2007.

remark: “Honesty has nothing to do with this…this is show business! I’ve never known the two to go hand in hand.” He steps before the camera, flanked by Mrs. Lamb and the choir, as a woman applies makeup and gives him a mirror in which he adjusts his appearance. As the cameras start rolling, Bacon steps forward, lifting his hands as the choir grows low and he begins his impassioned plea:

> Brothers and sisters, I stand before you with a heart that is broken. And I stand before you with a heart that is angry. It’s heartbroken because our brother, our neighbor, our son Henry Lamb has been struck down in the prime of his young life! And now he lies in a hospital, broken like my heart. But I tell you, my heart is also angry. Yes, angry! Because the driver of that car didn’t do nothing for him. And neither did the police! And neither did this man, Mr. Abraham Weiss (the fictional mayor of New York).[407]

Bacon’s performance, both on and off camera, offers a mixture of cynical realism, religious fervor, and political opportunism. He exhibits a mastery of his medium and a shrewd understanding of its stakes. Bacon approximates the broad strokes of Sharpton’s real-life activities, albeit to visual extremes.

In a 2007 interview, Sharpton speaks to both the novel and the character, arguing that they resonated with the cynical view of those who view his advocacy on behalf of black people in matters of racial injustice and police misconduct as self-interested political maneuvering. He makes the case that the ongoing litany of police killings of figures such as Amadou Diallo, Abner Louima, and Sean Bell is indicative of the substantive necessity of his public campaigning and protest.[408] While Sharpton disputes this portrayal on the basis of core motivation, intent, and the substance of the sociopolitical situation, what is certain is that the parallels between Bacon and Sharpton are not merely cursory. Like his fictional counterpart, Sharpton has operated

[407] *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Warner Brothers, 1991).
[408] Anne Barnard, “Looking Back on the Bonfire of the 1980s,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), December 10, 2007.

historically with an embrace of the performative elements of public rhetoric and communication. He has utilized those tools as a means of dramatically forcing a confrontation with matters of black life and being. He has capably transformed a variety of settings – from church stairs to street corners to talk show stages – into religio-political platforms. He has proceeded at times, not with documented facts, but with calculated embellishment and speculative talk. He has not shied away from publicly calling out elected officials in incendiary ways. The portrait of Reverend Reginald Bacon is not identical to Sharpton, but it bears more than passing resemblance.

A similar portrayal from this current millennium can be found in illustrator Aaron McGruder's character, the Reverend Rollo Goodlove, in his animated series *The Boondocks*. Goodlove is portrayed as a black left-wing activist and minister with flamboyant aesthetics. In an episode entitled "The S-Word," Goodlove appears seemingly out of nowhere during a press conference at the residence of the Freeman family, around whom the series is centered. As an aside, Robert Freeman, the patriarch of the family, questions what "that two-bit hustler" is doing there. With strains of gospel organ music playing in the background, Goodlove takes over the podium and expresses his outrage over an incident in which a white teacher called his black student, Riley Freeman, a nigger. His list of demands includes apologies from the school "to Riley Freeman, to Robert Freeman, to the ghost of Martin Luther King, and an apology to me, Reverent Rollo Goodlove." He goes on to demand termination of the teacher and compensation for the family's distress, at the threat of making trouble for the culpable parties. Goodlove describes himself as "marshalling all the resources I have available to me to ensure that justice is served." Throughout the episode, Goodlove carries out a public relations strategy, parading the Freeman family onto various television news shows. He engages in a series of public debates

with a fictionalized version of conservative media pundit Ann Coulter, with whom he is revealed to be friendly and familiar behind the scenes. Goodlove tries to persuade the Freeman family into a staged protest, but they ultimately abandon the pursuit, leaving him to ply his trade elsewhere.[409]

I highlight these two examples for the ways they evoke the contours of carnivalesque humor proffered by philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. In his text *Rabelais and His World* (1968), Bakhtin explores the idiom of carnival forms and symbols through a close examination of the work of sixteenth century French novelist Francois Rabelais. Rabelais' writing, in Bakhtin's view, is best understood in light of his engagement with the tradition of folk humor.[410] Through this tradition, Bakhtin writes, Rabelais embodies the characteristics of carnival, a celebratory time of revelry that temporarily disrupted hierarchal norms and structures. The symbols of carnival contribute to an experience of continual change, playfulness, and the relativity of established authorities and truths. In contrast to modern satire, the laughter of carnival is universal; that is, it is not merely directed at objects of mockery, but at the whole of the world and its inhabitants. It is marked by ambivalent recognition that they, too, are impermanent and unresolved, entangled in the cycles of death, revival, and renewal.[411] This ongoing process of tearing down and making new is what Bakhtin calls degradation. "To degrade," he asserts," is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better."[412] The carnivalesque, in sum, is comprised of the signs, symbols, and rituals that dismantle the official, the revered, in service of creating a new world.

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[409] The Boondocks, "The S-Word," *HBO Max* video, 24:00, January 21, 2008, https://play.hbomax.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GXpSbOQDuiB-auwEAAAV0.
[410] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 3-4.
[411] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10-12.
[412] Ibid, 21.

The parodical examples I've described can be interpreted as part of the realm of grotesque realism, an aesthetic category of folk humor comprised of imagery that is ambivalent and contradictory. These parodies are profoundly concerned with the embodiment and performance of central figures who are at once comedic and maddening. Through Bakhtin's lens, Reginald Bacon and Rollo Goodlove can be read as grotesque bodily images, representing "two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born."[413] They are both offspring of a charismatic leadership ideal, actively recasting and reshaping themselves as they blend with the world and continue overturning it. They embrace a continual play and inversion of order, and in that process, they collapse boundaries between their own absurdity and that of the world they inhabit. They expose the reality that there is no inherent stability in the structures and categories of their social and political worlds of play, and thus, they find purchase in those worlds by challenging the sacrality of institutions and practices in ways that other might deem merely debasing or embarrassing, but are rightly *degrading* in the carnivalesque sense.

The irony in such imagery is how it points to the durability of the charismatic framework – and, by extension, Sharpton's enduring hold on sociopolitical significance. Edwards describes charismatic leadership as a present absence and absent presence within post-civil rights black cultural production, an object of both nostalgic desire and contemporary dismissal. This body of black cultural production continues to appropriate charismatic leadership, among other black modern cultural and political projects, in order to extract meanings that align with contemporary experiences and desires.[414] The grotesque comic imagery of Sharpton's caricatures is one such example, conjuring up leadership performances in order to decry them as representative of bygone eras and practices. Even in the desire to create distance from those artifacts, they are

[413] Ibid, 26.
[414] Edwards, *Charisma*, 162-3.

continually resurrected as fulcrums for imagining black political futures. In the end, popular cultural imagery of this sort reflects the dual problem of resenting and reproducing charismatic leadership narratives while also struggling to construct a responsive political vision in the face of a fragmented contemporary landscape.[415]

"Black on Both Sides" – Contesting the Future of Black Political Leadership

It is worth reemphasizing that Sharpton's own development is a function of mentorship by figures within the traditional charismatic lineage of black ecclesial and civil rights leadership. He constructs the arc of his political engagements from the repository of imagery, style, and rhetoric conferred upon him by way of a particular black masculine tutelage. To that admixture of religio-political influences, he adds the performative competencies instilled by James Brown – competencies that evoke a cultivated elusiveness and resistance to neat, easy reduction. Sharpton's ability to move within the interstices of politics and popular culture, around and between boundaries of convention, is itself emblematic of the charismatic leader. He is everywhere and nowhere, (re)appearing and conjuring attention around dramatic episodes of injustice. Sharpton's charismatic leadership functions as "a loose script that simultaneously circulates loss (of past leaders), disappointment (with present leaders), and hope (for coming leaders)," engaging the post-civil rights landscape as a void shaped by the promise of messianic leadership and the mourning of leaders lost. The charismatic leader thus only exists as a specter, both a dead relic of the past and the anticipated but not yet appearing savior.[416]

What results is an ongoing contestation of black political meaning and viability, as well as wrestling over how one authenticates and verifies the figures capable of meeting what we

[415] Ibid, 164-6.
[416] Ibid, 143-4.

have already identified as a ghostly, immaterial leadership void. Part of the narrative authority of charismatic leadership lies in the ability to designate who rightfully and appropriately continues the lineage. A prime example of this public struggle is seen in a televised dispute between Sharpton and public intellectual and scholar Cornel West. In 2011, cable news network MSNBC broadcast a special program, "A Stronger America: The Black Agenda," in which a panel of ostensible experts debated a slate of issues related to black sociopolitical life. During the segment in question, the white male host, Ed Schultz, asks Sharpton about the future trajectory of political resistance versus his past protest activities. Schultz's framing echoes, perhaps unknowingly, the architecture of the black leadership void by rhetorically situating political activity between the polarity of the archaic and the anticipated.

The primary dispute of the segment centers on the accountability of black elected officials to black constituencies. West argues that there is a context in which any critique of President Barack Obama is framed as support of right-wing attacks against him. He goes further to express concern over the potential of Sharpton's manipulation and use as a public face for oligarchical interests under the presidential administration of Barack Obama. Sharpton, in response, reasserts his presence in the public trenches of political activity, arguing that ivory tower elites prefer talk over action: "They were scared then, and they (sic) scared now. If you're scared, say you're scared. Don't blame that on Obama! Say you're scared to stand up for the people." West challenges whether Sharpton has any substantive critique of Obama, while Sharpton asserts that West's peers – the black intellectuals and elected officials – have failed to critically address matters of black suffering prior to Obama's presidency. In the end, the argument descends into cacophony, with no clear resolution of the matter.[417]

[417] AAPCIcommunity, "The Black Agenda 2011," April 13, 2011, YouTube video, 4:49, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Feqpf7L558.

At the crux of Sharpton's and West's argument is the question of black leadership and its discernible commitments to the black majority, the group that literature scholar Houston A. Baker Jr. describes as the segment of the African American population that is most vulnerable, policed, and underresourced. Sharpton and West occupy the collective of post-civil rights era black public thinkers, whom Baker contends at large have engaged in more self-promotion than service to black majority interests.[418] The irony is that in this media-constructed event, Sharpton and West alike are promoted as authoritative spokespersons for addressing the void of black political advancement. Within this architecture, they are two patterns cut from a shared charismatic cloth, each laying claim to the relative righteousness of their leadership approaches. They each rhetorically situate themselves as veritable outsiders while implicating the other as dangerously close to the suppressive influences of power.

I believe the key to parsing this exchange and its seeming impasse lies in how we evaluate West's central challenge to Sharpton: the substance of his critique of Obama. What is at stake here is something more than a question of political insight. I have stated earlier that this scene of conflict is part of a larger matter of authenticating black leadership. The grounds of West's discontent become clearer when we consider his own working definition of black leadership: "To be a serious black leader is to be a race-transcending prophet who critiques the powers that be (including the black component of the Establishment) and who puts forward a vision of fundamental social change for all who suffer from socially induced misery."[419] Embedded in West's inquiry is a concern for the seeming absence of a *prophetic* critique from Sharpton. Sharpton's response is couched in an appeal to policy measures as a means of

[418] Houston A. Baker Jr., *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 7.
[419] Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Beacon Press, 2017), 46.

producing social change from within the formal political establishment. However, that appeal lands as a departure from the critical dialogue and democratic accountability that West argues is essential to remedying the crisis of black leadership.[420]

What cannot be lost in this confrontation is the fact of West and Sharpton both occupying positions within the black public intellectual sphere. Theirs is a crisis of legitimation of the role, authority, and speech that represent an adequate address of black sociopolitical concerns. But the realm of public intellectual dispute does nothing to rectify that concern. In fact, it serves to further muddy the waters. The role of the public intellectual, Adolph Reed writes, "is by an large an excuse, the marker of a sterile, hybrid variant of 'bearing witness'" that, rather than clarifying a political agenda or perspective, becomes "an admission and exaltation of *dis*connectedness…that is the opposite of rootedness in a discourse community."[421] In the quest for meaningful forms of black representational leadership, it is not entirely clear whom or what the most public and prominent figures represent at all.

It is significant that these questions and ambiguities unfold within "the heightened predominance of the visual as the primary mediator of communication."[422] West and Sharpton confront one another in a visual and auditory production of black politics as commodity, as a discrete object delivered in a consumable form. This is not an autonomous forum of black debate, but a network-mediated staging of discourse on *the* black agenda. The conflict on display reflects the discordance that Richard Iton describes between established political sensibilities and a rapidly changing cultural aesthetic of the late twentieth century. He asserts that in contrast to

[420] West, *Race Matters*, 45.
[421] "'What Are the Drums Saying, Booker?'": The Curious Role of the Black Public Intellectual" in Adolph Reed, Jr., *Class Notes: Posing and Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 87.
[422] Iton, *Black Fantastic*, 106.

younger generations' acclimation to a new pace of visual and audio output, the growing ranks of the black formal political establishment sought "rhythmic continuity with mainstream actors and the temporal logics of brokerage politics."[423] West's questioning of Sharpton is an attempt to ascertain Sharpton's political and prophetic rhythm, an invitation to clarify the ethics and aesthetics of his brand of black leadership. For while Sharpton has proved to be a masterful generator of popular cultural visibility, he has done so in ways that complicate any easy, fixed understanding of his motives, allegiances, and methods.

Recalling Reed's criticisms of the disconnectedness of the public intellectual, it is reasonable to ask how Sharpton negotiates a relationship with a discourse community. He is a reverend without a parish, a political player without a concrete constituency. Nonetheless, he maintains a foothold as a black religio-political figure publicly operating at the juncture between the black masses and the black political elites. Sharpton's use of contemporary visual media in the service of reinforcing religio-political authority might find its most apt analog in the realm of black religious communication. In his study of black televangelism, Jonathan Walton categorizes religious broadcasters as those who proselytize primarily through mass-mediated forms of communication, making use of video technology in order to transmit messages to national television networks. He argues that this phenomenon is characteristically personality driven, crowd dependent, and entertainment oriented.[424] While Sharpton does not operate from a fixed home base, he undeniably traffics in these black televangelical aesthetics as a religio-political broadcaster. His discourse community, then, is a mass audience attracted through his ability to generate charismatic rapport and consumer appeal.

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[423] Ibid, 121.
[424] Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 4-5.

While Sharpton has demonstrated a remarkable knack for reinventing norms of political and popular engagement, the evolving black sociopolitical terrain invites new questions about the reception and efficacy of his brand of black leadership. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, a scholar on racial inequality and public policy, raises critical concerns about what we are to make of the simultaneity of a black president, an expanding black political class, and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. She argues that present-day tensions between black political elites and the black working class lead us to a necessary reckoning with the future and substance of the black freedom struggle. Furthermore, this struggle, while bearing similar features to the earlier civil rights era, is not a mere redux of that era's concerns and strategies.[425] What this suggests is that the substance of black political leadership itself must also be reconsidered. Sharpton has articulated his contemporary role both in terms of his connection to the lineage of civil rights leadership and his function as a bridge between protest and electoral political entities. The unfolding uprising in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 framed him as a leader losing touch – by default or intent – with the sociopolitical concerns of the black masses while reinforcing the legitimacy of the formal political establishment. However, within the confines of the black church, Sharpton's voice and presence still situated him as a focal point and trusted authority. Sharpton's eulogy of Mike Brown, the black youth whose killing and defamation triggered the Ferguson rebellion, is a window into the complex and contradictory mechanisms of religio-political authority in the present black public sphere.

[425] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016), 6, 16.

"Life After Death" – Sharpton's Pulpit Politics

On August 9, 2014, at approximately 12:01 p.m., Michael (Mike) Brown Jr., an 18-year-old unarmed black youth, was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson, a white male member of the Ferguson Police Department, following an altercation on Canfield Drive in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, Missouri. In the wake of the shooting, Brown's body lay in the street for over 4 hours. The sheer indignity of Brown's treatment by local authorities catalyzed growing unrest that later erupted into mass protests and violent confrontations.[426] Against an unarmed mass of civilian protestors, the largely white Ferguson police force took up weaponry in an effort to decimate any opposition to their authority. Nevertheless, the crowds returned each day, meeting the police's brutal escalations with a defiant refusal to submit.[427]

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's assessment of these events and their aftermath highlights the competing social interests and political aims of protestors and citizens on the ground and the officials and leaders who made their way to Ferguson. Among those out-of-town leaders was Al Sharpton. Sharpton's established skills in publicizing matters of black life and death were on display as he operated in the unofficial capacity of "the new national face of the civil rights establishment."[428] On August 12, three days after Brown's killing, Sharpton convened a gathering at St. Louis' Old Courthouse, where he gave a brief speech concerning the matter. Sharpton prefaced his remarks by referencing that he had spoken with the immediate family of Mike Brown:

> This is not a cause for them, this is their child. This is not some prop for politics, this is their child. And we are here from National Action Network, committed long after these cameras are gone, to help them pursue justice on the loss of their child. Secondly, no one has the right to take their child's name and drag it through the mud because you're angry.

[426] "Timeline of Events in Shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson," AP NEWS (Associated Press, August 8, 2019), https://apnews.com/article/9aa32033692547699a3b61da8fd1fc62.
[427] Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter*, 155-6.
[428] Ibid, 159.

> To become violent in Michael Brown's name is to betray the gentle giant that he was. Don't be so angry…that you distort the image of who his mother and father told us he was. The story around this nation has been an unarmed young gentleman was taken from us on the weekend he was going to school. Some of us are making the story how mad we are rather than how promising he was. Don't be a traitor to Michael Brown in the name of you mad (sic). You may not like some of the politicians, some of the leadership, but don't diss them by disrespecting his parents. They are planning a funeral. They are trying to pick up the pieces for their life…[429]

Sharpton's speech struck a clear tone of reproof for the actions of the protestors while failing to contextualize the roots of their response. It implied a distinction and distance between the concerns of family & community and the personal and political interests therein. It read the protests as an instance of personal affront rather than a reaction and response to an extended local history of ongoing social and material denigrations. It also ironically cut against the very dynamics of the public protestation that enabled Sharpton's own rise to prominence. Sharpton has been no stranger to the limelight of protest, emphasizing the political dimensions of personal privations and the communal significance of familial concerns. However, his brief speech highlights his attempt to reorganize the content within his public performances.

The charismatic scenario Sharpton established on the steps of the courthouse was a classic attempt to define the terms of order for the enactment of justice and the validation of political authority. He signified proximity to power while also establishing a visual intimacy with the Brown family. The video recording of the scene also showed him being flanked by two high-profile outsiders: attorney Benjamin Crump, who gained national prominence through his representation of the family of slain black youth Trayvon Martin, and megachurch pastor Jamal Harrison Bryant. In this way, he communicated his credibility and connection at the personal and national levels. Simultaneously, he revealed his profound disconnection from the immediate

[429] Cristina Fletes-Boutté, "Rev. Al Sharpton's Speech at Old Courthouse," STLtoday.com (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 9, 2019), https://www.stltoday.com/news/multimedia/videos/rev-al-sharpton-s-speech-at-old-courthouse/html_bcdb486f-f3d5-5bb1-8d44-2708e84c170f.html.

discourse community of Ferguson. Sharpton's performance set him as political authority amidst a perceived dearth of leadership and direction. While decrying the use of Mike Brown as a cause or political prop, Sharpton nonetheless instrumentalized the occasion of Brown's death in service of a broader agenda: the Obama administration's intensified focus on police brutality. Ferguson was an opportunity to prove his usefulness and value to that regime through his brokerage of peaceful resolution and the reaffirmation of governmental authority.[430]

Sharpton's scene of literal and rhetorical elevation as a sociopolitical representative brings to mind the elevated space from which he first learned to ply his charismatic trade: the pulpit. Within the black church context, the authority of the pulpit retains a significance that is not so easily displaced. While contemporary social movements have reflected changing aesthetics, methods, and leadership, the pulpit has remained attached to traditional priestly duties and the practitioners thereof. The political value of Sharpton's public engagements is greatly enabled through his recognition as an ordained minister. It is not merely the role itself, but also how it becomes highly visible through the enactment of religious rites.

In the instance of Mike Brown – and many others before and after him – the rites of mourning are inescapable and sadly routine. The age of the black superpublic affords technologies of visual and auditory reproduction that profoundly expand the reach of these moments of lament. The resulting hypervisibility of these memorial services transforms them into public occasions for political meditation. Sharpton's recurring presence in these situations suggests something about his ability to connect to a discourse community through religio-political broadcasting. Fundamentally, he functions as a crisis preacher called upon to comfort the grieving and offer a meaningful response, both for the immediately gathered and the larger

[430] Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter*, 159-60.

viewing audience. However, in the funeral of Mike Brown, Sharpton imbues the traditional eulogy with his own sociopolitical framing of the events in Ferguson. Both the sermon and the responses to it warrant close analysis.

The funeral was held on August 25, 2014, at Friendly Temple Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis. Thousands of mourners filled the sanctuary for the service, with far more watching the events through livestreaming. Various black public figures could be observed in the audience, such as film director Spike Lee, radio personality Tom Joyner, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. Other notable figures in the audience included Martin Luther King III and megachurch pastor T.D. Jakes. The funeral proceedings at large were dominated by black male speakers, with the lone exception of Brown's stepmother, Cal Brown. Importantly, the spatial and visual arrangement of the platform reflected this dominance; the master of ceremonies and Al Sharpton were centered behind the podium, with a row of male ministers off to the left. Sharpton was introduced by Benjamin Crump, the family's attorney. Crump's remarks underscored the reasons for Sharpton's presence: "He answered the bell for Trayvon Martin, he answered the bell for Eric Garner, and he answered the bell of Michael Brown's family when his grandfather called while Michael Brown was yet on the ground for over four and a half hours."[431] Crump cited the Three-Fifths Compromise, asserting that Brown "was not three-fifths of a citizen, he was an American citizen, and we will not accept three-fifths justice." Crump's words suggested not only belief in the ideals of America's responsibilities to its citizenry, but also faith in Sharpton's unique ability to secure the fulfillment of justice. His introduction of

[431] PBS Newshour, "Michael Brown's funeral service | August 25, 2014," *YouTube* video, 2:00:56, August 25, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwaSHILDjd0.

Sharpton as "one of the most influential civil rights leaders of our history" further accentuates that sense of exceptionality.[432]

Sharpton's sermon drew from the Hebrew Bible text Micah 6:8 – "He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"[433] Sharpton's opening statements landed squarely on one of the hallmarks of crisis preaching, namely, the necessity of "naming the monster" or acknowledging the communal crisis.[434] In this case, it meant acknowledging the strangeness of parents burying a child, an inversion of the expected order of the natural world. Sharpton earnestly advised his audience of the need to appropriately deal with the urgent and difficult earthly matters before them rather than use their religion as a mode of escapism. The immediate concerns of injustice required a response. That notion of necessity dovetailed with Sharpton's description of how he was called to Ferguson in first place. The grandfather of Mike Brown contacted the field office of the National Action Network seeking Sharpton's assistance. Sharpton's initial response was "where's Ferguson, Missouri?" The remark drew laughter, but Sharpton's call narrative, as it were, clarified two valuable points: Sharpton was *asked* to come to the city, and he was utterly unaware of the city's existence prior to the request. This vignette both justifies the impetus for Sharpton's charismatic representation *and* reiterates his profound disconnection from the Ferguson community at large. Sharpton's sermonic rhetoric and interpretation are meant to appeal to a much broader discourse community beyond his immediate social, political, and geographical context.

[432] Ibid.
[433] Micah 6:8.
[434] Carol M. Norén, "Crisis Preaching and Corporate Worship," *Liturgy* 27, no. 1 (2012), 48.

The rhetorical framework of Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites helps to organize our understanding of Sharpton's sermonic discourse. His introductory remarks are part of the process of identifying and defining the core communal values.[435] Specifically, he establishes common ground with his audience by naming their shared recognition of conditions of disorder and injustice. His scriptural text places these conditions in relief against the requirements of God. By drawing on these common factors, Sharpton mitigates his outsider status and gains the assent of his audience. He and the audience share an agreement about the egregious circumstances of Mike Brown's death and the mistreatment of his body. Furthermore, Sharpton uses the image of that denigration to articulate a shared concern about the broader disregard for black life and being. His message at large communicates core values of order and justice.

Sharpton's next rhetorical move was constructing a hierarchy of values within his sermonic message. Sharpton made reference to the Old Courthouse, contextualizing his appearance there with the family as a necessary appeal to community members to stop looting and rioting. He framed the uprising as a personal offense to the family: "Can you imagine they're heartbroken – their son taken, discarded and marginalized. And they have to stop mourning to get you to control your anger like you're more angry than they are."[436] Sharpton's indictment of purportedly violent protestors drew applause and vocal affirmation from the crowd. It also revealed his interpretation of the killing of Mike Brown as the primary locus of that response, rather than a tipping point in a longer history of communal oppression.

Sharpton continued his challenge by invoking the legacy of Mike Brown: "Like you don't understand that Michael Brown does not want to be remembered for a riot. He wants to be remembered as the one that made America deal with how we gon' police in the United States.

[435] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, *Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, 3.
[436] PBS Newshour, "Michael Brown's funeral service | August 25, 2014."

This is not about you. This is about justice. This is about fairness."[437] This movement in the sermon is wholly speculative; Mike Brown was dead before Sharpton even knew of his existence. What Mike Brown did or did not want is unknowable. Rhetorically, Brown becomes a conduit for communicating Sharpton's projected ideal of making meaning of the tragic events. That ideal is a reclamation of justice and fairness, embodied at least partially through a national reckoning with policing practices, and certainly not through the uprisings that resulted. In Sharpton's courthouse speech, he claimed not to view Mike Brown as a political *prop*. However, the lingering specter of Mike Brown's death was certainly a fulcrum for generating political *leverage*.

Within the sermon, Sharpton extended a hierarchy of values that privileged personal and communal responsibility as the primary means of achieving the core values of order and justice. Put another way, the ability to bring people into right order precedes the possibility of justice. This expectation is specifically placed upon members of the broader black community. Some of us, Sharpton said,

> act like the definition of blackness is how low you could go. Blackness has never been about being a gangster or a thug. Blackness was no matter how low we was pushed down, we rose up anyhow. Blackness was never surrendering our pursuit of excellence…Now, in the twenty-first century, we get to where we got some positions of power. And you decide it ain't black no more to be successful. Now you want to be a nigger and call your woman a ho. You've lost where you come from. We've got to clean up our community so we can clean up the United States of America.[438]

Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites write that values hierarchies "are actively crafted and constructed in the rhetorical interaction of speakers and audiences as they actively negotiate the grounds on which their sense of community rests."[439] The ecstatic response of Sharpton's

[437] Ibid.
[438] Ibid.
[439] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, 5.

immediate audience suggested they were more than willing to cosign the rhetoric of black comportment and self-control as a precursor to justice at large. Even the organist played supporting chords in musical affirmation of the fervor and exclamation of the people.

The end of Sharpton's sermon marks the final rhetorical movement of sermonic discourse – the performative display of communal existence, wherein the people "enact their shared vision of a common unity through a public exhibition of presumably virtuous beliefs and behaviors."[440] Sharpton concluded the sermon with a declaration that in the end, the God of justice prevails. The performative display, however, emerged extemporaneously after the sermon's end. In the wake of his message, Sharpton took time to acknowledge various dignitaries, elected officials, and other well-known figures. Such acknowledgements are commonplace in these sorts of contexts. Part of what they rhetorically signal are subtle implications about the maintenance of protocol and order. Thousands may be gathered, but only some are called by name, owing to the public cultural significance of their work and personality. Sharpton mitigated the idea of a leadership hierarchy, reminding the audience that "when [Benjamin Crump] was talking about me with civil rights…we are not in show business. It ain't who's one and two and three, this is struggle. And we gotta hold each other up."[441] Yet, moments later, he reasserted the notions of tenure and established authority, casually remarking "a lot of folks just showed up at a rally last week and want to decide who should speak. You just got here."[442] Sharpton's signification on power dynamics was a means of indirectly fortifying his claims to authority without explicitly elevating himself. The communal beliefs in appropriate order and leadership were being reinforced through this display.

[440] Ibid.
[441] PBS Newshour, "Michael Brown's funeral service | August 25, 2014."
[442] Ibid.

This interplay between downplaying and elevating implicit authority set the grounds for Sharpton's next action. Sharpton called for corporate prayers for the Brown family, the nation, and for young people. Notably, Sharpton selected three prominent black male ministers – Rev. Frederick Haynes, Bishop T.D. Jakes, and Rev. Jamal Bryant – to carry out this task. The audience expressed audible sounds of approval and excitement – hand claps, calls of "oh yeah," "my bishop" – as Sharpton announced each name. Sharpton instructed the audience to link hands with one another. Beyond their liturgical function, the language of the prayers reiterated the core values of Sharpton's sermon, embodied and expressed through already recognized leaders. Haynes prayed for the ability "to transform this senseless murder into a salvific movement." Jakes called out for "the freedom and justice that the founding fathers said even if they didn't practice," being sure to remind his hearers that "though we cry for peace, we don't want to sacrifice justice in order to attain it." Bryant interceded on behalf of "a generation of believers…tired of being lied to, tired of being disenfranchised, and tired of being broken."[443] Prior to the final prayer, Bryant instructed the audience to lift their hands, a sign of surrender and vulnerability. The collective visual effect showed a community bound together in the moment, prepared to depart with shared purpose and focus. Such collectivity is a reflection of the successful negotiation of communal existence, a mutual persuasion of speakers and audiences to adopt and perform respective roles as minister and congregation.[444] The ministerial prayers become a seal and affirmation of the proceedings.

In the main, Sharpton's eulogy for Mike Brown grafted the radical prophetic requirements of Micah 6:8 onto a relatively conservative platform of moral rectitude and political gradualism. Its focus on the behavioral outcomes of black communities was not far

[443] Ibid.
[444] Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, 6.

afield from the rhetoric of racial uplift attributed to the teachings of Booker T. Washington, a dominant black leader of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was Washington who believed that black people might achieve full political and legal rights through self-help measures.[445] Thus, what Sharpton presented to his audience that day was hardly an expression of new ideas. Rather, it was a comfortable retread embedded in a familiar charismatic scenario that enabled him to generate his own discursive connection to the events at Ferguson. His lack of an organic relationship to the discourse community of protestors did not disrupt his ability to engage in the religio-political broadcasting that had secured his public notoriety for decades.

Sharpton's role in the funeral was nothing less than a televangelistic expression of political will. His introduction to the audience situated him as the iconic personality – the representative avatar – linking the (after)lives of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown. His engagement with the audience induced a dialogical exchange through which his sermonic message was approved and validated in multiple ways. He also seized upon the dramaturgical sensibilities of his black church setting, modulating the atmosphere between humor, ecstatic fervor, and sober reflection.[446] His recognizance as a viable religious authority made way for the acceptance of his political messaging.

Sharpton's performance demonstrates the endurance of the charismatic scenario. In this framework, Ferguson functions as a crisis site of racialized terror demanding the arrival of a charismatic leader "to provide a practical schema for sweeping change as well as to serve as a fantastic locus of projections of hope, wholeness, national identity, and renewal."[447] Through the sermon and his overall display of symbolic authority, Sharpton follows this arc, expressing a

[445] Byron D'Andra Orey, "Explaining Black Conservatives: Racial Uplift or Racial Resentment?" *The Black Scholar* 34, no. 1 (2004), 20.
[446] Walton, *Watch This*, 6-7.
[447] Edwards, *Charisma*, 187.

general plan of black communal remediation while serving as the representative focal point and mouthpiece. The locations, names, and circumstances change, but what remains is a repeatedly articulated desire for leadership heroism. Sharpton's mythology is built through these recurring appearances, and he extends that mythology both through the naming of surrogates and the descriptive work of defining the scope and requirements of appropriate political activity.

Of course, such mythologies only remain coherent when detached from clarifying realities. Sharpton's methodology was and is linked to older models of brokerage politics that privileged establishment relationships and leveraging connections.[448] However, the situation in Ferguson reflected a politics of immediacy born out of the direct conflicts between black youth and law enforcement. The observation of ongoing practices of oppression and injustice fomented a nascent body of activists and organizers who would not adhere to establishment strategies or timelines. Sharpton's sermon reflected his trepidation about their methods. He argued, "we can't have a fit. We've got to have a movement. A fit, you get mad and run out for a couple of nights. A movement means we've got to be here for the long haul and turn our chance into change, our demonstration into legislation."[449] What Sharpton sermonically characterized as a fit – or more derisively, a ghetto pity party – could perhaps be better understood as the eruption of a long pent-up frustration with an unceasingly violent state of affairs. The longer arc of the Ferguson uprisings would show that the activist cadre had a far better grasp on the means of contemporary movement sustainability within a sociopolitical culture no longer seamlessly coextensive with Sharpton's sensibilities.[450]

[448] Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter*, 168.
[449] PBS Newshour, "Michael Brown's funeral service | August 25, 2014."
[450] Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter*, 172-3.

Sharpton's funeral performance, for all of its fire and vigor, falls into the anticipatory routine of black leadership. He is both apparition and reapparition, visible yet immaterial, suspended between the glorious civil rights past and the promise of a bright future.[451] What makes him a fixture is precisely what curtails the efficacy of his representative functions. Sharpton operates as a continually reiterated icon, a repeating image circulating within a political economy that turns freedom into the exchange of commodities.[452] However, that iconography finds decreasing purchase among new generations with waning appetites for conjuring old messiahs. In the effort to create a salvific possibility from a senseless killing, Sharpton failed to recognize that the protest community was not in search of a savior. Rather, the exigencies on the ground prompted them to work out their own salvation – not with fear and trembling, but with bold resistance.

In so many respects, Sharpton has made a career out of boldly redrawing the lines of normative political engagement. The events of Ferguson found him in an unfamiliar position of defiance: an establishment elder resisting the shifting boundaries of a new political movement. While this generational conflict is not necessarily the death knell of black charismatic political authority, it is certainly a challenge to the assumed logics of black political life. The masculinist tradition that molded Sharpton ran headlong into a Black Lives Matter movement led by queer and female voices. The lineage of singular charismatic figures confronted the decentralized organization of multiple movement fronts. Sharpton's political niche is not utterly erased, but it is no longer the presumptive center. Indeed, the present-day matters of black political concern are not so easily condensed or codified. In the fragmentation of political and cultural life, it may be that the best response is not a predetermined or repeated model, but instead the active reaction

[451] Edwards, *Charisma*, 144.
[452] Ibid, 145.

and response to the needs at hand. This is not to suggest we have nothing to learn from our political predecessors. Rather, it may be that the spirit of their strivings is of greater value than the repetition of their strategies.

Conclusion

I began this dissertation with an account of an intimate conflict between two men who, in their own ways, understood themselves as representative authorities for black constituencies. This encounter was a microcosm of a larger historical confrontation over the ways, means, and personalities of black sociopolitical leadership. The longstanding significance of black church communities and their clerical leaders has made them an apt focal point for public action. Without question, the relative degree of autonomy afforded to black churches and their ministers enabled them to wield an unusual measure of influence with respect to matters of social and political import, particularly in the southern black movements. They were free to speak and act in ways their counterparts often could not.[453]

The public leadership and spokesmanship of black ministers often conformed to more conservative and accommodationist tendencies. However, black attitudes and expectations shifted greatly in the post-World War II era as barriers to black economic, social, and democratic participation were challenged.[454] What becomes clear is that the primary drive behind the actions and interventions we come to know as the civil rights movement came from outside of the church, and the ascension of black male ministers into leadership roles was not a matter of inevitability but of timing and usefulness.[455] The nascence of these freedom struggles began in the commons, in the everyday activities of laypeople, but over time this foundational labor has been obscured in the shadow of great man narratives. Nostalgic remembrances of these

[453] Fairclough, "The Preachers and the People," 405.
[454] Ibid, 405-6.
[455] Ibid, 407-8.

movements have been marked by the reiteration of popular moments of speech and performance oriented around a limited cast of charismatic clerical figures.

What I have put forth in this project is not merely a rearticulation of an old issue, or a retread of critiques against masculinist traditions of black public leadership. Rather, I have aimed towards a practice of critical memory, an ethical evaluation of past events and a record of their relationship to our present moment. I am of the mind that the perennial challenge of misremembrance with respect to black leadership in the public and political realms requires a genealogical assessment of the mechanisms by which certain iconic figures have become established in the popular imagination. In Chapter 1, I pursued this thread of inquiry, exploring both black preaching and the black preacher as genres of communication and performance. The confluence of African, European, and American rhetorics and aesthetics generated a powerful form of religious discourse with social and political implications. Through that mode of discourse, black preachers created space for psychic social, and spiritual resistance within oppressively racist contexts, using mythology by way of folk stories and sacred texts in order to fashion alternative visions of the world and themselves.

In Chapter 2, I expounded on how black religious leaders participated in the creative expansion of a black public sphere, which they leveraged in order to promote matters of social and political importance. Their ability to generate popular support and draw attention to chosen issues was thoroughly contingent on a black collectivity that assented and responded to them. While it cannot be denied that some leaders had a unique capacity for affectively and linguistically connecting to the masses, what it certain is that such a capacity was a function of time, space, and context. No single leader or typology was universally effective for sustaining the interests and energies of the people. However, the symbolic attractiveness of black religious

leaders was not diminished by these realities. Instead, it was enhanced by specific scenarios of charismatic speech and performance that served to reinforce the mythology of the black preacher as divinely authorized and endowed with unique power.

In my exploration of three iconic black religious leaders, I aimed to explain how a specific motif of black religious leadership was crystallized and reappropriated in different public and political contexts. What I described was not only the genesis of their public profiles, but also the recurring themes binding together their individual forays into the sociopolitical realm. In the case of King, we find a religio-political archetype shaped by Benjamin E. Mays' fervor for producing an idealized model of black male leadership. The contours of this model were solidified by the iconic scenario at the March on Washington, a platform whose construction owed much to the unacknowledged labor of women who would never appear on it. In both the staging and the content of King's speech, what is popularly read as a moment of singular genius is more accurately understood as the confluence of collective efforts channeled through a momentary representative. However, the tragic and sudden circumstances of King's death exacerbated the desire to routinize his charismatic leadership by reproducing claims to a special status.

In the exploration of Jackson and Sharpton, we see the effects of this charismatic routinization manifesting in distinctly different eras. In Jackson and Sharpton alike, we observe an ambition to break free from limiting contexts in order to reimagine the sociopolitical possibilities of black religious leadership. Yet, those ambitions rested on the same charismatic architecture that made King iconic. Jackson exhibited a keen awareness of the language and aesthetics necessary to transform himself into the de facto black spokesman after King. Nonetheless, in his attempts to translate organic clerical leadership into electoral political

authority, Jackson revealed some the contradictions inherent in the endeavor to merge the roles of the prophet and politician. Specifically, the prophet and politician appeal to different sources of authority, and the endeavor to condense these roles into the singular charismatic figure only reaffirms the crisis of political legitimation. Jackson's campaign for the presidency of the United States produced a fleeting fervor and excitement without any sustainable or unprecedented political outcomes, calling into question the political mythology associated with the black church and its leaders.

If Jackson's era of popular predominance illuminated fractures in the mythology of the singular charismatic leader, then Sharpton's era reflects the challenges of maintaining that role in a context of black social and political fragmentation. Sharpton, himself a product of the black male clerical tradition, was grafted into the leadership lineage of his predecessor Jackson. Sharpton, deriving a great measure of audacity and showmanship from his mentor, James Brown, eschewed typical arrangements of political legitimation by inviting engagement on his own terms. More than his forerunners King and Jackson, Sharpton demonstrated the portability of charismatic leadership, generating a following from wherever he chose, while remaining detached from a set organization or consistent stage. While Sharpton positioned himself as an unconventional leader moving in the intervening spaces around and between established sociopolitical boundaries, the structures of charismatic authority ultimately bound him to a familiar role alongside the political establishment. The events in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 revealed a fragmented sociopolitical environment in which Sharpton's staging of authority did not carry its familiar leverage. Rather, by situating himself in the camp of political brokerage, he demonstrated a measure of detachment from a younger, radicalized collective of protestors unwilling to entertain compromises with a political establishment they deemed untrustworthy.

Sharpton's recurring appearances – in Ferguson and elsewhere – as a eulogizer suggest that he retains a clerical authority still valued in the confines of the black church. However, his brand of singular charismatic proclamation does not hold the same sway over a contemporary black collective far removed from allegiance to the symbolic familiarity of his civil rights lineage.

Where does this leave us? Sharpton may well be the last of a waning breed of black leaders whose claims to public and political validity were grounded in their connections to the civil rights era. The King-Jackson-Sharpton triad conceivably represents the most visible and recognized set of black religio-political leaders from the mid-twentieth century to the present. What I have presented is an analysis of this leadership trajectory that underscores not only the potential limits of black representative leadership, but also a continuing challenge: that we are always "haunted by the problem of speaking for the race."[456] Adolph Reed insists that such representative (im)possibilities emerge from conditions of political immobilization: "The posture of the Racial Voice requires…a black population that is disenfranchised and incapable of articulating its own agendas as a citizenry."[457]

It seems reasonable to suggest that black sociopolitical futures depend on how a contemporary black citizenry articulates and enacts its own agendas for social transformation and empowerment. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor describes a twenty-first century movement landscape marked by intersectional, grassroots organizing, a contrast to the top-down leadership that characterized the civil rights establishment.[458] Under that umbrella, Taylor identifies the diverse approaches being taken by organizers, some of whom proffer formal organizational structures versus those committed to decentralized coordination of movement activities.[459] For some, the

[456] Reed, "'What Are the Drums Saying,'" 81.
[457] Ibid, 89.
[458] Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter*, 174.
[459] Ibid, 174.

resistance to formal structures and leadership represented a desire to operate more democratically, allowing the people at large, rather than any one person, to speak for their interests.[460] However, the cover of the May 4, 2015 edition of *The New York Times Magazine* featured two prominent activists from the Ferguson protests: Deray Mckesson and Johnetta Elzie. While both insisted upon the notion that the movement was leaderless, they nonetheless found themselves being called upon to serve as spokespersons.[461]

I note this instance for what it hints about a seemingly inescapable tendency towards the production of representative personalities. Regardless of Mckesson's and Elzie's refusals, the demand for designated figureheads persists as a mechanism for distilling complex interests and activities into consumable narratives. Their personalities and stories were accentuated by aesthetic details: Mckesson's ubiquitous blue Patagonia vest, Elzie's dark lipstick and leather jacket. Alongside this, Mckesson and Elzie expressed concern for what it would mean to compare their movement to the imagery of the civil rights movement, especially in light of the distortion of King's more radical, confrontational sensibilities and the selective use of his quotations to discredit their protests.[462]

It is precisely the problem of distortion that has animated this project. While I have challenged the nostalgic propensity to construe black freedom struggles as being grounded in black male clerical leadership, I am also clear that such interpretive errors do not merely dissipate. On the contrary, we find our histories and movements beset with the perpetual threat of misrepresentation. That threat should not compel us to discard these accounts, but instead to

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[460] Ibid, 175.
[461] Jay Caspian Kang, "Our Demand is Simple: Stop Killing Us," *The New York Times Magazine* (New York, NY), May 4, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/magazine/our-demand-is-simple-stop-killing-us.html (accessed January 21, 2021).
[462] Kang, "Our Demand is Simple."

diligently interrogate them and to derive important lessons from them. Time will tell how the freedom movements and leaders of the present day will be interpreted by future scholars. In any event, it is our critical memory that will keep us anchored, placing our freedom hopes neither in the relics of history nor in anticipated saviors, but in courageous response to the demands of this present world.

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